

The Second Coming of Jasmine Fitzgerald¹

Peter Watts

What's wrong with this picture?

Not much, at first glance. Blood pools in a pattern entirely consistent with the location of the victim. No conspicuous arterial spray; the butchery's all abdominal, more spilled than spurted. No slogans either. Nobody's scrawled *Helter Skelter* or *Satan is Lord* or even *Elvis Lives* on any of the walls. It's just another mess in another kitchen in another one-bedroom apartment, already overcrowded with the piecemeal accumulation of two lives. One life's all that's left now, a thrashing gory creature screaming her mantra over and over as the police wrestle her away—

"I have to *save* him I have to *save* him I have to *save* him—"

—more evidence, not that the assembled cops need it, of why domestic calls absolutely *suck*.

She hasn't saved him. By now it's obvious that no one can. He lies in a pool of his own insides, blood and lymph spreading along the cracks between the linoleum tiles, crossing, criss-crossing, a convenient clotting grid drawing itself across the crime scene. Every now and then a red bubble grows and breaks on his lips. Anyone who happens to notice this, pretends not to.

The weapon? Right here: run-of-the-mill steak knife, slick with blood and coagulating fingerprints, lying exactly where she dropped it.

The only thing that's missing is a motive. They were a quiet couple, the neighbours say. He was sick, he'd been sick for months. They never went out much. There was no history of violence. They loved each other deeply.

Maybe she was sick too. Maybe she was following orders from some tumour in her brain. Or maybe it was a botched alien abduction, grey-skinned creatures from Zeta II Reticuli framing an innocent bystander for their own incompetence. Maybe it's a mass hallucination, maybe it isn't really happening at all.

Maybe it's an act of God.

* * *

They got to her early. This is one of the advantages of killing someone during office hours. They've taken samples, scraped residue from clothes and skin on the off chance that anyone might question whose blood she was wearing. They've searched the apartment, questioned neighbours and relatives, established the superficial details of identity: Jasmine Fitzgerald, 24-year-old Caucasian brunette, doctoral candidate. In Global General Relativity, whatever the fuck *that* is. They've stripped her down, cleaned her up, bounced her off a judge into Interview Room 1, Forensic Psychiatric Support Services.

¹ First published in *Divine Realms* (1998), S. MacGregor (Ed.). Turnstone Books, Regina. *Way* before *The Matrix* came out.

They've put someone in there with her.

"Hello, Ms. Fitzgerald. I'm Dr. Thomas. My first name's Myles, if you prefer."

She stares at him. "Myles it is." She seems calm, but the tracks of recent tears still show on her face. "I guess you're supposed to decide whether I'm crazy."

"Whether you're fit to stand trial, yes. I should tell you right off that nothing you say to me is necessarily confidential. Do you understand?" She nods. Thomas sits down across from her. "What would you like me to call you?"

"Napoleon. Mohammed. Jesus Christ." Her lips twitch, the faintest smile, gone in an instant. "Sorry. Just kidding. Jaz's fine."

"Are you doing okay in here? Are they treating you all right?"

She snorts. "They're treating me pretty damn well, considering the kind of monster they think I am." A pause, then, "I'm not, you know."

"A monster?"

"Crazy. I've— I've just recently undergone a paradigm shift, you know? The whole world looks different, and my head's there but sometimes my gut— I mean, it's so hard to *feel* differently about things..."

"Tell me about this paradigm shift," Thomas suggests. He makes it a point not to take notes. He doesn't even have a notepad. Not that it matters. The microcassette recorder in his blazer has very sensitive ears.

"Things make sense now," she says. "They never did before. I think, for the first time in my life, I'm actually happy." She smiles again, for longer this time. Long enough for Thomas to marvel at how genuine it seems.

"You weren't very happy when you first came here," he says gently. "They say you were very upset."

"Yeah." She nods, seriously. "It's tough enough to do that shit to yourself, you know, but to risk someone else, someone you really care about—" She wipes at one eye. "He was dying for over a year, did you know that? Each day he'd hurt a little more. You could almost see it spreading through him, like some sort of— leaf, going brown. Or maybe that was the chemo. Never could decide which was worse." She shakes her head. "Heh. At least *that's* over now."

"Is that why you did it? To end his suffering?" Thomas doubts it. Mercy killers don't generally disembowel their beneficiaries. Still, he asks.

She answers. "Of course I fucked up, I only ended up making things worse." She clasps her hands in front of her. "I miss him already. Isn't that crazy? It only happened a few hours ago, and I know it's no big deal, but I still miss him. That head-heart thing again."

"You say you fucked up," Thomas says.

She takes a deep breath, nods. "Big time."

"Tell me about that."

"I don't know shit about debugging. I thought I did, but when you're dealing with organics— all I really did was go in and mess randomly with the code. You make a mess of everything, unless you know exactly what you're doing. That's what I'm working on now."

