

Conversation Pieces  
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# The Last Letter

A Novella

by

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Perhaps we all need to lose our minds at some point in our lives in order to maintain our sanity at all other times. Of course, if everyone succumbed to insanity at once, the world would tip into unbalance—an unfixable state of chaos, grief, fear, from which we could not again achieve balance. Unbalance is actually, by definition, a Hell.

—Peta Sutton, 2023

What you mistake for madness is but over-acuteness of the senses.

—Edgar Allan Poe, 1843



*The famous biologist Helmut Janvy stooped to collect the mail from his foyer floor below the mail slot, as he did each day. But on this particular morning, amidst the damp leaking in from the winter outside, he detected a scent he had known well years ago, one he hadn't smelled since. He'd long given up trying to name the fragrance, which resembled, more than anything, a wild summer storm: steaming earth, singed grasses, wind-whipped blossoms. He fell back against the wall as a wave of emotion washed over him. That scent! Had he imagined it? With trembling hands, he sifted through the pile until he found the source: a large, thick envelope bearing his name and address, several stamps from another continent, and the marks of travel. No return address. He inhaled. None needed.*

*He placed the envelope on the kitchen sill and set about making himself a cup of coffee. Never had the methodical process produced so much chaos, for his eyes and thoughts returned again and again to the envelope. He spilled the grounds and had to grind more. The kettle boiled over and spewed scalding water onto the floor. When at last he had cleaned up the mess and the brew met with his satisfaction and could be poured, he sat out on the balcony, the envelope on the table beside him, stealing his solitude like an unannounced guest. The winter chill cut through his thick wool sweater; he didn't feel it. He was a patient man. But the envelope had come from the one who could change him – one who had changed him. And it seemed she still had that power, for he couldn't wait until he'd finished his coffee. He set the cup down and tore open the envelope.*

*A manuscript, wrapped in an exquisite pencil sketch of a New World Island Toad, fell into his lap. He examined the sketch for a moment, marveling at the artistry and accuracy, recognizing her handiwork. He laid it on the ta-*

*ble beside him and picked up the manuscript. Handwritten in the unselfconscious scrawl of one used to writing only to herself, it began with the words To Helmut, who once loved me. She could not have commanded more of his attention. He read on:*

I have to tell you something—I can hear you chuckling already, for when have I not had something to tell you? But this time, I’m afraid, it’s very hard. Are you sitting down? Yes, of course you are, and you’ve probably made yourself a cup of coffee. I wonder, have you drunk it down, or abandoned it in favor of my words? *Es spielt keine Rolle.* It doesn’t matter. I’m just curious, even now, with Death so close on my heels.

My son died today. His body lies on the bed beside the desk at which I write this. I closed his eyelids and rested his head on the pillow after his body shuddered its final shudder and lay still, devoid of the life it had encased a moment before. His pink cheeks, now drawn and pale, his hair no longer shining, all but the shell have dispersed to a realm the living cannot know. My heart aches at the thought of his laughter, that unguarded joy I will never hear again, his thoughts, his voice—oh, the anguish I now feel compares only to one other I have known. Both are relentless, and I long to escape them—soon, very soon now, I will.

I remember when you developed a smoker’s cough, before you went on the patch once and for all and quit your habit. And quit me, too, I should say. But we both saw that coming, whereas my son was so young—I had no warning. His cough sounded ten times worse than yours ever did. Something—the doctors don’t know



what—ate up his lungs. In a few short days, he lost the ability to breathe. No one knows yet that he is gone. I will call no one until I finish this letter. And then I too will lie down for the last time.

I have to tell you—ah, Helmut! Writing to you makes my heart ache. I feel like the sailor who hears the siren and can never get that voice out of his mind, his heart. But of course, I am Peta. I am no sailor. And you are no lovely siren. Last I saw, in fact, you had a terrible mustache. I have told my heart not to live in this interminable *Sehnsucht*, but my heart will forever have its own mind. And my story will make no sense unless I tell you everything, everything you have forgotten with the care and purpose of a saint.

