

Alone In The White Silence

Alone In The White Silence

By: Jim Gleeson

He had lost count many days before, he couldn't remember when. *How long had it been?* He mused taking a sip of his Guinness Extra Stout. Each day passed into the next, without healing, without an answer, only the constant reminder that this was not where he belonged. This was not the way things were supposed to turn out. This was not to be the end of his story.

“But it is my story.” he said to himself. And the taste in his mouth was acidic. He took another sip of the dark frothy beverage to wipe it out, but the taste remained--hardwired, ingrained.

He looked around him and frowned, this place he found himself belonged in a museum, and he was not meant to be one of its occupants, and neither were the others sitting about. But, on this night, he felt old, so old, like a relic dug up before its time.

“Except in this case.” he mumbled to himself, but decided not to complete that thought. That thought signified a place that would only bring the familiar wave of sadness; despair and finally deep-seated depression that would send him back into isolation.

2 • Alone In The White Silence

He knew isolation wasn't the answer.

So here John Lanton sat at Harold's bar and Grill. The lights were down, and he had a nice corner table, dimly lit. He sat there feeling the hard wood against his back, feeling the creak that had risen because of it, but refused to move. The half eaten basket of tostada chips lay before him, the salsa barely touched. He snagged one with tapered fingers, dipped it lightly and then popped it in his mouth.

Who was this...this Harold anyway? He wondered. Harold sounded more like someone who would be an auto parts owner, or a supermarket operator. Harold was an indistinct character, perhaps a name that brought people comfort. No one would ever get mugged or killed by someone named Harold would they? Harold was the kind of name that denoted the word "family man."

The food was good though, as well as the atmosphere, he had to admit that. He liked how it was dim around him. If it were too bright it would spoil the mood. His mood.

The book he had brought with him was open; he had been reading the same page for the past thirty minutes. Glancing up on occasion, hearing the string of background noises that irritated and distracted him, he could not keep his mind on the book. Something kept pulling him away from the story; something in the back of his mind. It was the anticipation of pain, but something he could not deal without.

His forehead creased in apprehension. He closed the book and grabbed a chip, crunching it aimlessly in his mouth as he glanced around the room.

The room was dappled in light. Over each table hung a stained glass adorned lamp, seeming to add a halo effect over friends and lovers scattered aimlessly about. Written on the side of each shade in very ornate red script was the word "Harold's." Each shade though had a different design beside it, a hamburger on one, a drink on another, and so on.

John looked up, feeling the faint emanation of heat, seeing curls of smoke rise and disappear in its intensity. He squinted and then saw nothing but dark shadows engulfed in green splotchy after burn. He rubbed his eyes. He eyed his empty beer mug with a sense of resignation.

“You need anything else, sir?”

“Hit me with another one, will you?” John looked up and saw the woman, late forties, wedding band around her fourth finger; her face over-caked with makeup, long red fingernails protruded from chalk white skin. She looked overdone, either like a mussed up clown or someone who had been blasted by a mad make-up artist. He could imagine now, a vigilante from Avon totting eyeliner, lip-gloss and rouge.

“We’re closing soon,” the woman said looking at him distracted.

“Just do it, I’ll be out of your hair soon enough.” he bit his lip at that. A little too harsh, John, your losing it. Get a hold of yourself. It’s not their fault your here...

Her brow clouded for a moment with irritation, but then as if measuring him up again, she answered hesitantly, “Right up.”

“Thanks.” he managed to betray a friendly, almost apologetic smile.

She paused for a moment. He knew because she cast a shadow on the page he was reading. He looked up and stared into her inquisitive eyes.

“Say, what is that you’re reading?”

“Jack London.”

“The Call Of The Wild is a great book,” she said smiling, “My father read it to me when I was a small child.”

John smiled weakly, “I haven’t read that one since high school,” he stammered closing the book before him.

“Literature in a bar and grill?” She said appraising him queerly.

4 • Alone In The White Silence

“Not your average bar reading, is it?”

“Nah,” She grunted, “I got another Dean R. Koontz book yesterday, but I haven’t started it yet. Heard it’s supposed to be good.”

“Never heard of him.” He lied hoping that this is where the politeness ended. His mouth was dry and there was a slight sting from the salsa.

She straightened and then she said offhandedly, “Be back.”

John, you really blew it this time. What happened to you? A happy bright fellow like yourself treating that woman as if she were a fly. You came out here to be around people. You know that’s all it is. Nix the book, the atmosphere, people are what you need right now. That and the pain...”

“What I need right now is for time...”

But he didn’t finish the thought, he checked himself. Instead, he tried thinking about his day. He had worked earlier that morning. He worked at the Herald Sun. It was the thin Durham newspaper, and it was money, but that was all it was.

He liked working in the lifestyle section of the paper, reviewing the latest movies, going to concerts, and cataloging the upcoming events to the Raleigh Durham, Chapel Hill area.

So, it was the movie theaters, and not the newspaper office itself, that were his familiar hang outs. The Carmike off Roxboro was his favorite, but sometimes on Friday nights when he was done with work he would head down to Raleigh to catch a mid-night showing of Monty Python and the Holy Grail.

Anything to put off the inevitable sleep that would eventually consume him and dream about his past, or rather the futility of his future. Or what about the strange anachronism of pain in the present...

After reviewing the movie he would head to the Second street bakery, sit among the college students and sip Hot Lemon Tea, or sometimes it was Peppermint, he hadn’t quite figured out

yet which one he preferred. But that too, like the overcoming sleep, was more of an open wound than a soothing balm for his wounded life.

He opened the book in the place he had marked and began to read again. Going over it this time with more concentration, his eyes squinting, careful to grab the attention of each word...

-The afternoon wore on, and with the awe, born of the White Silence, the voiceless travelers bent to their work. Nature has many tricks wherewith she convinces man of his finity, -the ceaseless flow of the tides, the fury of the storm, the shock of an earthquake, the long roll of heaven's artillery, -but the most tremendous, the most stupefying of all, is the passive phase of the White Silence. All movement ceases, the sky clears, and the heavens are as brass; the slightest whisper seems sacrilege; the man becomes timid, affrighted by the sound of his own voice. Sole speck of life journeying across the ghostly wastes of a dead world, he trembles at his audacity, realizes that his is a maggot's life, nothing more. Strange thoughts arise unsummoned, the mystery of all things strives for utterance. And fear of death, of God, of the universe, comes over him, -the hope of the Resurrection and the Life, the yearning for immortality, the vain striving of the imprisoned essence, -it is then, if ever, man walks alone with God.

John Lanton looked over this passage and now he can see why he hasn't been able to concentrate. These are his feelings, his words, his life, in a single paragraph. He knew of this White Silence, he knew what it was like to be living in a dead world.

"Here's your Guinness."

"Thanks." he said casually, but then he looked up, another face, another voice? A voice that broke through his White Si-

6 • Alone In The White Silence

lence... That voice, the voice he had heard before when he arrived here-it still shocked him, because it was a reminder of what could not be.

