

BYLINER
SERIALS



POSITRON

EPISODE 2

CHOKE COLLAR

MARGARET ATWOOD

POSITRON | EPISODE TWO

Choke Collar

By Margaret Atwood

BYLINER SERIALS

Byliner Serials

Positron, by Margaret Atwood

Episode 1: *I'm Starved for You*

[Purchase this episode](#)

Episode 2: *Choke Collar*

Episode 3: *Moppet Shop*

[Preorder this episode](#)

Copyright © 2012 by Margaret Atwood
All rights reserved

Cover image: Getty/John Kuczala

ISBN: 978-1-61452-039-9

Byliner Inc.
San Francisco, California
www.byliner.com

For press inquiries, please contact media@byliner.com

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Table of Contents

[Story](#)

[Preorder Episode Three](#)

[About the Author](#)

[About Byliner](#)

[Byliner Serials](#)

[Byliner Originals & Byliner Fiction](#)

It's late afternoon, the December sun is low in the sky, the street is empty. Or it seems empty: as Stan has increasingly come to believe, there are eyes embedded everywhere—the lamppost, the fire hydrant—and just because you can't see them doesn't mean they can't see you.

He's trimming the hedge, making an effort to appear not only useful but cheerful. The hedge doesn't need trimming: he trimmed it two weeks ago, and if he keeps on like this it will soon be reduced to a lattice of twiggy stubs. But he finds the activity calming, for the same reasons nail biting is calming: it's repetitive, it imitates meaningful activity, and it's violent.

The hedge trimmer emits a menacing whine, like a wasp's nest that's been stepped on. The sound gives him a fleeting illusion of power that dulls his sense of panic. Panic of a rat in a glass cage, with ample food and drink and even sex, though with no way out and the suspicion it's part of an experiment that hasn't taken place yet but is sure to be painful.

The source of the panic: Jocelyn, the walking vise grip. The Leatherwoman Crunch. She's got him shackled to her ankle. He's on her invisible leash, he's wearing her invisible choke collar. He can't shake her free.

Deep breath, Stan, he tells himself. You're still fucking alive. He laughs inwardly. Or alive and fucking. Good one, Stan.

He's got buds in his ears, hooked up to his closed-circuit Consilience cell phone. The mean whine of the trimmer plays backup to the smiley-face voice of Doris Day, whose Greatest Hits playlist serves as his daytime lullaby music. It doesn't work completely, and he'd had an adverse reaction at first, with unwholesome fantasies of booting Doris off a rooftop, but there isn't a lot of choice inside Consilience—they censor anything too arousing or disruptive—and he prefers her to the medley from *Oklahoma* or Bing Crosby singing “White Christmas.” White Christmas: now *that's* a dusty notion. There hasn't been a white Christmas for decades, and even though it's mid-December, he hardly even needs his fleece jacket.

To the bouncy swing of “Love Me or Leave Me” he lops off a clutch of feathery cedar branches. Now that he's used to it—that butterfat smoothness, that white-sugar overdose—it's calming to think of Doris, ever virginal but with impressively firm bra-bolstered tits, smiling her long-ago ingenuous sun-bleached smile, mixing milkshakes in her 1950s kitchen, as in the biopic of her

so often shown on Consilience TV.

She was the “nice” girl, back when the opposite was “naughty.” *Something something list, checking it twice, naughty or nice*: what song is that? He has a childhood memory of some muddled, alcoholic, out-of-date uncle annoying young girls by calling them naughty for wearing short skirts. That must have been around 2012; he was eleven then, and beginning to notice.

Doris would never have opted for a skirt like that. Or if she did, it would have been for something sporty and asexual, like volleyball. Maybe it was a girl like Doris he’d been wishing for when he married Charmaine. Safe, simple, clean. Ironclad in pure white undergarments. Untouchable by anyone but him. What a joke that’s turned out to be.

Let me be lonely, he hums in his head. But loneliness won’t be allowed, not once Jocelyn gets back from whatever spooky snoop stuff she does during the day. “You should put your leather thingies on,” she said to him two nights ago, in the voice she intends to be enticing and flirtatious. “With the little screwdriver doodad. I’ll pretend you’re the plumber.” What she meant was what he’s wearing now: the leatherwork gloves, the work apron with its pockets and widgets. Kink dress-ups for men: that’s all Jocelyn sees. He hadn’t put the leather thingies on, however: he does have some pride. Though, increasingly, less.

He stands on a stepladder to reach the topmost layer of hedge. The balance is off: if he shifts he might topple, and that could be severe, because the hedge trimmer is ultrasharp. With it you could slice neatly through a neck with a lightning-swift surprise move, as in the black-and-white Japanese samurai films he used to watch online when he was a kid, along with knights in armor and monster movies and chain-saw massacres. Stan has more than once pictured Jocelyn’s head becoming detached from her body by means of edged tools.

For instance: medieval executioners could take off a head with an ax in one clean chop, at least in history flicks. Could he ever do anything that extreme? Maybe, with the drumroll and the audience of self-righteous judges and, below them, the crowd of jeering, vegetable-hurling yokels. He’d need the right accessories: the leather gloves, like the ones he has on, only with gauntlet cuffs and a leather face mask like those in twentieth-century horror films. Would his torso be bare? Better not: he needs to firm up, bulk out the muscles. He’s swilling too much of that paunch-building beer: made at Positron, tastes like piss, but anything to get drunk. Yesterday Jocelyn poked her index finger into the jelly roll over his lowest rib. “Shed that flab!” she said. It was supposed to be teasing, but there was an unspoken *or else*. But *or else* what? Though she’s never laid it on the line, Stan knows he’s on probation; but if he fails the test,

whatever it is, what then?

Once I had a secret love, Doris sings. *Dum de dum, me, yearning, free*. Stan barely hears the words, he's heard them so often. Wallpaper, with rosebuds on it. Would Doris Day's life have been different if she'd called herself Doris Night? Would she have worn black lace, dyed her hair red, sung torch songs? What about Stan's own life? Would he be thinner and fitter if his name were Phil, like Jocelyn's cheating dipstick of a husband?

What will be will be, croons Doris. After this song finishes, next up will be the Patti Page Top Ten playlist. "How Much Is That Doggie in the Window?" *Arf arf*, real dog barks. That must have been cutting-edge in 1952, putting a dog into a song. Charmaine thought it was cute. *Cute* was a primary category for her, like right and wrong. Crocuses: cute; thunderstorms: not cute. Eggcups in the shape of chickens: cute; Stan angry: not cute. He is not cute a lot these days.

Which would be better, the ax or the hedge trimmer? he muses. The ax, if you were an expert and had the knack of the clean stroke. Otherwise—for amateurs like himself—the trimmer. The tendons would cut like wet string, but what about the bone? Would the blade snag or jam? Then there would be the blood, hitting him in the face like a water cannon. The force must be amazing when the neck is sliced like that, and the temperature much hotter than you'd expect. Soup temperature. The thought of it makes him feel a little sick. This is the problem with his fantasies: they become too vivid, then veer off into possible snafus and fuckups, and he gets tangled up in what might go wrong. So much already has.

You could do a good job on your own neck with the trimmer; though not with the ax. With the trimmer, you'd only have to position it right against the skin, because once it was on, it would just keep going whether or not you were still conscious. He once read a true story about a guy who committed suicide in his own bed with an electric carving knife. His cheating wife was lying in the bed beside him; it was the warmth of his blood seeping into the mattress that woke her up, because he didn't make a sound. He's fantasized about that too—offing himself with the carving knife—because some days he feels so trapped, so hopeless, so dead-ended, so gutted and nutless that he'd do almost anything to get away.

But why is he being so negative? *Honey, why are you being so negative?* he hears in his head: Charmaine's chirpy, childishly high Barbie-doll voice. *Surely your life isn't that bad!* The implication being: with her in it. *Stuff it*, he tells the voice. The voice gives a little shocked *Oh!* then pops like a bubble.

But she's right: surely his life isn't so bad. A lot of men would be happy to trade. Every weekday he goes to his so-called work at the Consilience electric-scooter repair depot, where he's had to fend off questions from the other guys

—“What’re you doing, still here? Thought it was your month to be in Positron.” To which he replies, somewhat truthfully, “Some administration moron screwed up, seems they got my info mixed up with some other guy’s. Case of mistaken identity, but hey, I’m not complaining.”

No need to add that the other guy was Phil, the man who’d been jumping his perky, chirpy, treacherous bitch of a wife, Charmaine—snatching quickies with her in abandoned houses—and that the administration moron in question was no moron but Phil’s own wife, Jocelyn, a highly placed security-system spook. She’d tracked Phil’s every move, she’d recorded every one of his encounters with Charmaine, sometimes in sound only, sometimes in grainy and shadowy but still surprisingly erotic videos.

Stan knows the videos are surprisingly erotic because he’s watched them with Jocelyn, sitting on the exact same sofa where he used to sit with Charmaine to watch TV. Not that there was much to watch during those TV sessions: it was motivational workout shows or knitting and crafts, or two-day-old sports events, or reruns of old Hollywood classics and musicals. Or else it was the boring Town Meetings they were treated to every week to remind them how important Consilience was as a model template for the new America and how pioneering and productive and exemplary and, well, positive all its inhabitants were expected to be. That sofa with its royal blue ground and overall design of off-white lilies had signaled tedium and a comforting routine; the most he’d ever done on it with Charmaine had been hand-holding or an arm around the shoulders, because Charmaine claimed she didn’t want to do bed things except where they belonged, in a bed. A false claim, judging from the Phil-and-Charmaine videos, in which Charmaine required nothing more than a closed door and a bare floor to release her inner sidewalk whore and urge Phil to do things she’d never allowed Stan to do and say things she’d never once said to Stan.

