

What We Pretend To Be

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Linh shoved her fist toward the greenish slug thing and maced it right in its bulbous black eyes.

"Fire!" she screamed. "Fire!" Linh's father, who had also given her the mace, had told her if she was ever attacked to yell fire rather than to call for help because people are stupid and might run from a person calling for help but would run toward someone yelling fire. It had seemed ludicrous to Linh, but everything was happening so quickly that her instincts had taken over before she had the opportunity to process where she was.

A gauzy, glittery cone of light beamed from somewhere above Linh, and froze her as she was about to spray the monster again. Her muscles went rigid. She couldn't move. The light that was more than light had immobilized her. But Linh could still scream, so she screamed.

"Fire!"

If the mace had injured the slug thing, Linh couldn't tell. It remained motionless in front of her, staring at her with its globular eyes that seemed to be able to look everywhere at once. Actually, no. The thing wasn't completely still. Patterns moved subtly on its vaguely reptilian skin. Swirling and shifting, drawing Linh's eyes deeper and deeper. She was overcome with vertigo but she couldn't look away. She couldn't even blink.

"Fire!" she tried to scream one last time, though her heart was no longer in it. No one was coming. Wherever Linh was, she was on her own.

This was not how Linh had imagined her night ending. When Garrett had invited her to the football game with him and to the party at Samantha Rosenberg's house after, she'd thought life couldn't get more perfect. Linh was only a sophomore, and Garrett was a senior. Kyle hadn't believed her at first when she'd told him Garrett had asked her on a date, and she'd had to show him the text to prove it, but he'd spent the whole afternoon after school helping her find the perfect outfit. Linh's parents never would have agreed to let her go on a date with a boy, but she hated lying to them, so she'd simply left out the part about going to the game with Garrett. It wasn't really lying. She'd just been a little more selective with the truth than normal.

The game itself had been a disaster. Garrett had barely said a word to her. He'd been more interested in cracking jokes about the football players with his friends, which Linh hadn't understood the purpose of. Why go to a high school football game just to make fun of them?

But still...it was Garrett Wyle. Half the girls at school would have cut off one of their ears to swap places with Linh.

Linh had hoped her night would improve at the party, but it had only gotten worse. Garrett had gotten drunk and tried to corner her in one of the upstairs bedrooms. She'd entertained fantasies of kissing him before—of his hands on her skin—but in her daydreams his breath hadn't reeked of cheap beer and his

hands hadn't been clammy or quite so grabby. When he'd tried to slip one of his clammy, grabby hands under her skirt, she'd maced him too. Screaming fire hadn't been necessary. Garrett had been screaming quite enough at the time.

"My eyes, my eyes! What'd you do to my eyes?"

After incapacitating Garrett, Linh had run downstairs to find Kyle. She'd searched the whole house before trying the backyard. The next thing she knew she was staring into the face—was it really a face? The thing didn't seem to actually have a face—of the slug thing, spraying it with mace and yelling, "fire!"

No, this was definitely not how Linh had imagined her night going.

"What *are* you?" Linh asked. "Is this a government thing? If I get pregnant with some weird science experiment, my parents will disown me."

The slug thing hardly moved. Its eyes bobbed slightly on top of their thin stems. It didn't have arms or legs that Linh could tell. It obviously wasn't human. But it couldn't be an alien either. Aliens were science fiction. They didn't exist outside of movies and books. Right?

"Am I being pranked? Kyle? Is that you in there?"

If it *was* Kyle wearing a costume, it was a pretty damn good one. Linh didn't see a zipper or seams anywhere.

Linh had no clue where she was. The floor was black, but she couldn't see walls or structures of any kind. It was just her, the light holding her, and the slug thing.

"This isn't funny anymore, Kyle. It's getting past my curfew. If I don't get home soon, my parents will flip out."

