

UNDER THE BLUE CURVE

WHEN ELISA SAT down for lunch, Henry Overduin didn't know how much she was going to change his world.

She and her colleagues from the Department of Corporate Oversight sat in Henry's section but he would have noticed her even if they hadn't. There was something different and magnetic about Elisa Taper. The rest of the diners at Le Fou en Mer were unreserved cyborgs. Most of them wore their cranial implants in a showy style that was vogue among the rich but Henry found the fashion tasteless. Elisa's jet black hair was cut in a bob that just covered her implant; it was quite elegant. Her eyes were a startling emerald green, and there was something about the intelligence in them that caught Henry's attention.

She seemed completely natural—just like Henry. Of course, he had no implants of any kind. Even on his waiter's salary he could have afforded one, but there was no point because Henry was non-eact. He had been unable to access the datasphere his whole life. When he was young, the world

had begun integrating with it, and now the world was the datasphere. The latest generation of implants let humans access sensory experiences as well as information. It was more real than real, his regular customers told him.

Henry had never wanted to be a waiter; he wanted to tell stories. But he had no audience. Without the datasphere, he had no way to find an audience. There were no books, no magazines, no newspapers. There wasn't a real movie industry anymore, it having been swallowed by one all-encompassing medium. Even conversation had been subsumed by it. The irony was there was a desperate need for Henry's originality in what the Germans called the *weltgeschichte*—the world story.

But Henry's tales weren't part of it, because he couldn't be heard. At least, not beyond the routine of taking orders and fetching drinks. He tried not to resent his job. In some sense, he was lucky he was able to work at all. *Le Fou en Mer* wasn't so expensive that a human chef ran the kitchen, but it was trendy enough that the clientele were all served by real humans. In addition to Henry, the other staff that day included two students from the city's main academy. For them, the job was something they would remember fondly after they had graduated to work remotely or dynamically in the datasphere, depending on their abilities. But for Henry it was one of the few jobs that he could hold, all thanks to his faulty, non-eactive mind.

He tried not to dwell on it while he walked over to the table where Elisa sat with her colleagues. He let them know the chef's specials that day, trying to be pleasant, and asked for their drink orders. It might have been obvious that he found Elisa attractive but he tried to disguise it. No matter,

Elisa saw. She asked him his name, and was somewhat perturbed when he completely ignored her routine subvocal query.

Her colleagues received no answers to their questions about the specials, and one of them said, “I say, chappie. It’s kind of rude for you to be offline while you’re taking our orders.”

“I’m sorry sir,” Henry said. “I’m a non-eact person, so I can’t hear your questions unless you physically ask me.”

There was a moment of genuinely horrified silence when they realized that Henry did not have any cerebral implants, that he was fully and completely disconnected.

“That’s fine,” Elisa said warmly, and smiled. “I was wondering what your name was?”

“Henry.”

“Well, Henry. I’m Elisa, and I’d like a wine spritzer.”

The other diners mumbled their drink orders, avoiding Henry’s gaze, but he didn’t care. He only had eyes for Elisa.

By the time they became lovers, Elisa already knew that Henry liked to tell stories. She also knew that he was marvelous at it. She found his lack of eactive ability was compensated by the most incredible imagination. He could tell her about things that she’d never experienced in the datasphere—and you could experience so much there. She loved the strange sensation of listening to his smooth baritone with her eyes closed, and he delighted in finally finding an audience, even if it was only an audience of one.

One night Elisa said, “Henry dear, have you ever thought about using someone else as the conduit for your stories?”

“Someone else?”

“Me. I mean me. Why don’t you tell me the stories, and then I’ll find a way to get them produced.”

“Do you even know how to do that?”

“Produce an entertainment? Of course not, but I’ll find the people who do, and see if they’ll help me.”

“When?”

“How about right now? Why don’t I see if someone would be interested in the story you told me last night, about the world where nobody can hear?”

