

Portal

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A work of fiction, meant for adults. Read something else if you are not an adult, or are offended by stories with sexual content. Then again, if all you're looking for is in-out, in-out, in-out, you should probably read something else. I welcome constructive comments. Enjoy.

Doctor Bowles ran fingers through his sandy brown hair as he returned to the nurse's station. He dropped off a folder and asked, "What's next?"

Cynthia smiled and handed him another folder. "Doctor Carlson wanted you to do this one. Room 6."

Dan frowned a bit as he opened the folder. "Eval on a 48 hour hold?"

"Yes -- He seems normal enough, but he really spooked the cops who dropped him off."

"Oh?" Dan asked as he scanned the intake sheet. White male, mid-30's, picked up in the county park, where he'd been wandering, laughing maniacally. Identification showed he lived about 1200 miles away, on the West Coast. Didn't know where he was or how he'd gotten there. Business card said he was a Ph.D. Carlson had done the initial screen, and had written "Axis I -- delusional? Have Dan do workup."

"Thanks -- at least he isn't another screamer," Dan said. "No meds yet?"

Cynthia shook her head. "No, he seemed quite cooperative, noncombative."

"But the cops were freaked? Why?"

"Don't know -- I could tell he'd gotten to them though."

Dan nodded. Cynthia's instincts were quite good -- and she'd been working here for many years, as she occasionally reminded him. "So I shouldn't turn my back on this one?"

Cynthia smiled. "You shouldn't turn your back on *any* of them, Doctor..."

Dan waved the folder. "Thanks, I'll try not to..." He turned and walked to room 6. He was new on the service, and still learning. He'd made the mistake of turning his back on one patient, and ended up with eleven stitches and a concussion.

"Hey, Brad," he waved to the orderly sitting in the chair at the end of the hall. "I need into six."

The burly orderly stood up and walked to the door, getting out his keys. "There's something weird about this one, Doc," he grumbled as he unlocked the door.

"That's what Cynthia said -- what can you tell me?"

Brad shook his head, standing by the door, looking inside. "The way he laughs, the way he looks at folks -- like he was king of the world or something, but then it flashes off, and he looks like an ordinary guy again."

"Did you speak to the officers who brought him in?"

"Nah, but they were really glad to be rid of him -- they were spooked."

Dan nodded. He took a breath, gathering his thoughts. "Okay, let me in."

"I'll be right here, Doc," Brad reminded the young doctor as he opened the door.

Dan stepped into the room. It was small, with a bunk, a chair, and a toilet and sink in the corner. All furnishings were bolted to the floor. He felt the usual apprehension, excitement, of walking into a new situation, a new person, a new mind.

"Good afternoon, Peter, I'm Doctor Bowles," he said to the man seated on the bunk as he did his initial visual evaluation. Mid-30's, anglo, black hair, medium build, sitting up straight, legs crossed. Clothing neat and clean, well groomed, seemed to be alert, no initial signs of physical impairment, skin clear and unbroken, no strange or unpleasant odors.

"Good afternoon, Dan," the man replied in a pleasant voice.

Dan took a seat in the chair, aware of Brad's bulk shadowing the observation window in the door. Okay, he's aware of time, remembered my name. "I'd like to ask you some questions, if I may."

Peter nodded. "Sure -- I don't think I'm going anywhere for a while," he said with a smile.

Dan nodded. Cooperative, aware of his situation, sense of humor.

"Do you know why you're here?" Dan asked.

Peter chuckled. "Ah, that can be a very simple or a very complex question. Why are any of us here? To serve as a warning to others? I believe you and I are currently here to decide if I pose a risk to myself or to others."

Dan nodded. Go with the routine -- do the Folstein screen, and see where things lead.

“Do you know what year this is?”

Peter told him the year and the date, adding, “I’d tell you the time, but I’ve been relieved of my watch. My stomach tells me it’s past my lunch time though.”

“Okay, do you know where we are?”