The side of the slug thing—on the left side of the top quarter of its body—began to bulge outward. It grew into a long tendril that snaked out and snatched the canister of mace from Linh's frozen hand. Then the tendril was reabsorbed into its body, taking the mace with it. The whole thing took less than five seconds.

"This isn't real, right? I've been drugged. Someone spiked my soda with LSD or something. Right?"

The light around her intensified. The air around her shimmered with stardust. Pressure built around Linh's head like when she was about to get a migraine, but the pain never materialized. The pressure subsided. Images appeared against the backdrop of shadows in front of her.

Linh as a little girl, standing beside her great-grandmother's hospital bed, saying goodbye for the last time. Linh and her father building her first computer together. Puddles, Linh's first dog, running around her in circles, barking at her to play. Linh's memories played back for her, faster and faster, until the images became a blur. She could just make out a face here or a voice there before it changed.

And then the images vanished.

Linh felt spent. It was like the entirety of her fifteen years had been sucked out of her and played back over the space of less than five minutes.

"This isn't a joke, is it? You're not Kyle?"

The slug thing remained frustratingly inscrutable.

"Shall we play a game?"

"What?" Linh said. She'd heard the voice, she was certain of it, and she was even fairly certain that it had come from the slug thing, but it hadn't moved. It didn't even have a mouth hole that Linh could see.

"Shall we play a game?"

Yes. She'd definitely heard it that time. And it *had* come from the slug thing. She hoped.

"Uh, okay?"

Images appeared against the shadows again. Pictures. Her father, her mother, Kyle, her little sister Hoa, Garrett, two of her teachers from school, her grandmother, and a girl named Kristen she'd been friends with in elementary school but hadn't seen in years. The images were looped. Her father burst into the kitchen bearing a birthday cake over and over. Hoa leapt off the diving board into the pool, resetting the instant before she hit the water. Each of the images played a short clip on repeat. They were lined up across the shadows.

"One dies. The rest live. You choose."

If Linh hadn't already been immobilized, the statement certainly would have stopped her cold. But it wasn't just what the voice had said—that she would have to choose one of the people from the images before her to die—it

was how the voice had said it. Cold. Unfeeling. Kyle had shown more emotion when helping her pick out what top to wear to the football game with Garrett.

"You can't be serious," Linh said.

"One dies. The rest live. You choose."

"Hypothetically?"

"One dies—"

"The rest live," Linh said. "I get it." She bit her bottom lip, scanning the pictures. She didn't particularly like either of the two teachers—Mrs. Falstaff made terrible puns all the time and Mr. Regan was just mean—and Garrett had just recently earned the top spot on her list of people she hoped broke out in a painful rash, but Linh didn't want any of them dead.

"I can't choose," Linh said. "What if I refuse to make a choice?"

The slug thing barely moved, but the voice that seemed to come from it said, "Then they all die. Choose."

3 December 2014

Mal's little brother sat on the floor in front of him studying the board and the checkers, tapping his chin with a pudgy finger like the fate of the universe depended on his next move. Mal had no idea where he was or how he'd gotten to the dark room, but he didn't question it. He didn't question how Andre was there either since his brother had died three years earlier and there was nothing in the world Mal had wanted more than to see his baby brother again.

"You meet any cuties up here?" Mal said. "Wherever here is?" He looked around trying to peer deeper into the shadows. "This heaven or did I smoke too much?"

Andre finally picked up one of his red checkers and jumped three of Mal's black ones. "Ha! You stink at this." He collected the checkers and stacked them on the shiny black floor beside him. "And girls are gross. There're no girls here."

Mal moved one of his pieces forward. Andre was wearing the same Dora the Explorer pajamas he'd been wearing when he'd disappeared from the front yard two days after his sixth birthday. He hadn't aged a day. "Where, exactly, is here, Dre?"

"Who cares?"

"I guess I don't," Mal said. "I'm just happy to see you, bro."

"You were supposed to be watching me."

Mal's chin dropped to his chest. "I know."

