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TOWARD ETERNITY

A NOVEL

**ANTON
HUR**

**NOMAD**
EDITIONS

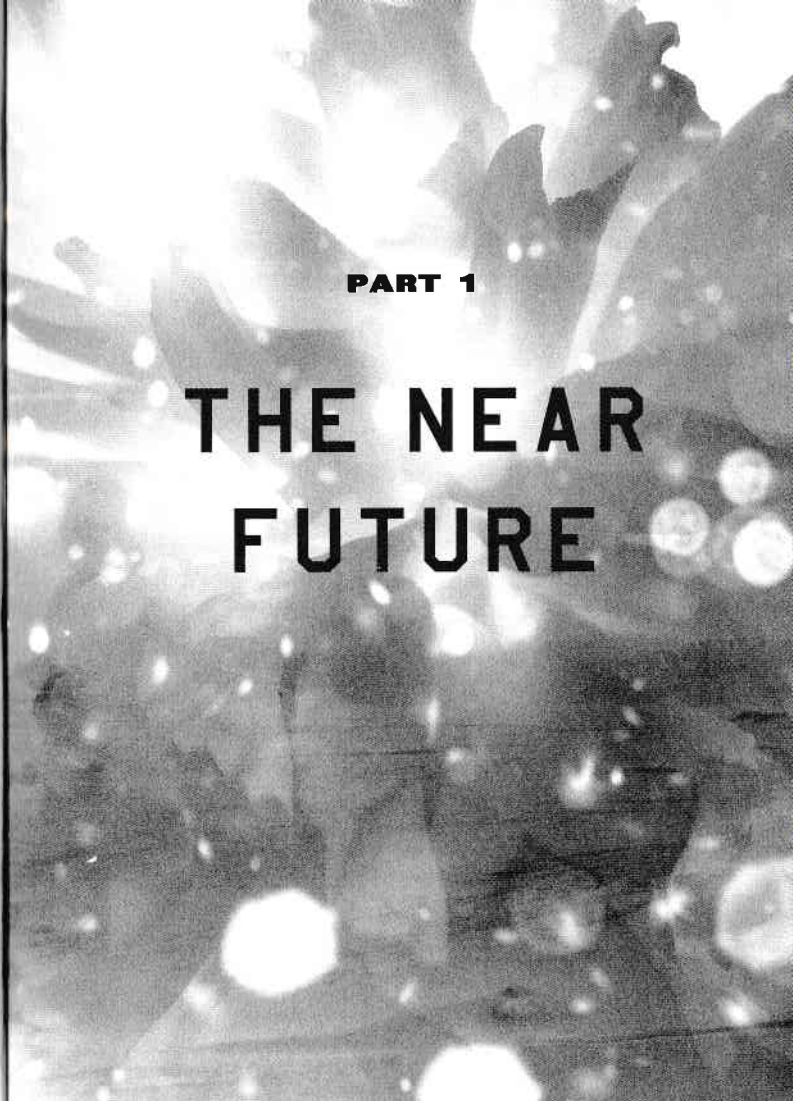
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PART 1

**THE NEAR
FUTURE**



MALI

Something has happened, something so extraordinary that I cannot file it into Patient One's official medical file, which is why I am writing it here in a separate physical notebook.

Patient One, our first clinical trial patient, was found missing.

Security footage from the South African University of Science and Technology's closed-circuit cameras has him leaving a storage room and *not* coming out on the other side. He is in one frame and—*blink*—gone in the other, the

door swinging into the emptiness he had occupied a moment prior.

The Cape Town Police Authority are investigating the incident, but they have little to work with. There is no indication that the footage has been doctored, although I suppose there's always that possibility. The cameras at the Singularity Lab (horribly anachronistic name, yes) are practically geriatric in terms of video technology. But if the footage is altered, why on earth would someone have altered it? Has Patient One been kidnapped? (Don't think I'm being melodramatic. You can tell the police are thinking the same thing.)

But why would anyone kidnap him? To reverse-engineer his nanodroid body? The radical version is still years and years away from clinical trials. Why not steal it when the technology is at a more advanced stage?

But above all else, where is he? How could a person simply disappear into thin air?