Will remembering the truth wreak havoc on your cerebral blip, I wonder? Is it possible for me to refill the gap in your memory simply by telling you this story? Or perhaps you will feel you are hearing this for the first time, and your brain will store it somewhere entirely different from where the memory first resided, before you had it surgically removed. Or perhaps you don't remember having the cerebral blip procedure done, and this all sounds impossible to you. No matter. We have no time for caution or controlled experimentation. You must believe me now—please allow it. Honor this last request of a dying woman and a mother who has lost her child. I will do the work. Have some more coffee, my friend, and promise to stay here with me awhile.

You loved me once. You may have erased me from your memory, but accept it now and I will prove it to you. It started so innocently. It's shocking to learn what

can come of such innocence. We never saw it coming, this love, until suddenly it was there. Here. Between us.

Nearly 25 years ago, in the northwestern region of the New World, on Island SG7, in the month of May, I spoke with you for the first time. I had called a general meeting. Such meetings usually drew 200 people or less and so were held in the pub, where they comfortably adopted the tone of a family squabble. My meeting, however, took place in the school gymnasium at the northern tip of the island, to accommodate the nearly 2500 island inhabitants who attended. They sat in the bleachers that lined the sides of the room. You stood alone against the far wall by the exit and said nothing, watching the proceedings as if observation were your business. In the middle of the gym floor, I clung to the sides of the podium with sweaty palms, trying to emanate an authoritative calm.

“Thank you all for coming,” I said. “This community obviously cares about its forest system.”

“You’re damned right we do!” A man’s voice shot out from the crowd and echoed about the gym, followed by righteous voices of agreement.

“I’ve spent the past week in the forest, as you know,” I said, “and I want to share with you what I’ve learned.”

“We already know—the worms are taking over the entire island!”

More shouts of assent.

“If you would please refrain from commenting until I’ve finished,” I said, “We’ll have time for everyone to share their views.” The crowd quietened. “The webworms and their webs are unsightly,” I said, “but

they have done and will do no permanent damage to the forest. This spring, the webworms will continue to develop through six phases, called instars—during which they will grow and molt, or shed their skins—until late June when they cocoon. I will destroy any cocoons near ground level and trap moths in early July. In the months that follow, I will destroy all accessible egg masses. This process will significantly reduce the webworm population and give the forest a chance to renew itself. That is the first step to restoring balance to the island’s forest system. As well, I will develop a long-term eco-balancing strategy. Until the forest regains balance, it may look strange to you, but I need you to be patient and let me do my job.”

The islanders, a mix of superstitious island-borns and educated, retired imports from the mainland cities, were accustomed to autonomy and immediacy. They wanted predators shipped in; they wanted bug bombs and pesticides. I reminded them that their overuse of pesticides over the past decade was one of the things that had gotten them into this mess in the first place, killing off beneficial insects and losing their webworm predators in the process.

“Then spray the worms,” someone shouted. “If the other organisms or creatures are gone, then we have nothing to lose anymore. Spray everything!”

“Spray them with what?” I said. “After completing my preliminary tests, I can tell you that the webworms have developed a resistance to insecticides, viruses, and fungi. Even the parasites they host have no significant effect upon them. You have bred some very resilient webworms here. So we must control them another

way. But this will take more than a season, so again I ask for your patience—”

“We’ve waited long enough already. Those worms have devoured half the forest.”

“What will they eat when they run out of trees?”

“Us?”

“Our homes?”

Mayor Falster rose, strode to the podium, and grabbed the microphone. “Now, that’s enough,” he said, his jowls shuddering. “We have a problem, and Dr. Sutton here will solve it. We’ve survived earthquakes and droughts—this is nothing compared to those disasters, right? Please continue, Dr. Sutton,” he said, smiling a politician’s smile and nodding to me.

