

Boxes

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Dr Alfoen peers into the hole for the fourth time. Box 43, says the small brass plate on top of the black cardboard cube. His knees pop as he leans, also for the fourth time.

“Mmmmm...” he grunts, partly approving, partly interested, mainly bored. This kind of obsessive double (and triple and quadruple) checking has become a common thing by now. After so many years (Centuries? Aeons?) in the lab, his mind has come up with all kinds of small routines to fool time into passing less tediously.

Dr Alfoen wipes his greasy hands – lunch of battered corn and fried tomatoes – on the once-white lab-coat. A few minutes drag past.

“Box 43: The same old shit,” he says finally, mainly to dispel some of the silence. He consults his watch, wiping the grease off the glass. It is twelve – time for his noon break. He walks to the corner and sits his complaining body on a bare mattress. The log book rests on a small table by its side.

After a moment’s deliberation, Dr Alfoen opens it and flicks the pages to the last entry.

Box 42; The Gruggs have decided to eat the Puttz. Great catastrophe shall follow. New star-system NB 778 still too hot to tell, but, confirmed, there are proto-planets. Space termites have annexed two galaxies this week. Looks like the whole thing is going down the tube before it even got started.

Dr Alfoen fumbles for his pen. Box 43: The same old shit, he writes.

At that moment, there is a knock on the door. His heart jumps. Thursday already? Every Thursday, the man from Archives begins his descent from the upper floors and completes his circuit of the rooms, collecting the journals and leaving fresh blank ones. But today's not Thursday. It can't be Thursday.

"Come in," he bellows.

The door opens and a man stands leaning against the frame. It takes the newcomer a whole minute to find Dr Alfoen in the room, as if after all this time the scientist has somehow fused into the background. The man makes no effort to hide a frown when his gaze settles on the shabby mess that is Dr Alfoen. He steps in, distrustful but resolutely. An impeccable gray suit hangs loosely on his body.

Gray? Dr Alfoen discerns warily. It means Administration. He wonders what he has done wrong this time.

The man plants himself in the center of the room and clears his throat.

"Dr Alfoen, I presume," he says, avoiding the doctor's stare. "I bring orders from Management. Box 91. Nine One. It must be taken to incineration." His gaze roams the room, squinting to read the bronze plaques.

"Ninety-one, eh? About time. Although I reckon if we leave them long enough we'll get another life form to succeed them."

"Do not waste Company time on idle speculation, doctor. The box has to be destroyed immediately and that is all you need to know."

"Well, I'm busy right now. It will have to wait."

"You have twenty-four hours. By the way, it seems there is trouble with your phone. Please, don't make me come here in person again."

The man in the gray suit leaves, slamming the door on his way out. Dr Alfoen is once again left alone with his thoughts. His gaze wanders along the deceivingly silent shelves, the rows of black cubes and brass plates. He smiles, briefly and unexplainably.

I hate mornings, thinks Ramiro as he sits at the edge of the bed. One day, he should write a poem about mornings; what would he say? That haunting twilight of the senses, everyday wavering into focus, dirty window again, with the sky beyond screaming rain. Oh forget it.

Coffee, coffee -- everything looks better after three cups. He stands up, juggling his weight from foot to foot, feeling the awakening customary pains. As he puts the kettle on, he is aware of the itchiness in his hand. Mosquitoes! His mouth twists in an ugly grin. If there is anything worse than mornings it is mosquitoes.

*He looks around, trying to spot the offenders. Instead, he meets the face of the clock hanging above the bookshelf. It says ten-thirty. His mind rushes ahead through the day's schedule, already dreading every minute of it: lunch with the editor, dropping the laundry at mother's, six hour night-shift at *Glamo's* -what a ridiculous name: *Glamo's**

*The kettle hisses at last. A hint of sunlight crawls into the room. A hard rain's gonna fall. He opens the fridge *What happens in fridges at night?* and realizes there is no milk.*

No milk? Ramiro's gaze desperately searches the shelves.

No. No milk. You and your stoned midnight Milo's.

Now he has to get dressed, go to the shops, face the world, the sunlight, however dim, the footpath, the faces. Strategy and cool-headedness are needed, and he feels like shit. Coffee for Ramiro is the alchemist's potion, the magic beverage with the power to transform beastly into human, clay into Golem, shit into precarious human form. But the crucial ingredient is missing: Milk.

