

Eleanor's Odyssey

Canada had nearly completed its LEED 5.0-certified wall, stretching from New Brunswick to British Columbia. Its solar panels powered Toronto, Ottawa, and Montreal. And it kept out persons the euphemistic Canadians referred to as 'medically disadvantaged'.

From Buffalo, Eleanor could see its gleam glinting off her bygone diplomas. But she had closed the curtains against the glare, and sat listening to an outmoded Amazon product playing the even more ancient 'The Sounds of Silence'.

Footsteps; lights automatically flickered to life. "Eleanor?"

Maria. Green cards for Filipina nurse-attendants had been one rare exception to the immigration ban. Eleanor tried to smile; Maria had once reduced the twittering Lola to tears for asking Eleanor how her *daysie-waysie* was going: "She's an *invalid*, not an *infant*!"

Invalid was closer.

"Hi, Maria." She watched Maria's bot fleet zooming professionally – vacuuming, dusting, counting pills.

"You couldn't find a more depressing sound?"

"I did. The chime at the entryway."

Richard had initiated her into the cult of Simon and Garfunkel, in '33. Their first date. His great-great-grandfather's antique record player – a museum piece, really. And when Eleanor heard the devastating dual appeal to darkness, and Richard squeezed her hand, she *knew*. Today would have been their anniversary. It would have been...how many...?

...the numbers etched themselves in her mind's eye, dissolved...

Her LifeWatch beeped. “I don’t need meal reminders,” Eleanor snapped.

“I’m supposed to check your vitals,” said Maria, fooling neither of them. She presented Eleanor’s lunch; the entirety resembled withered cauliflower. Much like, Eleanor thought wryly, her own brain.

Richard. She strained to summon his face...

Nothing.

“I’m not hungry.”

“You don’t eat, they blame me,” said Maria.

Eleanor stabbed the cauliflower. It tasted the way she felt.

“You’ve got a message,” said Maria. Eleanor looked up. “*After dinner.*”

Eleanor hoped the chicken’s current predicament in no way represented the bird’s entire existence. Eventually, Maria held a glowing tablet before her eyes.

“I hate those things.”

“Dr. Radcliffe wrote.” Maria paused. “He says he remembers you fondly –”

The worst day of that squirrely little man’s life had been the day he had to tell her she was picking up the wrong syringe – again. Her protégé, then her partner: they had known each other forty years, and that was the first time he called her Eleanor.

“– and you can expect to live a long time yet.”

Without Richard? Without...herself?

“That’s not why he wrote,” said Eleanor, seizing the tablet, corralling her unruly pupils.

“It’s advancing. I’m sorry.”

Tears prickled; she nearly missed the postscript:

“The serum is progressing, but it’s woefully incomplete...”

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And one sharp memory surged –

“Wrong,” Eleanor murmured. And something stirred, murkily, in the fever-swamps of her mind...almost –

“Wrong?” asked Maria.

“Radcliffe...wrong about the serum,” she said. In the last tiptoe-tense months, she hadn’t finished...

“Could you please get me a notepad, and a pen?” The words vanished halfway, but Maria intuited her meaning, and Eleanor scribbled –

Statins

Neurofibrillary tangles

Oligomers

Crosswords

“Crosswords?” asked Maria.

“Trying to stay sharp,” said Eleanor. “I’ve got to get to the lab. And the bookstore.”

Eleanor swiveled her wheelchair toward Maria.

Who snorted. “More than my job’s worth.”

“Just put me in a taxi.” The auto-pilot technology had improved; sophisticated gadgets helped an old woman in and out.

“I’m Catholic, you know. I can’t say enough Our Fathers to absolve myself of *just putting you in a taxi.*”

“Then come along.”

“To do what? Break into your old office?”

“Technically half of the lab remains mine.”

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“It’s Friday night!”

“The longest possible time before Radcliffe could turn up.”

“You’re not making –” Maria stopped. Those words were never used lightly in *this* ward.

Eleanor glared. “No, ma’am.”

Eleanor thought: *How would Richard have persuaded her? Right-to-the-heart-of-the-matter Richard?* “You – of all people – know I’m getting worse. You know what I was.” She met Maria’s eyes. “This is my last chance to save myself. And – if I get it right – others.”

“They will *fire* me.”

Eleanor smiled. “Not necessarily.”

Wearing a back-in-style cloche hat low over her eyes, sporting a borrowed visitor badge, carrying a tote, and walking – slowly, but upright – Eleanor slipped past the front desk at shift-change time. The auto-taxi extended the seat past the door. She sat, and it automatically shifted back into place.

Eleanor grinned. Her chariot surged forward.

The setting sun flared, almost obstructing the mouth-watering beef on weak holograms. She inhaled an ocean of chicken wings...*those*, an ever-green memory. She reached the lab fifteen minutes later, her fingerprint unlocking all.

