

The Truce of the Bear

15 FEBRUARY 2037

At the Friends Meeting in College Park, Maryland—the town where Carrie Sharpless had lived the second, or post-meltdown, half of her very long life—a memorial service was in progress. According to Quaker custom, no one was actually running the service. People would stand in place and say something about Carrie. Then they would sit down, and there would be silence for a time while the assembly reflected upon what had been said, and then someone else would get up to speak.

It was all very informal and unrehearsed—very genuine. The only sour note, but it was a good loud one, came from the dozens of spectators crammed into the back benches and along the walls—local people, not friends of Carrie’s or members of the Meeting, who had crashed the service in hopes of getting a look at the Hefn, Humphrey, who’d been Carrie’s good friend. No public announcement had been made that Humphrey would attend, but the connection was known, and the possibility of hearing a Hefn deliver a eulogy for a human being had brought the gawkers out in force.

Whenever a Hefn appeared in public there were bound to be gawkers. Pam knew that and was used to it, but these annoyed her. Like the media, which had been prevented from entering, they were out of place at a private funeral. Scrunched into the second row between Humphrey and her ex-lover, Liam O’Hara, she tried to focus on what white-haired Frank Flintoft, a widower now, come

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alone all the way from his sheep farm in Yorkshire for this, had to say about his old, old friend.

Yorkshire farmers are men of few words. Pam could feel Liam tense up beside her as the gruff, brief speech came to its end; and almost as soon as Frank had sat down, Liam—a short, athletically built man in his late thirties, face soft and boyish under thinning brown hair—was on his feet.

On Pam's other side, Humphrey shifted his weight to peer intently up at his brightest pupil. The bench and the Hefn's oddly jointed body hadn't been meant for each other, and the cushion Pam had remembered to bring for him didn't seem to be helping much; he must be fairly miserable. But given Humphrey's fascination with human bonding, and his closeness to the people most affected by Carrie's death, Pam knew that wild horses couldn't have kept him away from this service, let alone mere acute physical discomfort. In fact, when the news of Carrie's stroke and prognosis had reached him, he'd decided at once to postpone hibernation in order not to miss out on her final rite of passage. This was passion, not ghoulishness; Humphrey had his own things to say about Carrie, and he wanted, with an avidity that was almost comical, to say those things—to truly include himself in the occasion.

Liam's hands gripped the back of the bench in front of him. "I knew Carrie all my life," he began. "She was my dad's cousin. Carrie and Matt didn't have kids of their own, and we all lived pretty close to each other in Philadelphia, so Carrie used to take my friend Jeff and me hiking in the park when we were little, with a bag of doughnuts and a thermos of hot tea . . ."

He spoke steadily enough, but Pam, who could read every slightest nuance in Liam's voice and face and general demeanor, knew how upset he was—how drawn and exhausted. His shapely hands, tight on the bench, were bone-white; and the parallel scars, which ran across the backs of his white hands and vanished up his jacket sleeves, stood up in rosy welts.

Abruptly, without willing or wishing it, Pam found herself remembering the time, just after their apprenticeship at the Bureau of Temporal Physics had ended, when the two of them had encountered the bear.



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June in the Poconos. Shiny new leaves everywhere, from oak canopy to blueberry undergrowth; mountain laurel in delicate, fading white bloom; blue sky, bright sunshine spangling the river, green violently overwhelming the winter brown all across the long low mountains. Pam and Liam, a matched set of newly-minted temporal technicians, going-on-eighteen and going-on-nineteen, on holiday together as Terry Carpenter's guests at his cabin on Lake Winnepaupack.

Day after day the warm, sunny weather holds. At Port Jervis they launch the canoe that had belonged to Jeff Carpenter, Liam's friend, and paddle it down the Delaware to the Water Gap—45 miles of mostly whitewater rapids—camping two nights on islands in the river. The shad have spawned and are dying; their floating multitudes of smellily unraveling corpses are all that qualify the delight of being on the river. The journey is highlighted by happier sightings: five bald eagles, dozens of great blue herons, mergansers and goldeneyes and geese, does and spring fawns coming down to drink, a porcupine or two, a trillion songbirds. Even before the alien Broadcast accelerated the process a decade ago, by putting human fertility on hold, wildlife of every sort had been increasing all through the protected upper Delaware valley. Pam identifies the birds by song, and calls out their names happily to tolerant Liam: summer tanager! song sparrow! Baltimore oriole! yellow warbler! towhee! chat! cardinal! She knows these eastern songbirds like the back of her hand, and will miss them out in California.

They reminisce a lot about their other canoe trip three years before, in the spring of '14—The Canoe Trip That Changed History, says Liam, with a bow of acknowledgment to Pam. In the spirit of that earlier trip they harmonize on many, many stanzas of "Peace! Be Still!" (and compose several wicked new ones of their own). As before, their paddling together is another sort of expert harmony; and their relationship, which can be fractious, glides along day after day in perfect harmony as well. A magical journey, one to treasure for a lifetime.