Peter sighed. “On the second floor of a county hospital, I’d guess. I don’t know what county or city, but I’d guess we’re in Idaho from the license plates I’ve seen. I’m still a bit disoriented.”

Dan nodded. He made a note to come back to that -- awareness and acceptance of disorientation. This might be a brief, acute episode, one already fading. “Okay. Now I’m going to mention three things. I want you to remember them, and I’ll ask you to repeat them to me.”

Peter nodded and said, “Apple, Table, Penny.”

Dan knew he wasn’t supposed to cue the patient during the evaluation. Still, it was a surprise. But then again, those three items were on the screening sheet used by countless people.

“You’ve been through this before?”

“No. Bless you.”

Dan started to say something, then sneezed. He wiped his nose, then sat back. “You knew I was going to sneeze?”

“Of course,” Peter said matter-of-factly.

“Do you know what I’m going to do next?” Dan asked, looking directly at Peter.

Peter sighed again, smiling. He seemed to shimmer somehow. “You’re going to look at the door, carefully, out of the corner of your eye, to be sure Brad is there. I’m not going to hurt you, Doctor. I’m not going to hurt anyone. We can continue your screening exam if you want -- I can count backwards from 100 by seven. I can spell ‘world’ backwards: D-L-R-O-W. I still remember apple, table, penny. I can follow three stage commands. I can write complete sentences, in English, French, Latin, Greek, Linear A, B, or C, or Aramaic.”

Dan half-expected his patient to become more animated as he spoke, but he remained calm and collected. Without taking his eyes off Peter, he glanced to the side and down a bit, enough to notice Brad’s shadow through the observation window. He took out his pen and opened the folder.

“What is this?” he said, holding up the pen.

“Cheezy ball-point pen,” Peter remarked.

On the line marked "Folstein Eval" Dan wrote, "Incomplete -- estimate 29/30. Axis I?"

"You mentioned earlier you were disoriented. Can you tell me more about that?"

Peter nodded, frowning a little. "I'm still somewhat disoriented. I don't know how I got here, or where 'here' is, or why here, but I have the feeling that I will, after a while."

"What has to happen before you will know? I thought you knew what was going to happen?"

Peter smiled and shook his head. "Broccoli, pink, ouch. Can you remember that, Doctor? I think you will. I can see some things, not others. It comes and goes. My background? I've a doctorate in physics and mathematics from the University of Chicago. Single, from a normal family with two sisters, both parents and both siblings healthy, living in New England. The only hint of mental oddities in the family is a maternal aunt who claims to see auras -- but she's been taking phenobarb for so long she's bound to be seeing something."

Dan nodded. Why had Carlson foisted this off on him? Still, better than that screamer last night. Dan smiled. He looked at Peter and thought about the color purple.

Peter sat, a slight smile on his face, not saying anything.

Dan waited. He waited long enough that most normal people would have said something to break the silence. But Peter sat there.

Dan had a thought. He reached to his coat pocket and pulled out the deck of cards he always carried; he was a fanatical bridge player. "Let's try something. Are you with me?"

Peter leaned back against the wall. "Sure, whatever you like."

Dan cut and shuffled the cards, not quite taking his eyes off Peter. He took the first card and looked at it. "What card do I have?"

Peter smiled and said, "Two of Clubs."

Dan smiled and showed Peter the Jack of Hearts. Then he turned over the next card: the two of Clubs. The hair on the back of his neck started to stand up.

Peter said, "Five of Diamonds."

Dan turned the next card: five of Diamonds.

Peter said, "Eight Hearts."

Dan turned the top card, and saw the eight of Hearts. He looked at Peter.

Peter smiled. "Three of Clubs."

Dan took the cards, shuffled them, cut, and shuffled again. With one more cut, he turned the top card: three of Clubs. He had a very strange feeling.

Peter nodded. "I think it's something like jet-lag, part of me catching up."

Dan was rattled. He needed to fall back to what he knew. "Are you taking any medication, prescribed or otherwise?"

