

Storylandia

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Drunk on Time

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Mildred McGarvey ate a muffin while working on her memoirs in the activity room. Crumbs fell from her lips and gummed up her keyboard. The t and h keys. She brought the laptop out to me in the center's office with an embarrassed look on her face. I turned it upside down and shook it. Crumbs fell out. Others stayed put. I picked up my can of compressed air.

Just then Valeria Garza appeared at the center's double doors. She banged on one of them and Fred Barnes hustled over to pull it open for her. She pushed past him with a grunt, spotted me in the office, and hobbled toward me on her bad hip.

I dislodged a crumb with a blast from the can. Valeria tapped me on the shoulder.

"Saul," she said.

"No tapping," I said.

"I've gotta talk to you."

"Soon as I'm done with this laptop," I said.

"He's helping me," Mildred said.

"Wait outside," Valeria said to her. "This is personal."

Mildred stepped out and Valeria pushed the door shut.

"Get done please," she said.

I held up my hand. She took my sleeve between thumb and bony forefinger and gave it a tug.

"You're the big computer expert," she said. "I

need your help and I need it fast.”

I blew crumbs.

“I’m gonna tell you something,” Valeria said, “which is strictly between you, me, and the bedpost. Understand?”

“My lips are sealed,” I said.

“My granddaughter Julieta, she’s seventeen. She’s seeing a guy who’s trouble.”

I put down my can.

“His name is Tommy Link,” Valeria said. “Julieta thinks she’s in love. Tommy is nineteen, maybe twenty.”

“Okay.”

“Her dad told her to stop seeing the boy, but she just left the house with him. She had an overnight bag. They got in his car and took off.”

“That doesn’t sound good.”

“Running off with Tommy is the worst thing she could do. My son has a temper.”

“Have you tried calling her?”

“She don’t answer.”

“So why tell me?”

“I want you to find out where she’s gone and what she’s doing.”

She pointed at the laptop.

“Valeria,” I said, “this is Mildred’s computer. She’s waiting for it. And how am I supposed to find out what your granddaughter is doing on a laptop? I don’t know her and I don’t know the boy. I’ve got nothing to go on. I can find you a good surgeon for that hip, but your granddaughter’s social life is something else entirely.”

“Use Facebook,” Valeria said. “Use Twitter. Use those other things the kids use. SpotAndFly. Google her. Google Tommy’s license plates. Email her. Text

her. Do like they do on TV and hack her. Hack them both. What are you asking me for? You're the expert. Everybody says you can find anything on the computer. You've got a gift. Track her down. Go on now."

She pulled out a picture of a teenager and waved it in front of me. A pretty young woman.

I opened my mouth but nothing came out. I wanted to say no, but the woman was desperate.

"You helped Malika Tory find her cat," she said. "You told Agnes Chang whose dog was pooping on her lawn."

I kicked myself for those mensch-like actions. No good deed.

"I know you're a slacker," Valeria said, "but show some gumption for a change. Quit lollygagging and get busy."

"I just fixed this laptop," I said. "What about that?"

"I'm sorry. Your lack of ambition is none of my business."

"I'll look into it," I said, "but I can't do anything on this machine. My search tools are on my computer at home. Mildred wouldn't want me snooping around your granddaughter on her laptop anyway."

I stood up.

"What can you tell me about Tommy?" I said.

She grabbed my hands. Hers were cold, despite the warmth of the day.

"He's a nice kid. He met Julieta when he was doing some business with Tony my son. They hit it off. Tommy is okay but he's having some serious business problems with Tony. I don't know where Tommy lives. I think he works at the IKEA in Burbank. He used to."

"What kind of serious business problems?"

Valeria rubbed thumb and forefinger together.

“Something’s going on you’re not telling me about,” I said.

She stood looking at me, listing to the left.

“I’ll see what I can find out,” I said. “I’ll be here for a while tomorrow before I go over to Hesby Seniors in Sherman Village.”

“Call me as soon as you know something. I’ve got to talk to Julieta before she does something stupid and her dad finds out.”

