

Forty Signs of Rain

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Extract



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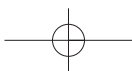
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ONE

The Buddha Arrives

The Earth is bathed in a flood of sunlight. A fierce inundation of photons – on average 342 joules per second per square metre. 4185 joules (one Calorie) will raise the temperature of one kilogram of water by one degree C. If all this energy were captured by the Earth's atmosphere, its temperature would rise by ten degrees C in one day.

Luckily much of it radiates back to space. How much depends on albedo and the chemical composition of the atmosphere, both of which vary over time.

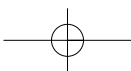
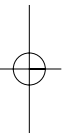
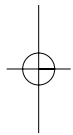
A good portion of Earth's albedo, or reflectivity, is created by its polar ice caps. If polar ice and snow were to shrink significantly, more solar energy would stay on Earth. Sunlight would penetrate oceans previously covered by ice, and warm the water. This would add heat and melt more ice, in a positive feedback loop.

The Arctic Ocean ice pack reflects back out to space a few per cent of the total annual solar energy budget. When the Arctic ice pack was first measured by nuclear submarines in the 1950s, it averaged thirty feet thick in midwinter. By the end of the century it was down to fifteen. Then one August the ice broke up into large tabular bergs, drifting on the currents, colliding and separating, leaving broad lanes of water



open to the continuous polar summer sunlight. The next year the break-up started in July, and at times more than half the surface of the Arctic Ocean was open water. The third year, the break-up began in May.

That was last year.



Weekdays always begin the same. The alarm goes off and you are startled out of dreams that you immediately forget. Pre-dawn light in a dim room. Stagger into a hot shower and try to wake up all the way. Feel the scalding hot water on the back of your neck, ah, the best part of the day, already passing with the inexorable clock. Fragment of a dream, you were deep in some problem set now escaping you, just as you tried to escape it in the dream. Duck down the halls of memory – gone. Dreams don't want to be remembered.

Evaluate the night's sleep. Anna Quibler decided the previous night had not been so good. She was exhausted already. Joe had cried twice, and though it was Charlie who had gotten up to reassure him, as part of their behavioural conditioning plan which was intended to convey to Joe that he would never again get Mom to visit him at night, Anna had of course woken up too, and vaguely heard Charlie's reassurances: 'Hey. Joe. What's up? Go back to sleep, buddy, it's the middle of the night here. Nothing gets to happen until morning, so you might as well. This is pointless this wailing, why do you do this, good night damn it.'

A brusque bedside manner at best, but that was part of the plan. After that she had tossed and turned for long minutes, trying heroically not to think of work. In years past she had recited in her head Edgar Allan Poe's poem 'The Raven', which she had memorized in high school and which had a nice soporific effect, but then one night she had thought to

herself, 'Quoth the raven, Livermore,' because of work troubles she was having with some people out at Lawrence Livermore. After that the poem was ruined as a sleep aid because the moment she even thought of 'The Raven' she thought about work. In general Anna's thoughts had a tropism towards work issues.

Shower over, alas. She dried and dressed in three minutes. Downstairs she filled a lunch box for her older boy. Nick liked and indeed insisted that his lunch be exactly the same every day, so it was no great trouble to assemble it. Peanut butter sandwich, five carrots, apple, chocolate milk, yogurt, roll of lunch meat, cheese stick, cookie. Two minutes for that, then throw in a freeze pack to keep it chilled. As she got the coldpacks out of the freezer she saw the neat rows of plastic bottles full of her frozen milk, there for Charlie to thaw and feed to Joe during the day when she was gone. That reminded her, not that she would have forgotten much longer given how full her breasts felt, that she had to nurse the bairn before she left. She clumped back upstairs and lifted Joe out of his crib, sat on the couch beside it. 'Hey love, time for some sleepy nurses.'