On the last day Liam borrows the car—a perk of Terry's position as Chair of the Senate Committee on Alien Affairs—and they cross the river at the Delaware Water Gap and drive up the derelict Old Mine Road to a trailhead Liam knows about. The Appalachian Trail runs along the ridgetop above them, parallel to the river; this shorter trail ascends more or less straight up from the road to the

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ridge to connect with the AT. The climb up is stiff, and they get sweaty and winded (and a little bit fractious, nothing serious), but the high long view of tiny, shiny Walpack Bend, the S-curve in the Delaware through whose boiling rapids they'd gone whooping and paddling like blazes just a couple of days before, takes Pam's breath away, what's left of it. Terry's chicken sandwiches are fabulous.

For variety they descend by a different route, the Kaiser Trail, a rough jeep track that will deliver them onto the Old Mine Road about a mile below the car. Unlike the gorges and stony cliffs through which their upward track led them, the mountainside here is park-like, a mixture of large trees and spindly saplings doomed to be shaded out before they can mature. This trail is wide enough for two to walk side by side, and Pam and Liam tromp along in their boots, making no attempt to be quiet, tired now and less inclined to sing than to argue. They are in fact quarreling fairly loudly about some damn thing or other—afterwards neither of them remembers what—when Pam happens to glance to her right, through the open area below the high canopy, and sees the large, dark, motionless object shaped like a barrel on end, some fifty meters away.

Her mind tries several times to reject the obvious in favor of something less problematic, but finally “Omigosh,” she blurts, interrupting Liam's tirade, “it's a bear.”

“Yeah, right,” says Liam irritably; he hates being interrupted. But then he looks where she's pointing. “Yikes, it *is* a bear! Jesus Christ Almighty! How come it's just standing there? When I see bears up here they always take off.” He slows almost to a stop and grins nervously at Pam. “Okay, you're the Girl Scout, what do we do?”

Pam, casting about frantically to call up anything she's ever read or heard about bears, says, “Just keep on going, don't make any sudden moves. Black bears are supposed to be more scared of us than we are of them, unless it's a sow with cubs.”

They resume walking. “I didn't see any cubs, did you?” Liam glances over his shoulder. “It's all right, he's leaving,” he reports with relief.

Pam looks too. What she sees she will remember for the rest of her life: the instant when the bear appears to change its mind, swings back around and charges toward them, swift and straight as a bullet. “No he's not,” she says, scarcely able to take this in, “he's coming!”

You're not supposed to run, and Pam's brain is still debating whether to stand tight, call the bear's bluff, but her feet have taken off. She and

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Liam tear up the shallow slope to the left of the trail, leap over a little creek in a gully, dart between the skinny trees. Away from the trail the footing is bad, the ground littered with branches invisible under thickly matted clumps of last year's leaves. Pam glances back just in time to see the bear bound across the gully, closing fast.

"I don't believe this! What the hell are we supposed to *do*?" Liam asks again, half laughing. No more than Pam does he seem able to accept the moment as a real one, continuous with the reality of graduating from the BTP and shooting the Walpack rapids.

"Climb a tree?" Pam pants, remembering as she suggests this that tree climbing is grizzly-attack strategy; black bears are skillful climbers. All the same she starts looking around for a climbable tree, because what else can they do? It's that or be caught on the ground.

But no luck: every tree in sight is either a smooth-boled giant, its lowest branches twenty feet out of reach, or a sapling too slender and weak to be of any use. "Maybe we should split up," she gasps, and strikes off down the slope, running as if in a nightmare, just as Liam swings one leg over a middle-sized log fallen at an angle against a living tree. The log's trunk is mossy and slippery but . . . frantically Pam scans the slope as she sprints, looking for a thicket of young trees growing in a tangle that she can maybe keep between herself and the bear.

The whole time she's aware, in a detached way, of her mind—superbly trained problem-solving mechanism that it is—continuing to search swiftly, methodically, for an answer to the present problem. But school problems set by Humphrey, however difficult, always had solutions. What if this particular pop quiz doesn't have one? She thinks again and again that the bear's bound to break off the chase, but what if it doesn't?

And then Liam shrieks, and Pam, skidding and twisting in mid-stride, sees the bear bowl him under the angled log with a swipe of its right paw, and plunge after him. Liam huddles on his stomach, arms wrapped around his head and neck. The bear swipes again, powerfully, too fast to follow; Pam sees a bursting bloom of red and then she's *there*, whacking at the bear's snout with her backpack, which she doesn't remember taking off, yelling, whaling the tar out of the bear to beat him off of Liam's huddled, bleeding form. For a timeless interval everything's a loud whirling blur with Pam at the center. And then, miraculously, the bear is lumbering away.

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Pam, unhurt, drops her pack and helps Liam sit up. The backs of his hands and arms are scored with deep claw-marks and bleeding profusely; there's blood all over his shirt. But none of his wounds are spurting, the bear didn't hit an artery, and his own daypack, ripped to pieces now, has protected his back. Pam pulls the shreds of the pack off him. He's dazed. If he goes into shock they're in big trouble, and he doesn't have the luxury of being wrapped up in the emergency blanket with his feet elevated. They have to get off the mountain.

But he probably won't go into shock if the bleeding can be stopped. There's nothing absorbent bigger than a gauze pad in Pam's first-aid kit, but there is an Ace bandage. This she unrolls, cuts in two with the little scissors on her Swiss Army knife, and wraps one piece, not too tight, around each of Liam's forearms, to apply pressure. She does this coolly and efficiently; then she hauls him to his feet. They have to get going. The bear might come back.

