

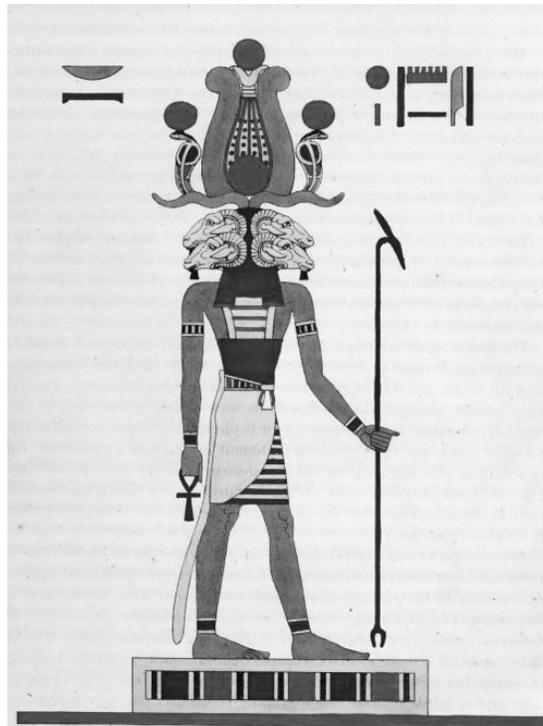
# Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 2 Number 7

Page 1 – ASTRONAUT AND BLUR by Lee Blevins. Mr. Blevins lives in Lexington, KY. You can follow him on Twitter @BleeSevens or visit his sad, bare-bones website [byleeblevins.com](http://byleeblevins.com).

Page 3 – THE DOMINANT DUO by Melodie Corrigan. Melodie Corrigan is an eclectic Canadian writer whose stories have appeared in *Litro UK*, *Foliage Art*, *Emerald Bolts*, *Earthen Journal*, *Still Crazy* and *The Write Place at the Write Time* ([www.melodiecorrigan.com](http://www.melodiecorrigan.com))

Page 5 – MERCY by Jen Messaros. Ms Messaros, of Dayton, OH writes, “After a short career as a professional musician, I retired to stay home with my children. Writing became a good outlet because rehearsals are never an issue. However, I did fall in with a great writing group, The Plot Sisters. We are being featured at the 2017 Antioch Writer's workshop as a guest panel.”



# “ASTRONAUT AND BLUR”

by LEE BLEVINS

Jordan and Trent were out of both weed and things to talk about when the portal opened in their living room. At first it was a blue sphere the size of a basketball but it grew up and out until it was the size of a small trampoline.

The astronaut stepped. He wore a baggy spacesuit, white with yellow fringes, and a tinted helmet. He held a big ray gun that had a small solar dish for a barrel.

The astronaut took one look at the two men on the couch and then he raised his ray gun and fired towards the hallway. A blue sphere shot out, spun, and hovered in front of the bathroom door. Then expanded outwards.

The astronaut lowered his ray gun and walked, heavily, as if weighed down by unusual gravitational pull, into the portal.

Jordan and Trent stood up and went into the space between the portals. Jordan looked into the one on the left and Trent looked into the one on the right. He couldn't see through its shimmering blue surface but there was a bit of a draft.

“Where do you think he went?” asked Jordan.

Trent looked back at the coffee table in front of the couch. It was covered in pop cans, empty bags of chips, ashtrays, and paraphernalia. His grocery store smock was

draped over the arm of the couch.

“I'm going in,” he said, and he stepped forward.

“Don't be stup-”

The blue surface of the portal washed over Trent like aloe vera and then he came through it with a plop. The world in front of him was dark and desolate and rocky. There were deep purple trails across the sky.

And Trent couldn't breathe there.

He felt cold wash over his face and his throat clenched tight and his nose snorted up in vain and his knee buckled and he was tipping forward in a fall he couldn't stop.

Then came the blur. It flew towards him and scooped him up in its arms and carried him through the portal and tossed him roughly onto his back and whipped through the other portal and away.

Jordan crouched beside Trent, asking him if he was okay. The portal Trent had stepped into shrank back down into nothing.

Trent caught his breath in harsh, jagged inhales. Color washed back over his face and feeling crept back into his extremities. His nose was bleeding.

“What -” went Trent, “happened?”

“I have no idea,” said Jordan.

Trent craned his neck back and looked up at the other portal, the one that was in front of the bathroom. It wasn't there anymore, either. But there was a small sliver of red fabric that floated slowly through the air until, done gliding, it landed on the carpet.