Ramiro sighs and slams the fridge-door close. One day he will drink coffee straight, like a real man. After a moment's deliberation, he sails decidedly towards his clothes waiting in a bundle next to the bed.

At that moment, a buzzing sound shoots past his left ear. He jumps up and tries to catch the insect's trajectory across the room. Grabbing a magazine at random (an old issue of *Writer's Digest*), he rolls it into a suitable weapon and set cautiously towards the window where the mosquito has settled, entertaining hopeless dreams of escape.

SPLAT!

He finishes getting dressed and leaves. But as soon as he has closed the door behind him, Ramiro feels a compelling force warning him to stay. He hangs there for a moment, then starts his way down the short flight of stairs, waving those bad thoughts away.

The street receives him. The air is heavy, the traffic dull and hesitant. He crosses the avenue, avoiding people. Not that there are many, but they look human enough to remind Ramiro of his inescapable destiny as part of the species. And that, without coffee, is unbearable.

It is not until he reaches the corner and is about to turn towards the shops that he realizes something is wrong.

It begins as he wills his trunk to turn left, one of those habitual, automated movements one hardly pays any attention to. His feet would follow and then the rest of his body.

However, his trunk disobeys. And his feet continue their inexorable course in a straight line, regardless of his efforts to make them turn left.

Ramiro struggles. It feels as if a huge magnetic claw has closed over him and is directing his limbs. His body has never rebelled like this before. An oncoming heart-attack? Sudden dementia? His muscles twitch, his forehead begins massive cold sweat production. His feet thump down below, left, right, left, right, crossing the street now, automatically avoiding vehicles and other bodies.

He tries to scream, to reach out and ask those faces for help or compassion. Behind the dark glasses, his eyes are wide pools of terror.

Then the voice blares into his head:

"Do not try to resist, Ramiro. You are now my prisoner. Trust me, I intend no harm. I'm sorry that things have to be this way. But you will understand everything in due course."

Now the panic began. A thousand dreadful acronyms flashed through his head: CIA, UFOs, KKK... An experiment? his organs? genetics? something he has involuntarily stumbled upon in his books? No... Those kind of things don't happen in the real world, least of all to him.

From the heights of his imprisoned mind, he watches helplessly as his body turns into a deserted alleyway and approaches an equally empty car-park. As he gets closer, Ramiro discerns where his captors are taking him. The front door of a red VW van opens and his steps set decidedly towards it.

He thinks of his flat, of his books, his mother, the streets and his friends. He waves it all goodbye. It wouldn't be smoking after all. Not even a decent car crash. He is dying to cry, but They are not allowing him that.

The man sitting at the wheel smiles with obvious pride and satisfaction. He is old and skinny, but something in his complexion tells Ramiro the frail exterior is deceit. His hair is white as milk and his cheeks hollow like craters. Ramiro watches himself stepping into the front seat and closing the door.

"Good," the man says, fingering what looks like a TV remote control. He turns to Ramiro: "I know this is a bit... unusual. But there'll be plenty of time to talk. My sincere apologies, by the way." His voice is calm, a trifle hoarse. The man sounds educated, a bit pompous even. Who the hell is he? He looks neither like a government agent nor an evil galactic invader. But, then again, you can never tell with that kind of people.

A hypodermic appears in the old man's hands. His eyes regard Ramiro questioningly, almost sadly. *No*. He feels the needle sink into his arm and a cold rush pouring in through his veins. The man turns the ignition.

The world is an unendurable blaze before everything dissolves into blackness, like a light-bulb bursting.

Once upon a time the boxes had been silent universes filled with mute and forgetful creatures, beings incapable of consciousness or insight. His job had been easy in those days, just record deaths, births and the occasional mutation with prospects.

Dr Alfoen drags the box to the incinerator and opens the heavy lid. Something inside is beginning to stink pretty badly. But that's the way things go. Some universes die, some prosper and develop in strange and amusing ways.

He believes that one day the experiments will end. Then he will apply for a promotion. Design. Dr Alfoen wants to work in Design. His private notebooks overflow with imaginary creatures, prototypes for vast machines, one-sided space-times and many other things aching for existence. Surely, they had knocked his ideas back. "Too baroque," they said, patting him away. "We will see."

