

Maps to God
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Here's the thing about my mother: she's been fading out for years. These days I can't understand her unless the electromagnetic fields line up just so.

Just yesterday evening at dinner she tuned in and out as I twisted the fork in my hand: "--Dr. Franklin--staff is excellent--not enough--"

I finally got the angle just right: "Herb, I bought the medication."

Fortunately, my dad is on my frequency, so I don't need utensils to hear him. "We already discussed this, Joan," he said.

Tum-ticka tum. I ain't no holla-back girl. That's the other thing about my frequency -- it's tuned to pick up secret signals from a Gnostic sect hidden deep in the Sahara. Or possibly Nevada. They send me messages coded in pop songs.

My mother's mouth opened and closed but the electromagnetic wind must have shifted because I could no longer hear her. My father shook his head at what she said. The setting sun angled through the kitchen window and bloodied the white tablecloth between my parents. I heard the clank of silverware and the ever-present hum of background radiation like a perpetual motion refrigerator.

I shifted so that the sprig of dogwood blossom in the table vase blocked my view of my mother and applied my fork to dinner. I segregated the little rosemary spears from

the potatoes. It was a long job, but necessary; my mother might have applied truth-serum to the tips of the spears. She was always trying to trip me up, get me to tell her my plans.

"No," my father said. "Remember what happened last time?"

I always loved the one-sided conversation. It was a puzzle.

"Come on, Joan. Leave her alone."

I looked up. My mother had obviously just addressed me; her face was expectant.

"She wants to know what you're working on now," my father said.

"It's proprietary," I said. *Tum-ticka-tum*.

I didn't expect my mother to understand. Even though I'm still a teenager she knows I could be the next Einstein, and it scares her. Some people are afraid of genius.

I've been ostracized by the scientific community for years. The National Academy of Sciences has never answered any of my letters. They just don't understand the importance of my work. They don't understand that I could have made teleportation work if I just had the right tools. At least the Gnostics believe in me.

This time I'm working on something big. I mean really big. It's a map to God, and it will change everything.

#

After dinner my father helped me in the lab.

"Wire cutters!" I sang.

"Wire cutters." My father passed me the red-handled ones.

My music swelled. *Tick-ticka-tum-TICKA. We are THE CHAMPIONS.* It's so sad that he can't hear it. My father believes in me even though he doesn't understand the physics behind my work.

"Tape!"

"We're out."

"Jesus Christ!" I couldn't help myself. "We're so close!"

"How does this machine work?" he asked.

"It's difficult to pinpoint," I answered.

A map to God is a paradox: every step of the journey is a piece of understanding, which leads you further from God. Every step closer is also a step further away.

My dad looked up from the machine. My mother stood in the doorway to my laboratory, hands on her hips, frowning.

I didn't used to have a lab in the basement.

Last year when I was sixteen my mother tried to help with my invisibility machine even though she didn't have the scientific background and I didn't need her help. That day she sat down next to me while I was working on the control box, picked up a capacitor, and put it in completely the wrong place.

I took her capacitor out.

How was that helping, I ask you. It wasn't.

She said something.

She reached in to the control box and took one of mine out. That was really not helping. I slapped her hand away.

She stood up and the control box overturned. And it had been almost done! I pounded the capacitors on the floor. Anger in my fists, anger in my fingers.

My mother's mouth moved and her face turned red. She stood up and tripped over the power supply cables which scavenged left-over kinetic energy from my sneakers.

I felt the vibration of her voice in my teeth, even though I couldn't hear her.

Later that day my dad helped me cart all my lab equipment downstairs. He said I had to work in the basement from then on.

We set up my equipment in the east side of the basement. On the other side was the washing machine, and in the middle was a piece of orange carpet and a couch.

My dad stood up, knees creaking. "Good luck with your machine."

I continued on with the wires. Red to black. Black to red. *Tum-ticka-tum*. I could do this without duct tape.

#

When I went upstairs to get some water my mother trapped me in a transition point. That's the thing about doorways, certain pathways, anything that helps you move from one place to another. Most people move through easily, don't even notice them. I get stuck in them, and my mother takes advantage of that.

She stepped in front of me as I was trying to get from the living room into the kitchen. I tried to move but I was held tight by the transition force, a giant hand on my shoulder.

She held up an orange bottle with typed words on the side. What poison had she concocted for me now?

She twisted open the lid. Small white pills spilled into her hand.

She smiled and held out her hand.

They were such tiny pills. How could she think that anything so small could affect me in any way? It struck me as funny, and I began to laugh.

My mother shoveled the pills back into the bottle, her lips pressed tight. Several dropped onto the floor, rolled this way and that. One rolled through the doorway and ended my paralysis. I followed the pill through the doorway.

Dum. Dum. Dum. Another one bites the dust.

My father sat in the living room reading a paper. My mother must have said something to him because he said, without looking up. "I won't make her take anything she doesn't want to."

My mother bent to gather up the pills, hands shaking. One had escaped. It lay in the crack between where the kitchen tiles ended and the living room carpet began. It was stuck in a transition. I knew what that was like. I felt a sudden kinship with the little pill.

I put my foot over it, pressed it further into the crack to keep it safe from my mother's enormous groping hands.

"Do not be afraid, little one," I whispered. I hummed softly to it. *Hum. Hum.*

Hum.

My mother walked away. Her back was very straight.

I would come back later and rescue the pill. I had a moment of inspiration: the pill was vitally important for my machine.

#

When I was young I could still hear my mother pretty well. One day when I was nine she lured me to the front of the house with the promise of a trip to the science museum.

She stood by the front door in a suit. Green light from the stained-glass inset spilled around her like a sick halo.

"Are you finally ready?" she said.