It was a piece of cape, of course. ❖



# “THE DOMINANT DUO”

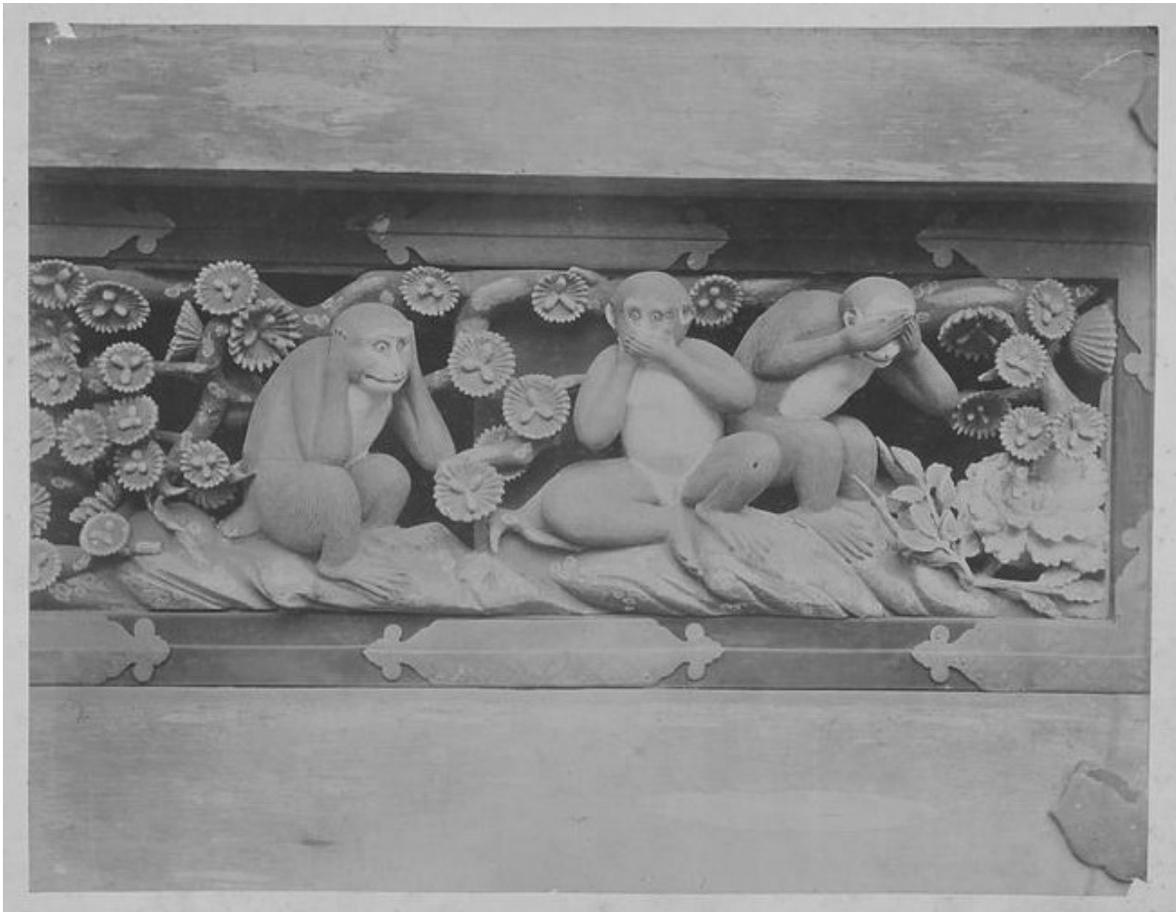
by MELODIE CORRIGALL

She was at the gate but entrance, to Tilley’s surprise, was not automatic. The woman ahead of her in line, tousled and troubled, was being held up as the gatekeeper rustled through his cards for her credentials. Cards! The organization was behind the times and an eye scan was not possible.

Tilley had relied on them to have a record of who she was. She expected them to be like Santa and know if she were good

or bad. Hopefully, they wouldn’t be petty enough to worry about a lapsed membership.

Off to her left, an alternate door of bristly steel caught Tilley’s eye. A well-endowed woman in a svelte red dress beckoned her over. When Tilley shook her head, a slender young man replaced the woman. Ignoring his inviting smile, she swung around to discover the person ahead still agitating for entry. It was worse than



trying to get past a bicep-rich bouncer.

Her father had always insisted it was all in whom you knew, he being comfortably ensconced with the influential. He was right, had she been a more steadfast member she might have been whisked through the line. Unfortunately she had been an independent thinker.

