

MISS EMILY'S VOYAGE

Mac Rogers

Miss Emily's voyage was set for April 17, a tour of the Mediterranean with her mother, her sisters Anne and Violet, their husbands, and their children; two other society families: the Connors of Albany and the Wellands of Boston; and Mr. Fred Talbot, a family friend.

Miss Emily's mother had at one point been Miss Sarah Reilly, a dazzling headhunter on a voracious shopping spree through New York society, appraising this possibility and that possibility before settling on the astoundingly rich, astoundingly boring Mr. Jack Bradford, heir to an incalculable shipbuilding fortune, who could not, by any reliable clock, maintain a pleasing discourse for more than thirteen Christian minutes at a time. Miss Sarah, now Mrs. Bradford, having assured the financial comfort of herself and, conservatively, three generations following her, now paid the price, as her much remarked-upon vivacity was worn down by Mr. Bradford's corrosive tedium, like shiny paint sanded off one coat at a time. He vanished behind plans and balance books and only emerged to forbid her from this occasion or that occasion, adamant she should not be seen without him at the public events he so despised and would only attend for the minimum possible level of reputation maintenance. And just as any orchid, no matter how rare and exquisite, withers and droops without water and sun, so Mrs. Bradford withered, bent over, spent money in copious amounts, and slept late. This former Valkyrie of society became the Gargoyle of her middle daughter's existence, an old crone, vicious and ill, whose arms and legs required constant massaging for their limp circulation. The death of the boring Mr. Bradford in 1901 only cemented his widow in her scabrous dislike of all creatures younger and happier than she, and she set about, with every resource at her command, to demolish youth and happiness wherever she might find it. She had certainly done that with her middle daughter, Emily.

Miss Emily's voyage was set for April 17, 1905. All told she expected to be mostly ship-bound for the better part of three and a half months in what was reputed to be the most beautiful part of the world. But Miss Emily had developed a bad habit: she had begun the practice of anticipating the future, by drawing upon the available clues surrounding her in the present. This practice caused Miss Emily no end of anguish, but she found herself unable to stop. Indeed, a mere sixteen days away from her voyage, Miss Emily found herself engaged in the unbearable practice of anticipation once again, as she regarded the people around her one evening in Mrs. Bradford's drawing room.

There had been a dinner party earlier that evening, but now most of the guests were gone. In the drawing room, only these remained: the widow Mrs. Bradford, the oldest daughter Anne, Anne's pinch-faced husband Claude, the youngest daughter Violet, Violet's beef-faced husband Edward, their guest (Mr. Fred Talbot), and in the corner, close by her mother should the sudden need arise for hot milk or a few scrambled eggs or the rubbing of medicinal lotion into long, varicose arms, sat Miss Emily, anticipating the future. What was useful about this situation, at least inasmuch as it fed Miss Emily's bad habit of anticipation, was that the people in the living room at that moment were much the same people who would be ship-bound with her for three and a half months in what was reputed to be the most beautiful part of the world.

A portrait of Miss Emily's anticipation: They would be in long, low chairs on the deck as the sun-dappled villages along the Mediterranean slowly drifted past. (She had always heard they were "sun-dappled.") In one long chair would sit her mother, her face a perpetual mask of pain and hatred, calling out constantly for medicine or lotion or telling Anne to learn how to discipline her children or telling Violet she had over-applied her rouge and looked like an actress. Anne's children would run and yell and fight as if stamina were no object, and Anne, in response, would summon the governess and then cover her own face with a night-mask. Violet would take the opposite path and turn her frustration on the middle sister, Miss Emily, an easy target who didn't know how to fight back.

“Well perhaps, Emily, if you knew how to properly fulfill your duties to mother, she might not find herself so disagreeable! Have you considered that?”

“Violet—I am at her pleasure from dawn to dusk, I carry her medicines everywhere I go, I never leave her side—what more am I to do?”

“You know, Emily, your face takes on quite an ugly aspect when you are pitying yourself. Small wonder you haven't married.”

And to such a response, Emily was always speechless. She had never known such malice could even be addressed.

The two husbands, wealthy and stultifying—like their mother, Anne and Violet had married quite well, a credit to their training — would provide no relief. Anne's husband, Mr. Claude Rimgale, would go on and on about the discoveries reported in the scientific journals always in his lap. Violet's husband, a stout, choleric, swinish man named Edward Lane, would long for the quail and game hunting that was his life's obsession, and he would no doubt moan about its absence all the way to Crete and back. This last anticipation was certainly based on strong enough evidence, as that subject was occupying Mr. Lane's speech at that very moment.

“Frankly? Candidly? It is my belief that a hunter who requires more than one shot is no true sportsman. When I bring back a quail, it is immaculate. Immaculate!”

Across the drawing room, on a low sofa by the fireplace, the Bradfords' handsome family friend Mr. Talbot listened to Mr. Lane with an expression of mock-attentiveness, nodding, and making little sounds of acknowledgement, but Miss Emily knew from long and careful examination of Mr. Talbot that this apparent interest was really a form of reconnaissance, gathering enough information about the enemy so that the strike, when it came, would be quick and effective.

“I wonder, Mr. Lane”—and here Mr. Talbot reclined further and leaned his head back into the sofa — “have you ever actually met a quail?”

“Uh... I beg your pardon?”

“Met a quail. Made its acquaintance. Shook its little... talon.”

“Met a quail?” Mr. Lane was already dangerously out of his depth, and beginning to flush.

“Before you shot it, I mean. My curiosity only stems from my utter ignorance of all things quail, compelling me to the nearest expert, which must surely be yourself, Mr. Lane. So I must ask: Do quails have moods? Are quails mostly cheerful, or usually in distemper? Do quails address one another in a native tongue, or are their clucks and squawks as unintelligible to one another as they are to us? When you shoot one of them, does the remainder of quail society notice his absence, or do they go on as before?”

Mr. Lane flailed. “I do not—” Here he turned to the pinch-faced Mr. Rimgale for salvation. “Mr. Rimgale, do the medical journals—” And then he caught Mr. Talbot's eye again, wide with facetious patience.

“Sir, you mock me!” Miss Emily saw Violet and Anne's eyes meet, saw their shoulders shake with laughter. Yes, Mr. Talbot was quite a favorite of her sisters, quite a favorite of all the wives, in fact. No sooner would he arrive at a function than all the women who had been married more than a year would abandon their husbands and flock to wherever Mr. Talbot was holding court, usually in the lowest sofa he could find. There he could slouch with conspicuous decadence and dispense withering commentaries to his heart's content. The real

curiosity about Mr. Talbot was his social goals. Little to nothing was known of his affections. It was truly strange that he had gone so long without some form of attachment. He lived in a very fashionable downtown hotel for bachelors, and it was quite often said that he was the handsomest man anyone knew, and the most handsomely dressed, and the wittiest. And yet this man was not married, nor even betrothed. No one, for the very life of them, could fathom the reason.

