

For Mary

Acknowledgement

This work only exists thanks to the inspiration of the excellent 1983 film WarGames, and its exciting novelisation by David Bischoff. However, Return To Goose Island imagines an alternative version of the original works' events, as retold by the protagonists some thirty years later.

Chapter 1

When David Lightman logged into his old webmail account, he was surprised and delighted to see a message from Jennifer - Jennifer Mack still, he noticed. He wondered if that meant she'd never married, then immediately squashed that thought. Who was he to speculate whether she was single? He'd made no effort to get in touch in twenty years, or more, he reflected ruefully.

"Hi David," he read, eagerly, "Remember me? I just looked you up. Do you want to get back in touch? I was thinking about that mad summer when we met the crazy doctor. I was wondering what you've been doing since then. There must be loads that you could tell me about. Not so much that's interesting has happened with me. I'm a mom now but not a wife, and my boy's older than we were back then, starting to make his own way in the world. It would be great to hear from you. Love, Jennifer Mack."

David wanted to reply immediately, gushing about all the giddy feelings her email had prompted, but he checked himself. He couldn't honestly say that Jennifer had been on his mind every day since they'd last met, way back before he'd left for California with his parents. However, she had been there, in his thoughts, on and off, all that time. He still dreamt of her quite often too, usually with her as a wild force of nature, cajoling him into doing reckless things. He guessed, from his casual understanding of psychology, that Carl Jung would say his unconscious had projected his anima onto his memory of her. Jennifer had literally become a part of his identity, even though they'd only really been close for a few months. Yet, he reminded himself, his inner Jennifer was not the real woman who'd just made the effort to reach out to him now. But he was also keenly aware that she'd signed off with "love", not "kind regards" or "yours sincerely", and what that might hint at sent his wildest thoughts racing.

He decided to keep his response brief and enthusiastic, but he was very glad when she replied promptly the next morning. That led to a regular email exchange over the next few days, with them trading a brief outline of their lives since high school. It seemed that while he'd been playing his small part in the online revolution, she'd balanced raising her son with steady office work. It sounded like her marriage hadn't lasted long, but her parents had helped out a lot. That also meant she'd been forced to stay rooted in the Seattle area while he'd been pursuing his solitary bachelor career all over the country, and beyond.

By the weekend, they'd converged on the idea of meeting up again, but Jennifer had poured cold water on his idea to fly up from San Francisco to visit Seattle again. It sounded as if she was fed-up of suburban Snohomish and wanted an adventure, and he could certainly sympathise with that from his memory of the Washington State small-town suburb. "Why don't we meet up in Oregon next weekend and visit that island where Dr Falken lived again?" she suggested instead. David wondered at this. He was very much aware that she'd chosen the exact location where they'd had their first proper kiss. However, he reckoned that had probably been a much less significant event for Jennifer than it had for him. He agreed anyway, on the questionable logic that it was halfway between them.

Jennifer proposed that he fly into Salem. She'd pick him up in her car there, then they'd drive to Goose Island. Again, it seemed as if she were trying to recreate the events as they'd played out when they were seventeen - except back then they'd had to catch the bus from the airport. He remembered how very surprised he had been to see her waiting for him, even whilst he'd been so very anxious about dragging her further into the mess that he'd made with Falken and the FBI. But he also clearly remembered the visceral relief and hope that he'd felt on seeing her then, waving eagerly to him across the arrivals hall.

The provincial airport terminal didn't seem to have changed much from what he could see as the small commuter taxied towards its gate. He'd only brought his carry-on bag for the weekend, just as if this were one of his routine consultancy trips. But in his mind he contrasted how different he felt about this trip, dressed in his soft plaid shirt over a new t-shirt with cargo pants and hiking boots rather than the standard smart-casual uniform that his clients expected of an expensive IT professional. He hadn't even packed his laptop, though of course he still had his tablet as well as his phone.

He felt much more anxious than he would on a business trip too. Would he and Jennifer still hit it off? Would she have changed a lot? Well of course she would have in some ways, as he had in the thirty plus years since he'd last seen her face-to-face. Would he even recognise her? How embarrassing it would be if he had to use the cell number that she'd given him, only to see a woman that he'd look straight passed reaching to answer her phone.