Their panicked flight has carried them into deeper woods. No sign of the Kaiser Trail. Stumbling over the uneven slope in their haste, angling downhill, they cast about for it, or rather Pam does—Liam's gone from being dazed to being hyper. They aren't really lost—if they keep heading down they'll eventually hit the river and the road—but if they have to bushwhack it'll mean a tough, slow, scratchy descent through the bear-fraught wilderness.

When they do finally strike the trail—much farther away than expected; the amount of ground they've covered astonishes them both—they light out, Pam more or less steering Liam, toward the road, the river, the car, and safety. High as two kites on adrenaline, they jabber and babble and talk on top of each other all through the downhill scramble. “They aren't supposed to charge you! They're supposed to back off if you don't threaten them—” “Except if they've got cubs! Maybe she had some cubs up a tree, and the trail went between her and the tree—” “No, I think it was the chocolate and trash in your pack, I think that's why she went for you instead of me, I didn't have anything but the first-aid kit—”

Down and down the wooded mountainside they rush, casting anxious looks behind them, peering between the tree trunks; but finally they sight the trailhead barrier, and the road beyond, without another glimpse of the bear.

In her frantic haste to get away, Pam's pack has been left behind. At the road they stop while she cuts Liam's tee shirt off him, tears it into strips, unwinds the blood-soaked elastic bandages, and wraps

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the strips of shirt around his arms and hands. The tube of antiseptic is still on the mountain. So is the bottle of Numbutol, and this process is making Liam's wounds hurt in earnest. "All the miles and miles I've carried that first-aid kit, and the only time I ever really needed it, I haven't got it!" Pam gripes, mostly to distract her patient, who is gasping and grimacing. She wants him to sit down and wait while she goes for the car, but he refuses so absolutely that she doesn't waste energy arguing. He's not bleeding too badly now anyway; the emergency measures seem to be doing the trick.

The adrenaline starts to wear off while they toil up the Old Mine Road together. Pam feels sick; Liam's in pain and his teeth are chattering. The road hasn't been repaired in twenty years, Pam has to watch where she's walking for both of them. "All the t-t-times I've been up here hiking and c-c-camping in these m-m-mountains," Liam complains, "all the bears I've b-b-bumped into, and n-not one of 'em was ever the least bit ag-g-gressive, not w-w-one!"

"Maybe your number just came up."

"Yeah, m-maybe s-s-so." Now that the acute peril is past, Liam's shuddering all over in reaction to the trauma.

A poem has been running through Pam's head all the way down the trail, and now for lack of a better distraction she starts to recite it, panting, in time with their double-quick pace:

"Up from his stony playground—down from his well-dugged lair—
Out on the naked ridges ran Adam-zad the Bear;
Groaning, grunting, and roaring, heavy with stolen meals,
Two long marches to northward, and I was at his heels!"

Liam's face smoothes out; he loves Kipling, they both do. "*I was at his heels!* A guy with a d-d-death wish! Is that the one about R-Russia?"

She nods, puffing. "The Truce of the Bear."

"Eyeless, noseless, and l-l-lipless, something, something of b-b-blank . . ."

Pam picks up the thread where she dropped it:

"Two long marches to northward, at the fall of the second night,
I came on mine enemy Adam-zad all panting from his flight.

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There was a charge in the musket—pricked and primed was the
pan—
My finger crooked on the trigger—when he reared up like a
man.”

Then, realizing where the poem’s leading, Pam breaks off. ”Oops,
sorry, bad idea, I’m creeping *myself* out!”

“D-d-don’t s-s-stop! Keep g-g-going!”

“No, it’s gruesome! It’s the worst thing I can think of to be quoting
right now, I shouldn’t’ve started.”

“Come on, I w-w-want to hear it!”

Pam argues some more, but finally she does continue, the rhythm
is irresistible:

“Horrible, hairy, human, with paws like hands in prayer,
Making his supplication rose Adam-zad the Bear!
I looked at the swaying shoulders, at the paunch’s sag and swing,
And my heart was touched with pity for the monstrous, pleading
thing.

Touched with pity and wonder, I did not fire then . . .

I have looked no more on women—I have walked no more with
men.

Nearer he tottered and nearer, with paws like hands that pray—

From brow to jaw that steel-shod paw, it ripped my face away!”

Pam stops. “Listen—” she starts to demur; but Liam shakes his
head. He’s not shivering quite so badly. “Keep going, I’m fine. Go
on. Finish it.”

So she goes on:

“Sudden, silent, and savage, searing as flame the blow—

Faceless I fell before his feet, fifty summers ago.

I heard him grunt and chuckle—I heard him pass to his den.

He left me blind to the darkened years and the little mercy of
men.”

Then she breaks off again in relief. “I see the car!”

Tightly packed as they were in the row, Liam jostled Pam out of
her reverie by sitting down. She’d heard nothing of his speech beyond

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the first sentences. Startled at the sheer vividness of what she'd been remembering, Pam made an effort to fix herself in the present—did a breathing exercise, rubbed her face, discreetly tightened several muscle groups in sequence. Being able to get such deep trances was an excellent meditation tool, but you wanted to pick your time and place. It was spooky when it happened by itself—not to mention (in the present instance) painful.