Peter sat up a bit, slowly. "Been asked that, twice. Don't believe so, although as I've said, I'm still a bit disoriented as to the last day or so. Unremarkable medical history, no surgeries, no broken bones, no concussions, no allergies I'm aware of."

"At the park, the report is that you were laughing uncontrollably. Can you tell me more about that?"

Peter nodded. "I suspect I was -- I have the feeling that something has worked out far better than I'd expected. Just what that is, I don't know."

"Have you felt that way often?"

Peter laughed softly. "No, I think this is the first time, Doctor."

"Is anyone trying to hurt you, or following you, against you, or giving you a hard time?"

"Not that I know of."

"Do things seem specially arranged for your benefit?"

Peter chuckled. "Obviously not, from where I'm sitting now."

Dan pressed on, continuing his questioning. Nothing Peter told him fit typical delusional systems. He seemed quite normal. He didn't seem to be hiding or suppressing anything -- he just didn't remember what he'd been doing the last day or so, or how he got here.

"Well, Doctor?" Peter asked after another prolonged period of silence.

Dan closed the folder. "I'll speak with Doctor Carlson." He stood up.

Peter reclined on the cot. "If you could see about something to eat -- I'm quite hungry."

"Okay, Peter, I'll do that."

Dan moved to the door, keeping his back to the wall and at least one eye on Peter. He knocked on the door lightly. Brad looked in, and opened the door.

Outside with the door closed, Dan took a deep breath. But for a couple of things, that man was normal...

"Well, Doc?" Brad asked.

Dan blinked. "Interesting, Brad -- of course everyone is interesting... Thanks..."

Dan walked back to the desk.

Cynthia gave him a raised eyebrow. "Well?"

Dan shook his head. "Did Carlson talk to him at all? And where is the good Doctor?"

Cynthia shrugged. "He signed the intake sheet. Think he was headed to the cafeteria."

Dan smiled. "Thanks -- I need to talk to him."

Dan walked to the cafeteria, got a Pepsi, and looked around. Carlson wasn't to be seen. The place reeked of over-steamed broccoli, and he was glad to leave. As he was walking out, he turned to get a better look at a stunning busty blonde woman in a tight pink knit skirt and top, watching her jiggle deliciously as she walked...

And he walked into the edge of one of the partially-open cafeteria doors, hitting his head hard and dropping his drink. He staggered back, seeing stars, holding his forehead with one hand, shaking Pepsi off the other. The woman turned and gave him a flirty smile. He leaned back against a wall for a moment.

And remembered what Peter had said, "Broccoli, pink, ouch." He felt his skin crawl. How the hell?

He found Carlson in his office. Carlson waved him in, and he sat down.

"Why Doctor Bowles, what is the matter? You look quite flustered." Carlson touched his own forehead and asked, "Turn your back on another patient?"

Dan frowned. "No -- I walked into a door. The guy in six..."

"Ah yes, what did you find?"

Dan rubbed his forehead again -- it still hurt. He had a bump. "Other than a few things, that was the most normal, well-adjusted individual I've spoken to in quite a while."

"But isn't that most of the people we see?" Carlson chided gently.

Dan shook his head and went over the nominal parts of the interview.

“Yes, sounds like he should be on the other side of that door, but then what’s the other part?” Carlson asked.

Dan told him about Peter’s seeming amnesia surrounding his appearance in the area. Then he told him about the cards. Then he mentioned, “broccoli, pink, ouch.”

Carlson steepled his hands in front of him, nodding slowly. “Interesting... Maybe we should ask him for some stock market picks... What’s your recommendation?”

Dan shrugged his shoulders. “He’s clean as far as the cops are concerned -- they ran his driver’s license and he has no prior record here or in California. I don’t see why we should hold him. We can keep him overnight to be sure, but we’re short on space -- if we get a more immediate case in, I’d turn him out but quick.”

“And recommendations to him?”

Dan shrugged again. “Memory lapses can be an indication of something serious, although he said he didn’t have headaches, vision problems, or the like. I’d advise him to get a thorough check-up to be sure there wasn’t something going on.”

