DIVIDED BY INFINITY

Robert Charles Wilson

1.

In the year after Lorraine's death I contemplated suicide six times. Contemplated it seriously, I mean: six times sat with the fat bottle of clonazepam within reaching distance, six times failed to reach for it, betrayed by some instinct for life or disgusted by my own weakness.

I can't say I wish I had succeeded, because in all likelihood I did succeed, on each and every occasion. Six deaths. No, not just six. An infinite number.

Times six.

There are greater and lesser infinities.

But I didn't know that then.

I was only sixty years old.

I had lived all my life in the city of Toronto. I worked thirty-five years as a senior accountant for a Great Lakes cargo brokerage called Steamships Forwarding, Ltd., and took an early retirement in 1997, not long before Lorraine was diagnosed with the pancreatic cancer that killed her the following year. Back then she worked part-time in a Harbord Street used-book shop called Finders, a short walk from the university district, in a part of the city we both loved.

I still loved it, even without Lorraine, though the gloss had dimmed considerably. I lived there still, in a utility apartment over an antique store, and I often walked the neighborhood—down Spadina into the candy-bright intricacies of Chinatown, or west to Kensington, foreign as a Bengali marketplace, where the smell of spices and ground coffee mingled with the stink of sun-ripened fish.

Usually I avoided Harbord Street. My grief was raw enough without the provocation of the bookstore and its awkward memories. Today, however, the sky was a radiant blue, and the smell of spring blossoms and cut grass made the city seem threatless. I walked east from Kensington with a mesh bag filled with onions and Havarti cheese, and soon enough found myself on Harbord Street, which had moved another notch upscale since the old days, more restaurants now, fewer macrobiotic shops, the palm

readers and bead shops banished for good and all.

But Finders was still there. It was a tar-shingled Victorian house converted for retail, its hanging sign faded to illegibility. A three-legged cat slumbered on the cracked concrete stoop.

I went in impulsively, but also because the owner, an old man by the name of Oscar Ziegler, had sent an elaborate bouquet to Lorraine's funeral the previous year, and I felt I owed him some acknowledgment. According to Lorraine he lived upstairs and never left the building.

The bookstore hadn't changed on the inside, either, since the last time I had seen it. I didn't know it well (the store was Lorraine's turf and as a rule I had left her to it), but there was no obvious evidence that more than a year had passed since my last visit. It was the kind of shop with so much musty stock and so few customers that it could have survived only under the most generous circumstances—no doubt Ziegler owned the building and had found a way to finesse his property taxes. The store was not a labor of love, I suspected, so much as an excuse for Ziegler to indulge his pack-rat tendencies.

It was a full nest of books. The walls were pineboard shelves, floor to ceiling. Free-standing shelves divided the small interior into box canyons and dimly lit hedgerows. The stock was old and, not that I'm any judge, largely trivial, forgotten jazz-age novels and belles-lettres, literary flotsam.

I stepped past cardboard boxes from which more books overflowed, to the rear of the store, where a cash desk had been wedged against the wall. This was where, for much of the last five years of her life, Lorraine had spent her weekday afternoons. I wondered whether book dust was carcinogenic. Maybe she had been poisoned by the turgid air, by the floating fragments of ivoried Frank Yerby novels, vagrant molecules of *Peyton Place* and *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*.

Someone else sat behind the desk now, a different woman, younger than Lorraine, though not what anyone would call young. A baby-boomer in denim overalls and a pair of eyeglasses that might have better suited the Hubble space telescope. Shoulder-length hair, gone gray, and an ingratiating smile, though there was something faintly haunted about the woman.

"Hi," she said amiably. "Anything I can help you find?"

"Is Oscar Ziegler around?"

Her eyes widened. "Uh, Mr. Ziegler? He's upstairs, but he doesn't usually like to be disturbed. Is he expecting you?"

She seemed astonished at the possibility that Ziegler would be expecting anyone, or that anyone would want to see Ziegler. Maybe it was a bad idea. "No," I said, "I just dropped by on the chance… you know, my wife used to work here."

"I see."

"Please don't bother him. I'll just browse for a while."

"Are you a book collector, or—?"

"Hardly. These days I read the newspaper. The only books I've kept are old paperbacks. Not the sort of thing Mr. Ziegler would stock."

"You'd be surprised. Mysteries? Chandler, Hammett, John Dickson Carr? Because we have some firsts over by the stairs…"

"I used to read some mysteries. Mostly, though, it was science fiction I liked."

"Really? You look more like a mystery reader."

"There's a look?"

She laughed. "Tell you what. Science fiction? We got a box of paperbacks in last week. Right over there, under the ladder. Check it out, and I'll tell Mr. Ziegler you're here. Uh—"

"My name is Keller. Bill Keller. My wife was Lorraine."

She held out her hand. "I'm Deirdre. Just have a look; I'll be back in a jiff."

I wanted to stop her but didn't know how. She went through a bead curtain and up a dim flight of stairs while I pulled a leathery cardboard box onto a chair seat and prepared for some dutiful time-killing. Certainly I didn't expect to find anything I wanted, though I would probably have to buy something as the price of a courtesy call, especially if Ziegler was coaxed out of his lair to greet me. But what I had told Deirdre was true; though I had been an eager reader in my youth, I hadn't bought more than an occasional softcover since 1970. Fiction is a young man's pastime. I had ceased to be curious about other people's lives, much less other worlds.