Of course his worries were unfounded. The arrivals lounge was smaller than he remembered, even whilst it triggered a strange sense of recognition. There weren't many people there, and he immediately saw Jennifer. She'd been looking out for him, and raised her hand as soon as he stepped into the hall, seemingly with just a moment of uncertain hesitation herself. She looked older of course, her familiar beaming smile exaggerating the subtle creases around her eyes and cheeks. In her loose pants and pale blouse, she also seemed a little heavier than she had been as an athletic seventeen year-old, but David felt no surprise at that. She still wore her long hair loose, though its dark brown was now shot through with grey, its waves falling to her shoulders, just as David remembered.

As they drew closer, they simply said each other's names, then gave each other a slightly awkward hug. David felt as if he were grinning like a fool as Jennifer checked he had everything, then led him to into the late Spring sunlight to find her car. The ease and confidence of her familiar voice, more than anything else, made David feel as if he were immediately back with the young woman he'd thought so often of. The gap in time since they'd last met seemed to close up for him as if it had never existed, almost as if he'd merely let the years pass in his sleep, like Rip Van Winkle.

"You drove all the way from Snohomish?" he asked in mild wonder, speculating aloud, "Are you up for hitting the highway again?"

"Yeah, it was no big deal. I've taken the whole day off. It took about four hours, but I was in Salem in time for a late lunch. I've been playing the tourist this afternoon. I checked out the university's little archaeology museum, in their library. You just took the afternoon off I guess?"

“Well, kind of, yeah,” David replied, not wanting to think of his complex timesheets, “I could still do a few emails on the plane. But you’re working in the public library yourself now, right? Was your trip to the university here a bit of a secret-shopper outing to check out the opposition?”

They’d approached an old red Subaru station wagon while they were making this small talk. Jennifer popped open the trunk, and David slipped his bag inside, next to her modest rucksack. As she closed the trunk and he went around to the passenger door, he felt again as if he’d fallen back through time. He was so used to being the driver, picking up a hire car at airports or ferrying his frail old father around, it was part of his self-image as an adult. It seemed as if Jennifer were giving him a rare treat by taking charge.

“Nah, not really,” Jennifer replied in answer to his question, settling behind the wheel and strapping her seatbelt in, “Snohomish Library these days is more like a place for the moms and old folks to visit when they’re bored of their own four walls at home.” She started the engine, fiddled with her satnav, then shifted the car into drive, setting off steadily.

“We go through the motions of keeping the novels fresh and having some reference stuff for the kids,” she continued, “But everyone’s using Amazon and the Web now. It’s the human contact of our story circles and book clubs that matter to folks now. I guess a university library might still be used for proper research. Hey, did you keep in touch with those weird geeks you knew at the UW? They were the original article, weren’t they!”

“Jim and Malvin? Nah, I lost touch with them when I was studying at Berkeley. I still see them every week though, in a way, the IT cliches who have trouble relating to people. The world needs them now more than ever, but it isn’t always kind to them. And there’s never enough of them to go around, so companies or whoever still keep them locked in their basements all over.”

“Hey, you went to Berkeley. Isn’t that hot shit in your line of business?”

“Yeah, Falken gave me a big helping hand in the end, with a hot shit reference. Perhaps he thought he owed me after I got into such a mess that summer. I’m not sure I repaid his favour at the time though,” or ever, really, he thought to himself ruefully. “I tooled around while I was there, then I had to learn the hard way that you need some genuine graft to get on in life, trying to hold down jobs to pay off my loans.”

They had hit the highway now. Traffic seemed light, compared to what David was used to on a Friday afternoon in California. He kept looking out for landmarks or reminders of their trip from the tiny airport to Falken’s island as teenagers, but wasn’t sure that he recognised anything. They could have been back in Washington State, or even Upstate New York for all that David could tell.

Jennifer seemed confident of where they were heading though, as she took her cues from the quiet satnav. She asked, “So what did happen that summer really? I didn’t understand much of what you were into at the time, and I think I kind of blocked out all that stuff with the FBI creeps. I’m sorry to admit it, but I kind of moved on from you pretty quickly too, I think. But that was the way I was back then, I guess.”

“Hey, no sweat,” David replied. “I was a jerk back then, and I didn’t think…” he hesitated, unsure of opening up the can of worms that were his ruminations about the brief time that he and Jennifer had really been a couple, “I didn’t act like a boyfriend should, I guess. But yeah, that summer. I really believed I might have set off something that could start a nuclear war. Crazy, huh?”

“It was like that then,” Jennifer said in a consoling tone, “Reagan was setting himself up as a dumb ass hawk, with all that Evil Empire crap. The TV was always showing Soviets tanks, rolling over Afghanistan or wherever, and there were all those protests about the Nevada bomb tests too.”

