

2. The Table

She eased into the chair pulled out by the waiter and nestled into position, her legs crossed, right over left. Taking the proffered menu, she ordered some sparkling water for the table, bread and that salted butter she loved. Checking the time on her smartphone (she didn't wear a watch, or that much jewelry for that matter) she noted with approval she was five minutes early. She spent her life up against time, a busy and successful career, and, well, a career.

A slight tremor shook the tables, her glass of water rippling. 'Those trucks just get larger and larger,' she thought, an ironic smile at the edge of her mouth. Strangely, it suddenly felt acutely cold, a shiver building up her back.

And then a hand on her left shoulder and the slight breeze as the younger woman passed her to take the opposite seat. She had a severe hairstyle, curious layers of metallic blusher, but little or no lipstick or eye shadow, or mascara. Her hair was a vibrant auburn, much like the older woman's. The younger arranged her hands on the table, her bizarrely overly large watch incongruous on the table.

Some small talk, ordering starters and main, no wine, and then they could look at each other, a moment that seemed to extend slowly. 'How have you been?', asked the older woman, her head slightly tilted towards the opposite side of the table. 'I'm fine, no issues,' the junior attendee quietly replied, sounding like she was in the distance.

'Yes, it's been very busy, not much time for a personal life, outside of us' the senior responded. 'Not even to start a family...', the young woman let that linger. The older one narrowed her eyes, pursing her narrow lips, 'God, we're starting early, are we?'

The starters arrived, both silently troubled their dishes without much enthusiasm, their mains similarly. The bread and water were clearly more popular, and all the butter. The waiter quietly kept them supplied as the evening wore on. Both declined dessert. 'I don't have much time left,' the younger woman uttered in the sea of silence around them. 'Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't realise this would be so brief, you can't control that, can you?', responded the elder of the pair, with amusement in her voice. 'No,' was the response, punched into the space between them.

And with that left said, the atmosphere was acutely cold again. The edges and contours of the younger woman seemingly softening, losing cohesion, her face and body becoming less solid. In moments, she was now transparent, the older woman could see other patrons *through* her. That large watch was glowing now, but also disappearing, along with its owner. Then nothing. The table with only a single seated occupant. 'Goodbye', she said under her breath.

She signalled for the bill. Pensively, she flicked right and left on the dating app on her phone until it arrived. Perhaps she'd find that partner, one to realise the possibility of a real daughter. Not one poached sliding in from a parallel universe. One willing to be here, not kept in a loop, captured.

The older woman dropped her security tag while paying the bill, her image, embedded DNA, and her title, 'VP, *Parallel Worlds, Parallel Time*.' So much was different now, since the discovery of portals, and the machinery and fusion energy to exploit them. Someone had to trial them, even limitedly, and who best, but her, and how best, but by tagging a daughter from thirty years ahead in a mirrored world. 'Motherhood for a busy career woman on your terms,' she had stated at the start of the trial.

She stood up as the waiter pulled the chair back, her feet crunching on the rapidly thawing frost around the table.