"Debugging?"

"That's what I call it. There's no real word for it yet."

Oh yes there is. Aloud: "Go on."

Jasmine Fitzgerald sighs, her eyes closed. "I don't expect you to believe this under the circumstances, but I really loved him. No: I *love* him." Her breath comes out in a soft snort, a whispered laugh. "There I go again. That bloody past tense."

"Tell me about debugging."

"I don't think you're up for it, Myles. I don't even think you're all that interested." Her eyes open, point directly at him. "But for the record, Stu was dying. I tried to save him. I failed. Next time I'll do better, and better still the time after that, and eventually I'll get it right."

"And what happens then?" Thomas says.

"Through your eyes or mine?"

"Yours."

"I repair the glitches in the string. Or if it's easier, I replicate an undamaged version of the subroutine and insert it back into the main loop. Same difference."

"Uh huh. And what would *I* see?"

She shrugs. "Stu rising from the dead."

* * *

What's wrong with this picture?

Spread out across the table, the mind of Jasmine Fitzgerald winks back from pages of standardised questions. Somewhere in here, presumably, is a monster.

These are the tools used to dissect human psyches. The WAIS. The MMPI. The PDI. Hammers, all of them. Blunt chisels posing as microtomes. A copy of the DSM-IV sits off to one side, a fat paperback volume of symptoms and pathologies. A matrix of pigeonholes. Perhaps Fitzgerald fits into one of them. Intermittent Explosive, maybe? Battered Woman? Garden-variety Sociopath?

The test results are inconclusive. It's as though she's laughing up from the page at him. *True or false: I sometimes hear voices that no one else hears.* False, she's checked. *I have been feeling unusually depressed lately.* False. *Sometimes I get so angry I feel like hitting something.* True, and a hand-written note in the margin: Hey, doesn't everyone?

There are snares sprinkled throughout these tests, linked questions designed to catch liars in subtle traps of self-contradiction. Jasmine Fitzgerald has avoided them all. Is she unusually honest? Is she too smart for the tests? There doesn't seem to be anything here that—

Wait a second.

Who was Louis Pasteur? asks the WAIS, trying to get a handle on educational background.

A virus, Fitzgerald said.

Back up the list. Here's another one, on the previous page: *Who was Winston Churchill?* And again: a virus.

And fifteen questions before *that*: *Who was Florence Nightingale?*

A famous nurse, Fitzgerald responded to that one. And her responses to all previous questions on historical personalities are unremarkably correct. But everyone after Nightingale is a virus.

Killing a virus is no sin. You can do it with an utterly clear conscience. Maybe she's redefining the nature of her act. Maybe that's how she manages to live with herself these days.

Just as well. That raising-the-dead shtick didn't cut any ice at all.

* * *

She's slumped across the table when he enters, her head resting on folded arms. Thomas clears his throat. "Jasmine."

No response. He reaches out, touches her lightly on the shoulder. Her head comes up, a fluid motion containing no hint of grogginess. She settles back into her chair and smiles. "Welcome back. So, am I crazy or what?"

Thomas smiles back and sits down across from her. "We try to avoid prejudicial terms."

"Hey, I can take it. I'm not prone to tantrums."

A picture flashes across the front of his mind: beloved husband, entrails spread-eagled like butterfly wings against a linoleum grid. *Of course not. No tantrums for you. We need a whole new word to describe what it is you do.*

'Debugging', wasn't it?

"I was going over your test results," he begins.

"Did I pass?"

"It's not that kind of test. But I was intrigued by some of your answers."

She purses her lips. "Good."

"Tell me about viruses."

That sunny smile again. "Sure. Mutable information strings that can't replicate without hijacking external source code."

"Go on."

"Ever hear of Core Wars?"

"No."

"Back in the early eighties some guys got together and wrote a bunch of self-replicating computer programs. The idea was to put them into the same block of memory and have them compete for space. They all had their own little tricks for self-defence and reproduction and, of course, eating the competition."

"Oh, you mean *computer* viruses," Thomas says.

"Actually, before all that." Fitzgerald pauses a moment, cocks her head to one side. "You ever wonder what it might be like to *be* one of those little programs? Running around laying eggs and dropping logic bombs and interacting with other viruses?"

Thomas shrugs. "I never even knew about them until now. Why? Do you?"

"No," she says. "Not any more."

"Go on."

Her expression changes. "You know, talking to *you* is a bit like talking to a program. All you ever say is *go on* and *tell me more* and

— I mean, Jesus, Myles, they wrote therapy programs back in the *sixties* that had more range than you do! In BASIC even! Register an *opinion*, for Chrissake!"

"It's just a technique, Jaz. I'm not here to get into a debate with you, as interesting as that might be. I'm trying to assess your fitness to stand trial. *My* opinions aren't really at issue."

