



WORMHOLE

By Risa Peris

I touched the cottonwood tree by the small, scraggly garden that occasionally spit up squat carrots and miserable looking radishes before I boarded the bus with my Canon Standard Model 35mm to head to the test site. I had carved the word UNIVERSE onto its trunk when I arrived in Los Alamos because at night, from our bedroom window, the huge tree would merge seamlessly into the dark and would cause my whimsical mind to imagine plunging into the belly of violent light that was the night sky.

"The universe in a tree?" mused my husband. He would exhale and rub his pointed chin with a faraway look. "Definitely. Definitely. A universe in a speck of dust as well."

It had become habit to touch the cottonwood when I left the house. I tended to be superstitious much to the enormous dislike of my husband.

"To the universe," I exclaimed as the pads of my fingers traced the 'U', *for the sky might catch fire and explode the earth on this very night*. "Please God take care of us," I said in a small internal voice while I adjusted my camera bag. My husband, Johan, was amazingly perceptive and sometimes picked off my thoughts as cleanly as a dog ripping meat from a steak bone. He did not like the mention of a benevolent God that gazed upon us as concernedly as Santa Claus. God to him was an ambivalent math equation designed to urge us into higher and higher levels of scientific understanding.

"Maggie, come dear. Let's go." Johan was wearing a leather jacket with a customary, slender tie in a shade of blue and tugging on his left arm was a small knapsack with a change of clothes, toiletries, a pack of cards and a silver picture frame that displayed a photo of his parents and brother standing in front of a pine tree in the Black Forest. Johan was always prepared. In the

dark, his circular eyeglasses flashed from a momentary reflection of starlight. The moon, a quarter full, looked pale and weak like a dying bulb and spread little light across the desert.

"Two hundred and thirty three miles," I said.

"Indeed. We have a long drive in an uncomfortable bus."

"What should we do? Exchange saucy and scandalous love notes?"

"Maggie, no hinky pinky. We will be with my colleagues. Be very professional. No typical Maggie. And I suggest you sleep on the trip there as you will have to be awake and alert in the early morning before there is even light."

I scrunched up my face to feign disapproval. "Hanky panky," I uttered with a quick laugh.

"What?" Johan touched my arm with a look of seriousness.

"You said hinky pinky. I think you meant hanky panky."

"Oh, yes. Thank you. Most appreciated." Johan pulled out a small, black spiral notebook from the inside of his coat pocket. He jotted English language reminders and heated, inspired mathematical logic in it. He went through a notebook every week and collected them all into a metal filing cabinet sitting in our living room.

"Not now, Johan." I pushed down on the notebook. "We need to board the bus."

I hurried down the dirt road with my camera bag bouncing against my back leg. I looked back at Johan and waved him forward.

"You're too happy," he yelled in the quiet night. "I'm the one who should be happy. Tonight is history."

"Or the end of history," I hollered but Johan, with legs toned from competitive swimming and running, had zipped past me and was stirring up dust.

"Can't hear you," Johan screamed. "Doppler effect."

We arrived at the center of the base out of breath and with a fine sheen of sweat beading our brows. The crowd gathered near the school bus was humming with energy but restrained in vocalization. They were all carrying satchels or briefcases and most were formally attired in jackets, ties and stylish haberdashery. A few of the younger scientists that I recognized, like Richard Feynman, were in open necked shirts, light trousers and decked with an air of impossible imprudence. Even Johan was adorned with that heedless demeanor. I caught sight of several Army uniforms dispersed through the crowd and I averted my gaze. The uniforms scared me. I abruptly remembered the war and why so many of us, from so many parts of the globe, were clustered on a lonely mesa in New Mexico where the coyotes howled and the noonday summer temperatures reached 115 degrees Fahrenheit. Our purpose here in the desert was top secret, but all the wives knew, from hushed and surreptitious whispers at bridge parties and teas, that our husbands were creating a bomb. We never uttered BOMB; we weren't so bold. There could be Nazis listening. Nazis that lived among us and that we invited into our kitchens for ration issued biscuits and Maxwell House coffee.

I was a photographer and I had been invited, after a rigorous background check (a secondary one to the initial one that I underwent before being allowed to live with my husband

on the base), to be an unofficial historian of the event. I was invited as a courtesy to the wives who were living on the base that spent hours cleaning dust from our small, poorly constructed homes, tending meager gardens and attempting to cook sweets with limited sugar. Johan had pressed the issue and Oppenheimer had approved with politeness and respect. I was thrilled and secretly very scared but I thought it best that if the world exploded that I should be by my husband.