Miss Emily lived in as much ignorance as anyone else. All she knew of Mr. Talbot was that he alone of the all men she knew paid her the same attention he paid all other women. And this was truly unique, and here Miss Emily was not ignorant. As men stared, dazzled, at her sisters, with their little observations and their tiny wrists, Miss Emily found herself complimented on her hair (which she knew to be thin and limp), her posture (which she knew to be inadequate), her drawings (which she knew to be laughable) and her manner (which she knew to be essentially reclusive). The first time one carries on a conversation with a man who the entire time is looking at some other woman as he speaks, a wound is placed upon the skin, and if nothing should come along to salve this wound, it turns gangrenous and lethal. Everything about Miss Emily was too large: her lips, her shoulders, her teeth. She was her father's daughter, coarse and equine, hunched in a chair in the corner, unlooked upon, waiting for her mother to cry out for tea or medicines.

As the party disbanded, Mr. Talbot bowed his head to her at the door. "What do you say, Miss Emily? Shall we flee? Shall we set out across the grounds with only the clothes on our backs and hail a slow boat to the antipodes?"

Miss Emily looked down at her feet, scarlet, feeling big and stupid. "Who would look after my mother?"

Mr. Talbot smiled. "Ah, yes. The selfless life. Service, and no complaints. You know, Miss Emily, I think we could all stand to be a bit more like you." And he drew her hand up in his, swooped down like a gull, and kissed her wrist. "I wish you a good night."

And if nothing should come along to salve this wound...

You see, Mr. Talbot figured in Miss Emily's anticipation as well, for he would be there too, ship-bound for three and a half months along with the rest. No doubt one of his friends from his fashionable bachelor's hotel would join him, no doubt he would continue to be attentive to Miss Emily, and make his routine jest that they should run away together. No doubt he would be entertaining at all times, that the husbands would sulk, and the wives would laugh with glee. And Anne would wear her night-mask, and her children would run and shriek, Violet would be vicious, the husbands would be tedious, and old Mrs. Bradford would never let her oversize, useless daughter out of her sight. And it wouldn't matter that what was reputed to be the most beautiful part of the world would be rolling lazily by, because no one would notice it. They would carry this drawing room with them all the way across the ocean just as if they had brought it aboard the ship in pieces and reassembled it plank by plank.

Miss Emily took her walks at one in the afternoon. The time was convenient because her mother would often take her rest at that time of the day, exhausted until three o'clock by the effort of a paltry lunch that would scarcely sustain a child. For an hour or so, Miss Emily could escape the house with a clear conscience, leaving her mother with servants and setting off through the hunting trails that wound through the grounds of the Bradford estate. Here, free of observers, Miss Emily could indulge in her most shameful of activities.

Today, for instance, Miss Emily was rehearsing Mr. Talbot's marriage proposal. Mr. Talbot was a man who chose his words with discretionary care, but also a man who could practice this discretionary care in a matter of seconds.

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“Miss Emily, there is a subject of great importance upon which I must—”

“Miss Emily, there are a few words—”

“Miss Emily, were your departed father still with us—”

Details were important. Mr. Talbot would choose his circumstances wisely. Would they, perhaps, be sitting? Standing? Would he kneel before her as she sat on his favorite low sofa? In some versions he swept her away from the drawing room before the astonished eyes of her sisters, in others he found her standing alone before a fireplace.

“Miss Emily—for many days and nights now—”

And the shame of these scenarios singed itself onto Miss Emily's skin for hours after their imagining. Her other habit, the anticipation, was regrettable enough, but it carried no accompanying brand of shame since those imaginings were actually going to happen.

“Miss Emily—Miss Emily—I wonder if it might be agreeable to you—”

The sound that at this moment disrupted Miss Emily's rehearsal was deafening—it was like the sound of a thousand simultaneous dog-barks, followed by a hollow crackling that reverberated dully through the forest. Miss Emily froze—

Miss Emily *freezes*—

Just as you too would freeze if you heard a sound that simply could not be explained, that no entity you've ever known or heard of could ever make.

Miss Emily turns to her right, for that is where the low crackling is, to her right, from deep in the woods. Above her, the skies are black with panicked, departing birds. Now is the time for young ladies to do what is right, to flee to the house, to alert the men and the servants and the police. Now is the time for plain young unmarried ladies to hand the business of problem-solving over to the people who solve problems.

Just as the crackling is dying down, a single voice, from deep in the woods on her right:

“Fuck! Aah FUUUUUUCK!”

Miss Emily, without considering, steps off the path and into the woods on her right. She runs, runs. Miss Emily runs. The pain in the voice, like nothing she's ever heard before. She falls—her skirt caught on the bramble. Rises again, and in a gesture she has never before made, raises her skirts with both hands and continues running, running in the direction of the scream.

In a small clearing, a two-minute run from the hunting path, is a shiny black sphere, partially embedded in the earth. The sphere is mottled with little black holes, like Swiss cheese, only uniform in depth and spacing. The crackling sound seems to be emanating from one oval-shaped opening in the side of the sphere, through which nothing can be seen but occasional flashes of blue light. Miss Emily takes a step back, resolved to flee, and then:

“Fucking GAAAAAAAAAAAAHDDD!”

Run, Miss Emily. Run and fetch the men and the servants and the police. Surely this is the mouth of Hell.

But one thing you must understand about our Miss Emily: There are these certain moments, when perhaps a servant is placing before her one of the most expensive of the Bradford family plates and she thinks, *Break it*, or other moments when she peers out a third-story window and thinks, *Jump*.

Inside the oval-shaped opening is not the mouth of Hell, but a room, an odd room, a dark room lit up by hundreds of little flickering lights and one big flashing blue light. The room is spherical to match the outside, except for a flat, smooth floor. The center of this spherical room is dominated by an enormous metal chair, and when the big blue light flashes again Miss Emily can see that the chair is occupied by a twisted, contorted man, clearly in great pain.

“Fuck! Fucking cunt-chocula!”

Miss Emily considers nothing. It is by considering nothing that she is able to continue. She braces herself against the side of the oval-shaped opening, raises her skirts with her other hand, and places one leg in the vessel—

“Fucking Christing fuck!”

And then the other. The man is bleeding, and his torso seems to be partially charred. She can see the blood running down the side of his chest. Again, she does not consider. If you're seeing your first spaceship, you scarcely have time to consider that you're seeing your first nearly naked man.

And then a soft, elegant male voice to her left says:

“Good afternoon. You are in violation of this vessel.”

Miss Emily screams. At first she takes the creature approaching her for a child, maybe three feet in height, unblemished by age. A closer look reveals its unblemished skin to be composed of metal, reflective and smooth like a piece of silverware, a tiny silver homunculus with a simple mock-up of a human face, and bright blue eyes. It points one long, silvery arm at Miss Emily and extends its little index finger.

“Good afternoon. You are in violation of this vessel. Currently my weapon is set to disable, but I am empowered to use lethal force if you do not depart this vessel and its immediate perimeter. Please leave now. Thank you.”

