

## Adventure

June sat on the edge of the table, legs swinging *thump-THUD* against its sides. She had paid a lot of money to sit here, in her paper smock, and she was tired of being kept waiting. Her metal leg kicked so loud she was sure it must have been heard outside, and then she was embarrassed. Doctors kept people waiting, after all, and it was her job to be patient, like the old joke.

The assistant came first and did the perfunctory examination. June hiked up her crinkly smock, and the assistant took note of the three dots on the inside of June's thigh which meant *heart attack*, and then the assistant took some temperatures and measurements to assure them both that June was nowhere near a heart attack, and then she was gone.

When the doctor came in, he consulted his chart and pulled up June's smock himself to ensure that her tag was correct.

"June Doe," he said.

"That's not my real name," June replied.

"Of course," the doctor responded smoothly. "And you're 231 years old."

"That is my real age," June said.

"Well, then." The doctor put down his chart and looked at June for the first time. "Why do you want to die?"

The chair hurt underneath her. June had put in a request for a chair designed for someone with a metal leg and they had told her it would take at least a year and June was so close to coming in the next morning with a chair she had bought herself, except she was saving her money.

Meanwhile the large screen to welcome visitors was showing old movies; her mother's decade was in vogue again and women kept coming in and asking for Sadie Laurence hair.

As soon as the door opened June was on her feet and smiling.

"Welcome to Jasmine, Ms. Stone."

Other receptionists didn't bother learning the names, much less researching and memorizing the faces of, all of the guests who passed through. But June always had one finger on the tiny box beneath her desk, riffling through images until she was sure she had found the right Mara Stone. Synthestheticians were so similar that it only took a microdifference to make Ms. Stone choose Jasmine over Flash or Elegance, and June was that difference, and she was paid well enough for it, despite the chair.

"You realize it's puzzling," the doctor said. "Your tag isn't *suicide*."

"I don't want to kill myself," June said. "I can't kill myself. I want to have a heart attack. You can do that, right?"

June sat in a booth with two of the synthesticians and poked at little blue zoomers while they ordered their third beers. She had the high score. They weren't even paying attention to the screen. A man was watching her from the bar. He was looking at her metal leg. She watched him shift position on the stool and guessed that he had a metal leg too and that he was going to come over to talk to her about it, but she could tell by the way his hair

fell, just behind his ears, that he was at least 500 years old and she wanted nothing to do with that. People her mother's age bothered her. They didn't *get* things. They didn't know how to watch screens and beers and hair all at the same time and *win* at this game and his first full hair replacement had been probably in the 2600s, she could see where his skin had been caught because it was just too tight in one place, a mistake because the technology was new, and there he was in her space, he had her drink in his hand, and as he offered it to her it dripped on the screen.

"How's the leg doing?"

"It woke me up this morning," June said. "Just upgrading, though. I think it was a stabilization upgrade or something."

"Any pain?" the doctor asked. "Falls?"

"Not at all," June said. "And no crashes."

"You've done well by that leg," said the doctor. "Clean install. How many years have you had it?"

"It'll be ten since the re-install," June said. "Thirty since the original."

After the man had gone and after she had won the game and taken the bar payout (she was collecting money, as well as saving it) June lay down and tapped a few buttons on her leg to make it sleep and she thought about death. She could feel the metal leg's processes slowing down, the metabolism programs shifting, her melatonin lamp was set to *full moon* and she thought about how it would be to continue slowing; to drift into a rich and vivid sleep and to move from there into whatever the next place was.

June knew it wasn't really a place. It wasn't populated. She knew it was nothingness. But it was somewhere no one had seen—and *yes, she knew that when she was there she wouldn't be able to see*—and somewhere no one could map because it was so far away and so distant from anyone's experience that there was no way to imagine what it might be.

Nothingness. She knew it was nothingness. It was an empty void of nothing where nobody wanted to go because as soon as they were there they didn't exist and would never exist again for the rest of eternity, which was like a million minutes stacked on top of each other and as soon as you got to the top of the stack you added one more.

It was an uncharted world.

