The weight loss came first and was easiest to explain away. Taichea and I are alone on the gyre with only the air-dropped cache of non-perishables to share between us, so it follows that I would thin out over time. The fatigue, I could effortlessly attribute to the lack of food as well. The chronic nausea was surely nothing more than a bug, a wayfaring flu virus that blew in from the South China Sea, and the night sweats? We are living on a solid mass of trash twice the size of the United States—who knows what sort of fumes we’re inhaling? The restless breeze that wafts over Bisphenol Beach leaves a sour tang in our mouths—who can say for sure what it’s doing to our bodies? But the blotched sores that bloomed on my neck like the bite marks of some creature attempting to dine on my soul—those marks were unmistakable to Taichea. The same spots had taken her grandfather and made a brittle wisp of her mother. There was no hiding what I’d come down with anymore and that is when everything started to really take a turn for the worse because there was a baby growing inside Taichea to whom I’d most likely passed the thing I’d contracted, and for all we knew it could be the last human baby gestating in anyone’s womb anywhere.

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“About what?” I said even though I had a feeling.

“Take a look at your neck before you say anything else.” She coolly offered the hand mirror. I had never seen her upset in quite this way before. I took the mirror and examined the spots, gingerly brushing them with my index finger. Faint beet-hued stains arrayed like a map from my adam’s apple down to my sternum. They were called sarcomas, weren’t they? This was not a thing that happened to people anymore. HIV was an antique virus that I knew only through folklore and the agonizing 2-D grade school seminars I’d endured in my youth. Xytomitol had effectively put it in the company of smallpox and
polio and those other diseases contained in test tubes under a mountain somewhere.

“How could you let this happen?”

“You make it sound like something I planned.” I set the mirror down on the Mexican blanket that was our sole article of bedding and stared through the netted skylight of the dome tent.

“And?”

And I knew exactly how it happened. Taichea and I had just parachuted down to the landmass with all of our belongings, about forty kilometers down the shore from our present location in the dome tent underneath the sheltering wing of a crashed drone bomber. I unbuckled the chute, kicked off my goatskin loafers, and tear-assed down the length of the beach in a sort of victory run. It was an impulse thing and I just went with it. Took long whupping strides through the polymer turf, huffing the malted sea air. I’d spent my career battling the public perception of the gyre and so it was not without a modest surge of righteousness that I enjoyed the authenticity of the beach moment. It had all of the pulpy immediacy of the standard sand beach, with uncompromising visuals and all of the baseline tactile features. Pundits routinely made a fuss about the profundity of colored nurdles that made up the surface of the beach, those preproduction pellets that were the core resource in the plastic economy and which, when dumped into the sea by a cargo ship or a production plant with excess inventory, were drawn to the whorling landmass of the gyre like metal shavings to an electromagnet. The nurdles are slightly larger in size than the standard grain of sand but they give underfoot with a pleasing little squeal that is its own distinct wonderment and this is why I think people never really got comfortable with plastics—they would not allow themselves to fully enjoy the material for what it is. A plastic beach is still a beach. A plastic palm tree gives as much shade as a wild monocot. I think that the comparative immortality of plastics made people anxious and depressed and just generally distrustful of the stuff, which is a shame.

Mixed in with the nurdles are, of course, the broken-down fragments of a billion plastic bottles and jugs, children’s toy bricks and gag hats, handsoap dispensers and laptop shells, diaper loaves and prophylactic errata and all of the foam and bubblewrap and bagging materials that had once swaddled the discarded products. There is, too, the occasional crazed and unidentifiable chassis of a thing that hasn’t yet broken down and is sticking half out of the polymer dune. And you’re going to sometimes come across some other materials such as glass or metal, sometimes insanely sharp objects made of metal with
one purpose in life, which is to pierce human flesh. Some of which are needles that have been used by a sullen junkie somewhere, used once or maybe multiple times, or who knows, maybe shared by many men and women as they slumped on frayed couches in darkened, hushed warehouses. Some of which or—let’s stop talking in generalizations here—one of which has been shared liberally among the denizens of some abandoned office building and then cast into the sea like a bottle that held a desperate message.