She sighs, and sags. "I know. I'm sorry, I know you're not here to keep me entertained, but I'm *used* to being able to—

"I mean, *Stuart* would always be so—

"Oh, God. I miss him so *much*," she admits, her eyes shining and unhappy.

She's a killer, he tells himself. *Don't let her suck you in. Just assess her, that's all you have to do.*

Don't start liking her, for Christ's sake.

"That's— understandable," Thomas says.

She snorts. "Bullshit. You don't understand at all. You know what he did, the first time he went in for chemo? I was studying for my comps, and he stole my textbooks."

"Why would he do that?"

"Because he knew I wasn't studying at home. I was a complete wreck. And when I came to see him at the hospital he pulls these bloody books out from under his bed and starts quizzing me on Dirac and the Beckenstein Bound. He was *dying*, and all he wanted to do was help me prepare for some stupid test. I'd do anything for him."

Well, Thomas doesn't say, *You certainly did more than most.*

"I can't wait to see him again," she adds, almost as an afterthought.

"When will that be, Jaz?"

"When do you think?" She looks at him, and the sorrow and despair he thought he saw in those eyes is suddenly nowhere to be seen.

"Most people, if they said that, would be talking about the afterlife."

She favours him with a sad little smile. "This *is* the afterlife, Myles. This is Heaven, and Hell, and Nirvana. Whatever we choose to make it. Right here."

"Yes," Thomas says after a moment. "Of course."

Her disappointment in him hangs there like an accusation.

"You don't believe in God, do you?" she asks at last.

"Do you?" he ricochets.

"Didn't used to. Turns out there's clues, though. Proof, even."

"Such as?"

"The mass of the top quark. The width of the Higgs boson. You can't read them any other way when you know what you're looking for. Know anything about quantum physics, Myles?"

He shakes his head. "Not really."

"Nothing really exists, not down at the subatomic level. It's all just probability waves. Until someone looks at it, that is. Then the wave collapses and you get what we call *reality*. But it can't happen without an observer to get things started."

Thomas squints, trying to squeeze some sort of insight into his brain. "So if we weren't here looking at this table, it wouldn't exist?"

Fitzgerald nods. "More or less." That smile peeks around the corner of her mouth for a second.

He tries to lure it back. "So God's the observer, is that what you're saying? God watches all the atoms so the universe can exist?"

"Huh. I never thought about it that way before." The smile morphs into a frown of concentration. "More metaphoric than mathematical, but it's a cool idea."

"Was God watching you yesterday?"

She looks up, distracted. "Huh?"

"Does He— does It communicate with you?"

Her face goes completely expressionless. "Does God tell me to do things, you mean. Did God tell me to carve Stu up like— like—" Her breath hisses out between her teeth. "No, Myles. I don't hear voices. Charlie Manson doesn't come to me in my dreams and whisper sweet nothings. I answered all those questions on your test already, so give me a fucking break, okay?"

He holds up his hands, placating. "That's not what I meant, Jasmine." *Liar*. "I'm sorry if that's how it sounded, it's just— you know, God, quantum mechanics— it's a lot to swallow at once, you know? It's— mind-blowing."

She watches him through guarded eyes. "Yeah. I guess it can be. I forget, sometimes." She relaxes a fraction. "But it's all true. The math is inevitable. You can change the nature of reality, just by *looking* at it. You're right. It's mind-blowing."

"But only at the subatomic level, right? You're not *really* saying we could make this table disappear just by ignoring it, are you?"

Her eye flickers to a spot just to the right and behind him, about where the door should be.

"Well, no," she says at last. "Not without a lot of practise."

* * *

What's wrong with this picture?

Besides the obvious, of course. Besides the vertical incision running from sternum to approximately two centimetres below the navel, penetrating the abdominal musculature and extending through into the visceral coelom. Beyond the serrations along its edge which suggest the use of some sort of blade. Not, evidently, a very sharp one.

No. We're getting ahead of ourselves here. The coroner's art is nothing if not systematic. Very well, then: Caucasian male, mid-twenties. External morphometrics previously noted. Hair loss and

bruising consistent with chemotherapeutic toxicity. Right index and ring fingernails missing, same notation. The deceased was one sick puppy at time of demise. Sickened by the disease, poisoned by the cure. And just when you thought things couldn't get any worse...

Down and in. The wound swallows the coroner's rubberised hands like some huge torn vagina, its labia clotted and crystallised. The usual viscera glisten inside, repackaged by medics at the site who had to reel in all loose ends for transport. Perhaps evidence was lost in the process. Perhaps the killer had arranged the entrails in some significant pattern, perhaps the arrangement of the GI tract spelled out some clue or unholy name. No matter. They took pictures of everything.

Mesentery stretches like thin latex, binding loops of intestine one to the other. A bit too tightly, in fact. There appear to be— fistulas of some sort, scattered along the lower ileum. Loops seem fused together at several spots. What could have caused that?

