

This story was extracted from my novel-in-progress, *Quilandria*, and adapted to short story format. The reference for an earlier, published version of it is: Gabora, L. (2020). Truth or Dare. *Bewildering Stories*, vol. 867.

Truth or Dare

Liane Gabora

There was an ear-splitting pop, followed by a long sizzle. Then just the moaning of guttural winds, and the crackle of embers in the fireplace.

Stella looked around the eerily dark living room. “It might be safer in the basement,” she said.

Alyzia’s large hazel eyes gleamed with a hint of fear. “Something strange happened down there a few nights ago,” she whispered, winding a finger through her luminous blonde hair.

Ice pellets clattered against the window. In the fireplace a log toppled, and tangerine sparks flew.

“Why are you whispering? I barely hear you.”

“Because it’s about Raj,” Alyzia said, glancing toward his adjacent bedroom.

“What happened?”

“He was coming down the basement stairs, and he didn’t know I was there. And—you’ll think this is crazy—but he was glowing, and something was floating above his head.

Stella gave a skeptical but good-natured smile. “His soul, perhaps, or a halo?”

“It *was* roundish,” Alyzia whispered. “And blazingly bright. Like no light I’ve ever seen.” Her luscious lower lip quivered slightly.

Stella threw a pillow at her.

Alyzia’s eyes widened. She tossed it back playfully. “Free your mind, Stel. Isn’t your Ph.D. thesis on light?”

Stella slipped off the paisley sofa, and nestled next to Alyzia on the beanbag chair. It was huge and salmon-colored, made of corduroy, and easily held two lithe women. Stella felt like a prepubescent boy next to Alyzia's lush sinuosity, but it felt nice to be enveloped in the warmth of her best friend. Everyone wanted to be friends with Alyzia. If it wasn't for them living together, Stella might never have had the opportunity to get close to her. She had never known anyone so opposite yet so similar to her; they were like two complex waveforms, completely different but with the same fundamental frequency.

"Have you ever heard of Terence McKenna?" Alyzia asked. "It was like those self-transforming, Fabergé-egg-shaped elves he saw on DMT."

"You didn't tell me you were high."

"I wasn't. But it was so intense, it almost felt like it."

Stella gulped. Since the pandemic hit a few months ago, she'd been so immersed in physics that it was disorienting how, when the storm took out the power that morning, she'd been flung back into the world of macro-scale entities.

"I've been reading everything there is about 'inner light,'" Alyzia said. "The metaphor between physical light and inner light has been around since the dawn of civilization. Eskimo shamen called it *qaumaneq*. Vedanta Hinduists call it *Atma*. The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* calls it the clear light of Buddha-nature."

Stella furrowed her brow. Could Alyzia have caught the virus? She looked unnaturally radiant, and lying next to her was making Stella feeling tingly, faintly electric.

"I thought you were open-minded," Alyzia said.

"So... what happened next? After your encounter with Raj?"

"He went upstairs."

“His body went up the stairs? Or his soul?”

“Both. But the next time I saw him, the light was gone.”

There was a tremendous crash as if a tree had fallen through the roof. Stella gave a little scream. Alyzia clutched her. They stared at each other, grateful not to be alone.

Raj emerged from his bedroom. Stella had never seen him look afraid before.

“Holy fuck,” he said softly.

The wind was raging now, passing right through the thin walls of the old house. Stella spread an orange afghan that had been crocheted by her grandmother over herself and Alyzia. She peered out the window, but all she could see between gleaming fractal spirals of ice on the old, faintly distorting glass was a fury of snow.

Raj paced the room.

Chirp.

The sound startled them.

“There’s a bird in the house,” Alyzia said.

“That’s impossible,” Stella said. “I made sure that every window was shut before the storm.”

There was another thunderous crash. They shrieked. Seung Gong appeared at the bottom of the stairway to the second floor, wide-eyed and shaken.

