HEARING THE ALEPH

A COLLECTION OF STORIES

by

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Abstract

In this collection of short stories, Charles Green explores how queerness and art might help us connect with ourselves and others. Drawn from experiences as an arts critic and a gay man, and using elements of speculative fiction, these stories take queer characters to unusual situations and encounters, testing their relationships, their desires, and their secrets.

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Christopher Madden
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Introduction

I began this program in the fall of 2020, during the pandemic lockdown. I had mixed feelings. On one hand, I was nervous about what to expect from fully online courses. On the other, with the world on pause, I was excited to have time to work on my fiction, which I had put on hold for years.

Selecting the short stories for this thesis, I noticed several themes. One was religion. I have always felt wary of how religion can damage those who do not fit in. Robert in “Puckish Delight” grew up in a Baptist community, where he learned to hide his “sinful” homosexual feelings; even as a successful composer and music department chair, he punishes himself when his longings emerge. In “Hearing the Aleph” Chris, a trans man raised in a rigid Chasidic Jewish community, struggles with religion when it takes sides in the culture wars.

Another theme I saw emerging was LGBTQ life. As a gay man who came out at thirty, I feel comfortable now sharing my full self in all areas of my life, including my fiction. These stories draw partly on my own and my friends’ experiences within the community. “Devotion to Art” features a gay couple with a significant age gap. “Madness in Love” shows the complications of a gay man in a secret relationship with a closeted man. I am incredibly appreciative to my instructors and fellow students, who offered helpful suggestions and encouragement with strengthening this queer theme.

Art was another recurring theme. As a theater and performing arts critic, I am curious how art affects people. I was surprised to find that music especially features in these stories. Both “Puckish Delight” and “Madness in Love” have composers as characters, and one who is a music historian. “Hearing the Aleph” shows Chris eager to attend an unusual production of Die
Walkure, while in “Devotion to Art” Jake and Florence walk out of a terrible performance of Parsifal.

Through this program I discovered I enjoyed working in speculative fiction. These stories thus utilize elements of the genre. In “Puckish Delight” closeted Robert encounters an enchanting stranger while visiting a gay bar. “Hearing the Aleph” follows Chris, reporting on a new search for extraterrestrial intelligence, who discovers more than he expected. “Devotion to Art” finds a young man meeting a strange painter of otherworldly scenes. In “Madness in Love” the downloaded consciousness of an intellectual engages in a revealing interview about his relationship with a famous composer.

All this work was written since Spring 2021 in the Hopkins Master of Arts in Writing Program.

I want to express my deepest gratitude to my thesis advisor, Christopher Madden, for his guidance and thoughtful suggestions. And much love to my parents and friends for their support.

Charles Green
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Hearing the Aleph

*Three weeks of waiting, and still nothing,* Chris scrawled in his little red notebook.

He lifted his glasses and rubbed his eyes before glancing around the lab, at the scientists adjusting dials and staring at computer screens. He crossed his legs for what felt like the thousandth time that day, wondering what the point of all this was.

Really, he had no business being here. Meredith had called him frantically a month ago to ask him to cover this story, after the magazine’s science reporter suddenly came down with the flu and couldn’t work on it.

“Why me?” he had asked her. “Science isn’t my beat.”

“We need someone on the ground to cover this, and you’re one of our best reporters,” she replied. “Plus, this’ll expand your expertise beyond the arts. You’ll do great, man.”

Chris thought being the magazine’s chief arts reporter and critic was enough. But he knew Meredith was passionate about this story, and he was thrilled she called him “man.” It was only two months since his request to change his name and gender on his legal documents had gone through. Although Chris had always been on his byline ever since he started writing professionally, having a different legal name made for complications. When he told Meredith, she simply responded, “Congrats. Tell payroll.”

On the flight to Albuquerque, Chris read as much as he could about SETI-X, the new private business venture to find and interpret signals of intelligent life from outer space. Created by tech mogul William Hamm two years ago, the company bought and upgraded old SETI
facilities in New Mexico, building new radio telescopes and detection equipment, and hiring young scientists eager for the search.

Hamm was certainly a promoter, telling all the media outlets if life exists out there, SETI-X would find it. Why the original SETI hadn’t found anything searching all these decades was never brought up, of course. That was two years ago, after many billions of dollars, with no results. But then, just in the last few weeks, Hamm had personally called Meredith for an off-the-record conversation about two unusual transmissions the project had detected. He invited Meredith to send her best reporter to embed in the New Mexico lab. “He thinks they might have some real results,” Meredith had told Chris.

Chris was skeptical. “Are they talking to little green men?” he joked. But Meredith believed. “The universe is huge, with so many planets out there. Some must have intelligent life sophisticated enough to send out signals. To think we’re all alone is egotistical, don’t you think?” The science reporter confirmed SETI-X’s methods were legit. “They’re not cutting any corners or fabricating evidence,” he said on a conference call, in between sneezes. “The protocols are essentially what they’ve used for decades, just now with cutting-edge tech.”

Chris was intimidated by the high-tech facility in the desert, a two-hour drive from the airport. He was more used to interviewing actors, artists, and musicians in old theaters, concert halls, or cramped studios. Even the steel and glass skyscrapers he passed by daily in the city felt more inviting than the huge rectangular structure he drove up to, surrounded by a chain-link fence. Beyond the building but still within the fenced-in boundaries, huge satellite dishes and radio telescopes covered every inch of the desert scrub. Pulling up to the front gate, Chris thought of government black sites and wondered if he’d be renditioned by the burly, scowling guard holding a rifle.
Dr. Hedvig, the head researcher, greeted him as he went inside. A scowl briefly passed over her face, and for a moment, Chris was suddenly keenly aware of his slender, feminine-looking fingers and no Adam’s apple. Even though he always dressed masculine, keeping his hair short and wearing khakis, dress shirts, and a sports jacket for assignments, he knew parts of his body sometimes confused people. If they noticed, most were too polite to say anything, but he remembered what he had heard about some scientists’ blunt inquisitiveness and tensed for the “gender question.”

Dr. Hedvig welcomed him tersely, remarking that Hamm was away on business, but would be back soon and invited him on a tour of the facility. Before he could say anything, she turned around and started walking quickly. As Chris hurried to keep up behind her, he heard her mutter “Why we don’t merit a science writer…” Blushing, he looked down and noticed her heavy, almost ankle-long dark green skirt clinging to her legs. He recognized it as the same kind he used to wear growing up in a Chasidic community outside Columbus. The memory rushed back of he, his parents, and grandparents walking the three blocks to synagogue for Shabbat services, meeting up with other families along the way.

He hadn’t thought about this since he moved to New York for college. He never went back home and kept in touch with no one there, though he set alerts for mentions of the community. Six months ago, an obituary for Grandpop popped up. He thought about attending the funeral but imagined the awkwardness, the possible stares, and pointed questions from people he no longer knew. What if they barred him from sitting with the men, made him sit up in the gallery with the women? Or worse, simply threw him out? He told himself he’d mourn in his own way. But he did nothing.
Chris snapped back to the present as Dr. Hedvig threw open a door and gestured for him to look inside. “Rec Room,” she explained. He saw the overstuffed couches and amusing posters on the walls but still felt the cold sterility permeating the place. He couldn’t imagine staying there for long.

A few doors down a windowless corridor, Dr. Hedvig took him into the Receiver Room, where she brusquely introduced him to the other scientists, hunched over their equipment. They looked up briefly and said hello. She showed him around the room, quickly explaining some of the equipment and their procedures. The facility was essentially a high-tech listening station, scanning multiple areas in space on different channels for any signals that might be out there. Every technician had their own areas responsible for monitoring.

Recently, Dr. Hedvig said, they had found brief, repeating sounds on two different channels in the same swath of sky. They were redirecting more equipment to focus on that section, in hopes of picking up more. She played the sounds, which reminded Chris of his electric toothbrush. She handed him a set of headphones, so that he could listen to that area. “It’s not as exciting as a Broadway musical, but maybe you’ll hear something,” she said, before quickly walking out. Chris wondered about the odds of picking up something before the trained professionals.

He soon understood why Dr. Hedvig wore such heavy skirts. The room was kept cold to keep the equipment from overheating. Shivering after his first day, he bought a fleece jacket at the general store next to his hotel, a half-hour’s drive from the facility.

After his third day, he had asked all the meaningful questions he could think of, and the only sound on his headphones was the background static of the universe. Chris felt he was
wasting his time. Earlier that day, he heard from a friend that, in defiance of Florida’s ban on 
drag, a travelling opera company was rehearsing a gender swapped production of Die Walkure, 
men playing women’s parts and vice versa, in a secret location in Tallahassee. Performances 
were in three weeks, for two nights only.

That night, he begged Meredith to let him cover the opera instead. This was in his 
wheelhouse, he told her, where he belonged. She said if SETI-X heard anything by the time the 
opera opened, she’d happily send him. But until then, she needed him here. “We can’t miss the 
scoop of the century,” she said.

She made a good point, but he couldn’t keep his mind off the opera. Throughout the days, 
while listening to his assigned channels, he checked his phone frequently, smiling at the rehearsal 
photos the opera company posted. His favorite featured the male soprano playing Brunnhilde in a 
long, pink dress and metallic breastplate. He also found himself scrolling through social media, 
reading comments from conservative politicians and religious leaders invoking the Bible against 
the upcoming production, calling it an “abomination.”