The *lab*. Intoxicating aromas of bleach, gauze, formaldehyde...

Her second home.

She went into Radcliffe’s office, in search of the notebooks she had offered him. The décor, as ever, *loomed* over the room. The squirrel’s other interest, besides degenerative brain

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conditions, was gambling. A poster-sized Jack of Spades glared with cycloptic disapproval; a bewitching Lady Luck beckoned...

Eleanor escaped to what had been her desk – a bare rock in a peeling linoleum sea – and opened the notebooks.

The tangled *taus* were old friends, but the other notes were...well...Greek. Toward the end, her letters simply wandered away from each other like idiosyncratic sacred cattle, each committed to its own holy path –

Footsteps.

Footsteps?

Nowhere to hide –

“Dr. Pantazis!” a man exclaimed, dropping his mop.

“Hello,” offered Eleanor. He recognized her, clearly; she sought his face in her diminished catalogue –

“You haven’t forgotten old Pete,” he said, grinning, then the smile dripped away. “Ah. I thought you...what are you doing here?”

Eleanor suddenly remembered a time when Radcliffe had attempted a card trick, and ended by spraying fifty-two cards about the office. Her words were on the same trajectory.

Pete prodded the buttons on her LifeWatch with arthritic fingers. “Ah. I guess...we should get you back to the home...”

“It’s *not* a home,” Eleanor retorted.

“Easy, Miss Eleanor –”

“Dr. *Pantazis*,” Eleanor intoned, but she just managed to secure her notebooks before Pete began steering her toward the front door. He was about to summon a taxi when –

“Thank goodness,” said Maria, sprinting from her car. “I’m Maria Abayan from the Everest Home, Mr. –”

“Pete,” he said, drinking in Maria from sunglasses to sensible shoes. Eleanor recalled, suddenly, that Pete had never required a sorceress to transform him into a pig...

“Her LifeWatch notified me that she, ah, *wandered...*” She smiled. “I’ll take it from here.”

“Nice to meet you, Maria,” Pete leered.

Eleanor settled in the back seat and arched an eyebrow at Maria in the rearview mirror.

“You couldn’t invent a more dignified exit?”

Maria laughed. “Where to?”

Where to indeed?

“Maria, if I go back – they’ll never let me out again.”

“I know,” she sighed. “I’ll take you home.”

Eleanor woke the next morning shipwrecked in a rose gloaming, to the ambrosial aroma of coffee –

– bewildered –

A dark-eyed child tumbled in, clutching twin Ariels, stuffed sirens; she shouted something enchantingly unintelligible, then fled. Hours or moments later, the thirty-years-old edition appeared. “Did you sleep well, Eleanor?”

“Yes,” began Eleanor, cautiously.

“I’m Maria. From the Everest Home. I brought you here...”

The woman kept speaking, but Eleanor's ears might as well have been jammed with beeswax. She assented, vaguely...The woman disappeared and reappeared with a delectable-looking tray – a banquet compared to the processed paste at Everest. Eleanor kept to the perplexing room.

Hours.

Days?

Eleanor woke to thunder and rain; to her relief, Maria entered.

“This isn't my room,” Eleanor said.

“Nope – my house.”

“My notebooks!” Eleanor cried. Over breakfast she scoured them, sifting through her own mythic scrawlings...

“I've told them your son came for you,” said Maria. Eleanor nodded approvingly. John was an ambassador – somewhere...the country had changed names several times. He visited regularly, when he was stateside.

“Did they believe it?”

Maria shrugged.

Eleanor came to a photocopied page pasted into her notebook – the last entry. Black marker scrawls rendered it an enigma. “What the hell?” demanded Eleanor.

Maria leaned over. “Why did you –”

“I *didn't!* But if I pasted it in here, it's *important!*”

One authorial fragment remained – a letter with a falling arch, then ia, then an M.

“Do you remem –”

“No,” Eleanor snapped. “Sorry. Maybe that's an 'n'? A name with 'nia'?”

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“Or ‘mia’?” suggested Maria.

Eleanor’s JSTOR (12.0) access still worked, but ‘mia_M’ and ‘nia_M,’ searches uncovered...*nothing*.

“If only I could get my holo-mails...” She frowned. “Today is...”

“Sunday.”

“Mmm.” Radcliffe occasionally used Sundays to catch up.

“My shift starts soon,” said Maria. “I’ll just let Rosamie know her grandmother will be watching her.”

Rosamie herself bounded back into the room, thrusting crayon-garnished posterboard into Maria’s face. “Great alphabet!” cried Maria.

Eleanor glanced at the lurching letters. And scribbled, frantically, *-hia*. Maria watched, alarmed, but Eleanor cried, “Sophia!”