The silence lasted a good while. Pam had time to get herself in hand, and then to wonder, as she had on the plane, whether she wanted to say anything herself about Carrie. Now would be the time, but her mind was a blank. Carrie had been kind to Pam when Pam was a fourteen-year-old first-year Apprentice at the BTP, when the Bureau was based in Washington and Liam would sometimes bring Pam out to College Park for dinner with his extended family. They had liked each other. She could say, “When Liam and I were just starting to be friends, poetry was almost the first way we connected, and Carrie taught Liam everything he knows about poetry”—but this, though true, put the emphasis in the wrong place. This service wasn't about Liam or herself.

Would Carrie have spoken at a memorial service for Pam? Pam didn't think so. What could *she* have said? “I hoped for both their sakes that the kids could make a go of it, but I knew Liam awfully well, and there was something about the fit that didn't feel quite right.” (Not even Carrie would've said *that* in a public setting!)

By the time Terry Carpenter rose to take his turn, Pam had decided to hold her peace.

Terry made a lot of speeches; you wouldn't need to recognize him as a famous face to figure that much out. “On the day when the time window opened,” he began, in a damped-down version of what Carrie used to call his “stentorian” voice, “I was a student at the University of Pennsylvania—a junior. I'd been working on a take-home exam, an exam for Professor Sharpless's class in American poetry. The year was 1990. Now, when the window opened, and I saw Liam O'Hara and the Hefn Humphrey standing on the other side of it”—he gestured across the room—“Liam over there hadn't even been born yet in real time—but in the time window, he was a good deal older than I was.”

At the reference to himself, Liam smiled faintly and nodded in acknowledgment. Humphrey did whatever it was the Hefn did to convey the impression of a smile. Having lived so much among

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humans, he did it better than most of them; today, delighted at being included, he did it especially well.

Terry bent toward the Hefn in a half-bow. “Now, of course, those two could only look through and talk through, they couldn’t step through and neither could I. Naturally Humphrey wiped every trace of our meeting from my mind, and he made a good job of it. Had Carrie given the class a different exam, my memory of the event wouldn’t have been triggered by her questions; had she not been concerned for my state of mind, and come back to the park with me, there would have been no witness to vouch for any part of my experience on that fateful day . . .”

It was what Pam had expected Terry to talk about, the story his political career had been founded on, the one that had linked his life to Carrie’s for keeps. There could hardly have been a soul present not familiar with it; but Senator Carpenter was chief mourner here and they all gave him their attention, even the crowd in back.

As he talked on, embellishing the tale, Pam smiled to herself to think how Carrie, an English professor all her working life, and a canny, tough old bird of 85 the last time Pam had been to see her, had despised cheap rhetorical flourishes like “that fateful day.” She’d have been cross as two sticks with Terry for making her the occasion of a phrase like that. She’d be spinning in her grave.

Not that Carrie actually had a grave, or ever would. At the moment, in fact, she was attending her own memorial service, on the bench next to Terry, in a cardboard box from the crematorium. The arrangement would have made her grin like a wolf and fire off some piece of tomsawyeresque self-parody—“She warn’t *bad*,” Pam could imagine Carrie’s rough old voice saying, “only mischeevous like”—while snorting and tossing her head like an elderly horse at her old student’s politico-babble.

It was true, as he’d so often said, that in the park that day—all of 47 years ago; Pam, the ex math prodigy, did the calculation in a flash—Terry had been a twenty-year-old undergraduate with lots of dark, curly hair, and Liam had been years older than that. Observing the trim, bald Senator from Pennsylvania as he picked up steam, Pam thought that despite the erect posture and confident manner he looked older today than anyone, impossibly old, a ruin of grief. “For many terrible years,” he was saying now, “Carrie was the only person—the *only* person!—who believed I had seen what I’d seen

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and heard what I'd heard. Her faith in me, in my experience, helped me hang on to my sanity. It supported my decision to enter the law, and politics—to prepare to respond when the calamity, the nuclear disaster foretold by Liam out of the future, finally occurred.” His voice suddenly shook, and he touched his eyes with a folded handkerchief.

Pam wriggled in her seat, uneasy with Terry's emotion, uneasy also because of having heard so often, from Carrie herself, how wobbly her faith had been, throughout those “many terrible years,” in her student's wacko experience. And how guilty she'd felt, knowing he depended on her belief, yet plagued by an unbelief she couldn't banish. Beside her, Humphrey also wriggled and adjusted his small, powerful body, trying to get more comfortable.

Terry went on and on, as if not quite knowing how to stop, his voice alternating between senatorial habit and a kind of stricken bewilderment. Pam had arrived in Washington bound and determined not to get suckered into feeling anything, but by the time Terry finally sat down her throat was aching. Knowledge undid her. Terry had lost his only child in the Peach Bottom meltdown “foretold” by Liam in 1990 from thirty years in Terry's future, had watched his first marriage fall apart and then, not long after, buried his much-loved second wife. In the end, only Carrie had remained to bear witness to everything in his life that had mattered most.

