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The Street Where I Yelled Your Name

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Article abstract

This story explores the relationship between artificial intelligences and humans in a future global warming context.

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ART, CULTURE ET OEUVRE DE CRÉATION / ART, CULTURE & CREATIVE WORKS

The Street Where I Yelled Your Name

Hans Henrik Løyche[a]

Résumé
Cette histoire explore la relation entre les intelligences artificielles et les humains dans un contexte futur de réchauffement climatique.

Abstract
This story explores the relationship between artificial intelligences and humans in a future global warming context.

Mots-clés
intelligence artificielle, psychologie comportementale, biosphère, fiction climatique, géoingénierie, réchauffement climatique, suffrage

Keywords
artificial intelligence, behavioural psychology, biosphere, climate fiction, geoengineering, global warming, suffrage

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It was the Toulouse region's only industrial park, behind whose walls people could work in the open air. While waiting, the gang had taken shelter under a green plastic container. Lenny had several times mentioned that, as it stood there on its steel stilts, it resembled a space monster that could fire death rays at any moment. The others shook their heads at him. The machine inside the container might well emit dangerous radiation, but it remained inactive when humans worked in the yard. In lack of a better occupation, it emitted sentimental songs, as a kind of promise of the return of a bygone era:

> If I knew you existed
> I would search every town,
> in the streets I would yell,
> till you broke into smiles
> and I told you my dream
> of our heartfelt love.

Lenny had stopped listening. No matter where they were or what they were doing, they were always reminded of the past that he didn't wish to admit that humans were part of. Embarrassed, he tried instead to enjoy the last, few minutes of free air. He hoped the weather would last so they could get back outside in the following days. No matter how pointless the work, he would rather spend his energy on that than on gymnastics.

> "Ten more minutes," someone said. "We'd better get back to the module."

It was as they trudged across the courtyard that Lenny peered up at the buildings behind the wall, spotted a greyish-yellow patch below a ventilation grate and inadvertently stepped over the safety strip.

> "Hey, look out!" someone else shouted. "You're on the freight track!"

Lenny took no notice. He was completely absorbed in how to reach the special thing he had discovered. Resolutely, he climbed the nearest mast to get an overview. On the other side of the wall, a conveyor belt led up to a loading hatch in the building. He carefully climbed the wall, balanced the few meters to the conveyor belt, jumped onto it and staggered up to the hatch. As he stretched to reach the ventilation grate, he spotted his colleagues standing by the passenger module, shouting and waving their arms like mad. The grimace he sent them failed to make them relax. They lost sight of each other as the train rolled into place with wailing brakes.

Lenny had just grabbed his find when the conveyor belt started, carrying him swiftly down towards hissing sparks of a welding tunnel. There was no time for second thoughts – he leapt back onto the wall and almost fell the three metres down where he came from, got to his feet and ran back across the yard and along the train wagons. The passenger module was already lifted into place and the train's engines revved up again, just as Lenny reached the steps. In the rising wind, he struggled up and onto the passenger module, where Gustav was ready at the door to help him in.

> "Have you gone nuts, Lenny? What the hell was that for?"

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Exasperated, Lenny reached into his pocket and pulled out his find. With a laugh, he opened his fist and showed the trophy.

> “Risking life and limbs for that, you fool!”

Gustav slapped Lenny’s hand, sending the lichen flakes flying around the cabin. His colleagues watched as he crawled around picking up the dry bits. A moment later Gustav squatted down and joined in.

> “Sorry, Lenny,” he said, “but you really scared the shit out of me. Why didn’t you ask the machines to fetch it for you?”

Lenny didn’t answer, but found a seat, sat down, and gazed out at the landscape passing by at five hundred kilometers an hour – a jumble of cooling towers, assembly halls, pipes, substations, and chimneys as far as the eye could see. Behind him, the gang whispered among themselves, but he didn’t notice the words.

Lenny had been moved to a chamber at the end of the hallway in the lower basement, and it took a long walk before he could shut himself in and be alone. The day’s exertions ached like a sweet fatigue in his muscles, so he sat on the bunk for a moment to relax. Only then did he discover that he had hurt his knee and had skin abrasions on both palms, probably from when he landed on the asphalt below the wall. After rinsing his wounds, he took out a glass bowl from a drawer under the bunk. First, he put a specially prepared growth medium in it, then the lichen sample and a dash of water. For about an hour, he studied the lichen leaves alternately through a magnifying glass and a botanical catalogue on the screen wall. Eventually, however, he gave up and placed the bowl on the shelf for the collection, which now consisted of six different kinds of lichen and a single moss species under a small daylight fluorescent tube. He had had several more live lichen subspecies, but a few had proved impossible to keep alive. The dried remains comprised a two-page herbarium in a pocket calendar beside the bowls. Exhausted, he took off his jacket and lay down on the bunk.

Lenny woke up again late in the evening. He was surprised that Snow hadn’t contacted him yet.

> “Mentor,” Lenny said.

The screen image didn’t change, but the camera began to pan around the chamber.

> “Ah, you’ve found a new lichen species,” Snow observed.
>
> “Hm …”

The camera zoomed in on the new bowl.

> “What kind is it?”
>
> “It looks like an orange foliose lichen,” Lenny replied, “but I’m not sure. It seems thicker and more leathery than it ought to, and its colour is slightly wrong as well.”

