



I wan-dered so aim - less, life filled  
Just like a blind man I wan-dered  
I was a fool to wan - der

# NO MORE NIGHT

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claimed for my  
nar - row the

Then Je - sus came like a strang - er in the  
Then like the blind man that God gave back his  
Now I have trad - ed the wrong for the

ELBE TRAKAL

Praise the Lord I saw the

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The emergency call came from a housing complex on the south side of Calgary. Looking from the highway, the five-storied cubes arranged in a grid, spread out over the plateau — a former mining pit now filled with gravel — reminded me of energy relay modules outside of my window back home on Mars. The settlement had been built within weeks by the end of the 24<sup>th</sup> century as emergency shelters for climate refugees from Winnipeg and the Midwest, some of whose descendants still live here, generations later. Today, much of the territory they had come from is uninhabitably hot. Calgary remains one of the oldest and most southern cities of the Northern Hemisphere save for the Portland Bay.

I had been on the emergency driver's medical tour for three days to study dream patterns and spiritual descriptions of near-death experiences in dying patients. My oneirotopic research on religious beliefs in the Northern Hemisphere was the continuation of the fieldwork my mentor Gan had begun almost four decades ago. She was one of the pioneers of Martian anthropologists who returned to Earth after the 270-year hiatus of interplanetary travel due to resource depletion. Her death had been a great tragedy for the entire discipline of Earth Culture Studies. The loss of Gan's leadership and the bias of the local population against the few thousand Martians on Earth made my research efforts particularly difficult. But there were also legal complications.

The driver had been a contact from Gan's original team of research assistants in Yellowknife. He is one of the hundreds of thousands of reproductive workers in Calgary, who keep the *Program* running. Taller than me by a head, hair in four braids, wrapped into a pyramid on his large skull, he still fared shorter in comparison to most of the population of the Northern Hemisphere.

His nose stood proud like the fin of a tiger shark; cheeks separated by thick wrinkles; thin lips concealed wise teeth that hardly showed when he smiled.

Praise

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Lord

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His knobby hands held a thin cigarette that — gauging by the shine of his eyes — contained several psychotropic ingredients. Meeting him was the closest and longest I got to observing a human *Inborn* in the *Here and Now*. Despite the information from his file (raised in Fairbanks, ethnically Indian and Siksika, born a cis-woman with a gender transition in his adult life, educated as a medical assistant, and in the job for 20 years), working with him proved how little I understood about Earth *Inborns*, even after years of specializing in their cultures. “Field and file are two things, altogether different,” as Gan often used to mark. May her words remain.

He had no face tattoos or any visible scan-points for the *Program*. No iris implants. No chips. Born into a *Deprogrammed* family, it is possible he never experienced the *Program* from the inside. Something we had in common.

Part of the research that Gan had left unfinished was the study of several distinct *Deprogrammed* sects here in the United States of Mexico and Alaska. These small and clandestinely organized communities evacuated people out of the *Program* and offered them a life on the outside. They would often shelter them within their anarcho-spiritual networks. A dangerous task, as these evacuations were classified as illegal trafficking of people out of the *Program*. Perpetrators faced extensive jailtime in the USMA, and were regularly sold into slavery in Europe, where they would often perform the same jobs they did here but without compensation.

It was these sects that I came to study originally, yet shortly after Gan's passing the United States Observatory Board closed down her research project indefinitely. Whether or not my driver was a member of a sect was not part of my official research objective and it was better for me not to know as it could get both of us arrested if my internal recordings were to show any proof of illegal conduct. In any case, the statistical probability that he indeed was part of some *Deprogrammed* sect remained high. This was, in fact, the reason I chose to work with him.

We stopped at an intersection on the East side of the sprawling settlement. The hard shadows of the housing units cast a checkerboard onto the dusty pathways, which was regularly wiped out by angry clouds. A swirl of dust moved like a ghost between the buildings and disappeared behind a wall.

“Mud coming,” the driver said as he exited the van, “we don't have much time.” Solemnly, he stared into the gray fomenting sky above the mountains in the West. The air outside was damp. Midday heat blew in from the open expanse East of the city, an area that hadn't seen any forestation efforts in half a millennium.

He walked to the back of the vehicle. A pull-out door in the sidewall held a plethora of tools and appliances; from screwdrivers to medical kits, light cones and various electrical supplies. He reached for the hefty bionic skeleton, which he put on like a backpack, weight centered on the hips. My visor informed me the skeleton was made of lab-made crystals.