“I—I—I—”

“Good afternoon. You are in violation of this vessel. Currently my weapon is set to disable, but I am empowered—” and then the bleeding man in the chair speaks.

“Jesus fuck, disarm, DISARM! FUCK!”

The little metal child lowers its arm immediately. It turns away from Miss Emily as if she was no longer there, crosses to the man in the chair and begins to examine him. In the stark, slowed-down clarity of her fear, Miss Emily can see that the shirtless man in the chair is wearing some kind of helmet that obscures most of his face, and that long strands of some strange material are attached to various parts of his body. The metal child speaks again. “Please remain as motionless as possible for this examination. Thank you.” It holds up its other hand, the hand it had not pointed at Miss Emily a moment before, and from the palm of the silver hand it emits a beam of yellow light, with which it slowly traces the man's body.

“Jesus Skullfucking Christ,” the man says, “1904?”

The yellow beam of light vanishes. The metal child steps back. “Examination complete. Your treatment will require four days. Please remain stationary while I prepare the necessary procedures. Thank you.” The metal

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child vanishes into one of the darkened recesses of the sphere.

“Recline,” the man says, and the back of his chair slowly slides down until he is almost prostrate. “Stop.” He breathes, raggedly, for a moment. “Hey lady. Lady. Hey lady. LADY!”

Miss Emily is jarred as if from a trance. She does not know what to think. Never mind action; she does not even have the basis from which to compose a single thought.

“Hey lady!”

“...Yes?” She hears herself speak.

“Lady. Come ‘ere. Come ‘ere. It’s okay. Lady. Come ‘ere.”

Now: There are certain things that every young lady from a respected family who has reached a marriageable age should know about the XS7 Santa Kitana Edition 3 Leisure Class Chrono-Hopper. Design on the Edition 3 was completed, pleasingly enough, in 2100, giving the Santa Kitana conglomerate the edge in declaring the XS7 “The Chrono-Hopper of the New Millennium.” Indeed, the Edition 3 boasts enough upgrades that it can probably expect eighteen months or so of market dominance until some competing chrono-hopper renders it obsolete.

A few of these upgrades include: a more complete film and music catalogue, even incorporating some of the earliest folk recordings from the nineteen-hundreds; upgrades of old films and television shows into a more decently watchable holographic format; a more refined and customized series of visual-tactile scenarios (for owners over thirteen years of age, of course) featuring a full range of homo, hetero, hometero, fetish, and taboo action that could be specialized according to the user’s specific needs. The time and space-travel capabilities are strictly standard issue, no one having figured out a new operating system to deal with the glitches of the basic program, but the Edition 3 does have one neat twist on the old restrictions: The Sentry, a three-foot tall android that in addition to performing all maintenance and janitorial tasks aboard the Hopper will also enforce the regulations of the time-space continuum. And should that not be enough, the Sentry can carry on a conversation, perform medical procedures, and provide reasonably effective manual sex for a male or a female, given speed and intensity specifications beforehand. Should the occupant of the Hopper be threatened, the Sentry is equipped with an adjustable weapon built into one arm, which can dispatch any opponent with a single blast.

There have been criticisms, to be sure—some from competitors, some from legitimate hardware experts—who suggest that placing the enforcement of time-continuum regulations in the hands of an android instead of simply programming it into the drive-system is not only impractical, but worse, is simply Santa Kitana’s latest way of showing off. The criticisms have affected sales not one jot.

“Okay—lady—lady—are you listening to me?”

“My—”

“Lady, what the fuck?”

“My brothers—we have hunting rifles in the house—we have dogs—”

“Stupid fucking bitch, I just saved your ugly-ass life, I coulda let the fuckin’ Sentry kill your fat ass, what the

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fuck, you're gonna turn me in? What, 1904, you got, what, cross-bows or some shit?" He takes a breath, then coughs. "Lady, it's cool. It's cool, it's good. We can work it out."

"Who are you?"

"Retract!" The helmet, which Miss Emily now sees is connected to more of the strange shiny strands from the ceiling, is lifted off the man's head. He turns his face to her. "I'm Jakks." Miss Emily shifts slightly and the sunlight from the oval-shaped opening strikes his face. "Ahh, Christ—" He tries to roll away, and then cries out again: "Fucking fuck fuck!"

From the darkness, the voice of the Sentry: "Please avoid excessive movement until I have attended to your injuries. Thank you."

"Yeah, fuck you, you little bitch. Okay lady. C'mere. It's cool. It's cool." Miss Emily steps closer. "See? It's cool. I'm Jakks. J-A-K-K-S, you know the alphabet? You know the alphabet? I'm Jakks. Do you read, do they have reading yet?"

"Where have you come from?"

"Ah boy. Ah shit. Okay—I'm from the future—okay—ah shit." He appraises Miss Emily. "Okay—say—lets' say—you have a mom, right?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"A mom, a mother, right?"

"I have a mother."

"Great, awesome, you have a mother, thank Christ on the fucking cross. Okay. So like—your mother, right? She lives what, like in a castle? Or like a teepee? Whatever—she—she eats breakfast, right? Come on, your mom eats breakfast!"

"When she is able, she is ill—"

"I don't give a shit if she's—okay—my bad—whatever. But say like—let's say—like tomorrow she eats her breakfast, you know, buffalo or whatever the fuck, and she pukes it up. Fine. But let's say like, what if you didn't have to wait until tomorrow to see your mom eat breakfast and puke. Let's say you could go see your mom eat breakfast tomorrow right now."

"I don't understand."

"Course you don't understand, Jesus Christ, fucking cave-bitch. It's like—instead of waiting all night to see tomorrow morning, what if you could see it right now? And then you could come back to right now, and then wait till tomorrow morning, and you'd already know how everything was going to happen 'cause you'd already seen it?"

Miss Emily is silent for a long moment, struggling. "Then you foretell the future?"

"No—GodDAMMIT—I don't foretell the future, I go to the future—I go to the past—I have like—when were you born, what was the year?"

"Eighteen eighty-two."

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“1882. Okay—so like—what I’m saying is—1882 isn’t a year, it’s not really a time, it’s a place, it’s a place you can go to, if you have the right kind of ship. It’s the same with tomorrow morning, when your mom eats the buffalo—that’s a place you can go. That’s what they figured out. That’s what this thing does WHEN IT FUCKING WORKS LIKE IT’S SUPPOSED TO!” Jakks winces in pain again. “Sentry—explain to her how—”

The Sentry, hidden in the darkness, cuts him off. “All time exists simultaneously in the space-time continuum. The Chrono-Hopper travels on the bandwidth that encompasses the space-time continuum by means of a—” But Jakks waves it into silence with a kind of impatient panic.

“Holy fuck, I’m about to die, that’s enough. Look—lady—I don’t care if you understand or not. All I’m saying is: don’t tell anyone about me. Okay? I’m in a shitload of trouble as it is, but the more of your people who know I’m here, the worse it gets. Please don’t tell anyone you saw me. I’ll make it worth your while, big-time. The Hopper can do anything, anything you want, just name it. Just don’t tell anyone I’m here.”

