Return of the Butterfly

The Fleur Trilogy, Book 3

by

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This book is a work of fiction. While some of the place names may be real, characters and incidents are the product of the author's imagination and are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to events or persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

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In memory of my mother, Ethel Karson.

These are the days that must happen to you…

Walt Whitman, "Song of the Open Road"

Chapter One 

ALMOST ANYWHERE YOU looked, the news was bad.

Honeybee colonies collapsing, school children killed in mass shootings, pesticides in breast milk, plastics strangling fish and fowl. Bigotry was blasting through the collective psyche like a cosmic flu, and western democracies were hemorrhaging. Too many claimed the sponsorship of one god or another to visit catastrophes upon places of worship, hospitals, concerts, marketplaces. And too many applauded their crimes, or used them for their own agendas, with unseemly enthusiasm. If, like me, you were of a scientific mind, you trembled at the mad race to release fossil fuels into a dangerously warming atmosphere. People popped mood lifters and anxiety quellers like candy, but there was no sugarcoating the state our species was in.

Gwennie had been pointing out for ages that the people of the earth had surrendered its bodies politic to sociopaths, its minds to meds and machines. This morning's offering was a particularly vehement variation on the theme. "The whole world's been bought off with hard and soft porn and glitzy gadgetry. Who can even form a complete, let alone original, thought with all these gizmos commandeering our attention? And so-called reality TV? Give me a break! That crap drains hearts and minds by the minute. Look at all the people who are prepared to vote for that man."

It was hard to argue. Naked bodies and naked greed were everywhere, but the naked soul stayed mostly hidden, mute, secret even to the bodies it inhabited. Some of Gwennie and Stanley's generation still croaked the old anthem, "All you need is love." But real sentiment these days seemed to be swirling down a drain composed of cynicism, denial, distraction, despair.

Yet I knew it wasn't for nothing that we humans, along with everything else the eye could discern (and all that it couldn't), were made of a great dusting of stars. Well, to be precise, dead stars. It was no less than the explosion of supernovas that swirled in a hummingbird's luminescent wing by a backyard bush. The rich blend of proteins, lipids, and nucleic acids expelled by a man relieving himself into his lover's tweeter and the copper-scented blood accompanying a baby's birth bore witness alike to the massive death throes of suns just like our own. Death begat life at every turn, and people still managed to survive grief, work hard, find humor, love, and—sometimes—a little meaning amid the static. Even as our species faced the all too real possibility of extinction, babies still got themselves born.

You'd think someone like yours truly, who'd been obsessed with the void since before she could speak and who'd funneled her fear into a fascination with science, would be able to maintain some

semblance of objectivity about life at the edge of the precipice. But there were more things in heaven and earth, tra la, tra la. I couldn't seem to rid myself of the conviction that a cosmic drama was taking place between darkness and light, that how we maneuvered this odd moment mattered, not only to us and the eight or so million life forms on our planet, but also to the vast web of superclusters, filaments, and voids in which Earth, like one of Indra's mirroring jewels, hung suspended. And that, like each of us, I had my own urgent part to play.

So we begin where any story begins, which is anywhere at all, in this case in a hospital room at a research facility optimistically dubbed City of Hope, where one of my favorite people in the world struggled from her narrow, tube-bedangled bed to articulate her particular take on these themes and a host of other topics to her current visitors. Her brother Stanley H. Fiske sat red-nosed and watery-eyed beside her bedside table, availing himself more frequently than anyone dared mention of the generic box of tissues perched beside a dreary tray of uneaten applesauce, grayish green beans, and pallid fish, each of which seemed to have been Saran-wrapped with greater care than it had been cooked. Every time Stanley removed his eyeglasses to swipe them with a flimsy tissue, Gwennie paused, as if wanting to make sure her brother could actually see her as she spoke, particularly when Mother asked, "Gwen dear, how can I help get the house ready for you tomorrow?"