Jocelyn likes to watch Stan watching as she smiles a tight but lip-licking smile. Then she wants him to re-create these video scenes, with her in the role of Charmaine. The horrible thing is that sometimes he can; though it’s equally horrible when he can’t. If he roughs her up and fucks her, it’s because she told him to; if he isn’t up to it, he’s a failure; so whichever it is, he loses. Jocelyn has transformed the neutral sofa with its harmless lilies to a nest of tortuous and humiliating vice. He can barely sit down on it anymore. Who knew that a man-made shape of fabric and stuffing could become such a crippling head weapon?

In addition to her yen for mindfucking and her sardonic sense of humor, Jocelyn—by virtue of her job—has tiptop coding skills and access to the Consilience/Positron database identity files. That’s how she switched Stan’s

identity with her husband Phil's, so that Stan is now Phil and Phil is Stan, at least as far as the digital tracking system is concerned.

Every month, half the people in Consilience go into Positron as prisoners and the other half come out and take up their assigned positions as guards and service personnel. The Consilience template guarantees full employment; not only that, it halves the cost of housing, since everyone is paired with an unknown Alternate who shares the same living space. One month in prison, one month out, turn and turn about. It's the data identity system that does the tracking: you are who it says you are; you are also where it says you are.

So right now Stan is outside the Positron Prison when he should be in, whereas Charmaine and Phil are both in. No doubt Phil's wondering what's happened and is making ineffectual blustering noises—*There's been a mistake, I'm supposed to be leaving now, just let me contact my wife, she's in Security, we'll get this straightened out.* Stan takes an acidic pleasure in imagining this scenario, as well as the stonewalling stares and hidden snickering among the guards, because haven't they got their orders, which come from higher up, and don't they know for sure that this is no mistake? *Just cool it, buddy, look at the printout, it's you all right, Positron identity numbers don't lie, the system's hackproof.* That twisted fuckwit Phil had it coming. Holding this thought keeps Stan going during his sexual command performances with Jocelyn, which are a good deal more like tenderizing a gristly cut of steak than anything he finds purely pleasurable.

Oh, Stan! comes the pert, giggly pseudovoice of Charmaine. *You get a kick out of it, you must! You do! Well, most of the time anyway, and every man has those letdown moments, but the rest of the time don't think I can't hear those groans and moans! It has to be enjoyable for you, don't deny it!*

Ram it, he tells her. But Charmaine, with her angel face and devious heart—the real Charmaine can't hear him. She doesn't yet know that Jocelyn's been messing with their lives, hers and Stan's—paying her back for stealing her husband, Phil—but on the first of the month she'll find out. When she walks into this house, expecting to find Stan, it will be Phil who'll be waiting for her. He won't exactly be pleased about it either, would be Stan's guess, because a quick hit of supercharged nooky snatched on the run is not at all the same as all day every day.

That's when Charmaine will discover that the fire of her loins is not who she thinks he is—not the Max of her fever dreams, whose fake name she invokes over and over in those videos, but a much less alpha male, who will look very different in plain daylight. Saggier, older, but also jaded, shifty-eyed, calculating: you can see that in his face, on the videos. She and Phil will be stuck

with each other whether they like it or not. Charmaine will have to live with his dirty socks, his hairs in the sink; she'll have to listen to him snoring, she'll have to make small talk with him at breakfast; all of which will put a damper on the bodice-ripping romance she's been acting out.

How long will it take the two of them to get bored, then fed up with each other? How long before Phil resorts to domestic violence, just for something to do? Not long, Stan hopes. He wouldn't mind knowing that Phil is smacking Charmaine around, and not just as a garnish to sex, the way he does onscreen, but for real: somebody needs to.

And Phil better not push it too far or Charmaine may stick a grapefruit knife into his jugular, since behind that blond fluff-headed act of hers there's something skewed. A chip missing, a loose connection. He hadn't recognized it when they'd been living together—he'd underestimated her shadow side, which was mistake number one, because everyone has a shadow side, even fluffpots like her.

But when Phil and Charmaine come out of Positron on January 1, the next switchover day, and take up domestic life in this house, what will become of him, Stan? Will Jocelyn finally tire of treating him like an indentured stud muffin, of hotwiring his mind and watching him jerk around like a galvanized frog, and send him off to Positron for a rest?

Though maybe she'll alter the schedule even further: maybe she'll just keep Stan here, playing her warped game of house, and let the other two cool their jets for one more month inside the slammer. Switchover day will roll round and Charmaine and Phil will be all set to put on their civvies and beeline it to their seedy rendezvous, as they've been in the habit of doing over the past few months. But then some gink in a uniform will tell them there's been a change of plans and they won't be coming out of Positron this month. Which will mean three months straight for Phil, and two for Charmaine.

By that time Phil will have guessed that Jocelyn has found him out; he'll be in an advanced state of anxiety if he has any sense at all. He must know his wife is a vengeful harpy, deep inside her business-suit-neutral cool. But Charmaine will be confused. She'll run through her gamut of girly manipulations: dimpled blond astonishment, lip-quivering attempts at reasoning, tearful outrage—but none of it will do her any good. Then maybe she'll finally have a meltdown, something Stan has never witnessed. She'll lose it, she'll wail, she'll crumple to the floor. The officials won't put up with it: they'll haul her upright, tell her to behave; if she doesn't, they'll hose her down. Stan would like to see that; it would be some satisfaction for the contempt with which she's been treating him. Maybe Jocelyn will let him watch on the spy-cam video hookup.

Not likely. His access to her Consilience spy-cam material is limited to the videos of Charmaine and Phil writhing around on the floor. Jocelyn really gets a jolt out of those. Her demand that he duplicate the action is pretty pathetic, come to think of it. Has any man ever felt any real passion for that clunky body of hers? Not him, and it shows. At those moments he'd drink paint thinner or stuff a chile pepper up his nose—anything to nuke his brain during these mutually humiliating scenes.

*

A couple of nights ago she tried something new. Of course, since she seems to have the codes for everything in Consilience, she can open the pink locker in the cellar where Charmaine stores her clothes while she's in Positron. Jocelyn went into that locker and switched the contents with those of her own purple locker. Then she rummaged around in Charmaine's stuff and found a nightgown she could fit into. It had daisies on it, and bows—very far from Jocelyn's functional style, but maybe that was the point.

Mercifully, Jocelyn is in the habit of sleeping in the guest room, where she also keeps her “work,” whatever it is; but last night, after lighting a scented candle, she'd woken him in the middle of the night. “Surprise,” she'd whispered. Her mouth was dark with lipstick, and as she pressed it down on his he'd recognized the cherry bubblegum scent. It was the scent of the lipstick kiss on the note he'd found by accident under the refrigerator so many months ago: *Darling Max, I can hardly wait till next time. I'm starved for you! I need you so much. XXOO and you know what more—Jasmine.*

Like a moron, he'd fallen for an illusion: this sultry and purple-mouthed Jasmine, the complete opposite of naive Charmaine. After he'd read the note, that was all he wanted: Jasmine, Charmaine's Alternate, who slept in his bed when he wasn't there, who showered in his shower, who rubbed her body with his towels, and who was having torrid sex with his own Alternate, Max. He'd fantasized about her endlessly; he'd stalked her, bent on seduction; he'd planted an illegal tracker in the pink-and-purple scooter that he'd assumed she shared with Charmaine. If only he could have gotten his hands on her, she'd have melted in his arms like hot wax. Finally he'd lurked in the garage once Charmaine had left on switchover day, waiting to pounce on Jasmine as she approached their shared house. One touch, then ecstasy. That's what he'd thought.

What a mirage! Then, what a disappointment. Jasmine is Charmaine, he knows that now; just as Max is Phil. And he is an idiot. And now Jocelyn wants

to be who? Dragged out of sleep, he was disoriented; for a moment he didn't know where he was, or who was now pressing herself against him. "Just imagine I'm Jasmine," she murmured. "Just let yourself go." But how could he, with the texture of Charmaine's familiar nightgown under his fingers? The daisies. The bows. It was such a disconnect.

But he did let himself go. Or almost. Or as much as it took.

How much longer can he go on starring in this bedroom farce without losing control? He can keep himself fairly steady during the day, when he's working at the scooter depot. Solving mechanical problems levels him out. But as the workday nears its end, he feels the dread building. Finally time runs out and he has to get onto his own scooter—or rather the scooter that's his to use at Consilience—and motor back to the house. His goal is to get a few beers into himself, then pretend to act busy and competent by concentrating on yard work before Jocelyn turns up.

It's risky to combine beer fog with power tools, but it's a risk he's willing to take. Unless he numbs himself, he might find himself doing something really stupid. Jocelyn is high up on the Consilience/Positron power ladder; she must have every one of her snatch hairs monitored, with a SWAT team ready to spring into lethal action at any threat. Stan would surely trigger some alarm while making even the most innocuous move against her, such as roping her up and stowing her in Charmaine's pink locker—no, not the pink one, he doesn't know the code; in his own red locker—while he makes his getaway. But get away to where? There's no route out of Consilience, not for those who've made the dick-brained mistake of believing the Consilience PR and signing themselves in. Signing themselves over. DO TIME NOW, BUY TIME FOR OUR FUTURE.