Andre climbed across the game and into his brother's lap. He hugged Mal, his beanpole arms stronger than Mal remembered them. "They said I can go back with you."

Mal barely heard him because he couldn't stop thinking about how he shouldn't have gone inside to talk to Lissa. If he hadn't taken that call, the man in the station wagon wouldn't have kidnapped Mal. His parents wouldn't have had to identify the body—still wearing those same pajamas—four days later.

Everything that had happened was Mal's fault, but Andre was there, right now, hugging him, and Mal was never going to let him go again.

"Who said?" Mal asked after a moment.

"I dunno. They did."

Mal hadn't seen anyone or anything else since he'd woken up on the floor of this place. He'd smoked some of the weed Benji had given him, passed out playing Xbox, and woken up somewhere else, staring into the face of his little brother. And he hadn't questioned how that was possible because when God gave you a miracle, you didn't question it. But Mal still felt like he was being watched from beyond the shadows.

"They said I can go back with you, but someone else has to stay in my place."

"Who?"

"Doesn't matter," Andre said. "Anyone."

"Mrs. Jones?" Mal said.

Andre giggled. "Yeah. She's so mean."

Mrs. Jones wasn't that bad, but she handed out toothbrushes on halloween and always yelled at the kids if they ran across her backyard. It wasn't their fault her backyard cut across prime hide-and-seek territory.

"Is it bad here?" Mal asked. "They do bad stuff to you?"

Andre shook his head. "I don't think so. You just have to choose."

Was it possible? Mal wondered. Had he really found Andre? If he had and he brought his little brother home, their parents would freak. Nothing had been the same since Andre had died. All Mal had to do was name someone to take Andre's place, and everything could go back to the way it was.

But that meant destroying someone else's life. Even a misanthrope like Mrs. Jones had to have people who cared about her. People who'd miss her if she disappeared.

"It's not fair," Mal said. "Why can't you just come back? Why's anyone gotta take your place?"

Andre looked Mal in the eyes. He touched Mal's face with his little hand. Wiped the tear from his cheek. "They said so," Andre said. "You just have to choose. Time's running out."

"Andre, I—"

"I wanna go home, Mal. Okay? Take me home."

29 August 2015

Marisol whooped as she pulled her knees to her chest and spun in the air, floating in the huge, shadowy room. She was flying. Or floating. She didn't know or care which terminology was correct. This was the best day of her life.

The molls, as she'd taken to calling them, took her from her bed the first Monday night of every month, and Marisol looked forward to her visits aboard their ship even though they'd never let her free float in null-g before. Usually they

made her solve math problems or logic puzzles. Once they'd replaced all of her skin with some kind of liquid metal. It hadn't hurt, and they'd returned her to normal before sending her home, but this was, by far, the coolest thing the molls had ever done. Marisol imagined she could flip about and swim through the weightless expanse forever and be happy.

The molls never spoke to Marisol, but she understood them regardless. She had a knack for discerning patterns, and between the way the molls' eyes moved and the swirling fractals on their skin, she could read what they wanted pretty well.

"Can we do this every time?" she asked.

Marisol focused on one moll directly in front of her even though there were ten surrounding her in a circle. They stood right at the edge of the shadows. The table that usually stood in the center of the room was missing that night, but Marisol knew, because she'd seen it often enough, that the chairs and tables and examination beds grew organically out of the floor. The moll Marisol was watching twitched its eyes. The movement was subtle, but Marisol caught the meaning.

"Oh," Marisol said.

If Marisol had read the moll right, and she was certain she had, then she was determined to take advantage of her remaining time in zero gravity. Her momentum carried her toward a wall hidden by shadows, but that she knew was there, and she pushed off with her feet. She tucked her legs and flipped through

the air. Marisol lost track of how long she played in the weightlessness before gravity slowly returned and she gently floated to the floor. She was breathless and riding high on endorphins. She'd never felt so alive.

"What's next?" Marisol asked.