“Well... okay.”

Her beautiful green eyes got that faraway look as she dove into the datasphere searching for the right people. Watching her, Henry felt like he was a lower form of life; there was so much that he couldn’t know about society. He was a fish, cursed with the vague awareness that there was an atmosphere filled with interesting creatures and stories up there beyond the blue curve of his world, but he could never experience them. His limitation was not sapience, but knowledge.

Abruptly, Elisa opened her eyes and said, “I’ve found someone to produce the story. They love it!”

She was so excited and Henry so happy that they made love right there in her reclining access chair. In addition to finally getting a story heard, there was money. Though the credit for story and writing went to Elisa, she transferred all the receipts from the sale into Henry’s accounts. She was scrupulous about sending all the profits Henry’s way even though she did have to adapt the stories so they would be suitable. But she was completely true to his vision, and that was why producers liked to work with them so much.

Henry was thrilled to finally have a wider audience, though he couldn’t really know what they thought of his stories, beyond the occasional snippet of actual conversation he heard in *Le Fou en Mer*.

“Did you experience the latest ElisaVision?” a customer said one day.

“It was divine. She has the most creative mind, and did you see—” the comment was clipped off as the patron switched to subvocal. But Henry was happy, even if he couldn’t hear the praise. For the first time in his life, he started to feel like he belonged to something larger. And he had Elisa’s love. They spent every night deep in conversation, and he would tell her stories while she listened raptly. He did not know she was recording these conversations so that she could resend the stories to her producers. They were ravenous for new material, and Elisa was developing quite a fan base. And just as Henry’s love for her grew, Elisa developed a hunger for those fans.

Their affair blossomed, and it seemed natural that they should move in together. Henry’s home was tiny, so he moved his things into Elisa’s place. Soon there was enough money for him to quit his job at Le Fou en Mer, though he was strangely sad the day he did. Elisa kept working at the Department of Corporate Oversight, but they agreed that she should move into a part-time position so she would have more time available to make important contacts in the entertainment industry. Henry wholeheartedly agreed that she should receive a portion of the royalties too.

Every morning Henry walked Elisa to her office building downtown. Afterward, he strolled along the river for a while and stopped at a little café to scribble in his journal, an activity that always got a curious look or two.

A few months after they moved in together, on one of his walks, Henry came across a derelict washing in the river. Henry knew the man was either a data-addict, unable to stop

accessing free entertainments long enough to qualify for his basic income, or he was non-eactive. He was a younger man, obviously sick and in need of help. Henry didn't see any implants so he approached him carefully. Many non-eactive persons, unlike Henry, suffered from a variety of psychological problems.

"Hi," Henry said as he approached, in what he thought was a friendly way. "My name is Henry."

"I can hear you!" the young man yelled. "I can—" His shouts were broken by a spasm of coughing.

Resistant TB, Henry thought. For a brief, shameful moment, he debated leaving the man there, but the coughing did not stop and it was clear that he was in real distress. There was no one else around so he used his datapad to call for an ambulance, and then tried to help.

A trickle of blood ran down the man's chin as he slumped to the ground, almost sliding into the river. Henry pulled the derelict back from the water and carried him over to a nearby bench that overlooked the river and the ancient parliament buildings beyond. The man was light, probably no more than fifty kilos, and Henry felt ashamed again for his earlier fear. The young man looked into Henry's eyes with a mixture of hesitation and relief. For a moment, Henry felt a connection with him, then it was broken by the arrival of the ambulance. The medibots took the derelict from Henry's arms. He rode in the back of the ambulance with the man, who had slipped into unconsciousness. Henry listened to the sound of the machines, the labored breathing of the derelict under the oxygen mask. En route to the public hospital, the young man regained consciousness. He slid the oxygen mask off his mouth.

“You know they can’t hear us, right?”

“What?”