He finishes the hedge, switches the trimmer to Off, clambers down from the stepladder. In his ears, Patti Page is exuding "With My Eyes Wide Open I'm Dreaming." The Singing Rage, that's what they called her then. "Detour" is maybe his favorite of Patti's. It has the word *bitter* in it.

Here comes Jocelyn now, in her darkened, softly purring spook vehicle. Now it's drawing up to the house. She has a driver, she always has a driver, she must have one, because she exits from the backseat. Unless there's something about those cars that he doesn't yet know and they're driven by robots or a set of handheld controls. Over at Positron they're said to be working on a bunch of new tech industries that are supposed to help this place pay its way. Some guys in the scooter depot have heard they're developing a line of sexbots, for export. So why not a bot driving the car? He has a wild impulse to sprint over there with the hedge trimmer, turn it on, threaten to shred both Jocelyn and her robot of a driver unless they take him to the main Consilience gateway—right now. What

if she refuses? Then he'll be sitting on the street in a stalled car full of electronics and body parts.

But if it works, he'll make her drive him right through the gateway, into the crumbling, semi-deserted wasteland outside the walls. He'll jump out of the car then, make a break for it. He won't have much of a life, picking through garbage dumps and fighting off scavengers, but at least he'd be in charge of himself again.

Though maybe better not to try. She can probably activate the alarm system by flexing her toes or something. Not to mention her fast moves. Those Security types must take training. Learn to crush windpipes with the sides of their hands.

Now she's getting out. Shoes, ankles, gray nylon. Her legs are good. A little muscular, perhaps, but good. Any guy seeing those legs would have to be turned on. Wouldn't they? They would.

Hang on to that, Stan, he tells himself. Stay in the moment. Things could get much worse.

*

On switchover day, January 1, Charmaine is told to stay behind at the prison. She has a sinking feeling right away. Do they know about Max? If so, she's in trouble, because how many times were they told it was absolutely not allowed to fraternize with the Alternates that shared your house? You weren't even supposed to know what they looked like. Which was one of the things that made seeing Max so thrilling for her. So forbidden, so over the line.

Seeing Max. What an old-fashioned way of putting it! But then she's an old-fashioned girl—that's what her husband, Stan, thinks. But her sightings of Max have mostly been close-ups, in half-light. An ear, a hand, a thigh. *Oh please, let them not know*, she prays silently, crossing her fingers. They never spelled out what would happen if you disobeyed. But Max had reassured her. He'd said it was nothing much: they just gave you a little hand slap and maybe changed your Alternate, and anyway she and Max were being so careful. None of those old houses had spyware in it, he had that on the very best authority. But what if Max was wrong?

She takes a breath: now she must be sincere. She smiles, showing her small, candid doll teeth. *What's the problem, what has she done?* she asks, her voice higher and more girly than normal. Is it something about her Positron job, her position as Chief Medications Administrator? If so, she'll go over things, she'll learn how to improve, because she's always wanted to do the very, very best job possible and be all that she can be.

She hopes it's only the job that's the issue. Maybe they've been monitoring her there in the Medications Administration wing, Procedures Department, in ways she hasn't understood. Maybe they've noted that she ignores the surgical-mask protocol, maybe they've decided she's being too nice to the subjects during the procedures. The head strokings, the forehead kisses, those marks of kindness and personal attention just before she slides in the hypodermic needle: they aren't forbidden, but they certainly aren't mandated. They're flourishes, grace notes—special little touches she's added because it makes the whole thing a more quality experience all round, not only for the subject of the procedure but for her as well. She does feel strongly that you should keep the human touch: she's always been prepared to say as much in front of a tribunal if it came to that. Though she's hoped it wouldn't. But maybe now is the time it will.

Oh no, I'm sure it's nothing, they say. Just an administrative formality. Someone must have keyed in the wrong piece of code, you know how such things happen, it can take such a long time to unsnarl them. Even with modern technology there's always human error, and Charmaine will just have to be patient until they can trace what they can only assume is a bug in the works.

She nods and smiles. But they're looking at her strangely (two of them, now there are three, behind the checkout desk, one of them texting on a cell), and there's something odd in their voices: they aren't telling the truth. She doesn't think she's imagining that; she isn't paranoid.

"If you'll wait in the Chat Room," one of them says, indicating a door to the side of the counter. "Away from the checkout process. Thank you. There's a chair, you can sit down. The Human Resources Officer will be with you shortly."

She turns away from the departing group of her fellow prisoners, who've shed their orange prison boiler suits and are already in their street clothing or their guard uniforms. As she is: she's wearing a lacy white bra underneath her new cherry-colored sweater. She chose these items a month ago to be special for Max. "What's wrong?" one of the other women calls over to her.

"Nothing, really. Some data entry thing. I'll be out later today," she says, as gaily as she can. But she doubts it. She can feel the sweat soaking into her sweater, underneath her arms. That bra will have to be washed, pronto. Most likely the cherry color is leaking into it, and it's so hard to get dye stains like that out of whites.

She sits on the wooden chair in the Chat Room, trying not to count the minutes, resisting the urge to go back out to the front desk and make a scene, which will not—definitely not—be any use. And even if she does get out later that day, what about Max? At this very moment he must be scooting toward

the empty house where they're supposed to meet—he told her the address last time and she memorized it, repeating it to herself like a charm as she lay in her narrow bed in her Positron cell, in her poly-cotton standard-issue nightgown. Max likes her to describe that nightgown. He likes her to tell him what torment it is for her to lie there alone, wearing that scratchy nightgown, tossing and turning and unable to sleep, thinking about him, living every word and touch over and over, tracing with her own hands the pathways across and into her flesh that his hands have taken. *And then what, and then what?* he'll whisper as they lie together on the dirty floorboards. *Tell me. Show me.*

What he likes even better—because she can hardly bring herself to do it, he has to force it out of her word by word—what he likes even better is to have her describe what she's feeling when it's Stan who's making love to her, not Max. *Then what does he do? Tell me, show me. And then what do you feel?*

I'm pretending it's you, she'll say. I have to, I have to do that. I'd go crazy otherwise, I couldn't stand it. Which isn't true really, but it's what Max likes to hear.

Last time he went further. *What if it were both of us at once?* he said. *Front and back. Tell me ...*

Oh no, I couldn't! Not both at once! That's ...

I think you could. I think you want to. Look, you're blushing. You're a dirty little slut, aren't you? You'd do the midget football team if there was room for them. You want to. Both of us at once. Say it.

At those moments she'd say anything. What he doesn't know is that in a way it's always both at once: whichever one she's with, the other one is there with her as well, invisible, partaking, though at an unconscious level. Unconscious to him but conscious to her, because she holds them both in her consciousness, so carefully, like fragile meringues, or uncooked eggs, or baby birds. But she doesn't think that's dirty, cherishing both at once: each of them has a different essence, and she just happens to be good at treasuring the unique essence of a person. It's a gift not everyone has.

And now, today, she'll miss the meet-up with Max, and she has no way of warning him that she can't be there. What will he think? He'll arrive at the house early because, like her, he can hardly restrain himself. He lives for these encounters, he longs to crush her in his arms and ruin her clothing, ripping open zippers and buttons and even a seam or two, in the haste of his ardent, pulsating, irresistible desire. He'll wait and wait in the empty house, impatiently, pacing the stained, mud-crusting floor, looking out through the flyspecked windows. But she won't appear. Will he assume she's failed him? Dumped him? Blown him off? Abandoned him in a fit of cowardice, or of loyalty toward Stan?

Then there's Stan himself. After the month he's just spent as a prisoner in Positron, he'll have turned in his orange prison boiler suit at the desk and put on his street outfit, his jeans and fleece jacket. He'll have left the men's wing in the Positron complex; he'll have scooted back through the streets of Consilience, which will be thronged with people in a festive mood, some streaming into the jail to take their turn as prisoners, others streaming out of it, back to their civilian lives. Stan too will be waiting for her, not in an abandoned building dank with the aroma of long-ago drug parties and biker sex but in their own house, the house she thinks of as theirs. Or half theirs, anyway. Stan will be inside that house, in their familiar domestic nest, impatient but not in a sexual way, expecting her to turn up at any minute and put on her apron and cook dinner while he fools around with his tools in the garage. He may even be intending to tell her he's missed her—he sometimes does that—and give her a casual hug.

She relishes the casualness of those hugs: *casual* means he has no idea what she's just been doing. He doesn't realize she's returning from a stolen hour with his Alternate, Max. She loves that expression—*stolen hour*. It's so—what? 1950s? Like in the romantic movies they sometimes show on Consilience TV, where it comes out all right in the end. Though *stolen hour* doesn't make sense, when you think about it. It's like stolen kisses—the stolen hour is about time, and the stolen kisses are about place—whose lips go where. But how can they be stolen? Who does the thieving? Is Stan the owner of that hour, and of those kisses too? Surely not. And even if he is, if he doesn't know about the missing time and the missing kisses, how is she hurting him? There have been art thieves who've made exact copies of expensive paintings and substituted them for the real ones, and the owners have gone for months and even years without noticing. It's like that.

But Stan will notice when she doesn't turn up. He'll be irritated, then dismayed. He'll ask the Consilience officials to do a street search, check up on scooter accidents. Then he'll contact Positron. Most likely he'll be told that Charmaine is still inside, in the women's wing. Though he won't be told why. Charmaine sits and sits on the hard little chair in the Chat Room, trying to keep her mind still, twisting her fingers. No wonder people used to go nuts in solitary confinement, she thinks. No one to talk to, nothing to do. But they don't have solitary at Positron anymore, do they? She and Stan were shown the cells, though, during the orientation tour, when they were making the big decision to join the Consilience plan. It seemed like the answer to their problems—the on-and-off jobs, the evictions, the vandalism and gangs that were roaming around more and more, the piled-up debt. Consilience just wrote your debts off if you signed, and it was such a light feeling when they did that, such a relief. At first it

felt so safe, to be inside.