The moll nearest where Marisol had landed moved toward her. Marisol was still amazed by the aliens. The way their bodies grew arms and legs when needed. She'd wondered more than once if their gastropod appearance was even their true form or if they'd simply chosen to look like something vaguely familiar to her. The moll stopped less than a foot from Marisol, and wagged its eyes. The patterns on its skin eddied and whirled.

"Are you serious?" Marisol asked. "I can stay on the ship and travel with you for one year or I can go back home?"

The moll tilted one of its round eyes.

"But if I stay, I die at the end of the year?"

The moll's eye twitched again.

"Can I fly through null-g again?"

The moll didn't move for a second before bobbing both of its eyes.

"Deal," Marisol said. "A year up here is worth an entire lifetime down there."

11 November 2013

A black and white image was projected in the air of a poorly drawn stick figure holding two other stick figures by their heads and shoving them together. Above the drawing were the words: Now kiss!

Delilah covered her breasts with her arms and stared at the naked, black-haired boy standing across from her. His cheeks burned red, and he was clutching his junk in both hands.

"Yeah," Delilah said. "I don't think so."

The image flared brighter.

"What's going on?" the boy asked. Delilah thought he looked about her age—seventeen—but he certainly wasn't acting his age.

"Are you crying?" she said. "Seriously?"

She'd been studying for a trig test that she needed a perfect score on to keep Tyna from overtaking her G.P.A. and knocking her out of the running for valedictorian when she'd nodded off and woken up here. Wherever *here* was.

The nakedness didn't faze Delilah. Her mom was a hippy nudist, and she'd seen more than her share of floppy dicks. But she refused to be ordered around by whoever had taken her if they didn't even have the nerve to show themselves.

"Send me back!" Delilah demanded. "I've got homework to do."

Tears streamed down the boy's face freely. "How can you think about homework right now? We've been abducted. Like in the X-Files."

"Shut up already," Delilah said. "We haven't been abducted." Except she knew that's exactly what had happened. Maybe they hadn't been taken by aliens, but this wasn't a dream, and she wasn't in her bedroom. She knew that for sure.

The image turned red and flared brightly again.

"I'm Dee," Delilah said. "What's your name?"

"Riker," the boy said.

"No it's not," Delilah said.

"How do you know?"

Delilah was about to go off on him, but it didn't matter. If the kid didn't want to tell her his real name, so be it. "Fine," she said. "*Riker*. What's the last thing you remember?"

Riker sniffled, snot drooling down his nose that he refused to wipe away.

"I was playing video games—"

"Why am I not surprised?"

"—fully dressed, and then I had to go to the bathroom, but I couldn't move. Then I was here." Riker snorted again. Delilah wished she had a tissue to plug up his nose with. "What's going on? Where are we?"

"Hell if I know." Delilah glanced at the Now-Kiss image, which was still red, but had begun pulsing menacingly. "But I'm not kissing you. No offense, but you're not my type."

"None taken."

"Also," she said. "I'm not doing anything these pervy whatever's tell me to." Delilah looked around, peered into the shadows hoping to catch a glimpse of their captors. "You hear me?" she yelled. "Do your worst, but I don't take orders from anyone."

Riker looked like he was going to say something, maybe join her in solidarity against their abductors, but when he opened his mouth, a scream came out. A wild, animalistic howl. Boils erupted on his skin. Down his arms and across his chest. Riker collapsed to the floor. The boils burst and watery puss gushed from them. The boy had lost all concern for modesty, his hands clutching where he felt pain, which was everywhere.

Delilah rushed to him and knelt beside him, but she didn't know what to do.

"Stop it!" she yelled into the shadows. "Stop hurting him!"

The image blazed bright red, so bright it was nearly blinding.

Kiss him. Kiss Riker. That's what they wanted. She couldn't block out the boy's screams, and they might stop if she just kissed him.

The boils began to bleed. Blood streamed out of the wounds and from Riker's eyes. His screams had become pathetic mewling cries as he writhed on the floor in a puddle of his own piss.