The word threw Chris back to the day when his rabbi spoke on the Supreme Court 
decision on same-sex marriage. Chris was up in the gallery with the other women, hearing the 
rabbi talk about how this “legitimated an abomination,” and how if any man in this community 
wanted to marry another man, he was no longer a Jew. Chris looked at his mother and her 
friends nodding in agreement, and inhaled deeply, holding back tears.

As the days passed with no change, Chris tried to get to know the staff. During lunch 
breaks he would eat with some of them in the cafeteria. The tables closest to the window (one of 
the few in the building) were always packed, so Chris sat with a group of scientists on the far
side of the room. Conversations were always short, as they would eat quickly and race back to work. Chris asked questions and they answered in between bites. While they were polite, they never offered any information beyond the questions, and never asked about him. In all his time sitting and eating with them, Chris only really knew their names and job titles. He wondered if they were keeping their distance because he clearly didn’t know science, or if they were worried about saying anything negative about the program to a reporter.

He continued to read comments about the upcoming opera, some complaining about drag queens “flaunting their sexuality in public.” This reminded Chris about his childhood next-door neighbor Mr. Moyal, who would hiss at Chris and mutter *zanah*, “harlot,” whenever the older man caught the child rolling up his long sleeves or hiking up his skirt. This happened often, as Chris hated wearing dresses even when very young, feeling weighed down in their heavy fabric, and hiked them up whenever he could. When his parents saw him do this, they would look at him sternly and lecture him about “modesty.”

Three weeks into his stay, he interviewed Hamm. It came as a surprise, as the mogul walked into the Receiver Room one morning, clapping Chris on the back. They went to Hamm’s office, a small windowless room he used for the few times he was onsite. Chris and Hamm sat on opposite sides of a large desk, and as their discussion progressed, Chris felt as though the room was shrinking. His questions mostly revolved around why Hamm would spend so much money on a project that so far had produced no results, though he tried not to put it quite so bluntly.

If Hamm noticed Chris’ skepticism, he didn’t show it, eagerly pointing out the possibilities of making contact. “An advanced race could help us solve all our world’s problems, like hunger and climate change. And what a joy it would be to know we’re not alone in the
Hamm’s phone rang after half an hour talking. He looked at the number and told Chris, “Gotta take this. Thanks for the convo.” Chris was relieved to leave.

He told Meredith that night he had enough material for a nice profile on Hamm, and asked if that was enough for him to leave. She appreciated him writing an additional piece, but he had to stay there a little while longer. “What if you leave and the next day there’s a definite signal?” Plus, reports from Florida sounded grim: the opera company was getting death threats, and police were arresting drag protestors. She’d be worried for his safety, and wondered if the people opposing the opera that he’d have to interview would even talk to him, a trans man. Chris tried to resign himself to missing the performance.

In the evenings, after dinner at the hotel restaurant and a drink at the bar, he would go back to his room, climb into bed, and re-read Nietzsche and Christopher Hitchens. He thought back to college, when he read them for the first time, underlining passages and writing notes in the margins. They seemed to say everything about religion he had been thinking his whole life but couldn’t put into words. When he discussed them with his friends, he joked they were his spiritual advisors. In fact, when it was time for him to choose a new first name, he picked Chris.

Sitting in the Receiver Room one afternoon, he thought about this facility. He knew he should appreciate it, a place devoted to scientific inquiry, but wondered if all the money spent here could have cured cancer or ended world hunger. What was this place’s purpose? To hear the messages of a civilization which, as he understood, might be long extinct by the time they reached us? He wrote down big, expensive toys in his notebook.

He thought back to his Saturday morning discussions with Grandpop on each week’s Torah portion. Chris would walk into Grandpop’s study, when he would take out his Tanakh, a
massive book with all the major Jewish writings and rabbinic commentaries in the margins. They would talk all morning about what every passage might mean, and Grandpop treated Chris’ interpretations seriously, even when they went against traditional thinking. The older man would press Chris on his arguments, making him back them up with scriptural evidence. When Chris’ parents asked if it was right for a girl to study Torah like that, Grandpop responded without hesitation, “That child knows Torah better than any boy, better than many rabbis.”

At his high school graduation, Grandpop gave him his own Tanakh. It was the only thing Chris took with him when he left for New York. He kept it on a bookshelf at first, then after a few moves, stashed it in a closet. He never opened it.

As Chris shifted in his chair, he felt a trembling. Then he heard a deep, primal rumbling from his headphones. He put down his notebook and stood up quickly, looking around the lab, at the scientists focused on their stations. He slid off his headphones.

“Anybody hear that?” he asked. No one replied. They were all glued to their own instruments, unconcerned. Chris was getting nervous; the noise reverberated deep in his gut, like something trying to break free.

Suddenly, in front of him, he heard what he instinctively knew was lightning and saw a flash of what he knew to be thunder. He gasped as impossible shapes, in colors he had never seen before, swiftly flew across the room, shifting forms at incredible speeds. Yet he could see them changing and knew what they were, even if he couldn’t describe them.

Multiple images of fierce horses driving golden chariots flashing across the ceiling. Frightened but also excited, in one ear, he heard, loudly speaking to him, the idea behind the triangle, so that he now understood it more fully than anyone else in history.
Underneath all this, he felt in his very being, his soul, if he believed that existed, the full force of what the phrase “I Am” truly meant.

Just as suddenly, the visions ceased, and Chris, his shirt soaked with sweat, heard once again the faint hum of machinery and saw the technicians looking at their instruments, having seemingly missed this entire event.

Dr. Hedvig noticed him looking pale and breathing hard. She asked if anything was wrong. He asked her if she had heard or seen anything unusual. “Nothing,” she replied. As he began to relate what had happened, a puzzled look crossed her face. Chris stopped, realizing she didn’t believe him. He could hardly believe it himself.

She checked his headphones and the equipment around him. No malfunctions as far as she could tell. She sent him to the on-site doctor, who after an extensive checkup told him he was perfectly fine, apart from a slightly elevated heart rate. Dr. Hedvig kept a close eye on him the rest of the day. “I’m told the local mushrooms are quite potent,” she said.

That night at the hotel, he wrote the article, getting everything down quickly, including his experience. Reading it on the computer screen, he knew how absurd it sounded but also knew, without a doubt, it was all true. He emailed it to Meredith, with a note that he was headed to Tallahassee; he made plane reservations for the next morning and bought a ticket to the opera for its final night.

On the plane he kept thinking about his vision. It felt strangely familiar, but he couldn’t place it. He was tempted to search for it online but couldn’t bear trying to wade through sites on mysticism. He would research when he got home.
Meredith called him after he landed. “Are you shitting me, man?” she asked. He said he wasn’t. She told him to return to SETI-X the next day. “If we’re lucky, they haven’t found anything yet.”

Chris apologized but said no. She had needed him to wait for a signal and he had gotten one and written it up. “I can’t publish this,” she replied. “Who’d believe it?”

Chris said it was all true and Meredith sighed. “Get me the Hamm profile ASAP, then. Maybe I can salvage something. I’m disappointed, man. Maybe the tabloids will buy this garbage.”

At the opera that night, Chris leaned back in his seat, the music and singing washing over him. He’d seen it many times before, but this production resonated with him like no other. The costumes, brightly colored frilly dresses for the men and tight leather trousers for the women, made him smile. Everything about it felt so outrageous and campy, yet the story’s drama and the power of the music came through beautifully.

*I’m home*, Chris thought as he closed his eyes, memories of the vision faintly playing through his head. It seemed a lifetime ago, and while it felt familiar, he still didn’t know why. Suddenly, as Wotan summoned the flames to surround Brunnhilde, he snapped open his eyes, remembering a story Grandpop had told him when they discussed Moses’ encounter with God on Mount Sinai:

“When the Lord revealed himself to the Israelites, the people gathered around the mountain heard visions and saw sounds. One of the things they heard is the sound of an Aleph.”

Aleph. The first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. One of only two silent letters.
Chris sighed in deep thought. On his first day, he had asked Dr. Hedvig how far away the channels she had selected for him to listen to were. She said they were from billions of light years away, some possibly from the birth of the universe itself.

He flew home the next day. As soon as he got to his apartment, he went to his hall closet and took out the Tanakh. He opened it and turned the pages, feeling the golden edges on his fingers.

Chris closed his eyes and, in memory of Grandpop, began to chant the Mourner’s Kaddish. Despite having not spoken Hebrew in years, the words came easily, almost as if from a collective memory: *Yisgalal veyiskadash shmei raba*.

“*May his name be celebrated and sanctified.*”

Chanting, he began slowly swaying forward and back, as he had seen the men doing during prayers growing up. He remembered how he always found the language of the Kaddish, sung at every service, so beautiful and poetic, even if he didn’t fully know what every word meant. It always gave him a sense of peace.

As he uttered the final line, *Oseh shalom bimromav, hu ya-aseh shalom aleinu, v’al kol-yisrael, v’imru: amen*, he realized tears were streaming down his face. He sat down on the sofa and closed the Tanakh. For the first time in years, he let himself weep.
Devotion to Art

The purple sky stopped me in my tracks.