The former solitary cells had been refitted with desks and computers—those were for the IT engineers and also for the robotics industry they were going to build. *Very exciting possibilities there*, said the guide. *Now, let's go and see the communal dining room, and then the livestock and horticulture—all our chickens are raised right here, and we plan to be self-sufficient in vegetables very soon—and after that we can look in at the Handcrafts Studio, where you'll be issued your knitting supplies.*

Knitting. If she has to stay in Positron another whole month, she's going to get really fed up with that knitting. It was fun at first, sort of old-timey and chatty, but now they have quotas. They nag. They make you feel like a slacker if you don't work fast enough.

Oh, Max. Where are you? I'm scared! But even if Max could hear her, would he come? Stan would. He appreciates it when she's scared. Spiders, for instance: she doesn't like those. Stan is very efficient with spiders.

Finally a woman with a clip tablet enters, in a guard uniform but with an identity badge pinned to her breast pocket: AURORA, HUMAN RESOURCES. Charmaine's heart sinks. Human Resources. The worst.

Aurora of Human Resources smiles mirthlessly, her eyes like sleet. She has a message to deliver, and she delivers it smoothly: Charmaine must stay in Positron for another month; and, in addition to that, she's been relieved of her duties with Medications Administration.

"But why?" says Charmaine, her voice faltering. "If there's been any complaint filed ..." Which is a dumb thing to say, because the subjects of her medication administrations all flatline five minutes after the procedure—or that's what people usually do when their hearts have stopped beating—so who is there still walking around on the planet who could file a complaint? Maybe some of them have returned from the afterlife and criticized the quality of her services, she jokes to herself. Suppose they did, they'd have been lying, she adds indignantly. She's justly proud of her talent, she does have a gift, you can see it in their eyes. She executes well, she gives good death: those entrusted to her care go out in a state of bliss and with feelings of gratitude toward her, if body language is any indication. And it is: under the tutelage of Max, his almost choreographic movements, his carefully calibrated technique, she has totally honed her skills in body language.

"Oh no, no complaints," says Aurora of Human Resources, a sliver too carelessly. Her face barely moves: she's had work done and they went too far. She has pop eyes, and the skin of her face is wrenched back as if a giant fist were squeezing all the hair on the back of her head. She most likely went to a

practice session at the cosmetic school in the Positron retraining program. Retraining is supposed to retrofit you to fill the needs of the Consilience community. “Be the Best You in the You-Niverse,” “New Skills for a New You in a New World,” “Surf the Wave, Top the Charts, Wave at the Serfs!”—those are some of the slogans. They do a good wall display: symmetrical faces and bodies, whitened teeth, beaming smiles that suggest pill-induced happiness. Looking at all that airbrushing, you can almost believe in the whole Consilience package. As Charmaine herself used to. Though right now, today, she’s having a doubt or two.

The cosmetic school is called Liftoff: its logo is a face with wings, a slogan in a curly handwriting style around it: LIGHTER THAN AIR! And underneath: DEFEAT GRAVITY! So if Aurora had her dermal makeover performed after signing into Consilience rather than before, that’s where she had it. The surgeons are students, so it’s only natural that they’d slip up a bit. Though Charmaine would jump off a bridge if her face looked like that.

Cosmetic surgery will be big in the future, because if you’re a woman and feeling trapped by the system, it’s sure to be a mood stabilizer if you can also feel beautiful. The average age in Consilience is thirty-five, so feeling beautiful isn’t that much of a challenge yet.

But what will happen as the years go by? Charmaine wonders. A top-heavy population of geriatrics in wheelchairs isn’t maybe something the head honchos have thought through. Will those now in Consilience be replaced by waves of younger arrivals once their productivity is used up? Will they be released, or rather expelled, forced to take up life in the hardscrabble world outside the Consilience walls as best they can? No, because the Consilience contract is for life: if you’re in, you’re in. No second thoughts, period. They were all told that very clearly before they signed.

So maybe—and this isn’t a nice thought—maybe they’ll end up in Medications Administration, the Procedures Department. Maybe I’ll end up there too, thinks Charmaine, with someone like me telling me everything will be just fine and stroking my hair and kissing my forehead goodnight and tucking me in with a needle, and I won’t be able to move or say anything because I’ll be strapped down and drugged. Like the others who have gone before.

“Then why?” Charmaine says to Aurora, trying not to let her frustration show. No, more than that: her desperation. “I’m needed in Medications, it’s a special technique, I have the experience, I’ve never had a single—”

“Well, as I’m sure you’ll agree is necessary under the circumstances, your codes and cards have been deactivated,” Aurora cut in. “For the moment you’re in limbo, you might say. The database is very careful, and just as well, because I

don't mind sharing with you that we've had a few impostors in here. Journalists." She frowned, as well as she was able to with her stretched face. "And other nosy troublemakers. Trying to unearth—trying to *invent* bad stories about our wonderful community."

"Oh, that's terrible!" says Charmaine breathily. "The way they make things up ..." She wonders what the bad stories are and if she can ask, decides against it.

"Yes, well," says Aurora. "We all have to be very careful about what we say, because you never know, do you? If the person is real or not."

"Oh, I never thought of that," says Charmaine, truthfully.

Aurora's face relaxes a millimeter. "You'll get new cards and codes if"—she catches herself—"when you're reverified. Until then, it's a trust issue."

"Trust issue!" says Charmaine indignantly. "There has never been *any* ..."

"This isn't about you personally," says Aurora. "It's your data. I'm sure you yourself are completely trustworthy in every way. More than loyal." Is that a little smirk? Hard to tell on a wrenched-back face like that. Charmaine finds herself blushing. It's that word: *loyal*. At least she's been loyal to her job.

"Now," says Aurora, switching to bustling mode, "I'm placing you temporarily in Laundry. Towel folding—there's a shortage in that department. I've done towel folding myself, it's very soothing. Sometimes it's wise to take a break from too much stress and responsibility, and the after-work pursuits we may"—she hesitates, searching for the word—"the pursuits we may *pursue*, to deal with that stress. Towel folding gives time for reflection. Think of it as professional development time. Like a vacation."

Darn, thinks Charmaine. Darn it to hell. Towel folding. Her status in Positron has just taken a pratfall over a cliff.

There's something else in Aurora's manner, Charmaine decides as she's changing out of the street clothes she'd put on just hours ago. (Oh shoot, look at that bra, she thinks: bright pink under the arms from the sweater, she'll never get it out. She must have been really nervous.) Of course Aurora can't smile like a normal person, but it was more than that. Charmaine is sensitive about voices; a lot of people wouldn't notice such fine nuances, but there was definitely something fake in Aurora's tone. Overly mollifying. How you'd talk to a fearful dog or child about to have a painful vaccination, or a cow on the way to the abattoir. They had special ramps for those cows, to lull them into walking placidly to their doom.

*

In the evening, after four hours of towel folding and the communal dinner—

shepherd's pie, spinach salad, raspberry mousse—Charmaine joins the knitting circle in the main gathering room of the women's wing. It's not her usual knitting circle, not the group that knows her: those women left today and were replaced by their Alternates. Not only are they strangers to Charmaine but they obviously view her as a stranger, too. They've made it clear they don't know why she's been inserted among them; they're polite to her, but only just. Her attempts to make trivial chat have mostly been cold-shouldered; it's almost as if they've been told some disreputable story about her, one they've been instructed not to mention.

The group is supposed to be making stuffed toys for preschoolers—some for the Positron playgroup, the rest for export, to craft and doodad shops in outside towns and cities, maybe even in other countries, because Consilience has to earn its keep, doesn't it? And everyone must contribute as best they can. But Charmaine can't concentrate on the blue teddy bear she's knitting. She's jittery, she's more anxious by the hour. It's the mix-up: she can't figure out how it could have happened; the system is supposed to be bug-proof. The female guards are sticking to the story of the database snarl: there are IT personnel working on it right now, but meanwhile Charmaine should just try some yoga classes in the gym and stick with the routine, and they're sorry but numbers are numbers, and her numbers are not showing her as being who she says she is; they're sure it will all work out, and soon she'll be free to get back to what she claims is her life.

She doesn't believe this runaround for an instant. Someone must have it in for her. But who? A relative or lover of one of her medications procedures? How would they even know, how would they have access? That list is supposed to be totally classified! Or else they know about her and Max.

If only she could talk to Stan. Not Max: at the first hint of danger, the first wail of approaching sirens, Max would vamoose. He's a traveling salesman at heart. *I will always treasure our moments together and keep you safe in my heart*, and more in that vein; then out the bathroom window and over the back fence, leaving her to deal with the smoking gun and the body on the floor, which might prove to be—at second glance—her own.

Max is like quicksand. Quicksilver. Quick. She's always known that about him. Stan, though, Stan is solid. If he were here, he'd roll up his sleeves and tackle reality. He'd tell her what to do.

Heck. Now she's made a boo-boo with the neck of the blue teddy bear, she's knitted where she should have purred. Should she unravel the row, knit it over? No. The bear will just have to wear a little ridge around its neck. She might even tie a ribbon around it, with a bow. Cover up the flaw by adding an individual

touch. *If all you've got is lemons, she tells herself, make pink lemonade.*

*

When she returns to her cell that night—the cell she left that morning with such anticipation—she finds it empty. The other bed is empty, stripped bare. It's as if someone has died.