But one day he will show them. Oh yes he will.

Ramiro's awakening is sluggish and painful. His eyes open to the view of a valley. The soil is dark red and the sky a twilight orange. Reticent shrubbery has popped up in the dry interstices and colossal rocks sit in the distance like sleeping Brontosauruses. His stomach aches. Despite the surge of energy and animal fear, Ramiro can't lift his heavy limbs off the armchair. But his neck is free, and he rolls his head to inspect the surroundings.

Heavy red velvet curtains flank the ample bay window. A porcelain cup on a silver tray and a kettle wait on a stylish glass table near his feet. The small dimensions of the room and the unfamiliarity of the landscape are making him slightly claustrophobic. The walls are covered in diagrams and blueprints of skies, astronomical charts, topographic and tectonic maps, complex graphs of what look like magnetic currents, other things Ramiro cannot identify. Along the wall, glass cabinets are filled with 3D models of interlocking spheres, molecular designs and odd miniature machines.

A few moments later, he hears footsteps nearing. The man who walks into the room is stocky and has martial arts written all over him. Wearing a dark violet three-piece suit that does not settle too well on his simian features, the man gazes at Ramiro for a long time. There is no animosity in his face, no anger, no sorrow, not even a sense of duty.

Come on, moron! What do you want from me? He wants to scream.

As if for an answer, two more people enter the room with calm and unhurried movements and take positions besides the man. They all wear the same dark violet three-piece suits and stare at Ramiro with the same expression --or the same lack of it.

What's more, they all have the same face. An uncanny effect, as if watching a trick with mirrors. He looks again, one face at a time, incredulously. Is he hallucinating? Is this some kind of practical joke?

At that moment the old man emerges through the door, remote control in hand. He approaches with difficulty – his legs seem partly paralysed-- and sits in the couch opposite him. His eyes search Ramiro apprehensively.

"At last we meet, Yrigoyen," he says after an interminable silence. "First, let me introduce myself. My name is Schonholz, Albert Schonholz. I am a scientist, formally trained in physics. I am also your number one fan. I wish the circumstances were different, Ramiro, but in these issues we, mere mortals, have little or no choice.

"I realize you must be hungry, scared and tired, so I'll be straight with you."

From a pocket, the man produces a handful of photographs, which he spreads neatly on the table, like cards in a solitaire game. "I have a proposition to offer. If you refuse, we'll return you safely home, after doing a bit of cleaning up around your memory, of course."

He laughs. The laugh is youthful and good-humored, and it takes Ramiro by surprise.

“On the other hand, Ramiro, if you decide to take my challenge, as I know you will, you'll become the subject of the most significant experiment in the history of science. I realize you must have heard this before countless times. But this time I am afraid it is true.

“If you accept, Ramiro, you will be the first man to travel to the Beyond. To Heaven, outside the wheel of rebirth, whatever you want to call it. I will send you into the infinite and bring you back to tell the tale. Who knows, you might meet God face to face and put an end to the ancient debate. But, please, do not take my word for it. I am an atheist, same as you. The gate to this ‘higher reality’ exists for us at a point in space and time. It is—how can I explain it?—a sort of logical necessity, or counterbalance to our mortal world here. It is possible to visit it by wearing a suit that preserves the dimensional conditions our bodies inhabit. See these pictures? I sent a robot probe there.”

Ramiro looks closely at the pictures. They show blurred stains of light, mainly in warm colors like orange and yellow, but also electric blues and blacks. Some shapes can be made out, some of which are recognizably human.

“The robot’s internal clock stopped as soon as it hit the Breach, and resumed the moment it returned. By the end of your short holiday here, I’ll have shown you enough proof that the Breach that links this Earthly level with the Beyond exists, and that I have discovered it.”

The old man is growing agitated. He stops to recover his breath. “A space-time breach. It intersects the Earth's path roughly every seventeen years.”

He presses a button in the control. Ramiro feels something distend and give way; the upper part of his body has been released.

"Let me go!" Ramiro shrills, throwing his head around wildly.

"Not so fast; you want to give the issue some consideration..."

"Fuck off! This is some kind of joke, right? It's gotta be... You old fucking nutcase! Get me out of here!"