That was my first glance of the painting as I walked through the front door of the Queer Artists Showcase. The purple was so vibrant and large, filling the whole background, that it felt unfamiliar.

Usually, after a long day working at the garage, seeing an exhibition of three new artists isn’t at the top of my list. I’d much rather eat one of Howard’s delicious dinners, then curl up on the couch together with a glass of wine and watch our shows. The quality of the artists always varied; some were almost professionals, but plenty were either still learning or had weird ideas about art. Being part of the community was the only real qualification for showing there. Even the good ones, that Howard liked and bought, never appealed to me.

Until now. Seeing this large painting, its swirls of purple covering most of the entry wall, I was glad Howard dragged me here. Of course, I probably would’ve gone with him anyway, like I go with him to most of these cultural outings. After all, he goes to stuff I love that he doesn’t care about, like soccer games and monster truck rallies. After we got married, he even went to a World Cup viewing party at Horrigan’s, nursing a beer and cheering on Spain with me and my friends. He’d much rather go to art showings, new theater, and operas, though.

I couldn’t take my eyes off the painting. In the foreground I saw what I knew to be a city, far enough away to see the whole of it but close enough to make out details.

It reminded me of cities I’ve seen in the old sci-fi comics I loved reading. The buildings were stacks of spheres and cylinders, connected by ramps and wires. Painted in dark greens,
oranges, and light reds, almost glowing in the purple sky. It felt strange, beautiful, and familiar all at once.

I looked at the label underneath it, seeing the title “Ythrixis”, and the artist’s name, Florence Lane. I stared at it for what felt like ages, noticing more details, until I felt a hand on my shoulder. I looked at Howard next to me, who asked “We’re holding up the line, Jake. Wanna see what else they have?”

“Sorry, babe. Sure” We walked in together. The three painters had their work interspersed with each other, usual for Queer Artists, but I didn’t look at the other artists’ work. I lingered at every one of Florence’s paintings, taking it all in. She had more cityscapes, with golden flying chariots weaving in between multicolored spherical towers. Landscapes as well, rolling hills and plains in oranges and reds, nearly empty except for an occasional dome-like structure just visible in the distance. And portraits of people with long necks and huge eyes that stared out at the canvas. Some were grey-skinned, others dark green, and some amber. Some of them pointed long slender fingers upwards as they looked off in the distance.

Howard passed me several times, more interested in the other two artists. He was beside me as I looked at one of the landscapes. I could tell he wanted to whisper a joke, but I glanced at him with such enthusiasm that he said nothing and soon walked off.

The reception area in the back room had cocktail tables and a bartender. Over in a far corner, I noticed a tall woman with flowing green and red hair, wearing khakis and a unicorn t-shirt. From her photo in the exhibit brochure, I immediately knew who she was and raced over, while Howard was still checking out the rest of the art. I never did this on my own at other events, but I wanted to meet her.
“Florence Lane?”

She looked at me and smiled. “Hello. Yes, that’s me.”

“Oh my god, I just love your work! It’s so different!”

She smiled. “Thank you.”

“It reminds me so much of comic book art.” Suddenly I remembered what Howard told me when we first started going to galleries together: “serious” artists hate comic books. “Oh, please don’t take offense.”

She laughed. “No one’s made that comparison yet.” She waved a long arm around the room, taking in the other patrons. “Of course, has anyone here ever seen a comic book?”

I laughed. “Though to be honest,” she continued, “I’ve not read them myself, but how wonderful that my work feels like such a popular American art form. I clearly ought to read some. Maybe they’ll inspire me.”

“You could borrow mine. I’ve got boxes full of them.”

Howard came over with two glasses of wine. I introduced him to Florence and took a glass. He asked Florence about herself. “There wasn’t much in the brochure,” he said.

“I’d rather my work speak for me,” she replied. “It shows deeper truths than I could myself.”

Howard nodded. “A philosopher and an artist. So, where are you from?”

She smiled, saying she came “from far away” to become a painter. “I’m just a beginner, but I’ve already created so much.”
Howard talked with us for a few more minutes before saying he wanted to meet the other artists. I stayed with Florence, and while a few people came up occasionally to meet her, we were pretty much alone.

I was rarely this social at these events, but talking with Florence felt instantly comfortable, like being with an old friend. My parents disowned me after they found out I was gay, a year into dating Howard, and a lot of my friends just cut me off. And some of the ones who stuck around just couldn’t understand why a twenty-year-old Catholic guy like me would date a forty-year-old Jewish guy. Our marriage three years later frightened them off for good.

Howard’s friends were nice and polite, but I knew some thought I was a kept boy. Even those who didn’t mostly talked about politics and art and parties from the past that I didn’t know much about and couldn’t really contribute to the conversation. Sometimes I felt like Howard’s arm candy, even though I knew he cared about me.

Florence and I chatted for a while, until Howard came back and gently rubbed my back. “We’ll miss our dinner reservations if we don’t hurry, bub.”

I apologized, and asked Florence for her number. We exchanged digits and Howard and I headed out.

At dinner Howard commented, “I’m impressed at how much you enjoyed the art tonight. Usually, you race through these exhibits like your pants are on fire, but tonight you were practically hypnotized.”

After swallowing a piece of fillet, I said, “Yeah, at least with Florence’s. Those portraits are so vivid! I’ll be thinking about them for a while. She’s cool too.”
“Her work doesn’t do much for me. But I’m glad you found art you love. I suppose I have your Christmas present all picked out.”

“Yay! Thanks, babe.” An idea formed as I took a sip of wine.

“How’d you feel about having Florence over for dinner?”

Howard speared a stalk of asparagus. “Hmm.” He chewed the piece thoroughly as he thought. “Sure, why not? I just hope she doesn’t ask what I think about her paintings.”

*

The next week, at 6:30 exactly, the doorbell rang, while Howard was warming the jambalaya, and I was finishing arranging the dining room table. I opened the front door and there stood Florence, a bottle of red wine in her hand. I led her up to the kitchen and Howard said hi, while I opened the bottle and poured three glasses.

We leaned over the kitchen counter while waiting for Howard to finish, snacking on veggies. Florence asked, “I’m curious. How did you two meet?”

“Daddy-O,” I answered. “a site for ‘mature men and their admirers’.”

“Although,” Howard commented, “at forty, I thought I was more admirer than mature man.”

I smiled. “You should’ve seen him when I called him ‘daddy’ on our third date.”

“I didn’t need a reminder that I was nearly old enough to be your dad.”

“He got me back, though. Called me ‘sonny’ for almost a week.” Florence laughed.

“Dinner’s ready,” Howard said.
We sat at the circular table while Howard placed the food in the center. “How did you get interested in painting?” I asked.

Florence replied while scooping jambalaya into her bowl. “As a child, I watched secret broadcasts and reports of paintings, and they thrilled me. I remember particularly looking at Van Gogh’s Starry Night and feeling inspired. I started drawing what was in my world, learning through trial and error.”

“Secret?” Howard asked.

“Yes, where I come from, art is forbidden, even reproductions or broadcasts. There were a few who dared to pick up images and share them with others, but they took great risks.” She sighed. “When they were found, they were exiled or executed.”

“That’s terrible,” I said, putting down my fork. “Is that why you left?”

“Yes. I was lucky. They sent me here, thinking it would be a punishment to be away from my people.” She stared off into the distance beyond me. “And it is, but now I can be who I was meant to and master my craft.”

“Well, we’re glad you got out and made it here,” Howard said.

“Thank you,” Florence said, savoring the food. “Sometimes what’s allowed here that isn’t at home overwhelms me. You two, for instance,” pointing at Howard and I, “could not be together. Homosexuality is illogical, as is romance of any kind. Marriages are made only for political and financial alliances.”

Howard let out a breath. “I’m sorry, it sounds just awful.”
“It is, and yet it’s also such a beautiful place. Maybe the most beautiful I’ve ever seen. But I couldn’t stay there and survive.”

“Where is it, if you don’t mind my asking?”

She paused, lost in remembering. “Oh, you’ve never heard of it. I call it ‘Far, Far Away.’” She sighed. “I’m sorry. I don’t normally talk about home this much.” She took a sip of wine. “This good food, wine, and company are all loosening my tongue.”

Over large slices of carrot cake, Florence made a suggestion. “Since coming here, I’ve never used live models. But lately I’ve been doing things I never thought would, like this lovely dinner.” She swallowed a bite. “Would you two like to sit for a couple’s portrait?”

I looked at Howard. “That sounds great to me. What do you think, babe?”

Howard hesitated briefly. “Sure. Thank you for thinking of us.”

“Good. It’ll be good practice for me. We’ll set up a date.”

After she left, we started cleaning up. Scrubbing the stovetop, Howard said, “Well, Florence is certainly queer in all meanings of the word.”

Washing the dishes, I replied. “She’s odd. But not much more than some people we’ve met. You remember that theater director who made everyone take off their shoes and socks before seeing her show?”

Howard chuckled. “I had just about blocked that from my mind. I wouldn’t have minded so much if she provided slippers. But no, we had to walk into a theater and sit for two hours in our bare feet. I thought we’d catch pneumonia for sure.”

I laughed. “I’ve never sat for an artist before. It’ll be so cool.”
“Me neither. You’re inspiring all three of us – you, me, and Florence – to new experiences.”