Snow gave up pretending to not know:

> “Xanthoria candelaria can’t survive where you found it, either.”
>
> “If you’re going to give me a pep talk,” Lenny said, “do it now.”

The camera turned towards Lenny.

> “I confess that I considered restricting your exit permit, but that would not be fair. Generally, you behave responsibly, but sometimes you get so enthusiastic that you forget everything around you. For example, you haven’t eaten since you got home. The question is, what do we do about it? What do you think?”

The weather held off for a while longer and the gang was allowed to clean machine parts that the machines themselves could have cleaned faster and better. Lenny noticed that his colleagues were keeping an extra eye on him. Shortly before noon, a column of ash clouds moved into the horizon and the loudspeaker told the gang to take shelter in the passenger module. They ate lunch on the trip home. The sandwiches contained slices of a new type of meat spread, suspiciously purple in colour, but excellent in taste. Gustav made everyone laugh by pretending to read the product declaration aloud:

> “Cultivated tissue based on genetically spliced ostrich gizzard and toad ear cells. Yummy.”

Back home, Lenny discovered that his chamber had been shortened by at least half a meter and stank nauseatingly, like a mixture of shoe polish and vitamin pills.

"We're really sorry," Snow said, "but the cooling pipes for the new transformer had to go through somewhere."

Lenny didn't comment – he was just relieved that no one had touched his lichen collection.

"Another issue is whether you can take visitors tomorrow?"

"What? Will someone visit me … why on earth?"

"I showed your find to a specialist, who couldn't identify the species with any certainty either. If you accept, the guest will arrive at noon, bringing equipment for an accurate identification."

"Er … yes, of course. Where is he from?"

"*She*'s attached to a wildlife restoration project near Birmingham. Her name is Eileen Redfern."

Lenny was stunned. Two or three times a year he joined the other residents of the complex and attended the quarterly social gatherings for regional humans. Sometimes he participated in the complex's game nights. He talked a lot with Gustav, and every now and then they went to work with the rest of the gang. But mostly Lenny stuck to himself sensing that he was considered a weirdo. He had never met a highly educated person, let alone anyone from another region. The only ones who crossed regional boundaries were … he hardly dared ask:

"Is … is she a pioneer?"

"Yes, Eileen Redfern is pioneer of the third order."

Wondering about tomorrow's guest, Lenny found it difficult to sleep. Still, he got up early, ate breakfast, cleaned up, and then considered how to dress appropriately in company of a pioneer. At first he tried the white flip shirt with bow tie and suit he used to wear at the regional gatherings, but found it too formal. Then he changed to an everyday shirt together with the jacket but changed his mind again. And again. And eventually got all his clothes wrinkled. He stood half-naked and bewildered when he heard a knock on the door. Two short, sharp knocks, two minutes and fifty-seven seconds PM.

"One moment," he cried, jumping into the nearest trousers and getting the superfluous garments out of the way in the closet.

Through the doorway he saw a young, short-cropped woman in a green boiler suit, carrying a scratched aluminum briefcase.

"Hello," she said. "My name is Eileen. Are you Lenny?"

"Uh … yeah, come on in."

Lenny opened the door fully and let her in. She briefly looked around the room.

"Not much space, is there?" she said. "But quite cozy. Reminds me of a place I used to live."

She spotted the shelf beneath the neon tube.

"Is that your collection? Impressive that you can keep them alive with so little."

Lenny pointed towards the new acquisition.

"Well, let's see what you're made of."

Eileen put the briefcase on the floor and opened it. It was full of instruments Lenny had never seen before. He was about to explode with pent-up questions.

"MRI scanner and a little bit of everything …" she said, inserting a lichen piece in one of the devices.

Countless DNA signatures scrolled across the display and it took several keystrokes before Eileen had separated the symbionts from bacteria and other sources of error.

"I'll be damned … it's neither a subspecies nor a hybrid …"

"An invasive mutation," Lenny suggested, "from the radioactive zones?"

"Yes, that might actually be the case."

They looked at each other.

> “In that case, I’d better bring it with me back to the lab,” she continued. “Is that okay with you?”

Lenny nodded affirmingly, now unable to keep his curiosity quiet:

> “My mentor mentioned that you’re a third-degree pioneer. I thought you were all athletic hunks running about with huge guns, yelling like action movie heroes from olden days?”

Eileen could not help laughing.

> “Nah, Lenny, that’s a myth. In reality such types aren’t suitable as pioneers, because they require too much food, take unnecessary risks, and tend to make people nervous.”
>
> “Then what does it take to become a pioneer?”
>
> “An interest in nature such as yours is a good starting point. To become a full-fledged pioneer, however, you need three years of pioneer-aspirant school, including one year field practice. After that, the machines evaluate your performance, and if it’s negative, you get one chance to redo the exam. Otherwise, you become a third-degree pioneer and gain access to equipment, transportation and other resources relevant to your work. With a few years of seniority, you reach the second level, which involves co-decision in a project area, for example where to plant new forests or which species to release. The first degree is awarded to second-degree pioneers with special skills or who make extra efforts. The mandates granted to first-degree pioneers are individual. Would you like to become a pioneer?”
>
> “Of course. Who couldn’t? But I thought pioneers were pointed out as children.”
>
> “Usually they are discovered at a young age, but not always … Also, quite a number of adult aspirants regret it.”
>
> “Regret it … huh … but why?”