Still, the box was full of forty-year-old softcover books, Ace and Ballantine paperbacks mainly, and it was nice to see the covers again, the Richard Powers abstracts, translucent bubbles on infinite plains, or Jack Gaughan sketches, angular and insectile. Titles rich with key words: Time, Space, Worlds, Infinity. Once I had loved this sort of thing.

And then, amongst these faded jewels, I found something I did not expect—

And another. And another.

The bead curtain parted and Ziegler entered the room.

He was a bulky man, but he moved with the exaggerated caution of the frail. A plastic tube emerged from his nose, was taped to his cheek with a dirty Band-Aid and connected to an oxygen canister slung from his shoulder. He hadn't shaved for a couple of days. He wore what looked like a velveteen frock coat draped over a T-shirt and a pair of pinstriped pajama bottoms. His

hair, what remained of it, was feathery and white. His skin was the color of thrift-shop Tupperware.

Despite his appearance, he gave me a wide grin.

"Mr. Ziegler," I said. "I'm Bill Keller. I don't know if you remember—"

He thrust his pudgy hand forward. "Of course! No need to explain. Terrible about Lorraine. I think of her often." He turned to Deirdre, who emerged from the curtain behind him. "Mr. Keller's wife…" He drew a labored breath. "Died last year."

"I'm sorry," Deirdre said.

"She was… a wonderful woman. Friendly by nature. A joy. Of course, death isn't final… we all go on, I believe, each in his own way…"

There was more of this—enough that I regretted stopping by—but I couldn't doubt Ziegler's sincerity. Despite his intimidating appearance there was something almost wilfully childlike about him, a kind of embalmed innocence, if that makes any sense.

He asked how I had been and what I had been doing. I answered as cheerfully as I could and refrained from asking after his own health. His cheeks reddened as he stood, and I wondered if he shouldn't be sitting down. But he seemed to be enjoying himself. He eyed the five slender books I'd brought to the cash desk.

"Science fiction!" he said. "I wouldn't have taken you for a science fiction reader, Mr. Keller."

(Deirdre glanced at me: *Told you so!)*

"I haven't been a steady reader for a long time," I said. "But I found some interesting items."

"The good old stuff," Ziegler gushed. "The pure quill. Does

it strike you, Mr. Keller, that we live every day in the science fiction of our youth?"

"I hadn't noticed."

"There was a time when science seemed so sterile. It didn't yield up the wonders we had been led to expect. Only a bleak, lifeless solar system… half dozen desert worlds, baked or frozen, take your pick, and the gas giants… great roaring seas of methane and ammonia…"

I nodded politely.

"But now!" Ziegler exclaimed. "Life on Mars! Oceans under Europa! Comets plunging into Jupiter—!"

"I see what you mean."

"And here on Earth—the human genome, cloned animals, mind-altering drugs! Computer networks! Computer *viruses!*" He slapped his thigh. "I have a *Teflon hip*, if you can imagine such a thing!"

"Pretty amazing," I agreed, though I hadn't thought much about any of this.

"Back when we read these books, Mr. Keller, when we read Heinlein or Simak or Edmond Hamilton, we longed to immerse ourselves in the strange… the *outre*. And now—well—here we are!" He smiled breathlessly and summed up his thesis. "*Immersed in the strange*. All it takes is time. Just… time. Shall I put these in a bag for you?"

He bagged the books without looking at them. When I fumbled out my wallet, he raised his hand.

"No charge. This is for Lorraine. And to thank you for stopping by."

I couldn't argue… and I admit I didn't want to draw his attention to the paperbacks, in the petty fear that he might notice

how unusual they were and refuse to part with them. I took the paper bag from his parchment hand, feeling faintly guilty.

"Perhaps you'll come back," he said.

"I'd like to."

"Anytime," Ziegler said, inching toward his bead curtain and the musty stairway behind it, back into the cloying dark. "Anything you're looking for, I can help you find it."

Crossing College Street, freighted with groceries, I stepped into the path of a car, a yellow Hyundai racing a red light. The driver swerved around me, but it was a near thing. The wheel wells brushed my trouser legs. My heart stuttered a beat.

… and I died, perhaps, a small infinity of times.

Probabilities collapse. I become increasingly unlikely.

"Immersed in the strange," Ziegler had said.

But had I ever wanted that? *Really* wanted that?

"Be careful," Lorraine told me one evening in the long month before she died. Amazingly, she had seemed to think of it as my tragedy, not hers. "Don't despise life."

Difficult advice.

Did I "despise life"? I think I did not; that is, there were times when the world seemed a pleasant enough place, times when a cup of coffee and a morning in the sun seemed good enough reasons to continue to draw breath. I remained capable of smiling at babies. I was even able to look at an attractive young woman and feel a response more immediate than nostalgia.

But I missed Lorraine terribly, and we had never had children, neither of us had any close living relations or much in the way of

friends; I was unemployed and unemployable, confined forever-more within the contracting walls of my pension and our modest savings… all the joy and much of the simple structure of my life had been leeched away, and the future looked like more of the same, a protracted fumble toward the grave.

If anything postponed the act of suicide it wasn't courage or principle but the daily trivia. I would kill myself (I decided more than once), but not until after the nightly news… not until I paid the electric bill… not until I had taken my walk.

Not until I solved the mystery I'd brought home from Finders.

I won't describe the books in detail. They looked more or less like others of their kind. What was strange about them was that I didn't recognize them, although this was a genre (paperback science fiction of the 1950s and '60s) I had once known in intimate detail.