It can't be...She looked back at him and smiled brightly. She was young, no wedding band, dimpled cheeks, and a soft voice that emanated humor. It was her eyes; they seemed to gaze through him like he was transparent as a Bahamian harbor. And that face, it was unmistakable, every contour, every nuance, he had it-It's her. But it can't be, it can't be her.

"I'm sorry, do you need something?"

He blinked, blushed realizing he had been staring, "Sorry, I uh..."

"You were staring."

Again. John blushed, deeper this time, "Yes, I just didn't expect to see you here tonight.."

The likeness was too similar to be mistaken. His breath caught for a moment, sought the haven of her eyes, but it was not her, it was--

She chuckled, flashing her teeth, eyes lighting up, "Dana's in the back and asked me to bring you the Guinness. I'm Jill and if there's anything you need, just tell me, but in twenty minutes we're closing. Just thought I'd warn you. Grill's already closed"

He had seen her many times in the restaurant and thought that the resemblance was well, superficial at best. He thought that perhaps he was just imagining the resemblance; after all he had not been himself after the accident. But looking at her now, up close...

John looked around and noticed that those lovers in the sea of scattered tables were putting on coats, grabbing purses, scarves, umbrellas and hats and filing out of the bar in a slow but steady trickle.

But then his attention returned to her, Jill. She was standing there, and seemed to be patiently waiting for him to do or say something. He looked at her, and in the blurry haze of memory

two faces superimposed; one he had seen for what appeared to be the last time some sixty days before, and now, reconstructed perfectly, but through a linear impossibility was almost an exact duplicate of the one who so enraged the flood of his passions, who so invited upon him thoughts of love, and of a time....

“Jill.” he said at last. He savored it awkwardly. The name didn’t fit; he wanted to call her something else, but restrained himself.

“That’s my name.” then her eyes fell to the book, “London, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“Good reading?”

“Sure.”

Her face changed, genuine curiosity stole over her, “Can I ask you a question?”

“What kind of question?”

This is at least a little like her. Insatiable curiosity from the start. She always knew how to keep me off balance with her straightforwardness.

“Personal. Listen, I say that because I say what’s on my mind and that sometimes offends people.”

He cocked his head a little and then brightened, “Go ahead, if it’s too personal, I won’t answer.”

“Fair enough.”

He swallowed and said a little too deliberately for his tastes, “Fire away.”

One of her fingers started caressing the table in an idle twirl as she asked, “What are you trying to escape from that you come here alone, in the dead of night, with only a book as a companion? Before you answer, I’ve seen you here before, always a book, and always alone. Why?”

So, she has seen me as well.

The question hit him hard, it sunk in like steel, and a frown

8 • Alone In The White Silence

stole over his face. He swallowed, “That is a good question.” The reply sounded forced between breaths.

“Well?”

“I don’t do this often...”

“I’ve seen you here three times this week alone.” was her reply, and at that he seemed to blush.

What could he say? How much time did he have? Twenty minutes. He didn’t know if he could give a sound bite version. The story was long, and from the present perspective extremely unbelievable. Even in his world...

It was amazing these people of this age. Psychologists, politicians, idealists, thinking that they see the problems so simple. But humans carry baggage; they build walls to keep in the emotions that they are trying to keep out. Simple. The complex part is what those walls are made of; stone, steel, memories, half buried.

“I’m unattached.” John said thinking that he had sufficiently answered the question to someone who might or might not find any interest in him at all.

She surprised him then, removing her apron, she slid in the booth across from him. He felt her knees touch his as she got situated. He started to tingle and then his face went blank. His shoulders relaxed and hands folded together in front of him. Looking down at his hands then noticing they quivered, he drew them to his lap, under the table.

“You’re unattached?”

He half-smiled, “Yes, does that surprise you?”

“Yes.” and she said it with such sincerity that it was received again with a grin. She continued, “Why?”

There it was again, a few stones rattled, pounded on.

“Why are you unattached?” he asked, and he was intensely sincere. Why if he were-if he were not-if not for, then he...

“I asked you first.” she smirked.

He sighed hard. His mind raced. He wished it were her,

but knew it wasn't. She looked, acted, seemed so much like her, but it was a linear impossibility, but God, what kind of cruel joke had fate played on him this time?

"I am alone by an act of Congress." he smirked, but it was a smile that did not belong to his eyes. His voice sounded stale, too deep and full to be in the now dwindling hush of voices in the restaurant.

She scrutinized him for a moment and then said, "That isn't an answer."

She looked around the room, appeared ready to leave, her brown shiny hair brushed her shoulders. Her skin was fair and her hands slender, nails painted with pink fingernail polish. Her skin was smooth and creamy, and for a moment he just want to reach out and touch her cheek. So much like her, I....

She was looking at him in anticipation. A waiter brushed by, leaned down to talk to her a moment, the waiter seemed to want to stay but with a look he frowned slightly and left. "Now, you were about to tell me the reason for your self inflicted solitude."

"It isn't self inflicted." he shot back a little too harshly. He closed his eyes and swallowed, "It was a mistake."

"Tell me."

"Look, its over and done with, I really would like to forget it."

With that he saw the waiter she had just spoken to move to the front door, and lock it with a resounding click.

"That." she said pointing at him, " is not a good way to deal with your problems."

"It's not a problem its--a circumstance."

She is awfully persistent.

He took another forced sip of his Guinness. It felt cold in his mouth and he found it hard to swallow. He stared at her over the glass as he took in a chunk of ice into his mouth. Beads of sweat were beginning to form on his forehead and his nose began

10 • Alone In The White Silence

to itch. Then there was the old familiar pain, arising from the pit of his stomach. He looked at the door longingly, but his legs were like rubber, and his back stuck to the seat like glue.

“But its the way we deal with circumstances that can be a problem.” she replied.

She, Jill, sounded just like her then, and he felt tears uncontrollably coming to his eyes. He wanted to cry to ask, “Is it really you?” but he knew she wasn’t because if she were things would be different.

John cleared his throat and gingerly touched his glass then he spoke, “It might take awhile,” he said honestly hoping that he wouldn’t even have to tell it at all.

“So go on, tell me. After all, you are locked in here, I was not even supposed to work closing this evening so please tell me.”

He brushed his fingers against his frazzled chin, looked down at his hands for a moment and saw to his astonishment that still they were trembling slightly, his palms felt clammy. He looked up. He saw in her eyes radiance; the eyes were open, they accepted him.

But what should I say? Would the truth be acceptable? It was amazing but he had told a score of people the same story, but the reactions appeared to be the same. They shook their heads, quickly left the table and did not even bother to talk with him again, though he could see them staring him down from a distance.

But she was different; the resemblance was uncanny. To be honest he had been prepared to tell her, from the first time he had seen her he had thought to, but now at the time when it came down to it...

Did he want to enter into the same sort of relationship with this -this waitress? It was so familiar though, the conflict, the wave of sadness, the sense of timelessness staring into her eyes. A dilemma is evoked, but what if it was in the end some ruse of fate, the same one that brought him here to this table? What if in the

end it only brought him sorrow as it had many times before?

But the waves of thought, and emotion clashed and emotion won out. He was compelled to tell her, she was different and even if she was not, could he refuse?