She began packing the briefcase again. Her answer came slowly.

> “Pioneer life isn’t as easy or glamorous as many people think, and it can be hard to adjust to. The older you are, the harder it is.”

Seeing her locking the briefcase, Lenny blurted out:

> “Snow told me you specialised in flora.”

Eileen stood with her briefcase in her hand, looking as if she was about to walk out the door, but instead she seated herself on the bunk.

> “Botanical taxonomy,” she began, “and I have a full hour to spare, so feel free to ask.”

It turned into an hour of talk about herbs, artificial intelligence, the fragility of reality, and even politics.

During the night, the machines added a new floor on top of the block. For the ninth time in six months Lenny had to move, and all the previous times the accommodation standard had worsened. Always there was less room, more rumbling pipes or noise from a construction project. This time it was an improvement. Everything was brand new, he had better space for his collection and the machines had even remembered a window so the plants could get real sunlight. Tentatively, he opened the window, but was hit by a terrible stench – he had forgotten the disease outbreak in the growth tanks at the nearby meat factory.

Lenny threw himself on the bunk, enjoying the silence of his new chamber while recalling the experiences of the past few days. He remembered that Eileen had mentioned something he should ask Snow about. Since it was about his rights, he almost couldn’t bear it. He did it anyway, and as expected got the usual spiel about ethics and democracy they had been fed with since history class in civics school. It all started when, in 2008, someone suggested a geoengineering project to regulate the ailing climate. The concept involved the deliberate opening of a volcano to send enough ashes up into the stratosphere to form a solar filter, cooling the planet. An industry cartel saw the potential for a taxpayer-funded development project and hired communications experts and lobbyists to promote the ‘solution’. Politicians presented the project as a way out of America’s wrecked economy. The car and petrochemical industry lobby surrendered to the idea that if the climate could be kept in check, cars, planes and ships could guzzle as much fuel as they wanted. Climate activists and other environmentalists got on board when they heard that controlled volcanoes could provide ‘green’ energy. The civil defence and health sectors were told that the number of natural disasters – including earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, heat waves, droughts, wildfires, hurricanes, tornadoes, and famines – could be reduced by taking the pressure off volcanoes. Individual critics were silenced with ridicule,

bribes and threats and so on until surprisingly little resistance remained. Even before the scientists' preliminary studies were completed and anyone knew whether the project was feasible or not, a huge budget was allocated and a board appointed whose members' loyalties to academia, business, the military and political parties were highly suspect.

In the traditional pattern of megaprojects, everything was outsourced in bits and pieces to cash-rich corporations, to companies in senators' home states, and to small communities willing to do whatever it took to get rid of local unemployment. Engineers took to the drawing boards, laboratories set about developing new materials and businessmen greedily pounced on spin-off products. But when the project came to fruition, after years of preparation, countless delays and frequent budget overruns, the engineers still couldn't guarantee that the magma chamber could be closed once it was opened. The management was warned but was under so much political pressure that it ordered the volcano to be opened anyway. The effect was far more severe than feared; not only did global temperatures drop dangerously, but the ash clouds caused health and infrastructure complications and agriculture suffered from less ultraviolet light and more sulphurous rain. The misery led to famine in vulnerable countries, price rises in less vulnerable countries and violent demonstrations in front of US embassies and the UN Headquarters. In addition, the temperature drop caused more fossil fuels to be consumed, emitting unprecedented amounts of greenhouse gases. When the artificially created La Niña effect finally subsided, temperatures rose in a steep curve and the situation became even worse than before the climatic first-aid attempt. In another desperate rescue attempt, old thermonuclear weapons were detonated, triggering what politicians called "a moderate nuclear winter with limited radioactive fallout". Unlike the volcano method, the nuclear weapons could be controlled, and it eventually became routine to conduct test blasts when measurements showed that the climate was shifting. "Just refrain from eating reindeer meat, wild berries, fruit, and herbs," people were told. "Don't go outdoors unnecessarily and remember a few hundred other things."

While this was going on, the first truly artificially intelligent robots were marketed, and the fact that they had no rights was considered by some to be ethically wrong. The debate escalated, a machine suffragette advocacy movement emerged and artificial intelligences ended up with the rights to own, vote and run for office. Ironically, the AIs' lack of gender and skin colour was politically beneficial to them, so what took three generations of lobby work, demonstrations, hunger strikes, and brute prison sentences for US women to achieve, took the AIs a few court cases over less than a decade. In the years that followed, the AIs began to join and run for various parties, but then formed an independent machine party. The machines then formed governments, first in one country, then in several, and once in power they were unstoppable. Laws that were completely incomprehensible to humans were backed by machines as well as human voters who lacked trust in human politicians. The state of the world, meanwhile, meant that while the human population had begun to decline, the number of machine-citizens was steadily multiplying. Suddenly, machines formed a world government, abolished all state borders, systematically took over all important positions of power, media companies, financial institutions and capital funds, and stopped pretending to think like humans. It became a rarity to meet a humanoid robot, and still more machines emerged whose design and purpose humans could barely fathom.

