



One

To Edward's left, the broad estuary of the river ran dark under a cloudy sky, and beneath the dike, the great marshes stretched to the sea, a thin white glitter on the southern horizon. The water looked nearer today, but Edward often had that apprehension, a professional apprehension as it were, quite suitable for his weekday role as Marsh-Keeper. He was one of a team that monitored the health and depth of the marshes, testing for the toxics, the slow leaks of gasoline and oil, the radiation, pesticides, plastics and other barely imagined plagues still left below water, and searching out invasives like *Phragmites australis* that might damage the grasses, green-gold and lovely in the low light, that were the chief bulwark of the city.

Sure, the dike was impressive, a cyclopean stone and cement barrier that surrounded the small, dense city, a wall so high that shipping crates had to be hoisted from the river by huge cranes. The walls were maintained by the Dike-Watchers, proud in their gray uniforms and black capes and caps, but in Edward's opinion, both the dikes and their watchers were more for show than substance. A dike alone, no matter how high, could not tame the sea, only a marsh could do that, soaking up storm surges, breaking the waves, slowing the fatal rush of heavy, sandy water. His parents had stories of the last Rising, and though they'd been just children they remembered the brown waves of salt water pouring over the old dikes to drown the lower floors of Hartford and submerge the southern suburbs. Bodies had floated down river for weeks, and from the taller buildings of the city the survivors had looked south at

the sinking roofs of ruined towns.

That was when Edward's specialty, marsh restoration, began. Now from the rebuilt, taller dike, he looked toward the sea, rising, of course, rising, but contained, sopped up and tranquilized by the thick mesh of grasses. The sea remained on the horizon for the moment, and Hartford, with its massive dike, its unique, raised architecture, and complex drainage system, held the river front, the lifeline of the cities on high ground to the west.

It amazed Edward that in the old days marshes were the enemy, to be drained, channeled, filled. Ancient history was full of horrors and follies, few worse, in Edward's opinion, than the destruction of what would be the city's salvation. Of course, if the records were correct _ and Edward had no doubt they were, having traveled to the shore in his work, having seen the ruins, and having, as part of his professional responsibilities, the monitoring of the wreckage left behind _ former generations lived hard by the sea. By choice. Amazing. Now only the poorest and most eccentric ventured to set up shacks on the edge of the marshes, and if the Surferklubs traveled down river when the waves were up, those sane & capable, as the phrase went, preferred to be out of sight of the ocean.

Edward thought that was why the Bulwark Café did not do quite the business its charming garden and excellent locally grown coffee and chocolate would seem to deserve: it had a sea view. One of his friends, admittedly of a morbid disposition, claimed he could see the dead from the walls. Well, thought Edward, if you went back far enough in any direction, you'd see the dead, dinosaurs or men or forest buffalo or conifers or maple trees. He was a naturalist and the rise and decline of species was an irremediable, if gloomy, fact of existence.

To clinch the point, the Great Risings were within living, if rapidly extinguishing, memory. A few ancients still spoke of Long Island and the Thimbles and the Great Evacuation of New York, and boaters had to navigate carefully around the sunken towers of Manhattan. All before Edward's time. Long before. He was of the so-called Aqua Generation, the first really adapted to the new conditions represented by the dikes and the marshes. He liked the soft, watery marsh light, the subdued hum of the massive tide turbines that fed the local grid, the sound of geese overhead.

So it puzzled him that lately he had felt a touch of Melankol. The epidemiologists were warning that the winter might be a bad one and blamed the outbreak on the grey marsh light. Edward, indignant, thought some slow developing mosquito-borne ailment or a new parasite was much more likely; the marshes were, admittedly, a nursery for such things. He and all the Marsh-Keepers took elaborate precautions and every known prophylactic before they waded into those dangerous and protective waters.

Edward set down his cup, opened his Komunikator for the day's headlines, and scrolled to the Healthbits. It was a characteristic of the Aqua Generation that they had an obsessive interest in their own well-being, a trait sympathetic commentators traced to the epidemics of the last Rising, and critics, to the selfishness of pampered survivors. Edward being in the oldest cohort of the Aquas, came down somewhere in between, but he never missed the day's Healthbit. Today, amidst the usual Melankol reports, he spotted another Absence: young female, 23, black

hair, light complexion, brown eyes, 5'4", slight build. No surprise there! Though the Fashbits touted the full figure, Edward hadn't seen a plump, never mind a fat, woman in years. He had a dim remembrance of Auntie Liz, a friend of his parents, a large, bosomy presence with a purse full of candies, his belle ideal really, but amplitude had gone with the last Rising. Rice, fish, and greens were not exactly an amplitude diet, though thanks to the Fish-Keeper, who managed the weirs and ladders that took salmon and shad safely past the turbines, the city ate far better than the hinterlands. There was that.