The shock was not just unfamiliarity, since I might have missed any number of minor works by minor writers; but these were major novels by well-known names, not retitled works or variant editions. A single example: I sat down that night with a book called *The Stone Pillow*, by a writer whose identity any science fiction follower would instantly recognize. It was a Signet paperback circa 1957, with a cover by the artist Paul Lehr in the period style. According to the credit slug, the story had been serialized in *Astounding* in 1946. The pages were browned at the margins; the glued spine was brittle as bone china. I handled the book carefully, but I couldn't resist reading it, and in so far as I was able to judge it was a plausible example of the late author's well-known style and habits of thought. I enjoyed it a great deal and went to bed convinced of its authenticity. Either I had missed it, somehow—in the days when *not* missing such things meant a great deal to me—or it had slipped out of memory. No other explanation presented itself.

One such item wouldn't have worried me. But I had brought

home four more volumes equally inexplicable.

Chalk it up to age, I thought. Or worse. Senility. Alzheimer's. Either way, a bad omen.

Sleep was elusive.

The next logical step might have been to see a doctor. Instead, the next morning I thumbed through the yellow pages for a used-book dealer who specialized in period science fiction. After a couple of calls I reached a young man named Niemand who offered to evaluate the books if I brought them to him that afternoon.

I told him I'd be there by one.

If nothing else, it was an excuse to prolong my life one more interminable day.

Niemand—his store was an overheated second-story loft over a noisy downtown street—gave the books a long, thoughtful examination.

"Fake," he said finally. "They're fake."

"Fake? You mean… counterfeit?"

"If you like, but that's stretching a point. Nobody counterfeits books, even valuable books. The idea is ludicrous. I mean, what do you do, set up a press and go through all the work of producing a bound volume, duplicate the type, flaws and all, and then flog it on the collector's market? You'd never recoup your expenses, not even if you came up with a convincing Gutenburg Bible. In the case of books like this, the idea's doubly absurd. Maybe if they were one-off from an abandoned print run or something, but, hell, people would know about that. Nope. Sorry, but these are just… fake."

"But—well, obviously, somebody did go to the trouble of

faking them."

He nodded. "Obviously. It's flawless work, and it can't have been cheap. And the books are genuinely old. *Contemporary* fakes, maybe… maybe some obsessive fan with a big disposable income, rigging up books he wanted to exist…"

"Are they valuable?"

"They're certainly odd. Valuable? Not to me. Tell you the truth, I kind of wish you hadn't brought them in."

"Why?"

"They're creepy. They're too good. Kind of *X-Files*." He gave me a sour grin. "Make up your own science fiction story."

"Or live in it," I said. We live in the science fiction of our youth.

He pushed the books across his cluttered desk. "Take 'em away, Mr. Keller. And if you find out where they came from—"

"Yes?"

"I really don't want to know."

Items I noticed in the newspaper that evening:

GENE THERAPY RENDERS HEART BYPASS OBSOLETE

BANK OF ZURICH FIRST WITH QUANTUM ENCRYPTION

SETI RESEARCHERS SPOT "POSSIBLE" ET RADIO SOURCE

I didn't want to go back to Ziegler, not immediately. It felt like admitting defeat—like looking up the answer to a magazine puzzle I couldn't solve.

But there was no obvious next step to take, so I put the whole thing out of my mind, or tried to; watched television, did laundry, shined my shoes.

None of this pathetic sleight of hand provided the slightest distraction.

I was not (just as I had told Deirdre) a mystery lover, and I didn't love this mystery, but it was a turbulence in the flow of the passing days, therefore interesting. When I had savored the strangeness of it to a satisfying degree, I took myself in hand and carried the books back to Finders, meaning to demand an explanation.

Oscar Ziegler was expecting me.

The late-May weather was already too humid, a bright sun bearing down from the ozone-depleted sky. Walking wasn't such a pleasure under the circumstances. I arrived at Finders plucking my shirt away from my body. Graceless. The woman Deirdre looked up from her niche at the rear of the store. "Mr. Keller, right?" She didn't seem especially pleased to see me.

I meant to ask if Ziegler was available, but she waved me off: "He said if you showed up you were to go on upstairs. That's, uh, really unusual."

"Shouldn't you let him know I'm here?"

"Really, he's expecting you." She waved at the bead curtain, almost a challenge: Go on, if you must.

The curtain made a sound like chattering teeth behind me. The stairway was dim. Dust balls quivered on the risers and clung to the threadbare coco-mat tread. At the top was a door silted under so many layers of ancient paint that the molding had

softened into gentle dunes.

Ziegler opened the door and waved me in.

His room was lined with books. He stepped back, settled himself into an immense overstuffed easy chair, and invited me to look at his collection. But the titles at eye level were disappointing. They were old cloth volumes of Gurdjieff and Ouspenski, Velikovsky and Crowley—the usual pseudo-gnostic spiritualist bullshit, pardon my language. Like the room itself, the books radiated dust and boredom. I felt obscurely disappointed. So this was Oscar Ziegler, one more pathetic old man with a penchant for magic and cabalism.

Between the books, medical supplies: inhalers, oxygen tanks, pill bottles.

Ziegler might be old, but his eyesight was still keen. "Judging by the expression on your face, you find my den distasteful."

"Not at all."

"Oh, fess up, Mr. Keller. You're too old to be polite and I'm too old to pretend I don't notice."

I gestured at the books. "I was never much for the occult."

"That's understandable. It's claptrap, really. I keep those volumes for nostalgic reasons. To be honest, there was a time when I looked there for answers. That time is long past."

"I see."

"Now tell me why you came."