“Thank you, Mr. Mayor. The webworms can only eat leaves from deciduous trees. Not you, not your homes, not your clothing. They are a nuisance, but they will not harm anyone. I feel I must remind you that the Global System Conservationists have taken over guardianship of the forest as is their right and responsibility when an ecosystem falls out of balance. They hired me as their agent. I go by the book, and I adhere to my sworn duty, which is to protect and rebalance the unbalanced system. Please understand that there is no quick fix, and disobeying my directives may result in a hefty penalty and/or imprisonment, per the International Conservancy Law. Now then, does anyone have any questions?”

There was only silence. The Mayor, still standing beside me, beamed.

“I reiterate: I will continue my research but will take no action to curb the worm’s activities until the

cocooning phase. Until then, please avoid the forest, as these kinds of webs can be dense and sticky and will increase as the webworms grow. If you have further questions, please seek me out. Thank you in advance for your patience and your cooperation.”

The Mayor shook my hand. Then, to close the meeting, he conducted the crowd as they sang, arm in arm, their island song:

“We’re SG7 and we love our land  
from greenest forest to golden sand  
we are the beauty of the archipelago  
Oh, SG7—that’s our home!”

After a hearty cheer, the islanders milled about, discussing the forest, their children, the weather. Although my body surged with an overdose of adrenalin, it seemed that the meeting had achieved my purpose. I held my head high and focused on breathing deeply to curtail the adrenalin flood. I failed to stop it, but after exactly 73 steps, I reached the door and entered the warm, safe, blackness of the night.

You stood at the far end of the lot beside my solar-powered cart, smoking a cigarette, beyond the edge of the lot lamp’s glare. You wore the universal garb of the sand scavengers—worn leather jacket, faded jeans, black boots. I recognized you from the beach, where I’d seen you some time earlier that week. You had stood among the geese, following imperceptible trails in the sand, isolated from the world by your headphones. Intent on maneuvering a prod attached by a cable to a sack slung over one shoulder and across your chest, you didn’t seem to notice my gaze. The sack at your hip did not contain a battery pack like real scavengers car-

ried, I suspected. No, you had some kind of computer in there, for your samples.

“Do you have a caterpillar-related complaint as well?” I said, hands and limbs trembling, adrenalin still shooting up my system. I stomped my feet and pushed my lungs to expand deeper with each inhalation, forcing calmness. You shook your head no and grinned a child’s grin, disarming. As we talked, my guard lowered, as did my heart rate, at last.

“No complaint,” you said, with a thick accent. “It’s a difficult situation.”

“Yes,” I said. “But I must act in the interests of the forest system. The GSC will retaliate against anyone who interferes with my restoration plan.”

You shrugged, sucked on your cigarette. “You could burn the forest.”

“Yes, and pay carbon penalties, plus exponentially increase the recovery phase here? No thanks. I consider that an emergency solution. This system is in a state of unbalance, but not in crisis.”

The door to the gym opened, and a man with a three-legged dog emerged. We watched him disappear down the side path.

“I’m curious,” I said, “on the beach, what do you scan for?”

You lied to me then, or tried to. You looked around as if on guard. I couldn’t read your eyes, brown and emotionless behind rather pragmatic wire-rimmed spectacles, but I could see my quizzical green gaze reflected in them. More than a minute passed before you said, “Treasure.”

“In goose shit?” I said. “Do tell.”

I laughed out loud. I hadn't laughed for days or months, it seemed, and what a release. I had to thank you. Once you realized your secret was out, you sort of hissed through your teeth. It interested me that you didn't really laugh. Your mustache also intrigued me—pencil thin, lining your upper lip and jaw in a fashion unknown and quite unattractive to me. "Where are you from?" I asked. And so it began, as I said, so innocently.

I felt a bit sorry for you too. I probably never told you that. But there you were, surrounded by gaggles of New World geese on an unbalanced island, not the worst of exiles to be sure, but thousands of miles away from your beloved wife and children, your country—a proud man sent on a fool's errand to examine goose droppings—drifting along the fringes of a culture so foreign to your own. I wanted to show you some New World hospitality. So I set about planning some cultural adventures for you, a hike or a pub night or whatever. I don't know when I became attracted to you, despite your poor taste in mustaches. It just happened. And I know what you'll say about that. No use wondering why. These things just happened. The strange—or perhaps magical—thing was, they happened to you too.