When she started getting creaky bones, she had been courted with pleas to join up: declare her affiliation. She should have responded to the opposing sides' propaganda and chosen one or the other.

A skeptic, reluctant to jump on board with causes or clubs, Tilley had dismissed the extreme alternatives. Both sides insisted that only they offered a sane solution. One offered short, the other long term, benefits. If you cast your ballot for one, you might suffer now, but if you chose the other you would suffer later. So whether to be hurled forward in a hand basket to hell, as one leader insisted would happen if she didn't come on board with him, or to be floated into the heavens for an idyllic life as the opposition insisted was on offer if she opted for her. Dismissing both sides as junk mail, she had dallied, hoping for a third choice—an independent party—for those not ready to sign up for either of the dominant duo.

“No vote is a vote for the winning party,” a friend had insisted. “Once the polls are closed and you sigh the last breath, too late to change your mind.”

So here she was, no way to slip through the gateway but finally her turn at the gate. The frail custodian in his beige jacket

leaned forward—were those wings on his back?—“Ready to join the throng,” he invited. Still she hesitated.

To her side the woman in red, skirt slit to the thigh, reappeared. “Still time to choose us,” she crooned. “You're used to hot summers with global warming. And we offer more fun than you'd have playing a harp.”

“We've changed with the times,” the winged gate man barked. “We have electric keyboards.”

“Whatever,” said the lady in red, dismissively. ❖

# “MERCY”

by JEN MESSAROS

I watched the video archive downloaded through Abel’s ocular implant. Linda Martin—age 17, stood on a street corner under a cone of light. I could count the ribs exposed by her halter top even from this distance. Abel hid behind a car in a nearby parking lot, watching.

A 1972 Pinto drove up next to the girl and I repressed an urge to smile. I’d seen films from the 1970s, with hissing sound and grainy images. It amused me to see the time period as Abel saw it, as clearly as though I walked there myself.

“Hey, you wanna party?” Linda asked. She leaned down low in the Pinto’s open window. This doubtless gave the driver a view down her halter top while Abel and I got to view the tight ass of her bell bottoms.

While the girl got in the car, Abel fired a Tracer onto its bumper. Then he stole a car from the lot and followed the trail. He glanced periodically at the Trace on his wristband monitor, but otherwise kept his gaze straight ahead and his hands at ten and two. He knew I was watching. If he had any butterflies, he wouldn’t let me in on it.

When the Trace stopped moving, Abel parked his car and walked. If the pinto driver was just another John, Abel would

let it go and walk back to his car. We didn’t interfere in small things.

I heard a scream and a slap. Abel took off running the last few feet and threw the driver’s door open. He grabbed the man by the back of his polyester shirt and dragged him out onto the asphalt. He clicked his weapon from Trace to Taze and fired. Now the girl and man were both screaming and I suppressed another smile. It sounded almost like the wail of electric guitars.

“Linda,” Abel said.

This surprised the girl in the car, and her part of the harmony stopped. The guy on the ground had wound down to a drone. Abel surprised me, too. Agents never spoke to the victims. It was against the rules. “I’m not here to hurt you, honey.”

I watched the screen, fascinated now. I used to soak in Abel’s professionalism, but lately he had changed. He’d never screwed up in the field, though. This was a first. I wondered what he would do next.

Abel reached down and searched the man’s pockets for car keys. He opened the trunk, silent and professional once more and glanced back at Linda, who finally got out of the car. She backed away from the open trunk, though. Abel turned his eyes

back to the trunk, and sure enough, it contained a nicely organized torture and murder kit—zip ties, duct tape, a length of chain, and a blowtorch. This was definitely the right guy.

Abel closed the trunk again and looked back at the girl. She started to cry. “I just want to go home.”

“I know. Calm down for a minute, okay? Close your eyes, take a deep breath, and think about your happiest memory.”

Linda looked him dead in the eye. “You’re not going to hurt me?”

“He was going to hurt you, Linda. It’s my job to stop him.”

Linda looked back toward the Pinto, but she couldn’t see her attacker lying on the other side. “Is he dead?”

“No, I didn’t kill him, but he isn’t going anywhere for a while.” Abel took a few steps closer to Linda. This time, she didn’t back away. “Are you all right?” he asked.

Linda nodded her head, but her smile quivered. “Think of my happiest memory, right?”

“That’s right.”

