LOVE.

AN ARCHAEOLOGY

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ONE.

LOVE IN A VOID

(TO THE MEMORY OF HARLAN ELLISON)

Seven Horrors

Nobody knows why the Time Traveler decided to kill himself. It was even more confusing when the other members of the Fellowship found out that the Assassin was scouring the ages after him.

First, because to kill a suicide seemed like a very ineffective—and futile—thing to do. Second, because the Time Traveler and the Assassin were deeply, madly in love.

When they got wind of this, the Traveler's friends (that is, all the members of his Fellowship, or pretty much all of them) thought he was going too far—literally—in his escape. That's because they thought the Traveler was running away from something. Not true.

He had really wanted to die. Just not by the hand of the woman he loved.

*

The first confrontation between the Assassin and the Time Traveler happened in the Permian, 254 million years ago. Not long after the eruption of the Siberian megavolcano that put an end to millions of species you never knew anything about, nor will ever know.

But it was a tiresome, ludicrous, pathetic event: the Assassin materialized before a tired, depressed Traveler, facing him through a swirl of falling ashes and the heat of smouldering woods around them.

It was the beginning of the end—of one of the ends, actually. The history of those two time-crossed lovers was very far from ending.

Without trying to get closer to him, the Assassin vanished in the Time Corridors as quickly as she had gotten in there. That's why that first contact, so to speak, could in all honesty be called an event. A meeting, a metaphor at the same time simpler and more powerful than that famous song of the 20th Century: *two ships that pass in the night*. Or a warning: *Brace yourself. I am coming for you*. A loving warning, if such a thing can be said of a death sentence.

*

Until the early twenty-first century, five big extinction events were recorded on Earth, namely: the process of glaciation in the Ordovician, the meteor impacts in the Devonian, the Siberian megavolcano in the Permian, the greenhouse effect in the Triassic and the Yucatán impact in the Cretaceous. The sixth is beginning right now as you read me: it's your Anthropocene. But it doesn't matter, not now.

Every other one of those extinctions, as you can see, is much more catastrophic than anything else that had ever happened to humankind in its comparatively short, so short, journey upon the Earth.

The Fellowship has another name to call extinction events: Horrors.

Definitions of what would exactly constitute a Horror don't necessarily encompass size, but intensity. The history of humankind, for instance, is chock-full of never-ending horrors. That said, the Traveler's list was strictly personal, and was based on his grieving.

His idea was to use each and every one of those in his very unusual suicide.

*

Let's be brutally honest: anyone can kill him or herself very easily. The evolution of technology was very helpful to human beings in this sense.

Naturally, not everyone needs such elaborate help. Really brave people just cut their wrists and wait for death to come by massive blood loss. It's a slow, painful process (which can be expedited if you cut along the veins rather than transversally). They can also hang themselves. A shot in the head, if correctly administered, can kill instantly—but if it doesn't, the would-be suicide might spend the rest of his probably long, hard life wishing he or she was very dead.

To throw oneself under a vehicle (preferably a bus, or, better yet, a high-speed train) should be enough. Also taking an overdose of pills, especially sleeping pills. Psychotropics may not have the desired effect, and they also can confuse the user in such a way that he or she can't know the difference between being alive or dead (this might be good, actually).

But I digress. The important thing, regarding this narrative, is that the Traveler wanted to kill himself. And, despite all the evidence to the contrary, he really wished that. But it wasn't that simple.

*

Time traveling has apparently only one side effect. To live forever.

This is not a figure of speech. This is not a philosophical wordplay with paradoxes or some such. According to the Inventor, the Cherenkov radiation emitted by time traveling affects directly the aging processes.

She doesn't know why that happens. In millennia of temporal exploration, no one ever found out the reason.

What is known (and this is just because there's one recorded case in the Fellowship, of the individual known as the Cadaver) is that immortals can die if they absorb an amount of Cherenkov radiation larger than the average in a very short time. For that to happen, though, one must travel almost nonstop through the Time Corridors.

*

The Time Corridors are exactly that: corridors. More about them in a while. Patience, please.

*

Something which the Traveler got used to during his stint at the Fellowship: traveling to uncomfortable places. Phobotopias, the Chronicler named those oh-so-likely places, of quite difficult description even for this member of the Fellowship, who had centuries (or more) to hone his skills. But some of those places are impossible to imagine because no one who hadn't been there is even remotely aware that they exist.