Gwen brushed aside Mother's offer with a bruised hand that still wore its ghastly bracelet of an IV line and launched, instead, into an itemization of what Stanley could do. I personally doubted Stanley could do anything but weep, but Gwennie had no mercy. "I swear I'll strangle you with my bare hands if I come home to find a bunch of ketchup-smeared McDonald's bags stuffed at the bottom of the trash. You know what Dr. Drew said about that crap and your cholesterol." Stanley looked aside sheepishly as Gwennie proceeded to take considerable care in describing the appropriate disposal methods of the inevitable sunflower seed shells littering the carpet beneath the sofa. Ditto the hoarder's-worth of newspapers and physics journals she just knew Stanley had strewn across every surface of the living room and den during her five day stay at the hospital following her averse reaction to her treatment.

I noticed that Mother took no offense at Gwennie's offhand dismissal of her offer. She'd been a peach ever since Gwennie had gotten her diagnosis, and I knew it would be she, not the brilliant but domestically inept Stanley, who'd take care of the empty McDonald's bags as she made the Fiske home sparkling clean and welcoming for Gwen. Fast food lunches aside, it had been Mother who'd brought Stanley dinner these past few nights, and if she hadn't cooked the meals herself—Dhani had done the honors, of course, perfectly seasoning each dish with mint, cinnamon, saffron, and the *garam masala* she was famous for—Mother had kept my physics mentor company while he fretted over what would become of his sole sibling.

We all understood his dread. His marriage to fellow scientist Doris Abrantes long past, Stanley had shared a household with his sister since shortly before I moved in a decade and a half earlier. In those days, Gwennie still had all of her hearing and Stanley his playful magician's charm, bending astonishingly from his towering height to retrieve a coin from my flip-flop, then froggishly hopping around, glee splashed across his wide forehead and cheeks, his eyes made even bulgier by his thick-lensed glasses. While Stanley mentored me in physics, Gwennie kept house, cooked her nourishing vegetarian dishes, and hennishly fussed over the two of us. No one spoke it aloud, but I knew my physics team shared my observation that the Fiskes behaved like an old married couple, with all the predictable nagging and bickering and profound dependency.

The latter had become particularly pronounced ever since Stanley crossed swords with my then-fiancé Assefa. It's a long story, but Assefa had actually attempted suicide— yes, I know, it's awful—after Stanley stunned everyone, especially himself, by flinging a rotten racial epithet at him. It hadn't exactly been my fellow Nobelist's most shining hour, but Assefa's uncharacteristic sexual aggression toward me hadn't been his, either. We seemed to inhabit an era in which no one could be counted on to act well—or entirely in character.

Assefa was actually in town at this very moment. Thanks to an offer he couldn't refuse to head up Interventional Cardiology at the UCLA Medical Center, he was moving back to SoCal. He'd brought his girlfriend Lemlem Skibba with him to look for apartments. Upon introduction, she'd caught me eyeing the attractive gap between her two front teeth and confessed apologetically, "I know. I'm 'tooth *mingi*.'" Which, seeing my confused expression, she leapt to explain meant she was considered bad luck by her Omo Valley tribe. Which struck me as more than a little nuts, given how she'd turned Assefa's life around.

I don't mind admitting that I felt more than a few pangs of jealousy. Not that I regretted my marriage to Adam. Hardly. But I was currently as wide as a house with our first child, my ridiculously burgeoning breasts supported by my ridiculously protruding belly, and Lemlem, with her slender, piquant curves, flaming cornrows, and thin gold band encircling her delicately flared right nostril, had to be the most captivating woman I'd ever seen.

Not to add to the impression of hopeless narcissism, but the timing of Gwennie's original diagnosis had been crap for me. (It goes without saying it was much crappier for Gwen.) When Gwennie first phoned with her dreadful news, Adam and I were minutes away from boarding an Air Emirates jet to bring Makeda back with us to So Cal, along with her newly adopted daughters Sofiya and Melesse. After the series of horrifying raids on orphanages by Al Shabaab, we'd managed to fast-track the trio's emigration to the States on humanitarian grounds with the promise they could live at least awhile with us. That was before we knew I was carrying our bun in my oven.