One day soon after our meeting, you motor-scooted over to my leased beach-front cabin from your room above the pub, denigrating the coffee there and offering to make some "good coffee" for us both. While it brewed, you informed me that you'd overheard someone new at the pub the night before who intended to set up a tour enterprise on the island called "The WebWalk." He had already met with Hank, one

of the island's fine artists, to see about getting some "I Survived the WebWalk" t-shirts made. He planned to advertise on the mainland and attract thousands to SG7 in the summer.

"To wander through a forest under guardianship?" I asked.

You nodded, scrutinizing my latest sketches.

The thought of imminent confrontation pulled something taut in my chest. "You know what my mentor told me when I finished training and left for my first assignment?" I said, talking more to keep myself grounded than to say anything. You looked up from a close-up of a webworm at second instar. "He said, 'Red, hit the first one hard with the International Conservancy Law book. You can't stop them from coming, but the rest will think twice before they come.'"

"Red?"

"My mentor called me 'Red'—you know, my hair." I shook my head.

You nodded. "So, the WebWalk will serve as an example," you said.

"It should." Again I felt the dread of confrontation stealing my breath. "I still don't know why the webs have that texture and strength," I said. "And he wants to lure tourists here to get stuck in them?" I fussed in the kitchen to get the mugs ready, forcing air into my constricting lungs, but you took the mugs from my hands and shoved a sketch of the caterpillar webbing under my nose.

"What about sketching interests you?" you asked. "Most biologists take photos these days."



I wiped my clammy hands on my shirt, searching for focus. “Sketching allows me to record and digest a system’s status,” I said. “Words in a report—even photos—cannot convey observations as a piece of handmade art can. When I stand in this forest, surrounded by the absence of birdsong, of animal sounds and smells, of lizards rustling the undergrowth and mosquitoes whining in my ears—I sometimes feel as if I’ve traveled to another planet. The webs hang from tree-top to ground, like curtains, blocking light, inhibiting my passage. The trees stand completely defoliated, like skeletons draped in silvery shrouds, waiting for resurrection next spring, the webworm larvae having moved on via their web paths connecting the trees—I’ve never seen a forest like this. I doubt anyone has. And photos cannot capture the phenomenon here. I could not call my report complete without this type of artwork. No biologist can, in my opinion.”

My breathing had returned to normal. “Helmut,” I said, edging a smile, “What about goose shit interests you?”

“It doesn’t,” you said, in an abrupt manner that told me I’d hit a sensitive nerve. “These geese live all over the world now, and people want to know all about them: if they carry disease, if they pose a threat to children, if they can be trained to, for example, mow lawns like sheep, eat bugs from flower gardens, things like this. And we may soon have a recipe for fuel pellets made primarily of their waste. I make a good living studying geese and, as you say, goose shit.”

I refrained from sharing my opinion of the kind of biologist who valued a fat wallet over meaningful

work, but you read my mind. “I have children, Peta,” you said.

“*Ja, ja*, I know,” I said, “But if these geese live everywhere, why come here to study them?”

“My manager decided that. He was transferred recently from another department. I applied for his position but, well, it was a political situation. So, he wants to be rid of me. I did not fight this assignment—I don’t want him to know I am a fighter. Until I am in a position where he will lose. Two months is no long time, really. Except, of course when I consider how quickly my little girls grow up while I am away. That is the hardest part.” You checked on the coffee and then returned to my sketches. “Yours is no easy assignment either,” you said. “No. The forest system is a good puzzle,” I said. “I like solving puzzles; I find it very gratifying.”

“What’s ‘gratifying?’”

“Solving puzzles, of course.”

You rolled your eyes. “*Ja*, but what does the word mean?”

I laughed, “‘Gratifying’ is like a good cup of coffee.”