“Salt?” I asked.

“Grown from the tears of dying aliens,” he said, flinching.

His crystal skeleton shouldered, he took a medical box from the back compartment, hammered the van door shut, and approached the building.

“Come on alien,” he said, “keep your ears moving. I don't like the silence out here.”

The houses displayed thin window slits in the rough walls. On close inspection, they were overgrown with lichen that shone in lind green and pale yellow and sunset orange in the hard midday heat. A sign of life. If it wasn't for these colored specs, the place would appear dead like the surface of Mars itself.

The room on the third floor was dark. As the doors split open, the sweet scent of crusted hair and unwashed skin spread into the hallway. The settlement didn't seem to have a water reclamation unit but I did see an indented metal nook in the corner next to the door that must have served as both a sink and a toilet.

The smooth walls of the circular room were mud stained and showed the lit reference points that the *Program* used for its simulations. The floor was made out of the typical thick track mat that would move the participant in place, infinitely extending the virtual space within the *Program*.

The rest of the spacious cylindrical room was empty, except for wrappings scattered on the floor, stained metal platters, and a kelp mattress. The silver-haired, heavy-breathing giant that lay on it moaned when we entered the room. The white woman in her 50s wore an orange gown, her doughy thighs and arms protruding. She flung her hands gracefully in the air, like a conductor.

“Dias, señora da Silva,” the driver started as he observed the room. “The system has called an emergency for you. Would you please stop the Program?”

“Carr, my god, you look terrible, have you gotten any coffee yet? They have splendid coffee and bagels at the lobby here...”

Scanning the patient's body through a visor from his medical kit, the driver cursed — “Oh, mierda!” — and abruptly kneeled down to unpack several capsules.

“Man, I need something for my back. It's killing me,” the giant complained.

“Señora,” replied the driver, “I will give you something to calm you down.”

“Did you bring a doctor?” with a whimper, the patient dropped the arm she had barely lifted to point at me.

After the driver injected her with a tranquilizer infusion he hastily fumbled for a second shot. Both given to the aorta, above her collarbone.

“Perhaps you better take me to a hospital, Carr,” she added after the second shot.

“I *am* the hospital, señora. I will need to take you out of this room. Please stop the Program now.”

His bionic skeleton in place, he lifted the giant woman, who was double the size of her mattress. A white-brown puss dripped from her shoulders and hips onto the stained mattress, releasing the sour smell of rotten flesh. Eyelids flipped open, her scream died in the gaping hole that was her mouth.

The wall reference points lit up. The track-matting under our feet jerked us backwards, so that he almost fell holding her in his crystalline arms.

“Chutiya! No mames,” he exclaimed, tongue flicking. “Would you please stop the Program, señora?”

“Where are you taking me?” she demanded to know.

By law, he couldn't terminate the *Program* by himself without the consent of the patient. Its recording of our actions was present in the room like the breathing of a silent observer.

Whether the patient heard the driver's request and chose not to listen to it, or had been too long and deep in the *Program*, was impossible for me to tell.

“Ehm, let me see...” he said, checking his visor, still holding the woman. “Canton, Ohio. For the New Year's concert?”

The woman nodded and closed her eyes.

A scattered drizzle had started outside and all but cooled the fast winds that were shooting particles of sand against my ankles.

He placed her body inside a tub filled with a pink solution in the back of the van, as I held her hair. On a low fold-out bench across from her, I watched him remove her textile piece, rinse her wounds, and scan the infections inside the gooey liquid of the tub. Beyond the respirator mask that the driver had put on her — a ventilator hummed behind a translucent gelatin glass — I caught a closer look of the woman's face. It had sunk into the skull's base, eyes protruding, nose half rotten away. Grenadier's disease was common among the *Programmed* in the Northern Hemisphere. Facial muscles broke down; cartilage of the nose and ears disintegrated, with the entire organ often missing; the fat in the cheeks and lips dried, it left crumbled rags

of skin hanging from the bones. Exposed gums and cheekbones bestowed the same skull-revealing smile on all of the faces that suffered from the disease.

By the time he was finished, the rain had turned loud. Dirt-colored rivulets collected in the center of the pathway carrying pebbles and viscous lumps of debris towards the valley.

He studied the van's computer display above the tub that showed her life stats, then looked out the window.