Jakks is pale and stubbly. His body, strangely enough, looks not too terribly different from Miss Emily’s body: soft, pudgy, pale, neglected, only he seems shriveled, shrunken while she’s ungainly and large. He wears only a small white garment covering his loins and his arms and legs are spread, trailing the shiny strands that connect to the ceiling of the sphere. Miss Emily has never seen a creature so helpless in her life.

“What’s your name?”

“I am Miss Emily Bradford.”

“Bradford—awesome. Hey Sentry! This is Bradford!”

“Good afternoon, Bradford. I am the Sentry. Welcome to the XS-7 Santa Kitana Edition 3 Chrono-Hopper. Please let me know if I may be of service. Thank you.”

There was quite a row going on up and down the supper-table that night in the Bradford estate, but Miss Emily only had the vaguest notion of its content. Earlier that evening she suffered her mother’s remonstrations over her unusually long walk in the woods with what must have appeared to be very good grace, but the truth was that Miss Emily simply could not listen. And here again, at supper, the same spectral presence, as Miss Emily placed her body in the space it was required to occupy and immediately departed it. Can there really be such a thing as the present, one wonders, if all of one’s thoughts are diverted away from it, to the future and the past?

“But surely,” Mr. Talbot was saying, “but surely—”

“Mr. Rimgale,” said Violet, “you cannot be suggesting that we eliminate all the lower orders.”

“Not at all,” replied Mr. Rimgale. “That is not at all what the eugenicists suggest. Without the lower orders, there would be no one left to carry out the loathsome but necessary tasks that would distract the higher orders from their higher purposes. But by identifying the lower orders and restricting *their* breeding, and by identifying the higher orders, the lighter-skinned, Anglo-Saxon races, and restricting their breeding, we create a society where each type of human being may be bred, raised, and trained to the task for which he is most suited.”

Had Miss Emily looked to her right, as she had so fatefully done on the hunting path earlier that afternoon, she would have seen Mr. Talbot’s aspect of perpetual amusement bleeding over to genuine anger. But she did not look to her right. Miss Emily was indulging in her bad habit of anticipating again, only now she had a whole new basis for doing so.

Suppose Mr. Jakks told the truth. Miss Emily had no reason to assume otherwise, no alternative to explain the extraordinary sights and sounds and events of the afternoon. So Jakks told the truth, and the following morning was not necessarily a time to be awaited, but instead a place, a place to which one could travel, like the Mediterranean. If all of time existed simultaneously—if, suppose, the events of time could be placed upon a map—if, further, this map were labeled with little cities: here is “Adam and Eve Cast Out of Eden,” here is “The Fall of Rome,” here is “Miss Emily embarks on a three-and-a-half-month sea voyage with the exact same people with whom she spends every single day”—than surely the events of future times—times she had always thought would be shaped by human action—were actually already set, predetermined. And when her sister Violet turned down a dashing Jewish entrepreneur to marry the non-dashing, non-Jewish Edward Lane, Violet was not actually making a decision, as she thought she was, but rather traveling to the next part of the map where her decision had already been made and was waiting for her, like a piece of coal wrapped in a red ribbon. One could not decide there was no Mediterranean; it was there. She would see it soon enough.

So Miss Emily began to see this map in her head, which cities would dot its topography, and which ones would not. There was no city, for example, where Mr. Talbot knelt before her as she sat on his favorite low sofa. There was no city where Mr. Talbot swept her up in front of her astonished sisters and said “Miss Emily, there is a matter of great importance I must discuss with you.” No city containing a breakfast table where Miss Emily and Mr. Talbot sat together, with no others present, while he showed her some funny item in the newspaper and they laughed, and she passed him a little pitcher of jam. There was a map of time—it existed—and on it these cities were nowhere to be found.

“I see you turn your famous smirk on me, Mr. Talbot,” Mr. Rimgale was saying, “And I resent it!”

“Oh, do I seem to smirk?” replied Mr. Talbot. “Perhaps it is merely my expression of concern which you misread. I’m only thinking that, in order to implement your plan, one would have to know without a shadow of a doubt which ones the lower orders are, and where they are. It could well be, Mr. Rimgale, that after a careful inventory has been taken of the most desirable characteristics of Higher Man, you yourself may be found wanting and consigned to loathsome but necessary tasks far away from your charming wife.” And here Mr. Talbot turned and winked at Anne, who beamed and giggled.

Mr. Rimgale pounded the table with his fists. “I read the medical journals, sir!” he bellowed. “Can you say as much?”

“Indeed I cannot, sir,” replied Mr. Talbot, “But I have read the works of William Shakespeare and I do recall where our Mr. Hamlet says ‘My tables—meet it is I should set it down, that one may read the medical journals, and read the medical journals, and be a buffoon!’”

And here he caught Miss Emily’s eye, to his left, as she emerged from her reverie, and he winked at her as well, a simple throwaway gesture that sent lances through Miss Emily’s heart. Such a careless man, this Mr. Talbot. Such fire sticks he was willing merrily to juggle, without care for the sparks.

As she sat by her mother’s bed that night, massaging the veinous legs while the elder Mrs. Bradford murmured invective under her breath, Miss Emily thought to herself that surely this was the city in which she would always dwell, the unmarried middle daughter with the big shoulders and the invalid mother, never loved, never touched, never noticed, to serve in darkness until she simply expired. She needn’t ever move to another city; all cities were exactly the same.

“Good afternoon, Bradford. Would you like me to select a song for you?”

But Miss Emily is not quite ready to talk to the Sentry as if it were another person, so she just stares.

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“Thank you,” it says, as if she responded, “I will activate the menu for you, and you may select at your leisure. Thank you.”

“Mr. Jakks is asleep—I will return later.”

“Jackks is under anesthetic for his surgery. You may remain or depart. Thank you.”

Jakks’s head is lolled back in the chair. His eyes are closed, his mouth is open and tilted to one side, and a trickle of saliva runs down his cheek.

“Please select a song. Thank you.” Another voice, this time female. Miss Emily turns in the direction of the voice and finds herself facing yet another astonishment, a giant ghostly mosaic hanging in the air, obscuring a large portion of the inner sphere, and composed of thousands upon thousands of tiny portraits of smiling people or groups of people.

Miss Emily reaches out one quivering hand—can such a thing be touched? Might such a specter not be lethal to the touch? But again, that peculiar aspect of Miss Emily. *Break it, Jump*. She extends two fingers, touches one of the portraits, and the world detonates in noise:

*Pour some sugar on me
In the name of love
Pour some sugar on me
Come on fill me up*

Then the woman’s voice: “Please touch the thumbnail again to hear the complete song. Thank you.” Miss Emily sucks in her breath. What terrifying fury in the voice, like a dragon. She quickly touches another portrait, to the left of the first one.