“But no matter how panicked or dumb the military got, they would never have connected their strategic operations networks to a PSTN modem, even back then, before the Internet really existed.”

“PSTN?” Jennifer asked.

“Sorry, I’ll try not be a geek. The public phone network. The Department of Defence, NORAD, Air Defence Command, USAF bomber command, whoever they might be, they’ve known since Pearl Harbour at least that you have to protect the whole communications loop against your enemy. They knew that even better when it all started going digital, with intelligence from satellites, one-time pad firing codes and the rest. There was never any way a high school kid, or even a well-trained Soviet electronic warfare unit, was ever going to just hook up a PC to a modem and dial in to mess with all that.”

“So what did you dial in to? You did hack something from that Aladin’s cave of your bedroom, right? Or the Feds wouldn’t have bothered showing up.”

“Yeah, it really was Falken’s old project that I’d found. He’d coded this interactive interface to his wargame simulator. Have you heard of Eliza? I guess it was just a chatbot, a forerunner of some kind to a modern digital assistant. The original Eliza was coded at MIT in the sixties. Falken had made his own version, a primitive artificial intelligence that could give the impression it was holding a conversation with you. Perhaps he really did do it because he missed his son, the real Joshua, but he told me that it was just his way of writing the front end to his strategic defence model for DARPA, the Defence Research Agency. I guess this was way before most people even imagined GUIs, graphic user interfaces, windows and mice and all that. Perhaps having a chatbot that you typed natural language commands into was a completely reasonable way to design a complex system’s front end back then.”

“But this was on the telephone network?” Jennifer asked.

“Yeah, DARPA had this modem on a research network that they’d left open in Sunnyvale. The base was a real USAF satellite control station, but DARPA also had a node there. A computer room, I guess, for digital comms equipment testing. One of Falken’s team must have worked there. They’d have had to do a bit more than just log in over the Internet, like it is now. I guess they had installed some obscure bit of code as a client, a computer process to listen out for commands, and it kept running just like it was bit of the regular operating

system. My button mashing eventually hit something that the shell, the computer operating system's proper command input, recognised as a message for this client to Falken's system, and that was my way in."

"I think I see. It was like someone had left a virus running on an experimental computer in Sunnyvale, and you found it."

"Well, some viruses work like that, but this wasn't malware really. It was all just a combination of innovative research, good intentions to write accessible software, and carelessness by some system admin who probably had a million other more important things they were struggling to understand. It was a back door, or a hole through the protocol stack that could be exploited. These kinds of things still exist today. It's why your computer has to download its updates so often."

"I hate those things. But the FBI aren't going to care if someone can log onto my state library system because I've skipped one, are they?"

"No, but it's different if it's the military, isn't it? I really was a hacker, a black hat. I was making a genuine cyberattack by war-dialling phone lines in California, then using the personal information about Falken that I'd found - that we'd found - to force my way in. It didn't matter that it was a research system, that it wasn't connected to the real picture of Soviet attacks or the network that sent launch orders. They were always going to shut me down hard when they found out it was me who'd dialled in."

"But why did they take you to Colorado and their big base in Cheyenne Mountain?"

"Jennifer, I said I was jerk back then. I have to be honest now. I'll understand if you want to kick me out on the side of the highway right now when I tell you this. But I was bullshitting you, and my folks and Vice Principal Kessler and everyone else. The Feds didn't take me to NORAD, the command centre that had our whole planet under their goddamn Sword of Damocles back then. That would have been madness! And I bet I would never have been able to bust my way out of there if they had. No, they took me to some rented office in Seattle, which they probably hadn't scoped out properly themselves. Maybe they figured I'd be too scared to try anything anyway, but I could literally just hop out of the window."

"Son of a bitch!" Jennifer exclaimed, slapping the steering wheel, but David was relieved see that she seemed to be laughing. "You really had us hooked, David Lightman! You could have told me anything back then and I'd have believed you. Hell, I'd probably trust anything you said now. But you fooled that arse-wipe Kessler too!" She laughed quietly to herself, then seemed to think, "But wait, I bought you a damn airline ticket from Grand Junction to Salem. You didn't even need it?"

"Well, like I said about being a jerk, I didn't want to hang around in Seattle when I escaped the Feds. I got straight on a bus downtown, then on the overnight Greyhound to Salt Lake City, just because it was about to leave when I got to the bus station. And then I hitched, because I figured it would be easy for the FBI to check coach passengers. Perhaps in my head I was actually trying to get to NORAD, making my fantasy a reality."