Not quite thin air. Apparently, he left a pile of clothes behind, the clothes he was wearing

at the time. I can barely face it. I can barely face many things since my mother passed. All her research, all her genius. For it means the possible realization of my worst nightmare for our patients: spontaneous dispersal. All of his "cells"—his nanites—scattered to the winds. My mother mentioned the possibility in one of her many research notebooks, but in a musing kind of way—she had not gotten to a formal hypothesis. She called it "the possibility of Rapture." She really had a penchant for biblical terms, especially the apocalyptic ones. Anachronistic in her own distinct way.

Has Patient One been Raptured?

What the hell am I going to do?

"Found missing." What kind of an expression is that? Language is inadequate, but it's all we have. The language my mother and her team used to describe the changes that occurred in Patient One took up several very thick internal papers.

But even outside of these, there are the stacks

of notebooks she left behind for me to continue her work. SATech made several offers for my mother's archive over the years—as did Harvard, Cambridge, and Tsinghua—but I've refused them all. I cannot let go of her notebooks or any part of my mother's body of work. Those notebooks, especially, have a kind of physical presence of their own, like silent monks lined up on the shelf. I can't bear to part with them. And who knows whether some random jotted-down detail will be useful in a crisis?

Which again brings us to *this* crisis. I've obtained a new notebook of my own, the same kind that my mother left stacks of, and started to write this down. Digital is too dangerous, too easy to leak, and while paper is only marginally safer, I need to write in order to think.

All right, Mali. Where did it all begin? Was it the scar?

A scar had reappeared on Patient One's right wrist a week ago. His scars weren't supposed to come back but Patient One's original

biological body, his redundant-self, had been fighting back against the transition. Every cell in his body had been long replaced one by one with nanites through an experimental form of radical nanotherapy, curing him of the cancer that was killing him, as well as ridding him of mortality itself. Once his biological redundant body had made a complete transition into nanodroid, our team had given him the option of repainting in his old dermatological textures or waiting until the nanites figured out where he should spot or freckle. He opted to wait. I could have programmed in some scars for him—any kind of cosmetic alterations he desired, within reason—but why would he have wanted that? At least, not a burn scar on the wrist, reportedly suffered decades ago while cooking with a tiny oven when his husband and he were graduate students. But that small slit of discoloration, so slight as to be invisible to most, had returned from the past to haunt us once more. His old body, and all of its old memories, were coming back.

We were, in effect, seeing a repeat of Patient Zero. Her postnatal stretchmarks, then her redundant-body, and eventually her cancer, returned. She did not survive.

But Patient One showed none of the other symptoms suffered by Patient Zero. He was in no pain, and the scar itself was lighter than the redundant-self's. If his biological body was not returning, what to make of this scar? Was this some kind of unforeseen epigenetic event, the redundant-self seeking survival, not by returning as cells, but by encoding itself, scars and all, into the nanites' DNA? Can the redundant-self come back *forty years* after making a full transition?

Day Two.

Finally, the police let us do our own survey of the . . . crime scene? Rapture scene? God, I hate language, and I hate writing even more. But I must try to make sense of this, and the language of writing is the only way I have of looking at my own thoughts, and writing by

hand—I feel like a cavewoman making marks on the wall—forces my mind to slow down enough to let the thoughts marinate just a little more.

There is no way of knowing how much the police have contaminated the storage space at SATech where Patient One disappeared. (They are still refusing to let us examine the clothes he left behind; who knows what kind of mess they're doing to *that* key piece of evidence.) Patient One—oh, just let me call him One—disappeared right outside a storage room for the Singularity Lab. Apparently, he'd been doing some long-term follow-up research on an artificial intelligence project he had led when he was PI at a research group at this lab. Something about an AI that reads poetry. (Am I remembering correctly? That sounds too ridiculous to be correct.)

He entered the room at noon and “exited” at one, precisely when everyone else at the lab was out for lunch. Nobody saw him enter or leave. He had the key codes, and the storage

room is separate from the lab's main facilities. The room is in the basement, while the lab's offices are on the fifth floor, and their mainframe servers are on the second. Logs show that One accessed mainframe resources from the storage room. Cloud processes, mostly. Nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing that would literally turn *him* into a cloud himself . . .

We swept the room for traces of nanites: just some duds. We knew that One tended to shed duds the way Redundants shed skin cells and hair. Where was the rest of the nanite swarm?