I showed him the softcover books, told him how I'd taken them to Niemand for a professional assessment. Confessed my own bafflement.

Ziegler took the books into his lap. He looked at them briefly and took a long drag from his oxygen mask. He didn't seem especially impressed. "I'm hardly responsible for every volume that

comes into the store."

"Of course not. And I'm not complaining. I just wondered—"

"If I knew where they came from? If I could offer you a meaningful explanation?"

"Basically, yes."

"Well," Ziegler said. "Well. Yes and no. Yes and no."

"I'm sorry?"

"That is… no, I can't tell you precisely where they came from. Deirdre probably bought them from someone off the street. Cash or credit, and I don't keep detailed records. But it doesn't really matter."

"Doesn't it?"

He took another lungful from the oxygen bottle. "Oh, it could have been anyone. Even if you tracked down the original vendor—which I guarantee you won't be able to do—you wouldn't learn anything useful."

"You don't seem especially surprised by this."

"Implying that I know more than I'm saying." He smiled ruefully. "I've never been in this position before, though you're right, it doesn't surprise me. Did you know, Mr. Keller, that I am immortal?"

Here we go, I thought. The pitch. Ziegler didn't care about the books. I had come for an explanation; he wanted to sell me a religion.

"And *you*, Mr. Keller. You're immortal, too."

What was I doing here, in this shabby place with this shabby old man? There was nothing to say.

"But I can't explain it," Ziegler went on; "that is, not in the

depth it deserves. There's a volume here—I'll lend it to you—" He stood, precariously, and huffed across the room.

I looked at his books again while he rummaged for the volume in question. Below the precambrian deposits of the occult was a small sediment of literature. First editions, presumably valuable.

And not all familiar.

Had Ernest Hemingway written a book called *Pamplona?* (But here it was, its Scribners dust jacket protected in brittle mylar.) *Cromwell and Company*, by Charles Dickens? *Under the Absolute*, by Aldous Huxley?

"Ah, books." Ziegler, smiling, came up behind me. "They bob like corks on an ocean. Float between worlds, messages in bottles. This will tell you what you need to know."

The book he gave me was cheaply made, with a utilitarian olive-drab jacket. *You Will Never Die*, by one Carl G. Soziere.

"Come back when you've read it."

"I will," I lied.

"I had a feeling," Deirdre said, "you'd come downstairs with one of those."

The Soziere book. "You've heard of it?"

"Not until I took this job. Mr. Ziegler gave me a copy. But I speak from experience. Every once in a long while, somebody comes in with a question or a complaint. They go upstairs. And they come back down with *that*."

At which point I realized I had left the paperbacks in Ziegler's room. I suppose I could have gone back for them, but it seemed somehow churlish. But it was a loss. Not that I loved the books, particularly, but they were the only concrete evidence I had of the

mystery—they *were* the mystery. Now Ziegler had them back in his possession. And I had *You Will Never Die*.

"It looks like a crank book."

"Oh, it is," Deirdre said. "Kind of a parallel-worlds argument, you know, J.W. Dunne and so on, with some quantum physics thrown in; actually, I'm surprised a major publisher didn't pick it up."

"You've read it?"

"I'm a sucker for that kind of thing, if you want the truth."

"Don't tell me. It changed your life." I was smiling.

She smiled back. "It didn't even change my mind."

But there was an odd note of worry in her voice.

Of course I read it.

Deirdre was right about *You Will Never Die*. It had been published by some private or vanity press, but the writing wasn't crude. It was slick, even witty in places.

And the argument was seductive. Shorn of the babble about Planck radii and Prigogine complexity and the Dancing Wu-Li Masters, it came down to this:

Consciousness, like matter, like energy, is preserved.

You are born, not an individual, but an infinity of individuals, in an infinity of identical worlds. "Consciousness," your individual awareness, is shared by this infinity of beings.

At birth (or at conception; Soziere wasn't explicit), this span of selves begins to divide, as alternate possibilities are indulged or rejected. The infant turns his head not to the left or to the right, but both. One infinity of worlds becomes two; then four; then eight, and so on, exponentially.

But the underlying essence of consciousness continues to connect all these disparate possibilities.

The upshot? Soziere says it all in his title.

You cannot die.

Consider. Suppose, tomorrow afternoon, you walk in front of a speeding eighteen-wheeler. The grillwork snaps your neck and what remains of you is sausaged under the chassis. Do you die? Well, yes; an infinity of you *does* die; but infinity is divisible by itself. Another infinity of you steps out of the path of the truck, or didn't leave the house that day, or recovers in hospital. The you-ness of you doesn't die; it simply continues to reside in those remnant selves.

An infinite set has been subtracted from infinity; but what remains, remains infinite.

The subjective experience is that the accident simply doesn't happen.

Consider that bottle of clonazepam I keep beside the bed. Six times I reached for it, meaning to kill myself. Six times stopped myself.

In the great wilderness of worlds, I must have succeeded more often than I failed. My cold and vomit-stained corpse was carted off to whatever grave or urn awaits it, and a few acquaintances briefly mourned.

But that's not *me*. By definition, you can't experience your own death. Death is the end of consciousness. And consciousness persists. In the language of physics, consciousness is conserved.

I am the one who wakes up in the morning.

Always.

Every morning.

I don't die.

I just become increasingly *unlikely*.

I spent the next few days watching television, folding laundry, trimming my nails—spinning my wheels.

I tossed Soziere's little tome into a corner and left it there.

And when I was done kidding myself, I went to see Deirdre.

