

Phantom Architecture
By Will Waller

On Thursday, April 18th, 1906 at 5:12 AM, an earthquake with a magnitude of 7.8 struck Northern California. Between the quake and the resulting fires, 3000 people died and 80% of San Francisco was destroyed. Among those landmarks destroyed was the Palace Hotel. Although a 'New' Palace Hotel would open its doors at the same intersection in December of 1909, the construction site earned a reputation for being haunted. Numerous sightings were reported of an older gentleman seen walking through the rubble carrying a potted palmetto plant.

1972

"Ah! Mrs. Winter. Congratulations and good morning and welcome to the Palace Hotel. Yes. We have your reservation here. One adult, one senior, one child, and in the very luxurious Presidential Suite. Oh! No no. Put that away. It's all paid, as is your dinner and all your drinks at the Pied Piper Bar and Grill. Now, here's your ticket for tonight's auction, in our *illustrious* Garden Court. Doors open 9 PM sharp, that's West Coast time now, and welcome to San Francisco!"

1887

"Jim! Welcome back!"
"Hello, Jenny. How's Conner's swing?"
"Bad, his team lost by three last week, and since he struck out near the end, he's sure it's all his fault."
"Ah. Tell him, once, when I was his age, I lost a spelling match on an easy word: descent! Know what my teacher said? 'Without the 's' it's decent! Ha!"
"Funny. I have the same room for you as last month. Number seven."
"Splendid! Such a lovely view of horse dung, with just a sliver of Market!"
"Heh. Here's your key."

2061

"Hi. I'm here to pick up a card key. It should be under Sara Rahman. R-A-H-M-A-N."
Typing.
"I'm sorry, we don't have any spare keys under that name."
Sara sighed, and almost walked off right there. Instead, she took a breath, and said, "Try..."
She looked around at the crowded lobby, and lowered her voice a little more. "Buttercup."
"Oh my god. That's *you*? Oh, um—" *you*?
"He thinks he's funny."
"O-Of course. Here. Floor nine. Room nine-nine. G'night, Ma'am." Sara cringed. *Ma'am*.

She tried not to make eye contact with anyone as she rushed past those glass fireplaces that sectioned off the bar from the lobby. The 'up' button for the elevator was already lit, but Sara pressed it again anyway, smoothing her dress while she waited for the elevator doors to open. When they did, it was full, and, when only two people got off, she said, "I'll get the next one."

The doors closed, but instead of waiting, she turned into the bar.

She wasn't going up. She'd decided she would just text Noura and tell her... Sara had no idea what she would tell her, but Noura would be a good little sister and pick her up, and they'd go back to Oakland and drink and forget about the whole thing. Sara did the drinking part, but the phone never left her purse.

The fluorescents of the lobby gave way to the fake boxed candlelight of the bar, conference room drab for black leather professional, and Sara nearly caught her overnight bag on a palmetto wedging herself into one of their awful circular booths. Soon, her new friends joined her, and she was back to another rousing round of 'did I earn this attention or did *he* do it?' followed, of course, by a lightning round of 'Aren't I just being paranoid?'

Her friends were still on about some panel.

"You're awful, Brooklyn—"

"I know, Jeanie. I know. I'm just saying. It was a little embarrassing to watch. Never mind they're both married."

"Oh, shush. I'm sure it was sincere scholarly interest."

Snort. "I have no doubt it was *sincere* interest. What's the line? Write to seduce?"

"Well, she *did* go to Yale."
What's that supposed to mean? Sara thought, a little indignantly. She asked,
 "What are you talking about?"
 "Sex: *What About Consent?*"
 "They forgot the consent."
 "And the women."
 "Ah," said Sara. "I think I went to *Teaching Applications* that hour."
 "Oh. I went to panels like that when I was just starting too."
 "Ah." Silence. "There weren't any women?"
 "There was one."
 "*Marina,*" they said together.
 "Marina?"
 "Marina Van Dyme. She did her dissertation, and nearly all of her post-doctoral

Elizabeth hadn't even
 heard of the Palace
 Hotel before her point of
 contact slipped her the
 address and the plane
 tickets a week ago.

Following the familiar
 nicks in the wood rail,
 Jim left his right knee to
 its war with all four
 flights of the marble of
 the spiral stair.

work on the erotic
 emersions of her friend
 and mentor—"The subtle—"
 "The brilliant—"
 "The *biscuit*—"
 "Jordon Dunn."

Given that, if Danny or any of the other boys in the Winter Gang caught wind of things, she would wind up in the ground, Elizabeth assumed it would be a small, out of the way sort of place that wouldn't attract too much attention. She, her mother, and Lizzie would share a room. Lizzie would be on a roll-away, but she wouldn't be upset anymore after she realized she could bounce the thing around the room, then Elizabeth would suggest that she and Bess try and find a pool. Once they were gone, she would sit down on the bed, flick off the lights, and let her eyes and ears enjoy the quiet.

Turned out, no. Not only was the Palace the most conspicuous building she'd seen since reaching San Francisco, but the feds stuck them in the Presidential Suite and put it under *her* name, *and* they had her signed up for some sort of art auction. If they wanted her at an auction, she could have simply wandered in, sat down. She'd done that at furniture auctions back home more times than...well, at all. No. No one was going to believe that they belonged here.

Even her mother didn't. As soon as they walked into Room 8064, Bess turned to her and asked, "How did you ever afford this?"

Lizzie didn't care.

"Oh gosh! There's a piano! And a chandelier. Is that *real* gold? Look at the size of that mirror over the fireplace. It's even bigger than me, Mama! See?"

Elizabeth did see. She saw cheap locks on three more rooms than she'd planned for, filled with sharp corner on low tables, street-facing windows, a precarious-looking chandelier, and about a hundred pieces of giant furniture she'd have to check before leaving Lizzie anywhere alone.

Bess had her own problems with the room. "I don't like the look of those couches," she said. "Pretty things, but I doubt they're as comfortable as the chair I have in your drawing room. You know, I brought it all the way from Donegal."

"Mother, that chair is almost a hundred years old."

"It smells," said Lizzie.

"It's got history. That's more'n can be said about any of this gaudy garbage. This wood's got no heart." Bess pressed the cushions with two longer fingers. "And what's this red covering?"

"Velvet."

"Awful."

"I knew you'd like it."

"I love it," said Lizzie. "Do I get my own room?"

"No," said Elizabeth. "There seem to be two bedrooms. I want you and your grandmother to share that one. Why don't you take your grandmother's bags?"

"I'm sixty-six, not dead. I can get them."

"I'll help!"

Once her mother and daughter were in their own room, Elizabeth took her first real breath of the day. No one back in Boston had told her anything about the feds paying the hotel bill. Just where to be and when, what to say and who not to tell. Did they have any idea what they were doing? She couldn't have thrown Lizzie a birthday party with this little instruction. Not when she'd have to spend half the planning stages making time for her husband's instructions – Sit there. Don't talk to him. Wear this. Come ere? What's wrong with you? Smile. The whole affair seemed unreal, like she was just another rich Boston wife on vacation, except the 'vacation' was never supposed to end. The whole business was nothing but nerves, not least because she had no idea what she should be waiting for. Would there be a note in her room? A bellboy with a message?

Would someone call the room? Without any clear instructions, all she could do was spread out on the velvet and listen to her daughter talk and the light bulbs burn and the city move.

Jim settled into the rocking chair closest to the balustrade, leaning back, forward, stretching his legs and curling his toes, fidgeting and checking that he wouldn't end up needing

While the room spun, Sara discovered what many before her had learned: There is no comfortable way to sit in a round booth seat. Was somebody talking?

to scratch the floor moving the chair once he got into a good rhythm. High as he was, he couldn't quite see into the Grand Court, but much was visible through the gaps between the spindles. There must have been some event in the Palace that had the staff busy prepping. Five was more carriages than he usually saw on his way up, and someone had moved his palmetto.