*She—showed me her room
Isn’t it good
Norwegian wood*

This one calmer, more benevolent, but nearly as startling.

“Please touch the thumbnail again to hear the complete song. Thank you.”

A single syllable of laughter escapes Miss Emily’s lips. She touches another, further left.

*Now I’m blue, Navy blue, I’m as blue as I can be
‘Cause my steady boy said ship ahoy and joined the Naaavy!*

“Please touch the thumbnail—”

Further left—another—

*In the big rock-candy mountain
All the cops have wooden legs
All the lakes are filled with whiskey
And the hens lay soft-boiled eggs*

“Please touch—”

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Miss Emily is laughing openly now. She reverses direction and touches another portrait, to the extreme right of the first one:

*Ladies leave your man at home
The club is full of ballers and they pockets full grown
And now you fellas leave yo girl wit her friends
'Cause it's 11:30 and the club is jumpin' jumpin'*

“Please touch—”

Now back left—another—

*All my thoughts just seem to settle on a breeze
As I'm lying wrapped up in your arms
The whole world just fades away
The only thing I hear
Is the beating of your heart...*

“Please touch the thumbnail again to hear the entire song. Thank you.”

Miss Emily has stopped laughing. She likes something about this one. She reaches her hand out again, careful to touch the same portrait as before: a fair-haired woman in a white dress, called, if the caption were to be trusted, “Faith Hill.”

*I can feel the magic floating in the air
Being with you gets me that way
I sit and watch the sunlight dance across your face
And I've never been this swept away...*

Miss Emily is mesmerized. Before she knows what's happening, she's sitting on the strangely hard, smooth floor of the vessel with her mouth opened, staring at nothing in particular.

*'Cause I can feel you breathe
Washin' over me
And suddenly I'm meltin' into you
There's nothing left to prove
Baby all we need is just to be...*

And before she knows it, it's over, and the elegant female voice, like cold water: “Would you like to select another song?”

“But—but—” She hunts frantically through the mosaic for Faith Hill. Wasn't she under the picture of five well-dressed Negroes? But where are they?

“Excuse me, Bradford,” says the Sentry from where it's hunched over the unconscious Jakks. “If you wish to hear the same track again, you may simply say, ‘Replay track.’”

“She will sing it again?”

“The track will replay, that is correct. Thank you.”

Miss Emily turns back to the mosaic. She opens her mouth, and then hesitates, feeling foolish.

MISS EMILY'S
VOYAGE
Mac Rogers

“Re—replay track.”

I can feel the magic floating in the air...

Miss Emily claps a hand over her mouth. She hardly trusts herself to speak. “Thank you, Sentry.”

“It is my pleasure to serve, Bradford. Thank you.”

Miss Emily goes on to listen to the song a total of five more times while the Sentry operates on Jakks. By the fifth listen she finds her lips moving along with the last chorus:

“In a way I know my heart is waking up, as all the walls come crumbling down—“

“What the fuck are you listening to?” Jakks is awake, propped up on his elbows. “Frankenfuck, what is this shit?” Miss Emily stares at him, filled with a bizarre new rage: *He ruined my song!*

“Good afternoon, Jakks,” says the Sentry. “Are you feeling better?”

“Yeah—how much more of this shit is there?”

“Well, Jakks, there are two more skin grafts and then the pores and sweat glands will have to be repaired. Rest now. We will resume in eighteen hours. Thank you. Would you like your messages now?”

“Whada we got?”

“There are several advertisements and one greeting from K-Dog.”

“No shit, K-Dog? Put that shit up. Awesome—K-Dog!”

The musical mosaic vanishes, to be replaced by another phantom, this time the portrait of another pale, hairless creature, more or less exactly like Jakks. Suddenly the portrait comes to life and begins to speak:

“Ay, what ‘appened? Where you at, you fuckin’ homo?! You fuckin’ some sheep? Yeah, you a dick. Fuck you, ya fuckin’ homoooooo! Hit me back.”

The face vanishes. Jakks absolutely howls with ecstatic laughter. “That motherfucker! That motherfucker! That shit is FUNNY! Reply—fuckin’—REPLY!”

The elegant female voice returns: “Begin reply now—Thank you.”

“Aaah, you fuckin’ dick! I should kick your fuckin’ ass! You can lick my nuts! You can lick my nuuuuuuuts!!!! End message.” Jakks is helpless with laughter. “You hear that shit? How I told him to lick my nuts? Oh man, he is gonna laugh his fuckin’ ass off.”

“I understand nothing you say, Mr. Jakks.”

“What’s this Mr. Jakks shit? I’m just Jakks, okay? Fuckin’, ‘Mr. Jakks.’” He looks at her for a moment. “Hey Bradford.”

“Yes... Jakks?”

“You tell anybody about me?”

MISS EMILY'S
VOYAGE
Mac Rogers

“No, I did not.”

“Any a’ the other cave people, how there’s a spaceman in the woods n’ shit?”

“I told no one, Jakks. That is the truth.”

“Alright. You’re alright, Bradford. You know that? Ain’t nothin’ wrong with you, Bradford. Bradford’s okay, right Sentry?”

“Right you are, Jakks. Thank you.”

“Lemme do something for you, Bradford. Whadaya want? We got the Hopper here—the drive-system’s out, but the whole entertainment center’s working. Whadaya want? Name it. Homo, hetero, weird stuff, whadaya do?”

“I don’t know what you mean, Jakks.”

“Right right right—my bad—fucking—you know—I mean—having sex, sexual, uh, you know, sexual fucking.”

Something in Jakks’ voice is touching off a vague memory in Miss Emily’s mind— some conversation, some voices, some admonitions from the past. But who? And where? Her mother? Some dark room, firelight? Ominous warnings about mysterious events in the future, terms like “marital obligations,” and “disgrace.” These terms seem to belong to a forbidden lexicon kept in a locked drawer somewhere, one Miss Emily has certainly never opened, nor even touched. And then there are those moments when Miss Emily’s sisters fix her with that certain stare, that particular brand of contempt Miss Emily has never been able to name, the contempt of the knowledgeable for the thoroughly ignorant.

“I am sorry, Jakks. I must ask you to rephrase your question with other words. I do not understand what you mean.”

Jakks looks at her for another long moment. “You know what, forget it.”

Miss Emily’s story was quite clever, given her time constraints and—she’d realized with a jolt—the fact that she had never, to her memory, lied before. She had fallen asleep, she tearfully told the others, while sketching an emergent crocus flower, and awoke in a panic just as dusk was beginning to set. The elder Mrs. Bradford, of course, told her she was a fool, and her sisters exchanged more of those knowing looks that they must have imagined Miss Emily never noticed. But Mr. Talbot fussed over her, and tried to help her recover from her trauma with a several of his best anecdotes, including the one about the stolen pastry that everyone liked so much.

When Miss Emily awoke the next morning, she was delighted to discover that certain trace elements of the song from the vessel seemed to be playing inside her head, in fact playing and repeating. She gasped aloud with the joy of it. At breakfast, as the others dredged up all the old morning topics, Miss Emily, whom no one expected to speak anyway, played the song, or rather the segment that was in her head, over and over.

