

## 31 K

Tom Wier

**First Prize Winner**

BSFS 2006 Young Writers Contest

Columbia, MD

*Hammond High School*

Subject 31K was, before the incident, in no way remarkable. He was in one of the least well-funded parts of the university, where maintenance was uncommon, and just keeping the subjects alive was our main task. I remember the vats got so dirty sometimes; it was almost like the brains were floating in some scummy pond in the woods. I'm amazed any of them survived a week, never mind a lifetime. They were dying all the time down there. Seems like every six months or so, we'd lose another one to "life support failures." Just to give you an idea of how bad things were, the wires connecting one subject's optic nerves to the computer got chewed off by rats one time. That's right, rats. It was a nightmare trying to change the program so he wouldn't notice he went blind for a few hours. I'm still not sure I pulled it off. He went to a lot of eye doctors afterwards, but that might have been just coincidence. He was crazy, after all.

Like most of the subjects in my area, 31K was in a mundane experiment of no real consequence, something involving delusional paranoia. I'm not absolutely sure exactly what it was trying to determine, but at that point in my career I didn't need to know such things. My job was just to connect to the computer and play the stupid psychologist, gathering data on the boring psychological issues of people whose entire world was created for them. It was amazing the amount of inane problems people could invent for themselves, even when we weren't inventing any for them. Of course, a lot of my "patients" were completely insane. Those were a bit more interesting, but after listening to thirty of them a day for a few weeks, even some guy rambling about a three legged monkey with a jar of peanut butter and a bottle of whiskey seemed dull.

31K was given a case of delusional paranoia, which reacted with him unusually well. My guess is he had an especially creative mind, because he could come up with the most intricate and complex conspiracy theories I have ever heard. It's almost a shame that his brain was taken for research, because considering the number of these scenarios he could come up with in a day, he would have made a great writer. I'm sure you would have found him fascinating, although at that point I had seen too many crazies to care too much. Besides, until the day I'm about to relate, he wasn't all that special. He was just a bit smarter than the rest of the subjects.

The first signs that there was something special about him came on a particularly slow day. I had just disconnected from subject 12J, a study of teenage psychology. 12J was a

perfect example of the dumber subjects, one of my least favorite. She was a tremendous bore and by the time I was finished with her I was not in a mood to go collect some more irrelevant data from a rambling maniac. But, unfortunately, that was my job, and if I wanted my paycheck, I had to. Of course, now I'm glad that I did. It was a very interesting experience.

He began our session, as usual, with a new conspiracy theory. It had something to do with the government using squirrels and other furry woodland animals to spy on him. It was not his best work. Original, perhaps, but lacking his usual sophistication. I tried to pay attention, but I was tired, and he was not very entertaining that day. I jotted down a few notes for my superiors to analyze, but after a little while I just couldn't stop my mind from wandering. I began to doze off, listening with one ear to 31K, while the rest of attention was on daydreaming. But towards the end of our session, I heard something that brought all my concentration back to my subject. 31K had moved off the topic of animal espionage, and had begun to talk about how he suspected that the government could put people in a virtual world machine to test their loyalty. The hapless citizens would, according to him, be given an opportunity to betray their leaders, and if they did, the secret police would disconnect them and kill them. It was a typical far-fetched scenario, and not very near the truth, but yet near enough to catch my attention. To my increasing alarm, he moved on to suggest that people could be put in this machine at birth, and live their entire lives in a simulated world, unaware that they were being watched all the time. At this point, I must admit, I began to get a little frightened. Rationally I knew there was no possible way he could have known, or even suspected, anything about his true situation, but the consequences if he did were tremendous. Our entire project was, and still is, based on the fact that the subjects are unaware of the virtual world, and can live a relatively normal life. If even one subject found out the truth, it would be a complete scandal. We were already on morally shaky ground, and the higher-ups were doing their best to conceal low-budget facilities like mine. Any more controversy would inevitably bring the project to a halt. And however much I hated my job, I still needed money.

Too shaken to continue, I ended our session early. I disconnected from the program, made up the most bland and uninteresting data I could think of, and went home.