Imagine the Seven Wonders of the World. Now imagine their opposite.

The Seven Horrors of the World is the name the Chronicler gave them.

The Chronicler is not the bad guy in this story, but it's a damn big bastard.

*

What's the Fellowship, after all? You must be curious to know what this group is that I've been talking so much about until now.

Very well: the Fellowship is a band of time travelers that attained immortality. How the Fellowship came to be, not even its members can remember for sure. The group is apparently as immortal as its members, maybe even something born with the Earth itself, or with Time. A few mortal writers had a brush with the concept. Hermann Hesse, for example. He tried to describe it in its forgotten classic *Journey to the West*. He wasn't entirely successful, but for someone who never roamed the Time Corridors, he got the gist of it in a very interesting manner.

I can't tell you more than this. Yes, I will be bold enough to use the time-honored cliché of the impossibility of understanding on the part of people from earlier ages, but I use that only because it's

true. You come from our past, or rather, from a remote, basic point of our hypercubic superstructure (I told you you wouldn't understand). For now, suffice it to say that there existed-exists-will exist a group of people, a band that lived-live-will live apart from everything, from time and space themselves. And those persons would give everything to have what you who read me already take for granted: the hope of dying.

*

But not everyone has reached the point of the Cadaver, or even the moment just before the ebullition, as was the case of the Traveler.

Hm. I'll have to interrupt my train of thought again to clarify one thing.

You must have noticed by now that every single member of the Fellowship has names that are actually indicative of functions. So far so good, right?

But, if all of them are time travelers, why does only one of them go by the particular title of Time Traveler?

The answer is simple: he is the first Time Traveler, the original one, the foundation of it all, the alpha and the omega. But he can't remember any of it. Let's follow him in his findings.

*

Speaking of which: we have no names, not anymore. It's not necessary: each one of us recognizes him-herself by the structure of the DNA, by the all too particular curves and loops of the chromosomes, by the density of nucleoli and the rhythm of the bombing of the blood through veins and arteries. A name of this kind translated for any of the old languages of the Earth of the Sixth Extinction would have more than a mile of length it put on paper. Fortunately, this—written language—do not exist anymore. This time is long past.

Even for time travelers.

However, there is something inexplicable—and deeply annoying—in those post-humans who insist on making themselves known by certain titles. Would it be a kind of generosity, of compassion, loving kindness maybe? As humans used to say in the old days, I run out of fucks to give.

What I do know—and would be happy to share with you—is that the Traveler decided to kill himself doing something that nobody expected.

Acceleration towards the horror.

*

The Second Horror visited by the Traveler was the Yucatán Holocaust. The force field used by the immortals to prevent contamination from both sides would also allow him to breath in the Cretaceous atmosphere, still too filled with carbon dioxide.

He arrived two days after the impact—the ideal moment for someone who, like him, didn't want to die on the spot (for we could have easily been spared all this story if he had just stayed exactly on the impact point when the asteroid struck—I forgot to tell you that, although knives or bullets can hardly make a scratch on their bodies, immortals can be killed by cataclysmic events that utterly destroy their bodies). But the Traveler was a romantic. He wanted to die slowly.

This, however, doesn't mean he wasn't smart. Real suicides always are. What he really wanted was to accumulate enough radiation to reduce his immunity instead of boosting it. (During one of the countless, sometimes heated, theoretical debates between bored immortals, the Inventor claimed that this strategy would probably work.)

The average temperature of what would be Mexico during the end of the Cretaceous was 73.4 degrees Fahrenheit. But not during the extinction event itself: the Traveler's equipment registered 152.6 F on the lip of the crater.

His companion AI protested. In vain. The Traveler knew all too well the risks.

And that was exactly why he shut down the force field.

The winds of forty miles per hour almost took him down, but he stood his ground. His lungs, however, suffered the full impact. The Traveler doubled over, feeling a sudden dizziness. His throat and nostrils burned horribly. His lungs were probably collapsing, but all of this wasn't enough to kill him.

He just stood there, surveying everything around him as far and wide as possible. The Traveler was a suicide all right, but he wasn't a masochist. Not much, anyway.

Then the Assassin arrived.