He was becoming predictable. Jenny had his coffee ready before he opened the door. The chocolate smell was as welcome as the chair, with the shape of his bottom pressed into the cushion, or the spot on the armrest where his palm sweat had finally smeared the lacquer, or that scratched corner where he'd once dragged it against the stone. Someone had put a cigarette out on the dresser in the bedroom, which management had tried to cover with a philodendron, but Jim found the black circle pruning. He remembered his first stay, when asking for their darkest roast had earned him a steaming cup of ash and many apologies, and he'd laughed. Whoever handled the brewing eventually improved. This latest cup was fine.

There *was* a note:

V:12:116 V:12:79 II:10:276 V:16:302
II:16:34 XII:1:84 XII:1:85 XII:1:8 II:13:63
V:14:124 I:5:202

The elevator doors
opened across the bar.
Several familiar faces
got off, but no one Sara
could put a name to.

Her new friends were all still gaping. Jeanie asked, "You were in the MIT Trials?"

"MIT-Harvard," Sara corrected. "With my grandfather, yeah. When the study folded, they let me keep our memories, and I started putting them together myself. Gedo died before I finished, not that it would have mattered. I didn't know what to do with it, but I saw Google was inviting project proposals for something called EmCon, so I sent it in. I didn't really expect to get in for my first emersion."

"That was your first?" Jeanie started to say, but Brooklyn was louder.

"What trials?"

"Remember the section in the program about the Strong Memorial study on traumatic brain injuries?"

Blank stares. Apparently nobody else did the reading.

"It's famous, anyway. The idea with the MIT-Harvard was that the same thing might work with Alzheimer's patients. They had me choose a memory, some important

moment he and I shared, but one that he still

"V. 12. 116. First. V. 12.
79. Seat! First Seat!"

remembered. Then they helped us make emersions. We'd trade those, talk, then make new emersions about doing that. I guess the hope was repeating that process every

week would help him put himself back together, but we got sidetracked a lot explaining to him why he was wearing a headset."

"But it didn't work?"

"They shut the study down after a patient's son shot himself."

This time, when the elevator doors opened, a robot toy wheeled out, followed by a young blond boy Sara had seen walking around the con alone. No one else Sara recognized left the elevator, and the doors closed. When she looked back, Jeanie was staring past her reflection in the fireplace, and Brooklyn was frowning at the tablecloth, twirling a blonde lock without thinking. She'd ruin her curl.

Sara finished her fourth Aberlour in cheerful silence, nodding 'thanks' to the server for her next glass.

"You made a piece out of that?" asked Brooklyn, finally. "How did you bear it?" Sip. "Scotch."

"It must have been a nightmare. You'd have had to go over it again and again."

"And again," said Sara.

"What was the editing process like?"

"More scotch." Nobody laughed. Sara stirred her drink with the red straw she hadn't used. There was a little scotch left, ruined by the ice. She hated the way the cold watered down the taste, but it made her glass seem less empty, and it slowed her down.

The elevator opened again. Was that Eric Ellison? ~~She~~ He was wearing a suit.

Eventually she said, "Initially, I wasn't editing anything, just hoping I could use his memories to learn Arabic. I guess either he was lying about what language he thought in, or I somehow translated everything to English."

"What was your grandfather like?" one of them asked.

"I don't know how to succinctly answer that question."

Eric had spotted her. Was he coming over? Why?

"What do you mean?"

Eric was there. "Sara! How long has it been?" Five years. "How's your poetry?"

Sip. "Writing much?" He slid in next to Brooklyn, who was suddenly scarlet.

"A bit," said Sara, remembering her reading the next morning. "How's painting?"

Eric seemed to push not just the question, but the whole concept of visual art aside with a wave of his hand. "I did your emersion Friday. Beautifully done. Haunting. Why weren't you on any panels?"

"Seemed like those were for people who knew what they're doing."

"You clearly do," said Eric.

"Yeah, well. I've only ever done the one, and I only did it for Gedo."

"Tell me you're not going to stop?" asked Eric.

Sara shrugged. "They wanted us to experiment, right? To see what we'd do with their tech? I guess I just don't like the form very much. It's too draining. I could barely

First seat... left side...

Right. First seat, left
side. II... 16... 34... II...

16... 34... Bring...

At dusk, it began to rain.

A well-to-do man

passing by asked

another about snow.

get through any
emersions on Friday,
and, after your little rant
on intersubjective
plasticity, I spent the
rest of the teaching

panel, thinking, 'Screw this. I'll stick to words.'" Brooklyn was still staring at Eric. Jeanie was glowering. Eric squirmed, but Sara met his stare until he turned to her friends, flashed a smile, and said, "Oh, and hi. I'm Eric Ellison." He shook all hands, and asked Brooklyn, "What do you do?"

"Brooklyn," said Brooklyn. "I mean—"

"You do an art, don't you?" he asked. "Or are you with someone?"

Brooklyn pointed at Jeanie, who pushed her hand down, and said, "This is Brooklyn Manners, the—"

"You're a painter?" Brooklyn said.

"I paint," said Eric. "But I went to school for music."

"And this," said Sara. "Eric actually has a Masters in Emersive Technology."

"Half a Masters," corrected Eric. "I didn't finish."

"How come?" Brooklyn asked.

Jesse.

"I moved to Ireland instead. My mother's family is originally from a little south of Galway, from a long way back, and I thought it'd be a bit like going home. And it was, but, once I got tired of that I started learning Irish, and burning emersions of the process to try and help preserve

the language...

Jim said, "Doubtful."

... I thought that, given
my heritage, my natural

aptitude for languages, and my knowledge of the technology, it was the least I could do. Housing in this city was, well, what housing in this city is, so I didn't have a lease to break. I just packed up my life, and moved it from an SRO in Oakland and booked a flight to Dublin."

When Sara's phone buzzed, she took great relief in escaping the table's conversation. That is, until she realized it was just her husband getting back to her. She read about as far as *...and can you give the hospital another number to leave messages at, or at least tell your mother you won't be coming back to listen to them?* before flicking to airplane mode. When she turned back to Eric and Brooklyn, she found they had moved from the Adventures of Eric Ellison in Ireland to the Adventures of Eric Ellison and Music. By the phrase 'B sections in A Aeolian,' Sara stopped listening and started staring at the flat screen on the far wall, watching a pretty blue-eyed man mouth something dire about driving conditions against the mute setting.

The cipher read:
*First seat, left side.
Bring the little book.
Tell no one.*

Elizabeth wondered if this fed even read Strunk's book. His words played over and over in her mind. *This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.*

worthless sort of individual, had murdered his wife Catherine and then ended his own existence. *The scene of the dual tragedy is a small beer-saloon, which was kept by the murdered woman as a means of support for herself and four children. Charles James, who acts as agent for the owner of the saloon property, was the first one to enter the building after the shooting. At the foot of a steep and narrow stairway leading to the sleeping apartments lay the body of Andrew Fettes in a pool of blood, his feet partly on the stairs and a horrible wound...*

Jim stopped reading there. The paper had space to fill and sales to make—and blood sold, but the *Alta's* story clearly ended in the title, and it was *their* story, their version of the end of Andrew Fettes's story. By no means a great, or even good man, but his story ended, after the bullet, with one last beer. Charles James may have found the murder, but he missed the death.