He had to in fact; it was a force driving him, to be believed, to belong. And he didn't want her to leave; he was still studying her face, and remembering. He didn't want it to end. Like the Ancient Mariner, he felt the longing to tell his story, his albatross, except this one was not around his neck, but around his wrist. He felt for the metal band around his wrist and winced. *Time was the enemy.*

He sighed long and hard, his hands steady now with the task before him. Closing his eyes he could almost feel the full effect of that distant time, could imagine himself not in a secluded smoke filled bar, but a luscious land of green and flower.

"It's like this," John began, "It might sound like a story that belongs in one of your speculative fiction magazines, but I can swear to you, it is no fabrication, I did not make this up. A few months ago, at least in my memory it was a few months ago, but in reality, well, reality tells a different story..."

"It was my wife's and my second anniversary--"

"Your married?"

"Not at the present time." he replied cryptically.

"Go on." she said, "I want to hear it all."

"I had gotten up early out of bed to prepare for her. It was a workday, so I had to get up especially early for the occasion. It was still dark out when I fidgeted around the domicile, our house, trying to be as quiet as I could muster. I set the synthesizer, and wrapped her gift. Then I took a H-jet and dressed as I would any morning."

"Our time was the morning." John Lanton said ominously, "It was our time to be together. It wasn't late in the night. We usually went to bed early. We are an example of the kind of people

12 • Alone In The White Silence

that night owls find so ingratiating. We love to get up quite early, shower, talk, drink coffee, and practice our smiles.

“And this morning like many other mornings I would go to the doorway to our combination bathroom/closet and lean against the door frame and watch her for awhile sound asleep.

“She looked like an angel. Wrapped up under the covers, a thin smile upon her lips, a few crinkles and sacks lined her eyes, but I loved each crinkle, my eyes caressed the sacks under her eyes.

“I liked the way, when she slept, her hand would rest on her chest like she was saying the pledge of allegiance lying down. The way her chest rose and fell. Silently I would watch her and I would silently thank Fate, or God, for the good fortune given me. This woman was not of my class. She was a perfected sculpture, I was an amorphous blob of clay.”

“Stop it.” Jill said across the table from John, “Stop that right now, you have no right to be so hard on yourself, I think its kind of sweet the way you talk about her.” Envy tinged the waitresses voice, but John went on.

“It always ended the same way, my watching her, that is. She would awaken and in her morning voice, still with a trail of her dreams lit upon it she would ask, “What?”

“Thus, began our morning ritual, but to us it was important as taking a H-jet, or synthing the Java or coffee in the morning. She would have a look of almost irritated puzzlement upon her face, and her lips made a flat line that curved upward slightly at the edge. She waited for my response, but knew it like you would know your name, or your address...

“I love you.” I would tell her, matter-of-factly.

“Oh, is that all.” was her reply, as she slipped into her gown and sat at the edge of the bed.

“I used to feel frustrated in the beginning of this morning ritual before I realized that she was simply baiting me. I caught on,

but I had a hard time those early days developing a sense of humor so early in the morning. I have a tendency to be quite a night owl myself. Before I changed, you know, to be with her in the early morning hours....

“Anyway, there she is sitting at the edge of her bed wiping the sleep from her eyes when everything gets kind of well, you know, dripping with syrup.

“I want to hear it.’ Jill said.

“In the next part of our ritual, I assume the pose and stance of a courtly gentleman. I would kneel up to her at the edge of the bed and I would ask, “Would you, you know.”

“Would I what?” she would reply, casting a sort of smirk at me.

“You know?”

“And this is where the ritual would change from day to day, a small test of our creativity and a way to check and balance to see if we were on our toes. “

The original ritual went, “would you marry me.” and she would smile and kiss me and say yes, but over the years it got a little strange.”

“Like what?”

“Would you pour cold water down my back, whisper sweet nothings in my ear, write me a poem every day, sing me that song we heard that you said “would be our song.”

“You would ask her..”

“No, that was another part of the variation, sometimes she’d be the one down on her knees and I’d be the one who overslept.”

“Or maybe she just got up earlier than you did?” Jill smiled.

“Could be.”

John cleared his throat. Time didn’t matter now and all the sweet little nothings that he had said and had done for her really

14 • Alone In The White Silence

didn't matter now, did they? *It was all over, wasn't it?*

“On that morning, the morning of our anniversary, I stuck with “Will you marry me?” it seemed appropriate, and I was right.”

I remember how she looked, that half sleep still glazing across her face, the pattern of the embossed pillow still tattooed lightly to her cheek--the smile, beaming.

You know you'd think some people would get tired of this ritual, but it really was a lot more than a few rehearsed remarks shared with bad breath in the morning. It was really a way to start a day. Not a day went by that I gave thanks for her, not a day goes by. Each morning was like a new day, and in it, promises...When my job was hard, when the words would not come, I could think of her.

I brought her a cup of hot tea, that morning of our anniversary, not knowing this was a last among other lasts. Over breakfast we read the holos together.

“Holos?”

“Oh, I keep forgetting. You'd think I would have got in the habit by now. All right, we were reading the news that morning. We were going over the general bad news of the day--earthquakes, famines, murders, and diseases. But then in the middle of it, as I had planned, I stopped and looking over the “Paper” at her I said, “But wait, here's some good news, Victoria.”

“Victoria was your wife's name?”

“Victoria Emerald Lanton.” John said with a slight melancholy tone to his voice.

John smiled sadly, savoring the name then continued, “When I told her about the prospect of good news she was casual... but waiting-”

“What do you mean?” Jill asked.

“Oh this was another one of our ways of conversing to one another in the morning. I would, well, make up a news story or two to kind of cheer us up.”

“Cheer you up?”

“Well, yeah. There is so much depressing news. The lies a President tells, natural disasters, murders, there needed to be some lifting of the spirits. Some people would look at that as cold, making light of the news of the day, but I had always thought that bad news always needed to be tempered, that each bit of tension needed seasoning of humor to give it a sense of homeostasis.”

Anyway on the day of our anniversary, March 29th, as I said, I already had it planned out. I had paused for a long time for dramatic effect and Victoria, because of her insatiable curiosity, was dying to know what I had thought up and conjured in my mind this time.” She said, “What is it?”

“It was in a tone that suggested to me as oftentimes it did, “Fess up, John.” So I did fess up. I stood up, opened the cupboard where I had hidden the gift and gave it to her.

“Happy anniversary, Victoria.” I said aloud with triumph. Her eyes lit up for a moment and she held it in her hands. I’ll never forget that look she had that morning. It was one of the things I really loved about her, the way she would take a surprise. But then that morning, like many others she would play a game...

“I wanted to be first.” she pouted.”

“Early bird catches the worm.” I said.

“Are you saying-”

“Just open the gift, Vic.”

I had gotten her a real wool sweater for her anniversary. Red wool and she loved it. Red is her favorite color.

Mine too.” Jill said again with the tone of envy on her lips.

John got chills for a moment, but continued, “She tried it on and it fit well, perfectly. She looked just beautiful, but Victoria could look beautiful wearing camel hide.”

She went back into our room and procured a small box and handed it to me triumphantly. She smiled and said, “For the good times.”