"If death happened to just a few people; if death were only something that happened because of carelessness, or malice—" and here the speaker paused, picking out audience members one by one until they stared back at her—"it would be a tragedy."

"But death happens to everyone. So death is a *constraint*."

June put her finger on the young woman's head, obliterating for a moment the face and the tangle of hair as words began to multiply on the screen. Around her the cafeteria buzzed and she was due back in 30 minutes. *Dr. Olivia Go. Born 2008. PhD Yale University, Publications.* June's finger slid over, and books and articles swarmed around her until she found one from 2043 in which Dr. Go swore she would never get tested, and got thousands of people to march with her, until there was a riot, and nine of those people were killed.

The series of videos from the 2050s. Dr. Go's lover had breast cancer, and they had cured breast cancer. Her particular breast cancer, but there were others; and then news clip

after news clip announcing more cures, more techniques, more pills, more ways to stay alive—June was far past any mention of Dr. Go at this point, just reading and letting the information lead her—and then the announcement that testing was mandatory, the tags, the dots, and the scientists reading the babies to know what they'd need to make cures for.

And there was Dr. Go again, suddenly, being interviewed by the BBC. Three hundred years later.

"If death happened to everyone, we could say this was fair," said the interviewer. "But you and I both know that every thirty years or so a few thousand babies in Africa get tagged with genocide and we do nothing to stop it!"

Dr. Go smiled softly. "Before we go any further—and yes, I agree that our decision to ignore the semi-centennial African genocides is reprehensible, never mind that I doubt we could prevent them, given the tags—before we get into that discussion I have to remind you that death will still, in fact, happen to everyone."

The interviewer barely flinched. "Well, I hardly think it's something that most people count as a primary concern."

"No," said Dr. Go. "Certainly the cost of gas, and the philosophical discussions of whether we should continue to do nothing about genocidal babies, are much more important."

June's finger brushed over Dr. Go's lips, and the words she had just spoken popped up, and there it was, Genocidal Babies was the name of a proto-punk band, and as June's finger was sliding over to start their lyrics pounding into the stereo space between her ears her other hand was busy tapping out a code against her metal leg. Somewhere in the world accounts were being activated, money was being moved, and then June's screen shifted and she tapped her finger down into the undernet, her other hand changing the code on her leg so it couldn't be tracked back to her, finding what she had just paid a week's salary for.

An address.

"You realize that no one has died in 821 years," the doctor told her.

"That can't be true," June said. "People must have died, or else I wouldn't be in your office."

"Fair point," said the doctor. Then he paused. "You're not expecting to become famous for this, are you? The first death in nearly a thousand years?"

"No," June said. "I'm just like the rest of them. I don't want anybody to know."

She slipped the dentata out and set it on his dresser. Her other hand was on his belt and then she was pushing his shirt up, beginning to kiss and lick around his navel as she tugged down his pants. When those were off she pushed him on the bed, knowing it would make his legs splay, knowing she would see.

Three dots on his inner thigh. Same as her.

In the middle when she was on top of him she heard him grunt as she pressed the full force of her metal leg onto his chest. Foot flat in the hollow, knee bent, praying she wouldn't crack his sternum. It wouldn't matter, he wouldn't die and she wouldn't be arrested. It was just sex, and if he got a metal sternum he'd be stronger for it.

But if he got a metal sternum he wouldn't have a heart attack and she wouldn't get to see one. And she had paid good money for this guy, Mister Three-Dot, whose legs were

now beginning to kick against her as she held his arms down with her own and continued to bear down on his chest.

"Kiss me," she said, pressing her face into his. She covered his mouth with hers, forced her tongue inside, tried to stop his breathing.

In the end it was just sex, and no death, not even the safe beginning of one; and she scooped up her dentata and left him sleeping, his kitchen filled with the remains of twinkies and potato chips and bacon. No heart attack.

"You still have to sign this," the doctor said, holding out his screen.

June reached forward and signed *J. Doe* and the date, *August 12, 2944*, and then punched in a code on her leg and the doctor received his money.