“A tree fell into the roof of next door house!” he said.

Stella and Alyzia gasped simultaneously.

Seung Gong sat on the sofa, stared at them, and shook his head slowly.

There was a loud knock.

“That *can’t* be someone at the door!” Alyzia said.

Raj opened the front door a crack. The contents of the living room shifted and clattered as if infused with life.

“Bruno!” Raj shouted. “What the hell are you doing out there?!”

A scruffy, sopping Bruno was holding on to the doorframe with all his might to pull himself in. Once inside, he collapsed in the doorway. Raj struggled to shut the door. Still on the floor, Bruno curled himself around the door and pushed. It took all their weight to shut it. Raj closed the latch, and exhaled deeply.

They stared incredulously at Bruno.

“Just happened to be in the neighborhood,” Bruno said, grinning. His freckled face was rosy, but his fingers were eerily white.

“Bruno, why were you out in the storm of the century?” Alyzia said.

Bruno’s teeth chattered. Stella threw him the afghan. As he rubbed his head with it, his red curls began to spring back to life.

“It was that or starve. I was on the verge of finishing my thesis, but I’d run out of food.”

“We would offer you something warm to eat and drink but we have no power,” Seung Gong said.

“No generator?” Bruno said. “No battery-operated hot plate? Nothing?”

“There’s some birdseed-like crackers,” Raj said. “And artichoke paste.”

Bruno raised an eyebrow.

“Beggars can’t be choosers,” Raj said. “In fact, we shouldn’t let you in. Everyone’s supposed to be on lockdown.”

“I’ve been holed up programing. I literally haven’t seen a soul in days. Weeks probably. There’s no way in hell I caught any virus.”

Chirp.

“There’s that bird again!” Alyzia said.

“I was hearing it upstairs,” Seung Gong said, looking puzzled. “But this time it seems to be downstairs.”

“Two birds?” Raj said.

“Maybe it’s the same one flying around in a panic,” Alyzia said.

“That wasn’t a bird,” Bruno said. “That’s the sound a fire alarm makes when the battery is about to go.”

“The fire alarms are flirting with each other,” Stella said with a grin. “That’s their mating call.”

They laughed.

“Where are your fire alarm batteries?” Bruno asked.

Stella shrugged her shoulders. No one else seemed to know either.

“You guys are useless,” Bruno said. “You need someone like me around here. A mench with a wrench.”

“I don’t think we’ll be here much longer,” Raj said.

A chill fell over Stella. Raj had had a falling out with the landlord. The place was a bit of a dive, but she loved its unexpected nooks and crannies, its whimsical carpentry, and glass doorknobs. And though she’d never thought of herself as a particularly social person, what she cherished most was the camaraderie. Even when she was alone in her room, deep in thought, she loved hearing their music and laughter, knowing they were there. She’d never been happier. Probably none of them treasured their home the way she did. Raj was exasperated with things not working. Alyzia had a million other options. Seung Gong would likely be happier living with

people who spoke Chinese. Stella felt almost grateful that the pandemic and the storm made it impossible to think about moving. For now, anyway.

More ice pellets clashed into the windows. The window panes trembled.

“Let’s go downstairs,” Raj said.

They clamored down the roughly hewn staircase into the damp darkness of the basement, followed by Glimmer, the white cat, and Inkling, the black cat. Stella, behind Bruno, noticed how laboriously his burly frame descended the stairs, his right hand clutching the two-by-four handrail. He had always seemed so invincible.

Alyzia set cedar-scented beeswax candles around a corner of the basement that held an assortment of abandoned furniture.

“Ooh, pungent,” Bruno said. “I thought the *living room* was musty.” He plunked down on a once-elegant tasseled cushion, and leaned back against the wall, legs crossed.

Seung Gong sat at one end of a chesterfield, Stella sat at the other end. Inkling hopped up and nestled himself between them.