All she had to do was kiss him.

But then what? If she capitulated, what would they demand next? Would she have to give him a BJ? Have sex with him? What if she kissed him and they

still let him die? Once she gave into their demands, they would know they could force her to do anything.

"I'm sorry, Riker." Delilah stood and wiped the tears from her cheeks. She faced the angry red picture. "No," she said. "I'm sorry, but no."

15 June 2015

Something was different.

Michael opened his eyes. He wasn't on the couch. He'd fallen asleep trying to block out the sounds of his father and his father's new girlfriend in their bedroom, which had been tough. There's nowhere to hide in a one-bedroom apartment. But Michael was mostly used to it. His father'd had a lot of girlfriends. When he'd been younger and hadn't understood about sex, he'd thought his father and the women he brought home were just wrestling, and he'd been so pissed that they were roughhousing and he wasn't allowed to join in. Life had been simpler back then.

But something was definitely different, and it wasn't just that he wasn't on his couch anymore.

Michael sat up. He was lying on a black metal exam table in the dark. Wherever he was, it was definitely not his apartment. It could have been, he supposed seeing as it was really too dark to make out anything, but it didn't *feel* like his apartment. It didn't smell like his apartment. He recognized the lack of

his father's cheap cologne and missed the stink of dirty dishes moldering in the sink. The air smelled clean. Antiseptic.

"Hello?" Michael's voice sounded froggy and weird. He coughed to clear his throat.

As if answering, a single tight beam of light burst to life a couple of feet away. It shone down on a tall, thin black slab hovering vertically in the air. The thing was approximately ten feet tall and four feet wide.

"Don't see that everyday," Michael mumbled to himself.

Since it was the only thing in the room, Michael slid off the table and walked toward the floating object.

When he stepped in front of the whatever-it-was, the surface transformed into a mirror. Under different circumstances, that in itself would have amazed Michael, but the mirror wasn't what caught his attention, it was the image reflected back at him.

"Oh," Michael said.

Something *was* different.

He was different. No...*she* was different.

Michael pulled the Star Wars t-shirt she'd fallen asleep in over her head and shucked off her shorts and boxers. She stood completely naked in front of the mirror.

She ran her hands over her breasts, her hips. Michael stared at where her penis used to hang.

"This is...me."

Michael's hair had always hung down to her shoulders, which her father had hated, but even that had looked masculine. The new changes, which were mostly subtle, had softened Michael's face. Her jaw was smooth and more rounded, an Adam's apple no longer bulged from her neck. And she had hips. Glorious wide hips.

"I'm beautiful," Michael said.

Michael would never have said she'd felt like she'd been born in the wrong body. She didn't hate the way her body had looked, though there had certainly been downsides to wearing her genitals on the outside. It was more a feeling of wearing clothes that were a little too tight. Of wearing shoes that were slightly too small. The person staring back at her in the mirror was still the same person she'd always been, but everything fit now.

Michael smiled.

"Thank you," she said. Her voice was higher. Not by much, but just enough that she noticed.

The mirror fogged over, became opaque. Silver words appeared on the surface. Michael had to read them three times to be sure she understood.

Keep these alterations, but you will never see your father again, or return home in your original condition.

"That's not fair!" Michael yelled into the shadows surrounding her. The mirror didn't reply.

But life's not fair. Wasn't that what her father was always saying?

Michael's father would never have allowed her to come home looking the way she did, and not just because of something written on a mirror. Michael's father wasn't capable of accepting her like this. He'd caught Michael wearing a skirt one of his girlfriends had left at the apartment when Michael was ten, and had made her kneel in a corner for eight hours as punishment. No food, no water. Michael's knees had hurt so badly, but her father had refused to relent. No, he'd never allow Michael to come home this way. He'd never accept that he had a daughter rather than a son.

