

GREG BEAR\_\_\_\_\_.

## Tangents

**T**he nut-brown boy stood in the California field, his Asian face shadowed by a hard hat, his short, stocky frame clothed in a T-shirt and a pair of brown shorts. He squinted across the hip-high grass at the spraddled old two-story ranch house, and then he whistled a few bars from a Haydn piano sonata. Out of the upper floor of the house came a man's high, frustrated "bloody hell!" and the sound of a fist slamming on a solid surface. Silence for a minute. Then, more softly, a woman's question: "Not going well?"

"No. I'm swimming in it, but I don't see it."

"The encryption?" the woman asked timidly.

"The tesseract. If it doesn't gel, it isn't aspic."

The boy squatted in the grass and listened.

"And?" the woman encouraged.

"Ah, Lauren, it's still cold broth."

The conversation stopped. The boy lay back in the grass, aware he was on private land. He had crept over the split-rail and brick-pylon fence from the new housing project across the road. School was out, and his mother—adoptive mother—did not like him around the house all day. Or at all.

He closed his eyes and imagined a huge piano keyboard and himself dancing on the keys, tapping out the Oriental-sounding D-minor scale, which suited his origins, he thought. He loved music.

He opened his eyes and saw the thin, graying lady in a tweed suit leaning over him, staring down with her brows knit.

"You're on private land," she said.

He scrambled up and brushed grass from his pants. "Sorry."

"I thought I saw someone out here. What's your name?"

"Pal," he replied.

"Is that a name?" she asked querulously.

"Pal Tremont. It's not my real name. I'm Korean."

"Then what's your real name?"

"My folks told me not to use it anymore. I'm adopted. Who are you?"

The gray woman looked him up and down. "My name is Lauren Davies," she said. "You live near here?"

He pointed across the fields at the close-packed tract homes.

"I sold the land for those homes ten years ago," she said. "I don't normally enjoy children trespassing."

"Sorry," Pal said.

"Have you had lunch?"

"No."

"Will a grilled cheese sandwich do?"

He squinted at her and nodded.

In the broad, red-brick and tile kitchen, sitting at an oak table with his shoulders barely rising above the top, he ate the mildly charred sandwich and watched Lauren Davies watching him.

"I'm trying to write about a child," she said. "It's difficult. I'm a spinster and I don't know children well."

"You're a writer?" he asked, taking a swallow of milk.

She sniffed. "Not that anyone would know."

"Is that your brother, upstairs?"

"No," she said. "That's Peter. We've been living together for twenty years."

"But you said you're a spinster—isn't that someone who's never married or never loved?" Pal asked.

"Never married. And never you mind. Peter's relationship to me is none of your concern." She put together a tray with a bowl of soup and a tuna-salad sandwich. "His lunch," she said. Without being asked, Pal trailed up the stairs after her.

"This is where Peter works," Lauren explained. Pal stood in the doorway, eyes wide. The room was filled with electronics gear, computer terminals, and industrial-gray shelving with odd cardboard sculptures sharing each level, along with books and circuit boards. She put the lunch tray on top of a cart, resting precariously on a box of floppy disks.

"Still having trouble?" she asked a thin man with his back turned toward them.

The man turned around on his swivel chair, glanced briefly at Pal, then at the lunch, and shook his head. The hair on top of his head was a rich, glossy black; on the close-cut sides, the color changed abruptly to a bright, fake-looking white. He had a small, thin nose and large green eyes. On the desk before him was a computer monitor. "We haven't been introduced," he said, pointing to Pal.

"This is Pal Tremont, a neighborhood visitor. Pal, this is Peter Tuthy. Pal's going to help me with that character we discussed."

Pal looked at the monitor curiously. Red and green lines went through some incomprehensible transformation on the screen, then repeated.

"What's a tesseract?" Pal asked, remembering the words he had heard through the window as he stood in the field.

"It's a four-dimensional analog of a cube. I'm trying to find a way to teach myself to see it in my mind's eye," Tuthy said. "Have you ever tried that?"

"No," Pal admitted.

"Here," Tuthy said, handing him the spectacles. "As in the movies."