Back in the comfort of my apartment, I regained some of my composure. The more I thought about it, the more I came to realize that it was completely impossible for 31K to have guessed anything. How could he? All his senses were diligently reporting the data we fed them back to his brain. Even if he were disconnected entirely from the computer, he would still see nothing. There was absolutely no way for him to sense our world, unless someone connected a video camera to the computer, and I was sure no one had done that. Besides, he was paranoid! Basically all he ever did was invent far-fetched scenarios. Considering how many he came up with a day, it wasn't really all that surprising that he hit on the truth one time.

Even though by that time I was convinced it was nothing but coincidence, I decided not to report it. The bosses would probably just freak out like I did, only when they freaked out, subjects got terminated. And I was still interested in 31K. I wanted to probe him further, see exactly how close to the truth he could get. It would be an interesting experiment, much more fun than the dull ones the higher-ups like to make up.

The next day went along just like any other day, until I got to 31K. Unfortunately, he had forgotten almost everything he had said yesterday. That wasn't too surprising, I suppose, considering he almost never repeated himself, but it was still frustrating. Of course, having spent so much time with crazies of his sort, I knew how to steer him in the right direction, and get him thinking about whatever I thought would be interesting. As I talked to him, asking cleverly worded questions, I steered him further and further toward the subject of virtual realities, until eventually he "realized" the pertinent idea, and my job was done.

I let him talk for a few moments so he could refine and develop his theory (he seemed to have forgotten that he had the exact same idea yesterday), and when his speech started to get repetitive, and I knew his idea had reached its peak, I began asking him questions. I had prepared these in advance, and all of them were trying to see just how close he was to guessing the truth of his situation. For once I was actually doing my job of collecting data on the subjects, although I wasn't planning to report it to anyone. The first thing I asked him was what evidence he had that his theory was true. He answered that of hard, cold evidence, he had none. I more or less expected this answer. After all, he had suggested that all senses could be manipulated, so obviously anything you see or hear, or for that matter smell or taste, is completely irrelevant. If he had told me any different, I admit that I would have been sorely disappointed, because that would have shown that his ideas were not as well thought out as I

had hoped. However, he dispelled all my doubts when he continued to say that although there was no evidence that his theory was correct, there was also no evidence to suggest that it wasn't correct. This was a very good point, and one I'd failed to anticipate. It makes perfect sense really, I'm surprised I didn't think of it.

I was caught a bit off guard by his insight (which at the moment seemed to be greater than mine), but I was enjoying the mental exercise more than you would think likely. It was an extremely refreshing break from the usual tedium of my work, so I pressed on in my interrogation, asking him what he thought would happen if he were to die in the fabricated world, but not in the real world. He had a good answer to that one too. He told me that the virtual world would probably not affect the real world that much, so that if, for example, he was to jump off an incredibly tall building, when he hit the ground it would hurt like hell, but he wouldn't die unless he was killed in the real world. I encouraged him not to try it, not because he was incorrect and he would die, but because he had hit the nail on the head, and if he actually tried it he would get suspicious. The whole "all evidence is irrelevant" thing was a good point, but making such a guess and having it proven the next day would put notions in anyone's head.

I asked him a few other questions, none of which you would find particularly interesting except the last one, which was, "How do you go about your daily life if you know that your entire world might be false?" He said that if it were true, and all his life was invented, he could do nothing about it anyway, so best thing to do was not think about it very much. I thought this was a very good way of dealing with it, and told him so. Then he asked me a question, which turned out to be much more enlightening than all that I had asked him. He said, "Is that the same thing you do?" At first I didn't understand, but as I thought about, I began to realize something that I should have realized long ago, before I even met 31K. You've probably seen it yourself by now. I thought to myself, all this time I've been asking him questions, wondering how he deals with knowing his whole life could be fake, but what about me? What makes me different from him? The more I thought about it the more I realized that there was absolutely nothing separating me from him. For all I know, I could be just a brain in a tank somewhere, and everything I see or do could be just a piece of an experiment, data fed to my mind to illicit a response. Even 31K could be just a clever invention, designed to lead me onto the very same train of thought I am relating to you now. The creepy thing is, that sounds exactly like something the bosses would do.