“I see.”

“Helmut, why do you sculpt your mustache that way?”

“Is there any other way?”

“Never mind.”

As would become our habit, we carried the coffee to the pier in travel cups, a New World practice you considered *kulturlos* at first—“coffee is meant to be drunk sitting down, in a civilized fashion”—but quickly adopted once you realized you could observe the natural

world while enjoying your coffee. We watched the sun rise while discussing the happenings of the previous night, the world and our places in it. You smoked cigarettes and told me stories about childhood in the Old World, and I told you about growing up in the New World. We had a lot in common for two beings from opposite sides of the planet. We both had grown up near water, studied biology, were married and had been for over ten years, survived on pizza, and had headed employee uprisings in the workplace. We never lacked conversation topics; your life wisdom lay in different areas than mine, and vice versa, so we learned from each other. Yes, you and I became fast friends in no time at all.

You may wonder why I take the time to tell you these things which, perhaps, seem commonplace thus far. Like any biologist, you want the results and then the explanation. But, these were extraordinary times, you understand, and our love grew from like circumstances. By the time the islanders lost their minds, you and I had changed as well. So, first, as a control, I must draw the baseline.

J.T. Arnaques dressed like a back-century ringmaster, in broad reds and whites, and sported a moth-eaten coon-skin cap. Myrna, the island's aging beauty queen, with perfect hair and perpetual smile, had taken it upon herself to assist him in his WebWalk endeavors. She drove her convertible cart straight to my cabin when he got stuck, and arrived without a lipstick smear or a hair

out of place. She begged me to hurry, so we left our coffee unfinished and followed her to the eastern edge of the forest, behind the edge of the defoliated zone, where Arnaques had been plotting his future WebWalk tour route. Thus far, he had penetrated the webbing about two feet, just far enough to get most of his body stuck. In one hand, he gripped one of the pub's steak knives, with which he was trying to free his other three limbs from the sticky wall of webs.

"Mr. Arnaques," I said, from where we stood just beyond the worm front, "I am Agent Sutton of the GSC." I flashed my certificate at him, but he didn't look. "It is my duty to inform you that International Conservancy Law prohibits the operation of any commercial venture on the site of a system under restoration, punishable by imprisonment and severe financial penalty." As my adrenalin flow increased, I struggled to get the words out.

"Never heard of it," said Arnaques, floundering deeper into the webs until he lost possession of his knife and could only stand immobilized and gaze at the knife hanging just out of reach.

As a rule, I did everything by the book, but the man's situation demanded a breach of protocol. I stomped my feet, trying to ground.

"Help him!" said Myrna, smiling in dismay.

"I got it, Peaches," said Arnaques through the webs. "Keep that motor warm for me."

"Right," said Myrna. She dashed to her cart and started the engine.

He wriggled to get a hand into his pocket and pulled out a cigarette lighter. He fumbled, and it fell

to the ground, hit a stone and drew a single spark. The webs at his feet burst into flame. I pulled off my jacket and dove at the fire while you grabbed Arnaques and managed to lift him clear. Flames smothered, I gathered the lighter and my ruined jacket, and tore the knife from the webbing. You and I each grabbed an Arnaques limb and yanked until we'd liberated his frame, then I gave him one hour to remove himself from the island. He raced away from the worm front, jumped into Myrna's cart, and took the next float plane out.

"I want a cigarette," you said, heading out of the forest.

"I'll catch up," I said, "I need a moment." I leaned against the trunk of a still-leafed tree a few meters from the worm front and slid down to sit at its base. You pocketed your cigarettes and sat down near me. "That was close," I said. "We could have lost the whole forest."

"And Arnaques too," you said.

"Yes." I stared into the sheets of webs before us, focused on deepening my breath, and waited for my heart to slow to normal. The stillness of the forest seemed to fill me, and after a few minutes I felt better. "Thanks for sitting with me," I said, wrapping the web-covered knife in my jacket. "Feel like a walk? Maybe a chemist can tell me more about this webbing."

