

# THE WOMAN IN THE NUMBERS

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Isaac Robert Newton, Isaac-the-Box, overgrown with sapling cottonwoods and birches, squats faintly clicking in the middle of Don't-Go-There Field. He sucks on a thread of random numbers, thin and sweet and silver, filling in the details of a sublime moment in obsessive fractal detail. He takes each grain of the moment and limns its particular details, then the details of the details, and the details of the details of the details, so on down toward infinity. Toward nowhere. Zeno's paradox, short distances halved, the object of desire within fingertip's reach but never achieved.

Isaac-the-Box is forever collapsing inward, a dying star, his consciousness becoming infinitely massive as it becomes smaller and smaller. Already, only thirty years since the straw-haired woman put him here, things are beginning to be drawn to him. Birds. Small animals. Lizards. They feel the attraction of the metal box. The box confuses them. There should be a smell. It should be a dangerous, uncertain smell, but there is nothing. Just a feeling, a sense of things impossible for them to understand. Doorknobs. A hand without an arm, suspended. A thing forever upside-down and right-side up at the same time.

The straw-haired woman (rather, the silver-haired woman now, for she is frail and there are reticulated webs around her mercury-bright eyes and soon she will be no more) leaves food for the creatures. Peanut-butter sandwich crusts and rinds of fruit. In the spring, she scatters flower seeds. The ones that are not eaten will grow and bloom into colors. She is alive, and she does have a smell. She smells of imperfection and resignation and love.

Isaac-the-box winks and blinks at various intervals, his little lights glimmering through the screen of weeds and saplings and flowers that have grown up around

**M. K. HOBSON**

him. Sometimes he buzzes, grinds or clicks. He is powered by a very efficient atomic battery, designed to provide uninterrupted power for ten million years. He will run until a seismological cataclysm sends him spiraling down through a fiery crack in the earth's crust. Or until the planet explodes.

He sits in the middle of vast tract of private land in the Bitterroot Mountains of Montana. Right in the middle of this remote stretch of wilderness there is a field. Don't-Go-There Field. He remembers walking with the straw-haired woman while she was naming these places. Don't-Go-There Field and Come-Out-Come-Out Cave and Look-At-Me Rocks and Time-Must-Pass Creek.

He still remembers these things, a little. But maybe in ten thousand years, he won't. Their consequence is so small. There is so much else. There is the thread of random numbers, sweet and encompassing, and there is always something to discover within them.

This day, he discovers an elaboration on the curl of brown hair above his mother's left ear. The shine of it is perfect. Her hair was never perfect, but the light hits this little curl of it just right.

He goes deeper, to an individual hair. The light is at just the right angle to penetrate the shaft, illuminate it. It is like copper glowing from within.

He goes deeper, into the glow itself. He tears it apart into every color of red and brown and yellow and gold.

He goes deeper. He concentrates on the red. There is more beneath that red, he knows. A wiggling vibration of wavelengths, each one requiring detangling.

And down he goes, down, down, down.

*In the curl of red, she is screaming at him.*

(What he remembers her saying is probably not what she really said, because he did not know so many words when he was four. This fact makes him feel mushy and dull and antsy; He should know. He should know exactly what she said. He should have listened better.

A small helical gear and pinion wire shift in sympathy. They remind him where he is. He is inside, and she is out. Her universe will never be his, never again. He resumes his unraveling, tearing her apart with slender remembered fingers.)

*She is screaming at him, shaking something in his face. A toy.*

*She is saying that he should pay more attention. That if he listened better, she wouldn't have to scream, and he would be a better boy. If he*

*listened, then he would know.*

*She throws the toy down on the floor, hard. It is a soft toy car with large wheels. There is a smiling face on it. It squeaks.*

*Isaac is still, deeply still. He does not feel fear, or anger, or sadness. He is only blank and uncomprehending and pinprick-tiny.*

*She picks up other toys and throws them on the ground and crushes them under her feet. Little broken pieces fly through the air.*

*He longs to crawl into her lap, to bury his face in her soft breasts, find the dark fragrance there. He wants to beg her to protect him. But she can't be both things at once. No one can be upside down and right-side up at the same time. He knows this, even at four.*