I walked over to him and wrapped an arm around his stomach, giving it a gentle squeeze. “I’d never have gone to that exhibit without you. Any inspiring I do comes from you, babe.” I gave his cheek a quick peck.

*

We found a date for the sitting surprisingly quickly, considering our full schedules. Florence greeted us at the door barefoot in grey sweatpants and a black T-shirt. “My work clothes,” she called it. Howard and I were in slacks and dress shirts, one of the few times I was eager to dress up.

Canvases were neatly stacked against the walls of Florence’s studio. Many of what I could see were finished, but a few needed a little more work. Cups filled with various brushes sat on the hardwood floor; Howard and I carefully watched our steps as we entered.

In the center of the studio was a wooden easel holding a large canvas. The morning light shined from a bank of windows along the side. Florence positioned us a few feet past the easel, in front of a blank wall. She walked to the easel and started sketching.

Howard had told me beforehand that some artists like to have music or TV in the background during a sitting, or they’d chat while working. None of that for Florence; she had a look of intense concentration as she kept glancing up at us and back down at the canvas.
Staring past Florence, I looked around the studio. Apart from the art supplies and a couch up against the wall opposite us, I saw no photos or personal possessions. In the far back was a closed door, which I thought might be a bedroom.

After about half an hour, Howard coughed and said, “Mind if we take a short break? I need to stretch.” Florence put down the pencil. “Yes, of course. I’m so sorry. I didn’t realize.” She put a cloth over the canvas, and Howard bent over while I used the bathroom. Walking past her, her face had a gray tinge.

“Everything okay?” I asked. “You’re looking a little…strange.”

“I’m fine,” she replied. She looked nervous, though.

Apart from a white towel hanging on the door, the bathroom had no personal items in sight: no toothbrush or cups or creams, like Howard and I had on our sink. I was tempted to go through the cabinet but held back.

Walking back out, Howard was pacing back and forth while Florence was at the easel studying her watch. Her grey color was more noticeable now, and her arms looked slightly longer. “You sure you’re all right?” I asked.

Before she could respond, her watch began flashing. She yelled something I couldn’t make out and rushed to the back, looking panicked.

“I am so sorry. I need to take care of something” she said. “Can we finish another time?”

“Of course. Can we help?”

“No,” she said, slightly opening the door in the back. “I must do this myself. My apologies.” And she raced into the room and slammed the door.
Out on the street, waiting for our ride home, Howard asked, “What the hell was that all about?”

“I don’t know. I hope she’s okay.” I looked up at her building. “Did she look gray to you?”

“I didn’t notice. I was trying not to squirm. Most artists take plenty of breaks when they’re drawing live people. She’s a whole other level of dedication, but no one can stand like that for very long. Maybe she’s on the spectrum?”

“Could be.” I thought for a moment. “I wonder if she has any other friends besides us. We should invite her to things.”

Howard squeezed my shoulder as our ride pulled up. “You’re a good friend,” he said.

*

I stretched my legs as far as I could, trying to stifle a yawn. On the stage in front of us the singers were performing Parsifal, although to me they just looked like they were standing around singing in a language I didn’t understand. Both Florence and I kept glancing between the stage and the scrolling translation on the ticker above. As soon as the performance started, though, the translation was delayed for a couple minutes and never caught up, so the singing was well ahead of what was being translated.

I wished Howard was here. This was one of his favorite operas, after all. But he had an emergency work meeting tonight and told me to invite someone. I suggested Florence and after a brief text bubble he replied “Good.” I called Florence and convinced her it’d be a fun night out. Now I wondered if she’d ever want to do anything with me again.
At intermission we walked into the lobby to get the circulation moving. I asked her what she thought. She hesitated.

“It’s…okay. I never go to these things, so didn’t know what to expect.”

I leaned over to her to whisper. “It’s boring as hell for me. We don’t have to stay for the rest if you don’t want to. You want to grab a drink?”

She nodded.

“Great,” I said. “I know a place.”

*

We clinked our bottles in the booth. I glanced occasionally at the soccer game playing on the tv over the bar, checking out the score. I had taken Florence to Horrigan’s, my favorite place, a neighborhood watering hole where the drinks were cheap, and they showed all kinds of sports on tv.

I hadn’t been there in a few weeks. Howard had gone with me a couple times in the past, but didn’t care for it, and lately we had both gotten busy with work and going out. I saw a few people I knew there and introduced them to Florence. It felt nice being in a place I knew and could just relax, even if we were overdressed in slacks, ties, and blazers.

We were each on our second beer and chatting. “How are you feeling?” I asked.

“Good. This is much more fun than the opera.”

“Well, that performance set the bar pretty low.” She smiled and took another sip of beer.

“I never do things like this. Tonight’s the time for new experiences.”
“You just stay in your studio and paint?”

“It’s a privilege I never had at home. Anything illogical, like art, was forbidden. I’m honored to spend my time painting.”

“I’m glad you can. But I hope you’ll get out and do more stuff with Howard and me. All work and no play, you know.”

“Yes.” She paused for a moment, and her face started taking on a faint gray tinge. If I hadn’t seen it the first time we were at her studio, I probably wouldn’t have noticed. But I was aware of it now.

“You okay?” I asked her. “You look gray.”

She looked down at her hands, then sighed. After a few moments she asked, “Would you like to come to the studio tonight? I’m almost finished with your portrait.”

She had called me a couple days after our first sitting and asked if we could come in to finish. Howard was hesitant to go back, but after some negotiation, we found a date. That session went by with no problems.

“Sure. Let me text Howard. Then I’ll pay up and we can head out.” Howard replied, “Nice. Take a picture if she lets you.”

* 

I walked into the studio behind Florence, who turned on the lights. Her skin was looking grayer with every moment, and she seemed to have grown slightly taller. The studio looked just like the last time Howard and I were there. Again, I watched my step as I walked to the center of the room, where a large canvas lay on the easel.
“It’s nearly done,” Florence said, gesturing to the portrait. “If I hadn’t been out with you tonight, I would have been working on it.”

I looked at it. The couple captured in paint looked barely like Howard and me. Their necks were almost comically long, their eyes big and wide, like old-time cartoon characters. And Howard’s skin was dark grey, while mine looked almost green. If we hadn’t posed for it, I’d never have recognized us.

Florence saw my look of disappointment. She sighed. “I knew it looked wrong. You two are the first humans I’ve tried to paint.”


“Come, sit down,” she pointed at the couch. “It’s time I showed you the truth.”

I nervously walked over. She stood in front of me as I sat down.

“This isn’t what I really look like. I’m from a far-away planet, exiled for wanting to know how to paint. Here’s my true form.” She waved her hand over her watch, changing even more. Her neck, arms, and fingers stretched out. Her skin turned dark grey, like some of the people in her portraits. And her clothes faded into her skin, which, except for on top of her head, was totally smooth.

I drew back in surprise, gasping. “Before I had to leave,” she continued, “I stole this image inducer, to let me pass among you all. It’s been malfunctioning recently, giving me less time in my human form. You’ve been so kind to me, I thought you deserved to see me as I truly am.”

I took a deep breath, trying to keep a calm tone. “Is Florence your real name?”
“No, it’s a near equivalent. Flow-Rah.”

She reached out towards me with an arm. It was so long, and so non-human looking, I shrank back. “I’m sorry, I need to go.” I bolted up from the couch and raced towards the door. I ran out as fast as I could.

When I got home, Howard was asleep in bed. I tossed my clothes in the middle of the room, and crawled under the covers, wrapping my arms around his hairy chest, pulling myself as close as possible towards his warmth and safety.

*

I tried explaining what happened to Howard the next morning over breakfast. It all came tumbling out in a rush. Speaking it out loud, I realized how bizarre it sounded.

When I stopped, Howard looked at me quizzically. “What sort of drugs did you two do last night?”

“We just had a couple beers, that’s all. I wasn’t even drunk, babe.”

“Well, whatever you two are doing, it’s certainly sparking your creativity. You should turn this into one of your comic books. You can write it and Florence can draw it.”

I sighed, wishing he’d believe me.

“I should hang out with Florence more,” Howard continued. “Maybe I’ll finally write that novel.” He got up from the table. “I better get going. Have a good day, bub. Remember the chorale preview’s tonight.”

*
For the rest of that week, Florence’s revelation was all I thought about. I realized how unbelievable it sounded, but also knew I hadn’t imagined it. I didn’t share any of my thoughts with Howard, knowing his reaction.

Finally, I texted Florence and asked if I could see her that night after work. She said yes. I told Howard I’d be home late. He said okay.

Florence smiled when she opened the door to her studio, in her human form. I walked in and asked if we could sit down.

As we sat, I said, “I’m sorry for running away last week, but wow, what you dropped on me was huge. I’m still wrapping my head around it.”

“I’m sorry for showing you so suddenly. I’ve kept it to myself for so long and it felt good to finally share it.”

“I understand. I know what it’s like to hide who you are, and I’m honored you felt comfortable sharing it. Although I still don’t quite believe it.”

Florence sighed in relief.

I reached out to touch her arm. “Listen, do you mind showing me again? I just need to know I’m not hallucinating.”

She nodded and touched her watch, turning gray, tall, and wide-eyed again. I took a couple deep breaths to steady myself, still surprised at her transformation.