They faced each other across one of the minor craters (a few pieces of the asteroid came off and struck the ground before the main impact). As if they weren't breathing. That's what was happening to the Traveler, at least. When his breathing started to fail, he turned the force field on again and left. He wished he had sighed, but his lungs were burnt enough to make that an impossible task.

*

In the beginning, the immortals always traveled together, like a band of brothers—or of wild animals. There were legion, but this legion quickly divided in subgroups that met once in a blue moon, until they

finally decided to meet once a year.

They never met on the same place twice. Paradoxes. Better to avoid them.

The meeting that time was at the Never-ending Party.

New York, turn of the millennium. The third, by the Christian calendar. 2000 to 2001. In the last floor of the World Trade Center, naturally.

The Traveler entered the room with a cold sweat. He hated crowds, and despised parties even more, but on the other hand he appreciated a good imbibing, so whenever possible he tried to annul one hateful thing with a much adored one.

He had just poured himself a drink (a gin and tonic, bitter and dry the way he liked it) and then found the only person he really didn't imagine seeing anymore in the group's alcohol-fueled meetings.

No, it wasn't the Assassin. She will reappear many times in this narrative.

It was the Enlightened.

The Traveler was fundamentally a non-believer. Right at the inception of the Fellowship, they had decided to avoid any kind of visit to the origins of the world's religions—any religion, from the main ones to the first ones, or even the long forgotten creeds or the very last ones at the End of Days. But it was impossible not to be impressed with the Enlightened. She seemed to emit a strange aura, something hard to explain, something that blurred the curves of her body. (He had already mentioned this to the Inventor, who told him he had the same feeling. However, he hadn't detected any kind of radiation or device able to produce such an effect.)

She was standing in a corner, holding a bottle of sparkling water. Since she became an *arahant*, that is, the very last stage before attaining full Buddhahood, the Enlightened didn't drink alcohol anymore. In fact, she barely ate. She depended on the *pindapata*, that is, food donation from the practitioners or anyone who cared. If nobody offered her food, she would spend the entire day without eating. That had happened many times, and she never complained, not that he knew of. This pissed him off deeply.

Besides, she seemed to behave pretty much as a nun, but didn't dress as one. The Traveler never understood completely his ex-wife.

"Hi," she said when she saw him, beaming.

"How's it going? Are you okay?" he asked her, but he knew it was in vain. She just stood there, smiling, not saying a word. A Buddha is indifferent to notions such as good and bad.

"Have you met Jan?" She gestured towards a young man who was at her right side, and of whose presence the Traveler hadn't been aware until that very moment. "He is an Oneironaut, a dream traveler. He's

visiting us in his dream."

Once upon a time, the Traveler would most probably have cracked a not very funny joke, using wit to exchange ideas and information with people like the Oneironauts. Not anymore. And that was precisely a symptom of his illness.

"How do you do? Are you enjoying the dream?" he just said, nodding in his direction.

"It feels good to be here," Jan said. They exchanged a few pleasantries, but nothing remarkable. The Oneironauts belong to other narratives. This is the one that interests us, and it starts again in the second that Jan, the Oneironaut, vanishes before their eyes.

"The Sleeper awakes," the Traveler said.

"Where are the others?" asked the Enlightened, ignoring the belated witty pun.

"Aren't they here yet?"

She shook her head. The Traveler only shrugged his shoulders and sipped his gin. The irony of time travelers being late never gets old.

One must understand that an *arahant*, or Buddha, or enlightened person (as far as this narrative is concerned, all these denominations are the same thing) has the perfect knowledge. There are no analogies able to totally explain this concept, but an image that may be of some help is the auditory phenomenon known as *perfect pitch*. This skill allows a musician to identify and name all the tones of a given chord. Perfect knowledge is simply to know everything that's going to happen—not because of supposed determinism (that doesn't exist, according to the Enlightened: the fact is that too many actions exist that repeat themselves in the timeline, for everything that's infinite tends to repeat eternally, and it's precisely that repetition that gives the Samsara its shape of a wheel. Hm.), but because time is not linear. Never was. The Traveler knew that already; he had had many conversations with her since she achieved illumination.

"She's not coming?" he finally deigned to ask.

"One does not need to attain *nibbana* to know that," she answered compassionately.