*Sitting on the floor, he makes his body smaller.*

Isaac began sponging at a very young age, but he did not have the word for it until later. He discovered the word when he was five and his mother threw a wine bottle at him and he soaked up the spilled red liquid with a ratty yellow sponge. He cut his hand on a shard of broken glass while he was cleaning up the wine, and the blood of his hand mingled in with the wine, and it stung. But it all was sucked up into the sponge, blood and wine and all, and it seemed so right and so final. If only his brain was like that. If only he could suck everything up, suck up everything so that nothing ever escaped him. Then there would be nothing for her to yell at him about. He would become steel, smooth and seamless. There would be no scalp for her to dig her nails into, no flesh for her to rip or bruise. She could beat against him forever, and he would be inside, looking out. She could beat herself to bits against him.

The thought was beautiful. He set himself to learn how to become a sponge.

It was not easy. He never knew what he should pay attention to. His mother knew, of course, but she would not tell him until the moment for attention had passed, and he had made a mistake. Made her angry again.

He tried very hard to predict what he should pay attention to, what the important things were. But only his mother knew what they were. One moment, it was the thin film of dust on the top shelf of the shelves in the back of the basement. The next moment, it was that he used the word "the" too much. Five minutes later, it was that he was sitting too still.

*"You think I don't get it?" She sneers. "You think I don't see what you're doing?"*

**M. K. HOBSON**

*Isaac taps a toe, tentatively. Lifts his chin up and down. How much is too much? How much is too little?*

*“If you paid more attention, I wouldn’t have to say a goddamn word.”  
He watches harder. Becomes a sponge. Becomes steel.*

Obsession is exhausting.

Isaac’s ability to pay extreme attention cost him. He would sleep all day, twelve hours a day. When he wasn’t sponging, he was sleeping, escaping the terrible burden of concentration. He slept deeply, and did not dream at all.

This pleased his mother, because when he was awake, things happened. Items would vanish or appear. Hours would pass, and she would not know where they had gone. Morning would become night would become morning. She did not know if these events were the result of the alcohol or the drugs or the cigarettes, but she knew that they did not occur when Isaac was asleep. When he was asleep, her reflection moved normally in panes of glass as she passed them, and did not stop to stare back at her. When he was asleep, stripes of light falling across the carpet did not bend and refract in ways contrary to their nature. When he was asleep, she was not as terrible; she could be young again, young and afraid and beaten, and she could feel sorry for herself.

By the time he started school, Isaac was a sponge.

He could stare at something—a page, a face, a textbook—and absorb it. Not read it, not consciously decipher it, but rather soak it in through his pores. Feel it, get his whole big body around it. Hug it, take it in, chew it, digest it. It was a good way to see small pieces of paper that had to be picked up out of corners, doors that should be closed but not shut, chairs that were not at a ninety-degree angle to the table. Sponging helped him foresee many disasters and avert them.

Many, but not all.

The method sometimes failed him where he needed it most. His mother remained an ocean of contradictions too large to absorb. She was random and contradictory and unencompassable. Her rages built and decayed quickly, and they had no appreciable connection to each other, so the hard-won knowledge of one day never carried over to the next.

*(She pushes his head through a window because he is wearing a blue shirt.)*

*She cuts off all his hair because he asks if there is any butter.*

*She locks him in a closet and lies on the floor outside of it, curled up in a ball, talking to the carpet.*

*Wake up.*

*Open your goddamn eyes.*

*Look, look!)*

Because he could not formulate a theory for how to consistently predict her storms of destruction and avert them, he learned to live outside of her line of vision. He stayed very still, moving just enough to escape her notice.

This got harder as he got older. He got bigger and clumsier. He was well over six feet tall by the time he was seventeen, his body composed entirely of elbows and extremities that flailed even though he tried to keep them neatly tucked in. It was as if his body had a mind of its own, a rebellious, treacherous mind. His body was like a vicious younger brother, always looking for ways to get him into trouble. His body knocked into things. His body ate too much. It all infuriated his mother.

No cloud without a silver lining, though. When he was outside his mother's zigzagging path of chaotic destruction, the skills he'd developed served him well. Sponging gave him perspective, and with perspective came pattern, and with pattern came beauty. He saw patterns in everything, but it was the patterns in the numbers that were the most beautiful. Straight and mute and unambiguous and predictable.