“Okay, thank you. I’m glad I haven’t lost my mind, although this’ll still take some getting used to.”

“I understand.”
I pointed to her watch. “Did you fix your device?”

“No, it only works a few hours a day now. I don’t go out unless I have to. I turned it on just before you came.”

“That’s awful. But you know you can be your real, full self here with me, right?”

“I know and thank you.”

An idea popped into my head. “If you want to learn how to paint humans, I could be your model. I could come over, say, one night a week and you can practice with me.”

She smiled. “I would love that.”

“Great. And I want to hear about you and your people. Maybe while we’re painting?”

She nodded.

“Cool. And if I can get Howard here again, would you show him this?” I pointed to her.

She thought for a moment. “Yes. For you.”

“Good. He’ll accept it if he sees it himself. Maybe he even knows someone who can help you fix your device.”

“That would be good. Do you have time now?”

“Sure.” I stood up and walked over to the easel, getting into a pose where I could comfortably stand for a while. Florence got up and started mixing paint. A new canvas was already on the easel. I asked her, “So, what’s your planet called?”

“Ixthar,” she replied, grinning as she picked up a brush and began sketching. “I’ll tell you all about it.”
Robert sat on the stool, holding a nearly empty glass of wine. He looked around the bar, watching the men chatting and drinking. He turned away from two men with their arms wrapped around each other, embracing without a care for who saw. A young man with bright green and blue hair strode past him. He asked himself what he was doing here. If anyone at the college knew where he was, his job, his life even, would be over.

His parents would have gotten an exorcist. He thought back to his childhood, attending service at the Baptist church every Sunday morning, where his father was deacon. Every week, the minister would preach against the temptations of this world and the punishments for giving in. He seemed to stare directly at Robert whenever mentioning “abominations.” Robert would try not to react, to keep his fears hidden. Some nights, though, he felt the fires of hell lapping at his feet, so that he leapt up in bed stifling his screams and tore off the sheets, expecting to find smoking stumps where his feet should have been.

His piano lessons, with their repetitive exercises, helped distract him from his longings. He picked it up quickly, playing beautifully and winning admiration from his parents, who encouraged it as God’s gift. In high school he learned the flute, expanding his repertoire. In college he discovered a talent for composing, first with songs and hymns, then symphonies, all celebrating God.

Pieces of the music he had written over the years passed through his mind. He was lucky so many of them were performed, that they touched so many people. He considered how much he enjoyed chairing the music department at Middleton Baptist, even with all the administrative tasks. Of course, his favorite responsibility was conducting the student orchestra at the end of
semester concert. With everything to keep him so busy, he should not have time to think about men.

Recently, though, the old temptations were returning. In his classes, he would suddenly picture the young men sitting before him kissing and hugging him and he would need to write something on the blackboard to get the images out of his head. Regularly working out three days a week, Robert found he had to go to the college gym first thing in the morning, to avoid the young men there whose sweaty bodies, lifting heavy weights or racing around the track, distracted him from his exercise, making him stare instead in admiration and fantasy.

When these thoughts emerged, as soon as he came home from work, he would rip off his shirt and paddle his back with a belt buckle, while kneeling at the edge of his bed, praying for forgiveness. The most recent time he stopped only when he felt blood trickling down his back; those scars were still tender.

But the longings never fully left. A week ago, he celebrated his fiftieth birthday. In accordance with college regulations, the department had a brief, simple party that afternoon, with a small cake. Robert looked at his colleagues, who congratulated him, and thought about how so many of them went home to happy spouses and children, while he usually turned on his stereo as soon as he got home, filling the empty space with music. He debated asking any of them if they wanted to go out for dinner afterwards, but by the time he decided, all of them were on their way out.

That night, Robert went online, looking at gay porn for the first time. Equally excited and horrified at seeing the variety available, many of which he had never imagined, he spent all night watching, without a thought to sleep.
While scrolling through the videos, he found an ad for Good Fellows, a gay bar twenty miles away. The next night, curiosity and desire overcoming any need for sleep, he drove there, cautiously entering and finding an empty stool at the bar. He had imagined piles of naked bodies writhing around on the floor, and was a little disappointed at just seeing men, mostly in their twenties and thirties, talking and drinking. But his eyebrows raised in surprise at seeing some men wearing blush and lipstick, or with large, elaborate wings strapped to their backs. Several men with thick beards walked around in short skirts, as though they wore such things every day. He ordered a glass of red wine and tried to look casual while taking everything in. He wished a man would come over and talk to him but worried what would happen if one did. A stream of men walked by him, but none approached. Even the ones sitting next to him barely even looked in his direction.

After an hour he finished his wine and left, both grateful no one had talked to him but also sad to be going home alone. The next morning, he realized he hadn’t beaten himself with his belt, either for the porn or for going to the bar. He was surprised to find he had no desire to.

Now, a week later, he was back. No one at Middleton had mentioned him being there the last time, so maybe he could keep this place a secret. He might even find someone here this time. But, as before, no one paid him any attention. He compared his khakis and long-sleeved button-down shirt to the sea of tank tops, tight T-shirts, shorts, blue jeans, and dresses that looked so good on the other men. If he ever could get the bartender’s attention, he would pay up and head home.

While deep in thought, something soft grazed his shoulder. Startled, he turned around in his stool and gazed at a tall young man looking at him and smiling. Robert studied him, seeing he was all in black, from a mesh shirt revealing slender arms, to tight leather shorts. What really
caught Robert’s attention, though, were the amber dragonfly wings on his back, gently swaying. He marveled at the level of detail.

“Hi there,” the young man said, sliding over to next to Robert, a wing gently brushing against his shoulder. “Can I buy you a drink?”

Robert caught his breath. “Yes, please.”

“Fabulous.” The young man waved the bartender over. Robert thought he could wrap his hand completely around this stranger’s slim arms.

“Would you like to try the house special, Puckish Delight? That’s what I drink whenever I’m here.” He smiled, putting his hand to his chest. “I hope I’m not being impertinent.”

“No,” said Robert, “that sounds… delightful.”

“Marvelous.” He spoke to the bartender. “Two Puckish Delights, please.” He giggled and draped his arm over Robert’s shoulder. Robert closed his eyes at the warm touch.

The young man turned to Robert. “I’m Tal. What’s your name?”

Before he could even consider whether to give a fake name, he replied “I’m Robert.”

“Nice to meet you, Robert.” The bartender came back with their drinks. “I haven’t seen you around here before. This your first time?”

Robert took the small glass in his hand. The dark purple liquid inside had splashes of glitter. “No, it’s my second. I was here last week but not for long. No one talked to me.”
“I’m so sorry. You know how cliquish we gays are, and here we’re even more stand-offish to first timers. But I’m glad you gave us another chance.” He picked up his glass and held it towards Robert’s. “Here’s to new friendships and experiences, the second time around.”

He clinked Robert’s glass then drank. Robert carefully took a sip. It was a bit sour, but not overbearing. He wondered why this was so special. Then, suddenly, his mouth erupted with a sweet flavor. A childhood memory of playfully wrestling with his older best friend Russell flashed through his mind. It was so vivid he could feel the weight of Russell’s body on top of him as the boy pinned him down. Robert had never let on how much he loved that sensation, how whenever he played with Russell he tried to get it. He put down the glass, blinking in astonishment.

Tal laughed. Robert found it charming. “Potent, isn’t it?”

“What’s in this?” Robert asked. “Is this where your wings came from?”

“I’ve had these since before I could drink, darling.” Tal took another sip. “As far as what’s in this, I don’t know. Pixie dust? All I know is I love it. It doesn’t knock me back now like it did that first time, but it’s still one of my favorite things here.”

“Do you come here often?”

“All the time. This is my home away from home. I’ve got a cot in the back.” He smiled.

Robert took another sip. The aftertaste was less intense, but now he saw himself at ten years old, walking downtown with his father, as he passed a beautiful blonde-haired boy. As they walked by, he remarked to his father, without thinking, how pretty the boy was. He remembered that at the time his father had stared at him, then said “Hush, boy.” When they got home, his
father had spanked him so hard, determined to “drive out the sin,” that he couldn’t sit down for the rest of the day. But now, all that remained of this memory for Robert was the beautiful boy and his reaction.

He sighed. After a moment’s hesitation he asked, “What do you do?”


“What about you?”

Robert knew he shouldn’t give away too much. He had heard of some Christian institutions that paid gay men for any information they might get about their members. But he replied, “I’m a composer, and I chair the music department at Middleton Baptist University.”

“That conclave of conservative Christians out in the wilderness?” Robert nodded. Tal clucked, and Robert worried what the young man was thinking. “Oh, honey. You do know those Baptists hate people like us? They want to send us all back into the closet or to the flames. You’re sure you’re not here to convert us sinners, save us from hell?”

“No! No, not at all. I don’t preach and I don’t carry signs. And I wouldn’t think of crashing funerals.”

“Well, then, you are welcome here. In fact, everyone at Middleton ought to come here. Let ‘em see what fun they’re missing!” He smiled and took another sip, his wings fluttering. Robert didn’t see any pulleys or strings attached.

“So, you’re a composer?” Tal asked. “Have you written anything I might know?”