I didn't even know her last name. All I knew was that she had read Soziere's book and remained skeptical of it, and I was eager to have my own skepticism refreshed.

You think odd things, sometimes, when you're too often alone.

I caught Deirdre on her lunch break. Ziegler didn't come downstairs to man the desk; the store simply closed between noon and one every weekday. The May heat wave had broken; the sky was a soft, deep blue, the air balmy. We sat at a sidewalk table outside a lunch-and-coffee restaurant.

Her full name was Deirdre Frank. She was fifty and unmarried and had run her own retail business until some legal difficulty closed her down. She was working at Finders while she reorganized her life. And she understood why I had come to her.

"There's a couple of tests I apply," she said, "whenever I read this kind of book. First, is it likely to improve anyone's life? Which is a trickier question than it sounds. Any number of people will tell you they found happiness with the Scientologists or the Moonies or whatever, but what that usually means is they narrowed their focus—they can't see past the bars of their cage. Okay, *You Will Never Die* isn't a cult book, but I doubt it will make anybody a better person.

"Second, is there any way to test the author's claims? Soziere aced that one beautifully, I have to admit. His argument is that there's no *subjective* experience of death—your family might die,

your friends, your grade-school teachers, the Princess of Wales, but never *you*. And in some other world, you die and other people go on living. How do you prove such a thing? Obviously, you can't. What Soziere tries to do is *infer* it, from quantum physics and lots of less respectable sources. It's a bubble theory—it floats over the landscape, touching nothing."

I was probably blushing by this time.

Deirdre said, "You took it seriously, didn't you? Or half seriously…"

"Half at most. I'm not stupid. But it's an appealing idea."

Her eyes widened. "*Appealing?*"

"Well—there are people who've died. People I miss. I like to think of them going on somewhere, even if it isn't a place I can reach."

She was aghast. "God, no! Soziere's book isn't a fairy tale, Mr. Keller—it's a horror story!"

"Pardon me?"

"Think about it! At first it sounds like an invitation to suicide. You don't like where you are, put a pistol in your mouth and go somewhere else—somewhere better, maybe, even if it is inherently less likely. But take you for example. You're what, sixty years old? Or so? Well, great, you inhabit a universe where a healthy human being can obtain the age of sixty, fine, but what next? Maybe you wake up tomorrow morning and find out they cured cancer, say, or heart disease—excluding you from all the worlds where William Keller dies of a colon tumor or an aneurism. And then? You're a hundred years old, a hundred and twenty—do you turn into some kind of freak? So unlikely, in Soziere's sense, that you end up in a circus or a research ward? Do they clone you a fresh body? Do you end up as some kind of half-human robot, a brain in a bottle? And in the meantime the world changes around you, everything familiar

is left behind, you see others die, maybe millions of others, maybe the human race dies out or evolves into something else, and you go on, and on, while the universe groans under the weight of your unlikeliness, and there's no escape, every death is just another rung up the ladder of weirdness and disorientation…"

I hadn't thought of it that way.

Yes, the *reductio ad absurdum* of Soziere's theory was a kind of relativistic paradox: as the observer's life grows more unlikely, he perceives the world around him becoming proportionately more strange; and down those unexplored, narrow rivers of mortality might well lie a cannibal village.

Or the Temple of Gold.

What if Deirdre was too pessimistic? What if, among the all the unlikely worlds, there was one in which Lorraine had survived her cancer?

Wouldn't that be worth waiting for?

Worth *looking* for, no matter how strange the consequences might be?

News items that night:

NEURAL IMPLANTS RESTORE VISION IN FIFTEEN PATIENTS

"TELOMERASE COCKTAIL" CREATES IMMORTAL LAB MICE

TWINNED NEUTRON STARS POSE POTENTIAL THREAT, NASA SAYS

My sin was longing.

Not grief. Grief isn't a sin, and is anyway unavoidable. Yes, I grieved for Lorraine, grieved long and hard, but I don't remember having a choice. I miss her still. Which is as it should be.

But I had given in too often to the vulgar yearnings. Mourned youth, mourned better days. Made an old man's map of roads not taken, from the stale perspective of a dead end.

Reached for the clonazepam and turned my hand away, freighted every inch with deaths beyond counting.

I wonder if my captors understand this?

I went back to Ziegler—nodding at Deirdre, who was disappointed to see me, as I vanished behind the bead curtain.

"This doesn't explain it." I gave him back *You Will Never Die*.

"Explain," Ziegler said guilelessly, "what?"

"The paperbacks I bought from you."

"I don't recall."

"Or these—"

I turned to his bookshelf.

Copies of *In Our Time, Our Mutual Friend, Beyond the Mexique Bay*.

"I didn't realize they needed explaining."

I was the victim of a conjuror's trick, gulled and embarrassed. I closed my mouth.

"Anomalous experience," Ziegler said knowingly. "You're right, Soziere doesn't explain it. Personally I think there must be a kind of critical limit—a degree of accumulated unlikeliness so great that the illusion of normalcy can no longer be wholly sustained." He smiled, not pleasantly. "Things leak. I think especially books,

books being little islands of mind. They trail their authors across phenomenological borders like lost puppies. That's why I love them. But you're awfully young to experience such phenomena. You must have made yourself very unlikely indeed—more and more unlikely, day after day! What have you been *doing* to yourself, Mr. Keller?"

I left him sucking oxygen from a fogged plastic mask.

Reaching for the bottle of clonazepam.

Drawing back my hand.

But how far must the charade proceed? Does the universe gauge intent? What if I touch the bottle? What if I open it and peer inside?