After showing Valeria out of the office, I gave Mildred her restored laptop and sat down to look up the Garza address. At five o’clock, I rolled out of the center’s parking lot in my Jeep. I considered driving straight home and finding the missing couple but instead I headed over to The Studio, a dive on Magnolia in North Hollywood. I parked on the curb and swung my door open when the traffic was clear.

The Studio was my bar of choice when I wasn’t in the mood to drink alone. It was located a couple of blocks from my apartment, which made it convenient when I was too impaired to drive home at the end of an evening.

The smell of stale beer greeted me at the door. I stood inside for a moment, letting my eyes adjust to the gloom, and then walked over and sat down at the end of the bar. Walt brought over a bowl of pretzels and a draft. Several of the regulars lifted their glasses and I toasted them back. I was the only one in the bar under sixty. Like at work.

“How’re the old folks?” Walt said.

“Most of them younger than you are,” I said.

I drank off half the beer. In back, Abe and Jose, both over eighty and arthritic, were playing a game of foosball that progressed at the speed of a zen exercise.

Mimi came in through the back and put on an

apron. Walt waved us a goodbye, gave his daughter a hug, and went out the way Mimi had come in.

She rubbed down the bar with a rag.

“You want a sandwich?” she said to me.

“Just an egg.”

She brought over a bowl of hard-boiled eggs. I took one.

“How was your day?” she said.

“Valeria Garza wants me to find out what her granddaughter is up to. You know Julieta Garza?”

“I know her sister Mariana. We were in high school together. Julieta was just a kid at the time. What’s Valeria worried about?”

“I think Julieta is hanging out with a kid who owes her dad money.”

“Why does Valeria think you would know anything about Julieta?”

“I’ve used the internet a couple of times to help her friends at the center. Apparently I have a reputation.”

“I’m older than Valeria Garza,” Keishi Suzuki said, down the bar. “Why don’t you ever help me?”

“What do you need?” I said.

“Another drink, but I’m tapped out.”

I nodded to Mimi. She set Suzuki up with a shot.

“Nurse it,” she said to him.

“We’re drinking my rent money,” I said to Suzuki.

“That’s why it tastes so god-damned good,” he said. “Always better when you don’t pay for it.”

“You know he’s not broke,” Mimi said to me.

I peeled and ate my egg and washed it down with the rest of the beer. Took a second egg from the bowl and got off my stool.

“Good luck with Julieta,” Mimi said.

“Give me one more shot and put it on his tab,” Suzuki said to her.

Outside, May twilight softened the urban scene with purple. Down the block, a homeless guy named Jekell sat with his back against the brick front of a laundry, his dog Bush beside him. Bush wagged his tail. I walked over and gave him the egg, which he wolfed down shell and all.

Magnolia Boulevard was still busy with folks heading home from work. I waited for a guy on a bike to whizz past, then climbed into the Jeep and fired it up.

I turned off Magnolia at Vineland. My apartment was a fifth-floor walkup in a vintage structure built long before the Metro Orange Line began gentrifying the area.

Inside, I broke open a fresh bottle of cheap bourbon and sat down at my work table in the apartment’s second bedroom. I began my late-night granddaughter search by hitting the switch that powered up the scanner’s server in its rack against the wall. Its auxiliary unit woke up next to it. I filled a water glass with bourbon and took a sip. Turned on the console and typed in the Garza address I had looked up in the Lankershim office. Took a sip. Settled the controller on my lap. One more sip and I pulled on my VR headset and snugged up its straps. My mouth was left free for my drink.

Inside the headset, a virtual 3D view phased in. I saw myself from behind. I twitched the joystick and the view drifted up to the ceiling, backing away toward the door.

I kept a list of bookmarks on the scanner. Before tracking the Garza girl, I took a minute to hop

back for the thousandth time to the day I first laid eyes on Liesl.

Dr. Liesl Blau, recently arrived from Germany. On loan to MIT for a semester from the Max Planck Institute for Gravitational Physics in Potsdam-Golm. Looking like a teenager, she had already published a series of original papers in quantum cosmology and quantum gravity that rocked the scientific world and elevated the integration of gravitational and quantum physics into new realms. The University was abuzz at her arrival.