Robert took another sip before replying, “Maybe. Do you listen to opera?”
“I adore opera!” Tal said, putting his hand on his chest. “Isn’t Lotte Lehmann’s *Der Rosenkavalier* simply heavenly? If only she could’ve recorded the whole opera. Reining’s a pretty close second. She did so many recordings. And the music, the costumes, the trousers’ role! They remind me of some of my friends.”

Robert laughed. “I wrote one. Ever hear of *Golgotha*?”

Tal waved a hand through his black hair. “I’m sorry, I don’t think I know it.” Robert was disappointed. He was especially proud of that piece, as even secular audiences had praised it. The *LA Times* review calling it “a masterwork” was his favorite clipping.

“Other than opera I’m a real philistine, I’m afraid,” Tal continued. “EDM and Taylor Swift are all I really listen to.” At that, a throbbing drumbeat filled the bar. Tal perked up his head in excitement, a wing brushing against Robert’s shoulder. “Speak of the devil. The music’s starting. Care to dance?” He offered his hand to Robert.

Robert looked at his glass. “Drink up. We’ll get you another,” Tal said. They both finished their drinks in a gulp. A vision of Gabe popped up in Robert’s mind, naked and embracing Robert. A new music professor with long, red bangs, Gabe would frequently visit Robert during his office hours. Sitting in the chair next to Robert’s desk, he would talk about teaching and funny things that happened in class. Sometimes they discussed music, Gabe vigorously giving his opinion on new releases. Recently, after Gabe would leave the office, Robert would find himself wondering what the younger man’s lips tasted like.

He placed his hand in Tal’s, surprised at the young man’s firm grip.

Tal guided them around the bar, skillfully weaving through the crowds of men, his wings folding and unfolding as needed. He waved and smiled to everyone they passed, who looked at
Robert with amusement and lust. They walked into the room behind, where overhead lights flashed in various colors and men danced with each other. All were moving to the rhythmic percussion and the chords of a synthesizer. In the background Robert could just make out a deep voice whispering “It's Raining Men/Amen.” Tal led them near to the center of the room and began swaying his hips.

Robert stood there, briefly transfixed by the sight, sounds, and smells. This was the devil’s music, the ministers warned, not to be listened to unless he dared to lose his soul. He would occasionally hear snatches of it while passing by the residence halls. He felt the driving pulsation within his body. He started tapping his right foot, slowly at first, then faster. Tal looked at him eagerly, and his head began nodding.

He mirrored Tal’s movements, swaying and moving. He felt awkward at first, but as he continued, Tal smiling at him, he lost himself in his senses. The sweat from all the bodies around him smelled animal-like. He threw his head back in delight, smiling. He briefly thought about all the years he had denied himself this, but he quickly put it away. He would enjoy himself now.

Tal slowly began to take off his shirt, gently sliding it over his wings as he revealed his smooth, slim chest. Robert’s eyes opened wide. Tal moved closer to Robert and took the older man’s hand, rubbing it against his chest. Robert sighed at its warmth and perfect smoothness. His hand squeezed Tal’s nipple and the young man licked his lips as his wings gently flapped.

After a moment, Tal let go, then slid his arm under Robert’s shirt, pulling him even closer. He could feel the young man’s hot breath on his cheek and closed his eyes in ecstasy. Tal’s hand gently tugged on Robert’s chest hair. His other hand slowly undid the buttons on
Robert’s shirt, then placed Robert’s arm around his small waist. Their chests pressed against each other, grinding away.

Tal then buried his face in Robert’s neck, slowly kissing it. Robert moaned with joy. He put his free arm on Tal’s back, rubbing and squeezing it. He felt where the wings connected to Tal’s back, briefly wondering why there was no tape, but Tal’s nuzzling of his nipple interrupted his thought.

Tal whispered in his ear, “Want to go somewhere private?”

“Oh, yes,” Robert replied.

Tal pulled away and took Robert by the hand again, weaving him through the ocean of dancing bodies. They walked out of the room and immediately down a flight of steps. For a moment Robert looked around with concern but followed.

They walked around beer kegs and other supplies to a door at the other end. Tal opened it and led them into a room. Red brick peeked out from thick, velvet tapestries on the walls, while a dark green carpet covered the floor. Lamps gave off warm soothing light. A queen-sized bed took up most of the wall on the far right, covered with a rich golden quilt and plump white pillows.

“My bower of bliss,” Tal said, smiling. He reached out to Robert’s neck and drew him close, kissing him on the lips.

Robert gripped the back of Tal’s neck, as Tal’s tongue explored Robert’s mouth. Tal pulled off Robert’s shirt and ran his fingers up and down the older man’s back. He paused at a scar, and Robert tensed, the memory of his self-punishment rushing back.

“What’s this?” Tal asked. Robert lowered his hands, briefly brushing against Tal’s wings.
“From my belt,” Robert replied, unable to say more. The younger man put a hand on Robert’s shoulder. “Guilt?” he asked. Robert nodded. “May I see?”

Robert turned around. Tal’s hands traced the several scars. They felt soft and gentle, but Robert winced at the fear of Tal rejecting him.

Tal’s arms wrapped around Robert’s chest and pulled him close. He felt Tal’s warm breath. “Oh, honey. Please don’t do this to yourself anymore. If you really want a whipping, I have a friend who can give you one, but I promise it’ll be a lot more fun.”

Robert laughed softly. “Okay,” he said. Tal let go and walked around him, holding the older man’s hand while gently leading him towards the bed. Tal’s wings began to slowly flap, and a faint buzz droned in Robert’s ears.

“How does it feel to be one of the fairies now?” Tal asked him afterwards, lying on top of him and stroking his cheek.

“Exquisite,” Robert replied. He had never felt anything that pleasurable before. All the videos from the week before were nothing compared to the actual physical experience. He had noticed at one point during that the buzzing was slowly growing louder but was too occupied with Tal to think much of it. The room was quiet now.

“Welcome to the family, Robert.” Tal kissed him deeply as he felt himself sinking into the bed, suddenly exhausted. He closed his eyes.

*

The next day he taught at Middleton as normal. The night before already felt like a dream. He had no memory of leaving the bar; one minute he was lying on the bed in the
basement, the next he woke up in his own bed to the sun shining, feeling refreshed. On the drive he hummed a few notes forming in his mind.

At the start of office hours, Gabe walked into Robert’s office. Robert smiled and they chatted about his idea for a new opera, a modern-day take on Plato’s *Symposium*. Gabe was intrigued and asked to hear a rough draft when it was ready. As he got up out of the chair, he softly patted Robert’s elbow and made to leave. This was the first time he touched Robert.

Robert decided boldness was in order. Before Gabe turned to walk away, he asked him “Are you free for coffee tonight?”

Gabe stopped and smiled. “Yes, I’d love to. 8 PM at Middle Bean?”

Robert nodded. “I’ll look forward to seeing you then.”

As Gabe left the office, Robert stifled a shout of joy. He hadn’t felt so excited in years. He felt free and light, like he was floating off the ground.
Welcome, Ms. Al-Mansour! It’s so nice to have a visitor, especially a fellow academic. I hope this interview helps your dissertation. Forgive the books scattered around; I haven’t had many guests since they uploaded me here, so most days for company all I have are these digital copies and newspapers Veritas lets me download. It’s how I’ve kept up with the real world.

Please, sit down. Here’s the most comfortable chair. I know all this is simply lines of code, ones and zeroes creating an approximation of my home, but it all feels real to me. I’m curious how you, coming from the real world, experience it.

Of course, you’ve grown up plugging into virtual worlds and speaking with Neural Networks. You’re used to it. I’m an old fogey. Waking up here was my first ever experience with this technology. If, back when I was teaching, they could have built a program from the brain scans of Mozart, I would’ve been the first to learn how to interact with it. A shame only those who’ve had their brains scanned can become Neural Networks. I suppose I should be grateful Veritas thought I was important enough to be saved.

But am I the “real” Nicolas Zimmer, or just a computer reproduction of his personality and memories? I do know everything he knew and respond the way he would have. And the flesh and blood Zimmer is dead, so for all intents and purposes, maybe I truly am the “real” one?
Apologies, I’m philosophizing. The result of spending a life in colleges and seminar rooms, rather than doing things. You can still escape! Would you like a drink? I have a lovely Malbec, or a nice Chardonnay. Another perk of this virtual world is never running out of wine, and never suffering hangovers.

Ahh, Malbec. A woman after my own heart. Sometimes I wonder if it’s ironic that an atheist like me ended up in what you might call this afterlife. Then again, you could argue I’m not really Zimmer, or truly human, so what does it matter? What does Nietzsche say, “As for the right way, the correct way, and the only way, it does not exist?”

Sorry, more philosophizing. Can you tell I don’t get many visitors? Here’s your wine, I hope you enjoy it. Let me sit across from you.

Now, remind me why you’re here? Yes, Eric Stewart. You don’t want my insights into my books or how they might apply to today’s world, but rather my connection to a composer and fanatic knifed in an alley.

My apologies. I did write two books about him, after all. And I’ve thought about him for ages. I just wish I could be rid of him after death.

We were friends, well, more than friends, for so long, and then we weren’t.

You haven’t heard this? Then let me tell you a story.

* 

I met Eric in 2000, when he conducted the Meade College Orchestra for a Friday night concert. I had just gotten my Ph.D. in music history and started teaching there, my first (my
only) position. I’d been a fan ever since *The Cut*, his first opera. That afternoon I skipped a faculty meeting and slipped into the back of the auditorium to watch him rehearse.