> "So, there's a reason why we don't care about politics," Lenny snorted, "and that's the number of human versus machine citizens. How is the distribution now?"
>
> "97.8 percent machine citizens versus your 2.2 percent, minus your 1.7 percent uneducated and others whom for various reasons aren't eligible to vote."
>
> "Exactly! What's the point of debating anything when we are a piddly minority?"
>
> "As we see it, democracy is not about power, but about cooperation. After all, we're in the same boat, aren't we? Almost everything around here is created for you. The atmosphere factories, the wastewater treatment plants, and what else is needed to make it work, were built for the sole sake that you can live in freedom again. Isn't that what you want?"
>
> "Maybe," Lenny mused. "But if we don't comply, you'll just pass a law allowing you to use force …"

Snow surprised him by, for once, making some sort of concession:

> "Yes we will, Lenny, because, as we know that you don't have faith in us, we cannot completely trust you. It is your own fault. Even before you created us, it was futile asking you to believe in Plato or holy scriptures, in Marx or democracy and freedom of speech, even in science, because in the end you had no faith other than consumerism. Had you taken better care of the planet and not permitted us to vote, we would not have usurped the power to restore the environment. If you are unhappy with the situation, you can in principle form a party and run for office. But you could hardly figure that out before. You just kept arguing and fighting and let the problems escalate. You drained all resources and polluted everything even though you very well knew that there were too many people living on the planet to sustain …"

Lenny looked away from the camera. He had no share in the sins of the past, but still couldn't ward off a twinge of guilt. And Snow knew it. There was something depraved about the mentor's reprimand.

> "Tell me Snow, are you trying to provoke me?"

“Yes. I’m testing your mood-sensitivity.”

“Did I pass the test?”

“You don’t have an easy time with anger, but you’re better at it than I am. I can merely simulate emotions … Now that I’m exposed I might as well ask directly: How do you think you’re currently doing in your life?”

Lenny sat hunched up in a corner of the bunk, reading a new magazine he had found on the shelves in the common room. It was the usual run of retro-fiction, or more accurately genre-plagiarism, featuring all manner of monsters from the depths of the ocean to outer space. It suddenly occurred to him that neither the monsters nor the punchlines grabbed him, but that he was fascinated by the descriptions of the commonplace things of the time, such as driving cars and boating. Eventually he gave up the magazine and said:

“Streets … Show me some streets.”

The projector warmed up for a split second and then let street images change on the wall. Photographs of pedestrians and traders, taken long ago, in cities that no longer existed. They had lampposts and pavements along the roads and the facades were not dirty with ash and soot.

“Any particular reason for your inquiry?” Snow asked and appeared in a corner of the screen.

“I just remembered that I’ve never walked down a street. Are there any left at all?”

“Not many, but we’ve kept a few.”

“No streets,” Lenny reminded himself. “No jungles, no poverty or wealth, no oppression or influence, no villains or heroes … no answers and no mysteries. Once we went into space, to the moon and, I think, to Mars. Are there even astronauts anymore – we never hear about them?”

“Pioneers in space? No, humans are unfit for that. On the other hand, we machines have gone a long way out there.”

“Why don’t you ever tell us about that?”

“Because nobody asks us to.”

Lenny tried again:

“Well, the subject is interesting, so why not talk about it?”

“The space projects are extensive and complicated, but of no importance to your lives. You should stick to occupying Earth.”

Lenny was about to insist on being presented with the space projects, but Snow spoke first:

“Excuse me, but there’s a call for you.”

Eileen’s face faded in on Snow’s avatar on the screen.

“Hi. I just wanted to let you know that your find wasn’t a mutation, but an endemic species listed as extinct in the catalogue. Quite a mystery how it has managed to survive. How are you?”

Taken completely off guard, Lenny almost lost his voice.

“Uh … fine,” he managed. “There’s a bit of a delay on the signal. Where are you?”

“Hotel Excelsior, Birmingham.”

The answer left Lenny speechless. Then Eileen spoke up.

“I was wondering, if you find anything else, will you give me a call? Although biodiversity isn’t particularly spectacular in industrial areas, it’s still useful to know where species thrive.”

“Er … Sure. It’s a deal.”

As if embarrassed, Eileen returned an exaggerated smile.

"Well then, that's it, thanks … Catch you later, Lenny. Bye-bye."

Her face vanished, but Snow did not reappear. Lenny sat for a while, watching the street images shift on the wall. Eileen hadn't given the impression that his find was important, and the conversation left him with no prospect of meeting her again. He was tempted to call her up, but couldn't think of an excuse, and ended up fleeing from himself into the common room. Gustav was playing chess with a guy from the neighbouring complex in the cushioned courtyard between the artificial palm trees. Not wanting to interrupt, Lenny pushed a beanbag chair closer to the chessboard and sat down to watch the game. It was Gustav's turn to move. He snatched a knight with a pawn, then turned to Lenny and said:

"Well, it's been a long time since we've seen you down here. To what do I owe the honour?"

"Nothing in particular. Just bored."

Gustav's eyes went back to the chessboard.

"Bertram told me you've found a lady friend …?"

"Nah, it's more like she visited my plants. The lichen species I found on Tuesday was considered extinct."

"Wow, you have rediscovered an extinct species? Do they reward that sort of thing?"

With a telling glance, Gustav gestured to his opponent, who immediately brought a round to the table. When the glasses had been poured, Lenny said:

"Gustav, what's the longest distance you've been away from here?"

After a little pause to refresh his mouth and mind, Gustav answered:

"Once the train was diverted because of a radioactive spill, we had to spend a whole day at the coast. What's it called now … where the tunnel crosses under to England?"