Nothing comes to mind.

Note it, record it, take a sample for detailed histological analysis. Move on. The scalpel passes through the tract as easily as through overcooked pasta. Stringy bile and pre-fecal lumps slump tiredly into a collecting dish. Something bulges behind them from the dorsal wall. Something shines white as bone where no bone should be. Slice, resect. There. A mass of some kind covering the right kidney, approximately fifteen centimetres by ten, extending down to the bladder. Quite heterogeneous, it's got some sort of *lumps* in it. A tumour? Is this what Stuart MacLennan's doctors were duelling with when they pumped him full of poison? It doesn't look like any tumour the coroner's seen.

For one thing— and this is really kind of strange— it's looking *back* at him.

* * *

His desk is absolutely spartan. Not a shred of paper out of place. Not a shred of paper even in evidence, actually. The surface is as featureless as a Kubrick monolith, except for the Sun workstation positioned dead centre and a rack of CDs angled off to the left.

"I *thought* she looked familiar," he says. "When I saw the papers. Didn't know quite where to place her, though."

Jasmine Fitzgerald's graduate supervisor.

"I guess you've got a lot of students," Thomas suggests.

"Yes." He leans forward, begins tapping at the workstation keyboard. "I've yet to meet all of them, actually. One or two in Europe I correspond with exclusively over the net. I hope to meet them this summer in Berne— ah, yes. Here she is; doesn't look anything like the media picture."

"She doesn't live in Europe, Dr. Russell."

"No, right here. Did her field work at CERN, though. Damn hard getting anything done here since the supercollider fell through. Ah."

"What?"

"She's on leave. I remember her now. She put her thesis on hold about a year and a half ago. Illness in the family, as I recall." Russell stares at the monitor; something he sees there seems to sink in, all at once.

"She killed her husband? She *killed* him?"

Thomas nods.

"My God." Russell shakes his head. "She didn't seem the type. She always seemed so— well, so cheery."

"She still does, sometimes."

"My God," he repeats. "And how can I help you?"

"She's suffering from some very elaborate delusions. She couches them in a lot of technical terminology I don't understand. I mean, for all I know she could actually be making *sense*— no, no. Scratch

that. She *can't* be, but I don't have the background to really understand her, well, *claims*."

"What sort of *claims*?"

"For one thing, she keeps talking about bringing her husband back from the dead."

"I see."

"You don't seem surprised."

"Should I be? You said she was delusional."

Thomas takes a deep breath. "Dr. Russell, I've been doing some reading the past couple of days. Popular cosmology, quantum mechanics for beginners, that sort of thing."

Russell smiles indulgently. "I suppose it's never too late to start."

"I get the impression that a lot of the stuff that happens down at the subatomic level almost has quasi-religious overtones. Spontaneous appearance of matter, simultaneous existence in different states. Almost spiritual."

"Yes, I suppose that's true. After a fashion."

"Are cosmologists a religious lot, by and large?"

"Not really." Russell drums fingers on his monolith. "The field's so strange that we don't really *need* religious experience on top of it. Some of the eastern religions make claims that sound vaguely quantum-mechanical, but the similarities are pretty superficial."

"Nothing more, well, Christian? Nothing that would lead someone to believe in a single omniscient God who raises the dead?"

"God no. Oh, except for that Tipler fellow." Russell leans forward. "Why? Jasmine Fitzgerald hasn't become a Christian, has she?" Murder is one thing, his tone suggests, but *this*...

"I don't think so," Thomas reassures him. "Not unless Christianity's broadened its tenets to embrace human sacrifice."

"Yes. Quite." Russell leans back again, apparently satisfied.

"Who's Tipler?" Thomas asks.

"Mmmm?" Russell blinks, momentarily distracted. "Oh, yes. Frank Tipler. Cosmologist from Tulane, claimed to have a testable mathematical proof of the existence of God. And the afterlife too, if I recall. Raised a bit of a stir a few years back."

"I take it you weren't impressed."

"Actually, I didn't follow it very closely. Theology's not that interesting to me. I mean, if physics proves that there is or there isn't a god that's fine, but that's not really the point of the exercise, is it?"

"I couldn't say. Seems to me it'd be a hell of a spin-off, though."

Russell smiles.

"I don't suppose you've got the reference?" Thomas suggests.

"Of course. Just a moment." Russell feeds a CD to the workstation and massages the keyboard. The Sun purrs. "Yes, here it is: *The Physics of Immortality: Modern Cosmology, God and the Resurrection of the Dead*. 1994, Frank J. Tipler. I can print you out the complete citation if you want."

"Please. So what was his proof?"

The professor displays something akin to a very small smile.

"In thirty words or less," Thomas adds. "For idiots."

"Well," Russell says, "basically, he argued that some billions of years hence, life will incorporate itself into a massive quantum-effect computing device to avoid extinction when the universe collapses."