Pal donned the spectacles and stared at the screen. "So?" he said. "It folds and unfolds. It's pretty—it sticks out at you, and then it goes away." He looked around the workshop. "Oh, wow!" In the east corner of the room a framework of aluminum pipes—rather like a plumber's dream of an easel—supported a long, disembodied piano keyboard mounted in a slim, black case. The boy ran to the keyboard. "A Tronclavier! With all the switches! My mother had me take piano lessons, but I'd rather learn on this. Can you play it?"

"I toy with it," Tuthy said, exasperated. "I toy with all sorts of electronic things. But what did you see on the screen?" He glanced up at Lauren, blinking. "I'll eat the food, I'll eat it. Now please don't bother us."

"He's supposed to be helping *me*," Lauren complained.

Peter smiled at her. "Yes, of course. I'll send him downstairs in a little while."

When Pal descended an hour later, he came into the kitchen to

thank Lauren for lunch. "Peter's a real flake. He's trying to see certain directions."

"I know," Lauren said, sighing.

"I'm going home now," Pal said. "I'll be back, though . . . if it's all right with you. Peter invited me."

"I'm sure that it will be fine," Lauren replied dubiously.

"He's going to let me learn the Tronclavier." With that, Pal smiled radiantly and exited through the kitchen door.

When she retrieved the tray, she found Peter leaning back in his chair, eyes closed. The figures on the screen patiently folded and unfolded, cubes continuously passing through one another.

"What about Hockrum's work?" she asked.

"I'm on it," Peter replied, eyes still closed.

Lauren called Pal's adoptive mother on the second day to apprise them of their son's location, and the woman assured her it was quite all right. "Sometimes he's a little pest. Send him home if he causes trouble—but not right away! Give me a rest," she said, then laughed nervously.

Lauren drew her lips together tightly, thanked her and hung up.

Peter and the boy had come downstairs to sit in the kitchen, filling up paper with line drawings. "Peter's teaching me how to use his program," Pal said.

"Did you know," Tuthy said, assuming his highest Cambridge professorial tone, "that a cube, intersecting a flat plane, can be cut through a number of geometrically different cross sections?"

Pal squinted at the sketch Tuthy had made. "Sure," he said.

"If shoved through the plane, the cube can appear, to a two-dimensional creature living on the plane—let's call him a Flatlander—to be either a triangle, a rectangle, a trapezoid, a rhombus, or a square. If the two-dimensional being observes the cube being pushed through all the way, what he sees is one or more of these objects growing larger, changing shape suddenly, shrinking, and disappearing."

"Sure," Pal said, tapping his sneakered toe. "It's easy. Like in that book you showed me."

"And a sphere pushed through a plane would appear to the hapless Flatlander first as an *invisible* point (the two-dimensional surface touching the sphere, tangential), then as a circle. The circle would grow in size, then shrink back to a point and disappear



again." He sketched the stick figures, looking in awe at the intrusion.

"Got it," Pal said. "Can I play with the Tronclavier now?"

"In a moment. Be patient. So what would a tesseract look like, coming into our three-dimensional space? Remember the program, now—the pictures on the monitor."

Pal looked up at the ceiling. "I don't know," he said, seeming bored.

"Try to think," Tuthy urged him.

"It would . . ." Pal held his hands out to shape an angular object. "It would look like one of those Egyptian things, but with three sides . . . or like a box. It would look like a weird-shaped box, too, not square."

"And if we turned the tesseract around?"

The doorbell rang. Pal jumped off the kitchen chair. "Is that my mom?"

"I don't think so," Lauren said. "More likely it's Hockrum." She went to the front door to answer. She returned with a small, pale man behind her. Tuthy stood and shook the man's hand. "Pal Tremont, this is Irving Hockrum," he introduced, waving his hand between them. Hockrum glanced at Pal and blinked a long, not-very-mammalian blink.

"How's the work coming?" he asked Tuthy.

"It's finished," Tuthy said. "It's upstairs. Looks like your savants are barking up the wrong logic tree." He retrieved a folder of papers and printouts and handed them to Hockrum.

Hockrum leafed through the printouts.

"I can't say this makes me happy," he said. "Still, I can't find fault. Looks like the work is up to your usual brilliant standards. I just wish you'd had it to us sooner. It would have saved me some grief—and the company quite a bit of money."

"Sorry," Tuthy said nonchalantly.

"Now I have an important bit of work for you. . . ." And Hockrum outlined another problem. Tuthy thought it over for several minutes and shook his head.