Another Absence with its own mysterious listing. Runaways were simply Runaways, while if a crime were suspected, the category was Disappearance; the latter would be entered in Crimebits and impinge directly on Edward's life. Since malefactors rarely bothered to transport incriminating evidence to higher ground, Disappearances meant searching the marshes and dragging the river. Edward couldn't count the number of times he'd had to take Solar 8 out with SafetyMen on board, grappling hooks in hand. Disappearances were not Edward's favorite thing by any means, but Absences were a source of considerable interest.

What was her name again? Diorina Ashansa. A pretty name and a flick of another button brought up a reasonably pretty face, nice because, though it was hardly fair and evidence, as Kara would say, of "serious Retro," an Absence without a pretty face lost some of its intrigue for him. Diorina Ashansa, a worker at Turbine Maintenance Level 2, had become Absent walking home along the Raised Road around 4:30 p.m. on Thursday.

That was interesting right there. Just as the marsh was the final resting place of Disappearances, the Raised Road seemed to have cornered the market in Absences. Three days ago: Light winds from the west, marsh water temperature 65 degrees, fair after a midday shower. Edward had been working on the ancient Hog Creek waterway. He thought for a minute, trying to bring up just where he had been at 4:30 p.m., and decided that he had been docking a small SolarBeaver. He remembered the dark water by the pilings and a late blooming water lily.

But Diorina Ashansa had been in the geographic and historic heart of the city, walking on the Raised Road, a modern construction that traced the line of an ancient thoroughfare. Some city historians dated the track back to the InterState because pylons had been found during excavations for the new, solid dike beneath the Raised Road. And although general opinion held that none of the Infra had survived the First Great Rising, Edward found those ruins suggestive. For him, as for so many others, the archeology of the city held an irresistible fascination, even though everyone knew Historicism was a key predicator of Melankol. Especially in the winter, Edward's Komunikator carried daily warnings about Pastolgia and all the other historically based ailments.

He ordered another coffee, dropped in a couple of chunks of the dark, bitter chocolate, and stirred in a good spoonful of sugar. He had in his Komunikator a list of the most recent Absences, five in all over the last month. There was no pattern of age or sex or occupation or even Family Residence PreRising, a key indicator of so many other diseases. Despite the best epidemiological analysis, Absences appeared random and mysterious.

It was possible, of course, that some criminal might replicate Absence, might strike at random, might

make the tremendous effort to conceal the crime by leaving the city, avoiding the marshes, seeking burial for his victims on high ground. There was precedent. Mythbits were full of such stories, and the popularity JackRip and HanBal put the greater criminals of bomb, plane, gas, and artillery in the shade. It was possible that not mystery but nefarious humanity lay behind the Absences, though on balance, Edward thought that unlikely. Hartford was CC, a ClosedCity, thanks to its proximity to the river, the marshes, and the sea. Sixty percent of the population was employed like Diorina Ashansa in some form of public works or maintenance, and the rest comprised their families and children or petty entrepreneurs like the owner of the Bulwark Café. Most of them were only one or two contacts away from any other adult in the city, and it was this mix of precarious hydrology and communal knowledge that gave the town its peculiar character and made any long running criminality difficult to conceal.

Epidemiologists had argued for years whether the crowded intimacy of life along the river counteracted the disadvantages of social and economic isolation. No doubt after the great disruptions of the Risings, friends and family had taken on immense significance, but Edward couldn't help noticing the popularity of jobs on the marshes. Any opening brought a flood of applicants, people eager to work six, seven, eight hours out on the lonely waters, and there were waiting lists for the solitary duty of patrolling the dikes. Even Diorina Ashansa had been in turbine maintenance _ not a lot of opportunity for chat, there.

He cranked the Komunikator battery and scrolled down the Absence list. He could go back several months if he wanted: male, 47, female, 45, female 16, male, 23, and so on. At the top of the list, the Komunikator posted the long standing offer of a substantial prize, including a trip to the western Highlands for the person who solved the mystery of the Absences. Edward was definitely up for that, though it seemed to him that the Absences, however unsettling, were less astonishing in every way than the Returns.