“Yeah, it’s an unusual metallic-earthly smell,” she said. “No one ever comes down here, except to wash clothes.” She turned to Alyzia. “Hey, what were you doing down here the other day?”

Alyzia’s eyes widened slightly. She turned from Stella, and glanced at the washing machine in the far corner of the room. “Washing clothes.”

Stella had the strange experience of *seeing* Alyzia avert her gaze, while *sensing*—visually, but not with her eyes—that Alyzia wasn’t quite telling the truth. This ‘bending of the truth’ as it were, appeared to her mind’s eye as a beam of light that bent, or refracted, as it passed

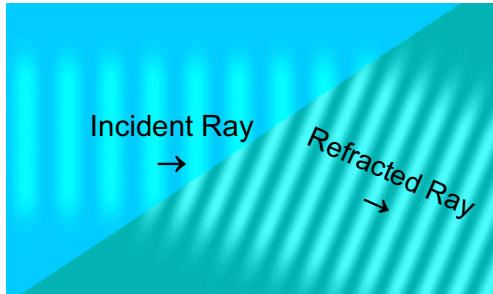


Figure 1. The incident ray bends, or *refracts*, as it passes from one medium to another. (Creative Commons; text and arrows added by the author. For animated version see https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Refraction_animation.gif)

from one medium to another (**Figure 1**). She could see this as clearly as she saw the physical world with her eyes, but it was a different way of seeing.

“My theramin!” Alyzia exclaimed, pulling a theramin out from behind an abandoned chesterfield. “I’ve been wondering where it was. And there’s still charge in the batteries.” Somewhat absentmindedly, she began distilling music from the air with her fingers.

Raj paced the dimly lit basement. “At least you can barely hear the storm down here,” he said. “Damn, Alyzia! I stepped on the paper mâché thing you’re making for Stella. Sorry!”

“No worries,” Alyzia said. “It’s easily fixed.”

“A paper mâché thing? For me?” Stella said.

“Yikes, sorry again, Al!” Raj said. “I guess I let the cat out of the bag.”

“Did you know that the Spanish translation for ‘to let the cat out of the bag’ is ‘to discover the cake’?” Bruno commented.

“What I’d give for a chocolate-frosted devil’s food cake,” Raj said.

“Or to go to a concert,” Alyzia said.

“Or hockey game!” Seung Gong said.

Stella still had the sensation of experiencing a new kind of “sight” in an elusive, tip-of-the-tongue kind of way, like something in your peripheral vision that disappears when you look at it directly. She was sensing, for each person present, an oozing light with its own unique colour spectrum. She tried to get a handle on the overall shape of the lights, but she was unable to control her point of view, and couldn’t stop from getting lost in details. She stared into Raj’s

light, and was mesmerized by a labyrinthine kingdom of Mandelbrot madness, some regions of which absorbed light, while others reflected it, or scattered it like a prism. Her brain was devoting a new kind of mental energy to nudging her into this new way of seeing, but part of her—the part associated with raw, animal survival—was resisting it.

There was another earsplitting crash. A dozen candle flames quivered in synchrony. Shadows danced in the darkness.

Alyzia stopped playing the theremin. “I feel like we’re being watched,” she said.

“Watched by what?” Raj asked.

“I don’t know.”

“The dystopic future is upon us,” Bruno said dramatically.

Shivering, Stella pulled a ratty sleeping bag over herself.

“Let’s play a game,” Raj said.

“How about Truth or Dare?” Bruno said.

“I haven’t played that since I was a kid,” Raj said. “But I’m in.”

“Who goes first?” Bruno asked. “Alyzia?”

“I’ll watch,” Alyzia said. She put down the theremin and sat on a cushion. Glimmer instantly curled himself up in her billowing skirt.

“Like hell you will,” Bruno said. “You can’t sit here and listen to everybody else’s deep dark secrets without letting them ask you yours.”

“Let’s start with innocuous questions,” Stella said. “Raj—if you could be any animal, what animal would you choose to be?”