She had only worn that suit once before to uncle Mark's wedding. She would never wear it to the museum.

I would have run except that she had already trapped me in the transition point of the hallway. I sat down on the floor. I held my backpack over my head. I thought maybe all the metal in there would shield me.

"Herb!"

My dad came back in, carrying the car keys. He didn't look at me.

"We're already late," my mother said.

He tried to lift me up by my arms. The backpack fell open, and all my lab supplies skittered here and there: antennae, transducer coils, power supplies.

"Jesus Christ," my mother said. "What is all that junk?"

My dad squatted next to me and helped me gather the equipment.

"Dr. Franklin won't wait forever," my mother said. "Just leave it."

"No!" I said.

"I don't know what good Dr. Franklin is going to do anyway," my father said.

I hugged the transceivers to my chest.

"Forget it," my mother said. "Just forget it." She slammed the front door on her way out.

That's when I knew she would never understand me.

#

Midnight. Alone in the basement. It was my habit to work late into the night, long after my parents had gone to sleep. That's when I did my best thinking, when the signals from the Gnostics got through loud and clear. *Love is a battlefield.*

I kept thinking of that little pill upstairs, trapped in the gritty boundary between tile and carpet. Carpet fuzz to the west, unyielding tile to the east.

I crept upstairs and with a plastic knife, freed the renegade pill from its prison. The basement door frame gave us a bit of a problem, but eventually the pill and I slid through sideways, my back scraping against the door jam, and we made it back to my machine.

The machine was almost ready.

The metal had to be carefully arranged so that the magnetic field lines of the earth (albeit small) would coincide with the induced field lines of the metal. The current I got from a dead light bulb. Transitions are fuzzy; there is a little bit of death in life, and a bit of life in death.

A special aluminum-tipped wedge served as a conduit, coaxing out the last bit of power from the bulb. Four spherical transceivers, a prism to cut and spread the energy of photons, a fine mesh to capture and distil the mystery that is God.

Here's the key to the machine: God is in the transitions. God is the moment just passed. The instant you think you've put your finger on it, it has slipped into the past. God is the moment about to come. It is always just out of reach.

I only had to capture a moment, hold it still for an instant.

I washed the courageous pill with the light from the prism. I placed it first in the tray of the machine so that it would soak up the precisely aligned magnetic fields, and then into my mouth, where in four hours it would bring me face to face with God.

#

I woke in the morning on the little strip of carpet next to the basement couch. Light shone through the dusty half-windows which looked out past the garbage cans onto the front lawn.

My machine stood on an upside-down plastic folding chair. Twine wound through the legs, creating a see-through basket. Aluminum foil balls adorned the feet. A prism hung from a key chain attached to a dead light bulb.

I stood and pushed the prism. As it swung, the colors of the rainbow washed over the litter on the floor: red sheaths of plastic from stripped wires, bolts and nuts and nails and screws. My equipment. My laboratory. My sad machine.

"No," I said. It no longer looked like a machine, like a key to anything.

And the Gnostics -- they had deserted me. I could hear morning jays calling to each other. I could hear a bus grinding the pavement outside, but I could not hear my music. My head was empty as a carved-out pumpkin.

I ran to the stairs, up the stairs, to the doorway, through the doorway. I was strangely unhindered by transitions. Failure, failure. My machine had not worked.

I went to the front door and opened it. Outside, dandelions sagged over the front stoop, dew clinging to their leaves. There was a bus stop directly in front of our walk. I remembered waiting there sometimes, holding my mother's hand. I remembered riding the bus downtown with her to the science museum, an hour away. I remembered my mother's bright blue cardigan and her singing softly to me in time with our steps up the wide cool steps of the museum, and the giant concrete lion out front.

"You're up early."

I turned. My mother stood behind me in a ratty bathrobe. Her hair was not in place.

"Are you going out," she said in a flat tone, not really a question. She moved away, as if she did not expect a reply. My mother was a stooped and graying woman. The years were written in liver spots on her arms, in the way her mouth turned down, afraid to smile. When had my mother become an old woman?

I blinked, swiveled my head this way and that, trying to find my frequency. Where had my music gone?

"Something's wrong with my head," I said.

My mother stopped. She turned and stared at me.

I knew in that instant that I would never forget the way my mother looked that morning. Her slumped shoulders, her lined face, time pivoting around us like a top dancing on its point, slowing, taunting, primed to topple.

And then, strangely, my mother began to cry.

Nothing. Only a whisper, but it was there. The Gnostics! They were coming through. I tested the doorway, felt a hint of resistance. Relief flooded through me. *Tik-tik.* The faintest brush of beat, like a grasshopper's legs preparing for the night.

"Have you talked to your father this morning?" my mother said. The last few words were so soft I could barely hear them. And then she said, "I thought -- missed -- but look."

"I'm going back downstairs," I said.

My mother wiped her eyes. She might have said something else.

Nothing's gonna change my world. I hurried through the hallway arch and through the basement door before the transition force could lay its clammy hands on me.

Ticka-ticka-tik. By the time I reached my machine, the music gurgled through my veins once more.

I surveyed the machine. The prism was at the wrong angle. The magnetic fields did not align.

The Gnostics had taught me that inside each person is the spark of the divine, and that it is just as real as the soup of the physical universe in which we swim, live and die.

But I think they are wrong. The divine spark is not inside or outside, but somewhere in between. God is not the attainment of knowledge, but the attempt at

apprehension. God is in the cracks; God is everything we can't quite reach, everything we can't control. In the border between sanity and insanity. In every imagined story ending.

I began to think: Maybe it was impossible to capture a transition, but every time we go through one a piece of God sticks to us like lint on a sweater.

There are many maps to God.

This is one of them.

END