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# The Rapture

The mother of two gifted children has to make a fateful choice between dooming them to an early death on a dystopian Earth, or allowing them into the unknown, as distant beings offer salvation on a mysterious off-world colony.

The apparition came to her in a dream, or what at first she thought was one. There was a sudden glow of diffuse illumination, which did not vanquish the darkness in her bedroom but only turned it into a greyish twilight. In the middle of the gloom, an indistinct blur of blackness marked the source of a command:

“Madame, please wake up.”

Patty Cummings asked shakily, still half asleep: “Who are you? How did you get in my apartment?”

The voice was an unaccented monotone. “That is unimportant. Please listen to this message.” There was a pause, a click, and another voice, similar to the first, intoned:

*“You are being invited to participate in a program to preserve the human race from extinction. Current projections indicate that your world is in the last stages of collapse and will become uninhabitable in twenty-five of your years or less. Provisions are being made to transport selected individuals from this planet to a suitably off-world environment, where they will be able to recreate a more successful civilization.*

*“Someone in your family has been identified as a potential member of the colony that is being established to preserve humanity. For the migration of this person to take place, however, there must be full cooperation by his or her relatives, and we request that you work with our representatives to facilitate completion of the task within the tight schedule imposed by the Earth’s impending demise. Another click.*

At first, Patty could not say anything. Then the dyke broke and she was able to articulate a question:

“Is this a joke?”

The first speaker returned, in the same unemotional, synthesized voice:

“This is no joke. Your oceans are overheated and near boiling, lands are being swallowed or despoiled, the atmosphere is heavy with smog and toxins. You have to wear masks to go outside and filter the air you breathe. There are volcanic eruptions and earthquakes, big storms

and even bigger fires. The food supply is disappearing. Famine and disease ravage every continent. Your world is dying.”

“Yes, I’m aware of all that. But who are you and why have you come to me?”

“The collective of which this one is part is a very old race. It had been colonizing worlds and expanding its rule through the galaxies for eons before your star gave birth to its planetary system. The collective noticed centuries ago how your planet was following a course towards self-destruction that has been seen before. The collective believes that all advanced life forms in the universe should be preserved. That is why it is imperative to salvage what can be saved from this planet.”

“How am I involved in the collective’s plans?”

“One of your children, the boy named Paul, has inherited his late father’s genetic makeup and is bound to develop as a genius, so he has been included in the contingent to be carried away before the end. Your husband’s scientific talents should be preserved.”

“What do you mean carried away?”

“Members of a religion of yours believes in the Rapture, a time when elected individuals will rise in the sky and join their God for eternity, whereas the non-elected will be left behind for a bitter Tribulation period. Under the collective’s guidance, selected earthlings will experience something like a Rapture. Your son’s molecules will be carefully mapped, disassembled, transmitted intact to the destination, and reassembled there again. He will travel thousands of miles in the void, without suffering harm or discomfort.”

“Where will he go?”

“A moon of the sixth planet in your system. That moon, which you call Enceladus, has been modified so it can provide a welcoming environment for humans. It has liquid water beneath its icy crust, and geothermal processes release enough heat to maintain a warm water ocean under the surface, closer to the core. The

subsurface ocean is salty and contains ammonia, organic molecules and volatiles. These compounds were released, triggering a natural greenhouse effect, and the water vapor and ammonia were converted to a nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere. By now, Enceladus has been endowed with the necessary flora and fauna and is an adequate place for humans.”

“Current projections indicate that your world is in the last stages of collapse and will become uninhabitable in twenty-five of your years or less. Provisions are being made to transport selected individuals from this planet to a suitably off-world environment, where they will be able to recreate a more successful civilization.”

“Why are you going through all that trouble to rescue our species from extinction?”

“As the collective continues to explore the Universe, it opens new colonies and incorporates intelligent life forms into its domain. The collective adds to its domain, bit by bit, as long as there is time.”

“Have you started the Raptures yet?”

“Facilities were established fifty years ago in East Africa, on the slopes of the Karthala volcano in Grande Comore Island, north of Madagascar. Candidates are transported to the Comoros indirectly, in a circuitous trip via Madagascar, so their destination cannot be traced. Raptures started five years ago and have resulted in the transportation of about twenty thousand men, women and children to Enceladus.”

“And these many people have been whisked away without their disappearance being noticed?”

“Rapture candidates come from all parts of the world and all cultures. One person missing here and there is hardly noticeable with a world population approaching fifteen billion people. Besides, the Raptures have proceeded slowly until now, but as the end draws near the transportation must be accelerated. That is why your son and others need to be moved quickly. But Paul is still a child so you must provide your consent, and must prepare your son for the transition.”