"I thought the universe wasn't *going* to collapse," Thomas interjects. "I thought they proved it was just going to keep expanding..."

"That was last year," Russell says shortly. "May I continue?"

"Yes, of course."

"Thank you. As I was saying, Tipler claimed that billions of years hence, life will incorporate itself into a massive quantum-effect computing device to avoid extinction when the universe

collapses. An integral part of this process involves the exact reproduction of everything that ever happened in the universe up to that point, right down to the quantum level, as well as all possible variations of those events."

Beside the desk, Russell's printer extrudes a paper tongue. He pulls it free and hands it over.

"So God's a supercomputer at the end of time? And we'll all be resurrected in the mother of all simulation models?"

"Well—" Russell wavers. The caricature seems to cause him physical pain. "I suppose so," he finishes, reluctantly. "In thirty words or less, as you say."

"Wow." Suddenly Fitzgerald' ravings sound downright pedestrian. "But if he's right—"

"The consensus is he's not," Russell interjects hastily.

"But *if*. If the model's an exact reproduction, how could you tell the difference between real life and afterlife? I mean, what would be the *point*?"

"Well, the point is avoiding ultimate extinction, supposedly. As to how you'd tell the difference..." Russell shakes his head. "Actually, I never finished the book. As I said, theology doesn't interest me all that much."

Thomas shakes his head. "I can't believe it."

"Not many could," Russell says. Then, almost apologetically, he adds "Tipler's theoretical proofs were quite extensive, though, as I recall."

"I bet. Whatever happened to him?"

Russell shrugs. "What happens to anyone who's stupid enough to come up with a new way of looking at the world? They tore into him like sharks at a feeding frenzy. I don't know where he ended up."

* * *

What's wrong with this picture?

Nothing. Everything. Suddenly awake, Myles Thomas stares around a darkened studio and tries to convince himself that nothing has changed.

Nothing *has* changed. The faint sounds of late-night traffic sound the same as ever. Grey parallelograms stretch across wall and ceiling, a faint luminous shadow of his bedroom window cast by some distant streetlight. Natalie's still gone from the left side of his bed, her departure so far removed by now that he doesn't even have to remind himself of it.

He checks the LEDs on his bedside alarm: 2:35a.

Something's different.

Nothing's changed.

Well, maybe one thing. Tipler's heresy sits on the night stand, its plastic dustcover reflecting slashes of red light from the alarm clock. *The Physics of Immortality: Modern Cosmology, God and the Resurrection of the Dead*. It's too dark to read the lettering but you don't forget a title like that. Myles Thomas signed it out of the library this afternoon, opened it at random

...Lemma 1, and the fact that $f_{ij} = \sum_{k=1}^{\infty} f_{ij}^{(k)} \leq 1$,

we have

$$\begin{aligned} \sum_{n=1}^{\infty} p_{ij}^{(n)} &= \sum_{n=1}^{\infty} \sum_{k=1}^n f_{ij}^{(k)} p_{ij}^{(n-k)} = \sum_{k=1}^{\infty} f_{ij}^{(k)} \sum_{n=0}^{\infty} p_{ij}^{(n)} \\ &= f_{ij} \sum_{n=0}^{\infty} p_{ij}^{(n)} \leq \sum_{n=0}^{\infty} p_{ij}^{(n)} < \infty \end{aligned}$$

which is just (E.3), and (E.3) can hold only if...

and threw it into his briefcase, confused and disgusted. He doesn't even know why he went to the effort of getting the fucking thing. Jasmine Fitzgerald is delusional. It's that simple. For reasons that it is not Myles Thomas' job to understand, she vivisected her husband on the kitchen floor. Now she's inventing all sorts of ways to excuse herself, to undo the undoable, and the fact that she cloaks her delusions in cosmological gobbledegook does not make them any more credible. What does he expect to do, turn into a quantum mechanic overnight? Is he going to learn even a fraction of what he'd need to find the holes in her carefully constructed fantasy? Why did he even bother?

But he did. And now *Modern Cosmology, God and the Resurrection of the Dead* looms dimly in front of him at two thirty in the fucking morning, and something's changed, he's almost *sure* of it, but try as he might he can't get a handle on what it is. He just feels different, somehow. He just feels...

Awake. That's what you feel. You couldn't get back to sleep now if your life depended on it.

Myles Thomas sighs and turns on the reading lamp. Squinting as his pupils shrink against the light, he reaches out and grabs the offending book.

Parts of it, astonishingly, almost make sense.

* * *

"She's not here," the orderly tells him. "Last night we had to move her next door."

Next door: the hospital. "Why? What's wrong?"

"Not a clue. Convulsions, cyanosis— we thought she was toast, actually. But by the time the doctor got to her she couldn't find anything wrong."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Tell me about it. Nothing about that crazy b— nothing about her makes sense." The orderly wanders off down the hall, frowning.