You smoked a cigarette while I visited the Mayor's office to mandate a campfire ban within 500 feet of the forest perimeter and an open fire ban on the entire island. Even as he eyed the charred jacket I had bunched in my hand, the Mayor resisted. "BBQ season approaches, and a 500-foot radius includes most

beaches—aren't you being a bit heavy-handed, young lady?"

"My name is Dr. Sutton," I said. "But you may call me 'Agent Sutton.' As the agent of the Global System Conservationists, I could, as a precautionary measure, ban possession of all flammable fuel, and flame and fire-making devices from the entire island," I said. "But I believe such measures would constitute overkill at this point. Forest fire hazards increase in summer, no matter where you live. As the GSC entrusted me to protect this region, I am implementing the fire ban. Persons found in violation of this fire ban will be subject to financial penalty and/or imprisonment, per International Conservancy Law. If you choose to resist my orders, you risk being removed from your office for impeding the GSC. Have I made myself clear, Mr. Mayor?"

"Yes, *Agent Sutton*," he said.

"Excellent. Now, would you please point me toward the island chemist?"

You came along, since you enjoyed my assignment more than your own, trekking the island's many beaches, measuring and recording the nutrients and bacteria levels in goose droppings, noting gaggle behaviors, aberrations in their seemingly mechanical 6- to 7-minute defecation rate, *e. coli* levels on beaches populated by geese. You had a quota to fill, as I recall, over a two-month period, before you could return home. Home to your world, your family, your life that seemed so perfect to me, I could only wonder how you'd come to lead such a charmed life. Besides falling prey temporarily to a boss who saw you as an obstacle to his

company-wide conquest, you had a good life. And you knew it. Satisfaction emanated from your calm, patient being—I could only hope some of that would rub off on me.

My life was different. I suffered from panic attacks and nightmares and went without sleep. I had a husband whom I rarely saw or even talked to. I liked my job, but I seemed to live in a constant state of double-think. In short, I functioned, but often in panic-mode, and rarely with the ease and confidence with which the average person functioned. And certainly not with your grace. Before meeting you, I had accepted that my life was as good as it could get. But you caused something to change in me. After meeting you, I wanted more from life than just survival, and I began to believe I could have it.

“So, and what kind of day will you be having today?” You once asked. We were walking to the pier in a dawn drizzle.

“What do you mean?” I said.

“Well, what kind of day do you want to have?”

“Helmut.” I stopped walking and faced you, remembering then how tall you were. My eyes met the third snap on your black leather jacket. I looked up to find your eyes, but raindrop-speckled spectacles masked them. “We come from different worlds, you know.”

You nodded.

“So try to imagine, my goal, every day, is to avoid harm, retribution, confrontation. If I can get through

without panicking as well, then I consider that a stellar day. Can you understand that at all?”

“So,” you lit a cigarette and took a drag, “you want a peaceful day,” you said.

I nodded. “I guess so.”

You took another drag, nodded and began to walk again toward the pier. I wonder, did you know you would pique my curiosity? I trotted, unmindful of sand in my shoes, to catch up with your long strides. “What kind of day will you have today?” I asked.

“Hrm...” you said, looking around at the gray, dim drizzle, the oppressive, low rainclouds. “I will have a wonderful day on a wonderful island,” you said.

“You will, eh?” I said.

“*Ja*,” you said, smiling with raindrops on your glasses. “And I want you to have one too.”

The chemist’s shop had a grass-covered roof that sloped to meet a hill in back. Goats grazed upon both hill and roof. The sign above the door read “White Lily Apothecary and Fine Cheese.” Pungent aromas of cultures and molds surrounded us when we entered. A woman in her early thirties stood at the counter in blue coveralls, one hand patting the head of a white goat beside her. The woman had large brown eyes, long, wavy brown hair, and dark reddish-brown patches splotching her skin from collarbone to mid-neck, and from wrist to forearms—a dark red melasma, I guessed, or a reverse vitiligo.

“May I speak with the Chemist?” I said, unfurling my coat to reveal the knife.