His teachers called him a genius, and pitied him.

He got a scholarship to a good college, and another scholarship to an even better graduate school.

And then his mother died.

He was working on his master's thesis when the news came. His research involved the radioactive decay of carbon atoms.

When he learned that she was dead, he sat very still, looking at his own reflection in the window, huge and bent and clumsy and distorted. He sat for a long time, shaking, waiting for something to happen, for the sky to crack open, for snakes to ooze from the walls. Something would have to happen. He stared at the data he'd collected for his thesis. A hundred pages of it, carefully compiled, partially analyzed.

It suddenly struck him that it was just not enough.

He didn't have enough data. His whole body was shaking. He could not

**M. K. HOBSON**

complete the analysis with the data he had. He could not breathe. His measurements were impossibly sketchy. He had not paid close enough attention. He never had.

He wondered where she had hidden the gun. A rifle, she had to have hidden it somewhere. In a closet, maybe. He imagined brain-matter spraying red against a wall.

He needed to measure the decay of the carbon atom at a far smaller granularity than he had been measuring it. He needed to measure more. He needed to measure everything.

It took eight weeks to set up the experiment. He did it alone, and in secret, because no one else would understand his need to measure the decay of a carbon atom to a degree of such obsessive fineness.

He did not tell his thesis advisor that he planned to collect a completely new set of experimental data. She was a straw-haired woman with heavy features and eyes the color of mercury. He thought she would be angry with him.

Once set up, the experiment took only one-millionth of a second.

It was a long millionth of a second. Measuring that one millionth of a second resulted in two hundred and fifty thousand single-spaced pages of data.

Isaac had the data printed at a copy shop. It took two months and cost him seventy-five hundred dollars. He got the money by stealing an autoclave and selling it. The copy shop delivered a hundred-and-twenty-five boxes to his apartment.

He sponged the data. Looked at it and took in everything about it, not only the information but the context as well, the whiteness of the paper and its grain, the blackness of the ink, the width of the margins, the height of the descenders and ascenders, the spacing between letters.

He absorbed the information like staring at the shifting patterns of clouds in the sky. Lying on your back, staring at the sky, you do not look for a story. The story finds you, and the cloud becomes a sailing ship, or a running horse. Or a rifle. The chemical processes within your brain form these, mold them, and then suddenly they are there, and they are real.

In this way, absorbing the numbers into the wide mysterious space between his eyes and his heart, Isaac saw it.

He saw a hand.

He stared at the numbers, took them into his mind, stared at them. Unfocused his eyes, absorbed the paper and the printing and the floor and the room around

him, and the sky beyond that, and the stars and everything beyond that, and there was the hand.

A hand reaching for something. A female hand, frozen in mid-motion, mid-movement, mid-moment.

He left graduate school.

His thesis advisor, the straw-haired woman, was worried about him. He felt that she was disappointed in him, and this made tense echoes rise in the low part of his chest. When she asked him to coffee, he agreed pleasantly, and held the door for her, and pulled out her chair, and put his napkin on his lap. He hunched over the table, trying to hide his extreme height, trying to make his body smaller. He sat as if there was scar tissue webbing the core of him, cramping him into something compact and shrimp-shaped. He paid the bill with the last of the money he'd gotten from the stolen autoclave. But he did not talk through the whole awkward visit. He sat very still and smiled at her very carefully. She tried to get him to talk about his future plans, about his research, about the weather. He just sponged his coffee cup, staring at the little brown puddle in the bottom of the saucer.

She filled the void of his silence by talking about herself. This was no great burden to her. She liked talking about herself.

Her research team had twenty million dollars from the Department of Defense to develop wireless brain computer interface technology. Powerful magnetic signals, manipulated to stimulate pathways in the human prefrontal cortex and transmit orders, plans, maps, in-field intelligence. The applications were being developed in order to kill people in newer and faster ways.

But she did not think about what this meant, about the mothers of sons who would die, about the mothers of those mothers. Her thoughts floated on the glossy surface of immediacy. She loved grant money and the allure of the shiny atrocities that she could create with it. She did not see the pattern within the chaos. No one ever did.

He smiled silently, inoffensively. He pushed the coffee cup around on its saucer.

As they were parting ways, she looked at him with a little exasperation that made his stomach curdle. She wore a knowing smile that made her look cruel.