"I attach myself too easily," he said, not unironically.

"Every kind of attachment is delusion," the Enlightened said. "I always imagined that our group would understand that better than the anchored humans."

"We are not anchored to the arrow of time, but we are still pretty human," he retorted. "Except you."

She laughed.

"I too have a human body," she said. "But this is not me."

The Traveler never showed any interest in Buddhist philosophy. Everything seemed so complicated to him. But sometimes he felt a

pang of sadness and mourned his own lack of interest on the subject.

"I guess that's my cue, then."

"I'll organize a retreat in Bangkok next year," she said. "I'd like to propose that our group meet there next time."

"It would be interesting, But I'm not sure if I'll be able to attend."

"I know. Be seeing you."

*

In the original time of the Traveler, humankind—that is, those who survived all the wars and decided to stay on Earth after the Post-Human Transition—learned like in no other moment in the long, not-very-well-recorded human history, the idea of *dedication*. It was, surely, an almost obsessive dedication that led the people of that age to have deeply focused interest in one subject, one object, one skill, one love. Nothing was done halfheartedly. A person who lived at the time of the Third Mentality (120th Century by the Christian calendar, which had been replaced by the Stapledon Pattern) was either a perfect artist, a perfect engineer, or a perfect athlete.

Or a perfect assassin.

Everybody did what they wanted to do and were encouraged to pursue their way. No subject, no ability, nothing was taboo. If everything was transitory, everything was permitted. So they forged on.

The Assassin was maybe the most dedicated member of the group in what she did.

*

The Third Horror happened in the Twenty-Third Century C.E. I am telling you this for your exclusive benefit. The immortals didn't guide themselves by the notion of linear chronological progression, for everything was time to them. Labels served only as signposts on the Corridors.

But it might interest you to know that the Apophis Holocaust happened in 2266.

Since humankind started to sweep the sky in search of asteroids on a collision course with Earth, such an event was expected. The visitation of Apophis was being announced since the early 21st.

It was huge. Bigger than the Yucatán meteor. Much bigger.

Nobody knows for sure how people survived after the impact. The orbital elevator that was being built over the equator was destroyed, and the few areas that weren't affected by the shock waves of the cable fall suffered with the nuclear winter that hid the sun from view for more than a year. Less than five per cent of humanity survived.

When the Traveler arrived there, many people were still alive. Most of them were agonizing, because of wounds, hunger, disease, or all three combined. He walked through the recently formed Southeast Asian Basin, where only a few days before stood the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea, both vaporized and now filled to the brim with debris of what used to be Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Malaysia, and Cambodia. His feet, wrapped in paper-thin sandals (an affectation that always pissed me off no end, because it hurt his feet unnecessarily), could feel the rubble formed by rocks and bone shards. The air was hot, almost unbreathable.

"You really like your asteroids," the Assassin said when she materialized by his side.

"Not only that," was his answer.

"How many jumps left?"

"You know the number."

"I want to hear it from you."

But, before the Traveler could say something, she sprayed something in his direction. The strain of Ebola Zaire that she had collected in the zero point of the first occurrence of the virus in the Yambuku village in 1976 was laced with a special inner time accelerator. It was a weapon that was quite hard to obtain even for members of the Fellowship.

The Traveler sniffed in the air the possibilities of the unfolding of events way before the viral cloud got near his body. He entered the Corridors without having time to bathe in the Cherenkov radiation of the Apophis aftershocks. He ran away feeling angry and sad.

*

The Fourth Horror was easy. The Traveler noticed that extinction events were just like that, probably because there were no humans around. He managed to map with impressive accuracy a point where he would absorb a huge amount of radiation in a very short time, and the Assassin somehow couldn't arrive in time to face him. So, let's skip the Devonian.

*

The Fifth Horror took place during the Armenian genocide.

It was a pretty hard time. Only those who lived through that could have the palest idea of what happened: during centuries this ethnic cleansing had been denied by the Turkish government and swept under the carpet for as long as possible. But you couldn't hide anything from the Fellowship.

Not that they could do anything about it. History might not be

deterministic, but the Fellowship had signed a pact of non-interference on the time flux. This pact wasn't always respected, but most of its members thought the world was too complicated already, and they had a certain idea of their limitations. They would have to pull lots of superstrings to change the smallest stitch in the fabric of reality.