16 • Alone In The White Silence

I opened the box and it had a watch inside. It was an antiquity, an analog watch, but there was no knob to wind it, and no battery set into it. I looked at it admirably for a moment, and placed it awkwardly on my wrist.

“Voice print recognition,” the watch said and I was in awe. An altered, no augmented antique watch as well, it must have cost Victoria more than a couple of credits. It was just the kind of gadget I loved. Victoria knew I loved gadgets. She also was a little irritated by this obsession of mine. Before we were married, I had antique cars and other machines all littered all over the back lawn that violated a number of neighborhood ordinances. I would fiddle around with when I was taking a weekend off. Old fossil fuel cars that aren’t even street legal anymore.”

“What?” Jill asked, but John went on.

“John Lanton.” was my reply into the watchband and then it asked, “Password.” the answer was, “Emerald.” And then I kissed Victoria for what would be the last time.

“I love you Victoria Emerald Lanton.”

“And I you.” she replied and smiled at me.

I looked down in order to set the analog timer and realized it had already been set, and it was time to leave for work as well.

“I found it in an antique shop.”

“Did it have a manual with it?” I asked hoping that there was not one. I liked to fiddle and puzzle my way through gadgets without the benefit of others helping me. It is sort of like the way people in this time try to program their VCR’s.

But never mind. She said to me, “It is interesting you should ask that question.”

She related to me that the sales clerk at the store had given her a word of caution as she was buying it. Apparently the previous owner, a nondescript man, entered with it and almost seemed to give it away a few days before. He appeared, mysterious, intense, oblivious to the effect he was having on others. He was

short, abrupt, and wary.

The clerk looked over the watch. “It appears to be an antiquity,” the clerk said placing the device under the scanner beside the antique cash register he kept at the “checkout.”

The man replied, “It’s just a watch, don’t handle it.”

The clerk related to my wife how he held the watch. He held it away from him as if it were dead, or diseased. He touched it as little as possible and when he first walked in to inquire about its sale value, he placed it on the counter, not wishing it to exchange hands personally.

The clerk asked, “The scanner confirms that this watch has been altered, there are a few modern alloy traces here in the watch mechanism. To be sure they are small, and there is a faint power source reading from it as well, not a usual trait for a watch one usually has to wind.”

“It has been modified,” the man said but when the clerk asked him to elaborate, he refused.

“Well then, does a manual of any type come with it?”

“No, I am giving it to you as it was given to me,” he had replied and he gave no further explanation.

“My wife told me that the clerk had grown suspicious of the man by then because he had a pained, but determined look on his face, like he was up to something. The clerk speculated the watch might be stolen property, and maybe a lot more valuable than first imagined. But his suspicions were quelled; the man did not have the look of a criminal, just someone who was intensely interested in getting rid of a strange altered antiquity. He held it, the clerk had said, as if it were something dead...Perhaps, the clerk speculated, it reminded him of a dead relative....

The clerk tried to get more out of the man with the watch, but after a number of queries the only response he received was “It’s special. And it should be given to special people for a special occasion.” but he wouldn’t elaborate and left before the clerk could

18 • Alone In The White Silence

ask him another question.

“And that’s how I received it, for a special man on a special occasion.” Victoria said this her voice rolling over the word man. The way she said it and smiled drew me to her, and I kissed her again. I just remembered that....

“Jill, dear, we are closed up, you wanna lock up?” a voice said this from across the room. Three waitresses and a cook were headed out the door, in rain gear. John had forgotten that it was raining.

“Sure” Jill said waving her hands casually shooing off the rest of the employees. And they became hauntingly aware that they were alone.

Jill smiled and said, “Go on, I want to hear the rest of this...”

So far her face did not betray a look of disgust, or incredulity that he suspected, but an open kind of expression.

“Gulping down the last bit of coffee we made out way to our separate grav cars and headed out to our jobs. She worked in the field of colonizing and terraforming alien environments. An expert theorist in those areas, but she was involved generally in almost every aspect of that including the colony ships that would eventually be seeded and sent to different planets.

“Victoria was fascinated with the physics and it was her work that led to breakthroughs in cryogenics which is the science of...”

“I’ve seen science fiction Mr. Lanton, I know what cryogenics are.” Jill interrupted.

‘I’m sorry.’

“Just go on, this is fascinating.”

Most people never let him get this far. They were perturbed by his language, and belligerent about where he came from. Actually they were downright hostile.

“I went to work at a holo-network, or a news net. I did

reporting, editorials. You name it; I had done it at one time or another, though my secret aspiration, though long since dead as a profession, was to be a novelist. With the advent of the virtual reality vicarious experiences had to offer, many people felt it was just too much effort to read, and not nearly as vivid.”

John stopped before he explained any further, he could see how he was alternately impressing and irritating the woman who sat across from him, a younger version of his wife Victoria. *They could easily be sisters.*

“Anyway, the ride to work was a usual ride for me. I set the car to its selected destination, darkened the windows and played around with my watch.

I darkened the windows because there was bound to be traffic, and because of the inertial dampers on the car, it was almost indistinguishable how quickly one traveled to their point of destination.”

“I played with the watch on the way to work that morning. Because I wanted to know what it was that made the man want to give it away. What did it do? Did it remind him of someone? Was it a deceased loved ones watch? Or what did it do?

“It started when I again mentioned the name “Emerald” that was the original password that I had given to the computer. There was a pause for a moment and then it replied, “Menu: 1.Time 2. Date 3. Set 4. Time Zones 5. Daily Diary 6. Calculator 7. Calendar 8. Miscellaneous.”

Through voice activation I was able to set the time and the date all the way to the nanosecond if I so desired. I was also, incredibly, able to dictate a diary into the watch as well as a calendar of events. In addition, under the diary entry, I could enter addresses of friends. I was amazed it wasn’t also an audio phone or something of the like. It also announced the time and I imagined this might have been altered for the optically impaired people.

20 • Alone In The White Silence

That's right, you call them blind. Still I should imagine."

Anyway, after playing around for a while I said the word, "Miscellaneous" and I guess that was where the beginning of the end occurred for me.

"Beginning of the end? Beginning of the end? You are still here..." Jill said as she stared at him across the table.

"I am here, but time is the enemy. Chronos has left me here as a casualty."

"Aren't we being a little over-dramatic?"

Over-dramatic, Victoria always used to say that to me. It was true that I am somewhat of an emotional person.

"Anyone might of dismissed the reply the watch made, but I had the same trait my wife had, and that was a insatiable curiosity.

"The computer had prompted, "Password." at my mention of miscellaneous commands and I tried a couple.

"Emerald." I said but the only response I got was, "Password insufficient."

I tried again and it said, "Password Insufficient."

"Like I said a lot of people would have given up at that moment just for a miscellaneous command whatever it was, but I was determined. So determined that I kept the watch's voice activated computer at that peculiar prompt for the rest of the day. In a staff meeting at the News Net the people there eventually ordered me to remove the watch and leave it in my office. It was hard that with every word you said it would reply, "Insufficient password" and my co-workers were very irked with me five minutes into the meeting."