So they aren't giving her a new cellmate, a woman from this batch of Alternates. They're isolating her. Maybe they've judged her untrustworthy after all. Why did she ever let herself get mixed up with Max? And so quickly, too. She should have run out of the room the first minute she laid eyes on him. She'd been such a pushover. And now she's all alone.

For the first time all day, she cries.

*

It's the tenth day of February, and Stan is still here. Still among the living, still in the house, still in limbo. He hasn't been sent back to Positron, not yet; and Charmaine didn't reappear on New Year's Day, as he'd been both hoping and fearing she would. Hoping because, he has to admit, he wants to see her, especially if she replaces Jocelyn. Fearing because would he lose his temper? Belt her one? Would she be defiant, would she laugh at him? Or would she cry and say what a mistake she's made and how sorry she is, and how much she loves him? And if she does say that, how will he know she means it?

"I think you two need more time apart" was what Jocelyn said, as if he and Charmaine were squabbling children who'd been given a time-out by a loving but strict mother. No, not a mother: a decadent babysitter who'd shortly be charged with corrupting minors, because right after that prissy little sermon, Stan found himself on the blue sofa with its chaste but by now grubby lilies, enacting one of Jocelyn's favorite scenes from the frequently replayed video-porn saga featuring their two energetic spouses.

"What if it were both of us at once?" he found himself growling as if from a great distance. The voice was his, the words were Max's. The script called for some handwork here. It was hard to remember all the words, synchronize them with the gestures. How did they manage it in films? But those people got multiple takes: if they did it wrong, they could do it over. "Front and back?"

"Oh no, I couldn't!" Jocelyn replied, in a voice intended to sound breathless and ashamed, like Charmaine's on the video. And it did kind of sound that way: she wasn't acting, or not entirely. "Not both at once! That's ..."

What came next? His mind went blank. To gain time he tore off a few buttons. “I think you could,” Jocelyn prompted him.

“I think you could,” he said. “I think you want to. Look, you’re blushing. You’re a dirty little slut, aren’t you?”

When would this be over? Why couldn’t he just skip all the crap, cut to the chase, get to the part where her eyes rolled back in her head and she screamed like a raccoon? But she didn’t want the short form. She wanted dialogue and ritual, she wanted courtship. She wanted what Charmaine had, right there onscreen, and not a syllable less. It was sad; she must feel she’d been left out, like the one kid not invited to the birthday party, so she was going to have her own birthday party all by herself.

And she *was* having it all by herself, more or less, because Stan wasn’t present in any real sense. Why doesn’t she just order herself a robot? he thought. Among the guys down at the scooter depot, talk has it that they’re now in full production down at Positron with a line of Dutch-designed prostibots, some for home consumption in Positron itself, but the majority for export. The prostibots are said to be lifelike, with touch-sensitive plastic fiber skin and several different voice modes, and flushable interiors for sanitary purposes, because who wants to catch a dick-rotting disease? These bots will cut down on sex trafficking, say the boosters: no more young girls smuggled over borders, beaten into submission, chained to the bed, reduced to a pulp, then thrown into sewage lagoons. No more of that. But it won’t be anything like the real thing, say the detractors: you won’t be able to look into their eyes and see a real person looking out. Oh, they’ve got a few tricks up their sleeves, say the boosters. But they can’t feel pain, say the detractors. They’re working on it, say the boosters. Anyway, they’ll never say no. Or only if you want them to.

The guys joke about applying to be prostibot testers; some claim to have actually done it. It’s a wild experience, they say: you choose the voice and phrase option, the bot whispers enticing flatteries or dirty words, you touch her, she wriggles, you give her a jump. Then, while the rinse cycle is kicking in—that part is weird, say the testers—you fill out the questionnaire, you check the ratings boxes for this or that feature, you suggest improvements. It’s better than the bonk-a-chicken racket that used to go on at Positron, they add. No squawking, no scratchy claws.

There must be male prostibots for the Jocelyns of this world, thinks Stan. Randy Andy the Handy Android. But that wouldn’t suit Jocelyn, because she wants something that can feel resentment, even rage. Feel it and have to repress it. He knows quite a lot about her tastes by now.

That night—the night of New Year’s Day—she’d made popcorn and insisted

they eat it while watching the video prelims: Phil's arrival at the derelict house, his restless pacing, the breath mint he'd slipped into his mouth, his swift preening of himself in the reflection of a shard of glass left in a shattered mirror. The popcorn was greasy with melted butter, but when Stan moved to get a paper towel, Jocelyn laid a hand on his leg; lightly enough, but he knew a command signal when he felt one. "No," she said, smiling her square-toothed smile. "Stay here. I want your butter all over me."

At least it was something extra, something Phil and Charmaine hadn't done. Or not on the videos.

And so it went on. But toward the end of January, Jocelyn's ardor or whatever it was had flagged. She seemed distracted, she worked in her room at the computer she'd set up in there, and some nights he found himself drinking beer alone because she was out of the house. He felt relief—some of the performance pressure was off—but also fear, because what if she was about to discard him? And what if the destination she had in mind for him was not Positron but that unknown void into which the bona fide criminals who were originally warehoused at Positron had vanished? Jocelyn could erase him. She could just wave her hand and reduce him to zero. She had that power.

But the first of February had come and gone, with no switchover for him. He'd finally dared to bring the subject up: when, exactly, would he be leaving? "Missing the chickens?" she'd said. "Never mind, you'll be joining them soon." This made his neck hair stand up: the nature of the chicken feed at Positron was a matter for grisly rumor. "But first I want to spend Valentine's Day with you." The tone was almost sentimental, though there was an underlayer of flint. "I want it to be special." Was *special* a threat? She watched him, smiling a little. "I don't want us to be ... interrupted."

"Who'd interrupt us?" he said. In old movies, the kind they showed at Consilience—comic movies, tragic movies, melodramatic movies—there were frequent interruptions. Someone would burst through a door—a jealous spouse, a betrayed lover. Unless it was a spy movie, in which case it would be a double agent, or a crime movie in which a stool pigeon had betrayed the gang. Scuffles or gunshots would follow. Escapes from balconies. Bullets to the head. Speedboats zigzagging out of reach. That's what those interruptions led to. But who'd do the interrupting here?

"No one, I suppose," she said. She watched him. "Charmaine is perfectly safe," she added. "I'm not a monster!" Then that hand on his knee again. Spider silk, stronger than iron. "Are you worried?"

Of course I'm fucking worried, he wanted to shout. *What do you think, you twisted perv? You think it's a kiddie picnic for me, being house slave to a fucking*

dog trainer who could have me put down at any minute? But all he'd said was "No, not really." Then, to his shame: "I'm looking forward to it."

"Looking forward to what?" she said with a blank stare. She was such a gamer. "To what, Stan?" when he stalled.

"Valentine's Day," he muttered. What a loser. Crawl, Stan. Lick shoes. Kiss ass. Your life may depend on it.

She smiled openly this time. That mouth he would soon be obliged to mash with his own, those square teeth that would soon be biting his ear. "Good," she said sweetly, patting his leg. "I'm glad you're looking forward to it. I like surprises, don't you? Valentine's Day reminds me of cinnamon hearts. Those little red ones you sucked. Red Hots, they were called. Remember?" She licked her lips.

Cut the crap, he wanted to say. Drop the fucking innuendo. I know, I know you want to suck my little red-hot heart.

"I need a beer," he said.

"Work for it," she said, abruptly harsh again. She moved her hand up his leg, squeezed.

*

Now Stan does the countdown: it's February 10. Four more days to go before Valentine's Day. The subject hasn't come up again, but every once in a while Stan catches her looking at him speculatively, as if measuring him.

Tonight they're on the sofa as usual, but this time the upholstery will remain unsullied. They're side by side, facing forward, like a married couple—which they are, though they're married to other people. But they aren't watching the digital gyrations of Charmaine and Phil, not tonight. They're watching actual TV—Consilience TV, but still TV. If you drank enough beer, slit your eyes, wiped the context, you could almost believe you were in the outside world. Or the outside world in the past.

They've tuned in at the end of a motivational self-helper. So far as Stan can make out, it's about channeling the positive energy rays of the universe through the invisible power points on your body. You do it through the nostrils: close the right nostril with the index finger, breathe in, open, close the left nostril, breathe out. It gives a whole new dimension to nose picking.

The star of the show is a youngish woman in a skintight pink leotard. Nice tits—especially when she does the right nostril—despite the air bubbles coming out of her mouth. So, something for everyone: self-help and nostrils for the women, tits for the men. Distractions. They don't go out of their way to make you

unhappy here.

The pink leotard woman tells them to practice every day, because if you focus, focus, focus on positive thoughts, you'll attract your own luck to yourself and shut out those negative thoughts that try to get in. They can have such a toxic effect on your immune system, leading to cancer and also to outbreaks of acne, because the skin is the body's largest organ, and so sensitive to negativity. Then she tells them that next week the feature will be pelvic alignment, so they should all pick up their yoga mats at the gym. She signs off with a freeze-frame smile.

New music comes on—"Somewhere Over the Rainbow," sung by Judy Garland—and with it the Consilience logo: CONSILIENCE = CONS + RESILIENCE. DO TIME NOW, BUY TIME FOR OUR FUTURE.

Another Town Meeting. Stan yawns, tries not to yawn again. Everyone in Consilience is expected to attend Town Meetings, and since there are tiny scanners with face recognition capabilities on all the TV screens, everyone does. It's not a good idea to look too bored. He opens his eyes wider.