“The others. The eacts. They can’t hear our thoughts. Oh, they try to read our thoughts, but they can’t. Not like you. You have a glorious psyche, Henry. Lovely stories, but they’re wasted on the—” The medibot put his mask on again, and the derelict slid it off. “They’re wasted on the eacts. It’s just mind-fuzz to them. It fills the void they’ve created. It —” The medibot put the mask back on, this time with rough annoyance, it seemed to Henry.

The young man closed his eyes, and his breathing slowed down, and finally stopped with a horrible chattering intake that made the mask bounce. The medibots tried to resuscitate him but Henry could see from the readouts that his frail body had given out.

A tear trickled down Henry’s cheek, and he wondered what it all meant. And just at that moment he heard a voice in his mind say, “They can’t hear us, Henry. That’s what it means.”

The readouts flatlined and the medibots stopped moving. Henry let himself out of the ambulance when they arrived as the bots prepped the young man’s body. He felt drained. He was terrified not by the man’s death but because of that voice in his head. So many non-eactive persons lost their sanity and Henry didn’t want to be one of them. There was an entire branch of psychological research devoted to the syndrome, and a small therapeutic community devoted to helping those unable to swim in the sea of the world’s information.

Surely hearing a voice in his head was a sign that his own sanity was slipping? He decided not to see a doctor. They would put him on some kind of medication. What might that

do to his ability to tell stories? Who knew how Elisa would react? That night, he told her a story about a man doomed to lose his identity in a world filled with people who had already lost theirs. Instead of becoming bitter, or angry, the man decided to live every moment to its fullest, to savor everything that life offered him, while he could. On the fateful day when he did finally forget who he was, the moment passed in peace, because he was happy.

Elisa thought it was beautiful and wanted to sell it right away.

“Tomorrow,” Henry said. “It can wait for tomorrow.”

“No!” Elisa said. “It’s too good. That will touch people. Jay will love it.” Jay was Elisa’s main producer. She used other people too but he seemed to be the one she mentioned most.

“No,” Henry said. “That one was just for you and me. Besides, I was hoping that we could go out on the veranda and look at the stars.”

“But you can’t see any stars but the brightest, hon. There’s too much light. It would be better to look at them in —” She cut herself short. Sometimes she forgot; Henry seemed so normal.

“It’s okay. I know it slips your mind sometimes.” They embraced, and then Elisa pulled away.

“Okay, you go look at the stars for a while, and I’m going to talk with Jay.” She left the room, though she was still sitting right there.

The story was a triumph. It was the most moving thing people had experienced for some time, though nobody could

really say why. Elisa's fame—and wealth—grew to the point that it was silly for her to continue working at the department, so she quit. They bought a beautiful house together near the river. Henry hoped they would have even more time together, but Elisa spent many more hours in the datasphere. Henry's morning walks got longer and longer.

On these jaunts he would hear the occasional voice in his head, and over the next few months he started to worry that his sanity might be slipping faster. Whenever he heard the voices, they talked about how the eactive were dead to the world. They couldn't hear, the voices said. Henry figured that his long-time resentment of the eactive was finally catching up with him.

One morning walk, about a year after he met Elisa, a quiet female voice said to him: "You know that she's having an affair—several affairs—right?" The voice was so clear, so devoid of psychosis, that it made Henry stop. A tiny old woman was sitting on the bench where Henry had carried the dying man just a few months before. It was the same spot, and he remembered the young man's death. It seemed like a lifetime ago.

The woman may have been a hundred years old, but her eyes were bright and alert. They regarded him sadly. "He was my grandson. It was very nice what you did for him at the end." Henry was certain that the words were hers. Or were they in his head?

"Sit," she said, so he did. The woman had blue eyes. Light blue ovals with flecks of dark blue in them that sparkled like sapphires. Her face was kind, and though her clothes were threadbare, she smelled wonderful, like freshly baked bread.