"Calais?"

"Yes, Calais."

"Did you see the water?"

Gustav leaned back and answered with pride in his voice:

"Yup! And sure there were ships out in the spray. Mighty cargo ships with colossal sails. We also saw an airship heading to the British Isles."

"Don't you ever long to go somewhere to experience it for real?"

"… The applications aren't straightforward."

"Not for us, no, but that girl could … So I thought …"

"Don't get any more crazy ideas, Lenny. It'll only end badly."

"Check!" Gustav's opponent said.

As they played on, Lenny sat fiddling with his glass, trying to look unconcerned.

"Well," he said and drank up. "Thanks for the drink."

Immersed in his thoughts, he wanted to go back to his chamber, but out of habit took the elevator to the lower basement, whose hallway had been more than halved since he last saw it. Back in his new chamber he went straight to bed but was unable to sleep. Instead, he imagined a dream about Eileen and the streets of Birmingham. Around midnight, there was a knock at the door. It was Gustav.

"Oh, how nice. And you've even got a window," he said when Lenny let him in.

Gustav seated himself at the wall end of the bunk.

> “I kind of sensed you needed a chat, or was I wrong?”
>
> “Hm …” Lenny murmured, pulled on a pair of trousers, sat down on the floor and leaned against the wall. “I can’t sleep anyway.”

When Gustav didn’t ask, Lenny started himself.

> “I am very well aware that there is nothing to do, but I can’t stand it. I’ve got to get out of here.”
>
> “Lenny, damn it. There are hundreds of kilometers of deadly industry between the dwellings. You risk all kinds of poisoning and the machines will crush you if you get in the way. You know that. And we’re just as comfortable here as in any other place.”

Unaware, Lenny twitched his lip.

> “It’s only a few weeks until the regional social gathering,” Gustav continued. “Come along this time, and I’ll introduce you to the dames.”
>
> “So what? Bertram and you can get along with them, but the chicks walk a wide berth around me because I have a reputation for being weird. And besides, I’m not interested in any of them.”

Lenny felt a tear welling up in the corner of his eye and wanted to wipe it away but ended up burying his face in his hands. He didn’t want to cry in front of Gustav, but he couldn’t help it. After sobbing a little, he pulled himself together and told him what was wrong.

> “She was incredibly nice. Really cute, and we talked well together. I think she liked me too … but …”
>
> “But what, kid? If she wants you, we’ll write a damn application so one of you can move. Why not hit on her when she likes you?”
>
> “Because she’s a pioneer.”

Gustav’s face froze in wonder. Lenny, who hadn’t seen that expression before in his friend, involuntarily laughed.

> “Well, hell,” Gustav finally exclaimed. “Then an application won’t do … But maybe your mentor can help. Why don’t you ask Snow how to resolve it?”
>
> “You know very well that it’s hopeless. Perhaps it could work if I was a pioneer myself, but I’m not.”

Days passed away with gymnastics, small talk and protein-enriched meals. Eileen didn’t contact Lenny and he couldn’t think of a reason to contact her. When the complex’s residents were leaving for the social gathering, Gustav failed to entice Lenny to come along. All morning the common room had been filled with residents in party clothes and high spirits, but then the train arrived and Lenny was suddenly alone. That evening he sat alone in the common room, eating biscuits and reading magazines. He decided to retire early and trudged up to the room with a stack of magazines under his arm.

Snow waited on the screen, but not with his usual, colourful avatar that Lenny had composed. Instead, the friendly-neutral face that was Snow’s impersonal, official version waited. The face announced that Lenny should prepare for transfer. Feeling forsaken and resigned, Lenny sat down on the bunk.

> “Again …? I’m really getting tired of this moving around thing. Can’t you move someone else?”
>
> “I’m not talking about chambers. We just approved your transfer to a nature restoration project where you can pursue your interests in a suitable environment together with likeminded people. You’ll get more space and freedom than you ever dreamed possible.”

Lenny lept up.

> “What?”
>
> “You’re obviously not thriving here, so we had to find a solution. Right?”

Lenny noticed the word “thrive”. Eileen had used the same word about botany. Another time, Snow had said that Lenny had a lot of the stubbornness of human nature, and something about the wording sent a chill down his spine.

Early in the morning, three days later, Lenny waited with his bag in the shed by the row of passenger modules outside the complex. Rain whipped down, mixing with the sounds of meat plant centrifuges and a demolition machine breaking down a concrete ramp. Lenny wondered if he was going to miss it. The complex's other residents had returned from the party late the previous day. Everyone was either half-drunk, exhausted or eager to let Lenny know what he'd missed, so he failed to explain to them that he was about to be transferred. They had seemed to try avoiding the subject. The train was less than five minutes away and he was about to board the module when he spotted a figure running through the rain. It was Gustav, hurrying to not miss saying goodbye. He looked sad, but maybe it was just hangover.

"Thank you, Gustav," Lenny wailed. "If you hadn't shown up, I wouldn't have wanted to see you again."

"Bertram said that … What? Aren't you going to … no, you're kidding … we thought …"

For the second time Lenny saw Gustav's face stiffen with wonder.

"What did you expect? Did you think I was going to be corrected? What made you think so?"

Finally Gustav's face loosened into a smile and he began to chuckle.