Linda closed her eyes and took a deep stuttering breath. Abel changed his weapon to Projectile. Before Linda Martin opened her eyes, Abel shot her through the heart. Her eyes flew open and her knees buckled. Abel caught her so she didn’t hit her head when she fell. “It’s okay, baby. You keep that memory with you and go on home.”

Linda tried to breathe because her brain didn’t realize yet that she was dead. She mouthed words I couldn’t catch.

When her eyes went dim, Abel kissed her forehead. He closed her eyes and put her back into the car and crossed her hands in her lap.

Abel went back to the groaning man on the pavement and kicked him hard in the kidneys. “Will, get me out of here.” He clicked his wristband, which sent him to Holding, where he downloaded his video feed. Nobody returned from Holding until the handler, namely myself, viewed the video and determined the job had been finished.

Despite Abel’s conversation, he had completed his mission. A new timeline had begun. Now it was time to see if anything had changed. If it had, I wouldn’t know. The change would have happened in the 1970s. Only Abel knew. I hit return and Abel blinked into existence on the pedestal in front of me.

Lately, Abel had started whining about the job. Complaining about his guilt over the innocent victims. I feigned sympathy, but in a way, he disgusted me. I would have done anything to get his job. “Somebody broke some rules today.”

“Just get to the protocols,” Abel said. When the barrier disengaged, he stepped off the pedestal and came to my station.

I played my part. Patient, understanding, businesslike when the situation called for it. “All right, then. First question: Do you recognize me?”

“Yes, Will. I know who you are.”

I recorded his answers. “Has anything in this room changed since you went back?”

He didn’t look around. “The walls are

grey. They used to be white.”

“Do you remember the name of the person in charge of interior decoration in this building?”

“Hope... something. I don’t remember her last name.” He put his hands on his hips, eager to get away.

“That’s right. So, at least she still works here. Maybe it’s just a small change in the timeline.” I noted the change, sure the higher ups would have something to say about Abel’s breach of protocol. We can’t have the walls changing color, you know. “Next question: Do you live alone?”

“Yes.”

“Any love interests?”

“No.”

I rattled off questions and filled his answers into my program. They matched the responses he’d given every other time I asked, aside from Hope’s taste in wall colors. The control questions proved very little

had been disturbed by Abel’s most recent foray into the past, at least not much in Abel’s sphere of experience.

Once the mundane part was finished, it was time to get to the grisly stuff. I pulled up the police report on the girl. “Teenage prostitute killed, body discovered July 26, 1976. Found in an alley shot once in the chest. No viable suspects.”

It was a clean kill. I had to give him that. But this was the part that bothered me most about the job. My files only told me how well Abel had done his job. Any record of the original murder were lost when the timeline changed. The whole Agency had to rely on an Agent’s memory of the original crime scene. Even if we provided Abel with files to take with him, those files would cease to exist the moment the shift happened.

I pulled up the Comparison Report. “What did the file say when you got it?”



Abel clenched his jaw. “Both shoulders dislocated, like he left her suspended by her wrists. Both knees broken. Cigar and blowtorch burns... I should have killed him.”

I nodded my head. We’d been over this a lot lately, since Abel started losing his nerve. Agents never killed someone who didn’t die in the original timeline.

Paradoxes resulted from drastic change. Abel’s job was to protect the girl from a torturous death, not to save her life, and not to punish the man who murdered her in the first place. “Did I give you a list of similar victims?”

Abel gave me a disdainful look. “No.”

“I regret I have to ask you these questions. There’s no other way for me to know what’s changed.” That part irked me. Abel knew *everything*. Every timeline he’d ever changed still existed in his mind. He carried whole worlds around. I had lived in them all, but he erased them each time he took out a victim.

“Never mind,” Abel said.

“I’ll check the records, see if the guy takes a replacement girl. Cheer up. You saved her.” I tried to buoy him because it was my job. Honestly, I didn’t care. He had my dream job, and if he couldn’t handle it, I wouldn’t weep for him.

“Sure,” Abel started to walk away, but paused. “That’s two dozen now. How many more before I’m done?”

I wanted to ask him if he left his balls in 1976. Instead, I said, “There’s no quota here, Abel. You’ll do as many as you can stand to do. Then you’ll be done.”

Abel nodded. “See you, Will.”

I called after him as he left. “Relax for a couple of days. I’ll send you a new file.” I had a good one in mind. See how well he handled it. I’d send him the rape and murder of a nine year old girl who’d been snatched a block from her house on her way home from school.

#

The higher-ups called it mercy. We risked paradoxes that had implications we couldn’t even understand to save people from suffering. Pain, in its emotional and physical equivalents, had become the universal enemy. When time travel had been invented in 2025, a crusade had begun to eradicate suffering from time itself.