Carlson nodded. “Checked with his employer?”

Dan shook his head. “No, sir. I left the interview and went looking for you.”

Carlson held out his hand, and Dan handed over the folder. One of Peter’s business cards was attached to the inside. He hit the speakerphone button and dialed the number.

After a few rings, a cheery woman answered, “Doctor Hanson’s office, how can I help you?”

“Is he in please?” Carlson said.

“Who is calling?”

“This is Doctor Jim Carlson.”

“No, Doctor Carlson, he’s on vacation through the end of the week, not expected until Monday... Wait a minute, let me look, I think it’s here somewhere...”

Carlson frowned and looked at Dan.

“Oh yes, I found it. He did leave a message in case you called.”

Carlson's frown deepened. "When did he leave the message?"

"Oh, it must have been very late last night; it was on my desk when I got in this morning. It doesn't make much sense to me, but he said it would to you. He says to look under the wastebasket."

Carlson nodded. "Thank you very much."

Dan moved over to the wastebasket, eyeing it as if it were a sleeping cobra.

"Is there any message you'd like to leave for Peter?" she asked.

"How long have you known him, if I may ask," Carlson said, leaning back and frowning.

"Oh, I worked for him when he was in grad school. We've known each other for many years."

"Thank you, that will be all. You've been quite helpful."

"Thank you, Doctor Carlson. Goodbye."

The phone clicked. Carlson reached over and stabbed the button, then turned to the wastebasket. Dan was still observing it with caution.

Carlson scooted his chair closer and gave the wastebasket a kick. It flew a few feet to the wall, where it hit with a clunk, landing on its side. Carlson reached down to the spot where the wastebasket had been, and picked up a button. He frowned and shook his head.

He looked at Dan, holding the button in front of him. "I lost a coat button day before yesterday, and my wife has been giving me hell to find it."

Dan sat back, smiling slightly. "What's your recommendation, sir, other than to ask for stock picks?"

"Indeed..." said Carlson. "Right now, I'm for whacking someone up with a few cc's of Vitamin T, but I'm not sure if it should be him or me."

Dan nodded. "Should we go speak with him together?"

Carlson pursed his lips, then stood up, pocketing the button. "Why the hell not?"

They walked back to the ward silently. As they walked down the hallway, they could hear muffled screams.

One of the nurses approached. "Doctor Carlson, the patient in 4 is having a *very* rough time."

“Indeed... Christine M? Duration?”

“She started about two minutes ago -- we were about to send out a page.”

“Meds?”

“Here’s her chart.”

He looked over the chart quickly. “Okay -- five thorazine stat.” Carlson looked to Dan, who nodded.

The nurse hurried off, calling out, “Vitamin T, five, for the X in 4!”

It took two shift nurses and Brad to hold down their one hundred five pound patient long enough for Dan to give her the injection. It took a very long minute for the drug to kick in.

Carlson stood out in the hallway, and nodded with approval as his staff exited the room.

Dan straightened his clothes. “Thanks everyone. Brad -- we need in six. Anything happening there?”

The orderly straightened his shirt. “No, Doc -- delivered lunch, and he ate it no problems. Talked with him a bit -- seems regular. Here you go, sirs...” Brad opened the door.

Dan entered first, followed by Carlson. Peter was on the cot, but his face was ashen. Dan approached, cautiously.

“Peter, what’s the matter?” Dan said, reaching to check the man’s pulse. It was fast, but strong. Peter’s skin was cool to the touch, beaded with sweat.

Peter forced a smile. “Your guest next door -- that was quite difficult.”

“How was it difficult? Hearing her scream?” Carlson asked.

Peter closed his eyes, swallowing, breathing deeply. “Not just hearing her -- my God!” Peter pulled himself up to sitting. As he did, Dan moved back.

Peter opened his eyes. “I... I need some water...”

Dan nodded.

Peter got up carefully and went to the sink. His hands were shaking and he moved unsteadily. He washed his face off, then took a few sips of water. He returned to sitting on the cot, folding his legs underneath him.