We'd been trying for years and had pretty much given up hope. At 27, I was just a hop, skip, and jump away from the age that Richard Bucke had declared most propitious for the attainment of cosmic consciousness. Which would undoubtedly be a great help in my project to facilitate zero-carbon-footprint travel, applying the Principle of Dematerialization for which I'd received the Prize. But alas, I was pretty sure I was condemned to be stalled at the more pedestrian level of self-consciousness that the vast majority of humans would ever attain, one that also seemed to include a penchant for murder, mayhem, and disaster. Which is hardly the most uplifting thought when you're about to have a child.

At this moment, with Gwennie looking like hell and my bun inserting what must be a butt proportionately similar to mine so far up my diaphragm that I feared she might float with my bottom ribs right up to my neck, gloom threatened to overtake me. Would Gwen live to see the face of my little girl? Would this child end up beating the record set by Beulah Hunter's baby Penny Diana by lingering in my womb longer than Penny's whopping 375 days? Would Adam murder me for my crankiness before then?

The appearance at the doorway of Assefa and Lemlem put paid to my reverie. Stanley nervously cleared his throat, and Assefa padded pantherishly toward him with that tweeter-moistening grace of his, reaching up to clap him on the shoulder with a solicitous expression. Except that, being nearly a foot shorter than Stanley, it was Stanley's elbow that Assefa actually patted. It was like this every time they met: Stanley radiating guilt from every pore despite Assefa's assurances that he'd long forgotten what Stanley had called him; Assefa assuming his most Aesculapian posture despite having once

pronounced my mentor a monster. So much had changed since their original rupture. Wasn't it Stanley who'd arranged Assefa's transfer from UCLA to New York-Presbyterian University Hospital of Columbia and Cornell, where Assefa had found quarters with a small group of Ethiopian-Americans that included U.N. staffer Lemlem Skibba? But I'd learned with my own failure to resurrect Grandfather that guilt can be as tenacious as the Green-eyed Monster in wrapping itself around our more rational selves.

Even in her diminished state, it was Gwennie who had the presence of mind to pronounce, "Shift changing time. Nurse Cory will kill me if we load up this room with too many bodies."

I inwardly winced. It was only a few weeks ago that I'd heard Gwen whisper as if in a trance from a bed just like this one, "I never wanted it to be like this." Wringing her hands and making the tubes attached to them tremble, she kept asking me to remove her clothes, then changing her mind, as if she were preparing for a journey, then deciding not to go.

Now Gwen motioned with her head for a kiss from Stanley, who complied with obvious relief, followed by Mother, then me.

The three of us filed out into a hallway shiny enough to broadcast every whorl of previous floor polishers, which I couldn't help but notice had created a pattern of comma-like shapes not unlike the undersides of Polygonia butterfly wings. Mother offered an upbeat, "Well, at least she's in full form. I haven't heard one of her political rants for ages. It's got to be a good sign, don't you think?"

She turned to Stanley, but he was already shuffling down the hall. She pivoted back to me. "How're you doing, love?" Her fingertips were silk against my cheek.

"Elephantine," I replied.

She cupped a hand against my bloated midsection, grinning. "You're nearly there."

A favorite phrase of Sammie's came to mind. "From your lips to God's ears."

"Honey, you know I believe in a higher power, but surely it doesn't have ears."

Thinking of the ticking time bomb of climate change, I whipped back disconsolately, "You're right about that one."

But Mother was determined to inject cheer wherever she could. "This little one will be the answer to all our prayers."

I didn't say what I wondered all the time these days: *But will* we *be the answer to* hers*?* The earworm I'd acquired of late took advantage of my vulnerable moment. *Hurry up,* it sang in pressured cadence. *We're running out of time!* Lately, I'd taken to talking back to it. "Leave me alone," I muttered under my breath, as I turned toward my section of the parking lot.