"Thank you," she said. "You're not bad yourself. You did a nice thing for my grandson. He was never able to accept the

way things are, and he was unhappy. Poor, as many of us are. But at least he had someone with him when he died. You gave him that much humanity. So much of it had been taken away. I don't want you to go on thinking you're going nuts. As lovely and romantic as your *carpe diem* philosophy is, you can't always live every day like it's your last."

She stood up then.

Henry said, "Wait!"

She turned around and smiled at him.

"I need to know how to control the voices and the paranoia," he said. "I need to know what to do next!"

She winked at him and began walking away.

Henry jumped up from the bench and cried aloud, "At least tell me how you know Elisa's having affairs!"

The old woman turned around. "Just because I'm a non-eact doesn't mean I can't listen to the gossip! Your girl Elisa is famous. They love Elisa, and all the men in her life."

Henry watched her walk away. He wondered if she'd just offered him confirmation that he wasn't mad—or that he was.

The week after that, Henry convinced himself that Elisa was *not* having an affair. At least, not one that was taking place in the physical world. He had no way of knowing if she was being unfaithful to him virtually, and he tried not to think of it. Though even when they were together, more and more Henry sensed that she was really somewhere else. She responded when he addressed her, but unless he was telling her a story she rarely seemed truly engaged.

So he told her more stories. They came out of him freneti-

cally, almost rapid fire, so much did he want to have her with him. But he had to stop talking sometime, and when he did, she was gone.

A part of Henry's mind told him that he really was losing it, that this obsessive behavior, this need for Elisa's company, was a sure sign. Other parts—or was it voices—told him it was because he still loved her, and that she was falling out of love with him. The voices told Henry that it wasn't her fault, exactly. She was dead in a way, because she didn't really live in the same world as him.

Henry thought about committing suicide but the voices told him not to. He thought he might do it anyway, but the voices always seemed more reasonable than him at those dark moments. Never once did the voices suggest he hurt her.

Eventually, the inevitable happened. "I've decided to leave you, Henry," Elisa said one night after his bedtime story. The blow hurt, even though he had been expecting it. He felt his shoulders curl toward one another, his chest implode, and hot stabbing tears form in the blue curve of his eyes. His lips shook uncontrollably, but he did not cry. He waited.

"I'm going to leave you the house," she explained. "And of course, the royalties for all the stories in production will still go to you, minus my percentage. I know this isn't what you want, Henry, but I can't stay in good conscience. I'm in love with someone else." After a moment's silence, Elisa added: "I still want us to be friends. And I really hope this won't affect our working relationship." That almost broke him, but he bore up well. His heart was tissue paper, but at least he bore up well.

"We'll see," was all he could say. He wanted to tell her that the stories weren't about his need to tell stories

anymore, they were about his love for her. About how he needed her. But he knew there was no point in it. He'd lost her to the datasphere, or some dead fiction within it.

The house seemed less empty when she left. At first, that made Henry even sadder, but he resolved to recover. Before he'd met Elisa, he had been stuck in a dead-end job that he could barely stand. He'd never been lonelier. Now, he was alone, but not lonely. When Elisa left, he lost his connection with her, but not the feeling that he was part of something greater. It was a mystery. Something he would need to figure out before he could move on in life.

He continued his walks, and despite the loss of Elisa, his love and his audience, he started to feel better as each day passed. There were stabs of regret. Surely he could have done something to make her stay? But usually a voice within him—sometimes his, sometimes not—reassured him that it had been inevitable that she would leave. When it was another voice, it usually reminded him that the eacts were dead to the real world.

Time passed, and his stories continued to generate revenue. The house was paid for; Henry knew money would never be a problem.

A year after their break up, Elisa dropped by to chat with him. "I was hoping that you'd be willing to tell me a story," she said.

"Sure." He told her about his walk that morning. How idyllic it was to be outside on a sunny fall day. The pleasure of watching crimson and gold maple leaves fall into the river.

It was not the kind of story she could sell in the datasphere. Its subtleties were lost on her.