Jasmine Fitzgerald lies between sheets tucked tight as a straitjacket, stares unblinking at the ceiling. A nurse sits to one side, boredom and curiosity mixing in equal measures on his face.

"How is she?" Thomas asks.

"Don't really know," the nurse says. "She seems okay now."

"She doesn't look okay to me. She looks almost catatonic."

"She isn't. Are you, Jaz?"

"We're sorry," Fitzgerald says cheerfully. "The person you are trying to reach is temporarily unavailable. Please leave a message and we'll get back to you." Then: "Hi, Myles. Good to see you." Her eyes never waver from the acoustic tiles overhead.

"You better blink one of these days," Thomas remarks. "Your eyeballs are going to dry up."

"Nothing a little judicious editing won't fix," she tells him.

Thomas glances at the nurse. "Would you excuse us for a few minutes?"

"Sure. I'll be in the caf if you need me."

Thomas waits until the door swings shut. "So, Jaz. What's the mass of the Higgs boson?"

She blinks.

She smiles.

She turns to look at him.

"Two hundred twenty eight GeV," she says. "All *right*. Someone actually *read* my thesis proposal."

"Not just your proposal. That's one of Tipler's testable predictions, isn't it?"

Her smile widens. "The critical one, actually. The others are pretty self-evident."

"And you tested it."

"Yup. Over at CERN. So how'd you find his book?"

"I only read parts of it," Thomas admits. "It was pretty tough slogging."

"Sorry. My fault," Fitzgerald says.

"How so?"

"I thought you could use some help, so I souped you up a bit. Increased your processing speed. Not enough, I guess."

Something shivers down his back. He ignores it.

"I'm not—" Thomas rubs his chin; he forgot to shave this morning—"—exactly sure what you mean by that."

"Sure you do. You just don't believe it." Fitzgerald squirms up from between the sheets, props her back against a pillow. "It's just a semantic difference, Myles. You'd call it a *delusion*. Us physics geeks would call it a *hypothesis*."

Thomas nods, uncertainly.

"Oh, just say it, Myles. I know you're dying to."

"Go on," he blurts, strangely unable to stop himself.

Fitzgerald laughs. "If you insist, Doctor. I figured out what I was doing wrong. I thought I had to do everything myself, and I just can't. Too many variables, you see, even if you access them individually there's no way you can keep track of 'em all at once. When I tried, I got mixed up and everything—"

A sudden darkness in her face now. A memory, perhaps, pushing up through all those careful layers of contrivance.

"Everything went wrong," she finishes softly.

Thomas nods, keeps his voice low and gentle. "What are you remembering right now, Jaz?"

"You know damn well what I'm remembering," she whispers. "I—I cut him open—"

"Yes."

"He was dying. He was *dying*. I tried to fix him, I tried to fix the code but something went wrong, and..."

He waits. The silence stretches.

"...and I didn't know what. I couldn't fix it if I couldn't see what I'd done wrong. So I—I cut him open..." Her brow furrows suddenly. Thomas can't tell with what: remembrance, remorse?

"I really overstepped myself," she says at last.

No. Concentration. She's rebuilding her defences, she's pushing the tip of that bloody iceberg back below the surface. It can't be easy. Thomas can see it, ponderous and massively buoyant, pushing up from the depths while Jasmine Fitzgerald leans down and desperately pretends not to strain.

"I know it must be difficult to think about," Thomas says.

She shrugs. "Sometimes." *Going...* "When my head slips back into the old school. Old habits die hard." *Going...* "But I get over it."

The frown disappears.

Gone.

"You know when I told you about Core Wars?" she asks brightly.

After a moment, Thomas nods.

"All viruses replicate, but some of the better ones can write macros—*micros*, actually, would be a better name for them—to other addresses, little subroutines that autonomously perform simple tasks. And some of *those* can replicate too. Get my drift?"

"Not really," Thomas says quietly.

"I really should have souped you up a bit more. Anyway, those little routines, they can handle all the book-keeping. Each one tracks a few variables, and each time they replicate that's a few more, and pretty soon there's no limit to the size of the problem you can handle. Hell, you could rewrite the whole damn operating system from the inside out and not have to worry about any of the details, all your little daemons are doing that for you."

"Are we all just viruses to you, Jaz?"

She laughs at that, not unkindly. "Ah, Myles. It's a technical term, not a moral judgement. Life's information, shaped by natural selection. That's all I mean."

"And you've learned to—rewrite the code," Thomas says.

She shakes her head. "Still learning. But I'm getting better at it all the time."

"I see." Thomas pretends to check his watch. He still doesn't know the jargon. He never will. But at least, at last, he knows where she's coming from.

Nothing left but the final platitudes.

"That's all I need right now, Jasmine. I want to thank you for being so co-operative. I know how tough this must be on you."

She cocks her head at him, smiling. "This is goodbye then, Myles? You haven't come *close* to curing me."