"It's not like we often repeat things over and over ourselves." I had said. They were not impressed with my attempt at humor.

Around lunchtime, after our meeting as I was dictating material for the news net, consolidating news material from corre-

spondents around the country I had hooked into the comm.

I took the watch out and read aloud again some of the dictation I had read aloud now typed up as hard copy on the comp screen.

I was going through the downloaded vid sequences and editing them with the voice over, but the watch was distracting me and I almost used the wrong vid for a story that was coming out of Eastern Tri-America. It was something about a hurricane hitting the coast of New Charleston and I was dubbing it with satellite photos of the geography of Pluto recently surveyed by the Telescope we had parked in orbit around it.

“I began to get frustrated. I was tempted to activate my computer terminal on a voice download of words from the hard disk’s dictionary, but I relented, I wanted to get the word on my own. The potential, the implications of it were staggering. It could be any word, any word from any language. If I did not find it by the days end, I would leave the watch overnight next to the computer as it went through the dictionary, both English and International.

“When I got back from lunch, I was swamped by a breaking story about the M.O.S.S. epidemic that was ballooning out especially in the Tri-America sectors.

“What is all this you are talking about?”

“M.O.S.S. makes AIDS look like the common cold, it kills in hours and is transmitted through any sort of liquid transfer really. The water is where it originally came from. Many different theories have arisen concerning its origin.

“I have never heard of it.”

“Nor I assume that you will. Be glad. Our water around the planet has to be tested weekly and new antigens have to be created monthly to combat the diseases quick mutations.”

John Lanton cleared his throat then and remembered the horror of M.O.S.S. and he was immediately rewarded by a stray

22 • Alone In The White Silence

thought. M.O.S.S. was one thing he didn't miss about his time.

“It wasn't until quarter till seven at night that I remembered the watch again, and I was already leaving, with my jacket on and the lights already dimming.

“I placed it haphazardly on my wrist and headed for the grav car. I dimmed the glass of the car and punched home and then started rattling off words.

#

“But then I hit upon a revelation. My wife knew of my inquisitive nature when she bought this watch and perhaps the password was something her and I would only know; some little secret term of endearment or memory that we shared together. So I thought hard about it, naming terms of endearment, and losing my patience.

Traffic was especially congested that day, the computer reported, due to some maniac setting his car on manual and going for a reckless joyride. It had the computers tied up for fifteen minutes just trying to track the guy down that was adding so much novel data into an otherwise predictable comp program.

“ETA thirteen minutes forty five seconds” the computer droned as I was starting to get cabin fever and would soon opt for an easy way out like inserting a virt-vid, but I liked books better.

Then I remembered something that only my wife and I would know. Something very private and yet very important, and that was our song. This one was an oldie, though you might refer to it as a contemporary song. It was the first song my wife and I heard when we met.”

The song was called “And so It Goes” by Billy Joel. So, reluctantly I started with the title, and then I started into the song.

In every heart there is a room

A sanctuary....

That's all I had to say.

“Password Accepted.” the voice of the watch computer

droned. I have no idea why, or what she planned by it being so. The command line was as follows: 1. Space Time. 2. Exit.

I picked space/time thinking this might give me the time of certain spatial coordinates that I enter. So I said, finally regaining my good cheer after the frustrating traffic as well as my breakthrough, “Space/time.”

“Set coordinates,” the computer droned.

“Durham, North Carolina, 1992.” I said.

“Time:” was the second thing it specified, and I thought it was some sort of a joke. But then I fathomed, perhaps this watch had a history mem bank in it as well. It was a diary, address book, calendar etc. Why couldn’t it do this as well?

“Example:” the computer added, “01/01/00 at daytime or specified chrono time.”

It said this wordlessly and I found this to be intriguing. I had given the place of birth of my grandfather, so I added also the time of his birth, “3/11/92 7:41pm.” It is amazing the things you remember as a child. I remember them, that is my grandfather recounting his date of birth and the interesting things that occurred before and during his birth.

Apparently, he was born in the midst of a storm, weird lights cascading outside. And, well, they saw a naked man running near the hospital on the night of his birth. Since that day, he hadn’t quite been sure what to make of that story, or the portents as well as omens it aroused and inspired. But I digress....

The time of his birth wasn’t really as important anyway. But to hear some of the other things that might have occurred. The watch might have a micro database that has hundreds and thousands of newspapers as well as other writings attached to it, I thought, the immensity and the vastness of what it could have been intrigued me. I was waiting and the computer said the word, “Execute.” and I was not prepared for what was ahead.

“I was dead wrong in my guess as to the true nature of this

24 • Alone In The White Silence

antique watch that had somehow been modified. I thought Victoria was adding to my sense of history. Instead, she was giving me the weapon of my own destruction, and her destruction as well, at least in my world.”

“Sanctuary, this was no sanctuary, it was a prison.”

Jill sighed loudly, “I can pretty much guess what you’re going to tell me, but go ahead and spill it anyway.” She sounded irritated, disappointed? Was she thinking to herself, “This man is totally phased out and should be locked in a rubber room?” He could imagine only what she was thinking. But this woman, Jill was so like Victoria and she just had to find out what happened next.

“There was a bright light filling up in the inside of my car. A bright, White Silence, that is the best way I can explain it now. The sound of my scream echoed, and was distorted within.

The boundaries of that light, of that silence seemed endless. I was encased and bathed, I felt alternately burned and frozen. A paradox arose around me. I could actually smell the light, as well as hear it. I could taste it and feel it. I was floating yet I felt tugged, pulled and pressed. I could hear my heart beating, my veins pumping and then.”

“Then what?” Jill asked wiping the table with a cloth she had fetched from her apron. She had also reorganized the salt and peppershakers in addition to placing the menus back into a small slot located on the salt and peppershaker holder.

John stared at her for a moment as if lost in her again, unable to speak, and yet knowing he had to tell the end of the story. He had been vague before, but still he knew that she knew. It was part of the game, part of the understanding; it was part of the telling of the story.

“Then I was here, as you might have guessed.” He hissed through his teeth.

“And it’s been about two months since you arrived here

from wherever. Have you tried returning?"

"I have."

"And you've been unsuccessful."

"Obviously."

"And what were your impressions when you first arrived here."

"It was dirty. The fossil fuels, I can see why they came out with grav cars, much more stable, and the whole system is more harmonious and it is more forgiving of human innovation. But my very first impression on being here was naked, wet alone. Those were words that filled by head, along with the pounding pain and ache of all my anatomical extremities"

"I see." Jill bit her fingernail now and she appeared to be unwilling to utter any other word as if it might break the spell, as if it might be used to shatter the fantasy and bring back the reality of it all; that this man was crazy. That his story was a tale left best for the birds, and imaginary folk like goblins, that maybe like Don Quixote he had read too many books, maybe a little bit too much sci-fi--the kind of material she liked to read.

"You don't believe me," he said.

He didn't sound hurt, he sounded more of less resigned, "I would try to prove it to you, but that would prove worthless. The watch I have has stopped and I really would not like to have it closely inspected in case it ever again decides to run. My clothes and all other articles were lost in my journey.