The Traveler left the Corridor and fell straight into a deep well full to the brim with corpses. All around him, one person or another, still alive, moaned in pain and asked to die. The soldiers at the lip of the crater did their best to comply, gunning everything in sight. The shots, naturally, didn't strike the Traveler; one of the things that make the members of the Fellowship angry and nervous is that, once outside the conventional spacetime flow, nothing coming from them is able to affect them directly. The bullets are just possibilities for the Traveler, and the continuum works always and forevermore in his favor.

But he wanted to suffer. He craved for pain.

He crawled slowly until he finally got out of the well. It took him two days.

The Assassin was there that entire time. But she didn't interfere. I don't know exactly why, but my guess is that she wanted him to suffer as well. Death could wait a little longer.

*

What can be said about all this hullaballoo? There wasn't a fucking epic thing on it. The members of the Fellowship were immortal, that's a given, but deep down they were only human, and the entire history of the human race consists, has always consisted, of a more or less random succession of events, having death as the final destination. The sole thing that separated them from the rest of the humanity was the end. The middle, with all its ups and downs, its glories and pains, its joys and disillusionments, would be the same. I know this all too well. After some many years following the Traveler as his designated Artificial Intelligence, I should know.

*

Let's talk a little about the Assassin.

Much has been said about those two characters, in quite a number of narratives both Western and Eastern, and in a number of universes. The two were living archetypes.

But their love story wasn't meant to be happy.

Even though the names of each actor in this drama are archetypical, the Assassin didn't start her… career, so to speak, by killing anyone. She didn't even like to kill time while waiting for the classes at the

university where, so many moons ago, she met the Traveler for the first time. And fell hopelessly in love with him.

It wasn't exactly love at first sight. That took a while.

We also must define properly what is understood as time, since both met in the past in order to better study humankind, but each one came from a different age.

The Assassin came from the far future. So far away that the notion of Mentalities, belonging to the Traveler's age, was already archaic to her. Humanity had already set sail to the stars and started to explore alternate Earths—and understood that what we had always figured to be alternate Earths were in fact another thing, folds in the fabric of spacetime that allowed humans to explore potentialities unimagined until then. Time travel was just one of them, but until he met the Assassin, the Traveler only knew the Fellowship's version.

The Fellowship's version was this: time travel had been discovered in their own age. But versions varied: after all, not every member of the Fellowship had originated from the same time.

*

"I hate you. I hate you with all my heart," the Assassin told him as soon as he arrived at the scene of the Sixth Horror.

London in the Great Fire of 1666 was a vision of hell. At least the Christian hell as seen in those times, and also for the next few centuries. This time the Traveler had his force field turned on, but attenuated so he could feel the heat and take a deep, not at all healthy breath of the toxic fumes.

The Assassin didn't use a force field. But she walked through the fire without feeling anything.

The Traveler didn't say a thing. He felt like crying, but the tears were vaporized as soon as they left the tear ducts.

All he could do was to deactivate his field.

A fraction of a second before the flames engulfed him entirely, he felt the full force of the impact. The Assassin hurled him through the Corridor.

Corridor, Schcorridor. Some call this system the Time Tunnel. Others simply Wormhole. The word of choice to the Fellowship members is just Corridor. Because the perception of who travel across the ages using that place (some call it a device, but in fact it's a place) is that of traversing a very long, cold, dark corridor. An utterly terrifying corridor.

He didn't fall too far. He stumbled upon a green hillock somewhere in the Iron Age, under a cold drizzle that cooled his body in a very welcoming way. The crisp, unpolluted air helped to cleanse his lungs of the future smoke.

He could only think of one thing: *if she hates me that much, why is she trying to keep me from taking my own life?*

*

"Anger moves you," the Enlightened told him the last time they met.

Her retreat took place among the ruins of Bangkok after the Second Pan-Asian Confederation War in 3019—long after nuclear weapons had been retired and replaced with sonic and viral arsenals, which, combined, could obliterate in a very efficient way populations and landscapes in order to facilitate cleaning and reconstruction by the winners. The Enlightened and other arahants not belonging to the Fellowship (though they could have easily joined if they wanted, for Buddhas saw the scaffolding of spacetime continuum as it really was; that is, an illusion) had chosen that moment in time, between the utter devastation of the old Thailand capital and the building of New Bangkok.