He smiles back. He can almost feel each muscle fibre contracting, the increased tension on facial tendons, soft tissue stretching over bone. The utter insincerity of a purely mechanical process. "That's not what I'm here for, Jaz."

"Right. You're assessing my fitness."

Thomas nods.

"Well?" she asks after a moment. "Am I fit?"

He takes a breath. "I think you have some problems you haven't faced. But you can understand counsel, and there's no doubt you could follow any proceedings the court is likely to throw at you. Legally, that means you can stand trial."

"Ah. So I'm not sane, but I'm not crazy enough to get off, eh?"

"I hope things work out for you." That much, at least, is sincere.

"Oh, they will," she says easily. "Never fear. How much longer do I stay here?"

"Maybe another three weeks. Thirty days is the usual period."

"But you've finished with me. Why so long?"

He shrugs. "Nowhere else to put you, for now."

"Oh." She considers. "Just as well, I guess. It'll given me more time to practice."

"Goodbye, Jasmine."

"Too bad you missed Stuart," she says behind him. "You'd have liked him. Maybe I'll bring him around to your place sometime."

The doorknob sticks. He tries again.

"Something wrong?" she asks.

"No," Thomas says, a bit too quickly. "It's just—"

"Oh, right. Hang on a sec." She rustles in her sheets.

He turns his head. Jasmine Fitzgerald lies flat on her back, unblinking, staring straight up. Her breath is fast and shallow.

The doorknob seems subtly warmer in his hand.

He releases it. "Are you okay?"

"Sure," she says to the ceiling. "Just tired. Takes a bit out of you, you know?"

Call the nurse, he thinks.

"Really, I just need some rest." She looks at him one last time, and giggles. "But Myles to go before I sleep..."

* * *

"Dr. Desjardins, please."

"Speaking."

"You performed the autopsy on Stuart MacLennan?"

A brief silence. Then: "Who is this?"

"My name's Myles Thomas. I'm a psychologist at FPSS. Jasmine Fitzgerald is— was a client of mine."

The phone sits there in his hand, silent.

"I was looking at the case report, writing up my assessment, and I just noticed something about your findings—"

"They're preliminary," Desjardins interrupts. "I'll have the full report, um, shortly."

"Yes, I understand that, Dr. Desjardins. But my understanding is that MacLennan was, well, mortally wounded."

"He was gutted like a fish," Desjardins says.

"Right. But your r— your *preliminary* report lists cause of death as 'undetermined'."

"That's because I haven't determined the cause of death."

"Right. I guess I'm a bit confused about what else it could have been. You didn't find any toxins in the body, at least none that weren't involved in MacLennan's chemo, and no other injuries except for these fistulas and teratomas—"

The phone barks in Thomas's hand, a short ugly laugh. "Do you know what a teratoma *is*?" Desjardins asks.

"I assumed it was something to do with his cancer."

"Ever hear the term *primordial cyst*?"

"No."

"Hope you haven't eaten recently," Desjardins says. "Every now and then you get a clump of proliferating cells floating around in the coelomic cavity. Something happens to activate the dormant genes — could be a lot of things, but the upshot is you sometimes get these growing blobs of tissue sprouting teeth and hair and bone. Sometimes they get as big as grapefruits."

"My God. MacLennan had one of those in him?"

"I thought, maybe. At first. Turned out to be a chunk of his kidney. Only there was an eye growing out of it. And most of his abdominal lymph nodes, too, the ducts were clotted with hair and something like fingernail. It was keratinised, anyway."

"That's horrible," Thomas whispers.

"No shit. Not to mention the perforated diaphragm, or the fact that half the loops of his small intestine were fused together."

"But I thought he had leukaemia."

"He did. That wasn't what killed him."

"So you're saying these teratomas might have had some role in MacLennan's death?"

"I don't see how," Desjardins says.

"But—"

"Look, maybe I'm not making myself clear. I have my doubts that Stuart MacLennan died from his wife's carving skills because any *one* of the abnormalities I found should have killed him more or less instantly."

"But that's pretty much impossible, isn't it? I mean, what did the investigating officers say?"

"Quite frankly, I don't think they read my report," Desjardins grumbles. "Neither did you, apparently, or you would have called me before now."

"Well, it wasn't really central to my assessment, Dr. Desjardins. And besides, it seemed so obvious—"

"For sure. You see someone laid open from crotch to sternum, you don't need any report to know what killed him. Who cares about any of this congenital abnormality bullshit?"

Congen— "You're saying he was *born* that way?"

"Except he couldn't have been. He'd never have even made it to his first breath."

"So you're saying—"

"I'm saying Stuart MacLennan's wife couldn't have killed him, because physiologically there's no way in hell that he could have been alive to start with."

Thomas stares at the phone. It offers no retraction.

"But— he was twenty-eight years old! How could that be?"