“Hmmm,” Raj said. “Oh, that’s easy.”

“Yeah,” said Bruno, “A piece of cat.” He turned to Stella. “Incidentally mi amiga, the way I remember it, starting off innocuously meant asking something like what’s the strangest sexual position you’ve ever been in.”

“What animal would you be, Raj?” Stella said.

“Hymenoptera,” Raj said.

“What is hymenoptera?” Seung Gong said.

“They’re microscopic bugs with seven different sexes,” Raj said. “So, seven times the sexual possibilities. Bruno—truth or dare.”

“Mineral. Oops... sorry. Truth. Hey by the way, whad’ya call it when one elephant dreams about making love to another elephant?”

“Let’s see,” said Raj contemplatively. “Have you ever had a sexual dream involving Jesus Christ?”

Bruno opened his mouth as if to speak, but no words came out. He looked confused.

Stella blinked in surprise. She’d *seen* Bruno’s inability to articulate his thoughts. In her mind’s eye this was portrayed as the divergence of a diffuse beam of light as it passes through a concave surface (**Figure 2**). As Bruno recovered his composure, the beam faded.



Figure 2. Since the surface of a sphere is concave, a ray of light diverges, or becomes *less focused*, after *passing through* a sphere. The more focused it is, the less it diverges. (Copyright held by the author.)

“A dream about bonking Jesus Christ? What the hell kind of question is that?” Bruno asked.

“Or Buddha, or any other such person,” Raj added.

Stella saw Bruno *reflect on* how he would answer the question, and it ‘looked like’ a beam of light *reflecting off* concave surfaces (**Figure 3**). As he ‘bounced the idea around in his head’, viewing it from different perspectives, the beam of light came into focus.



Figure 3. When an incident ray (lower left) *reflects off* a concave surface, it converges (becomes more focused).

Similarly, to ensure that an idea is clearly expressed, the beam of light representing an idea is reflected off concave surfaces, such that with each reflection it becomes more focused. (Copyright held by the author.)

Mesmerized, Stella tried to etch into her brain what it felt like to see in this new way, fearing that if she forgot, she might never get it back.

“I’d have to say no, I’ve never dreamt of fornication with deities.” Bruno said. “But that Indian goddess with all the arms could be interesting. Okay. Alyzia, are you playing or not?”

“I guess so.”

“Truth or dare,” Bruno said. “And hey, doesn’t anyone wanna know what it’s called when one elephant dreams of making love to another?”

“Truth.”

“No, it’s called an elephantasy. Oh, *truth!* Are you sure? Okay, I’ll give you an easy one. What’s the most unusual place you’ve ever had sex?”

“Hmmm,” Alyzia said, faintly blushing. “I don’t think I’ve ever had sex in a particularly unusual place. Does it have to be... sex?”

“Penetration not crucial.”

“On the floor, I guess.”

“Wow,” Bruno said sarcastically. “That got me excited. Pass the hot oil this way.”

“Was it the floor of something interesting, at least?” Raj asked. “An elevator? A barn full of animals?”

“That glass-floored bridge across the Grand Canyon?” Bruno suggested.

Alyzia swung her head back. The movement of her dusky-colored striped scarf tickled Glimmer’s ear. He looked up at her, and she petted him gently.

Seung Gong, meanwhile, was petting Inkling. His authentic broad smile, gracious manner, and twinkly innocent eyes made it virtually impossible to believe the rumor she’d heard recently that he was a Chinese spy. But... how could she know for sure? Was it possible to tell from his hypersphere of light?

Peering into it, she found herself in a world of clear, calm light interfused with thin patinas of chaos. Its meanings were harder to decipher than for the others; she had no clue how to ‘read’ it. She turned away abruptly, feeling guilty, and awestruck by a sense of aching, incomprehensible beauty.

“I never noticed before there’s a bed down here,” Bruno said. “Don’t suppose I could crash in it tonight?”