I had been passed over for service as an Agent because I possessed no empathy. Get that? I don’t feel other people’s pain. You’d think that would be considered an asset. The higher-ups explained it to me like this: As a Sociopath, I ran the risk of enjoying it too much, releasing victims from their immanent futures. Never mind the emotional pain it caused me, watching Agents do the job I was made for.

For the first few jobs as Abel’s handler, I noticed he never showed any emotion. He was so good, I wondered how he got past the Psychological screening. Twice now, he’d asked me how much longer he’d have to do this job. Then I realized he wasn’t like me. I could do it forever.

#

All week, I looked forward to seeing Abel when he arrived. I wanted to look into his eyes to see what emotion he dis-

played. I wanted to know how far he'd fallen. Finally, over the sound of whale song piped through the speakers in my section, I heard footsteps coming down the hall. Abel walked in wearing early 21<sup>st</sup> century running clothes. He strapped a weapon disguised as an iPod onto his arm. Deep wrinkles pressed the corners of his eyes.

"You all ready for today?" I asked. He looked like he hadn't slept much. But would he whine about the assignment?

"Let's just get it done." Abel stepped on the pedestal. The barrier went up.

My hand hovered over my controls. I didn't pause, not really, but felt myself ultra-aware of everything. I wanted to feel the moment when everything changed. My hand fell and I hit send. An icon for the video file appeared on my monitor. Nothing felt different. The change probably had already happened, but somehow, it never seemed real to me until I watched the video. I eagerly selected the file and sat forward in my chair.

Emma Brown kicked a stone on the sidewalk, oblivious to everything around her. A van turned the corner. Abel started jogging. The van stopped alongside the girl, who didn't turn her head to look at it, but remained intent on her stone. The driver opened the door and ran toward her. Abel pulled the iPod off his arm and shot the man in the head. My jaw dropped open. Cliché, I know, but that's what happened. I couldn't believe what Abel had done. I didn't worry too much about the fallout. After all, I still had my job. Abel hadn't messed with my world.

The girl just kept walking. She didn't notice the dead man behind her, or the huge mistake Abel had just made. Abel stood there and watched as the girl approached him.

"Man, do your job," I said. Of course, he couldn't hear me. The recording had been made decades ago. At this moment in time, if time existed there at all, Abel waited in Holding. I wondered what cataclysmic changes were occurring through the timeline as I sat in my ergonomic chair, watching it all go down.

Whatever Abel did, I'd have to sit still for it. I couldn't bring an Agent back until the job was done. This one little girl could totally jack the timeline if she lived a full and productive life. If I brought Abel back before he killed the girl, the whole time program could have ceased to exist. Try to figure out that paradox. It could and did drive people crazy. The psych ward at Union City General has a special room for the time-crazies. But we only do this because the higher-ups don't want people to suffer. Go figure.

Abel raised his weapon and shot the girl. He slapped the Return button on his wristband and the video blacked out before her body hit the ground. I verified the file. Single shot to the chest. I hit return.

Abel stood on the podium bent over with his hands on his knees. I kicked a trash can toward him. He came back puking about 75% of the time. I didn't like calling janitorial to clean up the mess and then smelling it until someone arrived.

"Keep it together, man," I said. I won-

dered sometimes, how the higher-ups chose agents. This guy clearly couldn't handle it. I'd taken him under my wing from the beginning. I found his emotional antics amusing, but he'd messed up big time now. I could hardly wait to see how the higher-ups would react.

Abel stepped off the podium but collapsed on it, pressing his palms against his eyes. In a minute, he coughed and sniffed, wiping his eyes dry and shaking it off. "I killed the guy. I killed him, dammit."

"You sure did. Let's finish these questions, then I can meet you for drinks later." I'd be celebrating the novelty of his situation. He could drown his sorrows if he liked.

Irritation flashed across Abel's face. He looked up at me with his mouth twisted. "What?"

Dealing with an agent right off the podium could be tricky. You never knew how different his old timeline had been. "It's been a tough day. Let's meet for drinks. We can talk."

"Not about this." He pointed at the pedestal. I wondered if he was more torn up about the kid or the man he'd killed.

#

We met at a quiet bar with a yoga room in back. The sound of ocean waves played in the background. I'd have rather picked a sports bar. One with waitresses in short shorts who served chicken wings. They often had real music.

Abel had started out with beer. I ordered a soft drink. People always assumed I was a recovering alcoholic, but really, I

just liked staying sharp.