I came home to find Adam attacking the pile of dishes in the sink, the scent of spicy *wat* permeating the house like the frankincense I'd first smelled when visiting Makeda and Father Wendimu at Tikil Dingay. How the world turned! Then, I'd been filled with uneasy curiosity to meet the woman who held a prior hold on Assefa's heart. Now, Makeda was doing anything she could to repay us—unnecessarily, I insisted, to no effect—for putting up her little family, including cooking nightly meals of *shiro* and *wat* and *samosas* to die for.

Adam's ungovernable cowlick stood straight up from his sleek chestnut head, and I wanted nothing more than to come up behind him and wrap my arms around him. But the balloon of my belly wouldn't let me. Instead, I awkwardly leaned my head against his damp back, inhaling his pheromonic Campbell's chicken soup B.O.

He turned and kissed me on the lips, making a satisfying smacking sound, and I laughed. He had a dripping plate in one hand and held an equally drippy dishwashing brush like a conductor's baton in

the other. I nodded at the brush and, humming Ponchielli's *Dance of the Hours*, proceeded to do a regrettably perfect imitation of one of the dancing hippos in Disney's *Fantasia*.

Defying logic and fairness, my husband had become more fit and handsome with every passing year. I'd privately regretted more than once during this pregnancy that he hadn't succumbed to the Couvade Syndrome—otherwise known as the "hatching phenomenon"—and put on at least a little girth with me. Some fathers-to-be actually got morning sickness along with their partners and even felt cramps when labor came on.

But who could complain as he leaned back against the counter and enthusiastically flourished his wand? As if every other man would be equally thrilled to see his lover stomp the floorboards so lumpishly.

Which was only one of the thousands of reasons I loved him.

I knew Makeda had already left to drop off the girls at the Children's Center at Caltech, whose director had made a huge exception in admitting them as members of our family. Things were working out well for this new Ethiopian wing of our clan, though it was small wonder Makeda had landed an internship at the Southern California Regional Office of UNICEF, with the carrot of a possible paid position once she completed her degree in global health at UCLA. Hadn't she and Father Wendimu managed to wrangle international adoptions for nearly five hundred children over the years from their hardscrabble orphanage in Tikil Dingay, assiduously keeping AIDS and civil war orphans alive and adored until couples with means whisked their young charges off to more promising opportunities? Makeda knew the underbelly of world health all too well, having been orphaned herself in the revolt against the Derg and subjected almost immediately afterward to a botched genital circumcision in Tigray.

Of course, it hadn't hurt that the renowned Stanley H. Fiske had lobbied for her and that fellow Nobelist Fleur Robins and her husband Adam Manus had purchased a home ample enough to accommodate the three of them. That was, of course, down to Mother. Adam and I could never have afforded the whopping down payment and mortgage on this San Marino home, just a stone's throw from the Huntington Gardens, whose paths Stanley and I had once skipped, debating the nature of dark matter and the validity of multiple universes.

After a lost and lonely childhood spent mostly in Father's voidish Main Line mansion, I swore I'd never live anywhere larger than the Fiskes' cozy Pasadena bungalow. But I had to admit I did love our new home. It had enough bedrooms and bathrooms—five and four—to accommodate Makeda's crew and our own coming bunlet. And it had enough Mission style features—exposed rafters, quatrefoil windows, covered walkways—to remind us that our Hispanic friends' ancestors were the true legitimate residents of SoCal. Unsurprisingly, the house seemed to suit us all. Melesse and Sofiya spent no end of time playing hopscotch in the walkways and running up and down the staircase, their delicate chocolate hands barely touching the scrolled metalwork banister as their deft feet flew. And Buster was particularly fond of sleeping in front of the vibrantly tiled, arched fireplace, snoring like a jungle cat and purring like a house afire. I knew Jillily would have joined him if she could, but she'd been ensconced for more years than I cared to recall in the deepest hole in my heart.