“Do you need a job?” she asked.

He paused for a long time, sponging the ground, its stochastic texture comforting him up through the soles of his shoes.

**M. K. HOBSON**

“Yes,” he said, finally.

She offered him her hand to seal the deal. She noticed that it was strangely hard to accurately gauge the distance between their bodies. It wasn't just that he was always positioning himself as if a blow could come from any direction at any moment. There was a hunch to his back, like he was carrying a lead weight in his belly. He carried himself like one side of his body was tall and one short, and his waist wide and his knees narrow. He looked like a pencil distorted by a glass of water.

But he was interesting to her. Interesting in the way things under glass are interesting. She thought she might dissect him, casually, just for fun.

So he joined the team. They gave him a white jumpsuit that did not fit him, and a broom to sweep the floors.

He did not work very hard.

“Don't you ever sleep?”

The straw-haired woman asked him this the first night she brought him home to her white oak white walled apartment. He had brought his black gym bag, stuffed with as many pages of data as he could carry, and when she was finished with him, he crept out of her bed to stare at the dog-eared pages. He stared at them, turning them over slowly in his lap.

“What is that you're reading? Numbers? Numbers can wait. You need your rest. Come to bed. Come to bed.”

He came to bed immediately, because he was a good boy. He held her, his chin pressed against the top of her head, his eyes wide open.

She slept for days that first night with him. She lived a lifetime in her dreams that night. When she woke in the morning, stiff muscles crackling, she expected to find that the trees outside her window had died, that the earth had gone barren, that dinosaurs had returned to rule newly-grassed plains.

But she just found him, his big body hunched back over the papers, his eyes unmoving and unfocused and bright, so bright.

The first few months with the straw-haired woman in her white oak white walled apartment were undemanding. She asked little of him and he gave little. He

came to work diligently and abstractly. He washed his jumpsuit when necessary. Mostly, though, he sponged data.

He discovered a hand and a wrist and part of an arm.

The hand was reaching for something.

There were intimations of boundaries beyond that, of a whole figure somewhere there within the hundred-and-twenty-five boxes of printed numbers. He could feel that the woman was standing in an unusual way. He imagined that there was a defeated slope to her shoulders, an expectancy in the way she had one foot placed before the other. He felt that she was reaching for something at waist level.

What was she reaching for? When would he get to the box, to the page, that contained the answer?

It was not going fast enough.

At the lab, however, things moved quickly. Twenty million dollars will make things move quickly. The team reworked the protocols on a standard Hauptman-Xian brain-computer interface (which had been helping quadriplegics move mouse icons around on computer screens for a dozen years) and came up with a working wireless neural output generator. From there, it was a small step to complete the loop, reverse the interface so that data could be returned to the brain from the computer that was being controlled by it. For the purpose of the team's report to the Department of Defense, it was called Project D-524a: Wireless Neural Interface. But among themselves, they called it the Box.

The day the team performed their first successful experiment with the Box (a test subject transmitted two large numbers to a remote computer, which divided the numbers and returned the result to the mind of the test subject) Isaac experienced a minor frenzy. He laid his hands on the Box, stared at it, open-mouthed. He chattered a stream of questions, hardly waiting for the answers before another sprung to his lips. His voice was high and tense.

This abrupt enthusiasm surprised the team. Before he was just another grad student, half-present and abstracted, the director's floor-sweeping machine. He brought her coffee at random intervals and kept her bed warm at night. If strange things happened after he joined the team, they were never ascribed directly to him, rather to the strange nature of the project they were working on. Long hours could make fluorescent lights flicker and wave in odd Morse-code patterns. Fatigue could explain the way that voices slowed and echoed, the way ghost-images of hands and doorknobs appeared in the polished steel surfaces of their magnificent appliances,

**M. K. HOBSON**

and the smell of spilled wine and blood.

But Isaac had realized what kind of freedom the team had created for him. They had engineered his salvation. Suddenly, and without warning, he knew that he could be freed from the tyranny of eyeballs, of paper, of ink. He could mainline the hundred-and-twenty-five boxes in a sweet digitized flood. He could become the data, suck it in, let it circulate through his whole body, tiny numerals like blood cells, oxygenating his soul, letting him finally, finally breathe.