The besmirched paper was from “The Misleading Focus on Amyloid Plaques” by Canadian neuroscientist Dr. Sophia Maxwell. “You see – I realized she was right, it wasn’t plaques, it was oligomers, and I should have been focused on untangling neurofibrillary proteins. So that was why I started –” Her face clouded. “Radcliffe insinuated that my mind was going.”

“Is it Friday?” Eleanor asked, the next morning.

“Tuesday,” said Maria. The next time, Maria said Wednesday. Then Eleanor lived a week of Wednesdays.

From nowhere, the starched dark-haired woman said, “It’s Friday night, do you want to go?”

“Go?” repeated Eleanor.

The dark-haired woman sighed.

On Saturday afternoon, Eleanor and Maria determined that Eleanor’s fingerprint no longer opened the door to Ithaca Labs. Eleanor slumped against the wall, vainly re-pressing her finger to the scan-pad. “Someone removed your access,” Maria observed.

Pete appeared at the door, sans mop. Maria turned to Pete with deliberate, laughing eyes; Eleanor remembered, suddenly, that the delivery door still opened with old-fashioned *keys*.

Pete had left the security room unlocked. Eleanor restored her fingerprint access, set the room to rights, and reappeared at Maria’s side just as Pete was saying, “So, would you like to get a cup of coffee?”

“That’s so kind,” said Maria, “but I just came by to see if Dr. Pantazis had left anything. Thanks!” She hustled Eleanor away.

They remembered, afterward, to check for Pete’s jet-bike *first*.

To Eleanor the work itself was nectar and ambrosia, an opportunity to unravel the shroud that aging and her own traitorous cells were weaving. Maria stayed; she was taking holo-net courses to qualify as a nurse practitioner, and welcomed the sepulchral quiet. Eleanor hacked into her old systems, finding, joyfully, her own notes contradicting Radcliffe’s focus on plaque – although she noted with concern that his drug was marching like a conquering army toward FDA approval.

Over the following days, they returned to Ithaca, swallows to their nest; by the following Sunday Eleanor was confident that her homeric efforts were about to come to fruition. She pushed aside Radcliffe’s vials, produced an experimental infusion from the back of a

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refrigerator, labeled in her handwriting. She added a tincture of mynemosyne's waters and a few milliliters of cholinesterase inhibitors, and put her sorceress's brew through the centrifuge. She prepared the dosage...

The door flew open –

“Dr. Pantazis!”

Eleanor nearly dropped her syringe. “Dr. Radcliffe!”

Radcliffe bristled like a rejected suitor. “What the *hell* are you doing here? You've gone completely mad –”

“At least I'm not pushing another worthless drug to burnish my own reputation –” began Eleanor, with heavenly fire.

Dr. Radcliffe opened his mouth, but then a female voice bellowed, “Everybody FREEZE!”

They stopped, poised like classical statues. The police swarmed, followed by –

“*John?*” cried Eleanor.

“Mom! Seriously? I flew home for consultations and came up to surprise you...The Everest people said you were – For God's sake! No one *knew* – we put out an Elder Alert – I made maybe fifty calls – and here you are *breaking and entering* –”

“This lab's still *half mine*,” Eleanor reminded him.

The policewoman frowned. “I'm going to have to take you in.”

Eleanor considered the Scylla of Radcliffe and the Charybdis of John and the police. She thrust the syringe at Maria, who deftly plunged it into Eleanor's neck.

The world went black.

When Eleanor woke, the sun was glinting off the wall and in her head, a thousand shrieking violins played a horror movie murder-scene prelude. John shifted the curtain. “Mom, you can’t *do* things like that! Running off – concocting God-knows-what –”

“Still a scientist,” she retorted.

“Really?” he demanded. “You couldn’t *manage* anymore, remember? And we *agreed* that you’d come here, and not draw underhanded staff into some pseudo-scientific crusade –”

Over the violins, Eleanor managed, “Don’t you dare, John! At least Maria treats me like an like an *adult* –”

“She’s no longer a concern,” snapped John. “You can’t imagine she still has a job after this.”

“You ass!” cried Eleanor. “She’ll be deported, now, without this position!”

“She’ll find something else. Don’t worry about that – she’s lucky I don’t sue! What was she *doing*, letting an elderly woman with dementia gambol around Buffalo, and use herself as a guinea pig –”

“I was so close,” Eleanor muttered; the score devolved into death rattles. “I just forgot –”

“Honestly, if you think you were on the brink of some great scientific discovery, you’re not fading, you’re delusional!”

Ear-splitting violins reached their crescendo: “Get *OUT!*”

John cadged Maria’s address from the abashed Everest Home staff. Maria answered his knock, nose swollen, eyes puffy.

“Mr. John, I adore Miss Eleanor –”

“I’m just here for her things.”

“Won’t you...come in?”

“No.” A beat. “Thank you.”

