

The
Thin
Tear
in
the
Fabric
of
Space



Douglas Trevor

*The
Thin Tear
in the
Fabric of
Space*



*The
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Short
Fiction
Award*

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In memory of my sister, Jolee

*Peace, tender sapling, thou art made of tears,
And tears will quickly melt thy life away.*

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Titus Andronicus*

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Elena Gavrushnekov made her way slowly into the Physics Department of Excellence University, through the heavy iron doors inlaid with thick glass, right up to the desk of Patti Tipendorf, the freshly minted, work-study receptionist who would be answering the phones for the spring semester. Elena walked timidly, not trusting her legs, which buckled and wobbled beneath her. In her left hand she clutched a piece of yellowed stationery on which she had written an acrostic in the form of a kind of bogus, verbal equation: her version of a *carpe diem* poem.

“Good morning . . . that is, hello there . . . darling.” Elena smiled, reminding herself not to let her lips part, lest Patti glimpse her crooked, discolored teeth.

"Hi, Professor Gavrushnekov." Patti tripped awkwardly over the middle syllables of her last name. "How is your project going?"

"Well, I am p-leased to announce that I have brought it . . . well, yes, I may say . . . brought it to completion. Would today be a good day f-for . . . for our coffee? P-Perhaps in a half-hour or so? I can save a . . . save a—of course—a table, f-for us." Elena's voice, difficult for her to control in the first place, now teetered precipitously between a whisper and a wail.

"I think so. Let me . . ." Patti pulled a pink plastic DayTimer out of her purse, recently purchased for the new semester, and opened to the date, marked by a heart-shaped paper clip. As Elena knew, Patti had a half-hour coffee break in the morning, and an hour off for lunch. "Yes, that would be fine."

"Wonderful. I will, at long last . . . that is, yes . . . at long last explain my work to you."

"And I'll print out my résumé."

"Oh by all means. And to whet your . . . as it were, to . . . solicit . . . oh goodness, wrong word . . . to *invigorate* your appetite f-for our discussion, yes, that's right, I have written a small *note*—" she attempted a wink but the left side of her face resisted the gesture—"for your perusal."

Having clenched her fingers, Elena did not have the muscle control required to release the piece of paper. She raised her arm, now in full flutter, onto the desk. Patti Tipendorf gently pulled the folded paper out of her hand. A student slumped in the far corner of the office, waiting for his registration card to be signed, watched the exchange.

"Thank you, Miss Tipendorf."

Patti smiled. For a moment Elena stared dumbly at the girl's face, its foldless skin, the cheeks rounded and full, frosted with just a touch of pink. Then, in spite of her efforts otherwise, she could not stop her eyes from peering down at Patti's tremendous breasts, which pressed up against her red cashmere sweater. These were breasts that had yet to feel the downward tug of gravity: beautiful, pert breasts. Looking at them, Elena was unable to suppress yet another thin smile. She turned abruptly from the desk, embarrassed, mumbled thanks again, and then began what would be for her the long walk to the coffee shop on Excellence

Drive, just across the central quad from the Physics Department. It would take her nearly ten minutes to cover the distance, about three hundred yards.

After she was gone, Patti unfolded the piece of stationery and read the following:

Law of Missing Energy

Omega, the figure by which we name all of matter in the cosmos, when combined with the velocity of our expanding, isotropic universe, tells us that energy in our galaxies is missing, along with the mass of many stars, and the emission lines we would expect to emanate from some of our larger nebulae. Physicists who claim dark matter as an explanation added, when pressed, the curvature of space as another cause. These same men know that 90% of our universe remains unaccounted for, and that the Hawking radiation emitted by black holes cannot make up the difference. Is there perhaps a thin tear in the fabric of space?

Missing the acrostic entirely, Patti shook her head with bewilderment and put the paper in her purse.

"What's it say?" The student seated in the corner lifted his baseball cap and put it back on his head. He had been trying to make eye contact with Patti for several minutes before Elena Gavrushnekov had entered, and her exit had given him an excuse to speak.

"It's like a poem, kind of . . ." In the last week alone, Patti had received half a dozen of Elena's notes, but had yet to read any of them as amorous declarations.

"She is *so* into you."

Patti didn't say anything.

"What's with the shakes? Is she a drunk or something?"

"I don't know. I think she's unwell."

"Dude, she's *all* into you."

Patti shook her head, blushing, her dyed blond hair pushing up against her headband. "She said she'd write me a letter of recommendation for the School of Education if I had coffee with her. She said she'd explain her theory of the cosmos and write a letter for me. I told her that I don't know anything about science but she said it wouldn't matter, that I'd understand it anyway. She's a professor, she was a professor, in the English Department, but

she knows about physics too. She thinks I'd make a good high school teacher."

The boy shrugged. "She was all, like, *into you*," he mumbled.

Patti returned to her clerical work: posting the office hours of all the physics professors on the department Web site. She was still unaware that she had in fact been the inspiration for the completion of Elena Gavrushnekov's cosmology, her study of the structure and composition of the universe. Neither did Patti know, although this she suspected, that Elena Gavrushnekov's brain was badly damaged, and that her days remaining as an animate being on this planet, in this solar system, in this galaxy, were very few.

Patti Tipendorf was right about Elena Gavrushnekov's employment status. The professor—an expert on the work of mid Romantic, feminist poets but only barely known in the field, as the two articles she had published were not widely cited—was on permanent medical leave from Excellence University. Her health problems went back to the spring of 2000, when she began to suffer excruciating headaches directly behind her right eye. Elena first dismissed these headaches as grief induced, caused by the death of Dmitri, her former husband. And so she took greater and greater doses, first of Tylenol, then Advil, then Excedrin, and finally varying mixtures of all three, until—now barely able to get out of bed in the morning—Casha, her lover and companion, pointed out that grief was an unlikely cause for her suffering, since Dmitri had tormented both of them with harassing phone calls and icy stares in the supermarket for years. "The man was a Neanderthal," she reminded Elena. "What was there possibly to mourn?"

Casha recommended a trip to the doctor and Elena refused, until the severity of her headaches made it impossible for her even to eat, much less take care of her vegetable garden. When she finally paid a visit to the Excellence University Health Clinic, the neurologist on call asked her a series of questions and then ordered a CAT scan that revealed a tumor about the size of a walnut pressing sharply against her olfactory nerve. Subsequent tests identified the tumor as benign, and a tricky extraction sur-