“Much better now,” he said. “What can I do for you?”

“Would you like to leave here?” Carlson asked.

Peter shuddered. “Yes -- if I had to spend a night next to someone like that, I’d end up just as bad.” He looked to Dan, then to Carlson. “Can you help her?” There was a pleading in his voice.

Carlson nodded. “Yes, we’ve seen her before, and if she stays on her medication, she does quite well.”

Peter nodded. He looked down at his hands. He took a breath, and as he exhaled, seemed to shimmer again. When he looked up again, his color was much better, and he was smiling.

“I called your office a little while ago, and got the message you left,” Carlson said. “How did you know it was there?”

Peter shook his head. “Sorry, I’m still a bit flustered. I don’t remember leaving a message for you.”

Carlson nodded, looking to Dan.

Dan spoke. “But you knew about broccoli, pink, ouch.”

Peter chuckled. “I saw it -- her name is Jennifer, she’ll be here about the same time tomorrow, and she thinks you’re cute, if clumsy. You should introduce yourself.”

“How do you do that, Peter?” Carlson asked.

He shook his head. “Haven’t a clue.”

Dan reached for his coat pocket. “How about some cards?”

Peter shook his head again. “I told you it comes and goes -- after that,” he pointed to room 4, his hand shaking, “it’s gone for a while.”

Carlson moved to sit in the chair. “Peter, does this amnesia concern you?”

Peter leaned against the wall. “Yes, it does -- but as I told Dan, I feel as if it’s sort of a jet-lag, something that will pass in time.”

“If we were to release you now, what would you do?” Carlson asked.

Peter sighed. "Ask where the nearest airport is, and a hotel, and get something more to eat -- I'm still starving. Make arrangements to fly home tomorrow, and get a good night's sleep."

"Would you check in with us in the morning?"

"If you'd like, yes."

Dan offered, "You're here at county expense -- you could stay the night."

Peter shook his head. "You saw how I looked when you came in -- that would do me far more harm than good."

Dan nodded in agreement. "Do you feel you'd be safe, to yourself, and to others if we released you?"

Peter nodded. "Yes, I do. And if I didn't think so, or wasn't sure, I'd tell you."

Dan looked to Carlson.

Carlson said, "Doctor Hanson, will you give me your word that you will have a complete physical when you return home?"

Peter thought for a moment. "Give me your cards and I'll have results sent to you, or at least made available. Let me assure you, as someone who makes his living using his head, not being able to remember a period of time is quite scary. I intend to get checked over thoroughly, from one end to the other. Luckily, I have an internist with small hands."

"Doctor?" Carlson said, standing up and nodding to Dan.

With a knock, Brad let them out. They stood outside the door. Dan looked in and saw Peter resting his head in his hands.

"Well?" Carlson said.

Dan looked at his boss and mentor. "This isn't covered in DSM-IV. I'd say turn him out."

"You think he'll follow up?"

Dan nodded. "Yes, I think he will."

Carlson smiled. "I think he will as well. Mister Stein, we'll have another conversation with our guest, if you please."

Brad opened the door and the two doctors re-entered. Peter looked up at them, calm and attentive.

“Doctor Hanson, do you know what will happen to you if you are returned to us?” Carlson spoke in his gravest clinical voice.

“I can guess,” Peter said simply.

Carlson nodded. “You will be restrained, medicated, and will be our guest for at least 72 hours, if not two weeks. If you feel unsure of yourself, you can remain here overnight; we could arrange for you to stay in a ward room upstairs, and we’d bid you a fond farewell tomorrow morning. I could have my secretary look up flights for you.”

Peter closed his eyes momentarily, taking a breath. When he opened his eyes, there was moisture evident in them. “I’ll be fine; thank you for your concern. I’ll be happy to check in with you through the remainder of the day, and tomorrow morning.”

The two doctors retired to the hallway again, and walked to the nurse’s station.