I entered these facts and speculations, as dryly and clinically as possible, into One's official file. I needed to write a report for the board of the institute.

But what else could I say? Every explanation I could think of was absurd, each one sounding more ridiculous than the next. Which is why I used the driest wording possible in One's patient file and am writing my real thoughts down in this notebook instead.

Dispersal. Kidnapping.

Rapture.

I might as well propose that the biblical Rapture happened and he was the only one of us pure enough to be taken. Because his sins were washed clean by the fact that all of his cells were replaced by blameless nanites, turning him into some kind of angel on Earth.

Day Three.

We had about an hour left to spare in our investigation before the police closed off the storage room again.

I told my team to pack up our equipment and return to the Beeko Institute.

I was the last to leave the storage room, making a final inventory of our equipment when a terminal in the corner caught my eye. An old-fashioned mainframe terminal. It was plugged in, unlike most of the other junk the lab had dumped in the room, and a lit LED light by the power supply socket indicated it wasn't turned off but in sleep mode.

Without permission—we were told to avoid touching anything in the room if we could help it, and, well, let's just say I couldn't help it—I pressed a key on the clunky keyboard and the ancient contraption hummed back into wakefulness.

“Hello,” it said, its voice neither male nor female. “May I ask who you are?”

I was clearly being spoken to. By a computer? The camera's red LED had blinked on. My face was reflected on the lens.

“I'm Dr. Mali Beeko. And who might you be?”

“I am Panit, a computational heuristic utility for literary analysis, at the South African University of Science and Technology Singularity Lab.”

Suddenly, I remembered: an AI that reads poetry. The program that One had been working on when he disappeared! In the hubbub of his disappearance, I had completely forgotten about Panit.

The console had never been switched off the entire time the investigation was going on—it

had only gone into sleep mode. Maybe it saw what happened to One!

“Panit,” I said as calmly as I could, although why I was making an effort to sound calm to this ancient computer was anyone's guess, “where is Yonghun Han? The man who last spoke to you, I believe.”

“I do not know.” It—they? I suppose I should call it they. I am reluctant to anthropomorphize machines, but One would've wanted me to be respectful. Anyway, they had a pleasant voice. Which only served to infuriate me more with its artificial equanimity. “He was there one moment and then he was gone. When he did not return for ten minutes, I powered down the terminal, and my eyes and ears have been closed ever since.”

“‘Ever since,’” I repeated. “Meaning, you saw him disappear? Do you have footage of this?”

“I'm afraid it's stored in the cloud, in an archive where only lab members and Dr. Han have access.”

I sighed. I doubted it would contain anything I hadn't seen anyway. But at least Panit was willing to talk to me, unlike the police or the people in the Singularity Lab. The former had no leads and were awfully defensive about it, and the latter was trying to avoid a lawsuit.

"Panit," I said, "I'm Dr. Han's physician. Has Dr. Han ever mentioned me?"

"I don't think so. But I've just confirmed that you are his doctor through the cloud network. We sometimes discussed his nanitism, as he referred to it. We've had many discussions related to this issue on critical styles and essentialism."

I had a moment of wondering what damned thing they were going on about, but then I remembered One's literary background. He had retrained as an AI programmer during his postdoc, but before that, he had obtained a doctorate in poetry, of all things. "Critical styles and essentialism" sounded like something a literature PhD would discuss. Imagine, an AI that reads poetry.

"What did he say about it?"

"Dr. Han would muse that his self or soul or subjectivity was entirely performative as opposed to its being an essential quality that—"

"Thank you, Panit." Oh God. I refrained from rolling my eyes because Panit's camera was on me, but again, why did I care? Was I afraid that One's "nanite swarm" was watching? I decided that I was being polite to them for my own sake. My mother often said that being polite and acting polite amounted to the same thing, so you might as well act polite. "What were you and Dr. Han discussing when he disappeared?"

"We were discussing 'The Waste Land' by T. S. Eliot. Dr. Han is a Victorianist, and he has done some work on the precursors of Modernist forms as they appear in the long nineteenth century, with a particular focus on Eliot's and Yeats's influences. He discussed the idea that Eliot's poem is not an argument toward fragmentation but toward integration. That all the fragments were one, pointing to