"Hey, buddy," I said. Like he was a dog or a little kid. "How's it going?"

"I go home to an empty apartment every night. No one knows what I do for a living because I'm bound to secrecy, and normal people would freak out if I told them, anyway. Oh, and to top it off, I murdered a little girl today."

"You shouldn't look at it like that."

He acted like he couldn't hear me, and it was just as well. I hadn't really said anything. I never did. "She never even saw me."

"Yeah?" He'd be crying soon, I could feel it.

Abel looked at me like he wondered if I was real. "I only have the crime scenes, you know? The crime scenes and their faces, right before I erase them. Those are the only consistent things."

"You can look at it that way if you want to. If it was me, I'd soak up everything, not just the crime scene. Man, it's a whole world no one else has seen."

"The world isn't real. Next week, I'll go back and everything will change."

Talk about seeing a cup half empty. Abel refused to see what he had. I decided to tell him what I thought. No more games. Just the truth. See how he handled that. "It is real. You lived it. Every alternate version of history happened. I don't know if it was erased from existence, or if it's out there somewhere, but it was real and only you can remember it."

"I don't take in the sights, Will. I take out an innocent human being."

I decided to let it go. The shrinks hadn't been able to see it my way, either. I was an idiot to think Abel might get it. Might as well change the subject, go back to playing games. I sat back in my chair and fiddled with the cardboard coaster under my drink. "Did you know you and I are cousins?"

Abel's eyes widened. Clearly, he didn't know. Agency headhunters picked candidates from the population, seemingly at random. Truthfully, we were all related, but the higher-ups never mentioned it. Abel must have jacked the timeline big time or else he would have remembered, because I told him about it myself.

"Yeah," I said. "That's why we work at the same program. I'm related to Amber Sills, too."

"What?" Abel leaned forward until his chest bumped the table edge. "Is everyone at the Agency related to her?"

I shrugged. "The agents all are, and the handlers. I haven't checked everybody. I just thought it might put everything into perspective for you."

"We're all related to the murder victim the Agency spared."

"And you know how that went?" We both knew. Thomas Raines was the first agent to travel back in time. He started out his life in the Agency as a family man. He saved a co-ed named Amber Sills. Back then, the Agency didn't terminate the victims.

That night, Raines went home to a house from his original timeline, but he didn't live there in the new one. When the

police took him to the address on his driver's license, he didn't know the woman he'd married. Turns out, his original wife had never even been born.

It didn't take him long to lose his mind. Thomas Raines was the first time-crazy. His tragedy helped form the questions Abel answered in every exit interview. After Raines, agents stopped saving the victims.

"We do this work because we're her descendants," I said. "You know that, right?"

Abel wore a stone face. I'd never seen him like that. He was the weepiest, most emotional Agent I'd ever seen. "We might as well do work that marginalizes us. We were never supposed to be born in the first place."

He missed the point. The work didn't marginalize us, it elevated us. "You're like a god, man. Don't you get that? Every time you go back, you leave behind a whole world no one else will ever see. You create the world you come home to."

Here I was telling the truth again. I should have let it be, but it drove me nuts that Abel couldn't see the truth. Sure, the aim was to make as little difference as possible. The bigger the screw up, the bigger the change. This little twist made Abel the most powerful Agent I handled. And all he could do was whine about a handful of people who would have died anyway, and died ugly.

Abel ran his thumb across his bottle, wiping the condensation away. "Have you heard what sort of penalty I'll have to pay?"

He hadn't responded to the point I'd tried to make. I let him change the subject. "What, you mean for killing a guy?"

"Yeah, Will. What else have I done that they would punish me for?"

I took a long swallow. I wished I could have made him understand my point of view. Then he would have been eager to come back into work. "Come into the office in the morning. You skewed the timeline, so you have to fix it right away."

Abel picked up his beer and pointed the neck at me. "Why did you invite me out for beers if I have to be at work in the morning?"

"We always go out for beers after the really tough ones." He usually needed a shoulder to cry on, and even though I never cracked a smile, I thought it was a lot of laughs. Always before, but no more.

"I've never had a drink with you in my life," Abel said. "I come in. I do my job. I go home."

Again, I felt a pang of jealousy. He remembered timelines I had forgotten. This very moment would be erased tomorrow, by him, and I would lose it. I emptied my cola. "Well, savor this moment while it lasts. The guy was a serial. Remember the list of victims' names you gave me in the exit interview? The ones he killed before they caught him?"