Jim moved away from headlines, ignoring opium in San Quentin. He knew nothing of Italians in the Soudan, and despite falling under the heading 'With Your Morning Coffee' he skipped the article covering Fanny Janauschek's fear of the number 13. He paused over an article titled 'The Storm' and, remembering the well-to-do gentlemen, took a moment to read:

Apparently, there would be fog. From what Noura told her, that shouldn't have shocked blue-eyes so. You'd think he was scared for each of them at that bar, specifically, the way he was gesticulating.

Jim and his coffee turned to the *Daily Alta*, his usual paper at the Palace. He skipped over articles concerning the railroad or the boy's school, but another headline halfway down the front page caught his eye. It read:

*A Dual Tragedy
Andrew Fettes Murders His Wife
Kills Himself*

Yesterday morning another dreadful tragedy stained the annals of this community. About half-past ten o'clock the sound of several pistol shots startled the neighborhood of 199 Fifth street, and it soon transpired that Andrew Fettes, who, by all accounts, was a

The Storm
Snow at Yreka-Raining in Various
Localities

YREKA, February 3d.—Over a foot of snow, and it is still snowing. It is the heaviest snowfall in many years, and everybody is sleigh-riding. These are good times for miners and farmers, but they may be disastrous for stockmen.

SACRAMENTO, February 3d.—Commenced raining here at half-past 10 to-night.

STOCKTON, February 3d.—Rain within the next ten days will save much grain.

SANTA CRUZ, February 3d.—midnight.—Another gentle rain has just set in.

SANTA ROSA, February...

Jim found no mention of snow closer than Yreka, though there was some rain sprinkling the glass ceiling of the Grand Court. He reminded himself that he was in California, turned his eyes back toward the paper to focus on the efforts of Rev. Father Crowley and Rev.

The auction wasn't until nine that evening, but the venue was open, and Elizabeth snuck down to the Palace Hotel's

'illustrious' Garden Court to get a look through one of the *more than two dozen doors* that led in. Elizabeth's first thought looking in was that if Bess hated the presidential suite, then this 'Garden Court' would make her ill. There were red rugs over violet carpet over white marble under no less than ten gold-plated chandeliers. The ceiling was a glass arch, and granite columns lined the walls. There was etching on the stone Elizabeth couldn't get close enough to to investigate, and surprisingly few plants mixed in with the seating area—mostly big leaves in pots. The nerves of the staff shuffling about filled the space, and Elizabeth stood by the entrance flipping through her battered school-teacher's copy of Strunk's book to check the cipher again. It still read: *First seat, left side. Bring the little book. Tell no one.*

Even before seeing the room, Elizabeth was worried that 'First seat, left side' left too much room for interpretation. Was that the first seat, closest to the door on the left when she walked in? Or, did they want her in the front, on the left, literally in the first seat? Never mind what would happen if an aisle had been left down the middle for easy exit. Would, then, 'First seat, left side' have meant the first seat closest to the door in the left column, or the left-most seat of the first column? That, of course, became even more complicated with a left or right side entrance. No. *This* was better.

There were several hours left before the auction, and Elizabeth spent them in the hotel bar. It was a little less gaudy than the Garden Court, and far less bright. The sparkle was replaced with wood paneling. Chairs were brown leather, instead of pastels. The cocktail selection was a little fancy for Elizabeth, but Mr. Boothby found a bottle of Redbreast from John Jameson & Son. It had the look of a movie ship-in-a-bottle, but it'd been aged 20 years. Sweet as honey, not that anybody else ever thought so.

Father Kenny of the Gaelic Literary Society towards the preservation of the Irish language.

Unfortunately, finally, Jeanie dragged Brooklyn off to bed, leaving Sara alone with Eric, without the cover of a crowd. Without it, they sat not talking. Sara drank. Eric watched her drink and said nothing louder and more emphatically. Sara made a point of taking big slurps, even when the ice hit her teeth.

"If it's too bitter, Miss?" began Mr. Boothby.

"It's fine," she said, eyeing the painting behind him. A bunch of kids and their mothers on a hilltop. Plus, some guy in red and a checkerboard skirt playing a pipe. The painting had to be 15, 16 feet long, and as tall as Elizabeth. You could see all the women's faces. They were the only ones sad, moving across a countryside away from a castle, and presumably the fathers. She took a sip for them.

It wasn't long before Lizzie got bored with the pool, and she dragged Bess up to see Elizabeth. Or, more likely, Bess dragged Lizzie to the bar. Elizabeth had been pacing herself—just a single whiskey and soda since she first sat down—but while Lizzie tore around the room, Bess enjoyed, through the generosity of the hotel's older gentlemen, sampling, and critiquing, Mr. Boothby's 'cocktail' selection. The poor geezers tried to keep pace, but they should have known better than to try to drink with an Irish grandmother. Bess talked happily with whoever was still standing. Elizabeth alternated between corralling her tired ten-year-old and doing her best impersonation of an innocent bystander through her mother's recitation of *The Highwayman*.

"...And still of a winter's night, they say, when the wind is in the trees,
When the moon is a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas,
When the road is a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,
A highwayman comes riding—
Riding—riding—
A highwayman comes riding, up to the old inn-door."

Bess paused there, sipping and confirming that yes, she still had the spirited attention of her audience, even if there might have been a bit more attention with a little less spirits, but she smiled that way she did and, rather than continuing with her favorite poem, moved on to her favorite story: hers.

"Bloody good for an Englishman. Wrote it in '06, the year I was born."

"The year of the quake," said Mr. Boothby.

"The quake?" Mother would always pause to listen to a good barman.

"Worst quake of the century," said Mr. Boothby. "Wrecked the city, burned the first Palace down. They built this hotel right where the old one was, and reopened the bar in 1909. The world kept changing, but we were still the last two-bit bar in the city. Until 1914 every drink cost 25 cents. Then ten years later it gets shut down for prohibition, but they only closed the doors, hoping it'd pass. Course, in 1921, they ripped the bar out anyway. I swear, the half-dozen workmen tearing it apart were pallbearers."

Sip. "Terrible."

"It was," said Boothby.

"Were you there?" Bess asked.

He said, "I was, actually."

"Well, I was still in Ireland, in my mother. There was a terrible storm, and my good-for-nothing father was chasing some sort of trouble. So, she's there on her back, on the family farm, and, when things get going, her father's stuck in town, looking for a doctor, leavin my mother alone with his other, younger daughter, a wispy fourteen-year-old who knew nothing about delivering babies, when the water breaks and the rain starts and my mother and the world start giving birth to me alone. Despite all that, it's going

well. I mean, my mother's screaming and Auntie Shana's a mess and the lightning's not helping anything, but my mother's body's doing what it's built to do, until it stops. Then Auntie Shana's crying 'Push! Push!' but my mother just coughs, sits up, and says, 'I need to get to Malin Head.' Malin Head, aside from being more or less a beach, is about as far north as you can go where I'm from. So..."

That story would go on a while. Meanwhile, Lizzie was fading. Her eyes were closed, her head leaning against Elizabeth's stocking. There was a little time before the auction for bedtime, and Elizabeth could read Strunk's book anywhere. She knew from experience that no one would miss them leaving during Bess's heron-midwife story, so she shook her daughter to semi-wakefulness, and they left.

As always, getting Lizzie to stay in bed was a process.

"When are we going home?"

Damn it. Rather than answering, Elizabeth asked, "Sweetie, are you liking being on vacation?"

Lizzie nodded.

"How would you like to be on vacation *forever*?"

Lizzie snorted. "That's not allowed."

"It is," said Elizabeth, grinning. "We could do it. We could go all around, see all sorts of places."

"With grandma?"

"Yes. With grandma."

"And Daddy?"