“Sure,” Raj said. “Move right in. Trash the place. The landlord couldn’t hate us any more than he already does.”

Stella cringed. “Really? The landlord hates us?”

“Screw him,” Raj said. “I’ve already found an apartment to move into in case we’re kicked out. We all should, probably.”

“It might not be safe to sleep down here Bruno,” Alyzia said. “That smell’s gotta be unhygienic. And... I still feel like something is here, watching us.”

“The cats watch us,” Seung Gong said.

“Not just the cats. Something else.”

“It’s safer than sleeping upstairs if a tree crashed through the neighbor’s roof,” Stella observed.

“Actually,” Bruno said, “Just in case a tree crashes through the roof of *this* house, Seung Gong should sleep on the chesterfield, one of you ladies should sleep with Raj in his first-floor bedroom, and the other should sleep down here with me.”

Stella and Alyzia exchanged glances.

“Or I sleep with the ladies and you sleep on the chesterfield,” Seung Gong said, grinning proudly.

They laughed. It was heartwarming that Seung Gong’s English was getting good enough to join the banter.

“Seung Gong—truth or dare?” Alyzia said.

“Truth,” Seung Gong said.

“Let’s see. Say you’re in bed with…”

“Buddha,” Raj suggested.

“An artichoke,” Bruno suggested.

“A logical fallacy,” Raj suggested.

“A vat of pig bile,” Bruno suggested.

Seung Gong looked perplexed.

“I’m going to change my question,” Alyzia said. “Seung Gong—have you ever had an erotic fantasy about anyone in this room?”

“Sorry… have what?”

“An erotic fantasy. About someone in this room.”

“What is an eroddy fantasy?”

“It’s when you imagine that you’re doing something sexual with someone. But you’re not.”

“Explain it in mime,” Bruno suggested.

“It’s when you think about someone passionately,” Alyzia said. “Romantically.”

“Ah.”

“Someone in this room.”

“Someone in this room?” Seung Gong repeated incredulously.

“Yes.”

“I am not sure,” he answered, looking puzzled.

“That was a tad anticlimactic,” Bruno said. “Hey, while we’re on the subject, has *anyone* in this room had a romantic fantasy about *anyone* in this room?”

“I sense something in this room that is fantasizing about all of us,” Alyzia said, “In ways we can barely comprehend.”

“Try us,” Raj said. “We might just comprehend.”

“I mean, in ways that relate to the meaning of life, to the vibrational impact we have on the universe. Even if humanity doesn’t survive as a species, each of us will have left a unique vibrational fingerprint.”

“Behold the delightful whimsy of the artistic temperament,” Bruno said.

Alyzia rolled her eyes. She got up and resumed playing the theremin.

“Seung Gong, it’s your turn to ask truth or dare,” Stella said.

“Alyzia—truth or dare.”

“Truth.”

“I cannot think of a question,” Seung Gong complained. “Okay, I have one. What is your most elephantasy sex position?”

Alyzia laughed. “You mean erotic? Or unusual?”

“The most unusual sexual position AI’s ever been in is when they turned around and did it with their feet at the pillow end,” Bruno said, chuckling.

Everyone laughed.

Stella noticed that Alyzia’s pupils were darting around, and wondered if Alyzia was seeing what she was seeing. She now had a better handle on it, and was starting to be able to move through some other kind of space, and control her point of view in that space. To her amazement, she was looking down upon the souls (if that’s what they were) of everyone in the room, represented as dazzling beings of lights, herself included. Now all the concave surfaces she’d glimpsed earlier made sense, for the beings were spherical, and spheres are the ultimate in concave surfaces. Or more accurately, they appeared to be hyperspheres: spheres in more than three dimensions (**Figure 4**). In fact, they were *nested* hyperspheres, one inside the other like the layers of an onion. They didn’t *look* like plants or animals or any other form of life, but seemed alive nonetheless, the way northern lights can seem alive.