# Twelve and Under

Davi da Silva

**Second Prize Winner**

BSFS 2006 Young Writers Contest

Silver Spring, MD

*Montgomery Blair High School*

## NEWBORNS FOR SALE

WASHINGTON—After months of hearings and deliberation, and dozens of revisions, Congress last night approved the Hazelfield Act. The 368-page bill, which is named for the man who drafted and proposed it, Texas Senator Edward L. Hazelfield, redefines the status that infants hold under the legal system. Starting January 1, 2061, all newborns under the age of twelve months will be classified as property of those who have custody of it.

Proponents of the bill argued that infants, who have limited mental and emotional capacity, should not be granted the same status as more mentally developed humans.

“[Newborns] are, in a sense, like household pets,” remarked Hazelfield himself in a press conference last Friday. “They can’t talk, read, write, wash themselves, feed themselves, or do much anything without the assistance of an adult. They aren’t making any contribution to society, so why on God’s green earth should they have the same rights as you or me or any regular citizen?”

With the new law, the sale and purchase of infants will be legal in all parts of the United States. While opponents of the bill are filing an appeal, it is most likely that the

*See INFANTS A12*

## BABY ORGANS NOW AVAILABLE ON WHITE MARKET, ALSO

WASHINGTON—Further legislation amending the Hazelfield Act has clarified a clause, now making the termination of infants and the sale of any part of its body legally acceptable. The decision arose in light of the recent rise in need for organ transplants and blood transfusions.

Opponents of the measure believe that Congress has overstepped the bounds of the law. During Senate hearings, Hugh Wilson (L) stated, “Buying and selling the infants themselves, though I still oppose it, is one thing; no one and nothing’s being hurt. But the Declaration of Independence, the document that created this great nation in which we live, promises ‘Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’ for all, and that should include our children.” However, supporters of the amendment argue that the phrase is not applicable to infants since, as the Hazelfield Act states, they are not people, but property.

“Hundreds, if not thousands of Americans are dying every day, because they can’t get a kidney, or can’t get enough

blood to keep them going, or don’t even have enough skin for a graft following a tragic accident, leaving them open and prone to infection. My colleagues and I agree that it is those people who should be saved, not the newborns.”

A recent poll showed that 87% of Americans held the same view as Hazelfield, though the incredible profitability of eBay’s newest branch, eBaby.com, which reports that it is has made a 257% increase in net revenue since eBaby’s launch in March of last year.

However, the other 13% are making themselves known. The National League for Infant Rights (NLIR), which was assembled in December of last year to protest the Hazelfield Act, is now even more agitated than ever.

Daniel Walker, Chairman and Founder of the NLIR, spoke to Congress on the behalf of all the NLIR’s members. “These are not just cows or pigs or chickens that are being slaughtered; they are our children. Would you rather deny them their entire life to save a 110-year-old man who will probably only live for ten more years, even with an operation?”

Those in need of organ transplants beg to differ. David Wainthrop, a senior ser-

*See NLIR A7*

## INFANT MORTALITY RATE SOARS TO 85%

PHOENIX—Recently performed studies at the University of Arizona in Phoenix have reported that since the Hazelfield Act was passed early last year, the number of infants whose lives are ended within their first year has leapt to 85%, the highest in the world. In light of this recent decline of children, the government has announced that it has cut its budget for pre-schools and child support by 90% for the coming years, and states that it will use the extra money to aid the sufferers from the recent hurricanes in Central America.

While at first the appeal for baby parts was for those who desperately needed them for survival, most of the infants killed are bought by major fashion and cosmetic companies who have picked up on the concept and have released new product lines taking advantage of people’s fascination with the new and innovative. Many department stores are now stocking BabySkin® purses and wallets, as well as other accessories from Soft as a Baby’s Bottom, Inc., which is renowned in the fashion world for its skill in making use of the material’s softer touch. They are also expected to launch a line of jewelry for the fall season made from smoothed

pieces of skeletal matter.