“Miss Rhodes, we’re releasing our guest in six,” spoke Doctor Carlson.

Cynthia raised an eyebrow, then reached for a folder.

Carlson turned to Dan. “I’d like you to have a loaded syringe in your pocket as we take our guest out. He may cause me to change my mind, but I don’t think so.”

Dan nodded and went off to get the medication.

He entered room six about half an hour later. Peter looked up.

“Peter, if you’d please?”

Peter stood with a sigh and a small smile. “Thank you.”

Brad followed, as he’d been instructed. They went to one of the consultation rooms off the ward.

Doctor Carlson stood as the others entered.

“I’d like to reunite you with your belt, shoes, and other personal belongings...”

Peter happily put on his shoes, belt, filled his pockets, and put on his school ring and watch.

“If I could get cards from you both, I’d appreciate it,” Peter said as he tied a shoe. “I believe you have mine.”

As Dan handed him a card, he said, "If there isn't a cab waiting in front, reception can call one for you. There's a Marriott about three miles from the airport; it's about a six dollar cab ride from here."

"That will do just fine. I'll give you a call when I check in, and another call in the morning." He shook Dan's hand.

As he shook Carlson's hand, Carlson told him, "And if you feel you're in difficulty, please call us."

"Thank you, sir, I will."

The four walked to the hospital's main entrance.

"Geez, I should have brought a jacket at least," Peter said, looking out at the light snowfall.

"There's a mall right across from the Marriott," Dan suggested.

Peter nodded. "Oh well, stimulate the economy a little. Gentlemen, thank you for your care and professionalism. I look forward to *never* seeing you again, at least not in your official capacities."

With agreement on that point, and handshakes, Peter departed.

As the three walked back to the ward, Carlson asked, "Well, Mister Stein, did we screw up on this one?"

Brad shook his head. "Don't know sir -- he was an odd one. He was right, though."

"About what?" Dan asked.

"When I brought him lunch, he told me he'd be gone by four thirty."

Carlson laughed. Dan shook his head.

Dan looked at his boss and mentor. "What about Christine, in 4?"

Carlson shook his head sadly, his laughter gone. "Dan, I don't think we can do much for her. My recommendation is to transfer her to Santa Mira, to Doctor Gerard and his colleagues. We're out of our league here."

Dan sighed and agreed. Just being in the room with her did things to people...

*

I looked at my hands as I rode away in the cab. They were shaking. I was still confused, still going through manic phases, still not sure. The note I'd had -- I'd dropped it while I was in the park, before they picked me up -- I'd remember between 8:32 and 8:37. Local time, or Left Coast time? Left Coast, Pacific time, it had to be. I looked ahead, knowing the stop light ahead of us was going to change... Now! That knowledge elated me, yet frightened me at the same time. And I'd come so close to blowing it, showing off, that thing with the cards, telling the young doc about his future bride. Had I told him that much? I couldn't remember; I'd seen myself at their wedding, surprising him. No, I think I just told him her name. Jennifer.

At least I had plenty of cash in my wallet, and credit cards. I gave the taxi driver \$10 for the ride. I was glad for whatever I'd done, and its effects -- the people behind the desk at the Marriott weren't too sure with me at first, showing up with no luggage, but I knew what to do, giving them my business card, knowing what to say to assure the young woman behind the counter I was safe.

But was I? I'd discovered something, something big. And I'd know in a few hours, if the note I'd written for myself was correct. A simple note -- "You'll understand between 8:32 and 8:37 this evening," it had said. My handwriting -- my notepaper.

Three elevators in the lobby, I stood in front of the left one, and it's the one that would open first. I still had it.

But it was fading in and out, I could feel it.

I washed up in the room, then went across to the mall. I bought essentials for the night -- toothbrush and toothpaste, shaver. Got something to eat, a *lot* to eat! I was far hungrier than usual. Was this part of the pattern? I had the hotel check flights for me in the morning, but didn't have them book anything just yet -- something told me to wait for a bit. Called and left messages for Doctors Carlson and Bowles that I was doing well, flying out in the morning.