Maria nodded, chin trembling; she returned moments later with Eleanor’s tote. “Please tell her – I hope she finds what she seeks.”

John arched his brow, his expression eerily familiar. “How do you imagine *that* possible?”

“Mr. John – she was more...*alive*, these last weeks, than ever before...I’m *positive* she was making progress...”

“Then you’re as irrational as she is,” John retorted.

Lola arrived with Eleanor’s dinner. “Good evening!” she chirped. “How are we doing?”

“I want Maria,” said Eleanor, ungraciously.

“Maria isn’t here anymore,” said the be-pigtailed muppet, “but I’ll help you!” She beamed. “Your son is here.”

“I have nothing to say to him.”

“But –”

“Did I misspeak?”

“I –”

“Put on ‘The Sounds of Silence’. And. Go. Away.” cried Eleanor.

A new doll-faced nurse entered. Her nametag read Rita; her starched attire failed to hide the calypso rhythm of her gait. “Miss Ellen,” she murmured, “we don’t want to be...*belligerent*.”

“*Eleanor*. And speak for yourself.”

John took his mother's proxy slap stoically, but stormed back to his car. He considered amassing her notebooks and torching them! Ramblings – !

One fell open.

Unintelligible to his humanities-trained mind, but...

...possibly...

...cogent.

He called Washington and his deputy in Kinshasa, made arrangements to stay stateside longer.

Dr. Maxwell's contact information blazed atop one page. He reached her (fortunately human, not AI) assistant, and wheedled his way to success: "Dr. Maxwell, you don't know me, but I'm John Pantazis, the son of Dr. Eleanor Pantazis..."

The next morning, John directed the auto-pilot to Toronto, Eleanor's notebooks in hand, his diplomatic passport allaying Canadian immigration's suspicions.

Dr. Maxwell pored over Eleanor's epic scribbles. "It'll take some time. I'm not certain that I can reconstruct her thinking."

"I know. I appreciate –"

"I'm making no promises, Ambassador."

"Right –"

"But...I looked up some of her publications, and...I respect her approach. Worth a look."

"OK. So I should check back with you – soon?"

“Sure. Don’t pester.”

Dr. Maxwell took two years, in which Eleanor accepted some, but not all, of John’s calls, and waxed lucid in some, but not all of them; in which Dr. Maxwell told John one more damn inquiry would constitute harassment; and in which Rita deemed Eleanor “occasionally hostile,” and introduced medication. Finally, Dr. Maxwell summoned; he shelled out for the supersonic jet.

Dr. Maxwell frowned. “I have serious doubts, Ambassador. I haven’t come this far to go rogue.” She met his eyes. “I’m attempting this as a professional courtesy to Dr. Pantazis, and because my colleagues and I experimented with mice and the results were...not discouraging.” She produced a miniscule cooler. “Ten doses – weekly. I guarantee nothing. This is probably illegal seven different ways, and it’s your responsibility to get it across the border.”

To her astonishment, John grinned. “Nothing easier. *Diplomatic baggage.*”

Ten vials gleamed a pale yellow beneath the wall-glare, and John, recently readmitted to Eleanor’s presence, said, “I didn’t think...”

Eleanor was good enough to constrain her response to a *look*.

“I...don’t know how to administer shots. Can we ask one of the nurses?”

Eleanor was having one of her good days. “Which? The muppet? Or Nurse Ratched’s understudy?”

As if on cue, Rita entered with a tray. “What’s that?” demanded John.

“Your mother’s medicine. To calm her mind.”

With the sudden, righteous fury of an angry god – “Oh *hell no.*”

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Rita backed out of the room.

John sighed. "OK, I have an idea."

"You'd better apologize."

"Yeah."

"I'm in her debt, too."

Maria was astonished to find mother and son on her doorstep. Eleanor gestured John forward with an overflowing fruit basket. "We've come to belatedly repay your hospitality...and to ask one small favor."

Maria embraced her.

John's tour in Kinshasa concluded three months later. "Mom, I think I'm planning to stay stateside for a while."

"I'm glad," said Eleanor, her eyes intent on his face. "Hey...John..."

"Mom?"

Eleanor smiled. "You really do look more and more like your father."

Eleanor stood at the podium, before star-spangled and maple leaf bunting. Yesterday had been one of her bad days. They were fewer, now. Happily the conference organizers had agreed to delay her speaking slot. Maria had put her in a soft blue dress and a white scarf, a long-ago present from Richard. She scanned her notes one more time.

Yesterday was my ninety-second birthday. I'm delighted to be here today, to present, with Dr. Sophia Maxwell, our paper, "Reversing Alzheimer's: The Promise of International Scientific Cooperation."

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She paused.

And *saw...*

Richard's perfect face, the day they married, the day they skipped *until death do us part* and substituted *forever, and ever*.

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