I was working on my fourth year as a support engineer in the University's IS&T department. We had set up Dr. Blau's office in Building 6, sandwiched between those of two Nobel physicists.

Dr. Liesl Blau, genius, live, on-campus.

"I am not a genius," she said to me once. "I have had one good idea."

"Einstein only had two," I said, "or so he told someone."

"Einstein changed the world. I will not."

She paused.

"I could," she said, "but I will not."

The scanner bookmark jumped me to the hallway outside her office, thirty seconds before I was due to show up. She opened her office door and stood waiting for me, a cup of coffee in her hand. No sound. She never got around to implementing sound on the scanner. She learned to read lips instead.

She looked younger than the students walking by. Younger, but like someone who knew things. Like a child standing in a bomb crater.

I took a sip and sat back in my chair. Behind her, outside her office window, the day was gray. She was wearing a German wool cardigan with the head of

a stag or antelope or reindeer on its right side. I never asked her which. The passing students tried not to stare but failed. She watched the hall in the direction of Building 8. I paused the scan. Thirty seconds. All I allowed myself. I didn't need to see me. I needed to see her.

At this point I quit sipping and started drinking.

I had a granddaughter to snoop. I used the map feed and keyed in the Garza home coordinates on Pine Hill Drive in Shadow Hills. The scanner jumped to the location with its clock set back to noon, five hours before Valeria Garza showed up at the senior center. The house was a sprawling two-story job with stone siding and an artificial waterfall and rock swimming pool off to the right. Valeria's mother-in-law cottage was located on the opposite side of the house.

I scanned forward in time, increasing the scan speed while I watched for motion. A man zipped by, walking his dog. A classic Cutlass muscle car pulled in from the street onto the natural stone pavers in front of the house. I slowed the scan. A young man climbed out of the car. Tommy Link, I assumed. He hustled up to the front door and gave the silver knocker a good rap. He was a tall, blond, athletic-looking kid. The teenager in Valeria's photo opened the door. I didn't bother following Tommy in. I turned up the scan speed and freshened my drink instead. Presently Tommy came out with Julieta in tow. She was wearing a backpack and carrying a gym bag. The two of them were laughing.

Valeria Garza appeared at a window in her cottage as the couple walked to the car. This was minutes after four o'clock. Julieta glanced back and saw her grandmother and stopped laughing. Valeria tried to open the window but the Cutlass pulled out of

the driveway while she struggled with it. No seatbelts in sight.

I manipulated the controller and followed the car around the big curve on McBroom to Sheldon, then to Roscoe and the Hollywood Freeway south to Chandler. The Cutlass made its way over to an LA Fitness on Coldwater Canyon, next to Tujunga Wash, two and a half miles from my apartment. After two hours of racquetball with a break in the middle, the couple showered, got back on the freeway and crawled south in rush-hour traffic to Little Armenia in East Hollywood. It took them more than an hour to get there. They were relaxed, in no hurry.

They had a leisurely dinner at a Lebanese restaurant on Hollywood Boulevard. No alcohol. Tommy kept an eye on his watch. When they were done and back in the car, they drove straight down Normandie to Wilshire in Koreatown. They parked in a church lot and Julieta waited in the car, smoking, while Tommy entered the church and joined a Gamblers Anonymous meeting in session.

I upped the scan rate. The meeting broke up and Tommy spent some time talking to a fellow who looked to be in his forties. Tommy's sponsor?

Night had fallen. With Tommy back in the car, the couple drove to a ritzy Los Feliz neighborhood above Little Armenia. Their destination was a stucco pile probably owned by a movie star back in the Thirties. The structure sat on a hillside behind a high wall on Glendower Avenue, near the slope that runs up to Griffith Observatory.