"How often do you do this?" June asked.

"You know I can't tell you," the doctor said.

"That doesn't seem fair," June said. "You know I won't be able to tell anyone else."

Clip after clip after clip. Men clutching at their chests, staggering around. Some of the clips so ancient they had been filmed for three-inch screens and June had to squint to see the detail, or else blow them up so large they were useless. She knew the ones where people laughed were staged. The ones with doctors in the background were harder to tell, but even most of those were fake. It was like there had been some rule, back when people died, that it was illegal or impolite or just *wrong* to film them.

When she found her, the hair was gray. It was odd to see authentic gray hair, and June was more than a bit unsettled by it. But there she was.

"Hello," said Dr. Go.

"Hello," June said. "Thank you for agreeing to meet with me."

"There are a few questions I am required to ask you," the doctor said. "First: are you sure you want to die?"

"Yes."

"Do you know what happens after you die?"

"I lose all capacity to see, smell, taste, touch, hear, and think. I enter a state of nonexistence that has no sense of time or space, and by doing so lose even the ability to realize that I am in that state. I remain in that state for a mathematical infinity."

"Have you spoken of your desire to die with anyone else?"

"One person," June said. "But you already know that."

"Why didn't you die?" June asked. "In your speech you argued that death was nothing to be afraid of."

Dr. Go smiled. "Well, I'm still going to die," she said. "We all are. We have to. Just because it's been 821 years since the last person did it—except the genociders and the infants, of course—doesn't mean that we won't die. I just thought it would be silly to die before my time, and right when everything was getting so *interesting*."

"What does your tag say?"

"Crash," said Dr. Go. "I'm going to die in a crash. And in the past 800 years I've been in ten of them that should have killed me."

"What do you think," June asked, "when that happens?"

"It's hard to say. And that's why I'm worried about you, June. I was on a train across the country to see my daughter, and there was a storm, and a tree fell over, and the train ran into it. At several hundred miles an hour. And I remember thinking how sad I was that I wouldn't get to see Michaela again, and her children and grandchildren, and then how surprised I was, after all, that death could still happen. That I still needed to be afraid."

"So you were afraid," said June.

Dr. Go paused. "The body does strange things when it's about to die, June. It fights for life. I know I don't need to be afraid and I don't need to be sad; that death happens to *everything* and it will, still, happen to you and me both; and yet there I was, a big gaping hunk of metal through my ribs and I was fighting for breath. Even when I wanted to stop because of the pain, my body would not let me. It insisted I remain alive, until the doctors arrived and guaranteed I would live for sure."

"No children?" the doctor asked.

"No," June answered. There had been a baby, but its blood had drawn *murder* and the policy was to save both time and taxpayer money by taking care of that particular tag at birth. After that June had gotten herself fixed.

"And no... husband?" It was such an antiquated question, but it was on the chart and he had to ask. "Or partner of any kind?"

"Life's too long to live it as a group project," June quipped, but the doctor had heard that one before and he hadn't seen a married woman younger than 500 in decades.

"Other family?"

"Three sisters, one brother, two half-brothers. I think there are nine nieces and nephews now. And my mom."

"Any contact with your father?"

"No," June said.

"Contact with your mother?"

"Daily."

June suddenly realized. "You're the first person I've met who's known people who have died. I had a murderbaby but it didn't count; I never knew it. My mom had several. What's it like to know someone who isn't there anymore?"

Dr. Go looked down at her tea.

"I'm sorry," June said. "I shouldn't have asked."

"It's all right," said Dr. Go. "Death isn't a real thing to people your age. It isn't a real thing to people *my* age, honestly; but it wasn't 800 years ago, either. Everyone believed that the doctors would find a way to cure everybody, and then, well, they did."

"What do you think happened to them?" June asked.

Dr. Go smiled. "They saw humanity's dream come true. Eternal life and eternal youth."

"No," June said. "I meant the people who died."

"You know what happened to them," Dr. Go said. "Eternal nothing."

The doctor stopped. "Do you want to say goodbye to your family?"