God, that had been close! If I closed my eyes, I could see and feel that poor woman's torment. They couldn't know what hell she was going through! But I saw it, felt it. If I'd been cooped up there overnight, I would have been as bad off as she was by the morning. I shuddered.

Nine thirty local time, eight thirty "my" time. What was it? What had I done?

"Oh my God..." I looked at my watch: eight thirty four.

I understood; I remembered.

I'd teleported.

Not the first time, either -- but this had been my longest jump. All the others had been short -- meters, to a few kilometers.

And with each, there had been the momentary confusion when I'd arrived ... as if different parts of me arrived at different times! I thought about it, pondered...

Phase lag! Different de Broglie wavelengths with different propagation velocities, or different path lengths, possibly both, and a phase mismatch, "smearing" the signal in time.

Except that *I* was the signal, *rupa* and *vinyana* with different transit times.

But that wasn't the only variable in this one -- all the other jumps, I knew exactly where I was jumping to. This one, I'd pushed. Sure hadn't picked some county park outside of Boise. I should feel very lucky I didn't pop into mid-ocean or something. No, I'd known that wouldn't happen, something to do with an other-than-conscious mechanism that wouldn't let me hurt myself.

So I ended up in the middle of a park, laughing like a maniac, attracting the local authorities.

Shit, how do I explain that?

I smiled, relaxing a bit. Explain what? Some charges on my credit card? Hotel and random purchases in Idaho? A weird police report? The hospitalization?

Anyone looking at it, it wouldn't make sense. Don't attract any more attention, and all will be well.

I did want a complete physical when I got back. I was due for one, so that part was easy.

Do I fly back, or get back the same way I got here?

I couldn't do it now, but I would be able to in the morning.

No, that's not quite right. I could do it now, right now, but I'd probably have seizures, and be unconscious for a day. Somehow, I knew that. Not the trip I wanted to take right now. In the morning, I'd be able to do it.

And since I knew my destination, and knew it so well, I didn't think I'd have the phase lag I'd had getting here. I had the feeling -- knowing about the phase lag, I would compensate for it.

Why here? Damn, where was I picked up? I needed to know that. Had I traveled a geodesic? I laughed out loud. Geodesic in what brane, what space? I called the hospital, but Carlson was gone and Bowles was busy. I left a message, requesting he fax copies of whatever paperwork they had to my home. I'd confirm in the morning.

But for now, wait. Wait, rest, recharge, recover.

I sat cross-legged on the floor, turning until I had the proper orientation. Hands in my lap, I started the exercises. The sound, from deep in me, resonating as I cleared my mind. D-branes, the noise floor of the quantum universe sweeping in like a foamy tide. But in spite of the tide, all “directions” are equal; I can move in any of them. Or are certain aspects of “me” caught in the tide? Is anything possible as long as conformal symmetry is preserved?

The actors, strings, particles, branes, spirits? -- cavort on the stage, cavort to the call of the piper, offstage and unknown. But the actors, while playing certain roles, have flexibility within those roles. Yang-Mills isn't the last word.

Oh my God... A shudder rolled through me as the realization hit... Others... Others traveled the routes I'd discovered... That girl in the next room, screaming in terror, Christine, she'd been -- touched -- by some *thing*, not of *this* world, *our* world, the world of mere humans. *They* traveled these paths, as they had for millennia... No, the danger to me wasn't from societal structures, from the state... It was from -- as Lovecraft put it -- the terror *beneath* space, the old ones.

I laughed out loud again, standing, shaking my arms. Our vaunted science, breakthroughs in physics, struggling to unify our understanding of the universe, had given me a glimpse into the future, into the past...

And a glimpse into madness...

In one of those flashes, I saw *her*, Christine -- her path would not be easy, but she would be freed from the curse. That I knew, with a certainty; she would emerge from the shadow. But I also had the feeling that someone would pay the price. I couldn't see who that would be, still in her future, but the certainty was there.