Tommy parked the Cutlass alongside several sports cars, models too expensive for me to recognize, outside a four-car garage. The couple went into the house hand-in-hand. Julieta's bag and backpack

remained in the car. I didn't bother to follow them in. I was tired and drunk. I upped the framing rate and watched various other couples arrive. As the evening in my headset wore on, I waited for Tommy and Julieta to leave. The scanner reached the present moment, ten-thirty, with them still in the house. Early for them but I was ready for bed.

I backed up five minutes and scanned through the front door into the house. A long hall beyond a wide entryway led past stairs and a dining room, through double doors to a veranda in back. Slate steps descended to a deck and a pool in the shape of an hourglass. Couples were scattered around the pool drinking, smoking, snorting and getting physical.

Tommy and Julieta passed a joint back and forth, lying in a double lounge chair and talking to a couple doing the same next to them. I powered off the scanner, unstrapped my headset, and called Valeria.

"Who is this?" she said after ten rings. "I was asleep. It's the middle of the night."

"It's Saul and it's not even eleven yet. You told me to call you when I found Julieta."

"Have you been drinking?"

"Yes."

"Well, never mind. Have you found them? Where are they? What are they doing?"

"When they left your house this afternoon, they drove over to a gym and played racquetball. They had dinner at a restaurant. They went to a party in Los Feliz. They're there now."

"Facebook," Valeria said. "These kids report everything they do."

After accepting her profuse thanks, I drained my glass and made it to bed without incident.

At Lankershim in the morning, Valeria came in

and informed her friends that her daughter had not been misbehaving but did have boyfriend problems. Reaction to this news was mixed. Meanwhile, my reputation as an internet magician took another step up.

“They seemed good together,” I said.

Valeria handed me a jar of plum preserves.

“From one of our trees,” she said. “It’s dropping fruit like crazy. I’m singing your praises this morning. I’m telling everyone.”

I put the preserves aside and drank from my can of Sprite hangover medicine. I had several urgent requests for internet assistance as the Garza story got around.

I left for the Hesby Senior Center in Sherman Village at noon. I was servicing five facilities, being the principal IT tech for Cedros Senior Activity Centers, Inc., leader of senior enrichment in the Valley. By the time I went out to my Jeep in the lot, my headache was restricted to the floor of my brain and the Sprite wanted company in my stomach. I stopped at a McDonald’s on my way over to Sherman Village and parked in the shade of an acacia tree. I bought a Big Mac and while I ate it in the Jeep, I thought about Tommy and Julieta. They impressed me as an intelligent, healthy couple of kids in love, which of course led my thoughts back to Liesl.

I was sent over to Liesl’s office for the first time soon after her arrival, to help her with credentialing problems on her machine. As I came down the hall, I saw her standing in her office doorway with a cup of coffee in her hand. Her gaze had me by the eyes fifty feet away. She put out her free hand as I walked up.

“Dr. Blau,” I said, taking it. “I’m your IT guy.”

She had a grip.

“I know who you are,” she said, sounding like Werner Herzog’s granddaughter. “The problem is already solved.”

Several gawking students slowed to listen. Dr. Blau let go of my hand and motioned them away with a quick gesture. She saw the look on my face.

“They are students,” she said, as if that explained everything.

“Then I guess...”

She smiled and turned back into her office, closing the door behind her.

I stood there for a moment in case she opened it again. She didn’t.

Magisterial. When I scanned her standing in the doorway waiting for me, I always stopped before the smile. I couldn’t handle the smile.

At the end of that first day, I sat in my Jeep at an exit in the Stata Garage, waiting to pull out onto Vassar Avenue. Rain pelted down from a whale-gray sky. A woman in a bright blue raincoat crossed in front of me. She tilted her umbrella into the wind and I recognized Dr. Blau. Easing the Jeep out onto Vassar, I rolled up beside her as she strode along. I lowered the passenger-side window.

“Doctor, can I give you a ride?” I called.

She stopped and faced the car.

“I am too wet.”

“It’s an old car. Wet doesn’t matter.”

She climbed in, furling her umbrella. I put the Jeep in gear.

“In Pottsdam I walk home,” Dr. Blau said.