“How about my older son, Peter? He’s twelve years old and is also brilliant.”

“He is, and normally he would be a fine candidate, but there is a strict rule in the collective’s program: only one person per family is eligible for the Rapture. Your son Paul is a bit younger and more malleable, and that makes him a better candidate so he is welcome in the program, but Peter is not.”

“If Paul were to die tomorrow, would Peter be able to get a slot in the Rapture?”

“Perhaps.”

“And if I were to deny permission for Paul to be seized, could I then get Peter selected?”

“Again, perhaps.”

“So in essence you are asking me to choose which of my children to sacrifice so the other one can survive.”

“In the case of this family, that is the case. However, bear in mind that the collective strongly prefers the younger one.”

Patty’s efforts at self-control failed and she broke down in sobs.

“Madame, those are the rules.”

At last, Patty regained her composure: “I need to think about this.”

“You have three days. This one will come back in three days, and must have your decision by then.”

\* \* \*

Patty could not eat or sleep or even walk around the apartment. She only got up to hydrate instant food for the children to eat, and then sat on her reclining chair considering her predicament.

“So, in essence, you are asking me to choose which of my children to sacrifice so the other one can survive.”

“In the case of this family, that is the case.”

At first she tried to decide if one of her children was more deserving to be saved than the other. She reminded herself that she *liked* Paul better, as apparently did the aliens. However, while Paul was more outgoing than his brother, this did not make him a better person; indeed, Peter was kinder, more loving and less self-centered. More importantly, she had no right to cast one of her children aside based only on personal preferences. She *loved* them both and could not bring herself to choose one over the other.

Then she sought to anticipate which of the children would be more likely to make it in the new world. Again, Paul seemed to come ahead based on personality and leadership qualities, but how did she know that such traits would equate to success in the colony? And, did it matter? This was a life and death decision, not one of personal success.

\* \* \*

On the second day, Patty had an idea. Since she could not bring herself to make a choice, why not let the children do it themselves? She sat them on the floor in front of her chair and spoke trying to sound light and breezy, as if proposing an adventure:

“Children, I’ve learned of a project that sends kids like you to a city far away, where the air is

clean and there is no hunger or war. Would either of you be interested in moving there?"

"Would you come with us?" asked Peter. "Would we be able to come back when things got better over here?" quizzed Paul.

Patty shook her head in regret. "No, there would be no returning. Only one of you would be able to go, and I wouldn't be able to travel with you."

Both children were bewildered. Finally, Peter turned to his brother: "You go, Paul, you are better with people than I am, and would have more fun." Paul was silent for a moment, as if weighing his brother's offer. Then he turned towards Patty and hugged her. "No, Peter, you go. I have to stay behind and take care of Mum."

Patty burst into tears. "What a cowardly woman am I. How could I have placed the burden of such a decision on the shoulders of my babies?" she silently told herself, and to the kids aloud: "Well, never mind, it probably won't happen in any case. Who wants hot cakes with lots of syrup?"

\* \* \*

When the third day dawned, Patty found herself puffy eyed, with a mounting headache. She thought and thought and even prayed a little, seeking guidance from a god in which she did not believe. Nothing helped.

Night found her sitting on her reclining chair, unmoving, with only the periodic heaving of her chest as proof that she was alive. She did not seem to react even when the living room was bathed in the same dim light that had accompanied the earlier visitation. And then the mechanical voice summoned her:

"Mrs. Cummings, it is time. What is your decision?"

Patty jumped to her feet as if bitten by a viper. "Yes, I have decided. Because a decision on the life of my children is one that only I can make. I choose to consent to the transportation of *both* my children to Enceladus. They will leave together as a pair, or not at all."

"Madame, that cannot be done. It is against the rules."

"Well, break the damned rules. I'm making the ultimate sacrifice, giving up all that I hold dear. You can bend your rules a little. My children will be better together, and so will be the new society you are building."

"This one cannot approve your request. The matter will be referred to the collective for a decision."

\* \* \*

Upon arrival at the Comoros they discovered that Moroni, the capital, was only a few miles away from the site of Mount Karhala, a huge active volcano ringed by almost impenetrable tropical rain forest. The transport facility was located on the southeastern side of the mountain, and lay mostly underground except for a large open pad on the surface that was disguised by a black sand cover. Most "launchings" took place at night, when the cover was removed and Raptures were conducted.