I remember you talking with Falken about that. He was like, well do think they'll let us just drive up and check their super secret picture of where the bombs are? And you were all for busting through their gates in a jeep if we had to, making a run for it to get through their big bombproof doors. I remember saying that I could lick both of you if came down to a straight sprint, and I recon I was right."

"Hey, you remember it really well!" David said in surprise, "Yeah, I had it real clear in my mind. They'd be shutting the mountain down, expecting an imminent strike. But we knew we were right and it was all so important, so we'd make a dash for it and get through those giant doors at the last moment, just like in a movie. Then we'd tell the top general to cancel the ICBM launches, because we knew the Soviet attack was just a simulation. And you so would have licked us in a sprint. You were like an Olympian back then, with all the sports and fitness you did."

"Don't tease. I wasn't anything special. And look at me now! I make sure I do a few lengths down at the pool regularly, and Matty, my son, sometimes uses me as test case for his circuits. I told you he's working toward getting his personal trainer accreditation, didn't I? But you look like your taking good care of yourself, if you don't mind me saying."

"Well, maybe," David actually felt very flattered that Jennifer had paid any attention at all to his physical condition. "When you're at a screen all day every day, you've got make time at the gym too, or else you end up like Jim Sting back in that UW computer graveyard. I like to hike too, when I'm on vacation."

"Yeah, I recon you'd beat me in sprint now, no problem."

"To be honest, I probably am fitter now than I was when I was seventeen. But let's just hope we don't have to put it to the test by rushing a high security military site, right?"

"Right. So you didn't make it to Cheyenne Mountain back then anyway?"

"Not even close, really. Some trucker dropped me in Grand Junction, and by then I was feeling pretty wrung out. I'd used up the last of my emergency fifty dollar bill. You really were the only person I thought I could trust and who'd want to help me, who'd understand that I still really wanted to find Falken. So yeah, I did use the ticket you brought me, and believe me, I was real grateful for it."

"That was some road trip, Seattle to Colorado. No wonder you felt beat. But you knew where to find Falken then?"

"I'm not saying those federal agents in Seattle were dumb, and they sure had no trouble finding me right after I logged into Joshua for the second time, but that rented office setup wasn't too slick. I saw my case file, and Falken's alias and address were right there. They must have been trying to get in touch with him too, right at the same time."

"Wait, you logged into Joshua a second time, just before they picked you up? I thought you said Joshua had called you?"

"Once again, I'll have to refer you to my previous statement about being a jerk. I'm sorry. No one would have coded a strategic warfare simulation engine to spontaneously initiate a

session or a pipe to some random terminal using a protocol that just so happened to work over the public phone network - not even Falken. I dialled in again myself. I was curious, and I was scared about what Joshua had shown me. The simulation's build-up to nuclear war just kept running, slow and steady, with all the little specific details the generals or whoever wanted, like it was all in real time. Like it was really happening. That's why I had to see Falken. Despite my fantasy about Cheyenne Mountain, I sincerely believed the apocalypse was coming myself."

"Hey, it's okay," Jennifer reassured him, glancing across with a sympathetic smile, "I like it that you said you were sorry there. We were just kids. Kids make mistakes. I had the money for the tickets. My parents were well enough off even back then, and they weren't stingy with me. It meant we had an adventure, you and me. Maybe the first time we did something real that was just our choice too. We weren't going somewhere or doing something just because our parents or our teacher or our team captain or our boyfriend told us to."

"Hey, wasn't I your boyfriend for a bit just then?" David queried, trying for a jokingly hurt tone.

"Yeah, it wasn't like that with you though, David. You were after something very different from most of those dumb ass boys at Snohomish High. Or maybe you were after the same thing as them too, but it didn't seem like it was the only thing you wanted. Hey! Do you recognise this place?"

David noticed how she'd almost interrupted her own train of thought. He felt he'd glimpsed the corner of something more personal about Jennifer's attitude to their brief relationship, but he recognised he'd have to be patient - like waiting for a shy wild animal that's unsure of coming back out into the light. And they did seem to be arriving somewhere.

Chapter 2

They'd come off the highway and followed a road down to what seemed to be a marina, lying on the shore of a wide stretch of dark water. Beyond were low hills, blanketed by conifers, glowing in the sinking sunlight. David couldn't quite work out if this was a lake or a very wide river. He felt they couldn't have driven as far as the Colombia River estuary, but this couldn't be lake in the park around Mount Hood either. It was all much smaller and less built up than he remembered. None of boats in the marina were very large and all seemed unattended, many laid up under weathered tarpaulins.