I got a glass of water in the bathroom and looked at the character in the mirror. There was an intensity there... And unease -- *they* could reach *anywhere*, *anywhen* -- a hand reaching out from the mirror, madness tumbling out of empty space...

No! The equations formed in my mind. There were limits. The mathematics were complex, so complex... I'd need to spend a few hours pushing them around, but part of one equation felt like a density thing -- a limit imposed by local density of matter. I couldn't put myself into the middle of a mountain, or even underwater, at least that was my interpretation. Matter, and energy -- very weak energy fields also set up barriers. How about electron transport, ion transport, across cell membranes? Is that strong enough? It just might be! What a fascinating question!

A mental leap -- shunting the field would increase the “shielding” effect... I got my shoes and hurried to the hotel's business center, taking over one of their computers. Some of the parameters I knew, others I found on the Web, others I guessed at, pulling together a simplistic model.

A good conductor, as good as possible, and not surprisingly, certain sizes or size ranges seemed to be optimal. I'd need to redo the whole thing in *Mathematica* when I got home, but I didn't see anything wildly wrong. One size -- 15 to 20 millimeters in diameter? Another, 45 to 60, then times 9, times 27...

I erased my work as best I could and headed back to my room. Those sizes... What was familiar about them?

Putting the card key into the door lock -- it hit me.

I stifled my laughter until I was inside my room with the door closed and secured -- at least in a three-dimensional sense...

I laughed again at the synchronicity -- the kind of laughter that had made me a brief guest of Doctors Bowles and Carlson.

The strength of the protective field around a body is greatly increased through the use of conductive elements in the range 15 to 20 millimeters times three to the n , with the greatest increase with $n=1$. That's what my advanced theory told me.

And the art and wisdom of the ages said silver and gold rings on the fingers, silver, gold, copper bracelets around the wrists.

It fit -- oh how it fit!

Oho -- early in my experiments, I'd had trouble. Until my watch died! The watch with the metal band! My first successful jaunt had been the day after that watch died! And I'd replaced it with one with a plastic strap!

And my school ring, the same thing -- somehow I'd known to remove it before trying... I'd have to go back and look at my notes, but I'd bet that I had problems when I had it in a pocket alone, and didn't have problems when I put it in my coin carrier, where it was touching other conductive surfaces, effectively altering the topological structure.

I'd look for a simple silver band when I got home, but for now my school ring would do.

Yes, put the shunts at the edges of the field -- fingers and toes -- much more effective there.

The phone rang; I knew it was Bowles before I picked it up, but didn't let on. Yes, I was doing fine, had a good dinner, walked around, and was just about to go to bed. Yes, I'll call in the morning, and when I get home. Thanks for your concern.

I set the alarm clock. I was feeling tired. Funny, my school ring would protect me... I got to bed and fell asleep quickly and easily.

Portal

Shower, left a message for Drs Bowles and Carlson, breakfast at the hotel, check out.

I knew how I'd get home, and it wouldn't be on an airplane. I started focusing during the shuttle ride to the airport. This one would be easy, and I'd arrive intact.

Inside, I checked one of the departing flight displays. A quarter to nine now, a quarter to eight back home. I smiled -- I thought I'd be home before two in the afternoon my time -- that's what it would be if I flew.

Walking to the nearest men's room, I took off my ring and put it in my coin carrier, sandwiching it between two quarters.

An empty toilet stall, might as well do something useful -- I dropped my pants and took a seat.

Wipe, flush, pull up my pants when I knew I was alone. Eyes closed, turning until I was facing the right direction, taking my breath under control.

Open the portal ... *be* there ... exhale slowly and *shift*...

Opening my eyes, I was in my study. I took a deep breath, feeling the smile fill my face. I'd done it, intact. I needed to write down the details for Bowles' wedding. But did I need to book a flight?

I glanced at the clock on my desk -- five minutes to two! My watch said ten to eight!

I dropped into my chair and laughed. It seems I still have a lot to learn!

FIN

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Portal

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