“Of course you may not,” the straw haired woman said tersely, when he came into her office and leaned over her desk and told her that he had to use the Box. “What do you think it is, a toy? Do you want us to lose our funding?”

He blinked, swallowed hard. He made his voice even more pleasant, more sweet, more ingratiating. He told her again, his voice shaking, that he must use it.

*Please*, he said.

*No*, she smiled at him.

In an instant, he had her by the throat. He shook her. He knew the place between the windpipe and the jugular, the place to dig his fingers. He dragged her little body across the desk, and things broke. She could not scream, but things broke and her team members heard. They rushed into the office, and pulled Isaac off of her. His face, they later said, was a blur, like a face of a man falling from a high building, featureless and terrifying.

Campus security came. They held him until the police came.

She did not press charges.

She came down to the station later. She hid the purpling bruises around her throat with a scarf.

Of course, she did not tell her team that she picked him up from the police station. She did not tell them that she brought him home, held him sobbing against her bruised breast. She could not tell them all the apologies she gave him and the promises she made. She would make it all right, she promised him. She would make it all right for him.

She took him back to the lab at night, when everyone was gone. They brought Isaac’s one-hundred-and-twenty-five boxes, the data encoded on a slim silver disc. They stepped together into the darkness in which clicking whirring machines waited. She put the transceiver on the very center of his forehead, the broad smooth place between his eyebrows. She covered his eyes and plugged his ears and his

nose. She placed a mask over his mouth, and his lungs filled with cyanotic bitterness.

Eyelids twitching, a hundred-and-twenty-five boxes streamed through every part of him, through his groin and gut, saturating his cortex and forebrain.

And the woman stepped forward from the numbers as if someone had just flipped a light switch.

*A doorknob.*

*That is what she is reaching for.*

*The tips of her fingers are just touching it, contacting metal. He can feel the cool smoothness of the metal. It is shiny brass, just like the doorknobs in his mother's house.*

*The doorknobs in his mother's house are strange.*

*They are barrel-shaped, with a smooth concave depression on the end that faces from the surface of the door. In the very center of the shining depression is a mysterious hole. A point of infinite smallness and darkness. If he could get small enough, he could crawl into that hole.*

*He looks at himself in those doorknobs and is reflected upside down. When he was young, and the door was always locked, he would stare at the doorknob, and he would pay attention to the doorknob. He thought deeply about that doorknob. He'd realized that even if he stood on his head, he'd still be upside down in that doorknob. His reflection would be right side up, but he himself would be upside down.*

*There is never any way to get both of him, the real him and the reflected him, to stand up straight at the same time.*

Isaac convulsed in the leather chair, his long muscles freezing and snapping, his hands curling up like flakes of burning bone.

She held him down, one hand on his shoulder, the other on his thigh; she pressed an ear against his thrashing chest. His heart was pounding spasmodically against his ribs, a panicked bird beating itself to death.

A dead grad student would not look good on her resume.

Around them, in the lab, the machines began to flicker. Time sped up and slowed down. Light bent. She could not move, she could only stand as the sun rose and set and rose and set a hundred times, and the moon crashed into the earth and then leapt back up again. A million terrible versions of herself shifted shadowlike

**M. K. HOBSON**

before her eyes, herself in this place and others, in this time and others. She was pitiless and cruel in all of them.

It was her. *All* of her.

All her ugliness, all her selfishness, all her fear, all her humanity.

He understood her. He knew her.

She was astonished.

No one had ever known her before.

Then, for the first time in her life, she was terrified of losing something. Or more accurately, she knew the terror of losing something she had not wholly discovered.

*He sees the flesh of her forearm in exquisite detail. It is constellated with little scars. His mother picks at scabs compulsively, liking to watch the blood come. She itches mosquito bites, worries pimples. Sometimes she takes up knives and digs at her skin, boredly. She says it is because she has an itch, but he sees the fixity in her eyes, the way they follow the tip of the knife as it creates some pattern of her own mysterious creation ...*

“No more,” the straw-haired woman screamed, over the thundering thrash of chaos. His body was vanishing into light, disintegrating, burning up. There was the smell of burning hair. She could not lose him now. She needed him. He knew her. He understood her. Somewhere inside him, she was. He was her one-hundred-and-twenty-five boxes.