"Most difficult, Irving. Pioneering work there. It would take at least a month to see if it's even feasible."

"That's all I need to know for now—whether it's feasible. A lot's riding on this, Peter." Hockrum clasped his hands together in front

of him, looking even more pale and worn than when he had entered the kitchen. "You'll let me know soon?"

"I'll get right on it," Tuthy said.

"Protégé?" he asked, pointing to Pal. There was a speculative expression on his face, not quite a leer.

"No, a friend. He's interested in music," Tuthy said. "Damned good at Mozart, in fact."

"I help with his tesseracts," Pal asserted.

"Congratulations," Hockrum said. "I hope you don't interrupt Peter's work. Peter's work is important."

Pal shook his head solemnly. "Good," Hockrum said, and then left the house to take the negative results back to his company.

Tuthy returned to his office, Pal in train. Lauren tried to work in the kitchen, sitting with fountain pen and pad of paper, but the words wouldn't come. Hockrum always worried her. She climbed the stairs and stood in the doorway of the office. She often did that; her presence did not disturb Tuthy, who could work under all sorts of conditions.

"Who was that man?" Pal was asking Tuthy.

"I work for him," Tuthy said. "He's employed by a very big electronics firm. He loans me most of the equipment I use here—the computers, the high-resolution monitors. He brings me problems and then takes my solutions back to his bosses and claims he did the work."

"That sounds stupid," Pal said. "What kind of problems?"

"Codes, encryptions. Computer security. That was my expertise, once."

"You mean, like fencerail, that sort of thing?" Pal asked, face brightening. "We learned some of that in school."

"Much more complicated, I'm afraid," Tuthy said, grinning. "Did you ever hear of the German 'Enigma,' or the 'Ultra' project?"

Pal shook his head.

"I thought not. Don't worry about it. Let's try another figure on the screen now." He called up another routine on the four-space program and sat Pal before the screen. "So what would a hypersphere look like if it intruded into our space?"

Pal thought a moment. "Kind of weird."

"Not really. You've been watching the visualizations."

"Oh, in *our* space. That's easy. It just looks like a balloon, blow-

ing up from nothing and then shrinking again. It's harder to see what a hypersphere looks like when it's real. Reft of us, I mean."

"Reft?" Tuthy said.

"Sure. Reft and light. Dup and owwen. Whatever the directions are called."

Tuthy stared at the boy. Neither of them had noticed Lauren in the doorway. "The proper terms are *ana* and *kata*," Tuthy said. "What does it look like?"

Pal gestured, making two wide swings with his arms. "It's like a ball, and it's like a horseshoe, depending on how you look at it. Like a balloon stung by bees, I guess, but it's smooth all over, not lumpy."

Tuthy continued to stare, then asked quietly, "You actually see it?"

"Sure," Pal said. "Isn't that what your program is supposed to do—make you see things like that?"

Tuthy nodded, flabbergasted.

"Can I play the Tronclavier now?"

Lauren backed out of the doorway. She felt she had eavesdropped on something momentous but beyond her. Tuthy came downstairs an hour later, leaving Pal to pick out Telemann on the keyboard. He sat at the kitchen table with her. "The program works," he said. "It doesn't work for me, but it works for him. He's a bloody natural." Tuthy seldom used such language. He was clearly awed. "I've just been showing him reverse-shadow figures. There's a way to have at least a sensation of seeing something rotated through the fourth dimension. Those hollow masks they use at Disneyland . . . seem to reverse in and out, depending on the lighting? Crater pictures from the moon—resemble hills instead of holes? That's what Pal calls the reversed images—hills and holes."

"And what's special about them?"

"Well, if you go along with the game and make the hollow faces seem to reverse and poke out at you, that is similar to rotating them in the fourth dimension. The features seem to reverse left and right—right eye becomes left eye, and so on. He caught on right away, and then he went off and played Haydn. He's gone through all my sheet music. The kid's a genius."

"Musical, you mean?"

He glanced directly at her and frowned. "Yes, I suppose he's

remarkable at that, too. But spatial relations—coordinates and motion in a higher dimension. . . . Did you know that if you take a three-dimensional object and rotate it in the fourth dimension, it will come back with left-right reversed? There is no fixed left-right in the fourth dimension. So if I were to take my hand—” He held up his right hand, “and lift it *dup*—or drop it *owwen*, it would come back like this?” He held his left hand over his right, balled the right up into a fist, and snuck it away behind his back.