He sipped his coffee, adding another few chunks of chocolate absent-mindedly to the hot liquid. Beyond the dike, the marsh was taking on the first flush of pink; Kara would be expecting him, and Edward was uncomfortably aware that he had shot the afternoon drinking coffee at the Bulwark instead of spending it with her. He might have invited her out to the café, although she would probably have refused or, more likely, made excuses, but in that case he wouldn't need to feel guilty. A year ago, even six months ago, they'd have been here together, laughing about some trifle or making future plans; he remembered her laugh, low and free, a joyous sound. She would have recounted stories about the more interesting of her charges _ the fours and fives whose parents worked in the turbine plant_ while he described his latest adventures on the marsh. On a sunny day like this, he might have taken out a canoe, a perk of his job, and paddled with her along the waterways to watch the herons and ducks. Kara, who even then had regarded such outings with a mix of pleasure and unease, would have teased that he was a true Aqua.

Edward tipped his head back and saw the fast moving clouds overhead. That's how swiftly things had changed. Now Kara would definitely not visit the Bulwark Café. She wouldn't even venture to his apartment, which, though in layout almost exactly like hers, faced the marshes instead of the Raised Road. Her excuse was

to joke about his housekeeping, though Edward was reasonably tidy as most people were, given their diminutive quarters. The standard new apartment, and most were no more than a generation old, consisted of a small front room with two large windows, a windowless back room equipped with a light shaft from the sun catcher dome; a kitchen at the front with burner, cooler, water, and a small window; sanitary in back. Polished cement floors, wall colors in your choice, bed, storage, and appliances built in, the whole as waterproof as possible, understandable when even Highland apartments were built to the same specs. So it wasn't his apartment that troubled her: it was the view of the marsh with the distant line of the sea, the fogs, the emptiness. It was the first, faint sign of Melankol, though neither one was brave enough to whisper the word.

Instead, Kara waxed rhapsodic about her own apartment, which was rather pretty. In fits of Pastolgia, she and Edward sometimes enjoyed prints from early shelter books, amazed at the exuberant consumption of space and material, the variety of cushions, drapes, couches, floors, fittings, tables, chairs, china, paintings, entertainment devices, all gone with the First Great Rising. Now, by both taste and necessity, austerity was the aesthetic, and even the rich and competitive had to be content with modest enhancements. Though her budget was tight, Kara was more ambitious than most. She had recreated an elaborate wallpaper decoration with paint, an arabesque of vines and leaves in soft greens and browns like a forest glade or an overgrown garden. Edward found it impressive if a trifle claustrophobic, especially after she began work on the ceiling, closing the room in a green arbor of vines and branches that seemed set to spread into the bedroom.

On a clear evening like tonight, you could stand at Kara's window with the greenish light of the apartment around you and look toward the towers of the Highlands and the palms and live oaks green on the parkland, and the shrubs and grasses softening the roof gardens. "You'd hardly know we were so near the water," Kara had said one day. "Would you? You'd hardly know."

Which was bizarre when he'd been still in his MarshKeeper's uniform; when his marsh boots sat on her doorstep. But their love had been quick and ardent then, and he'd come straight from work. When he turned to her, Edward had seen the anxiety in her face, the strain; perhaps he'd known then. It was surprising sometimes how much one can sense about other people and how much of that one can ignore. "You're a clever girl," he teased and put his arms around her. No one wanted to deal with Melankol, no one wanted to think about it.

He wondered now if all that obsessive painting, those trips through the RecycleBazaar for antique decorative items, the sewing of quilts and embroidering of pillows had been her means of defense. Maybe so, and Edward felt a little guilty for letting shopping and the smell of paint get on his nerves. He should go back. Though it wasn't strictly within his license, Carl would sell him some chocolate; he'd take back a bag and they'd make drinks and sit in front of her antique coffee table, a genuine rarity, although it was really too low for eating and no more convenient for coffee than the usual trays.

She had been thrilled to find it, nonetheless. That was in a happier time, a weekend when they'd gone

to the crowded bazaar with some friends. They walked past the usual clutter of old clothes, old shoes, kitchen ware, and antiques of dubious quality. There was modest craft work made with amazing ingenuity from recovered materials, and because the wealthy liked to cover their cement floors with wood in imitation of the old construction, salvaged timber newly sawn. This was courtesy of the Resurrectors, a shadowy fraternity who trawled ruins in flat-bottomed barges and brought up salvage with divers or grapples. The really successful outfits might have one of the rare compressors and do deep water or specialize in apartment towers for luxury goods like jewelry, sculpture, and porcelain, but most were shore rats. In dry summers, Edward often met them returning along the beach or prospecting in rough weather at the edge of the marshes. They did not have the best reputation.