"Wasn't there a ferry terminal here?" Jennifer asked, parking up so they could look over the quay across the water.

"That's how I remember it. The road went down to a roll-on roll-off ferry for cars. We had to make a run for it from the bus."

"Hey, I know what we've both done!" Jennifer exclaimed, thumping him gently on the thigh. "A bit after we came here, once we were in summer break and things were almost back to normal, you and I took the bus on a day trip to visit Anderson Island, back home in Seattle's own Puget Sound. That's the ferry we're both thinking of. When we were here, we had to persuade a guy to get us to Goose Island in his own boat. He said he did grocery runs for Falken."

"Well, do you want to see if we can do that again? Falken's long gone, you know, and there doesn't seem to be anyone around."

"We've got to try. We wanted to see the island again, up close I mean. Let's check out that shed."

They walked along the marina, crossing a boatyard to get to the building that Jennifer had seen. Through the wide roller doors, they could see a big guy in overalls doing something noisy to an old hulk. David couldn't quite work out if he was repairing it or breaking it up for scrap.

"Excuse me!" Jennifer called out confidently, "I'm really sorry to bother you, sir, but I was hoping that you might be able to help us out with something." She'd got the man's attention at least, David noted with respect. "My friend and I used to come here when we were young. We knew an Englishman who lived on Goose Island, just across the water over there. There was a very kind gentleman who would give us a lift over on his boat. Is there anyone like that around here who could help us now?"

"No one lives on that island now, ma'am," the big guy replied, dusting his hands down on his overalls. "No one goes over there regularly. Those who're down from the city to play on their boats, them that's moored up there, they sail over sometimes," he went on, indicating the pleasure boats lined up at the marina with a sweep of his arm.

"Oh that's a real shame. We know Stephen Falken moved away a long time ago, but my friend and I so wanted to walk around his island again. We've driven for hours just for a little trip down memory lane."

“Ah, Falken, yes, that was it. I remember my father talking about the crazy old man. Said he carried a great model dinosaur over for him one time. But I’m sorry ma’am, if you’ve not got your own boat, there’s really no way over.”

David thought he might be able to try another option to get the man’s help. “Excuse me sir, I know you’re not running a boats for hire business here, but if I offered you five hundred dollars, would you be able to let us borrow something small, just until this evening? I have the cash here, and here’s my business card, so you’ll know who we are. A rowboat with an outboard would be fine. Jennifer and I can handle ourselves nice and safely on the water.”

He was aware that Jennifer was giving him a startled look as he got his wallet out, but she didn’t say anything. It seemed he’d chosen his figure about right, as the man took the card and studied it slowly.

“David Lightman. San Francisco. Falcon Networks. Did your Englishman set up your company then?” he asked.

“In a way, sir, yes. He was a great man in his day, a pioneer. Might I ask your name? It might have been your father who ferried us over too.”

“Patrick Healy, Mr Lightman, but you can call me Pat.”

“That is a familiar name, yes. And call me David. So, do you have something that we could borrow, and do you think five hundred would cover it?” His fingers were deliberately counting off a fan of fifty dollar bills so that Pat could see they were real.

“Yes, you can use my skiff. I can spare it this afternoon. I was thinking of calling it a day, as a matter of fact. I’ll leave the oars in there for you too, just in in case. She might need a bit of a bale out too. It was raining earlier. I’ve a couple of life vests you can borrow as well, if you’ve not brought your own. Just leave them in there when you tie her up, after you’ve done.”

David handed over the money, still studiously ignoring the looks that Jennifer was giving him. As he’d suspected, Pat was very helpful once he realised there was a nice incentive for him, enough to feel good about knocking off early for the weekend.

He carried on chattering as he gathered his bits and pieces, then walked them over to a tiny boat at the water’s edge. “I’m sorry to say you might be in for a bit of a nasty surprise when you get over to the island though. That house has been empty for a long time now, you see. Those rich kids, when they come down from the city and play on their boats, they can go wild on the island, starting bonfires and all sorts. I’m afraid Mr Falken’s house is a bit of wreck now, windows smashed and graffiti, you know how it is. When your done though, if you stop by Juanin’s place, the diner by the highway motel, she can tell you more. She talks to the sheriff’s men and the park wardens all the time. Well, I’ll leave you to it now. The weather’s good for you.”