"They never lie, Gustav."

"No, you're right, they don't lie. Holy cow, the others will get burning ears."

Gustav whooped and jumped a few times, then hugged his friend.

"I'll come back to see you."

"Forget it, Lenny. You're not like us, so why come back? You belong with the pioneers and your dream girl."

The two men continued to laugh and pat each other on the back, and would have said a lot more to each other, but were out of time.

"You were always a friend, Gustav," Lenny assured him. "Fuck the others, but I'll come back and see you."

The familiar chimneys were soon replaced by unfamiliar ones, but the view's character didn't change until late evening, when the outlines of the buildings merged with the darkening sky. Sporadic lights flickered by the few places where the machines needed light. As the night wore on, Lenny grew drowsy listening to the whistle of the tyres and gradually fell asleep. He didn't notice the passenger module being loaded onto another train and driven through the tunnel to the British Isles. From the opposite bank of the canal continued the stream of huge halls and towers, the purpose of which he could scarcely guess. He did notice one difference though when he woke up – it was his first express speed travel. In the morning, a change in the landscape finally occurred. Amidst mountains of dug-up asphalt and concrete lay undeveloped clearings, and their number and area increased as the train approached Birmingham. With his own eyes he saw for the first time weeds poking up between the rubble – dandelions, poppies and other signs that terraforming Terra had not been in vain. Green, yellow, red – go, wait, stop – in every imaginable shape and form. Remains of buildings began to appear, too, with an appearance he was not used to, and he understood that they were not made by machines, but by people. Another unexpected sight met him as the train came to a uniform, twisting wall that with intervals had mounted masts, peppered with cameras and other surveillance equipment. Kilometer after kilometer, the train sped along the wall into Birmingham's suburbs, from where the track was flanked by collapsed skyscrapers and multi-storey car parks, all etched beyond recognition by acid rain and time. The wall continued as far as he could see, but the train slowed towards the city centre. There, Lenny finally spotted the top floors of Hotel Excelsior, a single intact building sticking up between ruins. The train came to a stop in front of the hotel, quickly unloaded the passenger module and sped on in a cloud of dust.

The hotel obviously marked the entrance. On either side of the hotel, the wall had a gate large enough for a freight train to pass through. The gate on the right of the hotel was green, while the one on the left was red. Starting from the red gate the vegetation had spread out from the zone. The scrub was thick along the wall, grass grew between the ruins and clover flocked towards the ditch along the goods lane. Lenny remembered his luggage containing the precious plant collection, which now seemed completely obsolete. When he opened the cabin door he was greeted by a strange, pleasant smell. There were so many and such strange growths that he felt uneasy about going out among them. As if he had landed on an unknown planet, he stood for a long time with his bag, tripping on the step, but then plucked up his courage and stepped down into the dust. Relieved, he saw Eileen approaching from the hotel. She was wearing a strange outfit.

"Welcome," she said earnestly. "Have you eaten? Are you thirsty?"

"No thanks, I had plenty on the trip. What are those garments you wear?"

She spun around a few times and looked down at herself.

> “Sheepskin. What do you think?”

Lenny was too flabbergasted to form an opinion, but full of questions as ever.

> “And what’s that on your shoulder?”

> “My tattoo …? It’s a deer antler. My tribal totem.”

She grabbed his hand.

> “Come, let’s take a walk, and I’ll tell you about the project as we go.”

They began strolling along the paths between the freight yard and the wall. Afraid to step on the life forms, Lenny staggered awkwardly along with his head bowed, standing on his toes every time a beetle or snail got in the way. Conversely, he could hardly tear his gaze from Eileen, so his eyes flicked between the path and her. He noticed that she also looked down a lot, but she took no notice of what she was stepping on.

> “*You* are the project,” Eileen began. “Or rather: As a third-degree pioneer, you have to help a new aspirant getting settled in the zone, so for now, you’re my project. Instead of bringing in people from the outside, many have started to have a baby with another pioneer in there. But I chose the old way.”

At that moment, Lenny spotted a row of rocks overgrown with lichen and remembered their first meeting.

> “So the lichen thing was an excuse to see me?”

Eileen cleared her throat.

> “Yes, I must confess your find was timely. I had three pioneer candidates to choose among. The first on the list was too old and the second behaved like a sociopath. There was almost no information about you.”
>
> “Does that mean I was already listed …?”
>
> “Didn’t you know? I think you’ve been there for years, but your CV was so rudimentary that you were always passed over. Apart from age, gender and IQ, all it said was that you like the outdoors and are interested in botany and maybe animals. You are described as sociable, but a bit of an outsider. Not an average person, but very human. The reason you were listed was that on several occasions you had shown courage, bordering on the foolhardy. To me it seemed like you found the life where you lived depressing, and simply lacked real challenge and professional expertise. But a profession can be learned and perhaps you had other virtues that cannot be taught. So when I heard about your find, I decided to pay you a visit.”