He disarmed her though, that was for certain. Jill found him likable, even if he was insane. But she knew he was not lying to her, he was self-deluded, or he was telling the truth. Those were her two choices. But when he mentioned clothes being lost in his journey and the two-month time span, something caught her minds eye.

"I think I heard something about that." Jill said.

"It did make the papers, a man found on the Duke campus

26 • Alone In The White Silence

unconscious wearing only a watch.”

“No one believed him or the girl, they thought he had made it all up.”

“So that’s the story. I arrived here in March of 1992. And here I am now, at this time. I lost my memory for a short while. When I first came out of it I was disoriented and it is a wonder I did anything, but it was the middle of March, and a cold rainy night if I remember correctly.

The only thing I had sense enough to do that night was run. I managed to steal some clothes while running through backyards around Gregson Street. Some clothes, a night’s sleep on the dark recesses of Dukes upper campus that had at one time been a women’s college were my first impressions of this place. The air had a foul smell to it, like honey, but it was a sick smell.

“The curing tobacco.” Jill replied and he nodded.

He could remember the sound of sirens the roars around him were so much edgier than the refined user-friendly environment of the future.

“When did you realize where you were?”

“Like I said I had my memory jumbled up for awhile. I didn’t know who I was, I only knew intense longing, a face in my dreams I would see on occasion, and strange fits of crying.”

But most of all there was that wall set up by the white silence, a knife of time that severed him forever from his world in the future. A future where his love was, a love that had somehow re-manifested itself on the face of this young waitress in the past, his past, her present.

“Perhaps.” Jill said helpfully, “You suffered an even greater concussion than you can possibly imagine.”

“I’ve thought of that, you know. That I’m going crazy, that I actually belong here and not there. But I know that I’m right.” he said, “I know the future.

It is a place I can touch when I close my eyes. I see the

house; I can see the passing of grav cars high above our house. I remember the smell of the morning air, I can taste the feeling I got being one of the powerful casters at the News-Net. But most of all, I remember her face, Victoria's face, the face of my future. I am a man out of time."

"And I know of Gerald Benton Lanton, my grandfather who was born that evening. I have even managed a visit to their place of residence..."

"I've had that feeling too." She trailed off.

"What do you mean?"

"That I'm before my time, people are always saying that. "Jill you have your head in the stars." and its true I do read a little too much science fiction, but I can't get enough of it to be certain, if I could afford college I would be a Science major and eventually I hoped to be in some field specializing in space sciences or the life sciences. "

John Lanton nodded. Another thing this woman and Victoria shared. And he felt a pang of guilt. He knew that however long he lived he would never be unfaithful to her, his Victoria, his Gem, his emerald."

"So that is what you think my story is, science fiction?"

"Not exactly, I would characterize it more as speculative fiction, or a sort of space soap opera."

"A soap opera?"

"An allegory."

"This is my life we are talking about here," he said taking the final sip of his Guinness, the ice inside the frosted mug rattled.

"Yes it is. But you have a vulnerable audience here. Mr. Lanton. I want to believe you. I might even be prone to think that someone put you up to this to somehow tease me. They make jokes at home and among my friends here at the restaurant that I always have my "head in the stars." I have all the Star Trek movies on tape and a good portion of the NextGen episodes as well."

28 • Alone In The White Silence

“I would think this, but my friends and family are not so ingenious enough to do this, so I either have one of two options, to believe what you say is true and your crazy, or what you say is true and your not crazy. In both cases, I find it hard to believe.”

“What do you mean?”

“I find it hard to believe that a man like yourself, who appears to be sane, can be crazy, and yet I believe the story itself is crazy to be called sane.”

“Victoria would have liked you.”

“But I’m not Victoria, Mr. Lanton, I am not your Dulcinea, I am not your fated woman. I am Jill Renauld Haven.”

“REVERSE TO BE EXECUTED”

Jill let loose an audible sigh that seemed to echo and lengthen as it emitted from her lips. Her eyes went wide, and without caution she was reaching for John. He could see her, her fingers trying to reach the look in her eyes, the same look he thought he had seen on Victoria’s face so many times when she thought he was not noticing....

John looked down in shock as he could feel the hum of life in his wristwatch, feel it being to tingle.

And fear and terror enveloped him, as well as a pure liquid anticipation.

“Specify time and space coordinates for return execution.”

His mind sped along a tumultuous path. He could feel his body tremble. He could feel his heart hammering against his chest and--

“John--what is happening?”

“I-am sorry Jill, I cannot stay. You looked so much like her. So much like her, I--”

It was unusual for Jill to fall for someone, but when she saw the feverish look in his eyes, the way he muttered to the watch he had on, the look on his face, she could not help but feel intensely for him. Maybe it was the first time they had met, when her

eyes chanced his downcast face as it was held so stoically in that book he was reading two weeks ago.

“You can’t leave.”

“I am.” Then he said, “2065, January 27th, Ellijay Georgia...6:30pm.”

“But...”

“Quiet, there is someone for you here, your time is here and is now Jill.

Its going to be cold there this time of year, but I don ‘t want to be found, besides I used to rent a cabin up there. Yes, but I need time to gather myself back to myself, if the last time was any indication, a month and then I will be with her, with Sweet Dear Victoria”

He was no longer looking at the world around him; he was talking instead to the future, as he seemed to stare past her. He said, “Execute”

“No!”

“Goodbye.” he said simple and for one last moment he looked around Harold’s, it was empty. At least that was good, no one to witness his disappearance.

#

The White Silence enveloped John Lanton, he was consumed in light, and the only thing that penetrated the light was the horrified sound of her scream, or it could have been his scream, and then, nothing.

The white silence throbbed, and pulsed again; it tasted coppery, it burned and froze. He felt tugged and pulled inward, his muscles convulsed. He felt like he had fallen, was being flattened, stretched, floating...

And then he felt coldness around him --a chill that froze him inwardly, and silence, a great silence. He was naked again save the watch.

A watch, he thought looking at it and a sudden revulsion stole over him. And then he collapsed into hysterics. All he could

30 • Alone In The White Silence

remember was a scream and a desire to run.

His breath was ragged and tinged by tears. He could still see the look of terror on her face, as it was enveloped in light.

Who was she? Where did she come from?

I have lost her, he thought, and then he felt the revulsion again, along with a desire to scream, instead he ran forward, a cold wave of nausea clutched at his stomach.

No one was out and about, his footprints were the only things that made dents in the snow. He looked for trees and found trees, but he knew that unless he fought hard, he would be frozen.

The White Silence, were the words that echoed in his mind. He could already feel the numbness, the slowness and the heaviness in his limbs. His name... who was he?

He could see his breath as he blew it out in front of himself. Although he was quite cold, his progress was a lot swifter than he expected.

But his legs were heavy and his calve muscles began to ache from the pain. His feet though, were turning numb. He had to get clothing soon or else.

He didn't want to complete the thought for that would surely usher in blind panic.

"Clothes, must find shelter."

Over the hill there was an old shack. He could see no lights on inside, but somehow he didn't expect there to be. It looked quite abandoned. A chimney was at the edge of it, and where there was a chimney, he hoped there was firewood.