Joe was used to this, and glommed onto her while still almost entirely asleep. With his eyes closed he looked like an angel. He was getting bigger but she could still cradle him in her arms and watch him curl into her like a new infant. Closer to two than one now, and a regular bruiser, a wild man who wearied her; but not now. The warm sensation of being suckled put her body back to sleep, but a part of her mind was already at work, and so she detached him and shifted him around to the other breast for four more minutes. In his first months she had had to pinch his nostrils together to get him to come off, but now a tap on the nose would do it, for the first breast at least. On the other one he was more recalcitrant. She watched the second hand on the big clock in his room sweep up and around. When they were



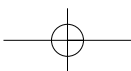
done he would go back to sleep and snooze happily until about nine, Charlie said.

She hefted him back into his crib, buttoned up and kissed all her boys lightly on the head. Charlie mumbled, 'Call me, be careful.' Then she was down the stairs and out the door, her big work bag over her shoulder.

The cool air on her face and wet hair woke her fully for the first time that day. It was May now and the late spring mornings had only a little bit of chill left to them, a delicious sensation given the humid heat that was to come. Fat grey clouds rolled just over the buildings lining Wisconsin Avenue. Truck traffic roared south. Splashes of dawn sunlight struck the metallic blue sheen of the windows on the skyscrapers up at Bethesda Metro, and as Anna walked briskly along it occurred to her, not for the first time, that this was one of the high points of her day. There were some disturbing implications in that fact, but she banished those and enjoyed the feel of the air and the tumble of the clouds over the city.

She passed the Metro elevator kiosk to extend her walk by fifty yards, then turned and clumped down the little stairs to the bus stop. Then down the big stairs of the escalator, into the dimness of the great tube of ribbed concrete that was the underground station. Card into the turnstile, thwack as the triangular barriers disappeared into the unit, pull her card out and through to the escalator down to the tracks. No train there, none coming immediately (you could hear them and feel their wind long before the lights set into the platform began to flash) so there was no need to hurry. She sat on a concrete bench that positioned her such that she could walk straight into the car of the train that would let her out at Metro Center directly in the place closest to the escalators down to the Orange Line east.

At this hour she was probably going to find a seat on the train when it arrived, so she opened her laptop and began to study one of the jackets, as they still called them: the grant





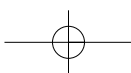
proposals that the National Science Foundation received at a rate of fifty thousand a year. ‘Mathematical and Algorithmic Analysis of Palindromic Codons as Predictors of a Gene’s Protein Expression’. The project hoped to develop an algorithm that had shown some success in predicting which proteins any given gene sequence in human DNA would express. As genes expressed a huge variety of proteins, by unknown ways and with variations that were not understood, this kind of predicting operation would be a very useful thing if it could be done. Anna was dubious, but genomics was not her field. It would be one to give to Frank Vanderwal. She noted it as such and queued it in a forward to him, then opened the next jacket.

The arrival of a train, the getting on and finding of a seat, the change of trains at Metro Center, the getting off at the Ballston stop in Arlington, Virginia: all were actions accomplished without conscious thought, as she read or pondered the proposals she had in her laptop. The first one still struck her as the most interesting of the morning’s bunch. She would be interested to hear what Frank made of it.

Coming up out of a Metro station is about the same everywhere: up a long escalator, towards an oval of grey sky and the heat of the day. Emerge abruptly into a busy urban scene.

The Ballston stop’s distinction was that the escalator topped out in a big vestibule leading to the multiple glass doors of a building. Anna entered this building without glancing around, went to the nice little open-walled shop selling better-than-usual pastries and packaged sandwiches, and bought a lunch to eat at her desk. Then she went back outside to make her usual stop at the Starbuck’s facing the street.

This particular Starbuck’s was graced by a staff maniacally devoted to speed and precision; they went at their work like a drum and bugle corps. Anna loved to see it. She liked efficiency anywhere she found it, and more so as she grew older.



That a group of young people could turn what was potentially a very boring job into a kind of strenuous athletic performance struck her as admirable and heartening. Now it cheered her once again to move rapidly forward in the long queue, and see the woman at the computer look up at her when she was still two back in line and call out to her teammates, 'Tall latte half-caf, non-fat, no foam!' and then, when Anna got to the front of the line, ask her if she wanted anything else today. It was easy to smile as she shook her head.