Patty and the children, as well as a hundred or so other visitors, were given a tour of the underground site, which featured a complex of living facilities and a control room whose walls were covered with panels of a translucent material on which shone myriad lights of all



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colours. But the most interesting feature of the room were two aliens, the first Patty had encountered. They were very tall, thin and featureless, vaguely humanoid in appearance, though they lacked mouths and nostrils and their “faces” were dominated by a large single unblinking eye that swiveled inside its cavity as it followed one or another of the visitors. From the trunk of each of the aliens protruded four spindly appendages capped by smaller appendages that served as fingers. One of the aliens explained in the now familiar monotone: “Members of the collective are able to shift their external appearance to simulate that of humans, but it requires a lot of energy and is not needed within our base. This one is Troi and will be your guide during your visit.”

“Yes, I have decided. Because a decision on the life of my children is one that only I can make. I choose to consent to the transportation of both my children to Enceladus. They will leave together as a pair, or not at all.”

Troi then proceeded to explain the mechanics of the transfer. The person undergoing the Rapture would be enclosed in a metal capsule (there were several of those lined against the walls), which would be hydraulically lifted to the above ground pad. When the transfer was ready to be made, he or the other alien (whose name was Prax) would touch depressions on a control board, there would be a roaring noise within the capsule while the person’s molecules were mapped and disassembled into an invisible cloud, the capsule’s top would open, there would be a bright flash of light, after which the capsule would return to the control room, empty.

A demonstration followed. A blond girl, dressed in a one-piece dark blue uniform, was brought by Prax to the center of the room and

led inside a capsule. Fear contorted her features as the door closed and the capsule slowly moved up to the surface. A few moments later, there was the predicted roar followed by a whoosh, and a bit later the capsule returned. Prax opened its door and showed that it was empty.

“She was gone, just like that” whispered Patty incredulously. “How do we know she made it to Enceladus uninjured?” she asked aloud.

Troi explained: “In a while, there will be a message from the headquarters in Enceladus confirming receipt of the new colonist, giving her name and city and country of origin. It will take two to three hours for her to get there and the acknowledgment to reach here.”

“Why so long?” asked somebody.

“She is traveling at the speed of light, and so is the message we will get back. The travel time depends on the relative positions of Earth and Enceladus. Today, it will take about two hours and fifteen minutes.”

A couple of hours later, when the tour was over and they were gathered at an improvised cafeteria for a late dinner, Troi came into the room and read the following message: “Enceladus to Earth Base - colonist, eighteen year old female from Bergen, Norway, name Kirsten F., arrived and has been integrated into the work force. Advise her next of kin.”

There was a round of applause and an excited hum among the prospective colonists and their relatives. Patty hugged her children and declared brightly: “You guys will be there soon.” Neither child showed any enthusiasm.

\* \* \*

Two days later, it was time for the Cummings children to travel. They were summoned to the control room in the middle of the night, right after another youth had lifted off for Enceladus. Prax joined them as the empty capsule returned and sat, awaiting the next passenger, in the center of the room. Prax examined a black oblong object that seemed to be some sort of clipboard and formally called out: “Paul

Cummings, you are next. Are you ready for your Rapture?"

Paul replied, his upper lip trembling: "Yes, sir."

"Then, proceed to the capsule." Paul wiped off the tears that ran down his cheeks, turned to his mother, and embraced her tightly. Patty kissed him on both cheeks and admonished: "Remember to always be good and kind. Be happy." She would have said more, but she was choking.

Paul walked over to the capsule and entered. At that moment, Patty shook herself and walked over to Prax: "I'd like my other son Peter to be next, so he and Paul don't have to be separated long."

If such a thing was possible, Prax could be said to be baffled. The alien looked through the oblong notebook, pressed buttons on its side that changed the image shown by the device, and inquired:

"Again, what is his name?"

"Peter Cummings" replied Patty, confused herself.

"Madame, our transport manifesto for the next two months does not include a Peter Cummings."

At that, everyone froze in place. Paul was in the capsule, whose door was still open. Patty, holding Peter by the hand, stood open mouthed. Prax remained immobile, its single eye scanning back and forth the contents of the notepad. The impasse was broken by the arrival of Troi, entering through a side door and coming to stand next to the other alien.

"It should have been this one the one that handled the Cummings transport, but other matters detained it. This one can explain the situation."

There was an expectant silence. Patty had stopped crying and was holding onto Peter firmly, the germ of a doubt growing on her mind.

"As requested by Madame Cummings, an appeal was made to the collective seeking an exception to the rule that would permit both of her sons to travel. The appeal was denied, but this was not disclosed and the entire family was allowed to travel to the Comoros, to ensure that the boy Paul would be available to travel and would do so. The plan was to delay informing Madame Cummings of the adverse ruling until after Paul had reached Enceladus. This did not happen."

As the duplicity of the aliens was revealed, Patty became agitated. In a voice made shaky by rage, she summoned her younger son: "Paul, get yourself over here." The boy rejoined his mother with alacrity.