"God only knows," Desjardins tells him. "You ask me, it's a fucking miracle."

* * *

What's wrong with this picture?

He isn't quite certain, because he doesn't quite know what he was expecting. No opened grave, no stone rolled dramatically away from the sepulchre. Of course not. Jasmine Fitzgerald would probably say that her powers are too subtle for such obvious theatre. Why leave a pile of shovelled earth, an opened coffin, when you can just rewrite the code?

She sits cross-legged on her husband's undisturbed grave. Whatever powers she lays claim to, they don't shield her from the light rain falling on her head. She doesn't even have an umbrella.

"Myles," she says, not looking up. "I thought it might be you." Her sunny smile, that radiant expression of happy denial, is nowhere to be seen. Her face is as expressionless as her husband's must be, two meters down.

"Hello, Jaz," Thomas says.

"How did you find me?" she asks him.

"FPSS went ballistic when you disappeared. They're calling everyone who had any contact with you, trying to figure out how you got out. Where you might be."

Her fingers play in the fresh earth. "Did you tell them?"

"I didn't think of this place until after," he lies. Then, to atone: "And I don't *know* how you got out."

"Yes you do, Myles. You do it yourself all the time."

"Go on," he says, deliberately.

She smiles, but it doesn't last. "We got here the same way, Myles. We copied ourselves from one address to another. The only difference is, you still have to go from A to B to C. I just cut straight to Z."

"I can't accept that," Thomas says.

"Ever the doubter, aren't you? How can you enjoy heaven when you can't even recognise it?" Finally, she looks up at him. "*You*

should be told the difference between empiricism and stubbornness, doctor. Know what that's from?"

He shakes his head.

"Oh well. It's not important." She looks back at the ground. Wet tendrils of hair hang across her face. "They wouldn't let me come to the funeral."

"You don't seem to need their permission."

"Not now. That was a few days ago. I still hadn't worked all the bugs out then." She plunges one hand into wet dirt. "You know what I did to him."

Before the knife, she means.

"I'm not—I don't really—"

"You know," she says again.

Finally he nods, although she isn't looking.

The rain falls harder. Thomas shivers under his windbreaker. Fitzgerald doesn't seem to notice.

"So what now?" he asks at last.

"I'm not sure. It seemed so straightforward at first, you know? I loved Stuart, completely, without reservation. I was going to bring him back as soon as I learned how. I was going to do it right this time. And I still love him, I really do, but damn it all I don't love *everything* about him, you know? He was a slob, sometimes. And I hated his taste in music. So now that I'm here, I figure, why stop at just bringing him back? Why not, well, fine-tune him a bit?"

"Is that what you're going to do?"

"I don't know. I'm going through all the things I'd change, and when it comes right down to it maybe it'd be better to just start again from scratch. Less— intensive. Computationally."

"I hope you *are* delusional." Not a wise thing to say, but suddenly he doesn't care. "Because if you're not, God's a really callous bastard."

"Is it," she says, without much interest.

"Everything's just information. We're all just subroutines interacting in a model somewhere. Well nothing's really all that important then, is it? You'll get around to debugging Stuart one of these days. No hurry. He can wait. It's just microcode, nothing's irrevocable. So nothing really *matters*, does it? How could God give a shit about anything in a universe like that?"

Jasmine Fitzgerald rises from the grave and wipes the dirt off her hands. "Watch it, Myles." There's a faint smile on her face. "You don't want to piss me off."

He meets her eyes. "I'm glad I still can."

"*Touché*." There's still a twinkle there, behind her soaked lashes and the runnels of rainwater coursing down her face.

"So what are you going to do?" he asks again.

She looks around the soaking graveyard. "Everything. I'm going to clean the place up. I'm going to fill in the holes. I'm going to rewrite Planck's constant so it makes *sense*." She smiles at him. "Right now, though, I think I'm just going to go somewhere and think about things for a while."

She steps off the mound. "Thanks for not telling on me. It wouldn't have made any difference, but I appreciate the thought. I won't forget it." She begins to walk away in the rain.

"Jaz," Thomas calls after her.

She shakes her head, without looking back. "Forget it, Myles. Nobody handed *me* any miracles." She stops, then, turns briefly. "Besides, you're not ready. You'd probably just think I hypnotised you or something."

I should stop her, Thomas tells himself. *She's dangerous. She's deluded. They could charge me with aiding and abetting. I should stop her.*

If I can.

She leaves him in the rain with the memory of that bright, guiltless smile. He's almost sure he doesn't feel anything pass

through him then. But maybe he does. Maybe it feels like a ripple growing across some stagnant surface. A subtle reweaving of electrons. A small change in the way things are.

I'm going to clean the place up. I'm going to fill in the holes.

Myles Thomas doesn't know exactly what she meant by that. But he's afraid that soon— far too soon— there won't be anything wrong with this picture.