I was running a victory lap because I owned the beach and the hills and valleys beyond. The entire landmass atop the gyre was mine. I had to buy the thing; it was an industry-standard power play in the guise of a PR campaign. Rod Watkins at GenDyne had just purchased an intimidatingly vast stretch of land in Nigeria, where those hacks got the bulk of their raw materials, and he financed the construction of a stadium for whatever sport they enjoyed in that country. Using indigenous labor, empowering the local economy, et cetera. Hitting all the sweet spots. It was one of those airtight campaigns, ruthlessly conceived and executed, that puts everyone else in a bad light. GenDyne’s ad agency produced some admittedly great footage of black children kicking a ball in a dead field that gave way through some convincing CGI to a clean, well-illuminated stadium at night where the children, slightly older, competed in slow motion while their parents cheered tearfully from the sidelines. We had no such record of service at United Polymer, which made us suddenly look like greedy monsters. History isn’t made by limpdicks so I bought the North Pacific gyre, the whole shot, and vowed to make the continent of floating debris at its center my permanent residence. Demonstrating to the public that the gyre’s landmass was an inhabitable surface was the low-hanging fruit; I was already thinking ahead to the bustling triple-A resorts and theme parks that the landmass would support in coming decades. With a satellite dish and a solar panel I could pretty much run United Polymer from anywhere, and I felt it in my marrow that if I didn’t take action on the gyre someone else would.

Taichea, a thorough and inquisitive recent graduate from Rutgers with skin like sunlight filtered through a liter of Pepsi, was my personal assistant, and it just made sense to bring her along. Now we are something else. It is a relationship that deftly evades any definition I attempt to apply. But there is a child growing in her that is at least half my fault and if I’ve passed this virus on to either or both of them I’m willing to take on any additional responsibility such a transmission might incur.

I was running on the beach, every inch of it mine to use as I wished. Bought from the UN for just a fraction of a cent per acre in an unprecedented sale that
was in itself a colossal publicity win. Previously the island of trash had haunted the psychic periphery of consumers across the developed world. Everyone held an occult suspicion that they had somehow played a part in its creation. Those were their cellophane wrappers and deodorant husks and yogurt tubes floating out to the great continent-sized landfill. When I declared ownership of and, by extension, responsibility for the thing, I released them from the burden of guilt. So that even as they derided me in public, calling me the Trash King of Plasticland, they had nothing but breathless admiration for me in the deep silence of their hearts, for I lifted the remorose scrim that separated them, spiritually, from all of the things they owned and enjoyed.

Running, striding confidently along the beach, my feet festooned with the neon particulate, I was renewed and redeemed. I felt like I could catch a strong breeze and take off in a gliding arc over the landmass, which I decided on a whim to call Dokken, after my father. I felt as if my body had attained a state of Grecian perfection. My mind was afire. I didn’t even know what I was going to do with Dokken, but I was spastic with the possibilities. I was COO of the second most successful plastics manufacturer in the world, just a hair’s breadth behind GenDyme and Rod Watkins, that bottomfeeder ghoulish with his African ball team, but I was gaining on him. I’d rendered his well-financed play for the public’s sympathy moot and inert. All that cash he’d spent on the stadium he might as well have saved for the early retirement I was forcing him to take. I was incandescent with power and possibility, and then I put my foot down on the beach and felt a whooshing pang that rippled up through my leg straight into my brain. I went down in a forward roll and hunched fetally by the burgundy surf. The needle was buried to the hilt at a forty-five degree angle just below the ball of my foot. I examined it for a moment, just sort of woozy with amazement at the aggressive depth of the puncture. There was no blood until I slowly unthreaded the sharp from the hole it had made. The spot welled up quickly with blood that ran down the course of my foot, commingling with the clearish gel that smelled faintly of fake cucumber and that held the landmass together. I looked back in the direction from which I’d come to see if Taichea had seen me fall but I was far down the beach. I saw no sign of Taichea or any other people or things. Just the wicked expanse of the gyre spread out for miles and miles.

“So that’s why you were limping that day,” she said.

“ Took forever for that thing to heal up.” I smiled as I said this, confident it would make a difference.

“You told me you had a leg cramp.”
“Well.”

“Why couldn’t you just tell me the truth?”

“I thought it was nothing,” I said, which sounded more hollow than I’d intended.

“You went ahead and seduced me.”

“I thought maybe it was more of a consensual-type thing.”

“You came to me. You told me things. You convinced me that we would have a life together.”

“Don’t we?”

“What kind of life is this?”

“It could still be a happy one.” It was the third thing I’d said already that I didn’t believe.

“Well, and what are you going to do about this?”