Turning to Troi, Patty asserted firmly: "I'm going away with my children. Don't try to stop us."

"The collective does not practice any form of violence. Its rule is based on friendly persuasion."

"I'm happy to hear that. Now, we need transportation back home."

\* \* \*

Patty's mood was unsettled after returning home. She felt that she had rescued her children from an uncertain future under these aliens. On the other hand, the threat posed by the Earth's descent into chaos became more palpable each day. The government had instituted strict rationing of most food and household items. Inflation was rampant, and people like her living on a pension suffered more each day. It was death by slow strangulation.

"...the threat posed by the Earth's descent into chaos became more palpable each day."

Not two weeks since their return she was awakened once again by the faint light and the mysterious presence in her room. She

was no longer cowed by the intrusion. In a harsh voice, she demanded: "What do you want?"

"The colonies to which other life forms are transported are each tailored to the needs of those that are taken there. Colonists are exposed to the best experiences that can be made available to their species. There is no suffering or disease or privation in the colonies, and the inhabitants live in health and are allowed to reach their greatest potential, whatever it may be."

"Are they free?"

"After your departure, the special circumstances of your case were brought back to the collective for further consideration. It was determined that you deserved credit for not going public with your concerns. The collective has authorized this one to submit the following proposal: In exchange for your promise to remain silent about what you have seen and learned, the collective will allow both your children to be transported to Enceladus. This is a unique offer, based solely on the collective's desire to complete its work on this planet without disruptions."

Patty let out an ironic little laugh. "So you are trying to buy my silence, is that it?"

"This one is only able to convey the collective's instructions. You may draw your own conclusions. However, you need to respond to this proposal without delay."

"You know, I don't think I can trust the collective anymore. Tell me something:

What happens to the people who are transported to Enceladus? What kind of a place is it?"

Troi responded very slowly, replaying a prepared speech. "The colonies to which other life forms are transported are each tailored to the needs of those that are taken there. Colonists are exposed to the best experiences that can be made available to their species. There is no suffering or disease or privation in the colonies, and the inhabitants live in health and are allowed to reach their greatest potential, whatever it may be."

"Are they free?"

"Colonists may interact with each other, engage in pleasurable activities including reproductive ones if their species countenance them, and apply their creative talents in what you would call artistic or scientific endeavors."

"Can they choose what they want to do at any given time?"

"There are representatives of the collective in each colony, whose function is to direct the activities of the colonists for the greater good of all."

"Are they what we would call overseers?"

"This one is not familiar with that term, but the collective representatives exercise oversight."

"So what the collective has in Enceladus is a slave colony!"

"It is not correct to compare our colonies to the slave systems you have on Earth."

"That's what you say. How will I know my children are not living in slavery in that off-world outpost?"

"We allow each colonist to send one message to his or her family six months after arrival in Enceladus, so the family knows the



child is well. No further messages are permitted after that.”

“How long do I have to respond to your new offer? Three days?”

“That will suffice.”

\* \* \*

The new dilemma became another nightmare for Patty. She no longer was forced to choose between saving just one of her children. If the terms proposed by the aliens were to be trusted (and that was a big if) the choice was between keeping her children with her for a few years and seeing them die with the failing planet, or have their lives saved but consigned to eternal servitude. What was worse, a shortened but relatively free life, or the prospect of a full life as a well-kept slave?

Somehow, the decision this time was easier to reach. Perhaps it was practice.

When the alien returned three nights later, she was ready.

“Madame, what have you decided?”

“I’ve concluded that I cannot subject my children to a life of slavery, indebted to aliens whose true intentions I do not know. They should be free for whatever time they have left. So I must reject the collective’s offer.”

For once, the mechanical voice of the alien was slightly tinged with something like regret.

“Very well. This one will advise your decision to the collective. Have a good life, as long as it lasts.”

“Thank you and good-bye.”

\* \* \*

Patty never heard back from the aliens, at least not directly. However, three years after the aborted attempt to transport her children to Enceladus, her attention was grabbed by a short item in the country’s last remaining newspaper. The wife of a member of the ruling junta had gone public with a denunciation of a plot to kidnap Earth’s children and send them to a colony in space. The woman claimed that she had allowed her only son to be sent to that colony for “safekeeping” and, sometime after the boy’s arrival, he had sent a message back to her revealing, in coded words, that he was being treated like the “ancient Jews in Egypt.” The story was reported in the article as nonsense, and was aired only because of the prominent status of the husband.

Patty felt a bittersweet sense of vindication, but her satisfaction did not last long. She was still in mourning after Paul’s death from leukemia, and Peter was bedridden with diabetes and kidney disease from severe malnutrition. She had enough with trying to keep herself and her surviving son alive to dwell on the wisdom of her choice.