Damn it. "Um. No. Daddy wouldn't be coming. He'd stay in Boston."

Lizzie shook her head like she was trying to get something off it. Her curls just missed Elizabeth's nose. "I want to go home," she said. "I want to go home. I want—"

"It's okay. It's okay," said Elizabeth, catching her daughter's hands and pulling her into a hug. "We'll go home."

Lizzie pulled back from the hug, put her little hands on Elizabeth's cheeks, and stared her hard in the eyes.

"Promise?" she said.

"Promise," Elizabeth lied. "I'll just be downstairs."

"Okay."

"Uh-huh," Sara said, massaging her eyes.

"No, it's true," said Eric.

"The pneumonia set back in just as Harding was getting off the train.

No. Listen. They got him to the Presidential Suite. Room Number 8064. He died in that bed. Coolidge took over, and everyone more or less forgot about *where* Harding died, but there were sightings of his body until 2016 when, you know, the room and the rest of the hotel was obliterated in an explosion."

She opened her eyes again, squinting around the bar. "And you have all this memorized?" she asked.

Eric shrugged. "I lived in the Bay for over a year, and you know I've always loved ghost stories."

She said, "I always thought you were just terrified they might be true."

Nice grin, Sara thought. Like the light, it didn't reach his eyes.

"It's not just Harding though," said Eric. "There've been sightings of William 'Cocktail' Boothby, the Palace's famous bartender, as late as 1982, and he died in 1930. Then there are the numerous reports of a woman with red hair running, screaming down the hall only to evaporate around corners. People go to sit in chairs, and fall straight through them. Then there was the time, like four years ago, when a horse and carriage appeared in the lobby downstairs from absolutely nowhere, charged the front desk, and exploded into smoke on contact."

Sara snorted. "Bullshit."

"There's a video!" said Eric.

"I saw," she said. "It's nice CG."

"Cynic."

"Nope, just the daughter of a physicist."

"You're invoking your mother now? How long does she even—"

Sara shook her head, but she regretted the movement immediately. She was still feeling the scotch, and up and down traded places for a second, leaving her hanging on to the couch, and wincing

at the squeaking sound
her fingers made against
the leather. The sound of
glass crashing
somewhere...

Jim returned with a fresh
pot of coffee to his seat
by the balustrade, and
found a young man
sitting dejected, but dry,
in a second chair.

...The elevator doors
opened and closed once
without Sara seeing
clearly whether anyone
got on or off. She looked
around for a waiter, to

only then realize they were mostly tidying up. A waiter paused by their table for last call. Eric asked for 'one half orange juice, mixed with one quarter pineapple juice, and one quarter seltzer water, with a splash of grenadine and a slice of lime' and when the waiter turned to Sara, so did he.

"Nothing. Thank you. I'm fine," said Sara.

What time was it? What day was it? The televisions were off, and her phone was far. Eric was chatting with an old man tending the palmetto, probably giving her a minute, because Sara was busy realizing, to her horror, that this was her sobering up. She was vaguely aware of the old man leaving and Eric saying, "Nice seeing you, Jim," and the room did a few more revolutions around their booth before Eric said to Sara, "I was sorry to hear about your grandfather."

This time, Sara only shrugged. "He got to meet my daughter, and actually know her for a while."

"How old is she?"

Last sip. "Seven."

"Phew. Second grade. She's old enough to understand things then."

"She will be when she finds out."

"She doesn't know you're leaving him?"

"She gets back from camp tomorrow. We didn't tell her anything before I left. I don't think he believed I was really leaving until I filed Thursday."

"And you, what, stopped at your lawyer's on the way to the airport?"

"Phones exist." They smirked. Sara said, "I was staying with my sister in Oakland."

"Was?"

Sara fished the hotel key from her pocket, flashed it, and jabbed a finger at the ceiling. "Floor nine. Room nine-nine," she said. She could tell from his expression that

Bedtime took longer than expected, and Elizabeth was a little late meeting her point of contact. It was hard to understand, but the auctioneer seemed to be taking bids on a painting that was mostly squares and green. She took the first chair on *her* left, next to a cheap suit. Feds always wore cheap suits. There was a glass ceiling and, outside, it had started to rain.

Jim had never seen a suit cut quite like this young man's before. It was torn, with dust mixed in the blood dried down his front. He wore no tie, hadn't shaved, and there was a cut above his eye that matched his split lip. He seemed to barely notice Jim, to hang off his chair, rather than over it, but he had the energy to look sharply up at every stranger passing, to start at every sound. When their floor cleared, he was slow to settle, but he did. Nonetheless, Jim knew that that straight stare of his went well past the balustrade, to an unfamiliar elsewhere. "Are you new to the city?" asked Jim. The young man did not start with Jim, only weighed his response, finally saying, "Yes and no."

Eric recognized Jesse's room number. She added, "He had it under the name Buttercup." Eric grimaced. "He thinks he's funny." "I'm sayin'."

All right. Jim waited a moment, in case there was more. Evidently, there was not, so he went on, "There are worse places to be this time of year. The winters don't get so cold." He paused, remembering the well-to-do gentlemen. "...Normally."

The young man seemed to put a great deal of importance by his choice of words. He frowned, looking this way and that, through the glass roof, at Jim's newspaper, before admitting, "I was just here in November." After a moment, he added, "It was raining, and plenty cold."

"You looking for work?" The young man pushed his face into his hands, breathed through his fingers, then pulled them down over his eyes, nose, and cheeks, pulling and distorting the fat there. No, then. Jim went on, "I mostly work down at the docks. It's not the easiest work for a man my age, but it's good work." There was another pause, this time Jim's fault. He still was never sure how to say this part. "Listen, the folk who run this place, if they see you, they might ask you to move along."

"You're the first person I've talked to who's not."

"I'm only saying, you don't need to worry. They know me. I check in a weekend a month, when I'm not sleeping rough. I'll tell them that you're with me."

The young man looked from Jim, to around, to back to Jim. "You're homeless."

"Is that a question?"

There was no embarrassment. The young man sat back, rolled one shoulder back, then the other. He undid the third button on his suit, and slipped off his very odd, very white laced shoes. They didn't go with his suit. With all that done, he seemed to breathe easier. He stuck both legs out, curled his toes, and said, "I guess, now, I'm homeless too."

"Now?"

"I think that you're..." He trailed off, grit his teeth, then sighed. "I think I'm traveling through time."

Shortly after purchasing the Palace Hotel from Marriot International in August of 2123, Google's Board of Directors announced their intention to modernize the premises, citing 'overdue common sense' as the reason. However, progress was inconsistent at best, and twenty years later, a dedicated maintenance staff based in the hotel was still necessary to combat the apparent planned obsolescence caused by renovation after renovation after renovation. One resident, who would only give the name 'Jim,' wanted to remind Google that the palmetto in his room was older than the company that owned it.

“What year is it now?”
Come on, I’m not that late. “1972.”

“I must be traveling through time.”

Elizabeth blinked. Was that supposed to be code, or a movie reference? Elizabeth knew nothing about movies. Her point of contact never said anything about movies. If she got it wrong, were they still going to give them new identities? Or did they make Elizabeth bring her daughter and her mother—her mother—out to this godforsaken city to be their bait? Yeah. That was it, wasn’t it? One of Danny’s boys must have made her back in Boston, probably one of the times she was meeting *that* fed at the racetrack—really, the racetrack. What would a woman like *her* be doing at the racetrack? Of course, they made her. And now they were tailing her. This suit was just there to keep an eye on who was eying her. Elizabeth hated admitting it, even in her own mind, but her mother was right, again. If anyone was going to look after her family, it’d have to be her. For now, she’d play along with this time-travel nonsense, to try to buy some time.

down, heading outside, calling Noura, and booking a flight home to Boston. She could burn the paperwork and...*that* was the top floor. The doors opened, but no one got on. No one got off either, and when the doors closed this time the elevator didn’t move.