Anger dawns on Schonholz's features, transforming his face entirely. He rises abruptly and slaps Ramiro on the face. Astonished, Ramiro looks up at the man, his mouth frozen in a big 'O'. He glances at the bodyguards, who have not moved in the least.

"Only a man of immeasurable foolishness would reject the treasure I'm laying before you."

The old man fixes his gaze on Ramiro and begins to recite: *"I will never reach you / core of unimaginable sanctity / their crazy fingers of air / weaving this theatre of shadows / spinning the blinding thread."*

Schonholz takes a hand to his chest, as if to harness the old beating of his heart. He clears his throat and waits for Ramiro's glint of recognition before speaking again:

"With an explosion loud enough / we'll break through / me and you / let's conceive it now / warming up in our bellies / the antidote for this tired cardboard nemesis / these walls / they are not real / these feelings / they are not real / behind the charade / Sophia entices me / and Time has stopped in the Heavenly Cabaret."

Speechless, Ramiro lowers his head. It is then that it dawns on him: This is no joke.

Schonholz shoots him an angry glare. "Your poems, Ramiro. They poems convinced me you are the man for the job. I remember reading your first novel, *Boulevard Ghosts*, ten

years ago. By then, I was well on the path to finding the Breach. That book really got to me. Lisa's feeling of standing still and the sky being transparent, letting her glimpse something beyond, a face. Then, your descriptions of the city, the false existence into which we have been plunged. The whole book just *oozes* with the mood! I remember I felt so close to you then... You intuitively know what the mystics knew, what has taken me years of investigation to find out."

Schonholz leans over him, his eyes leaping out at him. "The world is a lie, Ramiro, a composite lie of our senses. Something in the cosmic scheme has gone wrong somewhere, don't ask me what. Maybe the collective activity of our minds has created a projection, a monster that is now well beyond our control. Or maybe God is crazy -- whatever the case, the result is the same. Death, entropy, time, flesh: they now rule the universe, a universe that is nearing destruction at an ever increasing speed... Destruction? Worse than destruction! It will go on living, but as an insubstantial, dead simulacrum, all the blood dried up. Like a tomato in the sun. Think about it, Yrigoyen! The greatest poets, philosophers and mythologies have known this for centuries, they all have tried to express it in some way or other."

With a heavy sigh, Schonholz drops into the armchair. His words seem to have exhausted him. He presses a button on the remote and the clones walk out through the door in an orderly file. Ramiro is released. Astonished, he opens and closes his hands, testing them.

For a long time, the room is immersed in a comatose silence. Then, Ramiro speaks: "I always dreamed that I got away." The words jolt the old scientist out of his stupor. "I always dreamed that somehow there was a way of freely accessing other universes, of

mastering time and our bodies, of transcending this life and this flesh." He raised his head; his eyes glowed faintly. "But you haven't convinced me yet."

Schonholz stands up: "Follow me."

Ramiro obeys. Before he has time to ask himself what he is doing, he is walking behind the scientist through a long corridor of low ceilings. A sober, late colonial style; a remodeled old villa. There seems to be no end to the doors and intersecting passages.

Finally, they stop at a door like all the others. Schonholz fumbles through a set of keys and opens it. Ramiro enters first.

A glass dome crowns the vast dimensions of the room. The walls are smooth, ghostly white, curving slightly as they reach the ceiling.

It doesn't take him long to locate the machine Schonholz intends for the journey into the Breach. It hangs from the ceiling at the center of the room, reminiscent of a samurai full-body armor of ancient China, except the helmet looks pretty high-tech. A pair of large folded wings protrude from the back, made of multilayered membranes of a fragile gold material; a mutant butterfly, glimmering in lively rainbows. The suit has been threaded from a substance that feels to the touch like silver or lead, but Ramiro suspects it is neither. A small control box with two mobile handles is attached to its chest. The armour is a beautiful piece of work, and Ramiro catches himself imagining how it would fit his body, how weightlessness would feel like.

He raises his hand and caresses the fabric. His fingers brush the dials of the control-box. He looks up at the night sky through the glass ceiling and wonders what the Breach would look like.