The door was unlocked. He walked in to find a place that was barren, save one chair, a blanket, and a fireplace. Some wood was piled up next to the fireplace covered by a green tarp. It looked so primitive.

He placed the wood in the fireplace and lit it using a lighter he had found in a drawer while rummaging through the place. He

lit some paper and caught the logs and then wrapped the blanket around him in front of the fire.

And ever so quickly, he drifted, or rather nodded to sleep. He could feel it covering him like a blanket, but his dreams, they were fragmented, white, a silence, and then a scream, the after-image of a face.

“Noooooo!” She reached across the table and felt cold-fire. She shrunk back from it as her hand went numb from what, an electric charge? She watched in mute horror as he dissipated. No roar, just the sound of sucking and then nothing. However, the book, which lay there on the table, began to turn pages by itself, as if a wind had stirred it awake. Silently she began to run her fingers across its cover, the pages, and drew it to her. It was still warm from where he touched it.

Tears welled in her eyes as she could only think of two words over and over, “Curse Him Curse Him.” Over and over they spun. Curse him for not bringing her with him. Curse him for being married...Curse him for her falling in love with him. Curse him. But the words grew hollow in her throat as a pang began to spring up inside her. If only there was a way that she could get to him, to cross the boundaries, and be with him. To prove to him that she was his love. In a way, to change history, or rather make it.

#

His eyes were heavy, but he could hear sounds around him. The gentle crackling of the fireplace, he could feel its warmth on his back.

He gradually grew warm, and then he heard the sound of a slight droning approaching. It might be a snowmobile he fathomed, but snowmobiles were louder were they not?

He heard the sound of doors shutting, and then the door

32 • Alone In The White Silence

creaked open. Slowly, he slid over, and his eyes opened to see flickering shadows dancing on the front doorway.

The door flung open revealing the aged figure of an old man, a weapon of some sort in his hand drawn. What was it? A blaster? This far out in the wilderness?

“State your business.”

He kept the blanket around him and made no sudden movements, “Caught in storm,” was all he could say through chattering teeth, his feet began to sting.

“Damn HT Campers, don’t you know to dress warm. Where’d you stall out?”

“Was hiking.”

“Alone?”

“Yessir...” he shivered.

“Well if that ain’t the foolhardiest thing I’ve ever heard. I don’t care what year it is, you never hike alone, son, never you know how lucky...”

And then he revealed himself, he was big, with a beard, had strong looking hands of iron, and the gun at his side seemed inappropriate, he looked like someone who should be holding a shotgun, especially in the dead of winter.

“Where are your clothes.”

He shivered, but didn’t answer. He was all out of answers. He had no idea where his clothes were, only the vague recollection of a scream, and the white light all around him Her face and then nothing.

“You ain’t one of those strange boys are you?”

“Strange boys?”

“You know, one of them ones that want to get close to nature that you don’t bring a thing with you.” Heard of them before? They say the great Mother Nature will decide who lives and who dies. I say those people must had had their brains frozen doin’ headstands in the snow.”

“No.” was all he could reply. He didn’t know where his clothes were. Why he was here, he had no explanation.

The older man with the grizzled beard holstered his gun and squatted next to the fire, grabbing a poker and adjusting the wood a little bit causing spits of sparks to suddenly fireworks out in the fireplace.

“All right, reckon I can get you some clean clothes out of the car.”

Car...” was all he was able to utter and then he was fast asleep.

He awoke sweating a little while later. The blanket was hot from the heat that radiated from the fire. He stared into the fire for a while thinking about who he was and where he’d been. A cloud still hung over him, he couldn’t quite remember from where he’d come.

What time was it? He checked the watch, but was sure that the time was wrong, and then a familiar wave of revulsion stole over him, he buried his hand underneath the blanket. He could feel the hum, the slight tingling in his arm from the watch-band. A phrase kept emitting in his mind, “Time is the enemy. Time is the enemy...”

A set of clothes too big for him sat on the floor neatly folded. Somewhere in the background he could hear snoring. He picked up the flannel shirt and buttoned it followed by a thick stiff pair of pants that he assumed were blue jeans. And put them on, careful to Velcro the pants tight, as well as the shirt flap.

#

This seemed like a normal activity for him. These clothes somehow fit, and he also knew somehow that a grav car stood outside in the snow. He had recognized its drone and had given him his first since of familiarity since...

But it wouldn’t come to him. He couldn’t remember.

34 • Alone In The White Silence

He fell back to sleep.

The next morning, Mac, who was the name of the bearded lumberjack rough looking man, set some coffee and breakfast out for John.

“I figured you been drugged, or suffered from somethin’ real traumatic.” the old man injected taking a sip of his coffee, “Now you eat them eggs, you need it after all you’ve been through.”

And so he ate in silence still trying to sort out the truth. But the truth refused to come to him. He had cloudy visions--A scream, a face, and then White Silence. That was the order of his events. Then revulsion he had for the watch, it was well, ludicrous.

“Antiquity.” Mac said across from him gnawing chicken off the bone one night for dinner.

“Yes it is.” was all he could reply.

“Willin’ to sell it?”

John grabbed his wristwatch with his other hand and placed it protectively on his lap.

“Sorry, just askin’.”

“I apologize, its just important to me.”

“Why?”

“I...” he stared at the watch for a moment, trying to discover the meaning of it, of who he was, “I don’t know.” and with that thought came a pang of anguish whose source he couldn’t begin to grasp.

“You don’t know much do ya?”

“I know that I’m safe now.” With that he managed a smile and the old man slid down into a chair and joined him, handing him a cup of beans, “Synthed them myself just a few hours ago.”

“Synthed.” the words seemed familiar to his tongue, and yet he could not grasp them.”

“Like some Java?”

And then something, a fragment came to his mind, “How is that M.O.S.S. epidemic?”

“Why do you think I sit here in shack boiling my water boy, the city is the ferment of it all. Plague is real plentiful there, antigens. Someday the mutagens are going to fight and win against them.”

#

His days with the old man seemed to linger on, but to be sure he loved the older fellow. Somehow the snow, the cold and this man all seemed familiar. He would wrest himself awake early in the mornings, help with some of the household chores and then read the sparse collection of books that the man had scattered along his shelves.

But the books did not give him peace. Each day, as he sat alone in that shack, when he had time to himself, he would feel a longing emptiness, and a desire that rose within him to know who he was.

Gradually, his memory began to return. It was slow, and sometimes he would have to stop, focus on the image that was floating around in his memory, and gradually like grasping on the end of the rope, he would pull the full memory in, and when he did....

“Yes, an H’Jet, man there is nothing like it.”

“City people.” was all Mac muttered after he said this, “You are all the same. I don’t even own a holo-emitter.”

Which, John thought to himself, was why the man did not know him. He was a newscaster, his face was well known, but somehow he knew he was not on vacation, and he did not worry about found, he was not lost as far as he could....

One night, during a particularly bad blizzard, He got full recall. The snow became rain; the whiteness was incandescent with the bath of lightning. In his dream an image of his watch turning into a bright wall of light surrounded him, and then peering

36 • Alone In The White Silence

through the light he could see the outline of a grav-car, and then his wife's face--Victoria's Face, Jill's face. He could hear a scream. He awoke.