Carrie, and of course Liam, who had been his dead son Jeff's best friend. It was Carrie, not Liam, who'd first told her about Jeff.

Acutely aware of Liam's left ear, about a foot from her nose, she tried not to sniff too audibly. When Liam's sister Brett, sitting in front of them between her husband and old Frank Flintoft, stood up next, she managed a couple of more effective sniffs under cover of Brett's first words; but at once, despite her care, Eddie Ward glanced over knowingly from his place on Liam's right.

He smiled, with a sympathy that was probably real, if momentary. Pam looked away. She stared at Humphrey's hands as he propped them on either side of his cushion to hitch himself back.

While Brett was making the assembly chuckle, telling how Carrie was famous in the family for liking her party food served in four courses—first dessert, crackers-cheese-and-veggies, little sandwiches, second dessert—Liam shot his sleeve and glanced at his watch, clenched over the long diagonal white scars on his left wrist.

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June in the Poconos, new leaves glittering down the slope of the long, low mountain, blue river glittering to the left of the ruined road they struggle along, Pam's own voice forcing the words of a suddenly terrifying poem through a fog of anxiety—and then the wave of pure relief: “I see the car! We're almost there!”

Liam smiles too, safety and painkillers now in immediate prospect. “So we are. Well, you have to put these things in perspective. I got off p-pretty light.”

Pam doesn't say what she's thinking, which is how easily it might have been a very different story. That's when she realizes, for the first time, that by beating at the bear, presumably driving it away, she probably saved Liam's life. It makes her feel strange. She doesn't remember turning back, doesn't recall making a conscious decision to go back; the whole point of splitting up was so that one of them might have a chance to get away.

And that's when she understands—it shouldn't be a surprise, though it comes as one—that she will never ever be able to run away from Liam in deadly danger. Even if fleeing might make better sense, even if staying and fighting would only mean both of them getting killed. In the same flash of insight she perceives something else: that Liam *could* leave *her* in such a fix. He might not, but he could choose to—he has that choice. She doesn't.

Not that Liam is a coward, not at all. Three years earlier Pam has seen him risk his life for Humphrey, and knows that despite getting liberally peppered with buckshot he'd do the same thing again every morning before breakfast if necessary. Humphrey saved Liam's life once too, or at least talked him out of committing suicide, and that's how things are with Liam and Humphrey. And she also knows that Liam would have risked anything—*anything*—to try to save Jeff.

Liam would have died to save Jeff. But not, she entirely understands, to save Pam.



Snap out of it! she told herself, now truly alarmed. *Stop this!* It wasn't like dissociation—ghastly feelings and the world turning

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plastic—but even so, this interior time window was one she wished to look through strictly by choice and in private. What could be making her slip into trance involuntarily? What was going on?

Well, for one thing, being here with Liam, his left shoulder pressed against her right—*that* was going on. Pam thought suddenly of that story Terry had been telling for umpteen years, of how an exam question about a deer poem had triggered his memory of the deer he had seen in the park. Had something triggered her own detailed memory of the bear attack? Something about Liam? Maybe.

After Brett's message the silence drifted on. Pam closed her eyes and thought about Liam and herself.

Through all the wrenching shifts and alterations time had brought about since the bear-attack spring of 2017, that home truth—that she would always rush helplessly to Liam's rescue, that he might or might not rush to hers—held fast. Pam would be grateful to Liam forever for taking the initiative in the valuable and, for her, self-defining, relationship they'd had for a while. But all through the time in Hurt Hollow and Santa Barbara, when they'd been lovers whenever they could manage to get together, which wasn't all that often, the fundamental, unspoken, mutually recognized inequality persisted.

And it persisted even after Pam left the Hollow, to live with Liam in California and go back to work for the BTP. But not till Liam had met Eddie out there, and become so besotted with him (and so entangled in a web of clumsy deceptions in consequence) that Pam had faced him down, then gone to Humphrey and requested reassignment—not till then had it finally pushed them apart.

"Maybe we better split up," she whispered, too softly for Liam or Humphrey—or Eddie—to hear. Yes, very well. Correct and necessary to go away and leave Liam behind with Eddie in California, thence to wash up eventually on the shores of the Great Salt Lake. But even now—nearly two and a half years after leaving Santa Barbara and twenty years since the bear's heart-stopping charge across the Kaiser Trail—Pam knew she would still be powerless to abandon Liam in a state of mortal danger.

She didn't need to look in order to visualize Eddie in excruciating detail. Curly black hair, receding. Swarthy, mustache-punctuated handsomeness, losing focus as it beef-ified. Dark eyes, long black lashes. Dark loafers. Custom-tailored dark suit, doing what could be

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done to minimize the wearer's one-way journey from huskiness into forthright corpulence.

Without intending to she suddenly pictured Eddie in his expensive funeral outfit, thrashing and squealing beneath the avid teeth and claws of the bear—a fantasy so real and delectable that it revealed to Pam more than she really cared to admit about the depth of her dislike. She opened her eyes, frowning. But then, perhaps only a saint could feel sorrow at the conviction that, in a fix like the one she and Liam had coped with fairly well, Eddie would go all to pieces. Or the absolute certainty that Liam could clear right out of there *too* if he felt like it—wouldn't have to put his life on the line for Eddie's life, any more than for Pam's. *That's something anyway*, she thought, and smiled kindly at Liam when he glanced past her at Humphrey, for having that much sense at least.