"Creeping mud!" he said. "We can't go anywhere in this mud."

He passed through the car's middle walkway and sat on the driver's seat, began to roll a cigarette, then stalled.

"Shit pours once a month and this creeper is dying," he said, staring out the window as he licked the paper. "I can't bring her to the station. With these infected wounds, she needs a transfusion."

"We don't have any here?" I asked, looking around the shelves full of improvised boxes and nets holding clutter, before I realized the implication of my choice of pronoun.

"You aliens have human blood, after all?" He turned around to face me. "But, even with the two of us sucked dry, it won't be enough blood for her size."

The patient was moving ever so slightly. Somewhere between exhale and inhale she started singing with a quivering voice.

"When tears come..." inhale, "like fallin' rain."

She was still in the *Program*.

"Can't you help her...out?" I asked, knowing that the question sounded more provocative than I intended.

Not looking at me, he said "illegal," and lit his cigarette. "Program is in her iris," he added and slightly opened the driver's door for the smoke to get out.

"Rain like bullets," he said to himself after a while.

"Your cheatin' heart will tell on you," she continued singing. Her face had turned sideways and stared at me intently.

"Are you the doctor?" she asked.

"He is," I answered and pointed over.

"Carr, are you there? Would you stop by the road and get me something to drink? It's the New Year's, goddammit!" she said and started coughing violently.

"Pinche gringo!" He responded in alarm and stepped out of the driver's cabin to sit next to me on the truck bench.

The cough turned her wrinkly face violet. Eyes wide open, calling for help.

Cigarette in his mouth he snapped the mask off her face and screwed a tube into its nozzle. Pushed her torso to the side and pulled the mask back over her hair with a snap. He pointed at me to hold her silver hair bushel out of her face like a bouquet of roses. It was greasy and cold from the dripping slime. Staring at the display above the tub he remained calm. Then he went through some back-end data of the *Program*.

“How is she doing?” I asked.

“Not good. This might get interesting for you, alien.”

I started to record through my visor, following his advice.

“Want to see what she sees?” he asked and entered a command on the display without waiting for my answer.

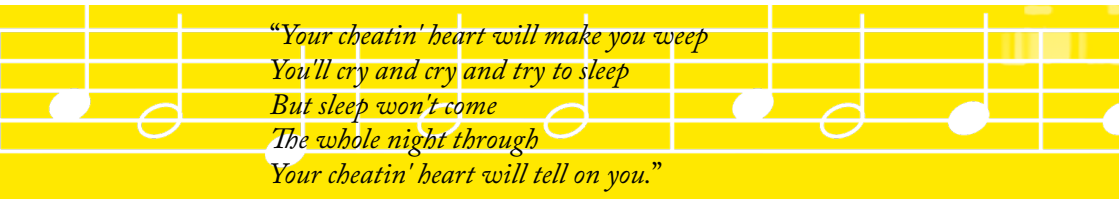
The color inside the van shifted to a flimmering gray. The car's own projection unit materialized a life-sized hologram of a skinny man with a wide-brimmed cowboy hat, a flashy silver guitar, and an embroidered button-up shirt with leather strips hanging off the sleeves. With a slanted grin on his thin-lipped face, he looked at us, then at the patient, nodding his head.

“Evening ladies,” said the hologram. “Now I don't know what made this coming-together of yours so sorrowful. But I may have just the tune to help you out in this very gloomy scene and lighten the mood just a little bit. What do you say?”

“Inside the *Program*,” explained the driver, still looking at the display, “she sees herself as this honky-tonk musician from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century US–America. She is living through the final night of his life.”

“The name is Hank Williams,” said the hologram cowboy and tipped his hat. Then commenced to strum a song on his guitar. A rhythmic, sweet-pitched, simple sound to which the drawling voice of the man began to sing and yodel the same lines the woman in the tub had sung just seconds ago.

She, too, looked up at the projection, stopped coughing, and sang along.



*“Your cheatin' heart will make you weep  
You'll cry and cry and try to sleep  
But sleep won't come  
The whole night through  
Your cheatin' heart will tell on you.”*



"Does she also see him here with us?" I asked.

He nodded.

"She sees him and simultaneously thinks that she is him. The use of a Double is typical for a last program."

He gave me a look perhaps awaiting approval.