Henry tried to engage her in conversation, to ask her about what was happening in the virtual world, but her answers seemed incomprehensible. People had taken to wearing other bodies that looked like aliens, or mythological creatures, and the latest rage was a game called phantromorph, the goal being to see who could change the fastest from their existing state to one determined by a virtual intelligence. She tried to describe it to him, but it was as if she were speaking through water, everything garbled, muted and off-key.

“How are your productions going?” Henry asked her.

“Good. I’m still producing things with Jay,” she said.

Except it turned out that Elisa had lost much of her popularity since the stories Henry had told her had run out. Her own stories were hackneyed and predictable. She tried to find the voice that made Henry’s fiction so vital but her attempts drowned in clichés and overused tropes.

“I don’t have any other stories for you right now,” Henry said. And it was true. He didn’t have any more stories for her. He had more stories; he just needed to find someone else to tell them to.

“Well, if you have any more, I’m sure they’ll be well received, and you’ll make lots of money. Let me know.”

The old woman was at the river again the next day, on the same bench where Henry had tried to save her grandson.

“So have you decided yet that you don’t need her?” she asked him.

“Don’t you ever just chit-chat?” Henry said.

“Ah, I’m too old for polite conversation. So what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know,” Henry said. “Find another audience, I guess. Do you want to hear a story?”

“Yes, please!” she said.

The next day, the old woman was there. So were several other people, all of them non-eactive, like Henry. His skill as a performer improved. He could read his audience in a flash of understanding, sense their collective mood. They were quiet as they listened, enraptured. They loved the way he could surprise them. His control of suspense, and emotion, and pathos.

After a few more days, the audience became too big for Henry to stand with his back to the river, so he got up on the embankment above the boardwalk and told the story that way. He got even better as a public speaker, learning how to project his voice, even on windy days.

Most of his audience were non-eactive persons, and that seemed natural. The eactive had their datasphere. They could keep it as far as Henry was concerned. But even the few eacts that joined them were enthusiastic. Henry’s stories made the virtual world seem bewildering, futile. Barren as an empty horizon.

The thought of leaving Elisa trapped in it haunted him. So he invited her out to one of the storytimes. The audience had grown so large that Henry had taken to telling his tales in an amphitheater near the river; before the datasphere, people had performed Shakespeare there in the summers. Of course,

it had long since become overgrown with weeds, but within a week of Henry moving there members of his audience had cleaned it up, returning it to its former glory.

“Wow,” Elisa said. “Look at all the people. I’ve never seen so many in one place... I mean, in the flesh.”

“They’re mostly non-eactive, or too poor to own implants,” Henry explained.

“Do you mind if I, uh, record, your story? Of course, if I sell it to my producer, I’ll split the revenue with you,” Elisa said.

“Jay?”

“Jay?” Elisa asked. “Oh, no, I don’t work with him anymore. He’s retired. In fact, he’s spending all his time in the datasphere now.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, there are a few people who are doing it. They’re extremely wealthy, of course, because they need a staff of medical bots to take care of their body while their minds are free.”

“Free?” Henry shuddered.

“Yes. He’ll never have to eat or sleep or walk around again.”

Henry didn’t have anything to say to that, but he thought he could hear the old woman’s voice: “Yes, that sounds like hell to me, too.”

“Well, I hope you enjoy the story.”

Henry got up on the stage, and told an old story about a princess who had been enchanted by an evil wizard. He put her into a sleep so deep that her dreams became her reality, and she became captive. But no prince could simply come and kiss her and so rescue her from her virtual prison; all he

could do was whisper in her ear while she slept, and hope that she could hear. She would have to rescue herself.

As Elisa listened to Henry Overduin's story, she realized that she was listening to a great artist. He kept them all on the edge of their seats with nothing but his voice. She knew she was listening to something deep, and affecting, but she had no idea how much this story was going to change the world.