But the fashion industry is not the only one to realize the value of this industry. The Culinary Institute of America (CIA) has announced that it will now be offering courses in the preparation of meals incorporating infant meat for students applying in the coming year. (*Editor's note: see this Sunday's Lifestyle & Living section for a number of recipes cooked up by the CIA.*)

The statistics that have been shown to be the most credible show that some 97.8% of infants who are killed are being used in non-medical industries, making for a \$520 billion industry which has led the United States into an economic boom.

However, this lack of children does not come as good news for all. Day care, pre-school, and nursery workers, as well as child therapists and psychologists are being laid off at an incredibly high rate, and are estimated to now hold the highest unemployment rate among all professions, most of whom are now members of the NLIR.

Scholars have suggested that in time, very few infants will live past the age of eight months.

This lack of children has not concerned Hazelfield very much, if at all. "If push comes to shove, and we really need more kids," he said, with a light-hearted chuckle, "we could always do to women what we did to infants."

## Every Time I Close My Eyes

*C.J. Henderson*

Every time I close my eyes,  
I see a fabulous expanse,  
A'stretched before me across the world,  
As big as the sky and all that.

Every time I close my eyes,  
I gaze into this blue beyond,  
Big and alien, harkening to me,  
And I wonder where I am.

Every time I close my eyes,  
The same haunting fear, coming faster and faster,  
With every blink and tear,  
As I pray for the sleep that I'm denied.

Every time I close my eyes,  
The searching eye grows ever closer,  
And I fear it shall soon have me,  
And I wonder how I'll taste...

Every time I close my eyes...



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# Persil, SAGE, Rosemary, and Time

Erin E. Binkley

Third Prize Winner

BSFS 2006 Young Writers Contest

Lutherville, MD

*Carver Center for Arts & Technology*

## *A Tale of Time Travel, Recounted in Chronological Order*

### **May 3, 2300 BC, 4:08 PM**

Two girls materialized in a towering forest. The night-gowned one let out a squeak and grabbed her companion.

"You idiot," said the other, wrapping her arm around the first's shoulders. "Hold on."

On the cuff on her wrist she pressed a button that read, simply, HOME.

### **May 30, 1952 AD, 10:24 PM**

Nobody was surprised when Mary Smith was declared Prom Queen for the Class of '52. After all, her boyfriend was the universally-loved football captain; and Mary, with her golden curls that everyone said looked like Marilyn Monroe's, smooth complexion, and sapphire eyes—Mary hardly needed to be sweet and gracious, because her looks alone would capture anyone's heart.

It was nearly ten-thirty when the prom king's car pulled up at Mary's house. The two royals kissed quickly; then Mary, gathering her bouquet and the folds of her dress, climbed from the car and walked hastily up the path.

### **10:26 PM**

Mary held her breath until she heard the car drive away, and then started for her room. She was almost there when she heard a soft *whump* from behind her door.

"Wh-who's there?" she called, freezing in place.

Some creaking and rustling answered her, but no words.

"My father's a policeman. You'll be arrested!" Mary had no idea where her father was, but she was confident in authority. Thief, vandal, or Communist, the intruder would be subdued.

Thus reassured, Mary stepped forward, threw open the door, and hit the lights. And gasped.

"Eek! Colored girl!"

### **10:29 PM**

Agent Persil's head was swimming. Obviously she'd messed up one of the coordinates, or, more likely, all of them. At least she'd landed somewhere soft.

Too dazzled to see, she oriented on the squeaky voice. *Okay, so I'm in the twentieth century. In the nineteenth that phrase wasn't in fashion yet.*

The light began to form coherent shapes. A room. A girl—the squeaker: blonde, pretty in a doll-like way. Wearing a Renaissance ball dress? As Persil's focus returned in full force, she read the sash across the girl's shoulder: *Prom Queen 1952. Okay, I'm in 1952. I hope.*

"Don't be alarmed," she began, trying to sound authoritative as she stood. "I'm not a ghost, a god, or an alien. I'm human. I'm here to help."