Alyzia’s theramin music was morphing into something more turbulent and mysterious.

“We could be using this as an opportunity to really get to know each other,” she said.

“Instead, we’re asking crap.”

“I don’t give a damn what animal someone wants to be,” Bruno said.

“Let’s ask *meaningful* questions,” Alyzia said earnestly. “Like: what do you most want to accomplish before you die?”

Simultaneously, the outermost onionskin layers of all their hyperspheres became more translucent. For an instant, Stella was peering deeper into the cores of her friends' light-selves than she'd seen before, at what looked like celestial bonfires spewing cascading fractal fountains of light. Except it happened so quickly she wasn't certain she'd really seen it, like clouds parting momentarily to reveal a distant landscape, and then closing again before you had a chance to properly make out what you were seeing. She was tempted to share the experience with them, but it felt like an invasion of their privacy, and anyways, they probably wouldn't believe her.

It occurred to Stella how many words there are that have one meaning related to light and another related to mental states: creative *spark*, *beam* with enthusiasm, moment of *illumination*, *brilliant idea*, her face *lit* up, show me the *light*...



Figure 4. A hypersphere, or sphere in more than three dimensions. (Since this is a 2D image of a 3D approximation of a 4D object, it is not strictly accurate, but it's the best we have.) Attribution: Andrew Seemann. Used with permission.

“Stella, truth or dare,” Bruno said.

“Truth.”

“What is your earliest memory?”

“Good question. Let's see.”

In physical space, Stella glanced at an old glass jug on a shelf above the dishwasher, but in the otherworldly yet strangely familiar hyperspace at the periphery of her awareness, she was peering into the light of her own soul. Descending into the light, she realized that she could propel herself through this abstract space,

and as she did so, memories from different points of her life hovered into her awareness. A small defect—a light-blocking bubble that deflected any passing beams—piqued both curiosity and

dread. She recalled ‘seeing’ Alyzia bend the truth with a defect at the surface of her hypersphere, and wondered if, just like a surface defect can distort communication *between* people, a defect *within* the hypersphere can distort a person’s own thinking, their train of free-association, their internal dialogue.

She eyed the bubble, wondering what it was, exactly. Her id? A repressed memory?

Suddenly she was inside it, re-experiencing an event from her ancient past, one she’d long forgotten about. She was a toddler, and she’d broken a family heirloom, a fragile jug that her uncle said was inhabited by a genie. Her parents were shockingly angry. It was the first time she’d ever felt like a bad person, and she was reliving it over and over from the perspective of a much earlier version of herself that couldn’t yet talk.

At some level, she realized she’d lost the capacity to speak English, or any language. She panicked. Her conscious self was reduced to a speck of energy bombarding itself against the walls of the bubble, again and again, from every angle, in a futile effort to break free. Terror overcame her.

In the distance she sensed a warm, loving light. It felt like Alyzia. Though that made no sense; it would be two decades before she would meet Alyzia.

The light penetrated the bubble, just faintly, and suggested to Stella, without words, that she forgive herself for breaking the jug.

But I deserve to feel bad, she thought to herself; I *did* break it.

Then: no, I *do* forgive myself.

Waves of forgiveness washed through her. The bubble slowly melted away, revealing a vast, misty purplish landscape strewn with other bubbles and irregularly shaped crevices that glittered enticingly like portals to mysterious worlds.

But her friends were waiting.

She was her adult human self again.

“You ok, Stella?” Bruno asked.

“Yes,” Stella said slowly. “I think so. I got lost digging up my earliest memory.”

They looked at her, expectedly.

“I was about two years old. My parents had a huge heirloom pottery jug with a big round bottom and skinny top. It had a gorgeous, iridescent periwinkle glaze. I used to pretend there was a genie living in it. One day it broke. I broke it. I remember watching it shatter, and being horrified that the genie had no home.”