She had to struggle to turn off the power. She had to struggle against the moon tumbling out of its orbit, the spiral arms of galaxies pushing against her, oceans of matter dark and unseen.

Her hand, trembling, found the switch.

Isaac screamed loss and frustration. He fumbled after the flood of numbers as they fled from him, leaving him heavy and dull and beached, a jellyfish flung ashore to quiver and melt.

He huddled in the chair, trying to breathe.

The straw-haired woman tore the mask from his face, unstrapped and unplugged him, moved her hand before his eyes until slowly, reluctantly, they followed. She smoothed him and petted him until time was right again, and the

moon was where it was supposed to be.

“It is too much,” she said, placing a hand on his fever-hot throat, feeling his pulse beating fire. “You can’t ... you can’t *die* for this.”

Isaac stared at her, unfocussed eyes bright and inverted as a concave brass doorknob.

“How can I die?” he said. “I’ve never been alive.”

That was when she took him away.

She told her team that she was taking a sabbatical. She did not tell them that she was going away with him. The experimental phase of the project was over anyway; all that remained was the detailed reporting that the Department of Defense required. There would be testimony required before groups of Generals. But that was yet to come. Meanwhile, she was taking a sabbatical.

She had to make him understand. She had to make him understand how important he was to her. He was vital to her life. He understood things about her that she did not understand. Her heart beat in his chest. His life was no longer his own. He had to understand that. She had to make him understand.

She took him to a place that she had in the Bitterroot Mountains. There was a cabin. It was primitive, but comfortably so; there was a satellite feed and a gas-hybrid generator and passive solar collectors. But there were no numbers. Isaac did not know what had become of the one-hundred-and-twenty-five boxes. Every night, he had writhing screaming nightmares, imagining reams of paper burning in a metal can, butterflies of ash rising up on constellations of sparks.

“We’re going to work on this together,” she said matter-of-factly. It was the tone she used when speaking of projects, of reports, of grant money. But there was a desperation behind it he’d never heard before.

She took him for walks. She showed him Don’t-Go-There field. She named places as they walked. You-Are-Mine Arroyo and Forgive-And-Forget Butte and What-Is-Past-Is-Past Creek. She owned the land, hundreds of acres, obscenely vast. She could call things whatever she wanted. She named ancient things whimsically; their redefinition was the work of a brutal instant.

“We are making progress,” she said to him one day, with undisguised relief at her own imagined accomplishment.

They were making progress.

She began to speak of houses. She spoke of Isaac completing his master’s thesis, but she did not speak of the decay of carbon atoms. She spoke of children

**M. K. HOBSON**

and cocktail parties and her brilliant future presenting her research to a group of Generals from the Department of Defense. She spoke of things that had nothing to do with rifles or doorknobs, and time did not do strange things and light continued on its accustomed path unbent and unmolested.

He pleaded with her gently, constantly; trying to convince her to take him back, take him back to the lab, to the box. He had to understand. He had to understand the woman with her fingertips on the doorknob. He had to know what she was reaching for.

“Understand her, you mean?” She prompted him, her mercury-bright eyes disassembling him, shaking him roughly to hear what rattled. “Your mother?”

He clenched his teeth. Fury surged through him. What right had she to ask him questions, to keep him here? What right had she to name things? He suddenly wished he had strangled the life out of her that day, when he’d had her windpipe and her jugular under his fingers.

“I’m leaving,” he said.

She stared at him in shock.

“No, you’re not,” she said. Her voice was dangerous. Anger kindled in her poisonous silver eyes. The anger that he’d always been so careful to avoid. Now he was inviting it. He welcomed it. Without the numbers, it was all he had.

He turned pointedly. Infuriatingly. He turned his back on her and walked away from her, back along the creek she had named Regret-Nothing.

She caught up with him in two strides, clamping a hand around his belt, pulling him off balance. She was shorter than he, but stocky and strong, and fired with abrupt fury. He fell to the ground, curling himself up on the slippery pine needles, shielding his head with his arms.

“How *dare* you,” she screamed at him, her rage inflating like the birth of a new star. Wisps of brown hair flew around her red sweating face. She beat him mercilessly, with fists and feet. “How *dare* you?”