The Hefn was slipping down off the bench; he was ready to speak now. As his hairy horny feet found the floor, as he reached up to clasp the back of the bench in front of him with his hairy, gray, four-pronged hands, a greedy murmur stirred the gaggle of curious strangers at the rear of the room.

Most of humanity had hated the Hefn from the day of their arrival, and many who hadn't, who had seen in them the Earth's one hope of avoiding ecological ruin, were beginning to question the point of a cleaned-up planet that lacked a significant human presence. The youngest human beings alive—the very last of the Last Generation—would soon turn 23, and the Hefn still had nothing to say about when their bosses, the Gafr, intended to lift the fertility ban. By now the whole world was wondering if the aliens were ever going to let people start making babies again—whether, in fact, they'd ever intended to let them.

But however they felt about the alien takeover of the world, the hope of seeing a Hefn in the flesh could still turn people out in droves. It was a celebrity thing. The Gafr continued to run the world from their ship parked on the moon. In twenty years of long-range occupation, no human being had ever laid eyes on a Gafr. Few could claim to have seen a live Hefn either, though one or another of the eighteen Hefn Observers addressed the world's people, via the media, almost every day. Wary of another mass-hypnosis episode, most taped the broadcasts and watched the tapes, but everybody watched. Often enough it would be Humphrey's own stumpy figure they saw on the screen,

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and that, added to his role as Founder and Director of the Bureau of Temporal Physics, would be enough to make him a kind of celebrity; but he'd also starred in a Hollywood movie a couple of years before, and that made him a real one. People *might* come out on a February afternoon for a glimpse of an important Senator, or of Liam, the math whiz who'd discovered the Hot Spot equations and made the cover of *Time*. A Hefn movie star, though, was a sure draw.

Humphrey threw back his shaggy head and uttered a piercing, desolate sound, something between a bellow and a howl.

People half-rose. Even Pam was startled, but Humphrey called out at once, very pleasantly, "Do not be alarmed. Among my people, this is the noise of grief." He let out another lowing bellow, and one more for good measure, then looked brightly from side to side until the rattled audience had recovered its composure.

"We have no tears, you see," he continued when they were still. "But when one of us dies his friends feel grief, as you do, and they must let the grief come out, as you must, or be ill. And so I make this loud and sorry sound for Carrie Sharpless, who was my friend.

"Working among you so long, I learned a great lesson. A bond of friendship between humans is not the same as a bond between Hefn and Hefn, or Hefn and Gafr. Our bonds exist from necessity, there is no choosing. And yet. From my time with Terry Carpenter, and Liam O'Hara, and Pam Pruitt, I have learned that a Hefn can bond with a human *in the human way*. For a Hefn, too, there can be choice. I chose Terry. I chose Liam and Pam. And they chose me." Whereupon Humphrey executed one of his pirouettes and clutched Pam against his hard, hairy body, with its patchy places where the hair had fallen out from the anti-hibernation drug Sleepynot. His beard, coarse as a broom, scraped the skin of her neck. She hugged him back, throat cramping. Liam sobbed once. Everyone peered and craned, trying to see what was going on.

Humphrey straightened up. "Ahhhhhhh but also! I learned the hard corollary. Where bonds are chosen, they can be unchosen. Among you, disconnection is common. It is very common." His flat eyes turned upon Liam's haggard face. "A friend damages an old bond in forging a new one. No help for this. Friends quarrel, their bond is destroyed. Neither may be to blame, yet there is much pain."

Pam felt a rush of grateful warmth; she knew, and knew Liam knew, that Humphrey was alluding to them, that he regretted their

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breakup and Pam's departure from Santa Barbara and had little use for Eddie. It was old news, but being even slightly on the outs with Humphrey made Liam miserable and Pam could feel his tension increase as their old teacher ground this familiar ax in front of everyone.

"Also," said Humphrey, "bonds are broken by death, which no one chooses." He glanced at Liam, who smiled briefly. "And so, now I will speak of Carrie Sharpless.

"I will say two things.

"One thing. Terry Carpenter became my friend. He brought me to the house on Calvert Street, where Carrie lived. And Carrie made a blackberry cobbler for me.

"Every day, in that time, I felt how the people of Earth hate the Hefn. I feel it every day in this time also. Now I am accustomed to this hatred. Then, I was not.

"The second thing. Carrie was bonded to Terry and to Liam. My own bonds to Terry and Liam formed and strengthened. But the bond between Carrie and myself appeared spontaneously, a product of these other bonds, like a chemical reaction. Catalyzed, yes, it may be, by a very fine cobbler! It so surprised me to discover that such a thing could happen. And now that knot has come undone. And I am very, very, very sorry."

The Hefn sat down—that is, he hoisted himself back onto the cushion and pushed himself straight. Pam put her arm around him. He patted her knee, satisfaction streaming from his whole body. Pam was touched, tickled also; Humphrey's determination to honor the obligations of friendship was so hilarious in a way. Carrie, who'd been extremely fond of Humphrey, had been known to laugh helplessly while repeating to intimates his earnest explanations of how attached to her he was. She would have loved his eulogy, though it would have made her grin her wolfish grin. "Carrie would have loved it," Pam whispered, and Humphrey beamed harder; it was like hugging a potbellied stove.