(These questions, of course, are answered now. I have only myself to blame.)

I had tumbled a handful of the small white tablets into my hand and was regarding them with the cool curiosity of an entomologist when the telephone rang.

Pills or telephone?

Both, presumably, in Soziere's multiverse.

I answered the phone.

It was Deirdre. "He's dead," she told me. "Ziegler. I thought you should know."

I said, "I'm sorry."

"I'm taking care of the arrangements. He was so alone… no family, no friends, just nothing."

"Will there be a service?"

"He wanted to be cremated. You're welcome to come. It might be nice if somebody besides me showed up."

"I will. What about the store?"

"That's the crazy part. According to the bank, he left it to *me*." Her voice was choked with emotion. "Can you imagine that? I never even called him by his first name! To be honest—oh, God, I didn't even *like* him! Now he leaves me this tumbledown business of his!"

I told her I'd see her at the mortuary.

I paid no attention to the news that night, save to register the lead stories, which were ominous and strange.

We live, Ziegler had said, in the science fiction of our youth.

The "ET signals" NASA scientists had discovered were, it turned out, a simple star map, at the center of which was—not the putative aliens' home world—but a previously undiscovered binary neutron star in the constellation Orion.

The message, one astronomer speculated, might be a warning. Neutron-star pairs are unstable. When they eventually collide, drawn together by their enormous gravity, the collision produces a black hole—and in the process a burst of gamma rays and cosmic radiation, strong enough to scour the Earth of life if the event occurs within some two or three thousand light-years of us.

The freshly discovered neutron stars were well within that range. As for the collision, it might happen in ten years, a thousand, ten thousand—none of the quoted authorities would commit to a date, though estimates had been shrinking daily.

Nice of our neighbors to warn us, I thought.

But how long had that warning bell been ringing, and for how many centuries had we ignored it?

Deirdre's description of the Soziere book as a "bubble theory" haunted me.

No proof, no evidence could exist: that was ruled out by the theory itself—or at least, as Ziegler had implied, there would be no evidence one could share.

But there *had* been evidence, at least in my case: the paperback books, "anomalous" books imported, presumably, from some other timeline, a history I had since lost to cardiac arrest, a car accident, clonazepam.

But the books were gone.

I had traded them, in effect, for *You Will Never Die*.

Which I had returned to Oscar Ziegler.

Cup your hands as you might. The water runs through your fingers.

There was only the most rudimentary service at the crematorium where Ziegler's body was burned. A few words from an Episcopal minister Deirdre had hired for the occasion, an earnest young man in clerical gear and neatly pressed Levis who pronounced his consolations and hurried away as if late for another function. Deirdre said, afterward, "I don't know if I've been given a gift or an obligation. For a man who never left his room, Mr. Ziegler had a way of weaving people into his life." She shook her head sadly. "If any of it really matters. I mean, if we're not devoured by aliens or God knows what. You can't turn on the news these days… Well, I guess he bailed out just in time."

Or moved on. Moved someplace where his emphysema was curable, his failing heart reparable, his aging cells regenerable. Shunting the train Oscar Ziegler along a more promising if less plausible track…

"The evidence," I said suddenly.

"What?"

"The books I told you about."

"Oh. Right. Well, I'm sorry, but I didn't get a good look at them." She frowned. "Is *that* what you're thinking? Oh, shit, that fucking Soziere book of his! It's *bait*, Mr. Keller, don't you get it? Not to speak ill of the dead, but he loved to suck people into whatever cloistered little mental universe he inhabited, misery loves company, and that book was always the bait—"

"No," I said, excited despite my best intentions, as if Ziegler's cremation had been a message, his personal message to me, that the universe discarded bodies like used Kleenex but that consciousness was continuous, seamless, immortal… "I mean about the evidence. You didn't see it—but someone did."

"Leave it alone. You don't understand about Ziegler. Oscar Ziegler was a sour, poisonous old man. Maybe older than he looked. That's what I thought of when I read Soziere's book: Oscar Ziegler, someone so ridiculously old that he wakes up every morning surprised he's still a human being." She stared fiercely at me. "What exactly are you contemplating here—serial suicide?"

"Nothing so drastic."

I thanked her and left.

The paradox of proof.

I went to Niemand's store as soon as I left Deirdre.

I had shown the books to Niemand, the book dealer. He was the impossible witness, the corroborative testimony. If Niemand had seen the books, then I was sane; if Niemand had seen the books they might well turn up among Ziegler's possessions, and I could establish their true provenance and put all this dangerous Soziere mythology behind me.

But Niemand's little second-story loft store had closed. The sign was gone. The door was locked and the space was for lease.

Neither the jeweler downstairs nor the coffee-shop girl next door remembered the store, its clientele, or Niemand himself.

There was no Niemand in the phone book. Nor could I find his commercial listing. Not even in my yellow pages at home, where I had first looked it up.

Or remembered looking it up.

Anomalous experience.

Which constituted proof, of a kind, though Ziegler was right; it was not transferable. I could convince no one, ultimately, save myself.

The television news was full of apocalypse that night. A rumor had swept the Internet that the great gamma-ray burst was imminent, only days away. No, it was not, scientists insisted, but they allowed themselves to be drawn by their CNN inquisitors into hypothetical questions. Would there be any safe place? A half-mile underground, say, or two, or three? (*Probably not*, they admitted; or, *We don't have the full story yet.)*

To a man, or woman, they looked unsettled and skittish.