Of course, one of the best things about our Old Mill Road digs was their proximity to Caltech, my home away from home ever since Stanley H. Fiske had whisked me from Mother's post-divorce New York penthouse to mentor me in quantum physics, calling me to a life of the mind that no one had ever imagined for the child who'd flapped and whirled and screamed bloody murder out of sheer emptiness and boredom. At Caltech, I'd met Amir Gupta and Gunther Anderten and Katrina Kelly

and Tom Haggis and Bob Ballantine and even that impish erstwhile lab chimp cheekily dubbed Lord Hanuman by Amir. It was there, too, that I'd deepened my connection to Adam, whose tutoring when I was just twelve had led to the whole adventure in the first place.

I hardly ever flapped anymore. It was a last resort of emotional release, to be used only when something exceptionally disastrous occurred, like the loss of someone I loved, Al Shabaab's recruitment of three-year-old orphans to serve as child warriors, pelicans plastered in crude oil, Miley Cyrus' aardvarkian tongue driving another nail into the coffin of contemporary childhood, and the possible election of a dangerous dolt who denied human agency in global warming—yet another roadblock in the way of our project to actually do something about it. I'd learned over the years, mostly thanks to Adam, to say what upset me and to ask for my favorite kind of Mack truckish hugs when things got really bad. But that didn't stop me from worrying whether my bunlet would be as plagued as I'd been by such a pitifully profound set of sensitivities. (I knew I really should stop referring to her as the Bunlet. We had a name for her now. Adam had urged me to pore over passels of baby naming books before he succumbed with more grace than I would have mustered to what I'd wanted to name her all along. Callay Myriadne Manus-Robins she'd be, for surely her incarnating into this world warranted more than a few *callooh callays*.)

But as is often the case, I'm afraid I've digressed. With a noisy clearing of his throat, Adam wiped his hands with a dishtowel and managed to maneuver me into his arms, whispering so strategically in my ear that my tweeter signaled it hadn't forgotten what a mini-explosion felt like. "So what is Her Grace going to get up to today while the rest of us slave away at the lab?" I felt a pang of guilt. Speaking of butt thrusts, it was after a particularly vigorous one by Callay that I'd decided it really was time to hand over the reins of our project to Amir, whose early circumambulations around string theory, the space-time continuum, the relative weakness of gravity, and mini-black holes had been particularly helpful in propelling my mind toward the discovery of C-Voids. We'd been banking ever since that those black holes within human cells would eventually enable us to initiate a process that would obviate most fossil fuel-propelled travel. Tom had more recently coined the term "Dreamization" for our project, putting together the dematerialization and rematerialization we were hoping to use to move people from one place to another. With Amir in charge, the work of Dreamization would go forward while I struggled to deliver some semblance of bleary-eyed competency to caring for an infant. And if you don't think I shuddered at the prospect, you've never grown up in a house with a whole wing devoted to small children your father had saved from the devil abortionists.

I answered Adam with a slight tone of defiance. "Probably see if I can manage one last prenatal yoga class with Siri Sajan before I completely lose the capacity to stretch the toes I can no longer see."

Adam gave a grunt of appreciation before warning, "Don't push it, babe. It's been great that you've kept it up, but it's getting pretty close …."

I waved a hand. "Oh, don't worry. Siri Sajan watches me like a mama bear." I paused. "Speaking of which, how would you feel about Mother being in the delivery room with us for the birth?"

Adam raised a brow. "Does she *want* to?"

"Oh," I hedged, "I haven't officially asked her. We just spoke loosely about the concept. Well, really, she happened to mention that her friend Dory was there when her daughter Lilia gave birth to Jemima, and I said that sounded nice." I stifled the impulse to pinch.

Adam crossed his arms. "Tell me what you're thinking, Fleur."

"I don't know that it's even a thought. It just occurred to me that she might appreciate … well, you know. Seeing the baby coming out. The generational thing and all."

"I'm surprised."

My laugh sounded a bit forced. "By my atavistic reversion to the matriarchy?"

"Noooo, I wouldn't exactly put it like that. By you wanting your mother there to comfort you."

I felt my face flushing. "No, it's not that. I just thought it would be sweet for *her*."

"Fleur, I'm good with it. Really, I am. But I just think you should call it what it is."

"Which is …?"