"H-help yourself!" squeaked the girl, gesturing jerkily around. "Take anything. Just don't hurt me!"

"I'm not a thief either!" protested Persil. The blonde had sounded braver earlier, maybe because Persil had been half-conscious.

"I won't hurt you. My name's Persil." Wait, self-identification was against regulation. She'd been distracted. Maybe she'd just leave this slip-up out of her report.

But no, Rosemary would know. Rosemary *always* knew.

### **10:32 PM**

The colored girl hadn't taken anything, or attacked, and her accent was surprisingly easy to understand. Mary nervously played along. "I'm Mary. Mary Smith."

"Well, Miss Smith," said the girl (very respectful for someone who'd broken into a house), "I'm sorry I scared you. I'll go now."

And she slid to the floor.

Mary hesitated for only a moment this time, then hurried down to the kitchen for a glass of water.

### **11:08 PM**

"I *told* Rosemary I was sick," Persil grumbled. "I *said* I wasn't fit for this mission..."

"Who's Rosemary?" asked Mary from behind her. Persil jumped.

"I didn't hear you come in," she snapped, but reached for the peanut butter sandwich Mary offered. "Thanks. I need the protein." She opened the panel on the cuff on her wrist. She ought to be better at estimating what nutrients she needed without the computer, but...

"What's that?" asked Mary, retracting the sandwich.

"Hey!" protested Persil, rising to grab it—and immediately feeling woozy. She sat back quickly. "No fair."

"Tell me what that is."

"Aren't girls in this decade supposed to be sweet and gentle?" After a silent moment Persil looked up again—and saw Mary's lips clamped together, eyes bright.

Persil melted. "Sorry... It's a computer." She held her arm out. "Have computers been invented yet?"

### **11:51 PM**

After Persil fell asleep, Mary was more wide awake than ever. She donned a nightgown and poured herself some warm milk.

This girl... Mary was awed. She seemed smarter even than Mary's boyfriend, who wasn't disadvantaged by being a girl *or* a colored.

And she had a *computer!* Like the machine that broke the Jap code. The government had one, she knew, but she'd never thought they could get that *small*, smaller than a radio.

In the future...

The girl—Persil—hadn't given a specific date. But it was far away. At least Mary knew the Reds wouldn't blow up the planet too soon... *Were* there still Reds, in Persil's time? So many *questions!*

What if Mary went to see for herself?

She'd slip the thing off Persil's wrist, look around, and be back in no time.

Mary left the kitchen and softly climbed the stairs.

### **11:58 PM**

Persil jolted awake as someone disturbed her computer. This was the gravest threat a SAGE agent faced—loss of the only link home, aside from (if they were close enough) the long way around.

"Get away!" she hissed, grabbing in the dark. Night-vision bulbs lit up around the cuffs edge, illuminating two delicate hands.

"Mary?—Don't press that!"—

### **September 24, 2018, 1:01 PM**

Veronica Silver had done news for twelve years, but still chose her own top stories. Today she was considering a claim about governor Mary Smith—a high-profile contender in the Senate race, already projected as a front-runner for President when O'Malley's term was up.

"There's something wrong with Governor Smith," said the claimant. He thrust a folder of clippings and printouts across Veronica's hardwood desk. "Look! Her mayoral run—a story about her degree being forged. Two days later, her college president turns up. She runs for Governor—someone finds her birth certificate, and it's legit but says *1935*—after the story breaks, they look and it says *1981*, like it should."

"So Smith gets attacked a lot, and the attackers never succeed. Why is this important?"

Veronica didn't bat an eye when the man said, with a straight face, "She's an alien."

"I'll look this over," lied Veronica, rising and offering her hand. "Good afternoon."

"I'm telling you, she's not human!" called the visitor as he was shown the door. When it closed, Veronica sat down to find the number of the scientist who'd built a quantum computer. Now *that* was news.

### **April 3, 2048, 6:22 PM**

Lying on her bedspread, Persil Waters fingered the acceptance letter from SAGE again. She still couldn't believe it. The application had been a long shot—she had good grades, but was no prodigy.