Michael tried to imagine life without her father. Where would she go? Who would she live with? Michael was only sixteen. She could try to find her mother, but she'd been trying for years and had never come close. Would Michael be better off living on the streets if it meant remaining this way? This was the way she'd always imagined herself. This was her true self. But could she stay like this if it meant never seeing her father again?

The man wasn't perfect, far from it, but he did love Michael in his own stunted way.

"Can you put the mirror back?" Michael asked.

She stared at herself, freezing the image in her mind. This was who she was. This was who she would always be, regardless of what was on the outside.

"I've made my choice," Michael said. "Send me home."

5 March 2013

Henry was thirteen. And he was scared.

"Where are my clothes?"

He'd been trying to fall asleep listening to his parents fighting again. They were always fighting. Yelling and slamming doors. His parents were aces at slamming doors. The sound had become the lullaby he couldn't sleep without. But before he'd drifted off, the darkness had come. He'd been surrounded by shadows. And he'd had to pee, but he'd been paralyzed, unable to move.

Then he was somewhere else.

A table. It was cold under his naked back. He couldn't move his head. Lights shone above him like bright stars. He was wearing only his underwear.

"Hello?"

The thing appeared in his vision from the left. Henry screamed. He hadn't meant to, but the thing looked like a giant upright slug. It had two eyes that were way too big and heavy for its head balanced on thin stalks. The thing seemed to float toward Henry, and it leaned over him when it reached the table.

"Sorry," Henry said. "You just...you startled me."

Henry's heart was racing. He tried to slow his breathing and remain calm, but there was some alien thing standing over him, so he didn't feel too terrible about being scared. Charlie would've made fun of him for freaking out, but Charlie pretty much made fun of him for everything. That's what brothers did, right?

"Where am I?" Henry asked. "What do you want?"

The thing didn't speak. It didn't make any noise at all. As far as Henry could tell, it didn't even have a mouth.

"You got a name?"

Silence. The thing stood beside Henry and just stared.

"No?" he said. "Mind if I call you a slugger? Cause you kinda look like a slug. Not in a bad way. Charlie, he's my brother, and he says I kinda look like a slug, too."

If the slugger had any objection, it didn't tell Henry.

Up close Henry could see intricate designs on the slugger's greenish skin. They moved. The patterns, not the skin. They swirled like the currents on the surface of the sun.

"Are you an alien?"

Still nothing. Henry didn't think they were going to answer his questions. For all he knew they might not have even understood him. His words might have been nothing more to the sluggers than strange sounds emanating from his face hole.

At some point, Henry's fear had begun to fade, replaced by curiosity. If the slugger was an alien, that meant he was probably on a spaceship. In outer space. Whoa. If it were true, then he was the youngest person ever to go to space. Suck it, Gherman Titov.

"How come there's gravity?" Henry asked. "Shouldn't I be weightless? Is your ship spinning to create it or do you have some weird artificial gravity like on Star Trek?"

Henry no longer expected the slugger to answer him, though he still hoped it might. He wanted to know everything about the alien and its ship and why it had abducted him. This was the coolest thing ever. Except for the part about being in his underwear.

"What now?" Being on an alien ship was great and all, but Henry was beginning to grow bored. He still couldn't move, and he wanted to see more of the ship, maybe meet some of the slugger's friends. He wondered if they all looked alike or if the crew was made up of different types of aliens.

The slugger didn't speak, but one of its eye stalks bent slightly. Tentacles descended from the blackness above Henry, rushing toward him. They were green, like the slugger, but the ends looked like lamprey mouths, circular and filled with fleshy teeth. At least twenty of the things whipped around Henry and latched onto his skin. His arms, his chest, his legs. Henry screamed again, but he couldn't fight back. Couldn't thrash around. It took him a moment to realize they didn't actually hurt. He'd only imagined they would, which had caused him to lose it. Not that he was ashamed. He imagined even Charlie would've freaked out if a bunch of mouthy tentacles had attacked him.