Abel didn't answer, but I knew he remembered. That was the bastard's problem. He remembered the victims when he should remember whole worlds.

"You guessed it right, buddy," I said. "Three girls to put down in one day. Reset

the timeline."

Abel stared at me for a full second, then he got up and walked out. He impressed me with that move. No crying in his beer, no running to the bathroom to puke.

On my way home, I realized part of what Abel had been trying to say. I kicked a can across the sidewalk, the sound of it skittering on the pavement. I walked across an alley and everything seemed hollow and lonely. That was the moment it fell into place. Abel's childhood memories never happened, not in this timeline. Even if the events of his life still lined up, he didn't live all the moments of this life. Abel didn't know who he was. He didn't know anything. He belonged in a different timeline.

That was why I couldn't figure out why he reacted so strangely. He wasn't the guy I knew. He was a different version of himself. He knew everything about every world but the one he was in. Abel didn't only feel guilty, he felt lonely, too. I wondered, when Abel came back from his mission tomorrow, would I remember anything I had learned?

#

In our semi-weekly drinking binges, Abel often asked me about memory wiping. The Agency promised to erase all memory of service upon retirement. It sounded like barbarism to me, but Abel lived for that promise. "How many more will I have to kill before the Agency wipes it away?" Blah, blah, blah.

The truth was, I never believed the Agency had the power to erase minds. I fig-

ured it was a quick lobotomy and off to the time-crazy ward. I never told him that, though. I wanted to see the surprise on his face when the Retirement Committee hauled him away.

On cleanup day, Abel wore a business suit and silk tie. He unpacked his equipment without speaking a word.

“Going to a funeral?” I asked. I thought it was funny, but he didn’t laugh. I expected him to cry, but he didn’t do that either. I could respect this version of Abel. “You changed a lot since yesterday morning.”

“I didn’t change. The timeline changed.”

“The old you would be crying about those girls.”

Abel buttoned his jacket. “I killed a man yesterday who raped and murdered four first graders before he was arrested. Girls whose names you wouldn’t even know if I hadn’t given them to you in the exit interview. Why should I cry about it to you? There’s nothing you can do about it.”

Moments later, he had gone. I hesitated, wanting to hold onto the moment. I didn’t want things to change, to have to start over, even though I wouldn’t realize I was starting over.

When the file appeared, I clicked the icon and I saw the girl on the monitor. Six year old Hayley Fossil sat on the sidewalk in her front yard, coloring with sidewalk chalk. “Hey, sweetie,” Abel said. “Is your name Hayley?”

The girl looked up and nodded. She waved with a dusty purple arm and smiled.

Abel closed his eyes and fired. “Bring

me back.”

Then the video ended. Abel waited in Holding.

I checked the file. Six year old Hayley Fossil disappeared from her front yard. Her body was never found. There were no suspects. I had to know what he’d done with her, so I pressed return. Abel appeared on the pedestal holding a squirming Hayley Fossil in his arms. He pressed a hand firmly over her mouth.

“Shit.” I hit the call button for damage control.

“I couldn’t do it. I had to save one, just once.” Abel stepped off the pedestal and put Hayley down. Purple chalk smears stood out against his crisp white shirt. He walked past the child, who cried to be picked up again.

“I want my mommy! Take me home.”

Abel picked the child up and propped her on his hip. With clumsy efforts, he put his equipment on the desk. “The room’s white again.”

“What do you mean, again?”

“It was grey this morning.”

A woman from Damage Control arrived. She wore pink scrubs with rainbows all over them. “Oh, my, what a pretty little girl! You’ve been coloring, haven’t you?”

Hayley wiped her nose and nodded.

“Come with me, baby,” Damage Control said. “Let’s go have some milk and cookies.”

She took Hayley and went. Abel limply relinquished the child and stood there.

“Do you think I’ll be retiring now?”

Abel asked.

“Were there other names?”

Abel cleared his throat. “Ah, yeah. There were two more.”

“You want to tell them to me.”