Then outside again, doubled paper coffee cup in hand, to the NSF building's west entrance. Inside she showed her badge to security in the hall, then crossed the atrium to get to the south elevators.

Anna liked the NSF building's interior. The structure was hollow, featuring a gigantic central atrium, an octagonal space that extended from the floor to the skylight, twelve storeys above. This empty space, as big as some buildings all by itself, was walled by the interior windows of all the NSF offices. Its upper part was occupied by a large hanging mobile, made of metal curved bars painted in primary colours. The ground floor was occupied by various small businesses facing the atrium – pizza place, hair stylist, travel agency, bank outlet.

A disturbance caught Anna's eye. At the far door to the atrium there was a flurry of maroon, a flash of brass, and then suddenly a resonant low chord sounded, filling the big space with a vibrating *blaaa*, as if the atrium itself were a kind of huge horn.

A bunch of Tibetans, it looked like, were now marching into the atrium: men and women wearing belted maroon robes, and yellow winged conical caps. Some played long straight antique horns, others thumped drums or swung censers around, dispensing clouds of sandalwood. It was as if a parade entry had wandered in from the street by mistake. They crossed the atrium chanting, skip-stepping, swirling, all in majestic slow motion.

They headed for the travel agency, and for a second Anna wondered if they had come in to book a flight home. But then she saw that the travel agency's windows were empty.

This gave her a momentary pang, because these windows had always been filled by bright posters of tropical beaches and European castles, changing monthly like calendar photos, and Anna had often stood before them while eating her lunch, travelling mentally within them as a kind of replacement for the real travel that she and Charlie had given up when Nick was born. Sometimes it had occurred to her that given the kinds of political and bacterial violence that were often behind the scenes in those photos, mental travel was perhaps the best kind.

But now the windows were empty, the small room behind them likewise. In the doorway the Tibetanesque performers were now massing, in a crescendo of chant and brassy brass, the incredibly low notes vibrating the air almost visibly, like the cartoon soundtrack bassoon in *Fantasia*.

Anna moved closer, dismissing her small regret for the loss of the travel agency. New occupants, fogging the air with incense, chanting or blowing their hearts out: it was interesting.

In the midst of the celebrants stood an old man, his brown face a maze of deep wrinkles. He smiled, and Anna saw that the wrinkles mapped a lifetime of smiling that smile. He raised his right hand, and the music came to a ragged end in a hyperbass note that fluttered Anna's stomach.

The old man stepped free of the group and bowed to the four walls of the atrium, his hands held together before him. His dipped his chin and sang, his chant as low as any of the horns, and split into two notes, with a resonant head tone distinctly audible over the deep clear bass, all very surprising coming out of such a slight man. Singing thus, he walked to the doorway of the travel agency and there touched the door jambs on each side, exclaiming something sharp each time.

'Rig yal ba! Chos min gon pa!'

The others all exclaimed, *'Jetsun Gyatso!'*

The old man bowed to them.

And then they all cried *'Om!'* and filed into the little office space, the brassmen angling their long horns to make it in the door.

A young monk came back out. He took a small rectangular card from the loose sleeve of his robe, pulled some protective backing from sticky strips on the back of the card, and affixed it carefully to the window next to the door. Then he retreated inside.

Anna approached the window. The little sign said

EMBASSY OF KHEMBALUNG

An embassy! And a country she had never heard of, not that that was particularly surprising, new countries were popping up all the time, they were one of the UN's favourite dispute-settlement strategies. Perhaps a deal had been cut in some troubled part of Asia, and this Khembalung created as a result.

But no matter where they were from, this was a strange place for an embassy. It was very far from Massachusetts Avenue's ambassadorial stretch of unlikely architecture, unfamiliar flags and expensive landscaping; far from Georgetown, Dupont Circle, Adams-Morgan, Foggy Bottom, east Capitol Hill, or any of the other likely haunts for locating a respectable embassy. Not just Arlington, but the NSF building no less!

Maybe it was a scientific country.

Pleased at the thought, pleased to have something new in the building, Anna approached closer still. She tried to read some small print she saw at the bottom of the new sign.