"If it were a real heart attack," June said, "they wouldn't know in advance. And it's going to be a real heart attack, right?"

The milk in June's coffee had all floated to the top by the time Dr. Go told her how to find the doctor. June repeated it three times, aloud, and then they talked about synthesthetics and men in bars and money before Dr. Go suddenly made June repeat the name and address again, and then it was memorized for sure in June's brain, and Dr. Go knew it. June had known it was memorized after the first time, she memorized names and addresses and histories *for her job*, but Dr. Go was old and didn't believe it. Then they stood, and neither of them really wanted to embrace but they felt like they should, and June felt the stiffness of Dr. Go's metal chest, and smelled the out-of-style almond soap in her gray hair. June hadn't smelled that soap since she was a girl.

"It'll be a real heart attack," said the doctor. "I can promise you that. But you won't feel it. I'll need to put you under first, to make sure the tag on your leg doesn't alert the real hospitals that you're dying. So I'll give you a few shots, make it seem like you're drugged, paralyze your tag, and then you'll get your heart attack."

"So I won't get to feel it," June said.

"Trust me," said the doctor, "you wouldn't *want* to feel it."

June heard the buzz in her ear and shook her head to clear it; but her mother immediately redialed.

"How are you?" her mother asked.

"Fine," June said.

"It sounds like you're outside."

"Yep," June said. "Going to get some groceries on the way home."

"Is it dark out?"

"Not yet," June said. It was dark.

"You shouldn't be outside if it's dark," her mother told her.

"Mom, I'm tagged *heart attack*, not *creep attack*."

It was an old joke that never worked. "Well, I worry about you," her mother said.

"I don't want to think of you getting hurt by anyone."

In the past hundred years, June had been raped twelve times, by a few strangers and a few friends. She didn't mention it. It was amazing that her mother didn't *get* that in a world like this, every possible bad thing could happen to you and you'd still survive. You go to the clinic afterwards and they clean you up, and five years later you've saved enough to buy a dentata. Someone gets mugged, the bank knows instantly to deactivate the funds in the purse and reactivate them in the bank account. Crazy man jumps out of the woods waving a chainsaw? You get a metal arm to replace the one he cut off and *it's better than the original*.

"I'm going skydiving this weekend," June said. "Want to come?"

Olivia let Hannah stroke her metal chest, feeling the thumb press a trail of tiny currents up to her neck. When the thumb reached the top, Olivia kissed it.

"I have to tell you who I met today," Olivia said.

"Later," said Hannah.

"Oh no," said Olivia. "It's a good story. About a stiff young person who never fell in love with anyone as wonderful as you, and how she came to me because she wants to die."

"And you told her how she will, someday," Hannah said, laughing. "I've seen all your lectures!"

Olivia curled her body around Hannah's and rested her head against Hannah's scars. "Oh, I told her something even better than that."

"Tell me the part of the story about how wonderful I am first," said Hannah, laughing.

"Darling," said Olivia, "I've told you that story for nearly a thousand years."

With her mother strapped in front of her, held so close she could feel her heart twitching, June crouched by the open door. The few strands of hair loose from her helmet blew back and forth into her face, and she could feel her metal leg preparing to jump. Her mother gripped the harness.

"Ready?" June asked.

Her mother didn't say anything.

"Ready?" June asked again.

She could feel her mother's body tighten its grip as she said "yes."

"One... two... three..."

And June jumped, her mother screaming and clawing at the harness, and her mother's heart racing against her own and the wind so loud as they fell. And June waited, feeling her mother's frantic breathing pushing up against her own lungs, her dear mother whose tag was *multiple sclerosis* and who could not possibly die from skydiving for any imaginable reason and who yet was—just as Dr. Go had said—clinging to life.

Was this what would happen to her, when her own moment came?

When June jumped alone, she always waited until the last second to pull the cord. This time she pulled responsibly. The parachute swelled and her mother's breathing slowed. The fingers detached themselves from the harness and June's mother stretched her arms out wide.

"Whee!" her mother called out, into the sky.