“How could you remember something from when you were only two years old?” Bruno asked.

“I think it’s appropriate that she *re*-members what she *dis*-membered,” Alyzia said.

“Did you *re*-collect the pieces?” Bruno asked.

“My parents put it back together, but I could always tell where it had been cracked.”

“That must have been a shattering experience,” Bruno said.

“Yeah, I really came apart at the seams.”

“Did the genie come back?” Alyzia asked.

“I don’t know,” Stella said wistfully.

Alyzia looked contemplative.

Stella noticed they were not alone. In the dark corners of the basement, constellations of other hyperspherical light beings had joined them. These ones didn’t represent anyone physically present. They pulsed impishly, emitting jelly-like flares of jewel-hued light. Stella was on the verge of commenting on them, when she realized she wasn’t seeing them with her eyes, but with

the other way of 'seeing,' and no one else seemed to be aware of them. Her housemates were staring at her, waiting for her to continue the game.

"Bruno," Stella said, "Truth or dare."

"Truth," Bruno said.

"Okay," she said. She paused. "Do you ever tell a joke because you fear silence, or because you fear that the conversation will become serious and you will end up revealing too much of yourself?"

"Hm," Bruno said. "Do you think I joke around too much?"

"You're funny. But sometimes..."

Bruno looked sad. "I guess I do sometimes fear silence. I don't know about revealing too much of myself. I'd have to think about it." He scratched his chin. "Seung Gong, truth or dare."

"Truth."

"Tell us a goal," Bruno said slowly. "Something you'd like to accomplish while you're in Canada other than your degree."

"My goal is to always understand when I laugh. To have my English so good that when everyone laughs, I laugh because I get the joke, not just join the laughing."

"I like that answer," Alyzia said.

"Raj—truth or dare," Seung Gong said.

"Truth."

"What is your greatest fear?"

"That climate change is destroying this planet and every living thing on it. And even if some kind of grub manages to survive climate change, it'll die when nuclear reactors go off because humans aren't around to keep them submerged in water. And anyways, the sun is slowly

burning itself out, and the universe is mostly empty space, and spacetime is just blindly playing itself without any plan or purpose, and existence is meaningless.”

“That is a good fear,” Seung Gong said, “But like Alyzia said, something more personal.”

Stella’s inner gaze fell upon one of the hyperspherical beings in the corner of the basement. It instantly responded to this attention by exuding dazzlingly intricate objects made of light, and holding them out eagerly for Stella to drink in. She had no idea what it was trying to express, but its antics were captivating; she couldn’t look away. It started playfully tossing intricate shapes made of light toward her, though they seemed to evaporate before reaching her.

“Ok, more personal,” Raj said. “One thing I’ve feared is... I had a sort of romantic involvement with a male friend, and I felt bad that I never invited him here. Not even on Thanksgiving. I was afraid if I did it could... somehow leak back to my parents.”

All eyes were on Raj. Directly above and slightly behind his physical body, a volcanic eruption was taking place. Blood-red light was spurting out in all directions and coalescing into fantastical forms.

“I wasn’t planning on coming out to you guys like this.”

“Invite him here some time, Raj,” Seung Gong said, hands outstretched.

“It ended,” Raj said. “He met someone else that night who was alone on Thanksgiving.”

They smiled at him warmly. He smiled back. Alyzia put her arm around him.

“Wish it was this easy to tell my parents,” Raj said.

The basement door suddenly banged shut, and the shaft of light on the stairwell was gone. The candles flickered.

“Does anyone see those lights?” Seung Gong asked softly, pointing to the far side of the basement.

“Yes!” Stella said.

“Me too,” Alyzia said.

“I see them too,” Raj said. “I had assumed it was just part of my headache. It’s like an enchanted forest lit up by a web of little round lanterns. But they seem... alive.”

“The way they’re juggling those plasmatic lightforms, it’s like they’re trying to tell us something,” Stella said.