“It’s going to get colder,” I said.

“MIT gives me a car and driver but I walk. In Pottsdam I walk home in the cold.”

“Where is Pottsdam, exactly?”

“Close to Berlin.”

She gave me an address on Washington Street. I took a left on Main and a right on Portland, and drove over to Washington. I kept my speed down with scientific royalty in the car.

“You are the IT fellow,” she said.

“Saul,” I said.

“Thank you for this ride. The wind pulls my umbrella.”

“My pleasure,” I said. “How are you liking MIT so far, and your time in America?”

“It is not so different from the Planck Institute. I knew already many of the faculty here.”

“Everyone is excited to have you on campus.”

“Yes.”

Scientists, at MIT anyway, are not a modest lot.

I pulled up at the address she had given me, a restored triple-decker crowded between two wooden apartment buildings full of students. The tri-decker was one of those old homes in Cambridge built before World War I.

Rain drummed on the Jeep’s roof. I turned to look at my passenger. She was staring at me. Her eyes seemed a little wide.

“What is it?” I said.

“You will come upstairs with me? I offer you a drink,” she said.

“A drink?” I said. I am not a guy often asked up for a drink. This was Dr. Liesl Blau speaking to me, a new star in the cosmological firmament. A young star.

However, saying no was not an option. I wasn’t qualified to carry her slide rule but science did not seem to be on her mind. I seemed to be on her mind.

Still, I hesitated. I knew how to have a good

time, but I wasn't sure I should try to have one with Einstein's daughter.

"My request is reasonable, yes?" she said. "I am a professor but also a woman. You are a man."

"Holy cow, Dr. Blau... How old are you?"

"Twenty-five."

"I'm twenty-five. You seem younger. And older."

"In Germany I live at home with my parents. I go too fast?"

She said this with a kind of familiar affection, the opposite of her nervous eyes, and put a hand on my arm.

"You're famous," I said, "an honored guest of the University, one of the smartest of the smart. I don't think MIT wants me taking up any of your cycles. In fact, I'm probably not allowed to."

"You are not a student," she said. "You are a worker."

"But you don't know me," I said, truly sounding like a student, the one with the dog and no homework.

Her hand moved on my arm.

"Professor Weingold has told me of you," she said. "You did not work hard in school. You had too many good times. Now I also want to have good times."

"Yikes."

She pointed at the building.

"Park in back," she said. "There is an assigned space for me there."

Liesl came up to my shoulder but there was no question who was in charge. I parked in back. She opened the door on the passenger's side and got out. I followed her to the back door of her building and up the stairs inside to the third floor, brushing raindrops out of my hair. She pulled out a key and stuck it in the lock.

“The school gives me this apartment for the semester.” she said, opening the door. “It is too big.”

The apartment was a flat that occupied the complete third floor. A hallway ran its length. Liesl took off her shoes and I followed suit. She pulled on slippers and handed me a pair. We padded down the hall. There were framed photos on the walls but in the gloom of day’s end, the figures in them were swaddled in shadow. We passed a bedroom, a guest room, a room with a server rack and electronic equipment in it, a kitchen and dining room. The dining room table was set for two, with unlit candles and an empty vase.

Past a front stairwell, we entered a living room that spanned the width of the building. It was populated with two minimalist plank couches, a rattan coffee table, glass end tables with lamps in the shape of carved rabbits, a nickel swing-arm floor lamp, an empty birdcage, and an overhead light in a paper globe. Ancient Persian rugs covered most of the finished oak floor.

“This is American style?” the doctor said, patting one of the rabbits.

“A mixed bag.”

She took out her phone and repeated my words into it. A female voice responded in German.

“Translation?” I said.

She nodded.

I helped her out of her raincoat, peeled off my jacket, and hung both on a coat rack standing inside the front door. I stepped back into the living room. Two canted bay windows overlooked Washington Street wet and shining as the street lights took hold in gray twilight. Rain rattled on the window panes.

The doctor disappeared down the hall. I switched on one of the lamps and perched on the edge

of a couch. My reflection in the window stared back at me as the day failed.