“I didn’t know that,” Lauren said. “What are *dup* and *owwen*?”

“That’s what Pal calls movement along the fourth dimension. *Ana* and *kata* to purists. Like up and down to a Flatlander, who only comprehends left and right, back and forth.”

She thought about the hands for a moment. “I still can’t see it,” she said.

“Neither can I,” Tuthy admitted. “Our circuits are just too hard-wired, I suppose.”

Pal had switched the Tronclavier to a cathedral organ and wah-guitar combination and was playing variations on Pergolesi.

“Are you going to keep working for Hockrum?” Lauren asked. Tuthy didn’t seem to hear her.

“It’s remarkable,” he murmured. “The boy just walked in here. You brought him in by accident. Remarkable.”

“Do you think you can show me the direction—point it out to me?” Tuthy asked the boy three days later.

“None of my muscles move that way,” he replied. “I can see it, in my head, but . . .”

“What is it like, seeing it? That direction?”

Pal squinted. “It’s a lot bigger. Where we live is sort of stacked up with other places. It makes me feel lonely.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m stuck here. Nobody out there pays any attention to us.”

Tuthy’s mouth worked. “I thought you were just intuiting those directions in your head. Are you telling me you’re actually *seeing* out there?”

“Yeah. There’s people out there, too. Well, not people, exactly. But it isn’t my eyes that see them. Eyes are like muscles—they can’t point those ways. But the head—the brain, I guess—can.”

“Bloody hell,” Tuthy said. He blinked and recovered. “Excuse



me. That's rude. Can you show me the people . . . on the screen?"

"Shadows, like we were talking about."

"Fine. Then draw the shadows for me."

Pal sat down before the terminal, fingers pausing over the keys.

"I can show you, but you have to help me with something."

"Help you with what?"

"I'd like to play music for them—out there. So they'll notice us."

"The people?"

"Yeah. They look really weird. They stand on us, sort of. They have hooks in our world. But they're tall . . . high dup. They don't notice us because we're so small, compared with them."

"Lord, Pal, I haven't the slightest idea how we'd send music out to them. . . . I'm not even sure I believe they exist."

"I'm not lying," Pal said, eyes narrowing. He turned his chair to face a "mouse" perched on a black ruled pad and used it to sketch shapes on the monitor. "Remember, these are just shadows of what they look like. Next I'll draw the dup and owwen lines to connect the shadows."

The boy shaded the shapes to make them look solid, smiling at his trick but explaining it was necessary because the projection of a four-dimensional object in normal space was, of course, three dimensional.

"They look like you take the plants in a garden and give them lots of arms and fingers . . . and it's kind of like seeing things in an aquarium," Pal explained.

After a time, Tuthy suspended his disbelief and stared in open-mouthed wonder at what the boy was re-creating on the monitor.

"I think you're wasting your time, that's what I think," Hockrum said. "I needed that feasibility judgment by today." He paced around the living room before falling as heavily as his light frame permitted into a chair.

"I *have* been distracted," Tuthy admitted.

"By that boy?"

"Yes, actually. Quite a talented fellow."

"Listen, this is going to mean a lot of trouble for me. I guaranteed the judgment would be made by today. It'll make me look bad." Hockrum screwed up his face in frustration. "What in hell are you doing with that boy?"

"Teaching him, actually. Or rather, he's teaching me. Right now,

we're building a four-dimensional cone, part of a speaker system. The cone is three dimensional—the material part—but the magnetic field forms a fourth-dimensional extension."

"Did you ever think how it looks, Peter?"

"It looks very strange on the monitor, I grant you—"

"I'm talking about you and the boy."

Tuthy's bright, interested expression fell slowly into long, deep-lined dismay. "I don't know what you mean."

"I know a lot about you, Peter. Where you come from, why you had to leave. . . . It just doesn't look good."

Tuthy's face flushed crimson.

"Keep him away," Hockrum advised.

Tuthy stood. "I want you out of this house," he said quietly. "Our relationship is at an end."