Persil reread the relevant phrases. *Test scores, acceptable... instinct for history, remarkable... will be admitted to SAGE premises for training at the close of the current academic year...*

No more science class. *That* would be nice. Sciences followed tiresome rules, usually counterintuitive. Take the reason for SAGE's founding. Something about quantum mechanics, used in computing, disrupting the fourth dimension—which time wasn't, but it was close enough—and SAGE sent people to repair the damage. She had no idea how it worked; it just did.

But history she got. The dynamics between the *people* involved

in SAGE's founding were clear as day to her.

Would that be enough?

### **June 17, 2048, 12:49 PM**

"This," said Agent Fennel, "is the library. Someone will show you around it in thirty minutes." Persil and her fellow new recruit, a curly-haired girl code-named Cannelle, watched Fennel push the doors open. "In the meantime, feel free to explore, or get lunch."

She vanished into one of the massive aisles of books, punctuated by columns of circuitry.

"Wanna go eat?" began Persil to Cannelle—and stopped. Cannelle's eyes were shining as she looked up into the brilliantly lit vault; she looked like she'd just been proposed to.

"Lunch?" she asked after a moment. "No, I—I couldn't—ooh, look at this!" She faced the library. "I can't leave *this!*"

Shivering with joy, she entered. Persil sighed. So this was how authentic SAGE material acted. Fine. She was a SAGE member now, and would act like one if it killed her. Ignoring the protests of her stomach, she followed Cannelle.

### **August 11, 2052, 1:02 PM**

Junior Agent Persil strode up to the library's front desk. "Give me everything on the USA, *1954*."

"Persil! Hi!" exclaimed Cannelle from across the desk. "Haven't seen you for a while. What're you up to?"

"Racking up mistakes and hearing senior agents say how in *their* day, you got promoted for doing things *right*. What else?"

Cannelle's fingers flew over keyboards. "You can't be doing *too* badly. Rosemary's still sending you on solo missions, isn't she?"

"Not too *badly*? I was aiming 1561 BCE and ended up in 1561 CE! American history isn't even my jurisdiction, and besides, I'm coming down with something. Honestly, I think Rosemary's going senile."

"She *can't* be. For one thing, she seems ancient, but she's only about seventy."

"How'd you hear *that*?" asked Persil, genuinely surprised.

"She's in some files. They're hidden—you can only reach them in roundabout ways—but they're there."

"Rosemary was right to put you in the library," Persil admitted. "You're brilliant at this."

"Exactly. If it were up to me, I would've assigned myself to time repair like you—but Rosemary put me here, and it's perfect. She founded SAGE, remember? She knows what she's doing."

Persil shook her head. She revered the head of SAGE; she really did. It was Persil who was the problem. She was out of her depth. Rosemary's only fault was not realizing it.

### **August 12, 2052, 11:29 PM**

Senior Agent Fennel enjoyed flight-gate duty. Younger, less mature agents had no patience for it, but Fennel was above that; besides, when an agent returned from a mission, she liked to be able to dispense much-needed wisdom.

So when she heard the signal that preceded the arrival of Agent Persil, Fennel was prepared to start advising the junior agent on how to improve.

Then Persil appeared with a blonde girl in a vanilla nightgown clinging to her, and Fennel found herself speechless.

**August 13, 2052, 12:04 AM**

SAGE Director Rosemary's office was dark. You stood in a spotlight, but SAGE's imposing leader (and everything else) lay in shadow.

Persil stood at attention; beside her, Mary tried to do the same. Neither spoke. Across the desk, gazing levelly at them, was the equally silent Rosemary.

She was huge—not flabby or unwieldy, but broad-shouldered. Her thin hair was an almost glowing white. Her eyes, behind rectangular glasses, were sharp and piercing. Persil wanted to cringe.

When Rosemary finally spoke, her words were as measured and clear as if she'd recited them infinite times before.

"Agent Persil. You are the first agent to bring a human from the past. This will permanently disrupt the timeline."

Persil flinched, then ventured, "Sir—couldn't we just put her back?"

"No. Reparations will not be easy. A solution will be calculated. You are suspended from active duty and charged with caring for this girl. Dismissed."