Here come the usual head deadeners: the graphs, the statistics, the hectoring disguised as pep talks. Violent incidents are down for the third time in a row, says a small nothing-faced guy in a tight suit, and let's keep that arrow moving down: shot of a graph. Egg production is up again. Another graph, then a shot of eggs rolling down a chute and an automatic counter registering each egg with a digitized number. Stan has a pang of nostalgia and self-pity—those chickens and eggs were once *his* chickens and eggs, in Positron. They were his responsibility, and, yes, his tranquility. But now all that has been taken away from him and he's been demoted to chief toe licker for spooky Jocelyn.

Suck it up, he tells himself. Close the right nostril, breathe in.

Now another face comes on. It's Ed, the pep-talker from Stan's first day at Consilience, now anchorman on the Town Meetings. Ed the confidence man, there to make them all feel confident about having signed on, signed in; but an Ed who's more substantial and assured, weightier in manner, more full of himself. You can tell he's been given a promotion. He doesn't have to do the graphs and the egg stuff anymore: he's got something more important to deliver.

The Consilience model has been going well, says Ed, all over America. Theirs was the first, the pioneering town; then nineteen others followed. And since then, the number of participating communities has swelled to more than a hundred. There are local variations—Louisiana has kept its full honey-hole model, the for-profit hosting of recalcitrants from some of the other states, and Texas is still dealing with its criminality problems by means of its celebrated serial executions, but many others have gone in for a more ... for a more

humane, or at least a more ... for something more like Consilience. He smiles.

But now, a frown. In fact, says Ed, the model has been so effective—so conducive to social order and, because of that, so positive for the nation as a whole in economic terms, and indeed so positive for the invest—for the *supporters* and *visionaries* who'd had the courage and moral fiber to see a way forward in a time of multiple challenges ... the Consilience model has been, in a word, so successful that it has created enemies. As successful enterprises always do. Where there is light, it does seem a rule that darkness will shortly appear. As it now has, he is sorry to inform them.

An even deeper frown, a thrusting of the forehead, a lowering of the chin, a raising of the shoulders: an angry-bull stance. Who are these enemies? Some are foreign agitators; others are enemies from within, agents in the employ of hostile elements, aiming to undermine the foundations of returning prosperity and endeavoring to chip away at trust, that trust without which no society can function in a stable manner. Some are illegals, working in the black economy, undercutting the legitimate jobs of legitimate citizens. Some are parasitic impediments, pleading for privileged treatment, posing as ill or disabled—clogging up the works, consuming valuable resources, blocking the flow. Some are malcontents, maladjusted misfits, who claim to be acting as they do in order to restore so-called human rights.

But is it not a human right to have a job? Ed believes it is! And enough to eat, and a decent place to live, as Consilience provides—those are surely human rights!

All of these enemies—says Ed—must be identified, and then they must be neutralized. For, otherwise, what will happen? The Consilience model will be threatened! It will be attacked on all sides by what may seem like small forces, but together in a mob those forces are not small, they are catastrophic, just as a million rats is catastrophic. Untruths or partial truths or outright lies will be circulated, and on the basis of these, large and organized and effective opposition groups may form that could even resort to destructive terrorist activities. So the sternest of measures must be taken before things get out of control. An overall solution is required.

And such a solution has indeed been devised, though not without much careful thought and the rejection of less viable alternatives. It is the best solution available at this time and in this place: they can take Ed's word for that.

And this is where he needs their cooperation. For the jewel in the middle of Consilience—Positron Prison, to which they have all given so much of their time and attention—Positron Prison has been chosen for a vital role in that solution. Every resident of Consilience will have a part to play, but for the present they

can best help by simply going about their daily routines as if nothing unusual is happening, despite the unavoidable disruptions that may occur in that routine from time to time. Though it is earnestly hoped that these will be kept to a minimum.

Remember, says Ed: these enemies, if they had their way, would destroy everyone's job security and their very way of life! They should all bear that in mind. He has great faith in their common sense and in their ability to recognize the greater good and to choose the lesser evil. He allows himself a tiny smile, and is then replaced by the Consilience logo and the familiar sign-off slogan: A MEANINGFUL LIFE.

Stan looks sideways at Jocelyn. She's staring thoughtfully at the screen, on which a toddler in the Positron preschool is playing with a blue knitted teddy bear, a ribbon around its neck. They always run kiddie pictures after the Town Meetings, as if to remind everyone not to stray off the course Consilience has set for them, because wouldn't they be endangering the security and happiness of these little ones? No one but a child abuser would do that.

Jocelyn switches the TV off, then sighs. She's looking tired. She knew all of that in advance, Stan thinks. She's in on it, whatever it is.

*

The first trucks arrive the next morning. They're unloaded at the main gates. The people herded out are wearing the regulation orange boiler suits, but they're hooded, their hands plasticuffed behind their backs. Instead of being driven straight to Positron, they're marched through the streets at a slow walk, shepherded by a batch of men and women in guard uniforms. But the guards aren't from Consilience: their uniforms are blue, not gray, and they have green-and-red armbands, as if they're tagged for Christmas. The prisoners must have some way of seeing out the front; they don't stumble as much as you'd think. Some are women, judging from the shapes muffled beneath their baggy clothing.

No need to parade them like this unless it's a demonstration, thinks Stan. A demonstration of power. What's been going on in the turbulent world outside the closed fishbowl of Consilience? No, not a fishbowl, because no one can see in.

The other guys in the scooter repair depot glance up as the silent procession shuffles past, then return to their work.

"Sometimes you miss the newspaper," one of them says. No one replies.

*

Charmaine is called to sit for the retina scan again, to repeat the fingerprinting, to read *Winnie the Pooh* for the voice analyzer. Will these steps re-create her profile for the benefit of the database? It's hard to tell: she's still alone in her cell, still shunned by the knitting circle, still stuck in towel folding.

But the next day Aurora from Human Resources turns up in the laundry room and asks Charmaine to accompany her upstairs for a chat. The other towel folders look up: is Charmaine in trouble? They probably hope so. Charmaine feels at a disadvantage—she's covered in lint, which is diminishing—but she brushes herself off and follows Aurora to the elevator.

The chat takes place in the Chat Room beside the front checkout counter. Aurora is pleased to be able to tell Charmaine that she will have her cards and codes restored to her—or not restored; confirmed. Just as Aurora assured her, the database glitch has been repaired, and she is now once again who she's been claiming she is. Aurora smiles tightly. Isn't that good news?

Charmaine agrees that it is. At least she has a code identity once again, which is some comfort. "So can I leave now?" she asks. "I've missed a lot of Out time."

Unfortunately, says Aurora, Charmaine can't depart from Positron quite yet: the synchronization is off. Although in theory she might move into the guest room of her own house—Aurora makes a laughing sound—her Alternate is of course now living in the house they share, it being that person's turn. Aurora of the skintight face understands how upsetting all this must be for Charmaine, but the proper rotation must be preserved, with no interaction between Alternates. Familiarity would inevitably lead to territorial squabbling, especially over such comfort items as sheets and pillows. As they have all been taught, possessiveness about our cozy corners and favorite toys isn't limited to cats and dogs. How we *wish* it were. Wouldn't life be simpler?

So Charmaine must continue to be patient, says Aurora. And in any case she's been doing such a good job with the knitting—the blue teddy bears. How many has she knitted now? It must be at least a dozen! She'll have time for a few more of them before she leaves, hopefully at the next switchover day, which is when? The first of March, isn't it? And it's almost Valentine's Day—so, not long to go!

Aurora herself has never learned to knit. She does regret that. It must be calming.

Charmaine clenches her hands. One more of those darn teddy bears with their bright, unseeing eyes and she's going to go sideways, right off the tracks! They've filled bins of them. She has nightmares about those teddies; she dreams they're in bed with her, unmoving but alive. "Yes, it is calming," she says.

Aurora consults her clip tablet. She has another piece of good news for

Charmaine: as of tomorrow, Charmaine will be taken off towel folding and resume her former duties as Chief Medications Administrator. Positron does reward talent and experience, and Charmaine's talent and experience have not gone unnoticed. Aurora gives an encouraging grimace. "Not everyone has the soft touch," she says. "Coupled with such dedication. There have been incidents, when other ... other operatives have been tasked with the, with the task. With the essential duty."

"When do I start?" asks Charmaine. She does want to get back to her real job, away from towel folding. She looks forward to reentering the Medications Administration wing, Procedures Department, following her usual route along the hallways. She visualizes approaching the desk, accessing the possibly real head on the screen—often the same head, but not always—that will validate her and give her the key code for the medications; then advancing through the familiar doors, snapping on the gloves, keying in the code for the medication, picking up the hypodermic. Then on to the room where her daily charge will await, immobile but fearful. She will soothe those fears. Then she will deliver bliss, and then release.

It will be nice to feel respected again.

Aurora consults her clip tablet again. "I see here that you're set to resume your duties tomorrow afternoon," she says. "After lunch. When we make a mistake here, we do move speedily to rectify it. Congratulations on a good outcome! We've all been rooting for you."

Charmaine wonders who's been doing the rooting, because she hasn't noticed anyone. But like so many things around here, maybe it's taken place behind the scenes. "Goodness, I'm late for a meeting," says Aurora. "We have a whole new group coming in, and all at once! Any further questions or points of information?"

Yes, says Charmaine. While she herself has been detained in Positron and her Alternate has been living in her house—their house—where has Stan been living? She hasn't dared to ask this before—it might have sounded like complaining, it might have cast suspicion, it might have interfered with her chances for exoneration—but she's been cleared now.