"I swear," Hockrum said, his voice low and calm, staring up at Tuthy from under his brows, "I'll tell the boy's parents. Do you think they'd want their kid hanging around an old—pardon the expression—queer? I'll tell them if you don't get the feasibility judgment made. I think you can do it by the end of this week—two days. Don't you?"

"No, I don't think so." Tuthy said softly. "Leave."

"I know you're here illegally. There's no record of you entering the country. With the problems you had in England, you're certainly not a desirable alien. I'll pass word to the INS. You'll be deported."

"There isn't time to do the work," Tuthy said.

"Make time. Instead of 'educating' that kid."

"Get out of here."

"Two days, Peter."

Over dinner, Tuthy explained to Lauren the exchange he had had with Hockrum. "He thinks I'm bugging Pal. Unspeakable bastard. I will never work for him again."

"I'd better talk to a lawyer, then," Lauren said. "You're sure you can't make him . . . happy, stop all this trouble?"

"I could solve his little problem for him in just a few hours. But I don't want to see him or speak to him again."

"He'll take your equipment away."

Tuthy blinked and waved one hand through the air helplessly.

"Then we'll just have to work fast, won't we? Ah, Lauren, you were a fool to bring me over here. You should have left me to rot."

"They ignored everything you did for them," Lauren said bitterly. She stared through the kitchen window at the overcast sky and woods outside. "You saved their hides during the war, and then . . . they would have shut you up in prison."

The cone lay on the table near the window, bathed in morning sun, connected to both the minicomputer and the Tronclavier. Pal arranged the score he had composed on a music stand before the synthesizer. "It's like a Bach canon," he said, "but it'll play better for them. It has a kind of counterpoint or over-rhythm that I'll play on the dup part of the speaker."

"Why are we doing this, Pal?" Tuthy asked as the boy sat down to the keyboard.

"You don't belong here, really, do you, Peter?" Pal asked. Tuthy stared at him.

"I mean, Miss Davies and you get along okay—but do you belong *here*, now?"

"What makes you think I don't belong?"

"I read some books in the school library. About the war and everything. I looked up *Enigma* and *Ultra*. I found a fellow named Peter Thornton. His picture looked like you but younger. The books made him seem like a hero."

Tuthy smiled wanly.

"But there was this note in one book. You disappeared in 1965. You were being prosecuted for something. They didn't even mention what it was you were being prosecuted for."

"I'm a homosexual," Tuthy said quietly.

"Oh. So what?"

"Lauren and I met in England, in 1964. They were going to put me in prison, Pal. We liked—love each other, so she smuggled me into the U.S. through Canada."

"But you're a homosexual. They don't like women."

"Not at all true, Pal. Lauren and I like each other very much. We could talk. She told me her dreams of being a writer, and I talked to her about mathematics and about the war. I nearly died during the war."

"Why? Were you wounded?"

"No. I worked too hard. I burned myself out and had a nervous breakdown. My lover . . . a man . . . kept me alive throughout the forties. Things were bad in England after the war. But he died in 1963. His parents came in to settle the estate, and when I contested the settlement in court, I was arrested." The lines on his face deepened, and he closed his eyes for a long moment. "I suppose I don't really belong here."

"I don't either. My folks don't care much. I don't have too many friends. I wasn't even born here, and I don't know anything about Korea."

"Play," Tuthy said, his face stony. "Let's see if they'll listen."

"Oh, they'll listen," Pal said. "It's like the way they talk to each other."

The boy ran his fingers over the keys on the Tronclavier. The cone, connected with the keyboard through the minicomputer, vibrated tinnily. For an hour, Pal paged back and forth through his composition, repeating passages and creating variations. Tuthy sat in a corner, chin in hand, listening to the mousy squeaks and squeals produced by the cone. *How much more difficult to interpret a four-dimensional sound*, he thought. *Not even visual clues*. Finally the boy stopped and wrung his hands, then stretched his arms. "They must have heard. We'll just have to wait and see." He switched the Tronclavier to automatic playback and pushed the chair away from the keyboard.

Pal stayed until dusk, then reluctantly went home. Tuthy stood in the office until midnight, listening to the tinny sounds issuing from the speaker cone. There was nothing more he could do. He ambled down the hall to his bedroom, shoulders slumped.