“There’s nothing left to prove
Baby all we need is just to be...”

“Miss Emily?” It was Mr. Talbot at the far end of the table. “Do you have something to share with us?”

With a shock of bright scarlet horror, Miss Emily realized she had been singing aloud without even noticing it. Mr. Talbot leaned forward with an aspect of delighted curiosity. "Were you singing something, Miss Emily? I could not quite place the tune."

Anne and Violet giggled, but Mr. Talbot did not turn to them to acknowledge their giggling. "You are mistaken, Mr. Talbot," declared the elder Mrs. Bradford, "my daughter does not sing at table." The sisters giggled again, and Miss Emily flushed from head to foot. But throughout the rest of the morning, as she dragged herself toward her one o'clock escape, she continued to replay the song in her head:

*Caught up in the touch
A slow and steady rush
And baby isn't that the way that love is s'posed to be...*

In the years before she married, Miss Emily's sister Anne used to play the piano in the parlor and sing love ballads for company. Miss Emily would endure these in silence, aware that they contained nothing to which she could aspire. But now the song from the vessel was in her mind, apparently not to depart any time soon, and Miss Emily understood something she hadn't before: Love songs belong to the lonely, too.

For the first time since Miss Emily has made his acquaintance, Jakks is standing up when Miss Emily arrives in the vessel that afternoon.

"Bradford! What is up, B-Dog! Check me out! Huh?" He turns around, displaying his torso for her, and she sees that large portions of his skin are off-color, a kind of light-pink that almost matches his natural skin tone. "Can't hardly tell I got second-degree burns comin' out of the continuum, can you?"

"I am glad to see you well, Jakks. Perhaps as a complement to your convalescence you might enjoy these." She holds up the basket she's brought with her. "We had scones this morning, and I was able secrete a few for you."

Jakks is speechless. He takes the basket from her, carefully unwraps the napkin, and lifts up one of the scones, studying it in the blue light of the sphere.

"Kick-ass... kick-ASS, Bradford. You see this shit, Sentry?"

"I do see it, Jakks. Thank you."

Jakks, rather than taking a bite, puts the whole scone in his mouth and devours it. "Oh fuck. I my fucking god, I can't believe how much this shit rules. Real food, man! I fuckin' FORGOT! You are the bitch, Bradford, you are the fuckin' bitch."

Miss Emily beams. She understands not one word Jakks is saying, but she can tell he's grateful nonetheless.

"So check it out, Bradford, I'm outta here tomorrow."

"You're leaving?"

"Yeah, Sentry figures he needs another twenty hours to fix the drive system and then I gotta go home and face the fuckin' music."

"Home?"

MISS EMILY'S
VOYAGE
Mac Rogers

“Yeah, check this out.” He leads her to a wall of flickering lights, including a long blue stripe lined with numbers that turns red at its extreme left end. “Okay, we are... here—” he indicates one point in the blue stripe, marked with odd numbers—“It’s hard to explain, that means 1904—and I’m gonna set coordinates for... here—” and he indicates another point at the far right end of the stripe: “2106, where I’m gonna get my ass majorly fucked.”

“Why is it red at this end?” asks Miss Emily, pointing to the red end, far to the left of 1904.

Jakks looks over at the Sentry, grinning. “I’ll show you. Check this out.” He calls to the Sentry, “How’s that drive comin’?”

The Sentry, bent over a mass of machinery, doesn’t even look around. “Quite well, Jakks. Thank you.”

Jakks reaches out and touches part of the red end of the stripe. “Activate coordinates—” But before he can finish the command, the Sentry has crossed the sphere and seized Jakks’ wrist in its tiny silver hand.

“I’m sorry, Jakks, but you are in violation of the Time Continuum Code of 2097. I cannot allow you to activate those coordinates.”

“Okay, okay, my bad.” The Sentry releases Jakks and returns to its work. “I fuckin’ love doin’ that.”

“Why did that happen?”

“’Cause you can’t go into the red. You have to have the capability, in case you need to do a quick-jump out of somebody’s path or something, but you don’t ever wanna use it. That’s why Sentry’s here.”

“Why not?”

“’Cause that’s the beginning of fuckin’ time, bitch. You don’t want a piece of that.”

Miss Emily studies the red on the timeline as Jakks returns to the scones. “There is a beginning to time?”

“Well, there’s something.”

“You have not seen it.”

“No, I haven’t fuckin’ seen it, Jesus Christ.”

“Why not?”

“Cause nobody ever comes back from there. You’d have to be fuckin’ bonkers.”

Miss Emily is silent for a moment, while Jakks gobbles scones. “Well, I wish you a safe voyage back to your home.”

“Hey, fuckin’, you too, Bradford—I mean, not a safe voyage, I mean—Hey Bradford—you know what?”

“Yes, Jakks?”

“I got a surprise for you, too.”

MISS EMILY'S
VOYAGE
Mac Rogers

For a moment there is only a series of flashes, blue light alternating with red. Then Miss Emily is in a room, an enormous, gorgeous room, huge open windows with long, white diaphanous curtains, swaying in a light, warm breeze. She is reclining on an enormous bed bedecked with pillows and she feels strangely... ventilated. She looks down to see she is wearing nothing but a nightgown, and a wisp of a nightgown at that, a little fragment made of the same material as the swaying curtains. But wait—it's not just the nightgown—this isn't her body! Those smooth legs, the giant, protruding bosom, all skin an orangey-brown—by now Miss Emily is getting used to disorienting phantoms, but this is something else entirely. And this is all before she sees the man at the foot of the bed.

He's just a silhouette at first behind the gauzy white bed-curtains, but then he slowly draws the curtains aside and smiles at her. "I knew you were going to be here. I just didn't know you'd be so beautiful." He looks like a piece of sculpture, like something you'd see in a museum brought to life. If one imagined a spectrum, a long blue to red stripe, and at one end placed the small, pale, mole-like Jakks, and in the middle the dashing Mr. Talbot, then this man was surely at the far end, in the red.

"You look tired," the man says. "I bet you've had a hard week. You know what I do when I've had a hard week? I just work it off with some long, deep, fucking." And then the man is on top of her and pressing his mouth onto hers. His jaw feels like hard iron.

"Jesus Christ—abort program—abort program!"

Miss Emily is shrieking with sobs. As Jakks lifts the helmet off her head, her face is streaked with tears. "I cannot—I cannot—I cannot—"

"Jesus Christ, lady, fine, FINE, just—I thought you'd like it—just stop, okay—I'm sorry—I thought you'd—"

But Miss Emily is doubled over in the chair, weeping. Her whole body is wracked.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—that's just what guys do, where I'm from—you like a girl, you fix her up with a nice program, I didn't think—Bradford, I'm sorry—I don't know how to..."