He remembered Kara radiant in the early sunshine, waving to her girl friends, stopping to chat with parents and bending down to share secrets with the children. She was full of fun, joking with Baba from the Marsh Keeper's office, and thanking Jonas, Edward's partner on the Solar 8, for some flowers he'd sent for her school room. Walking in the sunshine, admiring the way her chestnut hair caught fire in the sudden light between the dark shops, Edward had thought how lucky he was to have her, how easy and pleasant life was.

"Oh, look at this." A vintage textile with huge leaves and blossoms.

"Oak leaves," said Edward and felt a pang. You had to go nearly eight hundred miles north to find oaks _ and tulips! Now a winter specialty and fabulously expensive.

She draped the cloth over her shoulders; the fabric was soft and pretty, but, as with so much in the bazaar, there was still the faintest scent of mildew, and he shook his head.

They walked on, hand in hand, past old bird cages _ one of Baba's enthusiasms: they spotted her dickering with the salesman for an oval brass contraption complete with a fake bird _ and strange, rusted electronic devices, use unknown, and automobile parts, very big with collectors and the FoundJunk artists, and salvaged tiles in baskets. Special locked cases held cheaper jewelry and little chunks of gold. The really good stuff was in the Tresor, the Bank & Valuables building, visited by appointment only. The usual food vendors hawked grilled river fish on sticks, chocolate of all sorts, coffees, rice cakes with fruit, rice donuts with coconut, flavored waters, and herb teas. Because all CCs had a special entertainment dispensation, they found singers and dancers at every corner, clowns for the children, and flutists, fiddlers, trumpeters, and guitar players busy on little stages set between the pylons. As they walked along the aisles that threaded the bazaar, the music followed them, sweet and omnipresent, one song breaking off and another taking its place, with underneath, a patter of drum and xylophone percussion that reminded Edward of rain or the sound of water sloshing in the marsh.

Overhead, red and yellow awnings broke the sun, and big white gulls circled, watchful for any scrap of food. Edward and Kara were right at the edge of the bazaar, almost at the wide steps that led down to the Tide Turbine Works, when she spotted a new shop with antique furniture. Edward was unenthusiastic about such stuff, which, with its watery and disastrous provenance, brought on twinges of Histerror that he did not wish to

encourage.

But Kara, whose family had taken terrible losses in the last Rising, was enchanted. Edward wondered if it was because her family had been Marshedout with absolutely nothing left, that she was so taken with these dubious relics. She couldn't get enough of antique shops, and she pressed through the crowd toward the new one, a cement cubicle like all the others, but outfitted, behind the regulation flood glass with a clear antique shop window in a wooden frame. Inside, she exclaimed over an upholstered chair that Edward thought must be deeply unsanitary; a ladder in a weird greenish hue, still spangled with blobs of multicolored paint; a wooden chest, reeking of mildew. All were either impractical or priced beyond their means, but a low oval table, small for its type, dainty enough for even Kara's apartment, was sitting to one side. "Oh, it's perfect," she said.

There was damage, of course: a loose frame, badly repaired veneer, and worn legs. No matter; these flaws simply brought it into her price range, and Edward gallantly carried it back under his arm, though he disliked the old, damp smell that impregnated the wood. Kara was in high spirits, humming along with some of the songs. Back in the apartment, she made herb tea and a dish of fried smelts with lemon and bread crumbs, before they went to bed, where intense joy rose out of tangled sheets and entwined limbs. Edward remembered half dozing later, listening to the sounds of water moving through the pipes and watching the progress of the round disk from the light tube, traveling the walls like some lesser sun.

He thought now that was the last day they were happy together, the last day before unmistakable signs of Melankol began to manifest themselves, the last day before Kara began to avoid going out, to neglect her friends, to complain about the crowds in the bazaar and the noise.

"The music is nice, though," Edward said one day. "That new group has found a saxophone. Wouldn't you like to hear one? A true antique."

Her smooth face tightened. She'd lost flesh and her cheekbones stood out, noticeable even with the tinted powder she'd started using. "All right," she said, "if you really want to go." And smiled, though he could see it was an effort.