“Thank you, Pat. You’ve been very generous,” Jennifer said, with more than a hint of sarcasm, David thought. “We’ll just pick our bags up from the car, then we’ll set sail. You have a great weekend.”

When they got to the car, Jennifer opened the trunk for David to get his bag. As he ducked in, she stooped low next to him, shoulder to shoulder, like conspiratorial teenagers. Perhaps she wanted to be sure they wouldn't be overheard by Pat, even though he was now closing his shed's big doors noisily. "Five hundred dollars, David!" she hissed. "We could have bought his stinking boat twice over with that! What were you thinking?"

"Jennifer, see it my way," David replied calmly. He straightened up, but they kept leaning close into each other as he went on in little more than a whisper, "What do you think an IT network consultant, a decent one who's really been around the block, charges his clients for just one day's work? I'll let you in on a secret - it's more than five hundred bucks. We came here once, thirty four years ago. I worked it out. I've remembered that day ever since, and I cherish that memory. Though I was scared and in a heap of trouble then, there was magic in what happened. It was a milestone event, an inflection point, a once in a lifetime experience. For me it was, and remains, precious. If I could recapture just ten percent of that for five thousand dollars, I'd still say it was money well spent."

They were carrying their bags bag now, giving Pat a smile and a wave as they passed. "Well, I suppose, David," Jennifer conceded. "I just hope you've still got enough on your wallet for a decent meal at that diner and maybe a cocktail too. Can you start this thing?"

They'd slung their bags onto a bench in Pat's boat, and David untied the painter. Jennifer had got in confidently, then held her hand out to steady David as he stepped in. He felt he didn't need to take it, but he did anyway, taking her long delicate hand in a firm grip, enjoying its warm dry touch. As he sat down in the stern, she squatted in the prow and started to bail the rainwater out. "Sure," David replied, checking the tiny outboard, then yanking on its pull cord.

The engine started with a puff of blue smoke. Its noise put a dampener on conversation. They took their seats at either end of the little boat and put on their life jackets. Jennifer seemed to sigh, as if deliberately blowing her cares away, then gave David a thumbs up as well as a big smile. And so they set off.

Once they were out on the water, the modern world seemed to fade away. No other boats were about, and apart from their meagre wake, the surface was as smooth as glass, reflecting the sunlight and open sky. The rattle and chunter of the engine seemed almost calming as they sat in silence, taking in the space around them. As David steered the boat through the outboard's tiller, memories came back to him of learning this simple skill as a boy with his father, feeling the subtle connection between his movements and the boat's.

David recognised enough of the geography to pick out Goose Island against the hills behind, and as they got closer, he could see the mossy gables of Falcon's ruined house emerging from the trees. Jennifer was twisted in her seat, looking forwards, also searching the shoreline with her gaze. But she would turn to look at him from time to time, giving him a goofy smile, which made her seem just like the teenager he remembered. David, for his part, was sure that he was making the same uncontrollable foolish grin as he'd felt when they'd first been reunited at the airport.

He throttled down the engine as they approached the island's pebbly beach. He aimed toward a beached tree trunk, then felt and heard the boat's hull grounding itself on the shingle. Jennifer energetically sprang up with the rope, obviously reading his intention, making for the tree to tie them off. He cut the engine and shed his life jacket as silence descended.

He remembered when they'd first come ashore on Dr Falken's island, staring in amazement as his model pterodactyl swooped over them. Then it was as if they'd crossed over into The Land that Time Forgot, or perhaps Prospero's island, where the wizard had summoned supernatural aerial beings to satisfy his whims. Goose Island was barren now, perhaps disenchanted, with an empty wood and a ruined house, dark and unwelcoming.

"Maybe Pat was right about that nasty surprise, David." Jennifer said, echoing his thoughts as she tossed her own life jacket into the boat. "It's not like it was the last time we were here, is it?"

"Well, it's a cliché, but you can't step in the same river twice," he said, matching his words with actions as he stepped from the boat, taking Jennifer's offered hand again. "It's just up to us to make our own story here, our own magic, this time around. We were only at the threshold of adulthood then, looking forward to meeting the wizard with anticipation, seeing the world's wonders and horrors directly for the first time. We're the jaded grown-ups now, looking back with regrets maybe and wondering what we've made of our lives. But our youthful selves, our beliefs, feelings and dreams, are all still inside us.

David found that he and Jennifer had kept holding hands as if were the natural thing to do whilst they wandered up the beach towards the house.