IT guy said, “What’s your name?”

“Sara.”

“Have a last name?”

“No,” she said. “I was raised by freakish woods people who didn’t believe in last names, so I’ve gone through my whole life just going by Sara and having people call me Sarah and everyone’s always been terribly confused.”

The kid in the horse pajamas snorted.

The IT guy kept pushing. “Is this EMcon? Are you one of the artists?”

“I’m a poet.”

“What was your emersion?”

“I have a husband,” she said, loud enough that both guys stepped back.

“What year is it?”

Jim checked the *Alta*. “It is 1887.”

“Yeah. I’m traveling through time.”

“Right.”

“I’m serious. I mean I’m from the future.”

“I believe you.”

“...Why?”

“Why not?”

The young man stared.

Jim set his paper down, stuck out a hand, and said, “I’m Jim.”

“Michael.”

“Coffee?”

Some guy muttering

“What year is it?”

cornered Sara at the elevator and said, “I think I’m traveling through time.”

Was that a line? He didn’t *look* drunk, and wasn’t white the IT uniform? She still couldn’t quite see through the headache, and she almost missed the elevator trying to read his badge. IT guy followed her, the doors closed and she was stuck alone with him and some other grown man in horse pajamas. IT guy asked, “Floor?” Sara hadn’t decided yet. Jesse’s room was on Nine. Was she going there? Why now? He hadn’t messaged her once, just left her a key under that stupid pet name. Sara debated taking the elevator to the top floor, then back

IT Guy pushed the ‘Lobby’ button, and the ride down was silent. When he got off Sara took a deep breath and glared at Mr. I-Walk-Around-Tech-Conferences-In-My-Pajamas and saw Jesse standing there looking sheepish. She jabbed the ‘9’ button, sighed,

“So, when *did* you come from?” asked Elizabeth.

The time-traveler grinned. “I shouldn’t say.”

Then why bother bringing time travel up at all? She

glanced around, hoping what she was supposed to do would somehow become obvious.

The whole auction was facing forward, except the staff serving drinks, and the

auctioneer rattling off information. “...painted by

Carrington in 1942 when she was first living in Mexico

City. I have one and a quarter will you give me two two

bid is two will you give me two and quarter bid is two

will you give me two and quarter two bid three bid is

three hundred...” What was a Carrington doing in

Mexico? And was the auctioneer glancing at her a little

more often than everyone else? *Of course not. Don’t be*

crazy. One round of bidding finished, and another man in

a proper black suit took the shuffle of painting-down and

painting-up on stage to make his exit. He eyed Elizabeth on his way past and looked

livid. *That* was probably her point of contact. He looked the part better than her time-

traveler friend, and most likely all their new identities walked out the door with him.

Maybe if she left and caught up to him then she could save the situation. Yes. That is,

unless he was one of Danny’s boys, following her like she’d thought. Then this time-

travel gambit might still be her only way out, though the idea had a little voice in her

mind, very much like her mother’s, cursing wild. She couldn’t know anything, except

that, with that accent, the man sitting next to her hadn’t followed her from Boston, and

that nobody would do anything as long as there were so many witnesses, not to her

anyway, but there was still Bess and Lizzie and tomorrow, and everything came down to

her handling of a hotel art auction round of musical chairs.

Meanwhile, the time-traveler looked everywhere except the auction—at

baseboards, moldings, and the areas around light fixtures, never once at the art.

Elizabeth’s husband had started checking theirs for bugs around when he’d started using

his work computer to keep the Family’s books. He said you could never be too careful.

Apparently this man agreed. When he saw Elizabeth watching he nodded toward the

glass ceiling and said, “Looks like they’ve made renovations recently. Just around the

chandeliers there. Probably modernizing the wiring.”

Was *that* code? Either they were really talking interior design, or they suspected

somebody had slipped listening devices into the Garden Court, and this man was trying to

talk to her without talking to her, and, if *that* was the case, couldn’t he come up with

something a little less ridiculous than ‘Hi. I’m from the future. Isn’t that a nice lamp?’

Elizabeth said, “How do you know?”

He shot her a smug look. “Well, I know this hotel. I mean, I know the Palace of

my time. I work there, maintaining the...er...machines. They’re pretty ugly, so we keep

them walled off in old hallways. Installations were always such rush jobs. I catch the

mistakes.”

and said, “Really, how long have you been standing there?”

Sheets slick, wrapped around Sara’s fingers, wrapped around whose hair? His legs, her knees. Tangled time between her and sleep.

Machines? Was he asking for the diskette? Here? She didn't walk around with that. Those files were her only bargaining chip. And what mistakes was he catching? Did that mean one of Danny's boys *had* made her, or did he mean listening devices again, or was he just a nut?

"And that's got what to do with chandeliers?" she asked.

"Just looking for a pattern." Elizabeth knew the fucking feeling. Talking to this guy was like herding cats, and he wasn't done. "I was working, then I don't exactly remember what happened. I guess I squeezed myself through a space so tight, I popped out the other end in another time." She stared. He added, "Sorry. I really shouldn't have said anything. Anything could change the future."

And back to the weird time travel code.

"Or maybe it was the painting."

"The Carrington?"

"The what?"

Elizabeth pointed. "I don't know what art's worth when you're from, b—"

"Sold, to the red-haired woman in the back."

Elizabeth jumped. "What?" She scanned the seats. No. She checked behind her. They were the last row. Elizabeth was the only red-haired woman in the room.

"This was just somewhere to sit," said the time-traveler. "I'm not shopping. Hell, I'm not even here by choice. I don't know what that painting's worth when I'm from either, and I didn't bring a thousand dollars." Neither did Elizabeth, not that he cared. "And no. Eric Ellison's last painting. He destroyed it, or, destroys it, I guess. Slashes the canvas, burns the whole thing down. There's photos, hundreds, but they're all out of focus, or overexposed, or there's shadow and everything's just this blue-black smudge with bits of orange on a frame as tall as me. And herons, somewhere. There's always herons in Ellison's work, and they're supposed to be someone, though I don't know who. Yes! *That's* what I was doing. I was trying to find that painting before he torched it. I had to at least *see* it. There's not even emersions of it, and I think I went in the right room too, but, next I knew, I was sitting at the back of this auction wearing this suit."

"You don't know *whom*."

"What? Who the heron is. You okay lady? You don't seem to be doing too good."

Realistically, it was ridiculous to think that Noura would take Sara's call in the middle of the night, get out of bed, drive to San Francisco, just to take her back to Oakland when she had somewhere else she could stay—all just to be a good little sister, because when had she ever been?

Noura *would* take the call. She would get out of bed. She would even drive to San Francisco and *let Sara into her car*, but that was where the fairy tale would end. It wouldn't seem to, but Noura Rahman, now a long-time resident of the Bay Area, had spent years cultivating a plausible, if utterly false, reputation as a woman with no sense of direction, all so she could, when *she* felt it was appropriate, use that 'failing'—whose existence she would swear up and down, with much cursing, did not exist—to trap people in need of a talking to in long car rides for somehow even longer conversations for their own stupid good. Having taught Noura to drive, Sara had witnessed this particular tactic enough times to recognize it as just that, a tactic. She had also fallen victim to her sister's sanctimony enough times that she could do Noura's part without her.