"We can go by the turbine works, the same way you take to the school. That way we miss most of the bazaar. It's gotten very crowded," he said, agreeing with her, trying to show that he was on her side, that he understood. But he didn't, he couldn't. That's what all Melankol sufferers said when they recovered, if they recovered; the rate was officially classified, but it was low. Edward knew that and also that in CCs the rate was worse than inland.

Downstairs they found the street already hot. It was always a surprise to come out of the apartments, cooled by the ingenious hydrology that kept water moving around the city buildings, and feel the hot stone paving, the burning air.

"I don't know," Kara said. "It's so hot."

“A saxophone,” he said. “You know my grandfather had one. Actually had one.”

“And did he play?”

“I’m sure he did. He was in local politics, you know.”

She nodded. It was commonly believed that all politicians played saxophones, though Edward could not remember the source of that bit of folk wisdom. “All right,” she said, and took his arm. He could feel her trembling and she walked beside him without speaking.

To fill up the silence, Edward talked of the latest sightings on the marsh. Georg was convinced he’d seen a flamingo- “that would be the furthest north ever” _ and that nutria were colonizing Hog Creek. Excited about the observations, which would be featured soon on the *Komunikator*, he was describing an area of the marsh new to him, when she cried, “Stop, I can’t bear it. I can’t stand another word about your damn marsh. It’s all right for you,” her voice rising, loud even with the clatter of the street, “it’s all right for you. You have water in your veins and not blood at all.”

She burst into furious tears, and, in spite of his intentions for forbearance, they quarreled in the street. Later that night, he went to see her, and she apologized. “I don’t know what happened,” she said. “Normally, I like to hear about your work; you know that. And I am very fond of birds.”

“Yes,” agreed Edward. He knew that she fed the sparrows and pigeons against CC regulations.

“I just can’t bear the water. I look off into the mist sometimes, and I think I’m losing myself. I think if something doesn’t happen, my bones will dissolve. It makes me frantic.”

Edward had noticed bandages on her legs and on her sides. There was no doubt this was Melankol, whose sufferers carried razors to ‘bring themselves back’ from the disease’s terrifying dissolutions. That was the term: dissolution, to be rendered into the constituents, which in the case of *homo sapiens*, meant mostly water. “Perhaps you need to get away for a while. The Highlands are _”

“Too expensive,” she said. “Even the Rail alone_” Her voice trailed off. She should, Edward thought, have some savings, but looking about the apartment with her elaborate decorations, the few nice antiques, the books, he understood that shopping and collecting had been her attempt to fend off the disease.

“You could take the TideRunner,” he said. “That’s cheap. You can go as far as Springfield _ or if you pick the right time, further.” She didn’t answer and he hurried on. “Solar from there, pricey, yes, but you could get all the way to Brattleboro. You’d see the mountains, you’d have high ground on both sides. It would be worth it. Even Canada would be worth it: maple trees, spruces, they still have spruces.”

“I’d be on the river,” she said. “I’d be on water all the way. Floating. I can’t be on the river. I can’t.”

“All right,” said Edward. “All right. Let me talk to the Tresor. We have our Marsh-Keeper’s Union there. I can maybe borrow enough for the rail if you have a little for a hostel. The Medi might certify you and then _”

“I’m not going near the Medi. If they even suspect I have Melankol _ yes, that’s what you’re thinking, isn’t

it? _ if they even suspect, I'll lose my Care License and then what will I do? I'll be all right," she said. "It is the rain, you know, the rain and the heat. Once fall comes _ after the storms, I mean _ then I'll be all right. Please," she said, and Edward, who loved her, did not press any further.

Now it was late fall, the nicest season, really. Below the Bulwark Café, the grasses were turning from green to gold and their white and brown seed heads waved in the breeze. Kara hadn't been out in weeks except to go to her job. She managed the walk by a circuitous route along the Raised Road where she could avoid the river until she had to make a dash down the steps. Once inside the Child Room at the Works, she claimed that she was fine. So perhaps, it was only a mild case, perhaps she would be one of the lucky ones, perhaps, out of fear, he had misdiagnosed her. Perhaps.

Edward closed his Komunikator, exchanged a few last pleasantries with Carl, and slipped the bag of chocolate into his pocket. He'd take it back for Kara along with some new gossip about the Resurrectors, although that might or might not be wise. It was difficult, in a city that was surrounded by water, that was powered by water, cooled by water, fed by water; that lived on pumps and tides and water management, to find topics unrelated to their watery situation. Well, he thought as he started down the steps to the Circle Road, he would see how she was; he would maybe see something else on the way that they could talk about, that would bring her out of wherever Melankol had taken her today.