I went to bed knowing she was out there, Lorraine, I mean, out among the plenitude of worlds and stars. Alone, perhaps, since I must have died to her—infinities apart, certainly, but enclosed within the same inconceivably vast multiuniverse, as alike, in our way, as two snowflakes in an avalanche.

I slept with the pill bottle cradled in my hand.

The trick, I decided, was to abandon the charade, to *mean* the act.

In other words, to swallow twenty or thirty tablets—a more difficult act than you might imagine—and wash them down with a neat last shot of Glenlivet.

But Deirdre called.

Almost too late.

Not late enough.

I picked up the phone, confused, my hands butting the receiver like antagonistic parade balloons. I said, or meant to say, "Lorraine?"

But it was Deirdre, only Deirdre, and before long Deirdre was shouting in an annoying way. I let the phone drop.

I suppose she called 911.

2.

I woke in a hospital bed.

I lay there passively for more than an hour, by the digital clock on the bedstand, cresting waves of sleep and wondering at the silence, until I was visited by Candice.

Her name was written on her lapel tag. Candice was a nurse, with a throaty Jamaican accent and wide, sad eyes.

"You're awake," she said, barely glancing at me.

My head hurt. My mouth tasted of ashes and quicklime. I needed to pee, but there was a catheter in the way.

"I think I want to see a doctor," I managed.

"Prob'ly you do," Candice agreed. "And prob'ly you should. But our last resident went home yesterday. I can take the catheter out, if that's what you want."

"There are no doctors?"

"Home with their families like everybody else." She fluffed my pillow. "Only us pathetic lonelyhearts left, Mr. Keller. You been unconscious ten days."

Later she wheeled me down the corridor—though I insisted I could have walked—to a lounge with a tall plateglass window, where the ward's remaining patients had gathered to talk and weep and watch the fires that burned fitfully through the downtown core.

Soziere's curse. We become—or we make ourselves—less "likely." But it's not our own unlikeliness we perceive; instead, we see the world growing strange around us.

The lights are out all over the city. The hospital, fortunately, has its own generator. I tried to call Deirdre from a hospital phone, but there was no dial tone, just a crackling hiss, like the last groove in an LP record.

The previous week's newspapers, stacked by the door of the hospital lounge, were dwindling broadsheets containing nothing but stark outlines of the impending gamma-ray disaster.

The extraterrestrial warning had been timely. Timely, though we read it far too late. Apparently it not only identified the threatening binary neutron stars—which were spiraling at last into gaudy destruction, about to emit a burst of radiation brighter than a billion galaxies—but provided a calculable time scale.

A countdown, in other words, which had already closed in on its ultimate zero. Too close to home, a black hole was about to be born.

None of us would survive that last flash of annihilating fire.

Or, at least, if we did, we would all become extremely unlikely.

I remember a spot of blue luminescence roughly the size of a dinner plate at arm's length, suspended above the burning city: Cherenkov radiation. Gamma rays fractured molecules in the upper atmosphere, loading the air with nitric oxides the color of dry blood. The sky was frying like a bad picture tube.

The hard, ionizing radiation would arrive within hours. Cosmic rays striking the wounded atmosphere would trigger particle cascades, washing the crust of the Earth with what the papers called "high-energy muons."

I was tired of the ward lounge, the incessant weeping and periodic shouting.

Candice took me aside. "I'll tell you," she said, "what I told the others. I been into the medicine cupboard. If you don't want to wait, there are pills you can take."

The air smelled suddenly of burning plastic. Static electricity drew bright blue sparks from metal shelves and gurney carts. Surely this would be the end: the irrevocable death, the utter annihilation, if there can ever be an end.

I told Candice a nightcap might be a good idea, and she smiled wanly and brought me the pills.

3.

They want me to keep on with my memoirs.

They take the pages away from me, exchange them for greater rations of food.

The food is pale, chalky, with the claylike texture of goat cheese. They excrete it from a sort of spinerette, white obscene lumps of it, like turds.

I prefer to think of them as advanced machines rather than biological entities—vending machines, say, not the eight-foot-long centipedes they appear to be.

They've mastered the English language. (I don't know how.) They say "please" and "thank you." Their voices are thin and reedy, a sound like tree branches creaking on a windy winter night.

They tell me I've been dead for ten thousand years.

Today they let me out of my bubble, let me walk outside, with a sort of mirrored umbrella to protect me from the undiluted sunlight.

The sunlight is intense, the air cold and thin. They have explained, in patient but barely intelligible whispers, that the gamma ray burst and subsequent bath of cosmic radiation stripped the earth of its ozone layer as well as much of the upper atmosphere. The oxygen that remains, they say, is "fossil" oxygen, no longer replenished. The soil is alive with radioactive nuclei: samarium 146, iodine 129, isotopes of lead, of plutonium.

There is no macroscopic life on Earth. Present company excepted.

Everything died. People, plants, plankton, everything but the bacteria inhabiting the rocks of the deep mantle or the scalding water around undersea volcanic vents. The surface of the planet—here, at least—has been scoured by wind and radiation into a rocky desert.

All this happened ten thousand years ago. The sun shines

placidly on the lifeless soil, the distant blue-black mountains.

Everything I loved is dead.

I can't imagine the technology they used to resurrect me, to re-create me, as they insist, from desiccated fragments of biological tissue tweezed from rocks. It's not just my DNA they have recovered but (apparently, somehow) my memories, my self, my consciousness.

I suppose Carl Soziere wouldn't be surprised.

I ask about others, other survivors reclaimed from the waterless desert. My captors (or saviors) only spindle their sickeningly mobile bodies: a gesture of negation, I've come to understand, the equivalent of a shake of the head. There are no other survivors.