"You're scared, and you actually feel close enough to your mother now to look to her for comfort."

"Am I?"

"What? Scared? Aren't you?"

"Well, maybe just a bit."

"You wouldn't be human if you weren't a little. Don't get me wrong, I'm sure it'll all go fine."

"Oh my God," I marveled, "*You're* scared."

"Me? Don't be ridiculous." He ran a quick hand through his hair and made a face. "Oh, hell, of course I am. Of course *w*e are. Both of us." He shot me a sheepish grin. "It's a relief to say it out loud, isn't it?"

"I guess so. But I'm not sure it helps."

"Maybe we should talk about what we're afraid of?"

I eyed him warily. "What are *you* afraid of?"

"It's not what you think. I think the baby will be fine."

"Well, there *is* that, isn't there?"

"Yes, but I have a good feeling about her. I think she's going to be sturdy as all get out. No rational reason, but I do."

I attempted folding my hands across my belly, then gave up. "Well, then you must be worried about *me*. But honestly, I don't think you have to, because honestly—despite all my moaning, I'm in pretty good shape. Siri Sajan says she's never seen a pregnant woman more …" And then it dawned on me. "Your mother."

His green eyes moistened, and a little groan escaped him.

"Oh, sweetheart." I led him out of the room to the den and motioned to him to sit next to me on what we liked to call "the queen's settee"—a cat-shredded, lumpy old sofa Mother had commissioned after seeing a photo in *Architectural Digest* of a similarly Liberty-patterned one in Elizabeth Regina's private rooms at Buckingham Palace. Three feline lives and hundreds of Krispy Kreme Powdered Blueberry-Filled doughnuts later, it had descended into something more likely to be found in a homeless encampment.

I nuzzled Adam's head, detecting a slight whiff of something lime-ish. "I'm not going anywhere," I said. Dying in the throes of childbirth, Adam's mother had left him with a slightly crippled left leg and a longing for what he would never have.

"I don't think … and I don't want to worry you, but you know I would never be able to live if …"

"I wouldn't be able to live without *you*, either. But I am not going to die on you." And I realized then that I simply couldn't. That was that. I felt a surge of strength that I didn't believe I'd ever felt before, not even when I was convinced I was going to resurrect Grandfather. I'd failed at that, but I could not, *would* not fail at this.

"Well, that's settled then," I pronounced. "I think Mother will do us both good. Even if she did

stop pushing me out of her tweeter long enough to give me this pointy head."

"Oh, the head. You really do exaggerate, you know. You've got a perfect oval of a head." He laughed. "A true egghead."

"Well, at least you're right about something." We kissed for a long time, pulled apart, and then we kissed some more—even longer, with him fondling my gigantic breasts and me pressing my hand against his member and then taking it out of its zippered cave and caressing it more and more vigorously. All the while kissing. His ragged breath became my breath. I sensed his heartbeat in sync with my own. I wondered if Callay Myriadne was in tune with us, too. As Adam cried out, I felt momentarily certain that nothing bad was going to happen to this baby, to me, to us, to generations that would surely spill forth from our love.

Well, anyway, that was what I felt right then. Once Adam left for the lab, favoring me with a cheeky smirk before closing the door, it dawned on me that Grandfather would never see my little girl. Pushing aside any thought of Siri Sajan's class, I heaved myself up the stairs to the baby's room. An animal-themed alphabet frieze by Michael Spink cavorted across one cream-colored wall. Opposite it hung a sepia-toned framed photo of Grandfather pushing a gleeful young me on a swing. His walrus mustache was a strawberry blond in those days, the gleam in his eyes an ad for good health. A heavy gloom descended on the room, and I stood awhile, staring. Eventually, I forced myself forward and lifted the picture off its nail, propping it on my knees as I plopped heavily onto the single bed Adam had positioned catty-corner from the crib.

The child's hair was a mass of nearly white ringlets. Would Callay be as fair as this, or would she favor the more robust coloring of Adam's clan? On that swing now, I swept up toward the clouds, aware of my grandfather's adoring eyes, my heart in my throat.