"Stan?" says Aurora blankly.

"Stan. My husband, Stan," says Charmaine.

"That's not information I have access to," says Aurora. "But I'm sure he's fine, wherever he is."

Does he know why I wasn't there? Charmaine wants to ask. At home. Was he told what happened? Or did he think I'd just been subtracted? Sent to Medications? But to demand any more answers during this delicate transition

that's taking place—this rehabilitation—might be pushing her luck.

Then there was Max. Kept equally in the dark. But she couldn't ask Aurora about Max.

“Could I maybe just send him a message?” Charmaine says. “Stan? For Valentine's Day? To let him know I'm okay, and that I ...” A tremulous pause on the verge of tears, which she feels she might really shed. “That I love him?”

Aurora stops smiling. “No. No messages while in Positron. You know better than that. If prison isn't prison, the outside world has no meaning! Now, enjoy the rest of your experience here.” She nods, stands up, and bustles out of the Chat Room.

*

That evening, after the communal meal in the women's dining room—chicken stew, Brussels sprouts, tapioca pudding—they all file into the main space, where the knitting circle meets. The teddy bear bin is half full, and it is their task to fill it before the month is out.

Charmaine takes up her allotted bear and sets to work. But when she's done only two rows, one knit, one purl, there's a stir. Heads turn: a man has walked into the room. This is almost unheard of, here in the women's wing. It must be one of the higher-ups, but why is he here?

Behind him is Aurora with her clip tablet, and another woman: black hair, squarish face, a strong body, like someone who works out a lot—boxing, not yoga. Nice legs in gray stockings. Charmaine recognizes her: she's one of the talking heads from the validation screen in Medications Administration. So those heads are real after all! She's always wondered.

Is it her imagination or has this woman singled her out, given her a brief nod, a quick smile? Maybe she's a secret ally—one of the behind-the-scenes rooters, one of those who's restored Charmaine to her rightful job. Charmaine gives a little nod in her direction, just in case.

Aurora introduces the man. He's Ed, from Security, she says—they will of course recognize him from his excellent Town Meeting presentations on TV—and he has some very simple but very crucial instructions to give them at this juncture.

Charmaine does remember Ed. On the TV he was always friendly, he made eye contact, he somehow included everyone in. But he seems more distant in person.

Ed begins to talk. There is a crisis, he says, in the outside world. One might almost call it an insurrection. The situation is being brought under control, but

meanwhile he is calling upon all of them to exert themselves even more than usual, in order to repel the barbarians at the gates who have declared themselves against the new world order. The new order of things that is breathing new life into an exhausted and mismanaged nation—one might even say a deliberately sabotaged nation.

Who are these barbarians? He will be clear. A network of spies, ecoterrorists, Internet espionage artists, and carbon-energy saboteurs has been identified and rounded up, and Positron has been designated to process them. All assembled here are being called upon to do their duties, namely: No fraternizing with the incomers, even if an opportunity may present itself. The prompt carrying out of orders, when given by any guard in a blue uniform with a green-and-red armband. Though such orders may not be necessary; but in the event they are necessary, they must be promptly executed. Any unusual sounds are to be ignored. He cannot say what these sounds might be, other than unusual, but they will know them when they hear them. Otherwise they are to carry on as normal, and to mind—he will put this colloquially—to mind their own business.

As if it's been orchestrated, there's a scream. It's distant—hard to say whether it's a man or a woman—but it's definitely a scream. Charmaine wills herself not to turn her head, holds herself perfectly still. Did the scream come over the sound system? Was it from outside, in the yard? There's an imperceptible rustling among the women as they steel themselves against hearing.

Ed has paused a little, to make room for the scream. Now he continues. And finally, he will now share with them, and he does apologize for this: during this crisis, and he does expect it to be cleared up soon, Positron will not be the comfortable and familiar haven of friends and neighbors that they have helped to create. Regrettably, it will become a less trusting and open place, because that is what happens in a crisis—people must be on guard, they must be sharper, they must be harder. But after this interlude, if the forces acting for the greater good are successful, the normal pleasant and congenial atmosphere will prevail.

After Ed from Security leaves, followed by his sidekicks, the knitters look at one another.

“What was he talking about?” says one. “What sounds? I didn't hear anything.”

“We don't need to know,” says another. “When people talk like that, it means don't even listen, is what they mean.”

“What sort of crisis?” says a third. “Did something blow up?”

Dang it to heck, thinks Charmaine. I dropped a stitch. Darn bear! Whatever that was about, it's not good.

*

It's Valentine's Day. Stan lies in bed. He doesn't want to get up, because he doesn't want to plod through the hours ahead, expecting to be ambushed at any minute by whatever foul or embarrassing surprise Jocelyn's planning to spring on him. Will it be a red cake plus tawdry heart-sprinkled lingerie for Jocelyn—or, worse, for himself? Will there be a soppy and mortifying declaration of love from her, with the expectation of an equally soppy and mortifying one from himself in return?

Or will it be Option B—*We're done here, you fail*. Sandbag to the back of the skull from the lurking goon she's got hidden in the broom closet—he casts the driver for that, supposing there is one and not merely a robot—then dragged into that creepy stealth car with the darkened windows and hauled off to Positron to be processed in whatever way they process people there. Then into the chicken-feed grinder, or wherever they dispose of the parts. The cake, the sandbagging—she's capable of either.

He puts on his work clothes, listens at the top of the stairs. She's in the kitchen. He descends gingerly, reconnoiters. She's sitting at the kitchen table texting on her phone, a plate of breakfast leftovers in front of her. She's wearing her I-mean-business outfit: tidy suit, gold earrings, the gray stockings. Her reading glasses are perched on her nose.

No cake. No goon. Nothing out of the ordinary.

“Sleep in?” Jocelyn says pleasantly.

Should he say “Happy Valentine's Day”? Maybe not. Maybe she's forgotten. “Yeah,” he says.

“Bad dreams?”

“I don't dream,” he says, lying.

“Everyone dreams,” she says. “Have an egg. Or two. I poached them for you. They might be a little hard. Coffee's in the thermos.”

“Thanks,” he says. He'll wolf the food, then get out of the house. Down to the scooter depot, make small talk, wire some circuits, hit something with a hammer. Take a breather.

“You won't be going to your job today,” Jocelyn says, in a neutral voice. “You'll be coming with me, in the car.”

The room darkens. “Why?” he says. “What's up?” He peers down, over the edge. Mist, a sheer drop. He feels sick.

“I suggest you eat that other egg,” she says, smiling. “You'll need the energy. You're going to have a long day.”

*

They're in the car, in the backseat; he can scarcely remember walking outside. In front of them there's a driver—a real one, not a robot, as far as he can tell. The driver sits upright, his gray shoulders straight, the back of his head noncommittal. The car doesn't move.

"I'm going to tell you this very quickly," says Jocelyn. Her manner has changed completely. Gone is the awkward flirtation, the dominatrix pose. She's urgent, straightforward. "Forget everything you think you know about me; and by the way, you kept your cool very well, which is why I'm asking you to do this: because I think you can. We need to get somebody to the outside—outside Consilience. I've already switched the database entries. You've been Phil these past months, and now you're going to be Stan again, just for a few hours. Then after that we can get you out."

Stan feels dizzy. "Out?" he says.

"Outside. It's where we need you to be. We need you to—we need you to take some information. Make some connections for us."

"Just a minute," says Stan. "What's going on?"

"Ed is right," says Jocelyn. "You heard the Town Meeting. There are some saboteurs that want to destroy Consilience. But they aren't all out there. Some of them are in here. In fact, some of them are here in this car." She smiles: now her smile has an almost elvish quality. Dangerous though this is, she's enjoying it in some way.

"Whoa, just a minute," says Stan. This is far too much information for him all in one sound bite. "How come? I thought you were in charge of this place. Or the security, right?"

"I supported Consilience when it was launched. I worked hard on it. I thought it was for the best," says Jocelyn. "I bought the good-news story. And it was true at first. But then people got greedy."

"Greedy about what?" says Stan. "It's not like this place makes much of a profit! On the fucking Brussels sprouts? And the chickens? ... It's like a charity thing, right? All that stuff we have to buy from the outside ..."

Jocelyn sighs. "You don't honestly believe this whole operation—this whole nationwide plan—has been put in place simply to rejuvenate the rust belt and create employment? Forget that. It's a hugely profitable operation, and that's not coming from hand-knitted teddy bears. They've got some very high-end exports."

Stan can hardly follow. "I guess the contractors must be making ..."

"Forget the contractors," says Jocelyn. "Jails used to be about punishment, or

reform, or penitence, or keeping dangerous offenders inside. Then for a while they were about crowd control—penning up the young, aggressive guys to keep them off the streets. And then they were about the attractive margins for the prepackaged jail-meal suppliers. But now a major slice of it is body parts. Organs, bones, DNA, whatever's in demand. That's one of the biggest earners for this place. There's a big market for transplant material among all those aging millionaires in India and China, no? Not to mention right here in this country. The ones with the trillion-dollar offshore nest eggs."

"But just a minute," says Stan. "It's still the same number of guys in Positron, I know them, they're not being cut up for parts, it's not as if they're vanishing ... Not once we got rid of the real criminals."

"Those guys you know aren't going anywhere," says Jocelyn. "The good citizens of Consilience. They keep the place running day to day, they fix the plumbing, they know all the routines by now. They're the worker ants. Now that the system's functioning so smoothly, Ed and the boys are ramping up the production line. The raw material is being shipped in from outside."