Before then, I had loved his music, playing it repeatedly until it lodged itself in my soul. Seeing him in person, in action, I fell totally in love. He was passionate, moving the baton so forcefully I thought it would jump out of his hands. Whenever there was a mistake, he stopped and made sure the musicians got it right. After a particularly egregious error, he stopped and turned around. Even from my seat in the back I could see his red face glaring. I was worried he’d yell at me for eavesdropping on a rehearsal, but after a moment he turned back, picking up where they left off.

Once it ended, I tried to sneak out, but he shouted, “Hold up there, you!” I froze, terrified of what he would say. He quickly strode over. Seeing him up close for the first time, I was surprised how young he looked. I knew he was twenty-five, five years younger than me, but he looked like he should be in my freshman seminar, not touring the world giving concerts and teaching people to play his music. His khakis and blue dress shirt looked worn, as though he’d been wearing them constantly.

“You realize this was a closed rehearsal?” he asked. “Who are you?”

I apologized profusely and gave my name.

He smiled. “Ahh, Professor Zimmer. I didn’t think there was anything new to say about *Lohengrin*, but you make a compelling case.”

“Thank you,” I replied, releasing the breath I hadn’t realized I was holding.

“So, from what you’ve heard, are we ready for tonight?”
“I think so. They’re a good orchestra. Lucky to have the composer leading them.”

“I like to think so too.” He reached into his back pocket and took out an envelope. “I’m sure you have a ticket, but please take this VIP one with my compliments.”

“Oh, thank you,” I said as I took the ticket.

He reached out and clasped my arm. “Of course. The front row has surprisingly good acoustics. Plus, you can see everything.”

He walked back to the stage. I stood there momentarily before rushing to class.

*

I see you rolling your eyes. Be patient, I’m setting the scene. How’s the wine?

At the concert, I couldn’t take my eyes off him, from the opening notes of Thou and Thee to the close of Insania in Amor. His baton moved constantly, waving in perfect rhythm. During the quieter moments, he bent closer to the musicians, as though intently listening to them, and then snapped back to attention.

Eric’s ticket let me attend the cocktail reception in the lobby afterwards. Grabbing a glass of wine, I joined the crowd around Eric. As soon as he saw me, he stopped talking and announced, “Here’s a real masochist, listening to me conduct my pieces twice in one day.”

Everyone laughed. “It was an honor,” I said. As the evening went on, I got to stand next to him, mesmerized by his gossipy stories about musicians and artists he knew. He talked about composing, how when it went well, it felt like someone else was writing the notes instead of him. And how he despaired on the days when nothing would come.
Listening to him, I fell even more in love. I grew up exposed to good music and culture. But Eric lived art. He felt it deep in his soul and every day wrestled with creating it. I’ll admit, I was slightly jealous.

As the party wound down, Eric asked me, “Care to join me for a drink at my hotel? It’s just around the corner.”

I agreed and we walked off after he said good night to the hosts.

At his Presidential Suite, he sat next to me on the overstuffed couch as he took off his jacket and tie and began unbuttoning his white dress shirt. “I love classical music, but God, why do we have to get so dressed up? I can barely move.” He squeezed my thigh. “You okay if I take this off?”

I nodded and placed my tie and jacket on the end of the couch. I looked over at his perfectly smooth and tight chest, trying to hide my reaction to this beautiful young man undressing in front of me.

Obviously, I didn’t do as well as I hoped. He looked at me, smiling, then reached out and stroked my cheek. I inhaled suddenly, unsure what to do. He pulled himself closer and kissed me gently on the lips. I relaxed and wrapped my arms around him, pressing against his chest.

He placed his hand on mine and pushed me on my back on the couch. We continued kissing, joyfully exploring each other’s mouths, as he unbuttoned my shirt.

You’re squirming. I’m getting too graphic, aren’t I? Forgive me. At this point all I am is a collection of memories, and this is one of my favorites. I’ll let you imagine the rest then, but that
was the first of our many nights together. If I had known how it would turn out, would I have done it again? Absolutely.

*

From then on, for six years, we’d meet up at least once a week. Usually, I’d come to his studio in DC. Sometimes, he’d visit my home. And occasionally, while he was touring, I’d meet him for a quick tryst.

Whenever he called, I’d answer immediately and meet him as soon as possible. I left in the middle of dinners with friends, or at the intermission of concerts and plays, just to be with him. For years after things ended, I’d tense up whenever my phone rang, wondering if it was him and disappointed when it was someone else.

Before I met Eric, I used to wonder about addicts and why getting off their drug was so difficult. I knew why intellectually, of course, but after Eric, I fully understood addiction’s power. I wish I hadn’t learned. Feeling his arms wrapped around me, kissing me everywhere, was like shooting heroin. I craved him when we were apart, wanting to taste every part of his body on my tongue. I needed him like no one else before. I hated how quickly I dropped everything in my life to spend just a few hours with him every week. But I still did.

*

Part of my self-hatred came from needing to sneak around. Of course, this was mainly on account of Julia. His girlfriend when we first met, then his wife two years later.
I must admit, she handled that situation infinitely better than I. She made Eric agree that he and I would never publicly acknowledge what we did or sleep together in their home. So, we usually met at Eric’s studio on the other side of town.

In return, she let us carry on and was always gracious whenever I saw her. Despite how awkward I felt about the arrangement, she didn’t mind sharing her husband with me.

You look skeptical. Let me tell you how I can be so sure. One day, early on in our relationship, I was at their apartment interviewing Eric for *Wisdom Won from Pain*. Julia was there and when Eric left for the bathroom, she sat down next to me on the sofa, eager to speak.

“‘I realize how queer this situation feels,’” she said, “‘but you needn’t worry. I appreciate what you’re doing for Eric. Neither of us on our own can fill all his needs, but together perhaps we can. And I know you’ll stay discreet.’”

I stammered out a promise that of course I’d keep everything a secret. When Eric returned, she smiled and left us to continue. It didn’t stop me feeling guilty, but I was glad to know she was okay with me.

And I admired her business sense. As Eric’s manager, she was a tough negotiator, ensuring the best deal for him.

She did well for herself. Is she still managing the music center at Sweet Rock? Ahh, that’s right, I had read that she died, not too long ago. You say her son Julian’s running it? I’m sure she was heavily involved right up to the end. She was always good with details. After all, she handled Eric’s murder skillfully. Called it a “tragic mugging” while ignoring that he was in a dangerous part of DC for no reason, wearing a strange trench coat and hat.
You know, Eric invited me to their wedding. I was surprised Julia agreed. I declined, claiming other commitments. I couldn’t bear seeing their relationship consummated so publicly, while we couldn’t acknowledge what we meant to each other. I was terrified I’d somehow give away our secret in front of everyone they knew.

*

Why did I stay with Eric for so long? His music, mostly. You’ve listened to it, right? It’s complex, but hauntingly beautiful. It has pieces of calypso, samba, jazz, things that weren’t normally in classical music then. The librettos and the music blend in ways that feel like they shouldn’t, but they work. And he was so creative with his subject matter. His first opera featured the Norse goddesses of fate onstage for three hours. He adapted whale songs for his first symphony.

So many critics didn’t know what to think. Audiences either. Plenty of people walked out in the middle of performances. Even orchestras that played his music often struggled to get it right. I lost track of how many times he complained about their missing notes or playing in the wrong key, even when he conducted.

That’s why I wrote Wisdom, to help people understand his work. And it did, at least a little. Looking back at it now, I’m surprised no one saw it for what it was, a love letter to Eric.

Eric’s biography also impressed me. Here was this young man from a small Iowa farm town, who’d sneak into his school to practice whenever he could. When he was old enough to drive, he’d travel for hours to take lessons from the best music teachers he could find. He won a full ride to Julliard and went off to New York as soon as he graduated. Before long he was creating beautiful, difficult work.
His ambition thrilled me too, even if it was selfish. He was determined to build a music center and concert hall, mainly to teach musicians how to properly play his work, but also to have a place for composers to create and try out cutting-edge classical music. He spoke about it to everyone, especially people he met with any money or connections. He looked everywhere for locations: New York, DC, Santa Fe. He and I talked with my college about building it there; they politely turned him down.

I’m still surprised it ended up in Sweet Rock. You’ve been there, of course? I visited with Eric when he was checking it out. The town didn’t even have a stoplight. I asked him, why there, why such a desolate place? He replied, “That’s where it can get built, and that’s where people will come.” Once they settled on it, I think he loved the idea of creating a center where there was nothing else like it, a place like where he grew up. It would create community and draw crowds from nothing. He believed so passionately in American culture, how musicians, writers, and artists could give it new life, make it beautiful and meaningful again. In the end, though, he didn’t care who he needed to charm to make his vision a reality, just that they would.

*

Would you like some more wine? I need another glass if we’re going to continue this interview.

You want to know what ended our relationship? Well, parts of Eric disturbed me. After 9/11, he talked about enlisting in the Marines to “Kill Arabs.” Julia and I convinced him not to, that serving in the military would be a waste of his time. She and I worked together just that once.
He was never comfortable around Black men, always keeping his hands over his front pockets to protect his wallet. I figured it came from growing up in an all-white town, but it persisted years after living in DC and travelling the world.