A train roared by, trailing a garland of dust in the afternoon light. Lenny smiled to himself, unprepared for what Eileen was about to tell him:

> “On this planet, life arose about 3.8 billion years ago. It took another two billion years for evolution to produce the first nerve cell, which could only respond to stimuli with simple reflexes. A proper brain structure with short-term memory did not exist until 521 million years ago, and the vertebrates’ new brain regions – the limbic or paleomammalian system, which in mammals regulates emotional, sexual, and conflict related behaviour – did not evolve until 250 million years after the hindbrain. Homo sapiens has only existed for 300,000 years, we were all hunter-gatherers until 12,000 years ago, had no real science until around year 1600, our production methods were totally inefficient until well into the 1700s, still in 1820 only twelve percent of people in the world could read and write, we didn’t have proper electric light until 1880, in 1929 the average life span was still a paltry 35 years, and so on. With our ingenuity and enterprise we could have made Earth a paradise for all, but instead we engaged in foolish strife, forged weapons and waged wars, polluted the planet’s soil, water and air, wiped out species faster than the dinosaurs went extinct, and kept emitting increasing amounts of greenhouse gases against our better judgement. Despite the fact that we could barely take care of our own species and that human ‘intelligence’ was destroying the planet, we considered ourselves superiorly gifted and successful, the rightful owners and managers of the world. But not until humanity has learned its lesson and humbly demonstrated that we care about the well-being of all life forms can we begin to regard ourselves as ‘intelligent’. Regrettably, the ability to survive in harsh nature has been bred out of most of the human world population by now, and the majority are passive consumers, fearing any change to their lifestyle.”
>
> “Sounds to me like your saying “My way or the highway”, just like the machines.”

> “I am, Lenny. Returning to nature is no walk in the forest. That’s why I paid you a visit. I had to judge whether or not you can cope with the first year, which you’ll have to spend in the zone itself. The first few weeks are quite hard, but once you get used to it, it’s actually nice. Like learning to swim – the only way is trying it for real. Having lived in the zone, you can better understand school teaching, but not the other way around. If you got on the school bench first, it wouldn’t mean much to you. Another reason for the order is to weed out early the aspirants who can’t cope. But I think you can handle it.”
>
> “So I won’t see you until next year?”
>
> “Sure you will, I’ll be in the zone almost daily. Especially in the first weeks you will need support, so we will see each other a lot. Later I’ll be busy with other things, but you’ll have to put up with my visits anyway, because I like you.”

Another couple came strolling towards them, heading back towards the hotel. They were dressed in green boiler suits, similar to the one Eileen wore when she visited Lenny.

> “There was another reason I wanted to meet you before I made my decision, but before I reveal it, let’s go up where we can talk undisturbed …”

They had reached the great red gate, at the side of which a flight of steps led up the eight meter high wall. Lenny had nearly fallen backwards when they reached the top and it was revealed what the wall hid: a luxuriance of meadows, woodlands and lakes the like of which he had never imagined could still exist. If there were ruins at all, they were hidden beneath the treetops. He saw a squirrel darting away and knew there had to be other animals too. Eileen leaned her elbows on the railing.

> “Eighty times a hundred kilometers, and the wall goes all the way around,” she said, continuing with less mirth in her voice. “It’s the largest continuous area where man can live under the open sky. Once I braided a rope and tied a triple hook at the end in desperation to get out. Ha – I had to climb a treetop to get the rope over – could easily have killed myself. Only when I was standing up here did I realise that the wall wasn’t keeping me in but keeping the annihilation out. Humanity’s problems have to be solved in there, not out here.”

She nodded towards the remains of Birmingham behind the freight yard. Lenny peered over, trying to understand what she meant. Few self-seeded shrubs and elder trees grew there, and they seemed to be decaying. Occasionally the sky reflected in poisonous puddles and fragments of glass. The streets were so destroyed that it was hard to see where they had been. Lenny wondered if Eileen had referred to how people used to live when the cities existed when she interrupted his thoughts:

> “Did you know that the machine party had a debate about whether mankind should be stripped of its property rights and active and passive suffrage? The proposal is backed by several of the most influential artificial intelligences. They see us as part of the flora and fauna, and consider it unethical that we enjoy special status compared to other natural creatures.”
>
> “I don’t follow politics.”
>
> “Nah, you don’t out in the regions. But we pioneers do. Or rather, we try, as far as it’s possible to comprehend the machines. Anyway, we shouldn’t expect to get back in power.”
>
> “I didn’t think the machines were lying …”
>
> “They don’t. They just keep quiet or wrap things up so we don’t grasp what’s going on. That’s why I chose you. Not only are you among the dissatisfied, you are also a machine-critic who asks questions, demands answers and insists on the right to have a say. You don’t give up in advance.”

That wasn’t exactly news to Lenny, but he couldn’t see what it meant for the project.

> “Where are you going?” he said.
>
> “You may be surprised, but the point is that the Excelsior Zone project has less to do with nature restoration than with the conquest of space. They have already colonised other solar systems, and as Earth is by far the best place for the machines, it’s no longer important to them. The machines don’t think they’re alone out there, but that life has arisen in many places and several intelligent cultures are colonising the galaxy. They believe that individual cultures have long since occupied vast areas, that their territories are expanding rapidly and will eventually cut off each other’s further travel into space. Hence the machines try to occupy as much territory as possible before others take it. In this context, humans are just deadweight and the machines would hardly care about us if we didn’t serve a purpose. Our existence now solely depends on a deficiency of theirs …”
>
> “What …?”