**November 1, 2057, 9:57 AM**

Senior Agent Cannelle, SAGE's head Information Specialist, hated bearing bad news. But she'd taken over the project which calculated when to deposit the now-22-year-old Mary; it was her job to report the results.

Besides, Mary and Persil should hear this from a friend.

Nobody answered at Persil's door; Cannelle went to Mary's, and the blonde opened it in a moment. Old-fashioned robe notwithstanding, she looked infinitely more modern than she had on arrival: hair was pulled back like Persil's, eyes intelligent and piercing. To everyone's surprise (including her own), Mary had proven to be an incredibly fast learner. Had she been born a hundred years later, she would undoubtedly have been recruited for SAGE.

"Cannelle? What's up? We're off today."

"Mary... we've found it."

"What's going on?" asked Persil groggily, coming up behind Mary. "It's too early to be up."

"When?" asked Mary calmly.

"It's not bad. It's in 2001, not some prehistoric time," Cannelle replied, voice wavering. "They have computers, at least..."

Persil was wide awake now. "You're taking Mary away?" she asked. "But she's been here so long—she's *part* of this time. You can't send her back half a century..."

"It's all right," Mary assured her. "I was born a *whole* century ago. I grew up before computers and equality and all sorts of things they've gotten by 2001. I'll survive. I'll probably even live to see this time."

"But—!" began Persil.

"I—" added Cannelle.

Mary embraced them both. "Don't worry about me. We have to keep time going smoothly. That's the most important thing."

*Not to me*, thought Persil, burying her face in her partner's shoulder.

**December 25, 2071, 5:51 PM**

Senior Agent Persil was a relic, SAGE's oldest member except the ancient Rosemary herself. Most agents retired before thirty, even those as irreplaceable as Head Librarian Cannelle. But Persil

was thirty-seven, which caused whispers among younger agents whenever she entered the cafe.

She was digging her spoon into her dessert when the digital display on her table flashed: *Agent Persil to head office.*

Persil sighed and pushed back her dish—then changed her mind. If there was one thing she had learned from SAGE, it was that you had plenty of time, especially if you were Rosemary. Whatever this summons was about, it could wait until she finished her ice cream.

One cadet actually fainted when Persil, summons still flashing on the table displays, sat back and took a big bite of caramel-draped vanilla.

**6:03 PM**

"You wanted to see me, Sir?" said Persil, entering Rosemary's office.

"Ten minutes ago. I hope you enjoyed your dessert," replied the aged but still imposing figure.

Persil no longer bothered wondering how Rosemary knew things. "Why am I here?"

"We must discuss your retirement."

"Are you firing me?"

"No. When you understand your retirement plan, you will volunteer."

"Let's hear it, then. A beach house in Hawaii?"

"A two-bedroom flat in Maryland."

Persil was too busy fuming to notice Rosemary's eyes sparkling. "What could make me want to leave SAGE for any place that common?"

The senior agent stopped in her tracks.

"What?"

"The arrangements have been finalized. You will be installed in the year 2018, effective immediately upon your retirement."

Persil shook her head. "You really *are* psychic."

"No," replied Rosemary with something like a smile. "Only very, very well informed."

**8:44 PM**

SAGE Director Rosemary sorted through her keys until she reached the house key. Once inside, she sat down heavily on the couch and stayed there for a while, looking at the glow of the Christmas tree.

"Welcome home," called a voice from the kitchen. "I made cookies."

"I just sent Senior Agent Persil to the past," replied Rosemary at length.

Her partner came into the parlor and sat with her, holding out a tray of cookies. Rosemary took one and contemplated it.

"Am I selfish?" she asked.

"You dedicated your life to undoing the damage that other people did. To do *one* thing for yourself—no, that wasn't selfish."

More time passed.

"I'm tired, Persil," said Rosemary at last. "I'm very tired."

"It's okay," said her partner. "You can rest."

"Someone needs to take over SAGE. I need to find..."

"You can do it in the morning, Mary," said Persil quietly. "Rest now. You have plenty of time."