The truckloads. The parade of hooded, shuffling prisoners. Oh, great, thinks Stan. We're stuck in a grainy black-and-white retro thriller movie. "You mean they're rounding them up, carting them here? Killing them for parts?"

"Just undesirables," says Jocelyn, smiling with her big teeth. She's kept some of her badass sarcasm, anyway. "But they've broadened the definition of what's undesirable. It used to be real criminals, but now it's pretty much whoever they say."

"Do people understand about this?" says Stan. "Out there? Have they put it together, shouldn't they ..."

"You'll find out," says Jocelyn. "That's why we're sending you. To see if they know anything at all about what's really going on in here. If not, you'll help them know. You'll be taking out some key documents. Names, numbers, classified e-mails. Then, once they know, we'll see if they care."

"So I'm supposed to be what?" says Stan. "The messenger?" The one who gets shot, he thinks.

"More or less," says Jocelyn. "Now we'll go to Positron. Have to get you prepped, then see you through the day. We have helpers in there; but this is not without risks, I should add."

The driver, thinks Stan. It's always the driver, in movies. Spying on everyone.

"What about him?" he says. "He's heard all this."

"Oh, that's only Phil," says Jocelyn. "Or Max. You'll recognize him from the videos."

Phil turns around, gives a brief smile. It's him, all right—Charmaine's Max,

with his handsome, narrow, untrustworthy face, his too bright eyes.

“He’s been such a help in creating motive,” says Jocelyn. “We chose Charmaine because we thought she might be ...”

“Susceptible,” says Phil. “It was a gamble. But she paid off.”

The lying bastard, he wasn’t even sincere, thinks Stan. He was shitting poor Charmaine all along. Setting her up. Leading her astray for reasons different from the ones you’re supposed to have when you lead someone astray. It’s as if Charmaine wasn’t good enough for him. Which, if you think about it, is actually a criticism of Stan.

His hands are burning: he’d like to strangle the guy. Or at least give him a solid punch in the teeth.

“Motive for what?” says Stan.

“Don’t be sulky,” says Jocelyn. “For why I’d want to have you eliminated.”

“Eliminated? You’re going to do what?” Stan almost shouts. This is getting more demented by the minute. Underneath the heroic talk, is she a psychopath after all? With designs on his liver as a bonus?

“Whatever you want to call it,” says Jocelyn. “At Positron—among the management—they call it ‘repurposing.’ I have the discretionary power for that, and I’ve made those kinds of decisions before, when things have gone seriously ... when I’ve had to. In this particular scenario—the one geared toward getting you out in one piece—anyone likely to be watching knows power corrupts. They’ll have experienced that firsthand. They’ll see how I’d be tempted to use that power for personal reasons. They may not approve, but they’ll get it. The evidence is all right there.”

“Such as?” says Stan. He’s feeling cold all over, and a little sick.

“It’s on record, every minute—everything you’d need to establish a reason. Phil and Charmaine, their torrid affair, which I have to say Phil threw himself into; but he’s good at that. Then my own degrading and jealous attempts to reenact that affair and punish Charmaine through you: why do you think we had to go through all that theatrical sex in front of the TV? Your reluctance was fully registered, believe me—the lighting was good, I’ve seen the clips.” She sighs. “From what Charmaine had to say about your temper, I was a little surprised you didn’t take a swipe at me. A lot of men would have, and I know you almost lost it a couple of times; I worried about your blood pressure. But you’ve shown impressive restraint.”

“Thanks,” says Stan. He has a moment of pleasure at having been tagged “impressive.” Cripes, he tells himself. Get a grip. Are you buying this, do you trust the two of them? No, he answers. But do you have any choice? Pull back, say you won’t do it, and they’ll likely kill you anyway. Though maybe it’s all

posturing. But he can't take that chance.

"It was a plus that you had to force yourself," says Jocelyn. "I come across like a piece of leatherwork, gone desperate. Your reluctance played well, though it was hardly flattering: I almost had to beg. Or threaten; I guess I did sort of threaten, didn't I? So anyone can see it was sex at virtual gunpoint."

"She's not really like that, underneath. She can be very attractive. And sexy," says Phil gallantly. Or maybe even honestly, thinks Stan. Tastes differ.

Jocelyn crosses her legs, her quite good legs. She pats his thigh as if steadying him. "Anyway, those who'll be watching will see—given the humiliation I've been subjected to by you, with your obvious dislike of my, what shall we say, my physical charms—why I might want to get rid of you. And by means of Charmaine, for, after all, she poached my husband, right? Double punishment. It has to be watertight, this stunt. Something that can fool Ed. He'll buy that kind of malice, coming from me. He thinks I'm a hard bitch as it is."

Is this leading where Stan thinks? His hands are clammy. "What stunt?"

"The part where Charmaine goes to work in Medications Administration and finds that the next procedure she has to perform is on you. And then she does perform it, and she'll think she's killed you. But don't worry, you'll wake up afterwards. And then we'll be halfway there, because you won't be in the database anymore, except in the past tense."

Stan's getting a headache. He's not following this closely enough. "You haven't told her?" he says. "Charmaine?"

"For her, it has to be real," says Phil. "We don't want her to act, they'd see through it: they have body-language and facial-expression analyzers. But Charmaine will believe the setup. She's really good at believing." He grins. "She enters readily into created fantasies."

"Charmaine won't kill me," says Stan. "No matter ..." *No matter how far into her you got, you lying dickshit*, he wants to say, but doesn't. "If she thinks it'll kill me, she won't go through with it."

"We'll find that out, too, won't we?" says Jocelyn, smiling.

Stan wants to say, *Charmaine loves me*, but he's not completely sure of that anymore. *And what if there's a mistake?* he'd like to ask. *What if I really do die?* But he's too chickenshit to admit he's chickenshit, so he keeps quiet.

Phil starts the car, moves them soundlessly along the street toward Positron. He turns on the dashboard radio: it's the Doris Day playlist, again. "You Made Me Love You." Stan relaxes. That crooning voice is such a safe place for him now. He closes his eyes.

"Happy Valentine's Day," says Jocelyn softly. She pats his thigh again.

He hardly even feels the needle go in; it's just a slight jab. Then he's over the

edge of the misty cliff. Then he's falling.

Positron continues with ...
Moppet Shop

In the third installment in Atwood's latest dystopian thrill ride, the experiment in voluntary imprisonment that is the community of Consilience begins to show its cracks. Stan and Charmaine and thousands of couples like them thought they had signed up for paradise, but increasingly it's plain there's a horrifyingly fine line between heaven and hell. And what, exactly, is the Moppet Shop?

[Preorder this episode](#)

About the Author



Margaret Atwood is the author of the internationally bestselling novel *The Handmaid's Tale* as well as forty other books of fiction and nonfiction, including *The Blind Assassin*, *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Year of the Flood*. Her most recent collection of stories is *Moral Disorder*. She has written about utopias and dystopias in *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*. Atwood was awarded the Booker Prize in 2000 for *The Blind Assassin*.

Read more of [Margaret Atwood's best stories](#) at Byliner.com

Photograph by George Whiteside

About Byliner

Byliner publishes compelling works of original fiction and nonfiction written to be read in a single sitting.

Byliner.com features curated archives of the best fiction and nonfiction writing, and allows readers to easily find, share, and buy new and classic works by their favorite authors.

To discover more great reads by great writers, please visit us at www.byliner.com.

Byliner Serials

***15 Gothic Street* by Joe McGinniss**

Episode 1: Primitives [Purchase this episode](#)

Episode 2: The Human Circus [Preorder this episode](#)

***Positron* by Margaret Atwood**

Episode 1: I'm Starved for You [Purchase this episode](#)

Episode 2: Choke Collar

Episode 3: Moppet Shop [Preorder this episode](#)

Byliner Originals & Byliner Fiction

Great writers. Great stories. Readable in a single sitting.

[An Arrangement of Light](#) by Nicole Krauss

[The Boy Vanishes](#) by Jennifer Haigh

[The Fire Horse](#) by Elizabeth Mitchell

[All My Love, Samples Later](#) by Craig Vetter

[Everyone's Reading Bastard](#) by Nick Hornby

[How to Get Away with Murder in America](#) by Evan Wright

[The Ghost](#) by Paige Williams

[After Friday Night Lights](#) by Buzz Bissinger

[Farthest North](#) by Todd Balf

[Don't Eat Cat](#) by Jess Walter

[Lifeboat No. 8](#) by Elizabeth Kaye

[Sober Is My New Drunk](#) by Paul Carr

[One Way Forward](#) by Lawrence Lessig

[Death Comes to Happy Valley](#) by Jonathan Mahler

[The Secret World of Saints](#) by Bill Donahue

[Rules for Virgins](#) by Amy Tan

[A Killing in Iowa](#) by Rachel Corbett

[Joan](#) by Sara Davidson

[Lady with a Past](#) by Elizabeth Mitchell

[Sleeping with Famous Men](#) by Elizabeth Kaye

[The Cartel](#) by Taylor Branch

[The Getaway Car](#) by Ann Patchett

[Cooking Solves Everything](#) by Mark Bittman

[The Fearless Mrs. Goodwin](#) by Elizabeth Mitchell

[The Baby Chase](#) by **Holly Finn**

[Planet Killers](#) by **Tad Friend**

[I Hope Like Heck](#) by **Michael Solomon**

[And the War Came](#) by **Jamie Malanowski**

[Into the Forbidden Zone](#) by **William T. Vollmann**

[Three Cups of Deceit](#) by **Jon Krakauer**