*Because I love you*, he thought, savoring each blow. It was his own secret, spoken into his forearms from behind closed eyes as her fists beat down on his shoulders.

The straw-haired woman led him back to the cabin in silence, past Pay-Attention Meadow and Listen-To-Me Grove. She put him a bathtub of hot water and washed blood from his face with a warm washcloth. She did not speak.

“I won’t leave,” he said, offering the words gently. Soothing her, wiping away the blood she had not shed, palliating the bruises she did not share. Of course he would not leave. There was no longer any need to.

He saw her everywhere now.

In the random whorls of soap bubbles in the cabin’s big claw-foot tub. Even when he looked at the straw-haired woman. Especially then.

He felt free.

He did not need the numbers any more.

He could just look at her.

The straw-haired woman did not sleep for three days, though Isaac slept deeply, in deep peace, nightmares banished, burning boxes irrelevant. He slept gently and sweetly. She sat by his bedside and looked at his bruised face. Purple and yellow and orange swirled around the orbit of his eye.

He knew who she was.

“Get up,” she said softly, on the third day. “We’re leaving.”

He complied, placid and quick, making the bed and locking the cabin doors and holding the car door open for her.

They drove for two days, back to California. Back to her lab.

“Don’t be afraid,” she said to him. His eyes were anxious as he watched her unlock the door to the dark lab with its clicking whirring machines. She flipped on the light.

Taking her hand, she led him gently to where the box squatted, broad and gleaming. They stood looking at their twin reflections in the smooth metal.

“She’s not in there,” the straw-haired woman said softly. “And I’m not in there either.”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. Sudden concern kindled in his eyes. “I don’t ... I don’t want to leave you.”

She placed a hand on his face, on the bruises that were still healing. She stroked his cheek with her thumb.

“You’re a good boy,” she said. “You’re a very, very good boy.”

Because the straw-haired woman finally knew herself, and knowing herself, she knew him.

He looked for an answer in the hundred-and-twenty-five boxes, an answer that they did not have. If he stayed, he would look to her for an answer that she did not have.

**M. K. HOBSON**

She would disappoint him. But the boxes never would.

The woman in the numbers did not have the answer, but he would never know that. He would never know enough of her to know that. There would always be another detail to limn, another fractal filigree to chase downward into infinity.

She had to let him go, to let him lose himself in furious exploration of her eternally static image, an image that could never hurt him because it was infinite and there was always something else to pay attention to and he would always be a good boy because he would pay attention, such close, perfect attention to her forever.

It was the only way he could be saved. She was the only one who could save him. She was the only one who could save him from herself.

She took his hand, warmly cradled in her own, and placed it on the cool metal of the Box. She held it there, pressing it down.

“Go,” she said.

He hesitated for a moment, but finally he nodded. He was a good boy.

Then time stopped, and the planet stopped moving, and there was only him, and the straw-haired woman, and the woman in the numbers in everything, and the Box.

His body blazed with light, but his face was as calm and beautiful as the smile of God.

She let her hand drop, and stepped back from him, proud as only a mother can be.

For one long, last moment, he looked at her.

At her metal eyes, the color of imperfection and resignation and love. He thought of doorknobs, of upside-down reflections. Of two faces that were forever to be opposite. But for a strange confused moment, they didn't seem to be opposite at all. He thought that he didn't really recognize her. That she wasn't who he thought she was at all.

“I love you,” he said.

“I love you too,” she said, softly, over the sound of the sun imploding.

*I love you too.*

His mother is smiling.

Isaac-the-Box is grinding through data. He never thinks about the hundred-and-

## THE WOMAN IN THE NUMBERS

twenty-five boxes now; they were only a starting place, an outline, broad brush strokes on an aching white page. The straw-haired woman has provided him with a randomness generator that will spit out numbers forever. A silver thread, a thin sweet stream of milk he sucks on lovingly.

*She is looking at the door, and there is a look on her face of the most transcendent joy. He has never seen such joy on his mother's face. It is the most beautiful thing he can imagine.*

Someday, if he pays attention long enough, he will know what is behind that door. He will know what she is looking at with such joy. He will discover who is on the other side.

He hopes that it is him on the other side of that door. He hopes that he will see that doorknob turn, and that look of joy will still be on her face, and for a moment, he will be right side up.