What really hurt, though, was the secrecy of our relationship. I’d regularly invite him to concerts, performances, parties, any event I thought he’d enjoy. If I heard from him at all, it was always “Sorry, can’t make it.” Usually, though, he wouldn’t reply. Yet I always met him whenever he called, no matter how busy. And he found time for me when I interviewed him for *Wisdom*, when it would benefit his career.

One time I told him how much I yearned to take our relationship outside the bedroom. He asked, “If I can’t give you what you want, why are you here?” He quickly got dressed and left, leaving me to lock up his studio. It was one of our first fights and I figured it was over. A week later, though, he called, and I rushed over, like a dog to his master.

* 

Do I hear judgement in your sighing? I’d known I was gay since a child, and at the time I met Eric I was technically out, but until him I never acted on my feelings. I know this sounds unbelievable to someone of your generation but remember back then gay marriage wasn’t even an idea. Gay men could only serve in the military if they kept who they were a complete secret. Even the world of Ancient Greece, which attracted me so much as a child because of how it treated gay love, didn’t offer a model for modern-day relationships. So, I focused on my studies and contented myself with just looking at men, while hiding my fantasies about them.

Then along came Eric, who knew my desire immediately and wasn’t scared. In fact, he wanted me as much as I wanted him. We explored each other, did things together I never
would’ve imagined. How could I walk away from someone like that, no matter if he couldn’t acknowledge what we were?

* *

I’m curious, have you interviewed Eric’s Neural Network yet? You have. Did he talk about me at all? I see, just to say he spoke with me a few times when I was writing *Wisdom*.

I shouldn’t be so disappointed. He kept secrets so well he should’ve worked in the CIA. Still, when you’re finished here, you should go back and get his response to all this.

He was lucky they uploaded his Neural Network a few months before he was stabbed. He was dead by the time they found him, and they couldn’t have scanned him then.

Perhaps I shouldn’t admit this, but shortly after arriving here, I tried contacting him. Apparently, though, Veritas prevents Neural Networks from talking to each other. I don’t know what they think we might do if we were to work together. Take over the government? We couldn’t do worse than some.

When Eric joined the Purists was when I really began to reconsider our relationship. Before then, I hadn’t paid much attention to that coalition of right-wing politicians and conservative Christian leaders. But one evening, five years after we met, Eric came over to my place and excitedly told me he had met with their leading Senator about joining together to build his center. I was happy at first but asked Eric about the group’s politics. Eric spoke of their desire to “revive traditional American values” and “restore excellence to American culture.” I wondered about that language, and, later in bed asked him, “What do they know about music or culture?”
“They know how to raise money and make things happen,” he replied. “Isn’t that what’s important?”

“I suppose,” I said and turned over.

After that I started paying attention to them and found their narrow version of Christianity concerning. For them, women existed only to serve men and raise families, and homosexuality was an “abomination” to them. Their goal of bringing this religion into government terrified me.

I couldn’t understand why Eric would be involved with them. He was raised Lutheran but hadn’t been to church since leaving Iowa. Sometimes we’d get together on Sundays and he’d joke about having better things to do on his knees besides praying.

All throughout the time the center was being built, I asked him, “How do you get along with these people? You have nothing in common.” He kept replying, “They remind me of folks back home. Decent, real Americans.” And “They believe in my dream and can make it a reality.”

One of the last times we met, I asked him, “You know what they want to do to people like us, right?” He just looked at me and sighed, as though there was no point in trying to explain.

He invited me to the groundbreaking, though. I went out of curiosity, standing in the back listening to eager preachers and politicians offering prayers and thanks for the opportunity to “restore America’s place in culture.” Eric was the last to speak, a large silver crucifix around his neck, which I hadn’t seen him wear before. He spoke of gratitude to everyone who supported his vision of a “shining light of music.” Afterwards, a crowd gathered around him, and I couldn’t find a break to approach him. I wasn’t sure I wanted to.
He had started to distance himself anyway. He called less frequently to get together. Being seen with a gay, atheist, liberal college professor like me, would be hard to explain to such an organization. I was disappointed but also strangely relieved, as it made breaking with him a little easier.

I’m sorry. I need a moment.

* 

Chalice was my last straw. I went to see it when it premiered at Sweet Rock and couldn’t believe how awful it was. The Christian theme was so heavy and so earnest, the action on stage slowed down to a crawl; the singers just stood there declaiming. And the music sounded like “traditional” opera music, without any borrowings from other musical cultures. At first, I thought Eric must be poking fun. But no, it was too sincere.

And everyone there loved it. Standing ovations at intermission and the end. Flowers at curtain call. Reviews full of praise.

Was this the same composer who left critics either baffled or enthralled after a performance? He had never made music that pandered to an audience before, and now that he had gotten everything he worked for, it felt like he was perfectly happy to do it.

On the flight home I knew we were finished.

* 

Except I wasn’t. After all, I wrote another book about him. And you could say my subsequent books are in a way about him, the problems when art joins with politics.
Believe me, I wish I could’ve just forgotten him. But I saw how the Purists were using him to make their message sound mainstream. He even wrote their anthem. And he was using them to become a popular composer, enjoyed by the masses.

They were winning more elections, taking more statehouses and seats in Congress. Their rallies were getting larger, more insistent. They removed any books mentioning LGBTQ people and slavery from school curriculums. They repealed local nondiscrimination laws.

I could see the danger that was coming, so I tried to warn people through writing.

After *False Idols* came out, Eric called me. I didn’t answer and he didn’t leave a message. Later, a reporter asked him about the book, and he called it “the ramblings of a former fanboy.” Other than that, he never responded to it.

Why did I never reveal our relationship? I couldn’t bring myself to expose something so private to the world. People would’ve asked me tough questions I didn’t want to answer.

Maybe I should’ve. It might not have stopped the Purists’ rise to power, but maybe a chorus of them wouldn’t have sung arias from *Chalice* on Inauguration Day.

* 

For you, what the Purists did is just something you’ve read in history books, or maybe stories your parents told. Thankfully they didn’t last long. They crashed the economy and were back on the fringes after the next election. But at the time, for me, it was terrifying. A turning back of all our progress. And all I could see was Eric profiting from it, while I suffered.

I had to do something. So, I called him, the first time in years, and told him I missed him, and wanted to see him. He was hesitant, but I suggested meeting in an alley across from a cheap
hotel in DC. We’d both wear disguises, and if we wanted to, we could get a room. No one would know. He agreed, couldn’t wait.

You know where I’m headed. I recognized him immediately, even in his rain jacket and hat. I went up to embrace him, and as we hugged, I drove the knife hidden in my hand into his chest. I heard his shudder of surprise and supported him as his legs gave out. Laying him on the concrete as gently as possible, I pulled out the knife. He stared up at me, his mouth moving but no words coming out. I ran off after he took his last breath.

I knew even if Julia suspected me, she’d never tell anyone, not even the authorities, for fear of what I’d reveal about her husband. Mutually assured destruction, you might call it.

Why tell you this now? It’s been so long. Eric’s dead. Julia’s dead. I’m dead. His family is set for generations. What will Veritas do, throw me out of here? Let everything come out. No more secrets.

*

You’ve been furiously tapping away for a while now. If you’re taking notes as well as recording this, I know it’ll be an accurate transcript.

For years afterwards, I’d wake up some mornings and smell his scent next to me. No matter how often I washed the sheets, how much I sprayed with air freshener, I still smelled it.

I had lovers after him, over the years. But I always compared them to Eric. No matter how skilled in bed, or how kind or smart they were, they never measured up. I knew I was judging them unfairly, on my nostalgic remembrances of Eric. But I couldn’t stop.
So, I spent most of my time alone. It was okay. I occupied myself with teaching, writing, and listening to music. Never his. Too many painful memories.

Sometimes I felt cheated, though. Eric had a beautiful wife who supported him and his dreams. After the Purists lost the elections and became unpopular, she dissociated his music from their taint. She worked hard to ensure his legacy, to make him remembered as a great composer. Every year, symphonies and opera houses around the world perform his works. His family need never worry about money.

What’s my legacy? An academic who wrote a few books no one reads? A gay man whose longest relationship was with a closeted married man? Whose only visitors to this digital underworld are folks interested in my connection to someone more famous?

I’m sorry. A moment of bitterness.

* 

I hope that my responses to your questions have been helpful. I’d love for you to return and share Eric’s reaction to all this. Who knows, he might confess. Even if he doesn’t, I’ve certainly livened up your dissertation! I’ll try not to be so morose next time.

What? You’ve hacked into Veritas’ systems? That’s why you’ve looked so busy.

You can bring Eric here. Why do that? Ahh, you want me to tell him what I did. “Working through our conflict,” you call it? And you want to observe our conversation. I didn’t realize American Studies was so ruthless.

I need to think about this for a moment.

Yes, please send him in. Can I straighten up the room first?
Author’s Biographical Sketch

Charles Green writes regularly on books, theater, and performing arts for *The Gay & Lesbian Review, Blueink Review, and DC Theater Arts*. One of his short stories appeared in the anthology *Gay City 4: At Second Glance*. He earned a Bachelor of Arts in English from Kenyon College and a Master of Arts in Liberal Arts from St. John’s College. He lives in Annapolis, Maryland.