"Anger is good fuel," he replied.

"Does it work?" she asked.

He wobbled his head in the Indian way. To be near the Enlightened provoked in him the desire to behave like your stereotypical Asian, something he hated because he couldn't see himself as belonging to any place now, but sometimes craved for anyway.

"I don't know yet."

"Will you keep on trying until you find out?"

"I suppose so."

*

This story could only end where everything begins.

The Last Horror, according the Traveler's calculations, wouldn't be so hard.

Witnessing the end of Pangea demanded a certain refinement, as well as a great deal of patience on the Traveler's part. He needed to undertake a true pilgrimage by the Corridor, almost a temporal Camino de Santiago, stopping along the way, making measurements with his Time Rose. The tattoo on his right arm shimmered with a myriad of colors, whose tone and intensity could tell him the exact point in time he was in with far more precision than human calendars or even the previous Terran races.

The Traveler could have speeded up the process, but he was a romantic; I already told you this. For him, the way was the anticipation of suffering.

He took six subjective days to arrive. Six days of meditating,

moderate fasting, and total concentration on the goal ahead. To the Paleozoic.

He arrived at the early Cenozoic five minutes before the Indic Shock: the moment when the island which in your time is called India crashes into the Asian continent and forms the Himalayas by the sheer pressure of its tectonic plates.

The Traveler wasn't the first to witness that moment, but there weren't too many people interested in going there. The tremors ran the entire Richter scale (also the scale that would be created after Apophis). The Traveler calculated that the Ultimate Separation tremor could reach the equivalent of Richter 14 or 15—which would affect him very little if he left the force field on.

Naturally, he deactivated the field as soon as he arrived.

According to his calculations, the tremendous forces liberated by the Earth in the great pulses of the Indic Shock should release enough energy to give him an overdose of Cherenkov radiation—and finally kill him.

This time, though, the Assassin was waiting for him.

"Why?" It was all he could manage to answer.

She didn't answer. Instead, she charged at him at full speed.

The Traveler didn't wait. He did exactly as I suggested to him while we were crossing the ages.

He returned to the Corridor.

*

The truth is, nobody invented time travel. The corridor—or the corridors, because the structure is manifold and all-encompassing, branching like a tree of infinite size—was/is/will be found, by people who were in the right place at the right time. Or in the wrong place at the wrong time. The eye of the beholder and all that.

*

The Traveler, naturally, was in the wrong place at the wrong time. He couldn't enter the Corridor again. Instead, what happened to him was this: he was paralyzed in a kind of temporal sandwich, between one femtosecond and the next, unable to move. As in all great stories (be it of love or hate), the Assassin, being his nemesis, had a speech to make before killing him.

*

Another piece of information about the Assassin you need to know: she didn't have this title originally. She was once known as the Physician.

She devoted her life to curing people. The members of the Fellowship especially.

It was because of his suicide attempt that she became the Assassin.

Because she knew it would go south. And he would need help.

*

This time, however, the Assassin wasn't alone.

At her side was a frightened, wide-eyed child. Maybe, actually, more intrigued than frightened, even though he didn't understand anything at that point, and his heart rate was very accelerated for a seven-year-old child. The Assassin needed, her heart full of pain, to rescue her son from the abyss of time as evidence.

The force field used by the members of the Fellowship is an abstraction; there is no way to create a real quantum repulsion field capable of forbidding anything to penetrate and at the same time allowing air to get in and out the membrane. The solution found by the Inventor was simpler, if costly: to envelop the travelers in successive layers of spacetime. As a sandwich. Provided that it was prepared at the same time in several different ages and eaten all simultaneously. The Traveler was the filling.

But, before she could say anything, he retaliated.

Between each Horror, the Traveler had time to plan a proper defense to the Assassin's attacks. You don't spend an eternity traveling through time without learning an entire Encyclopedia Galactica of ways to kill. Case in point being: all he needed to do was to project an identical force field in her direction. And invert it. The enveloping method can be used to protect—or to destroy. All you have to do is invert the layers.

When the Traveler sliced the spacetime in front of him, the Assassin wasn't there anymore. She felt the impending danger and jumped a few seconds ahead.

Leaving their son in the line of fire.