Her eyes grew wide. “I only wanted to help,” she said. Then she turned and ran out the back door, the goat on her heels. They had covered half the back pasture before the woman stumbled and fell. Goats galloped playfully alongside us as we ran, their bells clanging and hooves thumping. When we caught up to her, gasping for air, she said, “Please don’t arrest me. Who will take care of my goats?” Then she burst into tears.

I could feel myself start to cry too and, cursing my lack of emotion filters, I appealed to you for help. “Helmut, what kind of cheese did you want to buy today? You do eat cheese in the Old World, don’t you?”

You proceeded to give a lecture on cheese so saturated in erroneous information that she finally could listen to no more.

“You know nothing about cheese,” she said, snorting and somehow looking down at us even though we stood over her. The goats jostled each other to be close to her, and she scratched their heads.

“Well,” I said, offering a hand to help her up, “why don’t you tell us what we need to know?”

Her name was Lily. She introduced her goats—Billie, Pan, Electra, Nanny, and Edie, the white one we’d seen in the shop—as her “family,” brought us into a little room adjacent to her cheese shop, and pushed the goats back outside so she could close the door. Her chemist’s lab had the basic necessities for her to concoct pharmaceuticals for the islanders—only as prescribed by a physician, she assured us—and supported her work on her own chemistry projects.

“We had so many caterpillars last year,” she said, sitting at her bench, surrounded by lab equipment, “I tried to get rid of them by infusing them with the MCF virus.”

“MCF?” you asked, barely intelligible with a mouthful of cheese from the large sampler plate she’d prepared for you.

“Makes Caterpillars Floppy,” I said.

“It’s supposed to trigger apoptosis,” Lily said.

“Cell death,” you said.

“More like cell suicide,” Lily said, “but somehow the worms survived. They were supposed to die off but instead, they made a super web.”

“Stronger, stickier, extremely flammable—” I said, handing her the pub knife. You offered me the nearly empty plate, but I shook my head no.

She leaned forward, the bench creaking under her. “Yes, exactly. And I don’t know what went wrong. I am not a caterpillar expert or biologist. I started studying chemistry to try to cure my red melasma—” she held out her arms, “and I sort of branched out from there. I guess the MCF virus mutated somehow. Or the worms did. You can’t know what the islanders tried on these worms before—I don’t even know—chemical compounds, pesticides, powders, sprays—even the island witch probably cast a spell or two over the past few years, so these caterpillars, they just aren’t like other caterpillars.” Lily shook her head. The goats’ bells clanged outside. “I know no one uses MCF anymore, but because this is an isolated environment, I thought the worms might not have come in contact with the virus before, and the worms would die and everything here would go back to normal—we’d have a healthy

forest with birdsong and ladybugs, a tourist industry to support us again, and happy islanders.”

Being a naturalist and ignorant of the supernatural, I did not know how to address Lily’s assertion regarding the island witch’s involvement, so I shelved it. However, the abuse of chemicals on the island worried me, and I associated a distinct danger with the islanders’ level of ecosystemic ignorance. I called the GSC to request a backup unit to enforce forest boundaries but was denied. Landslides in the South World had swallowed up a settlement two days prior, requiring GSC troops under emergency status. Unless the SG7 ecosystem was under direct attack, I must rely on local authorities for support. Since I had no evidence of mass conspiracy, I enlisted you as an aide and continued my work as best I could.

And so you rushed through your goose work each morning and then assisted me with mine. I had to chart the island’s forty-square-mile forest, which covered the predominantly circular southern region of the island, separated from the more populated northern region by the ponds. I noted density and viscosity of webs, recorded size and number of webworms, tested for parasites, searched for signs of caterpillar predators, and estimated the amount of time remaining before the pests would have defoliated the entire forest. The biggest problem: I couldn’t get past the worm front. The webs hung so densely, I couldn’t wriggle through, and no tool could cut or tear or break them. If I couldn’t examine the entire system, how could I return it to balance?