And Miss Emily does understand, in a way, she does understand Jakks, and what he was trying to do, but she doesn't know how to say it and couldn't speak anyway even if she wished to. Her body is revolting against her. It feels not so much like a solid entity as some kind of tumultuous occurrence, like a hurricane, pounding under every inch of her skin.

"I'm sorry, Bradford—shit—I mean—" And without knowing anything else to do, Jakks perches on the side of the huge black chair and puts his arms around her—first one, then the other. "Shit, Bradford..."

She manages to speak: "Forgive me."

"For what?"

"I know you thought of it as a gift..."

"No no no, forget it, I just... man... that's just how it is. I got a Hopper when I was three—everybody does. You're not supposed to get fucking programs 'till you're fourteen, but everybody I know does 'em way before that; the encryptions are easy as hell."

MISS EMILY'S
VOYAGE
Mac Rogers

“Three? Fourteen?”

“What?”

“But your mother and father...”

“They’re in their own Hoppers, they got their own things. I mean, they send me messages every week, it’s not like they don’t—I mean, this is how things are supposed to be—I mean, what do you have, like outhouses, like arranged marriages an’ shit? In my time everything’s perfect—you just put the helmet on, tell the Hopper what you want. Bradford—I’m serious—I really thought you’d like it.”

“I’m sorry, Jakks.”

“Well I mean...” Her sobs are beginning to die down. She does like this, though. Jakks is small and squishy, not very handsome and not at all dashing, but he has an unexpected talent for holding. “Hey, scoot over, Bradford.” She makes room for him, and he sits in the chair with her and holds her. They are silent for a moment, and then Jakks says “Okay, this is fuckin’ weird, we need music—what was that shitty song from yesterday?”

Miss Emily giggles. “You must say ‘Replay track.’”

“Smart-ass, huh? Replay track.”

Faith Hill sings: “I can feel the magic floating in the air...” Miss Emily rests her head against Jakks’s neck.

“Jakks?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you ever wish you did not live in the Hopper?”

“Naw, I mean... that’s just how people live. You know... you should...”

“Yes?”

“Ahh... I’m in enough trouble as it is.” She reaches up and touches his face, his bristly hair, and hears his breath catch. But he doesn’t move away.

Faith Hill sings, “The only thing I hear is the beating of your heart...”

“This song does suck, though, and that’s true shit.”

A gunshot, then, and everything changed. A gunshot, and once again Miss Emily is running, with her skirts pulled up with both hands.

The gunshot had come as the elder Mrs. Bradford was vociferously reprimanding her unmarried middle daughter, and not just reprimanding her, but reprimanding her in front of her beautiful, married sisters.

“These walks of yours, these leave-takings. They grow increasingly long. Twice now you have neglected my side for an entire afternoon, leaving me to the care of whichever savage may be dusting in the next room. It is irregular, and it is disgraceful, and it will cease.”

Anne and Violet were attempting to look smug in the corner while their oversized sister was scolded, but they were also quite irritated. Where was Miss Emily spending her afternoons? What was she doing out there? Not meeting someone—not meeting someone? Not Miss Emily. What right did she have to an intriguing secret?

The elder Mrs. Bradford reached the crescendo of her disapproval in what was almost certainly a direct quote from her late husband: “You will remember your duty is to me, and you will not leave this house!”

Then the gunshot. All turned to the window in shock.

“This is your husband, Violet,” roared the elder Mrs. Bradford, “This is your quail-hunting fool of a husband!”

Miss Emily ran to the window, sheet-white with terror. Where was the shot from—what part of the grounds?

“There!” cried the elder Mrs. Bradford. “There’s the fool now!”

Edward Lane was running out of the woods, screaming. From the second floor they could make him out: “Monstrous! Monstrous!” A sudden bolt of blue light emitted from the woods, narrowly missing Mr. Lane and setting a rose-bush on fire. The married sisters screamed. *Break it*, thought Miss Emily, *Jump*. And right there, right in front of her mother and her married sisters, she reached down with both hands, drew up her skirts, and ran.

“Emily! Emily!”

Miss Emily ran. Miss Emily *runs*. Down the staircase. Over the front walk. Across the great lawn. Past the smoldering rosebush. There are shouts behind her, the men, the servant, even Mr. Talbot, but our Miss Emily’s shedding the past like so many scales upon the ground. The woods. The second path. The left fork. Over the hill. By the creek with no bridge. The woods on the right.

From the oval-shaped opening of the sphere, Miss Emily can make out the voice of the Sentry. “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. This vessel—Thank you. Thank you.”

“Jakks!”

“Bradford? Ah, fuck! Bradford! Get away from here!”

Another bolt of blue light issues from the opening, racing past Miss Emily and boring exquisite even holes through several tree trunks.

“Thank you. Thank you. This vessel—Thank you.”

The Sentry is collapsed on its side, with its weapon arm pointing at the opening. A large portion of its torso has been blasted away and there is an awful burning smell in the air. Mr. Lane’s newest quail.

“Fucking IDIOT!”

“I did not tell them, Jakks, I told them nothing, I swear on my father’s life—”

“Fucking idiot, fucking musket—I can’t believe it worked!”

The Sentry’s movements are slowing, and his arm is beginning to droop. “Thank you. Thaaaank you.”

“He was just finished with the fucking drive-system, he didn’t see the guy coming—ah fuck!” Jakks is clutching

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VOYAGE
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his chest. He collapses into the chair.

“Are you hurt? Jakks, are you hurt?”

“Shit, Bradford, you’re the one lookin’, you tell me!”

“Miss Emily!” It’s Mr. Talbot’s voice! And others! “Miss Emily! Miss Emily!” Footfalls, crunching through the bramble.

“Thaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaank you.” The Sentry’s arm drops to the ground.

“Jakks—they’ll kill you—they’ll hang you—”

“They’ll ‘hang’ me? Okay. Door!” And for the first time since Miss Emily discovered the sphere, the oval-shaped opening vanishes as if it had never been there. “Hang me now, you fucking cave motherfuckers!”

Miss Emily touches the wall where the opening had been. Solid metal, just like the rest. By now she has almost forgot the taste of astonishment. It simply strikes her as a useful feature.

“You didn’t tell ‘em, Bradford.”

“I did not. I would not. Mr. Lane found you on his own.”

“Bradford—we gotta figure out how to get you outta here.”

BAM! BAM!

“The fuck are they doing?”

Miss Emily can hear the vibrations of her friends and family as they hammer on the outside of the vessel, seeking any weakness or point of entry. That’s Mr. Ringale’s voice, that’s Mr. Talbot, that’s the butler, Leven, and further off, her sisters Violet and Anne, and even further, in the almost inaudible distance, her mother, the elder Mrs. Bradshaw. She supposes they are terrified. She supposes they love her.

“Jakks... how do we embark?”

“What?”

“How do we depart?”

“Are you serious?” Miss Emily turns to Jakks, and something in her face spares her from having to speak. Jakks says, “Activate voice command.”

The female voice: “Voice command activated. Thank you.”