"Bonding!" A man's ragged, angry voice shouted from the back of the Meeting. "What the hell do you know about it? Bonding to some old lady that never had any kids of her own—how about *us* getting bonded to our own kids and grandkids? Hunh? When are the Gafr gonna let us have some kids again, that's what I'd like to know!"

Twisting around like everybody else, Pam could see an agitated form and a red face against the back wall. Being in church may

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have restrained most of the other gatecrasher types, but there were growls of agreement and a woman shouted, "Family is the only thing that matters! The *only* thing! You don't know beans about human bonding if you don't know that!"

Humphrey had scrambled up now and was standing on the bench, facing the back of the room. When he held up his arms, several people bolted for the door. Humans had been mindwiped back to early childhood for threatening a Hefn; the Ban itself had been effected by mass hypnosis, in the time before humanity had fully grasped what the aliens could do.

This alien waved his upraised arms in a wholly alien gesture. His hair stood out from his body, giving him the look partly of an alarmed cat, partly of a defensive porcupine. "This is the memorial service of Carrie Sharpless, and *you will be silent*," he said, not loudly, but in a weird, metallic, inhuman voice, a voice to freeze the blood. Pam had heard him use it only once before: to state his intention of murdering a man who had tried to murder him.

Nothing about the small gray figure, in fact, seemed human now, and everything seemed dangerous. The room sensed the difference and went very still. The Hefn pranced on the bench, gestured some more, made as if to speak again; but Brett O'Hara was suddenly kneeling, leaning over, clutching at him from behind. "Humphrey! Don't!"

When he whipped round at the unexpected interference, she grabbed his arm. "Don't. Carrie wouldn't want you to. And anyway, you know they're right."

Humphrey did the Hefn equivalent of staring, then breathing deeply several times, getting his outrage under control. His aura of gray hair partially deflated. When finally he disengaged himself and turned back to the electrified room, his voice had resumed its human semblance, but had not lost its steely authority. "You. You. You have attended this service, not to honor the dead, but to shout and remonstrate. You demand permission to reproduce your . . . *disreputable* kind. Brett O'Hara claims also that you are in the right." He glared round the Meeting. "To me," he said, "it seems otherwise. I have been a better friend to you than you know or deserve, I have pleaded your case with my lords the Gafr, but I say now that if this decision were mine to make, I myself could not encourage you to hope."



Anybody can say anything at a Quaker Meeting, including hecklers and Hefn; but the Clerk of the Meeting had obviously decided that they'd all had enough excitement for one funeral, and stood to make her announcements the instant Humphrey stopped lecturing and got down. They were now (she said) to hear an old recording of the Philadelphia Boys' Choir singing Mozart's "Alma Dei Creatoris." Carrie had requested this in her will. The recording had been made at the choir's final concert, just before all the boys, together with their conductor and bus driver, had been killed in the Peach Bottom Power Plant meltdown. The soloist was Senator Carpenter's son Jeff, then twelve years old. The music would conclude the service, which would be followed by a reception featuring the four party-food courses Carrie had loved. Everyone was welcome to stay, but all (she said, rather severely) were reminded of the nature of the occasion and requested to respect it.

Briefly, then, music immobilized the room. But as soon as the sound of singing had been replaced by the sounds of people rising and beginning to talk, Pam turned to Humphrey, who'd gone into the contracted posture of extreme Hefn agitation, arms and legs clamped so tight against his torso he looked like a large, dirty, rather lumpy tennis ball. "I don't think they came to heckle, Humphrey, I really don't. They came to get a look at you and got carried away by what you said."

"I will not talk of this now." As he spoke Humphrey uncoiled smoothly, placed his hands on the back of the bench before them and vaulted over, agile as a monkey. He jumped down hands first and trotted stiff-legged across to Terry on all fours—a mode the Hefn virtually never assumed in public.

Pam sank back and widened her eyes at Liam. "Godamighty."

"Godamighty indeed. What did he say?"

"That he wouldn't talk about it right now. I told him I didn't think those people came here planning to make a disturbance, I thought they just got carried away. That's what I *do* think. How could they know he was going to talk about bonding?"

"Well," said Liam, standing up slowly, "whether it was planned or not, they violated Humphrey's sense of fitness but good. I've never seen him this upset, have you?"

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“Only once. After the tornado, when he was going to kill Otie Bemis.”

“Till you talked him out of it.” He darted a glance at the Hefn, on his feet again with Terry bent over him, speaking urgently. “Listen, we’re skipping the reception. Terry and Humphrey and I are taking Carrie’s ashes out to the Ragged Rock to scatter them. That’s what she wanted. Maybe you better come too, Pam—calm him down, smooth his ruffled feathers.” He started to shrug into his topcoat.

“I’m not going,” Eddie put in quickly. *So don’t say no on my account*, he meant.

Pam pictured the bear ripping Eddie’s face off, smiled and shook her head. “No point. He doesn’t want to talk about it yet—and anyway, I’d rather not crash the party.”