From the moment I sat on the bus seat I began to yawn and before the bus exited the security gate my head was resting heavily on Johan's shoulder. I fell asleep as the fluid inkiness of the night flowed over our heads and seeped into our bones.

"It is time." Johan nudged my floppy and drowsy head. I followed him off the bus. There was an orderly line heading towards the bunker. The official photographers were setting up cameras outside to capture the blast.

"How much time do we have?" I was eyeing the thermoses that were being passed around.

"Not long." Johan suddenly looked like a child set loose in a toy shop. He was bristling with anticipation.

In the bunker I unslung my camera and adjusted the bulb. I gazed at the scientists, bureaucrats and military personnel sipping cups of bitter coffee and fidgeting. We were all nervous but most were also squirming with a deep pride. I did not understand the science and could not fully appreciate the momentous complexity of what had been accomplished but if splitting an atom was possible, if the bomb exploded as calculated, then I could understand how

even a spectacular humanity ending invention could also be a great and irrevocable achievement in understanding our existence. I began snapping photos of the group in the hopes that I could, in some small way, capture this heightened mood.

An alarm sounded at 5:15 AM and dark amber glasses were passed around. Johan had immediately hooked his behind his ears and the globular bulge of the lenses made him look like a pale fly. The sharp planes of Johan's face looked pinched and I knew not to tease him about his pensiveness. He had that deep and tense look that made it seem as if he was at the bottom of an abyssal water well.

"My life might end tonight," I mouthed. The tension was almost unbearable and I crawled into a safe, warm place inside my mind where the breeze from the sea was gentle and the rhythmic crashing of the waves against my soul lulled me into calm. I clasped Johan's hand and held my breath. The countdown began.

The light was like a tidal wave. It reached high into the sky and then pummeled me. Light has pressure. That's what Johan told me. I imagined the light from the explosion punching every cell in my body. I fell to the ground and shielded my eyes with my arm. The amber glasses did little to dim the sky. But then the worst was coming. I heard the rumbling long before it shook the ground I stood on. It was more intense than an earthquake. I know I screamed but my voice was lost in the apocalypse of destruction consuming the landscape. I refused to look up but Johan yanked on my arm.

"Look up!" Johan yelled. "Look up!"

I inched my head upwards and saw a giant mushroom cloud hovering on the horizon. It was oddly beautiful in its scope and power and as savage as any instrument of death.

"What have you done?!" I was verging on hysteria. "Dear God, what have you all done?"

The crowd was happy. They clapped, cheered and patted each other on their backs. Only a few looked introspective. Feynman's brow was furrowed and he seemed concerned. He looked at me. I was still on the ground and had torn the glasses from my eyes. I could feel rivers of tears flowing down my cheeks and I could tell that he sympathized with my emotions and possibly even understood them but Johan put his arm around him and then they shook hands and shared a smile full of accomplishment. I stood up, dusted myself off and headed towards the bus.

"The tower that held the bomb disintegrated. Can you imagine?" Johan was chattering away next to me on the bus seat. I leaned my head back and closed my eyes. There were so many excited conversations going on around me that it felt overwhelming. I wanted to be in bed with some silly novel full of dashing romance. I didn't want to be here with these men; these men so full of happiness over an explosion. A monstrous explosion, albeit.

"Boys. Such boys!" I said.

"Maggie..." Johan whined.

"Don't talk to me." Johan quieted but then started talking to a man in a porkpie in the seat in front of us.

Morning had crowned and the sky was as blush as a flirtatious girl. I let myself drift and imagined swimming at Bayview Beach in Cape Cod where I had spent many summers. The

water was always cold but the humidity could be so intense that quick dips into the water were a requisite for staying invigorated. I thought it would be nice if Johan and I could visit the beach when the war was over. But certainly the war would end now that we had a bomb, a bomb I witnessed. I mused that they should have invited the Nazis and the Japs to see the test. It would have ended their stubbornness quickly and without any more loss of lives.

"Time to get off."

I opened my eyes. It was dark outside. Morning had slipped away.

"Time to get off."

I stood up. The bus was parked and all the passengers were asleep. Johan was dozing solidly with his head leaning against the window.

"What's going on?"

I could see the bus driver looking at me through the oblong rearview mirror. He smiled and flicked his hand. I walked forward confused.

"This is your stop," he said. He was a portly man with head of tight, darks curls barely contained under his driver's cap and sticking out, like sails on a boat, were two enormous ears. He looked merry, slightly drunken and not all concerned about his appearance.