This was exactly the kind of case I was after for my research. The system might have given up on her when it had called in the emergency. *Last programs* initiate when individuals in the *Yonderverse* enter a critical phase. Whether they helped the affected person to accept death or provided the *Program* with a set of experiential data that could only be retrieved during brain activity of near-death experiences, was a disputed controversy in my field. The structure of the scene and the characters in it were an intricate choice between psychograms and desires of the human individual and a vast archive of experiential media from the *Program's* own networked intelligence.

For a Martian anthropologist who never experienced the *Yonderverse*, it was hard to tell whether this final scene was dreamed by the individual or if the individual's experience, whose life was often spent entirely inside the system, was indeed dreamed by the Program. According to Gan's hypothesis, the woman's externalization of herself and her merger with the represented character, in this case, the singing cowboy, was proof of the *Program's* totalitarian control of the human consciousness.

"Can I talk to her?" I asked the driver hesitantly.

"I think it's safe. To her, you are a doctor from a nearby town. I am a hired college student who is driving her, or Mr. Williams, in a car to Ohio, where he is supposed to perform a New Year's concert. This is New Year's night 1953, he is 29 years old, has a morphine addiction, chronic back pain, lots of heartache, and a multi-million dollar record deal. He died on this night, somewhere on the border between Virginia and West Virginia. Two territories in what used to be the United States of America at the time."

The patient was humming along with the music.

"Turn up the radio," she said, "will you Carr? I know this song. Did you know that's my song? Doesn't it make you sad?"

"What does it make you think of?" I asked. Emotion, I figured, might be an access point to the religious theme of the scene within the *Program*.

"You remind me of my sweetheart, doctor. You two have the same eyes, I swear to god. I wrote this song for her, you know?"

"Where is she now?" I asked.

"She... Is she not here with us? I hope she is alright. Oh god, doc-

tor, you have to give me something, my back is killing me.”

“Did you always make music?” The question surprised her. I tried to approach one of the central themes of the scene, which seemed to be music.

“Tell me about your first memory of making music,” I asked.

She tried to look at the hologram for help, who started answering the question for her. She repeated after him but trailed slightly behind with her answers.

“As a young boy,” they both said looking into each other's eyes, “I sang in the church choir, mainly gospels. My mother would take me to church and we used to sing together. The longer we sang together in that tiny wooden church, the brighter the light that shone in the night, the clearer the voices of the other selves that spoke through us. Oh god, the pain.”

I looked at the driver. I could sense his tension, his irritation with me. Were there any cultural protocols I had missed while speaking to this dying person? Was the driver irritated by the fact that I — a scientist, a woman, a Martian? — may be one of the few real humans that this patient had encountered in their life?

“You should hurry up. Virginia is small, if you know what I mean,” he added as he leaned against the back door window and stared into the rain, which was dense like white noise.

The hologram sat next to her body inside the tub and held her head on his lap. She looked up into his eyes. Her synthetic irises dilated. I wanted to know what this woman was seeing in the cowboy's face.

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

When she started speaking her voice was high-pitched and dissonant. The cowboy hoarsely whispered with her in unison.

“I feel... sad. Somehow sad. I am thinking about my life, all these memories. You are born, you play as a child, and play the guitar or the fiddle or the harmonica. You play with so many gifted people. You sing on the radio and the people listen to you. All over the country. All these people with their lives. It's as if I had lived all these lives, all these people, in different ages, in the future and in the past, in different countries, on other planets... To be awfully honest, I feel scared, doctor.”

Her eyes opened wide and her stare carried a horror not from this world. Or not from mine anyway.

“There were so many lives. I don't know which one was mine. We had children, I think. We don't know where they are. We do wish they were here with us now.”

I could feel the driver's uneasiness. What was so terrible about a dying person? He must have seen hundreds of these deaths.

The woman began to sob uncontrollably. Her sudden screams came erratically and were interrupted by heavy coughs.

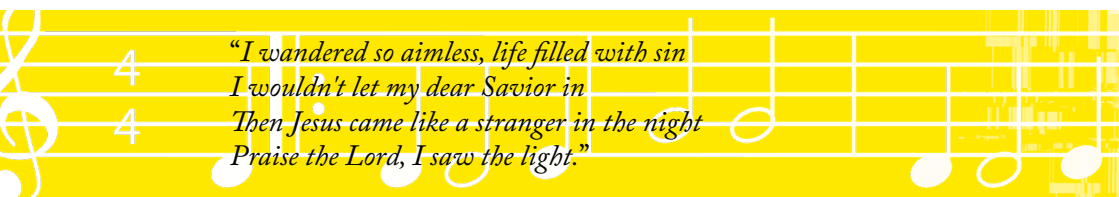
“What are you seeing?” I asked her.