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

Schonholz is standing at the doorway. His body seemed to hang uncertainly between the corridor and the room's space. A pale hand holds on to the edge of the door. Through the distance, the scientist's eyes glisten like a caged animal's. He has seen that look before, and realizes Schonholz is an agoraphobic.

Without being aware of it, Ramiro has already decided he would do it. He will fly through the Breach and find out once and for all.

Dr Alfoen remembers the time when all this stuff began to pour out of one of the boxes. The civilization in that box had extinguished itself in a great war, leaving behind a race of machines that could not stop producing. They produced and produced and eventually the stuff – any shit, match-boxes, rubber dolls, digital watches, aeroplanes, chocolate bars, prosthetic legs – filled the entire cosmos and poured into his lab. Naturally, they had to send the whole thing to the incinerator, and for weeks afterwards you'd find something on the floor or in a drawer and in the corners.

But now the boxes have no surprises. Oh yes, Dr Alfoen knows all about their little tricks, all about their stoic cunningness. The dwellers in the boxes hardly hold any secrets anymore.

"At every moment, time stutters and the infinite opens before us, or more accurately, inside us. Unhinged voids haunt the spaces between heartbeats. Reality is forever tottering at the brink of self-forgetfulness and new beginning."

Ramiro stands at the edge of the cliff facing the immensity, listening to the scientist's words. Violent winds rise in clashing directions. His heart is thumping furiously. No, he hasn't expect it to be so... so... *grand*. Obviously God has a Big Budget.

The sky is darkening, the daylight retreating hurriedly over the ranges. Ramiro has been following the progress of what has started as a soup of blackness and is now a tumultuous cloud that changes color and spins like a sea-vortex. Ramiro feels small, defenceless, scared, all the standard human emotions when faced with things like this. But he is here to overcome it, to overcome himself and the accursed infinite, to see if those kingdoms of light prophesized by so many lunatics have some basis in fact.

Schonholz has told him not to worry, that he would enter an atmosphere of total calm within a few miles of the Breach. The flying-machine had to be as small as possible to do the job. The armour, propulsor and wings are the perfect solution.

The scientist's voice comes through the intercom : *"Do you see it? Do you see it, Yrigoyen?"*.

"Of course I see it; it's the size of a country. What shall I tell God, doctor?"

"Tell Him to get fucked."

"Wow, you know? I can't believe I'm doing this..."

"Remember: Let the vortex swallow you. Pass right through the center. There won't be another Breach for seventeen years. Start flying low now, in circles and gaining altitude, as you did before."

Ramiro does as told. In the weeks of training, he has become used to the machine, but this is different now. This is for real. He finds it hard to stop his hands from

trembling. The Beyond is breathing on his neck. Below, the landscape is haunted by the enormous riot in the sky.

“Communication will be lost soon.” Ramiro can feel the emotions coming through the man's voice. *“Good luck, Ramiro. The whole of humanity is now with you.”*

Ramiro takes a deep breath. Naked horizon opens at every side, Earth laying boundless, yet imprisoned. Night charges, the Breach roars.

Ramiro ascends.

Dr Alfven has another thoughtful swig from his bottle. He has lots of time in his hands nowadays, and he spends it wondering about things. Sometimes, for example, he wonders if the whole universe he inhabits isn't in turn another box, and if some scientist immensely larger than him isn't at this very moment inspecting his movements and writing down his reactions. Even looking down at his thoughts.

Hang on a minute... What is that? For a second there is a wild hope that something has screwed up in one of the universes – now that'll give him something to think about! He stands up and inspects the space before him. But it is only a damned mosquito, he realizes, disillusioned. I thought we had got rid of them. How he hates the buzzing bloodsuckers. And look at it, how it plunges towards the light-bulb and whirls around the sickly radiance in such tiny joy.

Dr Alfven waves at the insect. Violent currents of air are born, casting Ramiro backwards. He flies in circles, trying to steady his course, and finally settles on a vast field presided by a burning sun. A desert, thinks Ramiro. A landscape of nothingness. Jeez, maybe Sartre was right.

Dr Alfoen stares at the mosquito absentmindedly. He thinks for a few moments of the gigantic scientist who is looking down at him right now, very much the same way he is looking down at this mosquito right now.

He shakes those ideas away – it's not good to think about those things. They interfere with his work.

He raises a hand.



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