And yet I can't help wondering whether Lorraine waits to be salvaged from her grave—some holographic scrap of her, at least; information scattered by time, like the dust of an ancient book.

There is nothing in my transparent cell but bowls of water and food, a floor soft enough to serve as a mattress, and the blunted writing instruments and clothlike paper. (Are they afraid I might commit suicide?)

The memoirs run out. I want the extra food, and I enjoy the diversion of writing, but what remains to be said? And to whom?

Lately I've learned to distinguish between my captors.

The "leader" (that is, the individual most likely to address me directly and see that others attend to my needs) is a duller shade of silver-white, his cartilaginous shell dusted with fine powder. He (or she) possesses many orifices, all visible when he sways back to

speak. I have identified his speaking orifice and his food-excreting orifice, but there are three others I haven't seen in use, including a tooth-lined maw that must be a kind of mouth.

"We are the ones who warned you," he tells me. "For half of a million years we warned you. If you had known, you might have protected yourself." His grammar is impeccable, to my ears anyway, although consonants in close proximity make him stumble and hiss. "You might have deconstructed your moon, created a shield, as we did. Numerous strategies might have succeeded in preserving your world."

The tocsin had sounded, in other words, for centuries. We had simply been too dull to interpret it, until the very end, when nothing could be done to counter the threat.

I try not to interpret this as a rebuke.

"Now we have learned to transsect distance," the insectile creature explains. "Then, we could only signal."

I ask whether he could re-create the Earth, revive the dead.

"No," he says. Perhaps the angle of his body signifies regret. "One of you is puzzle enough."

They live apart from me, in an immense silver half-sphere embedded in the alkaline soil. Their spaceship?

For a day they haven't come. I sit alone in my own much smaller shelter, its bubble walls polarized to filter the light but transparent enough to show the horizon with vicious clarity. I feel abandoned, a fly on a vast pane of dusty glass. And hungry. And thirsty.

They return—apologetically—with water, with paper and writing implements, and with a generous supply of food,

thoughtfully pre-excreted.

They are compiling, they tell me, a sort of interstellar database, combining the functions of library, archeological museum, and telephone exchange. They are most grateful for my writings, which have been enthusiastically received. "Your cosmology," by which they must mean Soziere's cosmology, "is quite distinctive."

I thank them but explain that there is nothing more to write—and no audience I can even begin to imagine.

The news perplexes them. The leader asks, "Do you need a human audience?"

Yes. Yes, that's what I need. A human audience. Lorraine, warning me away from despair, or even Deirdre, trying vainly to shield me from black magic.

They confer for another day.

I walk outside my bubble at sunset, alone, with my silver umbrella tilted toward the western horizon. When the stars appear, they are astonishingly bright and crisp. I can see the frosted breath of the Milky Way.

"We cannot create a human audience for you," the leader says, swaying in a chill noon breeze like a stately elm. "But there is perhaps a way."

I wait. I am infinitely patient.

"We have experimented with time," the creature announces. Or I think the word is "experimented." It might as easily have been the clacking buzz of a cricket or a cicada.

"Send me back," I demand at once.

"No, not you, not physical objects. It cannot be done. Thoughts, perhaps. Dreams. Speaking to minds long dead. Of

course, it changes nothing."

I rather like the idea, when they explain it, of my memoirs circulating through the Terrestrial past, appearing fragmented and unintelligible among the night terrors of Neanderthals, Cro-Magnons, Roman slaves, Chinese peasants, science fiction writers, drunken poets. And Deirdre Frank, and Oscar Ziegler. And Lorraine.

Even the faintest touch—belated, impossible—is better than none at all.

But still. I find it difficult to write.

"In that case," the leader says, "we would like to salvage you."

"Salvage me?"

They consult in their own woody, windy language, punctuated by long silences or sounds I cannot hear.

"Preserve you," they conclude. "Yourself. Your soul."

And how would they do that?

"I would take you into my body," the leader says.

Eat me, in other words. They have explained this more than once. Devour my body, hoc est corpus, and spit out my soul like a cherry pit into the great galactic telephone exchange.

"But this is how we must do it," the leader says apologetically.

I don't fear them.

I take a long last walk, at night, bundled against the cold in layers of flexible foil. The stars have not changed visibly in the ten thousand years of my absence, but there is nothing else familiar, no recognizable landmarks, I gather, anywhere on the surface of the

planet. This might be an empty lake bed, this desert of mine, saline and ancient and, save for the distant mountains, flat as a chessboard.

I don't fear them. They might be lying, I know, although I doubt it; surely not even the most alien of creatures would travel hundreds of light years to a dead planet in search of a single exotic snack.

I do fear their teeth, however, sharp as shark's teeth, even if (as they claim) their bodies secrete an anesthetic and euphoriant venom.

And death?

I don't fear death.

I dread the absence of it.

Maybe Soziere was wrong. Maybe there's a teleological escape clause, maybe all the frayed threads of time will be woven back together at the end of the world, assembled in the ultimate library, where all the books and all the dreams are preserved and ordered in their multiple infinities.

Or not.

I think, at last, of Lorraine: really think of her, I mean; imagine her next to me, whispering that I ought to have taken her advice, not lodged this grief so close to my heart; whispering that death is not a door through which I can follow her, no matter how hard or how often I try…

"Will you accept me?" the leader asks, rearing up to show his needled mouth, his venom sacs oozing a pleasant narcotic.

"I've accepted worse," I tell him.