But Henry felt no pain. In fact, where the mouths attached to his skin felt warm and tingly. The way his lips felt when he had to get a cavity filled and Dr. Lein injected him with Novocain.

"Are you eating me?" Henry asked. "Am I food?" Whatever the slugger was doing to him was making him a little giddy. "I sure hope I'm tasty. Nom, nom, nom." Henry giggled.

The slugger turned and disappeared. Henry followed it with his eyes as best he could, but it vanished from his peripheral vision.

"If I survive this," Henry thought, "no one is going to believe me." Not his friends from school or his parents. Nana might believe him. At least, she'd pretend to. But the person he most wanted to tell was Charlie. His brother had been acting weird lately. They hardly talked anymore since Charlie had started high school. He had more important things to do now than hang out with his lame little brother. But Charlie would believe him. Henry thought maybe he could even convince the slugger to abduct his brother with him next time. If there *was* a next time. For all Henry knew, this might be a one-time thing. The slugger would perform whatever experiments it had planned, send him home, and he'd never see it again. Or the lamprey things would suck him dry, leave him a desiccated husk, and the slugger would feast on his gooey insides. Still, it couldn't hurt to ask.

"Hey," Henry called. His voice sounded syrupy, and it echoed. Wherever he was must be pretty big. "Can you bring my brother Charlie here? He'd love this."

The slugger reappeared, drifting toward him. Henry couldn't see how it moved or if it had legs. He doubted it was actually floating, but based on the night he was having he couldn't discount any possibility. It stopped beside the table again, and stared at him.

"You're kind of a creeper," Henry said. "I mean, the way you keep looking at me is weird. And why don't you talk? In movies and stuff, aliens always have universal translators or some kind of space magic that lets them understand alien languages. How come you don't?"

Maybe it did, Henry thought. Maybe it understood every word he said and simply chose not to respond. Maybe Henry's language and questions were so primitive the slugger couldn't be bothered to respond. The way adults often ignore the repetitive and non-stop questions of little kids.

"You should bring my parents here. They probably wouldn't appreciate it as much as me, or even as much as Charlie, but I bet meeting you and knowing aliens are real would make them see how stupid they are." Henry didn't feel the mouths on his skin anymore. He was so relaxed he barely felt anything. "They fight all the time about the dumbest stuff. Like, a couple of days ago Mom forgot to put gas in the car and it died while Dad was driving to work. He was so mad. I

mean, it was an honest mistake. It's not like she sits around hatching plans to ruin my dad's day. But he won't let it go.

"Seeing you, though...Yeah, I bet that'd make them realize their problems are pretty dumb. I mean, running out of gas is meaningless when you know you're not alone in the universe, right?"

Henry stopped babbling. The words had poured out of him, and when he finished he couldn't even remember what he'd said. His mind, like his body, had grown numb. He could barely keep his eyelids open. But he didn't want to fall asleep. This was a once-in-a-lifetime experience and he didn't want to miss a second of it.

"Can you fix us?" Henry asked. "Not just me. My family. The whole world. It's all screwed up. But I bet you could fix it."

The tentacle lamprey things detached from Henry's body and coiled back up into the darkness. Henry tried to see where they went—some hatch or holes or something—but the shadows swallowed them. The mouths had left bright red hickeys on his skin.

"How am I going to explain those?" Henry mumbled to himself. He was fighting to stay awake, but he was losing the battle.

The slugger leaned over Henry, so close its black cue-ball eyes were nearly touching him.

"Fix it, all right?" Henry said in a slurred voice. "Make it all better."

Henry's eyes slid shut. His mind was dissolving. His thoughts were melting shelves of ices, the fractured pieces drifting far from one another. But he clung to one thought, held tightly to it until it was the last one that remained.

Henry hoped the slugger could understand him. Because if anything could save his family, aliens could. If they could travel the universe, surely they could keep his family from falling apart.

Right?

"Oh!" Henry said before the blackness finally consumed him. "Please don't send me back without my clothes."