Sara's problem now was the same problem that was always Sara's problem, that she knew and had known for ages exactly what her problem was, but she stopped there and marinated, built a wall around herself, then blamed everyone else when she found herself trapped in a cage of entirely her own making. Once she was finally ready to take some sort of action, she realized it had to be pretty drastic, and now she wanted to

"Fascinating," said Jim. "This conference must have been...must be quite something. Is it a success?"

Michael was still rubbing his eyes, but he peeked around his thumb to eye Jim's cup. "Would you like some

coffee first?" Michael nodded, Jim tapped the silver pot with a finger to make sure it was still properly hot, then filled a spare cup. He offered it and a saucer, whose purpose his new friend seemed unsure of, and Michael proceeded to burn his tongue in increments forcing the hot liquid down. When he was past the numb tongue and gasping stage of his recovery, Jim poured another, and Michael said, "The conference was not a success. The new technology earned its place as a medium, but it didn't replace anything. Turns out, many people don't enjoy having to relive other people's more interesting experiences, no matter how real."

"That makes sense," said Jim. "After all, isn't that what books do?"

"Or movies," Michael laughed.

"Movies?"

Michael laughed again. "Right, *eighteen* eighty-seven. I forgot." Michael stood and looked out over the Grand Court, eyeing the seven floors and looking down. Jim watched the lad, and when he sat down again he looked at Jim, then back across the Court, apparently mulling some question over in his mind.

Jim said, "Coming here as often as I do, the contrast from one month to the next makes the smallest changes apparent. I suppose none of this is familiar?"

"You could say that," said Michael. "Are there any hallways in this Palace, or just this mezzanine?" He asked in so casual a tone, it only emphasized how important the answer was to him.

"They call it the Grand Court," Jim said. "And no, unless the staff has halls only they use, I'm not aware of any. That's always seemed to be the way of things, pushing

Elizabeth would not calm down. Yes, she knew the consequences, and that this was all her own fault, and no. She did not care.

working people to the back so nobody has to see them. You see it at the docks all the time. There are folks who get up four AM every day and pay eight hours of every day of their lives to that pier until that one day when they don't anymore. Doesn't matter if you knew them well. Doesn't matter if you know who's gone. There's an absence, and it haunts the place. But what am I saying? You must know all about that. Working in the walls,

behind those machines, you must know better than me what it's like when you're expected to be invisible."

Michael smiled a little. "It's the Garden Court in the next Palace."

"Is that where you jumped?"

Michael shook his head. Jim wasn't sure the boy was listening; he was leaning over the balustrade, looking down. "If I could just find another hallway."

take it back. Except, Sara didn't, but she didn't want to have to explain that to her sister.

“I don’t think you should jump,” Jim said.

Michael looked sharply up. “What? No. No, of course not. Once was enough.”

Michael paused, staring into his cup a moment before lowering it with the saucer to his lap.

“I remember the pain of hitting the pavement, of people crowding round while my lungs filled with blood. And dying. I remember that. I woke up in this chair, remembering all of it.”

Whatever reaction Michael expected, Jim didn’t provide it. He held out a hand for the boy’s cup, took it, filled it, and doled out two spoonfuls of sugar and their last splash of cream. While he stirred, he watched the air above the liquid’s surface for that shimmer that went with proper temperature, before handing it back.

“I was chased out a window by a madwoman I met at an auction. I don’t know why, just that she chased me out of the auction, through a bar, and down several ha...” He sipped his drink, or started to. The coffee was still hot, and burned his tongue. He licked the cool air, and cringed, looking around for some relief. “You’re sure there’s no hallways here?”

“What would you expect to find?” asked Jim.

“My *time!*” said Michael, raising his voice for the first time. “When that woman in the nineteen-seventies chased me into hallways it was my time, my Palace, and maybe, if I could find a hallway here, I could get back there. You’re absolutely sure that there’s none?” There was still some fire in the boy’s eyes, but when Jim shook his head, that fire, and the last of some tension, left the young man’s body. He slumped into his chair with his coffee, and Jim sipped patiently at his own cup.

Jesse drifted off almost as soon as they were done, leaving Sara lying there alone with only herself for company.

Jesse had left the windows open, and the sheets were cold. Who’d have thought summer in California could feel so much like fall back home? Well, Noura, but Sara had always thought her sister was exaggerating. She had to push toward the middle of the queen to keep any sort of warm. Turned out, in addition to a tendency to hog blankets then toss and turn until he cocooned himself, Jesse was a little handsy when he was sleeping. *Careful, boy. Where’re those fingers going—oh.* After the Aberlour, Sara’s stomach didn’t love the pressure that came with him pulling that hard, but she was warmer with the front of his legs pressed against the backs of hers, and his face buried at the base of her neck. Course, then he let out a sound like a lawnmower. *He snores? Right, then. I’ll need to find my own apartment...*

“Jim, how did you know I jumped?”

...But the snoring was consistent, and

eventually blended in with the room’s other ambient noise: the wind, Sara’s empty stomach, the buzzing of the mini-fridge. While Sara wondered if Jesse had any food, he shifted against her. *Fuck. It’s awake again. Nope. Nope. Nope.* It took some tricky untangling, but Sara managed to get out of bed without waking her partner. With her gone, he splayed across the full surface and continued wrapping himself in blankets like a bat. The closest he came to waking was in briefly choking on his own hair.

All Jesse had in his fridge was milk. *Fine*, she thought. *I’ll make sahlab.*

Gedo was very particular about his favorite drink, but, in a hotel room, Sara couldn't afford to be. Heating the milk was going to be tricky. Sahlab could be prepared in a microwave, but it would be a travesty...

“Excuse me a moment. I need to grind beans for our next brew.”

...Maybe she could use the coffeemaker.

Luckily, the sahlab flour would be easy. Sara grew and ground Gedo's orchids at home. She carried it, the sugar, and cinnamon herself in her purse.

Growing up, Gedo's garden was mostly herbs and orchids. Basil, spearmint, thyme—it seeped into everything. Sara would help him tend the plants after school, and learned to grow and pronounce *Orchis mascula*, until her mother moved out of their Burlington apartment and into Gedo's Boston home. It didn't take long for her to decide she 'wasn't comfortable' with Gedo being alone all day, and that he needed to be moved to a care facility. Years later, when the doctors running the MIT-Harvard trials gave up trying to get her mother to show up for anything, Sara asked to come instead, and brought in sahlab flour and memories of gardening, and talked with her grandfather about brewing strategies. When she'd get home, she'd try them with orchids from her own garden. When *her* mother started getting sick, Sara was starting her own family, so she took the house. The day they moved in, she had walked out back for the first time in a long time. The garden still smelled the same.

Her husband had her orchids now. Would he know what to do when they came back? Sara didn't realize her phone was out until she was halfway through the email to her husband.

Hi,

So, quick thing, just in case. And sorry, I know, I've probably mentioned this before, but I needed to make sure you'd remember, and the only way to do that was to make sure it was written down. Make sure not to over-water the orchids. You're supposed to neglect them. I already put lime in the soil, so you shouldn't have to do that again until next spring. In fact, you shouldn't have to do anything to them until they start popping up, probably around October. So yeah, do nothing. It's very important.

Sara

“And...send.” Relieved, Sara clicked the screen off, and made it halfway through doling out the correct portions of sugar and sahlab powder before realizing what she'd done. She read the email she'd sent, reread it, and started typing again, because she couldn't leave it like that.

Hi again,

So that was a little curt. I mean, I know you've been texting me since thursday and still I haven't read any of them. I've been swamped is all. My sister took me all around Oakland and then there's this conference and Oh my poem! I've got a new poem. You know that 'because' thing I was working on for ever, about my mom? I finally finished it. I know things aren't great, but maybe you'd want to hear it anyway? I guess probably not. Maybe though? You always said you loved my work. I hope Sunday goes okay. Are

you going to tell her when you picked her up from camp? I can tell her, if you want to wait until I'm back. I'm sure it'll be fine.