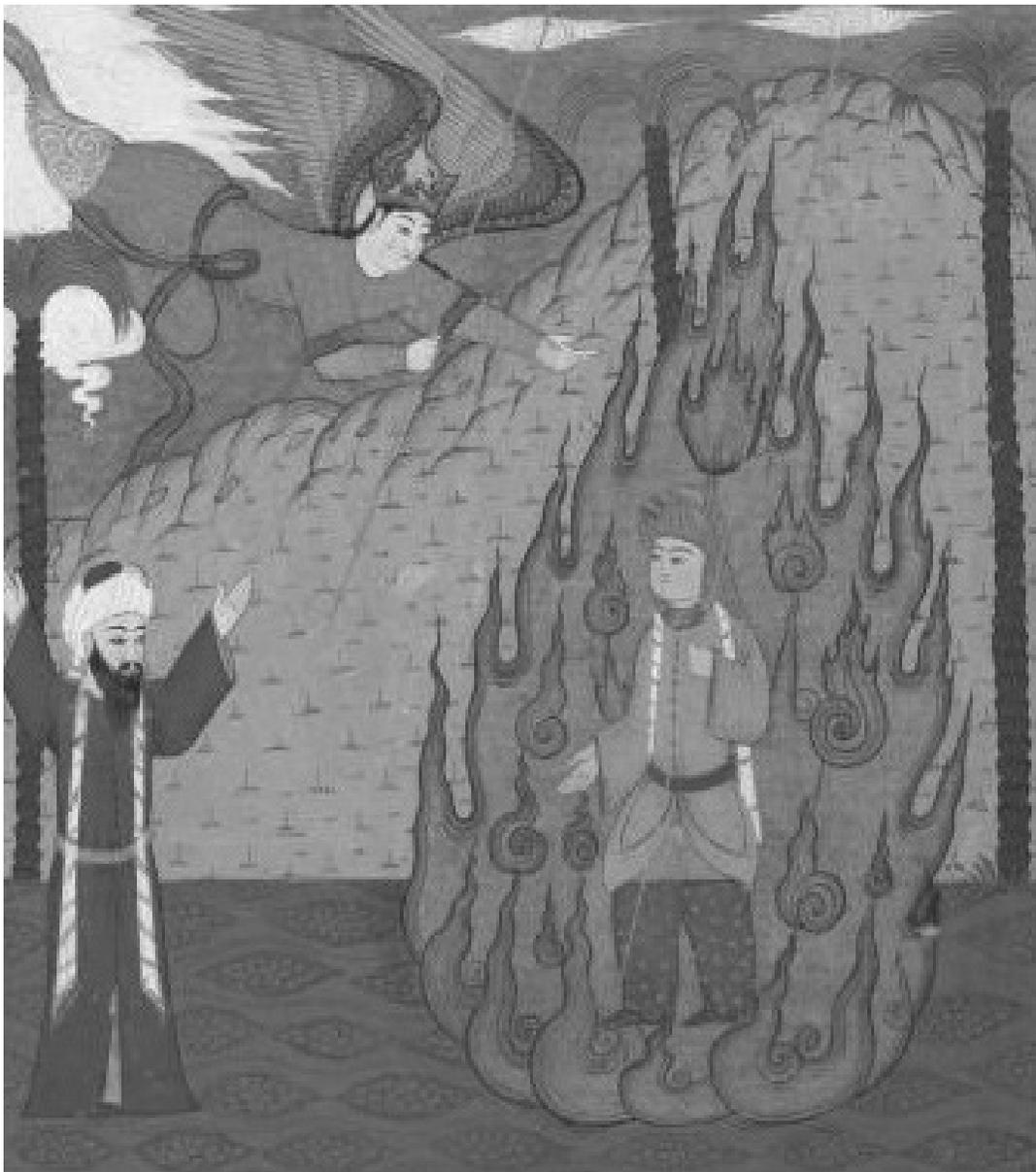
I thought he wouldn't tell me for a minute. He cared more about two little girls than all of civilization. But then he said them in a whisper. “Abby Halifax and Maria Moran.”

I entered the names into Comparison

Report. No matches. We'd still have to send someone back to take care of them.

“Will. I need to go home. I can't do this anymore.”

He was right. Abel didn't belong in the position of Agent. He didn't belong anywhere in the world. Just an odd piece that didn't fit into the machine. A person in pain, when pain was no longer allowed. “You don't really think anything will get better from this point, do you?”



“I don’t know. But it had to change.”

I wasn’t supposed to do anything but watch. Leave an accurate record. Nothing would ever change for me, either. I would never go back in time to save a victim, but I could save one now. “Just close your eyes, take a deep breath, and think about home,” I said.

Abel looked at me funny. “What?”

I shrugged. It seemed like good advice to me. I didn’t know where I’d heard it

before. “It’s a line from an old movie, or something.”

Abel shook his head. I heard footsteps coming. The retirement committee. Abel took a deep breath and closed his eyes. I picked up his weapon. It felt good in my hand. I should have been an Agent. I would have been a good one.



**END TRANSMISSION**