

Lisa missed California. Outside her door, London drizzle was turning a newspaper to plump pulp in the lee of the kerb. Coincidence? Or was this how the damp, monochrome streets of Camden formed, hardening from the grey gruel of mulched newsprint, gradually tarnishing to the colour of paving slabs in the grimy, industrial air? She missed the vivid blossoms of Rose Drive.

Walking to the tube, the only colours she could see were in her memory. Just behind her eyes lay her favourite Orange trees, lifting their leaves in the breeze as it spilled off the ocean; in that remembered place an easy sun was already shining from an effortless blue sky; the misty drift from morning sprinklers would spritz her bare legs as she crossed the lawn to her bike. As she pedalled, she'd be able to smell the far-off savour of the sage brush and see... but the memory was losing power, collapsing into the gunmetal palette of Bayham Street.

Overcast Camden settled on her like the sad TV commercials for loans she'd come to hate. She liked to turn on one of the travel channels in the morning, let the holiday clips run, without sound, as she made green tea and dried her hair. It reminded her that the world she'd left still existed: sand and open sky and waves, in bright three minute segments, tiny soundless vacations, each of which ended with the tranquil presenters smiling and reeling off inaudible facts for the studio camera. It was reassuring to see those pictures, a limitless supply of getaways and sunshine moments.

What she didn't like were the breaks for commercial, glutted with ads for personal-injury claims and loans for the already debt-burdened. One in particular depressed her. It began in black-and-white, to illustrate how the maddening, face-pawing worry of too many outgoings might soon be replaced by the soothing strings and resurgent colours of a single, easy payment. She always imagined they were talking about London, but a London beyond their help, its credit so damaged it must stay anxious and colourless forever.

The station was still busy from the rush hour, but not insanely so. The mob (which she thought of as a single entity) were already at work by now, so Lisa would usually get a seat – sometimes two, which let her spread out her notes if she wished. Today her carriage was a private island of space. She rummaged in her satchel, sliding out a dense pack of papers, while ignoring the stare of the man opposite whose eyes never left her chest as he sipped thoughtfully from his cider. Unfazed, she clamped a pencil between her teeth, plucked the top sheet free from the pile and let the maths absorb her.

Jude, the insane German she worked with, had pressed into her hand a page of calculations as she'd left yesterday. Now, as the tube did its customary buck and twist she was oblivious to her surroundings, mesmerised by his crabbed and scratchy equations. He'd been right. Just as he'd said, her experiment had drawn no power. He suspected a broken connection. Worse, one

reading said her experiment had actually generated power, which meant their measurements couldn't be trusted. She felt sick at the thought. How much time was wasted? She wasn't sure how much longer she could bear London, especially (now she came to think of it) the absurdity of travelling underground when all the good, clean Earth lay above. As her train clattered into Borough station, she forced the papers into her bag and stood, well before the train had slowed, suddenly desperate to be back on the surface, needing whatever natural light the cloud-locked London sky would permit her.

It would have been quicker to change at London Bridge and get off at Southwark but invariably she preferred the longer walk. And sometimes the walking helped her think. It was like that today and by the time she reached Jude's lab she had an idea. He nodded his big head when he heard it and they made a start.

Work wolfed down the day, consuming hours so quickly that Lisa was momentarily confused when the sky grew dark. "Is it a storm?" she asked. Jude pushed straggly hair from his eyes and pulled his head out of the power cabinet. "It's sunset. It happened yesterday too."

Now aware of the time, Lisa took a break and went up on the roof. It was too misty to see the city lights, but still, the dim bulk of nearby buildings reminded her of winter in the Sierra mountains and helped her feel less homesick. It dawned on her now that it wasn't curiosity that had drawn her so far from the Golden State; it had been pride. Unable to reproduce the

Imperial College experiments however furiously she tried, eventually she'd let her ego drag her here, into the urban pall, to see for herself.

Tonight they both felt like working late. Around eleven Lisa asked, "Won't he worry?" meaning Jude's mysterious beau. Jude shrugged and said, "He's an artist," which appeared to settle it. Another hour passed before he said, "Look at this," and clinked the tip of his screwdriver on the glass screen of the capture scope.

The weird waveform stayed in their thoughts even after they looked away. "Maybe we're detecting some positive vacuum energy," Jude suggested at last, without enthusiasm. It was midnight and he was taking tiny nips of slivovitz from what looked like a brass thimble, barely enough to taste. Lisa was playing a descending scale on the flat of the whiteboard as she stared unfocussed at the ceiling. "It's..." she said and then nodded to herself. Jude waited patiently. "It's... something. It's not our equipment. So we should measure it."

Jude frowned and then announced "Schwuchtle Oma" and rolled off his chair to rummage under the table. Lisa was still trying to translate his disjointed cursing when he reappeared, holding up what looked like a brooch made from parts of a pager. "Digital dosimeter," he said, "which department rules say we must wear at all times to record our exposure to radiation. Pfft! But I can make it useful. It can measure this vacuum energy. Wherever you go, we will have measurements."

"Wherever I go?" asked Lisa, "Why would I go anywhere with it?"

"This experiment would not work in California; it works here. Two data points is not enough. Let's add more," he said and then stood up on his chair. Before Lisa could ask why, he popped the cover off the smoke alarm and yanked out its innards. "I need the *Amerizium*. Don't know English word."