"Victoria!" he cried out sitting bolt upright in bed. But Mac was gone; he was nowhere to be found. John Lanton married to Victoria Emerald Lanton was snowed in.

His head ached

He had to see his wife again. What was the date? He knew where to ask."

"Date/time he said.

The voice was a monotone, impersonal. It is March 27th, 2065.

"Two days." he said to himself in a half cry. Two days till my anniversary. And then he started to cry. Tears of joy, a flood of passion, and then planning

He deeply loved and missed Victoria. He remembered her face, the fogged White Silence, the strange waitress he had met that last night, and something about her name had triggered the watch.

When he arrived at his house it was early afternoon, no one was home. Both grav cars were gone. That was odd. He was puzzled and waited.

And that was when he saw himself. John Lanton again. Arriving home after dark, suitcase in his hand a smooth contented grin on his face. He had the look of being up-to-something.

And it was then that it hit him.

A tinge of jealousy filled him, followed by sadness, outrage, and many different emotions. That was himself he watched from across the street, but it was him then. He tried to recall what he had been up to; perhaps the anniversary gift had been what was on his mind, or some interesting bit of creativity he had planned for the next morning. He couldn't remember.

But he knew then what he had to do.

He knew he had to get his life back. That he should kick himself for what he did. But he knew that time must be time. It was the enemy, but it had to come full circle. He wanted his life back, and his wife back.

#

Looking disgruntled he approached the antique shop with much speed. He knew he would have to return the watch else it would never be a gift. His wife never specified when she had picked it up and he was not about to go on living as some left over stunt double shadowing John Lanton, himself.

And what would happen if he did not return into the past as he had? What would erupt, a paradox? Had a paradox already occurred? What was the power of this watch that could send someone through time?

He took the mechanism to someone specializing in computers, the chip or something had burnt out and he had to get the infernal thing fixed. If it didn't work, he himself might cease to exist, and he was worried about the consequences of that occurring.

Sure, it might have been better if he never had to go through the process that he had gone through, but what if he prevented it, who would he become?

It was the battery. It had to be replaced, and questions were asked about some of the mechanisms in the watch, to which John replied, "It is a special watch, one my wife gave me, that's all I know."

#

He was very quick about how he returned the watch. Flip-pant, held it in front of him like it was dead. He was afraid to wear it on his wrist anymore and he did not utter the passwords, although he had to re-enter them with the restart of the watches battery.

And then he must find a place, and wait.

38 • Alone In The White Silence

Wait for the grav car, the White Silence, and a chance to replace him. He knew the day, and he knew the route. He hired a taxi to have his other followed.

The empty grav car was still in automatic mode. He followed it home. Home, he said the word silently to himself, and smiled as he said it. He was coming home. He knew what he would find as he pressed open the car doors. The computer intoned, "Security breach, logic discrepancy, the man, John Lanton already resides in the car."

"Computer how many occupants are in this car?"

"There is one."

"And who am I?"

"Voice print recognition records the speaker as John Lanton."

"Therefore has there been a security breach?"

"Findings are inconclusive, canceling security procedure alpha seven three one."

He breathed a sigh of relief. The computer records would have to be erased, of course, but he could do that at his leisure now.

He slid inside the doors of the car and changed into his work clothes. They fit him a little baggy. Possibly from the lean food he had eaten while in the mountains near Ellijay.

And there stood Victoria waiting for him.

His Victoria

He wanted to embrace her, to make love to her right then. They were planning to have a child soon. If only she knew. If only she could see what he had been through. I am back. He thought to himself, I am really here. And then for just a moment he felt the slightest pang of guilt. He remembered the face of the waitress and it hurt. He knew how she felt, a woman without someone to love. But she only knew me a little, that is how it is different. She only knew part of me, not all of me. She would get over me in a couple of days, and it is true someone else would love her just as

much as I could have....

“Happy anniversary.” Was what he said as he entered the threshold of the house. How bright it seemed to him now. How strange and mysterious it looked.

She had a box in front of her, and immediately he became afraid, was it another watch? Or was it the first watch and this was merely a variation on the theme. He decided to guess another choice, “Another gift?”

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“Your not wearing the first one I gave you.” she trailed off. She looked nervous, pale. In fact, she looked almost ill.

“Are you all right?”

She looked up at him, their eyes meeting, and for a moment it seemed like they were haunted eyes. Eyes that had seen him for the very first time...

The box was bigger, rectangular in shape. It did not have the same look as a watch box. He felt some relief as he felt it. A little heavy for a watch as well, too bulky.

“I left it at the office.” he lied. She seemed uninterested, that was not like her at all.

“At the office, no John, I don’t think you could ever leave something like that behind.” she smiled at him weakly. Questions formulated in his mind, would he ever tell her what had happened and seeing her face he felt a tinge of guilt. Guilt for the other woman he had come to see many times when he was no longer, here. He knew in his heart he had been falling for that woman. Jill. Victoria.

“Open it.” she said and it seemed to struggle out from between her teeth. She seemed intense, worn, and weak. Resignation?

John Lanton took the package in his hands and shook it. It was heavy, covered by dust, the dust of age it appeared--a plain brown wrapper. On it was stuck a card, he unfolded it and it sim-

40 • Alone In The White Silence

ply said, “To John, Time will never stand between our love.”

Then he heard it, was it, whimpering, he looked into her eyes, they blazed, filled with tears, and then they grew blurry, her face was distorted, his eyes too, were filled his sadness, joy, elation, pain....

He peeled open the paper that seemed to flake and crumble in his hands. Inside was a corrugated box, dents covered it and it seemed almost brittle to the touch. He removed the flap. Fear stole over him.

“I’ve always loved you.” she said and bent her head as tears rolled down her face. ,”Ever since the first time I saw you.”

His cry choked in his throat....”Victoria.”

The cover was faded, crinkled, dog eared, the pages yellowed, the binding all but shot, but it was his volume of Jack London’s short stories, still marked in place he had picked so many years ago -Just a month ago. The place marked he had been reading that evening....

He took her into his arms, the box falling between them, the White Silence no longer separating them. He took her in his arms and kissed her and thought about her ambition, her work in cryogenics, how it had begun by a woman in the late nineteen nineties.

“For you my love.” she said between kisses.

Tears were running down Victoria’s face. He could never imagine the love she had for him. He had suffered months; she had endured years. And what she knew, she risked everything for him.

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Jill had reached an epiphany on that day she saw John Lanton somehow escape from her life. That epiphany had been her beginning. Others would simply refer to him as “the strange man.” But she knew better, and she also knew she was in love with him. The kind of love than would span lifetimes. They wouldn’t believe the truth even if I told them. Amazing how love captures you at

first sight and only grows through the years.

She flipped through the volume of Jack London short stories and stopped at the marked passage and read it carefully. She would go to college, she mused, and get a science degree. Cryogenics, the procedure of freezing people for long voyages would be her specialty. She would find a way. She would go to him. She would succeed. And find an end to her own White Silence.