All night long the Tronclavier played through its preprogrammed selection of Pal's compositions. Tuthy lay in bed in his room, two doors down from Lauren's room, watching a shaft of moonlight slide across the wall. *How far would a four-dimensional being have to travel to get here?*

*How far have I come to get here?*

Without realizing he was asleep, he dreamed, and in his dream a wavering image of Pal appeared, gesturing with both arms as if swimming, eyes wide. *I'm okay*, the boy said without moving his lips. *Don't worry about me. . . . I'm okay. I've been back to Korea to see what it's like. It's not bad, but I like it better here. . . .*

\* \* \*



Tuthy awoke sweating. The moon had gone down, and the room was pitch-black. In the office, the hypercone continued its distant, mouse-squeak broadcast.

Pal returned early in the morning, whistling disjointed selections from Mozart's Fourth Violin Concerto. Lauren opened the front door for him, and he ran upstairs to join Tuthy. Tuthy sat before the monitor, replaying Pal's sketch of the four-dimensional beings.

"Do you see them now?" he asked the boy.

Pal nodded. "They're closer. They're interested. Maybe we should get things ready, you know—be prepared." He squinted. "Did you ever think what a four-dimensional footprint would look like?"

Tuthy considered this for a moment. "That would be most interesting," he said. "It would be solid."

On the first floor, Lauren screamed.

Pal and Tuthy almost tumbled over each other getting downstairs. Lauren stood in the living room with her arms crossed above her bosom, one hand clamped over her mouth. The first intrusion had taken out a section of the living-room floor and the east wall.

"Really clumsy," Pal said. "One of them must have bumped it."

"The music," Tuthy said.

"What in *hell* is going on?" Lauren queried, her voice starting as a screech and ending as a roar.

"You'd better turn the music off," Tuthy elaborated.

"Why?" Pal asked, face wreathed in an excited smile.

"Maybe they don't like it."

A bright, filmy blue blob rapidly expanded to a diameter of a yard beside Tuthy, wriggled, froze, then just as rapidly vanished.

"That was like an elbow," Pal explained. "One of its arms. I think it's trying to find out where the music is coming from. I'll go upstairs."

"Turn it off!" Tuthy demanded.

"I'll play something else." The boy ran up the stairs. From the kitchen came a hideous hollow crashing, then the sound of vacuum being filled—a reverse pop, ending in a hiss—followed by a low-frequency vibration that set their teeth on edge.

The vibration caused by a four-dimensional creature *scraping* across their three-dimensional "floor." Tuthy's hands shook with excitement.

"Peter!" Lauren bellowed, all dignity gone. She unwrapped her

arms and held clenched fists out as if she were ready to exercise or start boxing.

"Pal's attracted visitors," Tuthy explained.

He turned toward the stairs. The first four steps and a section of floor spun and vanished. The rush of air nearly drew him down the hole.

After regaining his balance, he kneeled to feel the precisely cut, concave edge. Below was the dark basement.

"Pal!" Tuthy called out. "Turn it *off*!"

"I'm playing something new for them," Pal shouted back. "I think they like it."

The phone rang. Tuthy was closest to the extension at the bottom of the stairs and instinctively reached out to answer. Hockrum was on the other end, screaming.

"I can't talk now—" Tuthy said. Hockrum screamed again, loud enough for Lauren to hear. Tuthy abruptly hung up. "He's been fired, I gather," he said. "He seemed angry." He stalked back three paces and turned, then ran forward and leapt the gap to the first intact step. "Can't talk." He stumbled and scrambled up the stairs, stopping on the landing. "Jesus," he said, as if something had suddenly occurred to him.

"He'll call the government," Lauren warned.

Tuthy waved that off. "I know what's happening. They're knocking chunks out of three-space, into the fourth. The fourth dimension. Like Pal says: clumsy brutes. They could kill us!"

Sitting before the Tronclavier, Pal happily played a new melody. Tuthy approached and was abruptly blocked by a thick green column, as solid as rock and with a similar texture. It vibrated and described an arc in the air. A section of the ceiling a yard wide was kicked out of three-space. Tuthy's hair lifted in the rush of wind. The column shrunk to a broomstick, and hairs sprouted all over it, writhing like snakes.

Tuthy edged around the hairy broomstick and pulled the plug on the Tronclavier. A cage of zeppelin-shaped brown sausages encircled the computer, spun, elongated to reach the ceiling, the floor, and the top of the monitor's table, and then pipped down to tiny strings and was gone.