“I...I can't. Oh, no. It's terrible. All these... kept alive... Oh god,” both of them said. The grin of the cowboy had turned upside down.

Her heart rate jumped irregularly. Shocked with adrenalin her face distorted into a terrible grimace once more.

“Can we sing you another song, doctor?” said only the hologram this time, with a toothless smile “Maybe you know it from our childhood.”

A fiddle tune came from the van's speaker system. As the driver held her screaming head tightly, the cowboy sang.



The hologram smiled but the woman screamed.

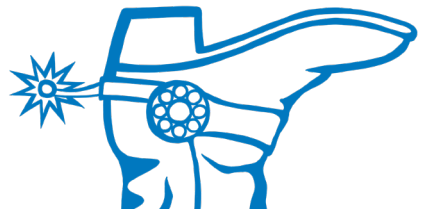
The *Program* was portraying something for her that must have been excruciating to witness. The horror in the woman's face gave me chills. No wonder the driver had been so uneasy, he must have known about the terror of these deaths inside the *Program*.

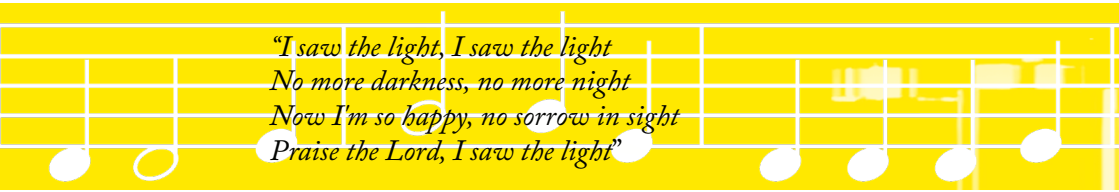
“Oh fuck it,” he murmured finally, came close, and released the mask from her screaming face. looking at me irritated, he asked, “are you done?” I nodded and removed my visor, ending the recording.

Her face in his hands, he shook her head until her eyes focused on his.

“Look at me señora! You were not all these people, this was just an illusion — you are here in this world, in the back of an emergency van. Your name is Angelina da Silva, you live in Calgary, you are 53 years old. Your back is heavily infected, and you're tranquilized. You are dying, Angelina. The best thing you can do is to stop the *Program*. You have to do it by yourself. Repeat after me to terminate the *Program*.” His small hands pressed on her skull tightly. Slime dripped from her hair. “Stop the *Program*,” he repeated.

Meanwhile, the cowboy continued with a bright voice...





*"I saw the light, I saw the light  
No more darkness, no more night  
Now I'm so happy, no sorrow in sight  
Praise the Lord, I saw the light"*

"Stop the Program, Angelina, mia," the driver said softly looking into her pupils, one at a time. "Repeat after me. Stop the Program!"

She looked at him scared.

"Stop the Program," she whimpered finally. The cowboy and the music instantly vanished. She stared at him with a revering gaze. Like one looks at a saint.

This was not the first person this driver had taken out of the *Program*, not the first dying person anyway. It was probable that he had released other people from the *Program* before.

If this man was indeed part of a *Deprogrammer* sect, his job as an emergency driver would be more than a cover or daytime job. Likely, it provided him with the very possibility of recovering people from the *Program*.

All this came to me as she died in his arms. Peacefully. He pushed her eyelids close with both his thumbs and sunk her head into the solution that engulfed her entirely.

What I just witnessed might get this man arrested, or worse. What reasons did he have to trust me? How can I show him that indeed he could?

"What happens to her now?" I asked, hesitantly.

"We eat her."

I considered whether he was referring to some verb I was not familiar with or whether he expected me to respond in a certain way, perhaps offer him the first... bite? Lost in cultural translation, I turned to face the window, embarrassed.

The rain had slowed. Mud ran in slow waves over the magnetic highway strips. The wind shook the van that hovered in place.

"A joke. Don't aliens joke?" he said and stepped into the driver's cabin. "We are taking her for dissolution on the South strip."

On our way back to the city we had to drive into the mountains first where the tributaries to the mud river in the city were shallow enough to cross. From here, one could see the silent ignition of the city lights at dusk that extinguished the night.