As it turns out I was well prepared to give her an answer because I had turned that very question over again and again in my mind over the previous days and nights after it had become clear to me what I was up against, being a man infected with HIV at the end of civilization floating around on a massive heap of trash with no access to a doctor or meds or even someone to tell me how to die. “We will go,” I said. “We will scour the land for some Xyтомito-l. Surely there’s a case of it somewhere. I’ve seen boxes full of Wellbutrin, Paxil, Erythromycin, Oxycontin. Crates of the stuff half-buried in the sub-strate. Good as new.”

“Did you just say ‘substrate’?”

“You can hardly call it dirt.”

She shook her head.

“Look. You don’t want to go. I can already tell you do not want to go.”

“And you think you have the strength to go traipsing all over the place looking for a treatment that might be buried somewhere?”

“I feel pretty good. Surprisingly good.”

“So you’re going to leave me here?”

“I can’t win this, can I? I mean, come with me or stay here. It sounds like I’ll be ruining us either way.”

She issued a subtonal growl of disgust. Like I was a hair plastered to the back of her throat that she was trying to hack free. She started to walk away from me toward a charred ridge of child-size sport utility vehicles.

“Look. I’ll be back. I’ll be back with the medicine and all of this will just. Be past.”
She put her hand up like she didn’t want to hear the next thing I had to say. The gesture came as a relief because I found I had no follow-up.

I put some things in a bag and, sweat welling in sheets across my forehead, on my arms, and down my back, hobbled for what felt like several miles but was probably only about a thousand yards. I was familiar with the territory. I used to take long hikes up into the foothills to clear my head before conference calls. I would wake up early and wander through the bright crumbling wilderness while Taichea slept under the Mexican blanket in the dome tent. The terrain was like a superdimensional map of all that humankind had achieved. I’d follow a winding, improvised path, awestruck by the great diversity of objects that I found, always ending up at my desk on the beach, where I’d start up my device, connect to the network, put on my headset, and bark commands at my direct reports who sat in horrified silence around a slick phone in a conference room in the Financial District. Everything had a brilliance to it in those days, a compact clarity. I sat in my desk chair on the beach in flip-flops and boxer briefs, staring out at the horizon, my head emptied and alive, doling out the sort of withering directives that made me legend in the minds of my peers and followers.

Then the markets fell. And with alarming speed, everything else fell away in turn. I received a roaring tide of frantic calls followed by a wave of panicked all-caps emails and then a scattering of desperate texts and then there was nothing but the “service unavailable” message hovering on the gunmetal screen of my device.

I trudged through a shallow tidepool caked over with coppery surf that popped and sputtered as I moved through it. I saw a gutted aluminum trailer home erupting from a pinkish slurry, vomiting glow-in-the-dark windshield dice from its open front door. On a hill beyond there was a jagged pyramid of a hundred or so white Chinese hardhats piled up like the skulls of monks, topped by a Tekken 9 arcade cabinet, the composite frame of which was swollen and separated, rimed with a sick yellow crust. I passed a vinyl lawn ornament in the shape of a snowglobe that was partially inflated from the heat. The team of reindeer trapped inside was furry with black fungus. Hundreds of Nerf darts littered my path like grapeshot cast on the battlefields at Gettysburg, and in the distance a fiberglass restaurant chain mascot lay with its braincase smashed. I marveled at how the things had gotten to Dokken, and how it had come to be an inhabitable surface at all. When my father ran United Polymer the garbage patch was little more than a speculation. It couldn’t be seen by satellite or by the naked eye, and the threat it posed was so remote that nobody paid much
attention. Suddenly, though, there was a small, rainbow-colored island spinning at the center of the gyre. I remember the photograph that my father tried to hide from me of a group of scientists balanced on its surface in T-shirts and running shorts, staring ruefully into the distance. He was ashamed of the picture but I found it fascinating. The objects collected in the gyre told a story that no single human hand could author.