"They can't see too clearly here," Pal said, undisturbed that his concert was over. Lauren had climbed the outside stairs and stood behind Tuthy. "Gee, I'm sorry about the damage."

In one smooth, curling motion, the Tronclavier and cone and all the wiring associated with them were peeled away as if they had been stick-on labels hastily removed from a flat surface.

"Gee," Pal said, his face suddenly registering alarm.

Then it was the boy's turn. He was removed more slowly, with greater care. The last thing to vanish was his head, which hung suspended in the air for several seconds.

"I think they liked the music," he said with a grin.

Head, grin and all, dropped away in a direction impossible for Tuthy or Lauren to follow. The room sucked air through the open door, then quietly sighed back to normal.

Lauren stood her ground for several minutes, while Tuthy wandered through what was left of the office, passing his hand through mussed hair.

"Perhaps he'll be back," Tuthy said. "I don't even know . . ." But he didn't finish. *Could a three-dimensional boy survive in a four-dimensional void, or whatever lay dup—or owwen?*

Tuthy did not object when Lauren took it upon herself to call the boy's foster parents and the police. When the police arrived, he endured the questions and accusations stoically, face immobile, and told them as much as he knew. He was not believed; nobody knew quite what to believe. Photographs were taken.

It was only a matter of time, Lauren told him, until one or the other or both of them were arrested. "Then we'll make up a story," he said. "You'll tell them it was my fault."

"I will *not*," Lauren said. "But where *is* he?"

"I'm not positive," Tuthy said. "I think he's all right, however."

"How do you know?"

He told her about the dream.

"But that was before," she said.

"Perfectly allowable in the fourth dimension," he explained. He pointed vaguely up, then down, then shrugged.

On the last day, Tuthy spent the early morning hours bundled in an overcoat and bathrobe in the drafty office, playing his program again and again, trying to visualize *ana* and *kata*. He closed his eyes and squinted and twisted his head, intertwined his fingers and drew odd little graphs on the monitors, but it was no use. His brain was hard-wired.

Over breakfast, he reiterated to Lauren that she must put all the blame on him.

"Maybe it will all blow over," she said. "They have no case. No evidence . . . nothing."

*All blow over*, he mused, passing his hand over his head and grinning ironically. *How over, they'll never know.*

The doorbell rang. Tuthy went to answer it, and Lauren followed a few steps behind.

Putting it all together later, she decided that subsequent events happened in the following order:

Tuthy opened the door. Three men in gray suits, one with a briefcase, stood on the porch. "Mr. Peter Tuthy?" the tallest asked.

"Yes," Tuthy acknowledged.

A chunk of the doorframe and wall above the door vanished with a roar and a hissing pop. The three men looked up at the gap. Ignoring what was impossible, the tallest man returned his attention to Tuthy and continued, "Sir, it's our duty to take you into custody. We have information that you are in this country illegally."

"Oh?" Tuthy said.

Beside him, an irregular, filmy blue blob grew to a length of four feet and hung in the air, vibrating. The three men backed away. In the middle of the blob, Pal's head emerged, and below that, his extended arm and hand. Tuthy leaned forward to study this apparition. Pal's fingers waggled at him.

"It's fun here," Pal said. "They're friendly."

"I believe you," Tuthy said calmly.

"Mr. Tuthy," the tallest man valiantly persisted, though his voice was a squeak.

"Won't you come with me?" Pal asked.

Tuthy glanced back at Lauren. She gave him a small fraction of a nod, barely understanding what she was assenting to, and he took Pal's hand. "Tell them it was all my fault," he said again.

From his feet to his head, Peter Tuthy was peeled out of this world. Air rushed in. Half of the brass lamp to one side of the door disappeared. The INS men returned to their car with damp pants and embarrassed, deeply worried expressions, and without any further questions. They drove away, leaving Lauren to contemplate the quiet.

She did not sleep for three nights, and when she did sleep, Tuthy and Pal visited her and put the question to her.



*Thank you, but I prefer it here,* she replied.

*It's a lot of fun,* the boy insisted. *They like music.*

Lauren shook her head on the pillow and awoke. Not very far away, there was a whistling, tinny kind of sound, followed by a deep vibration. To her, it sounded like applause.

She took a deep breath and got out of bed to retrieve her notebook.