"Americium," Lisa said with a tired smile. It amused her that the flyspeck of radioactive metal at the heart of a smoke detector was named for America and that it might help her solve this puzzle and get back home. Was that funny? She was tired now and she couldn't tell. She yawned.

"You should sleep," Jude said. "Go. I'll finish the dosimeter. Then I'll find my bed and you can take over in the morning."

Lisa thanked him. She took a cab home, despite the cost, drowsing in the back seat as the driver cursed the obvious insanity of all foreigners.

Maybe his words were still in her mind the next day as she rode the tube to work. She sat opposite a man with tuxedo-black skin, tribal scars beneath his cheekbones, who rocked backwards and forwards and appeared to be softly crying. It seemed to her that 'homesickness' was a weak word for the loss of your world and the shattering of your mind that sometimes went with it. She felt the man's tears like a warning.

At the lab she saw the modified dosimeter was ready for her. Jude had also left her half a dozen pages of scrawl. The final equation was underlined several times and Jude had written 'True conclusion or consequence of slivovitz?'. From what Lisa could tell, Jude had got a little drunk, free-associating conflicting versions of m-theory and twisting the conclusions to explain their power anomaly. He had concluded that extra-dimensional masses were influencing their readings: the conditions in parallel universes affecting the vacuum energy in this one. Intellectually cute though it was, it didn't get them anywhere. You certainly couldn't test it. So Lisa set it aside and spent the morning writing up her notes. After lunch she was so sleepy she decided to leave early, before the rush hour. She remembered to turn on the dosimeter and drop it in her bag before she left.

A sour headache dogged her to the tube, threatening to strengthen into a migraine. She prayed it would pass. She was standing on the northbound platform pressing the cool back of her hand to her forehead when the first change occurred. A geometric mural formed in the tile opposite her, and the walls around her lost their grime and began to gleam like mother of pearl. The lights above her head were now iron cages of flickering gas flames. She staggered and the world shifted back. Familiar orange dots announced the arrival of a train.

Shaken she rushed onboard to take her seat. The doors closed, the train pulled away and there was another change. A banded fish was framed

in the window for a moment before it flitted away into the soft Mediterranean glow of the water beyond. The metal around the plate-glass window had a gorgeous rainbow sheen to it; the engravings looked Celtic. Curiously she didn't panic. She held perfectly still, waiting... until the tartan seat covers returned and the sea-blue light outside the window faded to tunnel blackness.

Whatever had just happened, her headache was improved. Once, before a migraine, she'd seen colours streaming from the objects around her. It had freaked her out. It had felt like her mind was breaking down. She thought of the swaying African, the tears in his eyes. Was this how he'd felt staring at her world?

At the flat she dumped her bag by the door, dropped her shoes in the corridor and sprawled on her couch. She took three Nurofen and managed to fall asleep right there, without thinking of what she'd seen.

Lifeless sunlight woke her. Everything seemed normal. An e-mail from her mother had arrived with photos of a neighbour's new dog. Normality. Whatever collision of homesickness and migraine had struck her the previous day, it had departed. She hummed as she dried her hair. The world remained familiar, but there was a moment of unease as she left. Picking up her bag from where it lay by the door it seemed different, the colour, the buckles maybe. She ignored it and left the house.

Today she would do without her walk. She'd endure the tube the whole way. And everything

was fine until she changed trains. Pulling away from London Bridge station, lights began to move like fireflies outside the window and in the distance a suggestion of wings in the night sky. Lisa closed her eyes firmly and concentrated on mundane sounds, the din of the train, the voices of passengers. Two old ladies talking: "I know. So modern. All new stations too. It's so much nicer. I come this way every day now." The other old lady: "It was on the television when the extension opened. The Queen was there." Lisa focussed on their words hoping they would lead her back to reality. "She's marvellous for her age. I mean you forget, what with her mother, that she's eighty now. So she cut the ribbon and then the wyrm surfaced right on cue. Horrible looking, but it did a lovely job with the tunnel. Straight as a ruler apparently. I was sad they killed it." "Have you tried a bit?" the other asked. "Once. The meat's very rich. You could see the Queen only nibbled hers."

Afraid now for her sanity, Lisa opened her eyes slightly. Avoiding the window, she looked down, seeing only the walnut of the armrest, the indigo carpet by her feet and her bag. She rummaged inside it until she found the dosimeter. According to the display, she should be dead. But then it was no longer measuring fatal radiation; according to Jude it was measuring energy from parallel realities. *And not just measuring*, Lisa thought, *bridging*. It was drawing enormous power from somewhere, but if she could just pop the tiny battery out, she thought the link would break. Only she couldn't get her fingernail under its edge. She nearly had

it just as the train rushed out of the tunnel into what would have been Southwark station. She couldn't help it, she looked up, right into the sun. The train was in a hollow chamber, a thousand yards or so wide, tiered all around with apartments, creepers hanging from every balcony. In the centre of the cavern, a smoky tangerine sun poured soft light onto the trees below.

Entranced, Lisa bathed in the sunlight until the train came to a complete halt. Then, for the first time since reaching London, she laughed. Prising the battery free she stepped back into her world and went to find Jude.