"Do you have regrets then?" Jennifer asked.

David wondered about where to start with that. He didn't want to be maudlin with Jennifer, but sometimes it seemed that his regrets filled his whole horizon, and her shining image had a special place in that grim realm of self-flagellation. He looked at the looming house and thought of the man who'd made his hermitage here before he'd passed on into the unknown.

"I'd made a hero, an icon of Falken by studying his work in computer science. He was right up there with the other pioneers of game theory and artificial intelligence, you know. For him it wasn't just about using these new computers to do smart stuff, to do what humans already did, only faster and more reliably. I think he really believed that through computers, we'd find different ways to see the world, ways that we'd never even imagined were possible."

"Did Joshua and the wargame do that?" Jennifer asked sceptically as they stepped carefully around the mildew covered walls and broken glass.

"I honestly don't know. There are programs like those today, in universities, on bedroom laptops and in defence research institutes, I'm sure, and I bet they're a thousand times bigger and faster, at least. But it's doesn't seem as if it's their artificial thoughts that have

changed the world. The real revolution has been about making it easier to shop for stuff, or to pin a message on a shared noticeboard.”

“So what do you regret? That you’re not helping those machines talk, or that the world hasn’t paid them any attention, or that you weren’t the one who built Amazon and Facebook?”

“I don’t know. I do feel bitter sometimes about Bezos, Zuckerberg and the rest sometimes. I was there at the start of things too. But I just helped brush the tarmac on the roads, poured the concrete for them to build their stalls on. But then you don’t drive to the mall just to look at the pavement, do you? I could say it should have been me, but couldn’t anyone say that really?”

“You’re telling me! I’ve lived, like what, thirty minutes from Microsoft Redmont? Since you left Snohomish, I’ve watching it grow from an unlikely David to IBM’s Goliath to the monster it is now. They had regular little teams that came out into the community, testing their potential customers, I guess, giving workshops on new technology. Hey, you’d have been proud of me, maybe, I learnt to program one time.”

“Can you remember what language it was?” David asked, letting himself get distracted by her aside.

“Visual Basic. We made a little calculator on the screen. You could click the buttons and do sums on it. It was a bit rubbish, really.”

“Ah, it’s a classic though. You should be proud you did it. Many wouldn’t have.”

“It didn’t really see the point at the time. But do you know what my idea of professional training was, before that, when I was just starting out? Learning to use an electronic typewriter and a Dictaphone! Anyway, you’ve still not said what you really regret.”

David thought before going on, “In a way, to analyse the root-cause so to speak, I regret ever trying to dial up and log in to Joshua. It wasn’t a nice feeling, being a hunted criminal. But then if I hadn’t, I’d never have ended up here with you that early summer evening, and I’d never have known Stephen Falken. I think, when I spilled out my guts to him back then, he saw that I was smart and that I was basically curious about his work. Perhaps he even saw in me a version of who the real Joshua might have been. He was very patient with us when we turned up here, really. I know he turned us over the Feds, but what else could he do? It was the best thing for us too, that the appropriate authorities picked us up and took us home.”

“Yeah, I thought that sucked big time back then. But you’re right, we couldn’t have become some kind of secret agents for truth, hiding out here from the Man or Big Brother until the world’s nuclear stockpiles were scrapped or whatever.”

“He told us a bit about his work when we were here, but he kept in touch with me, and he told me a lot more, as much as he could that wasn’t classified I guess, once I was at Berkeley, like he was my tutor. But I suppose a big regret was that I never really measured up as his protege. I just couldn’t be bothered to really put the time in. I would get

something working, prove the basic point, then get bored or distracted and move on. You can write a computer program that plays chess that way, but it won't be one that can challenge a grand master. Then real life got in the way, and I was working all hours just putting in and fixing networks for businesses who'd pay me. I guess at the end of the day, I felt I'd let him down."

"Hey, even if that's true, that would be his issue, not yours. So you didn't take the relay baton from him and go into military game simulation intelligence research or whatever. So what? That had hardly brought him prestige and happiness, had it?" They were standing in what had been Falken's front room now, empty apart from campers' rubbish and drifted forest detritus. Side by side, still hand in hand, they were looking through the glassless window frame, across the veranda towards the water. The claustrophobic interior gloom contrasted starkly with the dazzling play of the setting sun on the wide glassy expanse.