"What do you mean?" My voice was losing strength.

He turned around and eyed me mischievously. "You're on a journey."

"Yes, back to Los Alamos." I fiddled with the zipper on my jacket.

He laughed. "Why travel one way when you can go another way? Why go one place when you can go somewhere else?"

I was getting annoyed. "What is your name?" I asked a little haughtily.

"Rabbit."

"Excuse me?"

"That's my name. I popped out of my dear mom's belly and she saw my nose twitch and my big ears flop so she named me Rabbit."

"Well, that's peculiar."

"Peculiar is also ordinary. Depends on which side of the line you are on. I personally think ordinary is peculiar. Why choose tea when you can have raspberry juice? Why choose a black shoe when you can wear a red shoe?"

"Listen...why are we stopped? And what happened to the morning?"

"Oh, the morning is out there. Just on the other side of the world. And we are stopped because you are getting off. Here you go." He opened the bus door.

"I'm not getting out."

"Sorry, but you must."

"My husband..."

"Who?"

I looked behind and saw that every single bus seat was empty. "What?!"

"Bye now." The driver pulled my arm and with his knee nudged me down the bus steps into the terrible dark.

When I stepped off I was in Manhattan. I was on Lexington not far from the magazine office where I used to work. It was day time and the familiar New York City soundtrack was playing – honking car horns, clamoring voices, banging from construction. I stopped at a newsstand and looked at a paper. The New York Times had a picture of a tank emblazoned across the front page with the words HITLER ATTACKS POLAND. The paper was dated September 1, 1939. I had a moment of déjà vu but instead of being taken with the usual whimsy I was scared and perplexed. I turned around and stared at myself in the storefront window. I was wearing a light blue summer dress with a yellow flowered belt that I had bought at Woolworth when I had first moved to the city from Connecticut. I had lost the belt when I moved from my fifth floor walkup that I shared with two other girls to the new home I shared with Johan.

"Now here it is. On my waist. It's like it was spit up from the foggy depths of time. Curiouser and curiouser." I was talking to my image in the window. I realized I probably looked like one of those mad people who roam the streets begging for money. A bum in a nice dress.

I turned right and walked down the street. I stopped at the corner. Boris and Family Diner. I remembered it well. They served up frosty root beer floats in large, wide mugs. They had key lime pie they made fresh daily. They piled coleslaw into corned beef sandwiches. I opened the door. It was crowded. No one looked at me. I stared into the sea of faces. Nearly

everyone seemed jittery. War. So many conversations about war. The start of war. Will we get into the war?

I wanted to scream. "We're in a war! A terrible war. So many lives have been lost."

"How many?" A harried looking waitress with blonde streaked auburn hair had approached me.

I looked around me. "Just one."

"Want to sit at the counter, honey?"

"...sure..."

"Go right ahead."

I saw two empty seats. I chose to sit at the end of counter near the waitress's station. I saw pie and 5 layer chocolate cake in the dessert case. I salivated but I had no money. No purse or bag. I shoved my hands in my dress pocket and felt the jingling of change and wadded paper. I emptied the contents on the counter. There was seventy-five cents. I unrolled the paper. *Ask about time travel*, it read. Ask who?

"What can I get you?" It was the waitress again. She had a pot of coffee in her hand.

"What can I get for seventy five cents?"

"A cup of coffee and some pie."

"I'll have that."

"What kind of pie?"

"Key lime?"

"Ran out. How about a lemon meringue?"

"Oh, yes. Please."

"You got it." She placed a coffee cup in front of me and then poured the steaming liquid. She then went to the dessert case, set down the coffee pot and cut me a large slice of pie.

"Whipped cream?"

"On the side," I said.

She placed the pie in front of me.

"Can I ask you a question?"

The waitress looked impatient. "Sure."

"What year is it?"

Her pencil arched eyebrows raised upward. "1939. Are you lost?"

"I might be lost in time."

"Aren't we all?" She walked off to tend to other customers.

I cut into the pie with my fork. Translucent yellow and glistening with sugar crystals. My tongue sunk into its silky texture. My jaw seized slightly from the sour lemon.

"Can I get a pistachio pudding and a glass of milk?" asked the German accented voice.

I turned my head to the left. "Johan!" I exclaimed. "Oh, Johan. I'm so glad to see you. Strange things are happening."

"I'm sorry. Do I know you?" Johan looked hesitant though quite curious.

"Johan, it's me."

"Are you in my class?"

"You don't know me. I'm truly lost." I could feel tears slip sloppily down my face.