Beyond the mascot, which was a muscular cheeseburger dressed as a ninja, there was an oblong depression lined with a patchwork underlayment of parched tarps and wrappers, lengths of tattered plastic woven together and shot through with tangled bits of safety-orange fencing and drag nets. The dyes and colorants used to brand the various materials had faded and bled to create a variegated tapestry. Little fronds of torn poly whipped in the breeze. There was a slick pool at the bottom of the depression and I could see even from far away the dorsal fin of something that still lived. The fin wagged slowly in the baking heat. I hadn’t seen anything alive on the landmass except for the red mites that were everywhere, even grasping their way along the insides of my eyelids. I sidestepped down the slope until I came to the water’s edge where I could clearly see that the animal was a dolphin. Covered with tiny sores and bites, it looked barely alive. I squatted for a better view and when I did so the dolphin reared back to regard me with a single cobalt eye. It had a graphite apparatus clamped to its forehead and it appeared, even though it was an animal with no real expressive features, to be in a great deal of pain. I sloshed into the grimy pool, which was butter-thick with musky yellow algae. The dolphin heaved and flapped in an effort to flee but the water was too shallow. It couldn’t produce any momentum, so it just slapped gracelessly in the muck.

“Easy,” I said.

“We have many fine options as far as beverages are concerned. You please take a moment to look at the menu,” the animal responded through the apparatus, which translated its yips and clicks with startling clarity into English II.

“Pardon?”

“You would like to try our kimchee sampler?” The animal lifted its flipper in a defensive pose, staring at me with the one eye.

“Do you—you need to get back to the sea, don’t you?”

“You please take a moment—”

“This is no place for you.”

“—to look at the menu. Many fine dishes.”

I was not going to be able to carry the dolphin myself. “Hang on, buddy,” I said. I tried to place my hand reassuringly on the dolphin’s flank but it flinched.
I thought about saying to hell with it but the animal looked so despondent. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I walked away. I circled the depression looking for something I could use as a sled to carry the dolphin to the shore. It didn’t take me long to find a cracked plexi billboard display screen for a personal body lubricant called SlutCracker. I quickly braided a chain of plastic grocery bags into a tether, which I then tied to one end of the screen. I hauled the thing down the slope to the sludge pond.

“I’m going to lift you onto this,” I said. I felt oddly comfortable talking to the dolphin, who seemed to really get me. “Will you let me lift you up? I promise to be gentle.”

“Would you like me to top off that cola for you?”

I approached the animal and it did not buck or squirm. It allowed me to straddle it and drag it through the ripe grime and up onto the makeshift gurney. I remembered a scene from a film I’d watched as a child where rescue workers ladled water over a beached whale’s back as they hauled it out to sea and I did the same with the dolphin. I cupped my hands and poured the brackish gunk down the length of the animal’s body and it didn’t seem to mind.

I pulled the sled along the path I’d taken until I reached the dome tent.

“What is this?” Taichea said, rising from the overturned bucket she used for sulking when she wasn’t eating pork from a can.

“I found him in a sort of a gulch. He talks!”

“Oh,” she said, putting her hand to her face. “It’s one of those talking dolphins.”

“You’ve heard of a talking dolphin?”

“There was a restaurant in Korea that was famous for it. They attached these devices to the dolphins’ heads and trained them as waitstaff. Some luxury resort on Jeju Island.”

“You think this dolphin came from Korea?”

“What do you think of our beautiful country?” the dolphin said, which more or less cinched it.

Taichea made a sour face. “So you’ve brought a dolphin back, but where is the medication?”

“Well. I was only out there a short while. You can’t expect me to have found it already.”

“But you brought back a dolphin.”

“It talks!”

“Can it cure AIDS?”

“I haven’t asked.”
“That’s great. Make a joke about it. Your unborn child is laughing inside me.”

“Well.”

“I hope you’re proud.”

“A country with a proud, long history, mountains hidden by clouds,” the dolphin said. It reared its head and made a clicking trill in the direction of the water that the device could not translate.

“I’m just taking him to the sea,” I said to Taichea. “I will be right back and I will find the medicine and we will be fine.”

She sat back on the bucket and bit down on her fingertips. I did not know how to make her happy. Didn’t have a clue.

I dragged the sled down to the shoreline where the water lapped against a crispy upcropping of melted Halloween masks, all of the same stoic silver robot man. The masks shattered as I dragged the screen into the water and I slipped right in over my head and down into the velvet depths. I felt the braided plastic rope tug at my neck as the screen descended toward the ocean floor. It carried me down into a dark suspended reef of plastic fronds and fragments that chafed my entire body. With all my remaining strength I untangled myself and floated slowly to the surface, my limbs like ragdoll parts. I surfaced some yards away from shore, my head draped in perforated bread bags, just in time to catch sight of the dolphin as it surged out into the clotted waves, dodging a barnacle-encrusted home entertainment center and the sunbleached carcass of a robotic vacuum.