"It's sounds almost as if you did make him into a judgemental father figure, deliberately trying to play the part of the imagined adult Joshua, even though that was impossible on many levels. Or maybe he was even like a puritanical Jesus to you, giving you rules that you could never quite keep. You must have realised that for yourself by now though, and know that it's futile to think like that. Surely we've both reached an age when we can let go of other people's expectations for us, especially if we were only imagining them anyway. We've got to live our own lives, for ourselves, right?"

"Right," Joshua agreed, leading them both out onto the veranda, into the light, stepping over the broken sill. "I guess I have accepted the pragmatic reality, that I had to just get on with a low-profile career. The Feds kept watching me, you know? They wanted me to know that they knew what I was doing too. It really was just like having a suspicious God looking over my shoulder all the time, and He wanted me to be the boring American citizen, earning regular money to pay for things, or else He would indeed smite me mightily! So no, letting Falken down is not my big regret."

They were heading back towards the beach now, but Joshua led them off at an angle, toward a familiar rocky promontory. "Do you recognise this, Jennifer?" he asked, seemingly changing the subject.

"Yeah, I think I know what you're remembering," she replied coyly as they reached a natural rock shelf that they could sit on to look at the water. "After you'd dumped everything on Falken, and he'd tried to put you right, then told us all that nihilist crap about even if nuclear war was coming, there was nothing to do about it, you and I came out here on our own. I guess he just wanted us out of his hair so he could make his call to the authorities, but I remember you still seemed pretty upset and emotional."

They had sat down now, side by side, hips touching. David's hand was folded in Jennifer's, resting in her lap, almost as if she were consoling him now, as she'd done that evening, so long ago. He earnestly hoped that she'd go on as he looked into her eyes, and she did. "I wanted to comfort you, even though I was really worried myself about how things would work out. You looked so lost and confused and, well, I thought you were kind of cute by then too. So we had a kiss, didn't we?"

“Yes Jennifer, we did. I remember it very well,” David paused, wondering how much to confide, even after all this time. “It the first time I’d kissed someone like that, like we both really meant it.”

“Oh, and now you want to know if it was like that for me, don’t you?” she asked rhetorically, looked deep into his eyes. “David, I was a careless seventeen year-old, you know? I’d kissed lots of guys, and I’d go on to kiss a lot more after you disappeared down south. You were really sweet, and the trip out here was wild, like I said, a real grown-up adventure that we’d made for ourselves.”

“But…” David prompted.

“But I don’t really remember what we did on this rock back then. We kissed, right, but we didn’t do anything else much did we? When that boat came roaring out of the darkness and Falken came out to find us with his big torch, I think he expected to catch us making out. But we’d not gone past second base, right?”

“I was never too sure about those bases back then. I’m not sure I know what they mean now.”

“First base, kissing, right? With tongues. Second base is a grope basically, say if you’d grabbed my tits. Third base would be something genital - mutual masturbation, I guess. And a home run is sex, full on coition, and I suppose that’s what I meant by ‘making out’ too. We used to talk about it all the time in our girly gossipy cliques - who had got where with whom and how quickly. I guess you boys were probably talking about Pac-Man high scores or something instead.”

“Yeah, something like that,” David said ruefully, but glad they could be honest about it now. “So yeah, we just kissed. I’d put my hand under your t-shirt when we were cuddling. I remember your soft warm skin under my hand. But I didn’t touch your breasts, or anything else, that time. Yet still, it was like the whole fucked-up world just melted away, so there was only you in the whole universe. After all the panic, running to Colorado then back to Oregon, I suddenly felt at peace, in a private universe of life and wonder.”

“Ahh, you old romantic. You really have been cherishing that memory, haven’t you?” Jennifer jiggled his hand in hers, then spontaneously leant over to give him a small peck on the lips. David was ready for more, but that was all there was. “But you do understand that we’re not giddy teenagers now, right? We don’t believe that we alone can save the world from nuclear war, and we don’t believe that True Love will swoop down to pick us up, blowing all our other worries aside with in the wind beneath her mighty wings, do we?”

David kept looking into Jennifer’s eyes. He knew she was right, and he didn’t want to look like a hurt puppy, pleading for her affection, but he didn’t know what to say.

“From what you said earlier, it’s seems you’ve spent a lot of time with your regrets. You talked about just ending up as an average IT professional, about letting Falken down and getting tangled up with the FBI. But I think I see what your big regret might be now,” she paused, drawing a deep breath, “And I don’t want you to go there, David. It would be too sad, to know what we might have had, you and I, to know that we wasted all that time.

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