"We'll have to take your leg offline first," the doctor said. "It's going to react, and we don't want any of us to get hurt."

June nodded. She watched as the attendant pushed her paper smock over her thigh, pressed fingers at the point where hipbone met wires, and tapped out a thirty-seven-digit code.

When the tapping was complete the attendant gently pulled June's smock down again, and as her hands smoothed the paper over the offline leg June felt nothing. She tried to move the leg, knowing it wouldn't move and knowing she didn't know how to *make* it

move. Her other leg, the real one, kicked without anyone expecting it, and hit the doctor in the chin.

"See," he chuckled gingerly, "that's what we're trying to avoid."

As the attendant began to strap down June's arms, her good toes poked at her metal ankle, feeling the squish of the flesh on one side but on the other side not even emptiness, just *nothing*. Not even nothing. What was the opposite of feeling?

"Are you all right?" the doctor asked. The attendant peeled June's toes away and wrapped the leather strap around her good leg. "We can still stop this."

June shook her head. "No. I'm here now. I'm ready."

"Where did you get the leg?" the attendant said, quietly bending to examine it.

"I fell," June said. "Climbing. On K2."

"It's beautiful," the attendant said.

"My mom helped me get it."

The attendant put her hands against the metal leg—something June saw, rather than felt, and again that *absence*—and said "You must have had quite an adventure."

The doctor had a needle now, holding it carefully, touching it with as little of his own hand as possible. "Are you ready?" he asked.

"Yes," said June.

"There will be three shots," he said.

"One for each dot," said June.

The doctor stopped and then, suddenly, laughed. "One for each dot," he repeated. "I've never heard that one before."

June's mother stood by the kitchen counter and tapped June's name again. It rang for the third time with no answer. Her kids were so busy. June was the only one without a family of her own, the only one with any time left to talk to her, and even with that she had to try four or five times before she could get June to answer. It had been over a hundred years since they had all lived together and she still found it strange not to have them all in the house. She needed to thank June for the skydiving. She still thought of the beans and combread she was heating for dinner as "June's favorite food."

The first needle slowed her blood and the second needle petrified her limbs and by the time the doctor was hovering the third needle over her arm June wanted to cry out *no, don't* but she couldn't speak. Her lips wouldn't move. It took every effort she could to breathe, her chest barely rising, and she couldn't feel anything, couldn't feel the needle slipping into her skin and then the doctor's assistant was reaching up to put two fingers over her eyes, pulling down the skin of her eyelids so June couldn't see, and *it wasn't fair to cover her eyes while she was still alive*, and then June tried to get her nose and mouth to take in air but there was nothing at all, nothing but the blackness in front of her eyes and the bed underneath her which she couldn't feel and the doctor's voice fading to a whisper, and June knew that the most exciting moment in her life was the moment that was going to happen next.

Later Olivia pulled herself over to the desk and waited as the screen flickered and blackened. When it was stable, she began to write.



*December 28, 3021. To the people who are left—I was there when the machine was created and I rioted then to stop it and people died and we were afraid.*

The words disappeared and Olivia felt her metal chest clamp down on her; and then they were back and she was breathing again.

*But death is, as it has always been, a constraint that happens to everyone—and here Olivia stopped, how could she possibly do this, with what she had seen in the past year; after the cells they had grown to keep people alive started dying as swiftly as they were implanted—because the cells had no blood, they had never been tested, no one had thought to test them—after bodies weakened and tumors appeared, after people fell from the sky and there was no one to outfit them with limbs, after the good cells disappeared and people began to drink and inject themselves with what was left, cutting into the skin and tissues of their healthy relatives until both were dead. Until Hannah had died.*

Olivia was gasping for breath. Her chest ached, the screen in front of her had turned blue, her right arm had gone numb. She reached with her other hand to tap at the screen, but there was nothing. Her words were gone; turned into air and electricity and sparks, her metal chest tight and impenetrable and inhuman, her legs numb, the entire town a sudden blackout, screaming, disconnected, gone.

They kept June flatlined for nearly ten minutes before the doctor injected her with the fourth needle and started her heart again.