But the sound of a motorcycle spouting noisy smoke farts jarred me back to the present. Below stairs, the grandfather clock in the study sounded eleven chimes. I shifted my position, grateful for the thickness of the plush mattress pad Mother had purchased for an arm and a leg. It occurred to me that I'd be spending a good deal of time on this bed, certainly more than Mother had spent in my pink-painted room when I was young; she'd been too wedded to the bottle—speaking of dematerialization, shrinking into invisibilized form to elude Father's whip-like words, my stricken grandfather's helpless *ugga umph uggas*, and my own frantic screams that only Nana, with her Mack truck grip, could manage to quell.

I lifted a thick corner of the whimsical quilt sewn by Stanley and Gwennie's mother that had once graced my bed in *their* home. I poked it against my cheek. I'd actually coordinated this room's color scheme of robin's egg blue, buttercream, apricot, and deep forest green to go with it. "No insipid pink," I'd proclaimed to Adam, "for our Callay!"

What I hadn't said to him, nor to anyone else, was the thought that kept me up after too many nightly pees: would my having aborted Baby X at the age of thirteen be penalized belatedly by one of the more punitive gods and spirits in the vast panoply of religious traditions, like the Norse goddess Vár, who wreaked vengeance on those who broke vows, the Albanian Perit, turning those who wasted food into hunchbacks, or the Shinto Amaterasu, who rewarded an act of rudeness by bringing an age of darkness upon the world? Or even Yahweh, who seemed to have quite a predilection for smiting? Of course, even the most benign of gods could be something of a stickler when crossed: Artemis turning Actaeon into a stag, ripped apart by his own dogs, for staring in awe at her bathing body; Zeus punishing Ixion for flirting with his wife by fastening him eternally to a burning wheel.

Whatever my crimes over the years, my own worst punishments seemed to consist of huge

dollops of melancholy, regret, and dread. But if my daughter's health were to be compromised by her mother's sins? I swept my hand across the photo sitting rather heavily on my knees, wishing I could again feel Grandfather's gnarled hand wrapped comfortingly around mine.

But now I noticed that my fingers had made tracks on the glass, which was dustier than I'd realized. Looking up, I saw that someone had left the window wide open above the crib. Pushing a fist down into the mattress, I rose gracelessly to return the picture to its perch on the wall, and then shuffled over to pull the window closed, taking care to hear the click of its brass latch.

It still amazed me how quickly things got messy. "Hell in a handbasket," our old housekeeper Fayga—she of the serious aversion to dirt—used to say. She'd frantically ply her powerful, industrial grade vacuum at dust balls and cracker crumbs, sending me fleeing in terror lest I be suctioned in myself. That fear didn't get any better over the years. Once I started studying physics, I learned that the universe was rife with black holes, sucking in vast clouds of gas and whole solar systems like our own. Great debates raged in my field around John von Neumann's theory of entropy and his description of wave-function collapse as an irreversible process. In the course of my work on Dematerialization, I was one of those who'd posed the possibility that physical information might permanently disappear into black holes, effectively dissolving many disparate physical states into the same dead one.

You can see what the presence of a little dirt did to me. Lacking a mother sober enough to see to me or a father who'd cared to, I'd clearly osmosed the household staff into my psyche more than I cared to admit. Rubbing my thumb against my blackened fingers, I felt a distinct sensation of impatience with our current housekeeper, Lukie. She might be a sweetheart of a human, but she could use a bit of Fayga's fanatical compulsiveness. I made a mental note to make sure she dusted this room thoroughly before the baby came. I wanted everything pure and clean for my child.

But who was I kidding? How could anything be clean and pure for our little girl when everything was going haywire on the planet? I ducked my head as if I could block out the impossible dilemma. We had to live our lives as if we had forever, didn't we? Otherwise, we'd climb under the covers and go paralytic with despair. And that simply wasn't going to be an option. Not for me, anyway. And certainly not now. I headed for my own room and yanked a loose-fitting T-shirt from a cupboard. I'd decided to go to yoga after all.