*

(Maybe you are wondering why she didn't take the kid with her, or, in case that wasn't really possible, why she didn't rescue him from that horrible death. The answer is that she couldn't. Because it had already happened. She was acting in accordance with a previous script.)

Breathing deeply, the Assassin got closer to the field that still surrounded the Traveler and finally said what she had to say.

*

"Listen," she finally said. "The reason why I must kill you is that your suicide attempts are only making everything worse. The excess radiation won't end your life. On the contrary: you will become immortal. And omniscient. And omnipresent, through all ages. You will feel an indescribable pain. I am doing it because I hold you dearly in my heart. And because we had a child together."

"I didn't know that," he said.

"You never looked behind. If you insist on following your plan, you will never be able to not look behind, forward, now. You will not stand it."

"And how do you know that?"

"Because it already happened. You are my past. The creature you will become is my present."

"Why did you sacrifice our son?" he managed to ask after a long time, without taking his eyes off the twisted mass of flesh, blood and guts lying in front of him, and that suddenly started to shake uncontrollably, as did the entire plate they stood upon. The cataclysm had just begun.

"I thought you wouldn't ask. But, in all honesty, I expected it to start later."

Then the field collapsed. And the Chronicler acted.

See, in fact the Chronicler is not human. He was once, but that was long ago; the Chronicler is actually their son. The sacrifice was from the body only—his mind was stored in a crystalline dataseed, which bloomed and gave fruits.

And it became a tree. Of infinite boughs.

The boughs of that tree make traveling through spacetime possible. The tree is more powerful than the tunnel. Maybe the tunnel is one of the boughs. I can't tell.

You already guessed that I am the Chronicler, right?

*

"I had no children," he said. "I haven't transmitted the legacy of our misery to any creature." He liked to tell to anyone who cared to listen (when he drank a bit more than usual) that he was the one who told Machado de Assis the last sentence of his novel *Posthumous Memoirs of Bras Cubas*, but that wasn't true. Travelers didn't change history, not even to create alternate timelines.

There are precedents, though. We'll come back to this later.

*

What happens now?

We already established that time is not only linear, but also

multidirectional and rhizomatic; that traditional rules do not apply when time is considered and, when they apply to time, they don't apply to the members of the Fellowship.

We also learned that nobody dies from Cherenkov radiation overdose. We also learned that the process is much more complex, and the excess bring its user to a situation, say, untenable:

The physical body seems to multiply, like a row of clones, first forward and backwards, then to the sides, also up and down, and after that the superpositions become impossible for the naked eye to watch. To a theoretical external observer, it's possible to see an expanding aura, like a water bubble mixed with a drop of oil, forming thus a superthin layer that shimmers in all the color spectrum, from the infrared to ultraviolet and other frequencies that don't exist in the visible swath of the spectrum in quite a few universes.

A sort of echo in the spacetime continuum fabric that seems the sedimentation of a new memory, a memory that had ever been there already, as if the new was old, or not exactly that, but one of the foundations of the fabric of memory.

The feeling that every single dejà vu in existence, past, present and future, was created right in that moment, overlaying layers, echoing images, sounds, thoughts.

Other feelings, this one truly terrifying: realizing that, if there is a God, this was the moment of Its creation.

And the Traveler is God.

*

"I failed," the Assassin will tell the Enlightened later, at the Thailand retreat.

"There is no such thing as failure," the other will say.

The Assassin will take a deep breath and say:

"This is not how it works. Things don't stop being what they are just because you face them with indifference and self-help dictums."

And the answer is going to be:

"You know all of this was written already. The Writer will take care of the rest."

"If time is immutable, why didn't you stop me? Why didn't you stop all this useless fight? The sacrifice?"

"I didn't say time is immutable. Everything changes."

"Even the origin of all?"

"Even the origin."

*

You are wondering why you are reading this narrative. It's simple: you are being summoned to join us in the Time Corridors.

You are not special. Remember that immortality isn't necessarily a blessing.

And we can always use more travelers. We are the ones who maintain a modicum of stability in this universe. The Corridors are the veins and arteries; we are the blood. Time is a virus that infects the universe. But is good that it exists; without the passage of Time, everything crystallizes.

Actually, the reason for your summoning is that my mother has failed. And my father turned into a god.

We need to kill him. I'm counting on you.