“Tell us what?” Seung Gong asked.

“I’m not sure. That thoughts can take the form of massive objects made of light?”

“That was my impression too,” Alyzia said. “I think they’re trying to tell us that thoughts are tangible, and leave imprints all through the cosmos.”

“Who are they?” Seung Gong asked. “Why are they spying on us?”

“I think they’re people’s souls,” Alyzia said quietly. “Maybe the souls of people who lived in this house before us.”

“The landlord used to live here,” Raj commented. “He’s supposed to give us 24 hours notice before showing up here, and as far as I know, that applies to his soul as well as his body.”

They laughed.

“Maybe they’re the souls of our ancestors,” Alyzia said. “And other people whose lives touch us and whose lives we touch.”

“Indra’s Net!” Raj said.

“What’s that?” Alyzia asked.

“It’s a Buddhist allegory that says humanity is a web made of strands of light stretching horizontally through space and vertically through time. At every intersection dwells an individual, and in every individual dwells a bead of light.”

Bruno snorted. He walked over to the lights and pointed his flashlight at them. “It’s little light-emitting bugs living on some kind of funky fungus. Cool. They probably use the light to attract even littler bugs for breakfast.” He grimaced. “Ugh, they’re stinky buggars!”

“*That’s* not what we were looking at,” Stella said.

But the beings she’d seen were no longer there. Not only had the other beings disappeared, but so had the hyperspherical lightform versions of her friends. The unnatural light of the cellphones seemed incompatible with the kind of light they’d tuned into in the darkness.

The normal human experience suddenly felt bland to Stella. Watered down. She turned to Alyzia, but all she saw was Alyzia’s bodily form, her vessel. Not her inner light. And despite Alyzia’s Nordic beauty, compared to her inner light, the vessel was dull, a remote and indirect pointer to the essence of who she was. Like trying to know someone by examining their fingernail clippings.

She noticed tears in Alyzia’s eyes, droplets of liquid crystal light, distillations of the other realm.

“What *was* that?” Raj said.

“It’s a case of—on top of pandemic paranoia and mega-storm mayhem—everyone getting stoned on the smorgasbord of slime molds that birthed these mutant bugs,” Bruno said.

Stella walked over to the washing machine, and picked up the glass jug. “Maybe, the lights were us. Our bodies and minds are vessels, like this jug.” She filled the jug with water.

“The light is the soul, like the water in the jug.”

“What happens when you die?” Raj said.

Stella let go of the pitcher, and it shattered into a hundred splintered pieces. Water splashed everywhere.

“That’s what happens,” she said.

“A less dramatic explanation would have sufficed,” Bruno said.

“Why did you *do* that?” Alyzia asked. “Your leg is bleeding. And you’re soaked!”

Stella looked surprised. “I don’t know why I did it.” She paused. “Or, maybe I do.” She hung her head. Her sleek black hair partially obscured her face. “My pitcher of water stays held together because of you guys. I’m terrified we’ll all go our separate ways.”

She looked up. They were staring at her, taking this in.

Alyzia gave an understanding smile. “Well, we’re stuck here together now, for who knows how long.” She got up and sat next to Stella on the chesterfield. “Hey, wanna know something weird? Guess what I’ve been making for you down here out of paper mâché?”

“What?”

Stella’s pulse quickened slightly as she recalled the first otherworldly vision she’d had that evening: Alyzia not being straight with her.

“A spherical lampshade,” Alyzia said. “With little holes for the light to shine out.”

Stella knotted her brow. A smile slowly swept across her face. “Al, could you make a paper mâché big enough for a genie?”

“Of course,” Alyzia said. “And if you’re ever lonely, our souls will be right there, shining out at you through the holes. I’ll make one for each of us.”

Stella grinned. Not because she believed that if she was ever lonely, her friends’ souls would be shining out at her from holes in a jug. But because they’d want to be.

END