The doctor returned wearing blue jeans and a sweatshirt with German script across its front. She carried a bottle and two glasses, which she arranged on the coffee table. She sat down beside me.

“Himbeergeist,” she said. “It is raspberry schnapps. This is okay?”

“Sure,” I said, although if I had ever tasted schnapps, I was too drunk at the time to remember.

This whole situation was as new to me as the schnapps.

She poured and we toasted each other.

“To a good semester,” I said.

“To our friendship,” she said.

Her cheeks glowed. I couldn’t feel their heat from where I sat, but I wanted to.

“Doctor, listen, I...”

She held up a hand.

“For you, I am Liesl,” she said. “You do not mind that I spoke to Professor Weingold about you?”

I shook my head.

“The school threw me out on my ear,” I said. “Professor Weingold used to play poker with some of the IT guys. I did too. Instead of studying, I’d go over to Fenway Park or the Garden with them. Weingold warned me more than once that I was in trouble but it didn’t help. I almost made it through, though.”

Liesl lifted her glass again.

“Listen, Dr. Blau,” I said. “I don’t know how they do things in Germany, but I don’t want to lose my job.”

“Please say my name. Liesl. You will not lose your job.”

An old-fashioned doorbell sounded in the hall. Liesl got up and buzzed the downstairs door open.

Galoshes clomped on the stairs. She opened the front door and greeted the delivery man standing there. She accepted a large paper bag and a bouquet of flowers, handed him a tip, thanked him, and closed the door.

“I do not cook,” she said to me. “The University delivers dinner for me when I am home in the evening. Many nights I lecture. Tonight they have delivered dinner for two. The chefs at the Faculty Club prepared it.”

She disappeared down the hall again, presumably to put the flowers in the empty vase and to do something with the food. When she returned and sat down beside me on the couch, her thigh pressed against mine. On its own, mine pressed back. My glass was empty.

“Now we eat dinner,” Liesl said.

The bag from the Faculty Club sat on the dining room table. The flowers stood in water in the vase. We unpacked a green-bean-and-potato soup, rolled-up beef, bacon and onions, and potato dumplings and red cabbage. I opened a bottle of German red wine that came with the food.

“A German dinner,” Liesl said.

She lit the candles and turned the lights lower and we sat down across from each other.

The setting had the feel of a state dinner. There was something very odd about the way the professor was interacting with me, beyond the basic miracle of her inviting me up in the first place. Odder than odd.

“I will stay until Christmas and go home,” she said. This was in early September. “Where is your home?”

I told her about my youth in Los Angeles, my parents in Thousand Oaks, my brother in San Diego, my sister in Torrance.

“I did not go to school until the Institute accepted me,” Liesl said. “We moved to the city from the country. The tutors came to my home when I was young. I studied science and mathematics. I learned to play the violin.”

Her eyes seemed even wider than before, as if her words had carried her a step beyond theory. I swallowed some wine. She put her napkin to her lips.

“You will stay with me tonight?” she said.

She waited for me to respond without moving, but breathing quickly.

“Is this how they do it in Germany?” I said, feeling stupid as soon as I said it. A simple yes was beyond me. “Is this a good idea?”

“I do not know how they do it in Germany. This is not an idea. It is a desire.”

My ears felt as red as the cabbage. I nodded. We got through dinner and left the dishes for the cleaning person sent over weekday mornings.

In bed, Liesl was precise and eager, then just eager, and then Mother Nature took over for both of us.

I was the teacher but she was the professor. We began with the lights out but turned them on again. There were periods of sleep, but not many. The rain fell through the night. By the time day dawned gray and still, we were groggy and laughing and horsing around like long-time lovers. We showered together and ate leftovers in bed.

We left the Jeep where I had parked it. The rain had let up and we walked to school on foot. Pigeons skirted puddles on the wet streets. A gentle breeze rustled damp autumn leaves on the trees we passed.

“Tonight I have a seminar until seven,” Liesl said. “You will meet me in the Ayasli Conference Room after?”

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