#

The Palace staff usually made Jim enough pre-made coffee, cream, and sugar to last an evening, but they always left him the ingredients and equipment to make more, in case the need arose. That meant someone in the hotel had ground beans, put out matches and a copper kettle for the stove, and 'misplaced' the silver coffeepot. However, since Michael had joined him, Jim had gone through the last of those prepared coffee grinds. If he wanted more coffee, not only would he need new sugar and cream, but also to grind new beans. To do that, he needed a coffee grinder. Luckily, he had discovered many visits ago that the ever-adaptable staff of the Palace Hotel simply kept one stashed in the back of the china cabinet, likely to save *themselves* a little time.

Once back in his room, Jim filled the copper kettle and set it over a low stove flame. He put the bag of beans down next to the grinder and two new cups, and set to the process of abusing his old knuckles in the pursuit of a decent cup of coffee.

He poured his grind into the silver pot just as the kettle let off its first whistle. Then, with the water not quite boiling, he poured it, let the cover down, and allowed the coffee time to brew.

He found the sugar, poured another cup of cream, and, with his arsenal made, took a moment to decide how he would move everything back to the chairs outside before the drink got too strong.

#

Even from a microwave, the sahlab was good. Sara sipped at the window and watched the fog steal the moonlight. Outside, or inside, she couldn't see anything else, having lost her night vision in a glow like snow blindness. No, like brights in a blizzard, totally different than the shock of sunlight reflecting off snow. She squinted through the vapor, the way she would squint through snow, searching for some safe off-ramp, or rest stop, or roadside hotel, but she'd already checked in to one of those.

When she pulled out her phone, Sara skipped straight to messenger this time. Her last conversation with Eric was a long way down. She told messenger *not* to show their older messages, and spent the customary minute debating whether she could really just message him out of the blue like talking was something they did all the time. She decided she didn't care. She had to talk to someone.

Sara: I fucked up

Eric's response came before the phone's auto-lock kicked in.

Eric: You didn't touch his ass, did you? He hates that.

Sara: What no i emailed my husband

Eric: Oh Sara, why?

Sara: He doesnt know how to take care of my orchids

I had to make sure he knew not to do anything

Eric: You emailed him to tell him -not- to do anything to your orchids?

Sara's thumb was starting to hurt. She moved to her computer to answer.

Sara: Ugh I know. I wrote him another email to fix that, but I ended up just talking about my writing so I emailed him again to try to fix that and then I sent another email and now I'm just sitting here freaking out and I need someone to talk to.

Eric is typing.

Sara: Did I pick a bad time?

Eric: No. I'm just sitting in front of my painting.

Sara: Why would you do that to yourself?

Eric: iunno

Sara: Do you remember what happened last time you did that?

Eric: Last time I was drinking.

Sara: Your not now?

Eric: three years next week

Sara: Congratulations.

Eric: It's looking at me.

Sara: uh...

Eric: Please distract me with your deeply stupid problems.

Sara: It is stupid isn't it? I have this new poem, this old poem really, that I'm reading tomorrow that I've been working on for years and it's finally where I either love it or hate it depending on I don't know what, but every other other time I look at it I hate it and think I'm just whining and usually I spend the nights before readings reading to my husband on the phone over and over until I'm tired enough to sleep but I can't even if he says I can. I asked him, in one of the emails, but I don't think I can actually read the emails to find out if he said yes, if he's even awake yet, and either way I can't go back

Eric is typing.

Sara: Even though he'd probably take me back. No. even if I never met Jesse it'd just have been someone or something else or maybe it'd all just go on for ever and I can't die there in that house. I can't I can't I can't

Eric: Woah. Woah. Give me a second to read. Gods, you're making me miss Jesse's texting style.

Are you still upstairs?

Sara: Yes...

Eric: If you need to read your poem to someone, you have someone there for that.

Sara: He's sleeping. Why don't I come down and read it to you.

Eric: No. I'm busy.

Sara: You're glaring at a heron YOU painted. You know what actually I don't want you to be alone.

Eric: Don't you dare use me as an excuse.

Sara: I'm coming down

Sara dressed, ignoring the pings that were her phone and computer's way of telling her that Eric was still trying to change her mind. She wrenched the door, hit the smell of summer—that dry, bitter taste of overzealous air conditioning—and then she hesitated. Given how cold the room already was, she considered grabbing her coat, and then considered grabbing all of her things, skipping the talk with Eric *and* her reading in the morning. She was doing the mental math for a cab, when the man from the elevator blasted by wearing Eric's suit, chased closely by a red-haired woman yelling "Learn! Fucking! Grammar!" The woman's hair whipped Sara's cheek just as she and the man began to shimmer. With each step, they mixed into the air like food coloring in water, until they disappeared. When Sara stuck a hand through the threshold, her fingers began shimmering the same way. She closed the door without leaving, ignored Eric's messages, and pulled up her poem. She glanced back at Jesse, but eventually shook her head and turned back to the screen to read to herself.

Elizabeth thought she had been the one chasing the time-traveler, and that that gave her the upper hand, but when he led their chase to the top floor, and finally to her own suite, she realized he had been leading her the whole time. She didn't know how he got past the lock, only that she saw him inside before the door slammed. By the time Elizabeth worked the lock, the suite was empty. She made sure Lizzie was still alone and asleep before wasting time doing anything else. She was,

and a quick look through the main room and Elizabeth's own room convinced her that Danny's boy, or the time-traveler, or whoever he was, must have doubled back. After a glance toward Lizzie's room, Elizabeth took the door at a run, and nearly fell through face-first skidding to a stop.

The hallway she thought she remembered was not behind her hotel room door. Or, if it was, it was lost in the din of the lighting, the decor, the walls of the Palace Hotel itself changing so quickly that every blink must have cost her another flicker.

The effect was dizzying, like looking into the infinity one mirror makes reflecting another mirror. Strange people in strange dress appeared and disappeared under unfamiliar lights, muddying a hundred different carpets.

Certain older, whiter stone rooms took the places of hallways at times, with gas lamps visible through open wooden windows one moment, and part of a white stone wall splitting down the middle of her doorway the view of beautifully furnished rooms.

Once she saw an impossible city only partially visible through the fog when, for an instant, there was no Palace between her and it at all.

Next instant, the walls were the glass screens of a cinema-something.

And then an elevator shaft and then sunshine, then shaking, then fire. And all of it—all of it—passed by her with absolutely no sound. If the time-traveler had wandered into *that*, she was not going to find him, and even if she did, who was going to find *her*?

Elizabeth felt she ought to close the door, to not look, to forget it all and return to—What? She didn't know. Instead, she stared, marveling at the specters of what she somehow knew must be this hotel in other times. If she stepped forward she would lose herself, compelled toward that next step, that next step, that last step, toward death, or life, or afterlife, but anyway oblivion.

Elizabeth lost time and forgot herself, staring at the shadows of men, women, children taking shape around corners and dispersing at doorways just as their formless fingertips touched the knobs. She only turned away when the sounds of a window shattering, of wind, wings, and the city outside surprised her, and the door slammed shut on its own. There was no time-traveler in her hotel room, just a heron, flying in a circle around the room, cawing, and eventually landing facing her on the arm of the velvet couch Bess hated so much. There, it raised a wing and preened a little with its beak, unconcerned as Elizabeth drew near. Only when she was close enough to touch it did the bird look up. Elizabeth

saw nothing in its eyes.