That night I lay in the dome tent at a safe distance from Taichea, shuddering in the throes of a deep fever, my eyes fixed on the nylon vent at the apex of the dome. I did not think that I would live through the night and for the first time—truly the first, though it must seem like I am making this up, since I had already come to terms with the fact that I’d contracted a virus that I was almost certainly powerless to defeat—I wondered what my death might really matter in the wild and unfathomable course of the universe. I was aware that countless men and women throughout the ages had chewed on this very notion as they looked up into the luminous heavenscape but I had never thought to do so myself. I’d never had any reason to doubt my ascendancy to greatness as the COO of the second most successful plastics manufacturer in the world, and because I could not come up with a reason to live that held my attention for more than a moment or two, even when I considered the possibility that the child I’d sired might go forth into the future and rekindle the world with the
flame of human ambition, I gave myself over to the virus and waited, shaking, for it to take me.

And then it was morning again and I woke to the smell of oven-toasted bread. A low yeasty smoke that made me long for the Financial District flat I’d lived in with my modest staff back when there still was a Financial District. There I could sit by the window with my headset on and watch the sun strike the towers by the esplanade while Wen Wen prepared toast and pepper tea in the kitchen area. But the smell that woke me could not have been toast because we had no bread on Dokken save for the moist canned variety that we used only on holidays. Because it could not be toast I felt immediately that something was wrong. I turned toward Taichea, but she was gone.

I rushed outside in my briefs. Taichea was kneeling at a sterno can, cooking something skewered to a metal stake over the blue flame.

“What are you doing?”

She turned to me, and there was a softness in her face that I had not seen since before she’d discovered the sarcomas. “I was—I’m sorry for what happened yesterday.”

“Oh,” I said. “I—take full responsibility for that. I—”

“Please,” she said, offering the overturned bucket. “Let’s start over, you know, like they say? I am making you a delicious breakfast and then you’ll go and you’ll find the medicine.”

“We can do this,” I said, nodding cautiously.

“We can do this.”

I looked at the food she was preparing. “That smells amazing. What is it?”

“Just the canned meat blend. What we’ve been eating all along. What are you smelling?”

I looked out toward the shore. The sky was dark and heavy with purple clouds but I could see something shearing the mirrored surface of the water. “Hey,” I shouted. “That’s the dolphin. The dolphin is back!” I took off toward the beachfront and got down on my knees as if the dolphin might leap up out of the sea and into my arms, licking my face like a puppy would. As the animal got closer I saw that it was pushing something toward me with its snout, a white waterlogged box ensnared in brown raggings of seaweed. The dolphin came right up to the rim of the landmass and pushed the box up over a tightly packed berm of deformed sporting equipment and even before the bloated walls of the box split along the seam, spilling the prescription bottles over the surface of the beach, I knew what the dolphin had brought me. I snatched up one of the amber containers to confirm my hunch. Xytomitol, the AIDS killer.
There were maybe seventy-two bottles of the stuff lolling on the beach at my feet. I worked the child safety cap off the bottle in my hand and poured the whole thing into my mouth. I wanted not so much to get rid of the AIDS but to torture and decimate it. I wanted to perform the pharmacological equivalent of tying the virus to a chair in a basement room and clocking its face with a set of brass knuckles until nothing remained but blood pulp. I gagged on the load of pills, spilling a few as I huffed and wheezed. The dolphin watched with its eyes like black diamonds, revealing nothing of its impression of me.

I turned back to the camp with chipmunk cheeks, my arms upraised in a champion’s pose. “I’m cured!” I shouted.

Taichea was standing by the bucket, staring dumbstruck at the horizon behind me, the color in her face draining to a translucent slate tone. The skewer lay on the sterno can where she’d dropped it, the meat sizzling and sputtering in the small fire. I turned back to the sea. The sun was half-covered by a roiling mass of clouds that seemed to billow in reverse. Along the horizon as far as I could see in either direction there was a razor-thin streak of white fire lighting the clouds from below.

“Is that China?” I said, and Taichea may or may not have said something. I could not hear her voice over the song the dolphin sang as it took off into the open water.

“Arirang, Arirang, Arariyo.

“Arirang gogareo nomoganda.

“Cheongcheon haneure jan byeoldo manko ureene gaseume hemangdo manta.” The tinny synthetic voice chiming a terminal lullaby into the muted world.