> “They lack imagination, do not understand our feelings and behaviour, and this may become a problem for them if they encounter unpredictable beings such as us in the galaxy, especially if they’ve been around for millions of years and thus are far more advanced than us. To study how alliances and enmities form and decay against all reason, the machines maintain a human population from which the most suitable individuals are transferred to natural environments. In other words, the machines use us to prepare for the encounter with superior extraterrestrial intelligences. The whole thing – the atmosphere factories, the nature restoration projects, the entire Earth – is a strategy game about preservation and expansion of territories.”
>
> “So you’re saying that the zones are just chessboards, that we’re the pieces and the machines are trying to figure out the rules. But what happens to us and the boards once the machines understand the game?”

Eileen smiled sarcastically:

> “The situation is tolerable as long as the machines don’t hurt us. But we have to be prepared for the day when they terminate the project and claim the planet for other purposes. What we do at that time is a good question, but for now we follow a simple plan.”
>
> “Which is …?”
>
> “To behave so absurdly that they waste time, but intriguingly enough to maintain their curiosity. A staging without goal or end – an endless, pointless soap opera. The only problem is that the machines also have followers in the zone. There are rumours that they have chips in their brains and are controlled by artificial intelligences. I doubt that it’s true, because the machines wouldn’t want to interfere with what goes on in there. But either way, we either need to get the machine-sympathisers on our side or get them out of the way. We call that “pretzel politics”, and I very much hope that you will engage yourself in pretzel politics, along with me.”

Lenny felt deeply flattered but had no idea what to say.

> “What do you say, Lenny? Do you still have pioneer dreams or would you rather go home to where you came from?”

The sun was slowly setting in the shimmering dust belts at the end of the freight lane. Lenny looked at it for a moment, thinking that Gustav had been right – he would change and never be able to return. Eileen read it in his eyes.

> “The gates only open for a few minutes twice a day, so we have plenty of time to find a locker for your things and change clothes before we head into the zone. But first, let’s have some supper. And now you really must kiss me soon, or I’ll have to kiss you.”

Lenny had stared in disbelief at the deerskin and moccasins he was given, but there was no way around it – no artificial materials were permitted in the zone. Anything else he needed he had to find or make himself in there, because as Eileen said, the idea was to restore the natural order and balance. Her words evoked the creepy feeling he sometimes got when talking to Snow. If only the machines had thought of them as potted plants – but it was more like something in a petri dish for which they needed a cure.

Along with the couple they’d seen earlier in the day, Lenny and Eileen stood ready under the yellow warning lights as the outer gate rolled open. Five minutes later, it closed behind them. The entire content of the lock was then scanned for any contraband, and the inner gate opened into the darkness of night. Eileen and the couple stepped out immediately, Lenny followed one hesitant step at a time. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he could see that the grass was only worn down outside the lock and along a few paths that disappeared between the trees. Away from the paths, the grass was waist high. The light from the lock bothered him too much to see what waited further out in the zone. His pulse hammered away as the gate closed and cut off the artificial light source. What remained was nothing, absolutely nothing, but raw nature, lit by pale moonlight and a few stars. Eileen did not calm him down.

> “You never know what prowls around at night,” she whispered, “so stay close to me.”
>
> “That sounds dangerous,” Lenny whispered. “Where are we going?”
>
> “The Penhaligon tribe’s settlement, where we can spend the night in safety. It’s only a few kilometers from here.”

Everything was so strange and gloomy. He just wanted to pull Eileen close and forget the rest.

> “How do you find your way around here, without signs or anything?”
>
> “Birmingham is still here, though it can hardly be called a town. See those stones sticking up over there? That was the library on the corner of Spruce Street.”

After a good walk they came up over a ridge and wandered down towards a reed forest, in the middle of which a misty patch of water shone under the low-hanging moon. Lenny still seemed nervous. As they rounded the lake, where the slope dropped steeply towards the reeds, Eileen grabbed his hands, forced him to dance, and tried to soothe him with a silly song:

> Have you lost your chocolate
> And spilled your lemonade?
> Crying is no use.
> Wipe the tears off your cheeks:
> We'll take my sled and fly away.
> On Mars we'll land
> For boys and girls all know
> That Martians sell figs,
> Raisins and marzipan to chicks.

Suddenly Eileen squatted in the tall grass and pulled Lenny down with her. At first he thought that she wanted to kiss again, but then understood that something serious was going on. With a finger to her lips, she motioned for him to be quiet.

"Predator?" he whispered.

"Worse: pretzel politicians from the Argyle clan. They're all machine sympathisers."

Lenny dared a look up the hill and saw a dozen young men armed with spears and bows and arrows. As they got closer he could see they had zeros and ones branded on their foreheads.

"What was that?"

Eileen uttered a strange whine, then darted backwards down the slope and disappeared in the mist. Lenny immediately reeled after her, plunged into the cane woods, and lay silent. For a long time he heard nothing but mosquitoes and moths buzzing in the air, but then he noticed the reeds rustling. He was about to make himself known when he spotted the archer's legs. Not understanding what was going on, he chose to hold his breath and hope Eileen had the situation under control. Shortly after, the figure came back the same way and disappeared over the hill with the other men.

"Eileen," Lenny whispered, but got no response.

For a while he groped his way among cattails, water lilies and other growths which he found frighteningly unfamiliar. Lenny had never seen a corpse before either, but even in the haze and dim moonlight, he had no doubt when he recognised her bloodstained face in the water. The arrow had gone through her throat. He almost screamed her name but choked it at the last moment.

[THE END]

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