“Apologies. I simply
cannot drink my coffee

“Because because...
No.”

without sugar and cream. The taste is fine, but then I swallow and there's this burning in my gut for hours and hours, and I won't scar you with the knowledge of what the coffee does to me on its way out. You're young, and have quite enough to be getting on with already. There's no need for you to carry that too. Cream?”

“No. Thank you.”

Michel frowned, and stared while Jim went about preparing coffee for them both. The lad opened his mouth more than once, probably trying to decide how to say, ‘I'm not traveling through time. I'm dead,’ but by the time Jim handed him his cup, he hadn't said a word.

Sometimes they stumbled getting there, so Jim asked, “What was it were we talking about before I so rudely left?”

Michael lied, "I don't remember."

Jim smiled. "All right."

A quick taste test told Jim he hadn't quite achieved the balance of his first few cups, but the drink was enjoyable nonetheless. There wasn't much light to read by this late, but, then, reading a newspaper would have been rude with company. Jim settled for sitting and watching the Palace's unduly wealthy clientele sidle back to their rooms in odd pairs.

An older gentleman with a weak heart and a young man who, like Jim, was there to work.

A newly married couple with a long life ahead of one of them.

Boothby.

Plus, the fire. That much death had a way of seeping back in time, and lately he saw echoes more and more. The smoke filled his vision when he turned unfamiliar corners or stood when he wasn't expecting to, but it was still far from constant. So, at least a decade away, then.

Or maybe not. Michael looked concerned.

"So, um, Jim. How long have you been here?" Michael asked.

"I checked in this morning."

"Right. Right." The lad was trying to seem unconcerned again. "And you check in...you said once a month?"

"That's right."

"Where are you the rest of the time?"

"Around the city, working," said Jim.

"Do you remember specifically?"

Jim frowned, then it dawned on him. The lad was trying to break the news to *him*.

Oh poor thing, he thought. *That's not your job today*.

"Do you think that's snow?" Jim asked. He pointed at the glass ceiling. Michael looked up. It was difficult to tell without light whether the white on the glass was snow or dew reflecting the moon, which would have been almost full. They sat there, staring and sipping, watching as maybe snow, and maybe nothing, fell.

"Does the city change much?" asked Jim.

"Yeah," said Michael.

Jim waited, but Michael didn't elaborate. His smile was small, and his gaze lingered on the glass. It was an odd look for him, as if he was looking, but not seeing the ceiling he was staring at. While he looked, apparently trying to tell whether there was really snowfall, the smile vanished completely, and he seemed suddenly quite sad.

Sara stood next to the bed, debating. Jesse was splayed across the bed.

Clearly, his claim that he never slept on his back was less than accurate, as was his professed love of blankets. Those still on the bed were wrapped around and between his legs along with his pillow. He was still snoring, until his hair fell over his face, and into his open mouth again. He made a sound like a cat throwing up, and rolled onto his side. The snoring stopped, and he pulled the blankets up.

Sara kicked the side of the bed.

Jesse nearly fell out of bed sitting up, but she caught him by the shoulder, and pushed him back down. She put a finger to his lips before he could speak. There was still a lot of sleep to

him. His eyes were out of focus, still glazed with bits of dream. Sara looked away before she saw something else reflected there.

Right, she thought. *Start by telling the truth*. She said, “So, my mother’s sick. She’s dying. She wants to see me, and I can’t.... I need to talk to *somebody* about it. Can you listen?”

#

They couldn’t have a heron in their hotel room, obviously, so Elizabeth did what any sensible person would do and tried to shoo the bird away. All she got for her trouble was a short ‘caw’ and a reproving look, followed by the view of shit falling through its

tail feathers during another circuit around the room. Elizabeth responded with several carefully aimed throw pillows and a good deal of swearing. Nevertheless, by the end she was panting, the room was a mess, and the bird was back on the chair. Things were getting out of hand. The consequences of missing her point of contact at the auction, the way Elizabeth had left the auction, let alone the thousand dollars she didn’t have that she owed for the painting she’d apparently bought, all suddenly seemed more important than the presence or absence of bird shit. Then there was Danny’s man at the auction. At least, if he didn’t work for Danny, she’d eat her shoes. After the way she’d chased him down those halls, security was probably already on its way. Elizabeth didn’t know what she ought to do or where they all ought to go, but they couldn’t stay there.

From the other room, Lizzie called, “Mama?”

“Damn it, Bess,” Elizabeth muttered. The bird only cawed again.

“Mama?”

Elizabeth abandoned the cawing bird. Lizzie was sitting up, looking around her darkened bedroom. Her hair was east, and she was rubbing her eye.

“I’m here,” said Elizabeth.

“Where are we?” Lizzie asked.

“California, remember sweetie?”

Lizzie didn’t look like she did. While she squinted around the room with her free eye, the bird cawed again. The window was open, broken. Why was it still there?

Lizzie wanted water. Then Lizzie wanted a story, but Elizabeth couldn’t think of any. Grandma always knew good stories. *Bess knows a good story, and right now she’s telling it to a bar full of art snobs*. Elizabeth didn’t actually say that. She told her daughter a story about a woman who married a heron, moved to New York, and had two kids. It didn’t make a lot of sense, and she mostly wasn’t listening to herself anyway. Lizzie didn’t seem to mind. She drifted off, and after a couple minutes watching her daughter sleep, Elizabeth went back to pest control. The heron was still there, watching her from the chair back with haughty nothing in its eyes. Elizabeth pulled one of the room’s nice stools over, and sat facing the chair and the bird, her nose level with its beak, and stared, trying, even when her eyes watered, not to blink. She lasted

until it cawed, startling her, and causing her to fall while already sitting down. Once she was back steady on her feet, Elizabeth swiped at the bird with the back of a hand, but that only led to another poop tour around the room. Elizabeth took the velvet chair, as it was the only clean place left to sit. When the heron landed on the stool she'd moved, she actually smiled.

"I'm glad you're having fun," she said. "Today, I navigated a city I've never seen with my daughter and *my mother*, missed a meeting that was supposed to get us away from the Winter Gang, spent a grand I don't have on a painting I don't care about, and some goon claiming to be a time-traveler tried to get in here and do I don't know what to Lizzie. At this point, you and your shit are the simplest stupid problem I've had to deal with today. Make yourself at home."

The heron tilted its head a little. Elizabeth cawed.

#

Michael gave up the ghost quietly a bit before dawn, while he and everyone else were staring at the snow. Those white shoes dissipated to smoke, looking momentarily like an illustration meant to show a runner suddenly stopping in a comic book. Then his legs, his torso, his neck. Jim lost him in the snow.

Jim had not checked into the largest hotel in California to watch snow from the street, so he walked back inside. The morning staff was arriving. Jenny was already sipping coffee at the front desk. He spared her having to speak, but took a copy of the day's *Alta* next to her. She smiled. He nodded, walking towards the stairs. There were a number of stories he might read, but clearly the people at the paper thought one event in particular deserved the front page:

A SNOWFALL.

The Gelid Rainfall Puts in Its Appearance This Morning.

At about 1:20 o'clock this morning snow commenced falling and the deposit on the ground before morning was several inches thick in the Western Addition, and deep enough on the sidewalks of the city to swear by.

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Will Waller is an author of speculative fiction, scholarship, and experimental writing originally from the Finger Lakes Wine Region of New York. After two years in San Francisco spent working as an editor for *Eleven Eleven Literary Journal*, he relocated to St. Louis to found [The Fantasist](#). His writing focuses on memory, music, and the weather, and has been featured by *Bay Area Generations* and *Heavy Feather Review*, *Rivet Journal*, and is forthcoming in the *On Fire* anthology out through Transmundane Press.