Liam didn’t try to persuade her; it really was something for just the three of them to do. The Ragged Rock, in a park deep inside the radioactive zone created by the power plant meltdown, had been holy ground for Jeff and Carrie and himself. It was holy ground for Terry, too, because that was where Terry had seen Liam and Humphrey through the time window, back in 1990. When Liam, age fourteen, had set off on his solarcycle to die of radiation poisoning like Jeff, the Ragged Rock had been his destination. Pam had never seen the place. Anyway, she had her own 61-acre parcel of holy ground.

The Meeting was emptying out, most of the strangers leaving, family and friends drifting toward the rec hall where tables had been set up, everybody murmuring in a subdued, uncertain way. It occurred to Pam that Carrie wouldn’t have minded the disturbing turn the occasion had taken. Carrie had relished a good commotion. She and Eddie got up too, and they all sidled out of the row and started up the aisle. “Will we see you again before you go back?” Liam asked her. Again he glanced worriedly at Humphrey.

“I guess not. There’s a Gaian delegation flying back to California tonight and I’m hitching a ride.”

“They’re stopping in Salt Lake?”

“Just to let me off. There won’t be another flight for two weeks. Will you guys be taking the train back?”

“I probably am,” said Liam, “It’ll take a week or so for Terry and me to get Carrie’s affairs sorted out. But maybe Eddie could catch that plane.”

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He stopped. Across the way, Humphrey and Terry now had their heads bowed over the box of ashes. “Not the perfect moment to ask a favor, but—” Liam cleared his throat. “Humphrey,” he called quietly, “will it be okay if Eddie flies home with Pam and the Gaians tonight? It’ll save him having to cancel three more days of sessions.”

Humphrey was still for so long that Pam had time to wonder whether he intended to answer at all. But when he spoke, it was to her: “Is this acceptable to you, my dear?”

Oh Humphrey, Pam thought, weak with relief, *God, I love you, you mangy old furball!* His voice sounded almost normal; maybe he was all right. Aloud she said, “Sure, it’s fine.”

“Then Eddie may fly home with Pam Pruitt and the missionaries.”

Except for the five of them, the room was empty now. Terry gave the box of ashes to Humphrey to hold while he draped his coat over his shoulders, then took it back and followed the others up the aisle, with Humphrey following him.

At the door Eddie gave Liam a long, showy hug and a kiss while Terry pecked Pam on the cheek and Humphrey put her mind further to rest by laying his hand on her shoulder and saying, “I will be in touch, Pam Pruitt.” As the three ash-scatterers went out into the winter mildness, and the door swung shut behind them, Eddie touched Pam’s arm. “I’m sorry you feel so much hostility toward me,” he said in his warm, sincere, psychologist’s voice that could linger so sweetly on the high notes of a tenor solo. “I understand, of course, but I just wish things could be different. For Liam’s sake if nothing else. He’s very attached to you, you know.”

“Hey,” said Pam lightly, “we got you on the plane, didn’t we? Can’t have everything.”

She walked away from Eddie’s sorry, fleshy face, into the rec hall and the reception in progress, and stood in the doorway, getting her bearings, trying to shake off the effects of the scare they’d all just had. A minute later Brett’s husband, Eric Meredith, appeared at her elbow with a plate of petit-fours. “Talking to yourself already, huh?”

She grinned, pleased to see him; Eric was a nice guy. Nicer than his wife in Pam’s opinion, though just at the moment she was disposed to think rather well of Brett. “Just remembering a poem.” She chose a little chocolate cube and popped it into her mouth.

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“Is Humphrey okay? Wow, wasn’t that something? For a minute there I thought those wisecracs were dead meat.”

“I was thinking before, though, Carrie would probably have enjoyed the fuss.” They both grinned, but Pam’s expression turned serious. “I think he’s okay, he was talking pretty normally when they left, but if Brett hadn’t intervened I’m actually not sure what would have happened.” She hesitated, then admitted to Eric what she’d been reluctant to admit to herself: “Please tell Brett thanks from me for saving the day today, if I don’t get a chance to tell her myself. But I’ve got a feeling there’s going to be some major fallout from this.”

“The media, you mean?”

“The media on one side, and the Hefn and Gafr on the other. *Humphrey’s* probably okay,” she repeated, “but I think this incident’s really serious, in a symbolic sort of way. The truth is, Brett was right, and the hecklers were right, even if they picked a bad moment to make their point. If something’s not done soon about the Ban . . .” She shrugged and helped herself to another of the little cakes Carrie had loved, a pink one.

Eric looked her soberly in the eye. “You guys, the ones the Hefn listen to, the ones they trust—you’ve got a lot of responsibility.” That said, he changed the subject. “So, what poem were you ‘remembering’? Something you learned from Carrie?”

“Unh-unh, not me, but Liam did. Or sort of semi-learned—not as well as ‘The Ballad of East and West’ or the Mowgli songs.”

“Yeah, Brett learned all those Kipling poems from Carrie too. Those kids were so lucky to have somebody like Carrie practically living right in the house with them. Nobody in my family knew poetry from pig swill.”

“I was just quoting a little piece of one to myself. It won’t make sense out of context but—

“When he shows as seeking quarter, with paws like hands in
prayer,

That is the time of peril, the time of the Truce of the Bear!”