The young man who had put out the sign reappeared. He had a round face, a shaved head, and a quick little mouth, like Betty Boop's. His expressive black eyes met hers directly.

'Can I help you?' he said, in what sounded to her like an Indian accent.

‘Yes,’ Anna said. ‘I saw your arrival ceremony, and I was just curious. I was wondering where you all come from.’

‘Thank you for your interest,’ the youth said politely, ducking his head and smiling. ‘We are from Khembalung.’

‘Yes, I saw that, but . . .’

‘Ah. Our country is an island nation. We are living in the Bay of Bengal, near the mouth of the Ganges.’

‘I see,’ Anna said, surprised; she had thought they would be from somewhere in the Himalayas. ‘I hadn’t heard of it.’

‘It is not a big island. Nation status has been a recent development, you could say. Only now are we establishing a representation.’

‘Good idea. Although, to tell the truth, I’m surprised to see an embassy in here. I didn’t think of this as being the right kind of space.’

‘We chose it very carefully,’ the young monk said.

They regarded each other.

‘Well,’ Anna said, ‘very interesting. Good luck moving in. I’m glad you’re here.’

‘Thank you.’ Again he nodded.

Anna did the same and took her leave.

But as she turned to go, something caused her to look back. The young monk still stood there in the doorway, looking across at the pizza place, his face marked by a tiny grimace of distress.

Anna recognized the expression at once. When her older son Nick was born she had stayed home with him, and those first several months of his life were a kind of blur to her. She had missed her work, and doing it from home had not been possible. By the time maternity leave was over they had clearly needed her at the office, and so she had started working again, sharing the care of Nick with Charlie and some babysitters, and eventually a daycare centre in a building in Bethesda, near the Metro stop. At first Nick had cried furiously whenever she left for any reason, which she found

excruciating; but then he had seemed to get used to it. And so did she, adjusting as everyone must to the small pains of the daily departure. It was just the way it was.

Then one day she had taken Nick down to the daycare centre – it was the routine by then – and he didn't cry when she said good-bye, didn't even seem to care or to notice. But for some reason she had paused to look back into the window of the place, and there on his face she saw a look of unhappy, stoical determination – determination not to cry, determination to get through another long lonely boring day – a look which on the face of a toddler was simply heartbreaking. It had pierced her like an arrow. She had cried out involuntarily, even started to rush back inside to take him in her arms and comfort him. Then she reconsidered how another goodbye would affect him, and with a horrible wrenching feeling, a sort of despair at all the world, she had left.

Now here was that very same look again, on the face of this young man. Anna stopped in her tracks, feeling again that stab from five years before. Who knew what had caused these people to come halfway around the world? Who knew what they had left behind?

She walked back over to him.

He saw her coming, composed his features. 'Yes?'

'If you want,' she said, 'later on, when it's convenient, I could show you some of the good lunch spots in this neighbourhood. I've worked here a long time.'

'Why, thank you,' he said. 'That would be most kind.'

'Is there a particular day that would be good?'

'Well – we will be getting hungry today,' he said, and smiled. He had a sweet smile, not unlike Nick's.

She smiled too, feeling pleased. 'I'll come back down at one o'clock and take you to a good one then, if you like.'

'That would be most welcome. Very kind.'

She nodded. 'At one, then,' already recalibrating her work



schedule for the day. The boxed sandwich could be stored in her office's little refrigerator.

Anna completed her journey to the south elevators. Waiting there she was joined by Frank Vanderwal, one of her programme officers. They greeted each other, and she said, 'Hey I've got an interesting jacket for you.'

He mock-rolled his eyes. 'Is there any such thing for a burnt-out case like me?'

'Oh I think so.' She gestured back at the atrium. 'Did you see our new neighbour? We lost the travel agency but gained an embassy, from a little country in Asia.'

'An embassy, here?'

'I'm not sure they know much about Washington.'

'I see.' Frank grinned his crooked grin, a completely different thing than the young monk's sweet smile, sardonic and knowing. 'Ambassadors from Shangri-La, eh?' One of the UP arrows lit, and the elevator door next to it opened. 'Well, we can use them.'