"Oh, don't cry. Don't cry. Here." Johan handed me a napkin to wipe my face.

"My name is Maggie. I'm your..."

"Yes?"

"Friend. Yes, I've attended your lectures at Columbia." I was sad.

"Ah, that's what I thought. There are so many students in my physics class."

"We will meet again. In the public library. We will both reach for the Mill on the Floss by George Elliot. You will think I look familiar. I will smile and we will drink milkshakes in this diner."

Johan stared at me quietly.

"Time to go!" The voice was loud and clear but no one in the diner looked up. I could see Rabbit standing in the entrance door. He was waving me on.

“My ride’s here,” I said. I left the seventy five cents on the counter. I smoothed my dress and headed for the door.

“You forgot something.”

I turned around and saw Johan holding the wadded piece of paper that had been stuffed in my dress pocket. I took the paper. “I don’t really need it,” I said. “It’s trash I think. I am supposed to ask someone about time travel.” I paused. “Do you know about time travel?”

“We are all time travelers,” answered Johan. “I suppose a tear in the space time continuum could allow for it. Theoretically. Things are so strange at the quantum level.”

“Quantum weirdness.”

“Indeed.” Johan waved goodbye and focused on his pistachio pudding.

I followed Rabbit out the door. When I blinked I was on the bus again. Still empty and still night.

“That was baffling.” I was exhausted.

“Such is life. Did you like the lemon meringue?”

“How did you...Oh, it was delicious. Quite refreshing.”

“I personally prefer chamomile pie.” Rabbit started up the bus.

“That sounds awful.”

“What's awful to one is delightful to another.”

"I want to go home. I want to rest against Johan's shoulder."

"Not yet. One more stop."

"Why am I doing this?"

"Living?"

"No. Flitting here and there through time. I want to be straight as an arrow. Unfolding like a flower."

"What's wrong with going backward? I once road a train in Austria backward. I entered Vienna buttocks first."

"Strange. Going backward is so untidy."

"Going forward is messier. Entropy drives one mad."

The bus rumbled and sputtered in the darkness.

"Here we go. Time to get out."

"Where am I now?"

"You'll see. Make sure and ask about wormholes."

I stepped off the bus and entered a neat and colorful living room. There was a piano and a male child was sitting with a stiff back playing, haltingly, Eine Kleine Nachtmusik. His fingers gingerly pressed down on the keys as if her were afraid of smudging them. The child was blonde with a bird like delicateness. There were a myriad of pictures around the room. I noticed a wedding photo. Johan and I. His expression was glum even though I knew he was quite happy

that day. My puffy white dress looked juvenile and pure though I was far from being a virgin at the time of my marriage.

"Maggie! Have you seen my blue sock?" Johan rushed into the living room holding a brown sock. I stared at him.

"You recognize me." The child stopped playing the piano and looked up. His blue eyes looked curious. Johan looked frustrated.

"Of course I recognize you Maggie. Where's the blue sock?"

I thought for a moment. "What year is it?"

"1954." The child giggled.

"Maggie, I don't have time for this. I have a lecture at Harvard in an hour."

"Perhaps the blue sock got folded in with another colored sock. I might have folded laundry in dim light."

"I will check..."

"Oh, and Johan you are holding a brown sock not blue."

"Balls."

Balls? Did my German husband sound like a teenager in the future?

"Mommy listen." The child began playing again. Mommy? My child. My boy. I felt a surge of happiness. What a gift to see my son before I see my son. What a darling little boy he is. Not a carbon copy of his father. Johan's features are sharp. My son's features are soft and

cherubic. And talented. My child is not more than six or seven. Playing Beethoven from memory. A jagged rendition and yet still recognizable.

"I found the sock." Johan sounded exultant as he bounded into the living room. Johan was dressed, replete with brown oxfords and paisley tie. "Off I go." He leaned over to kiss me and I enclosed my arms around him and squeezed.

"Goodbye my darling. I love you so much. I hope I find you again in time."

"But darling. You have already found me." He kissed me with his dry lips. I licked them until they glistened.

"Disgusting," hollered my child.

"Darling..."

"Yes, Maggie."

"What are wormholes? And can you travel through time in them? What if the atomic bomb split the fabric of time and I fell into some sort of traveling mechanism that was capable of carrying me through the past and the future?"

Johan was silent.

"Do you remember the tree in Los Alamos? The one I carved universe on? Do you remember the ants that crawled over the tree, and in the bark and some disappeared through little holes? Who's to say we can't do that? Slip through a hole."

"Like Alice in Wonderland." My child laughed joyously.

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