Jakks points to the red and blue stripe. “Touch the spectrum right under the black homing mark. That’s 2106.”

Miss Emily finds it, a black hatch mark close to the right end of the stripe. She takes a deep breath—falters—touches it. Outside, Mr. Talbot: “Miss Emily! Call out if you can hear us!”

“Did you touch it?”

MISS EMILY'S
VOYAGE
Mac Rogers

"I did."

"Activate coordinates."

"Coordinates activated, Jakks. Thank you."

There is no vibration, no blast, no sound at all. The only sign that they have embarked is that one moment Miss Emily can hear Mr. Talbot: "Emily—please—" and then the next moment she hears him no longer. She braces herself against the control panel and breathes.

"Oh shit—ooh shit—" Jakks is bleeding badly from two wounds. "Bradford—I'm fucked..."

"What happened?"

"Shrapnel from the Sentry—ah fuck—I don't know what to do, he always fixes me—I'm so fucked..."

Miss Emily inspects him—the wounds are deep, and they seem mortal. "Could they heal this in your time?"

"Yeah."

"How long will it take to get there?"

"Twenty, twenty-five minutes." They both manage not to voice the obvious conclusion.

"Is there anything you wish me to do?"

"Bring me the helmet."

"Of course."

"Computer, show me the experiences catalogue." A list of strange words appears in the air before him. "Scroll." He studies the words as they dance by him. "Where's that one, where's that one..."

"Jakks." Miss Emily holds out the helmet. "Shall I put it on?"

Jakks suddenly flicks his hand and the ghostly list of experiences in the air vanishes. "Bradford."

"Yes, Jakks?"

"Can I tell you something."

"Of course you may."

"I feel like an asshole."

"I do not know what that means."

"No one's ever kissed me before." He raises his head and looks directly at her. "Outside the entertainment center. In life. No one's ever kissed me before."

"No one has ever kissed me, either."

"Well what's your fuckin' excuse?" And she can laugh for a bit, and it's good. She sits on the edge of the chair,

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as Jakks had done the day before.

“How do I begin?”

“You’re askin’ me?” Jakks is beginning to shake.

“I do not wish to hurt you.”

“Bradford—I think I’m past that.”

She leans over and puts her lips to his. As simple as that. His lips are chapped. But these are of him, these lips. The breath in his nostrils is stale, but this is of him, too. Mucus runs from his nose, but this is of him, too. He coughs, and blood trickles from his mouth, but this is of him, too. There are tears in his eyes, and these are of him, too. These are all Jakks, these are part and parcel of him, and this is what she understands now. She sucks in this breath, kisses this mucus, this blood, kisses these tears from his eyes, and when their tongues touch, which ought to be vile but somehow isn’t, Miss Emily knows: everything I have ever been told is a lie.

“Bradford...”

“My given name is Emily.”

“Emily.”

“Yes, Jakks.”

“Can you... can you touch the... the yellow square by that wall? Big-ass yellow square? For the ob-screen?”

She locates the square next to a blank portion of the inner wall where there are no flickering lights. “This?”

“Yeah, just touch that, that’s for...” She touches it, and the blank screen vanishes, to be replaced by another phantom: a night-sky filled with stars, but not a black sky, a sky of bluish-gray, with a horizon of white in the distance. There are flashes and bursts of light, there are great stones suspended in the sky that vanish as soon as they appear, there are other spheres, other vessels whizzing by in both directions. And Miss Emily realizes this is no phantom—this is a sort of window—this is what’s happening outside.

“Jakks—Jakks, it’s—Jakks, it’s—” And here she turns, and here she discovers her companion with his eyes open, twisted over on his side, motionless.

Miss Emily’s response is methodical. She lays him carefully on his back, sets his arms on the arm-rests of the chair, lays his head back, and closes his eyes. She murmurs a prayer, asking for pity for this man who never got a chance to be good or evil. Then she goes back to the window. There is now, visible in the distance, a blue-gray sphere from which all the tiny black spheres are either approaching or departing. This would be Jakks’s world, where she will be arriving presently.

She turns to her right, once again, and looks at the red and blue stripe. 1904. 2106. And so many years for the choosing in between. The Sentry, in pieces on the floor.

Break it. Jump.

Miss Emily goes to the stripe, presses down on the extreme left end, deep in the red, and says, “Activate coordinates.” The female voice: “These coordinates violate the Time Continuum Code of 2097. Are you sure you want to activate them?”

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“I’m sure. Activate coordinates.”

“Thank you.” And just as quickly, the Jakks-world vanishes. In the spectral window, the other spheres begin to fly by at an extraordinary velocity, but Miss Emily cannot feel this speed from inside. So she keeps her eyes on the window.

Outside the window, stars are beginning to blur, elongate. There are fewer and fewer other spheres to be seen until there are finally none at all.

“Warning. This vessel is now in violation of the Time Continuum Code of 2097.”

But Miss Emily only replies, “Replay track.” Faith Hill sings. Miss Emily watches the window.

Suddenly there are no stars. The gray-blue deepens to purple deepens to black. Great sounds invade the sphere, enormous guttural voices. She watches the window. There are colors, shapes, great gouts of fire. There are councils, there are great meetings taking place, beings whose eyes are nine hundred feet across. There are great declarations and plans, damning truths, new ways to see and hear—new to Miss Emily, that is. Somewhere in the deep background, Faith Hill sings.

The sounds and the colors and the creatures are coming into the vessel, they’re coming into the vessel, they are joining Miss Emily on this final leg of her voyage. They are her companions.

They are coming in the vessel, the shapes, the colors, the sounds, the creatures, they are coming into the vessel and disassembling the package, the inches and quarts and tendencies that compose Miss Emily. They are taking her apart and putting her together again. It is not that no one has ever returned. It is that they were never themselves to return.

Outside, through the window, the vessel has stilled. There’s nowhere else to go. There are no more planets, no more colors, no more sounds. There is only a great black wall of silence. The vessel drops away, the song of Faith Hill, the body of Jakks, the remains of the Sentry. There is Miss Emily, suspended in space.

And just as suddenly, the black wall splits open, cut open by a lacerating light. Miss Emily closes her eyes.

But this is the end of Miss Emily’s voyage. There is nowhere else to go. And this light, rushing forward like a great wind, is not to be denied. Its brightness is so savage, so complete, it’s if her eyes are not closed at all. So what is left of our Miss Emily of the drawing room—Break it. Jump.

Miss Emily opens her eyes.

Mac Rogers is a writer and performer based in Brooklyn. His plays *Universal Robots* and *Viral* won Best Off-Off Broadway Play honors from the Independent Theater Blogger Awards, and *Robots* earned four New York Innovative Theater (NYIT) Award nominations. He is the co-founder (alongside Jordana and Sean Williams) of Gideon Productions, and an NYIT nominee for his performance in the title role in James Comtois’s *The Adventures of Nervous-Boy*. He lives with his wife Sandy in a converted auto-body shop in either East Williamsburg or Bushwick, depending on who you ask.