

# Number 42

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*What's the catch, I wonder?* thought Emily. She re-read the advertisement and then re-read it again, before listing the main points aloud to clarify; "twin-storey, two-bedroom, living room, small backyard. Will only rent to responsible young female". Then she looked at the price and wondered if it were a typo.

In the end she drew a circle around it with the yellow highlighter, thus dotting the newspaper with a fourth splotch of colour, resolving that even if it were a typo there was no reason not to at least call and enquire. The bit about the 'young female' was strange though. She would have to wait and see.

Fifteen minutes later, after the other three highlighted items had been crossed out, the voices on the end of the line having replied to Emily's deliberately sweet enquiries with gruff refusals, she picked up the phone once more and dialled the number accompanying the last advertisement.

"Hello?" said a female voice warily.

"Hello," chirped Emily, again in her sweetest, most convincing voice, "I'm ringing about the apartment listed in the paper—"

"It's not an apartment, it's a *house*," corrected the lady on the other end, interrupting.

"Oh, yes, of course. Well that was my question. The price seems very reasonable for an entire house, especially in such a nice area. Is it a spelling mistake?"

"Thank you, it's a lovely area. And no, it's not a spelling mistake," said the woman, warming slightly at Emily's compliment, "the reason it is very inexpensive is that I now *own* number 42, and I live in number 43. Since I don't need the money all that much, I have made the price very attractive so that I can choose a pleasant and responsible neighbour."

It was a perfectly valid reason, and furthermore it explained the reason for the 'responsible young female' bit in the advertisement. Emily's concerns were allayed. The lady continued quickly before she had the chance to respond.

"What is your profession, may I ask?"

"Profession?" Emily's thoughts were still on the last point and she had to catch up to answer the woman's demand. "Oh, well I don't work—"

There was an audible huff of disapproval.

"—since I'm writing my thesis."

“Oh?” exclaimed the lady, surprised. She had been about to bluntly refuse, since she probably maintained that anyone unemployed would be unfit to be her neighbour. “So... you’re a student?”

“A *post-graduate* student, yes. I already have a degree.”

The voice on the other end began to become enthusiastic.

“What do you study?”

“Philosophy.”

“Philosophy! Then you must be quite open-minded.”

It was a difficult enquiry to answer, but Emily didn’t have to as the other lady continued eagerly.

“Where do you write your thesis; at home—” the enthusiasm in her voice dwindled as she spoke the very last words of the question, “—or in the library?”

“Well I was hoping for somewhere very quiet. I prefer to work at home.”

The lady once again became very enthusiastic.

“I think you ought to come and look at number 42. You sound like a perfect candidate. May I ask your name?”

She exchanged details with the lady, who turned out to be one Ms. Charlotte Green, and Emily concluded that she gave the overall impression of a schoolteacher; particular, almost prissy, and she spoke down to Emily just like schoolteachers did. The ‘Ms.’ was the icing on the cake.

Ms. Green appeared more keen to see Emily than Emily was to see the house, and thus found herself pressured into visiting that very afternoon. Barely an hour later, she stood in front of a lone trio of houses with the feeling of apprehension that one experiences when one knows that there is about to be a significant change in one’s life.

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Number 42 Wilson St. was neighboured by number 43, and not surprisingly, number 41. However, that was it.

The three houses stood alone, cramped as all Victorian terraces seem with their extremely narrow facades; a relic of the days when real estate was taxed according to its width on the street-front, resulting in narrow, yet very long, two-storey houses. Here, however, they

seemed unnecessarily cramped since there was nothing on either side; just the pleasant trees that loped gently from side to side in the warm wind. It was a wonderfully green and scenic inner-city suburb, and the trio of houses basked in unusual isolation for such an area – not only was there free space to either side, but Wilson St. was an old-fashioned promenade with a wide strip of greenery between the two lanes, so there stood a row of noble, ancient oaks between the houses and those on the opposite side of the road, resulting in the appearance that numbers 41 to 43 were comfortably nestled alone amongst the trees.

Even as Emily approached the door to number 43 opened quickly, spitting a lady's figure out onto the small balcony, and snapped shut.

"Oh! Ah... hello. Ms. Green?"

"Good day – are you Emily?"

Ms. Green was an attractive lady only a fraction older than Emily and she beamed at the newcomer.

Emily smiled back and put on her best behaviour, and soon the pleasantries were concluded and Ms. Green ushered her into the neighbouring house for an inspection, which was rather brief and didn't allow Emily to examine details as thoroughly as she would have liked. She entered the front door into the narrow hallway that served as an arterial through the squashed building, a staircase pushing its way into it a few metres in, and was shown the living room at the front of the house, had a quick peek at the kitchen in the rear, before being whisked upstairs to view the two bedrooms, from the rear of which she had a view of the modest backyard.

Despite the rapidity of the inspection, Emily found herself feeling quite positive towards the place, particularly because of the isolation and peace and quiet, despite being so close to the city, and because of the remarkable price. The only questionable factor was Ms. Green. If she was so particular to have a neighbour that suited her that she was willing to lower the rent, then perhaps she had some type of neurotic personality. Perhaps she would gossip without end; maybe that's why she had seemed pleased when Emily had mentioned that she liked to work at home – she wanted company.

Soon the inspection of the house turned into an inspection of Emily. Ms. Green grilled her on every topic imaginable, and the expression on her face during the interrogation session betrayed that she expected and was prepared to reject Emily for the slightest flaw. However, she finally seemed satisfied, and after a long pause, yielded.

"Well, Emily, I think you can have the house ...if you like it."

Emily beamed, and despite her few reservations, accepted.

Just as she was leaving, a question occurred to her, which she felt should always be asked when making a decision on a used item such as a car or house, and she turned to face Ms. Green, who bore a satisfied smile.

“What happened to the previous tenant?” asked Emily, wondering why anyone would move out if it were so reasonable and in such a lovely location.

“She wasn’t a tenant; she owned it. I bought it from her. Her name was Ms. Bingle,” there was a pause, “she died.”

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Emily spent the first night in her new apartment –correction; *house*– with the usual feeling of anticipation upon doing something new and exciting. She had only a thermal mattress and sleeping bag, and slept on the ground in the front bedroom, which she had already chosen as her own, so that she could be up nice and early for the arrival of the removalists the following morning. *Odd*, she thought with a chuckle, *that they should be named after only half of the job they do. They don’t just ‘remove’, they have to put the things back, too.*

As she drifted off to sleep, Emily was aware of the oddest noise emanating from somewhere in the house –it sounded like it might have been in the other upstairs bedroom– and was a type of popping with a whoosh of air followed by a small rattle. It was possibly the water pipes knocking about. She reminded herself to check in the morning.

Emily slept as soundly as is possibly on the thin mattress; disturbed only once during the night, when she stirred at a minor scraping sound that in her dazed and sleepy state entered her dreams as an unknown person gently running a knife across a spinning grinding wheel. Upon waking she couldn’t identify the noise, but saw a flickering of light travelling across the walls, which she naturally attributed to the dancing reflections of a car passing outside, before drifting gently back to sleep.

The following morning a more detailed inspection of the house took place, which was interrupted by the intrusion of Ms. Green, who must have heard Emily’s presence as she went from room to room and studied the features, some of which were strange to find in a rental house, such as the desk in the rear bedroom upstairs (which Emily immediately deemed to become her study) since desks and so forth aren’t usually left by the owner. She commented upon this to Ms. Green.

“I must reiterate,” replied her new landlady, “that you must not, ever, move or remove anything that is already here. We discussed this when you signed the papers. It’s in your contract.”

“I know – it’s just unusual, that’s all.”

“Unusual or not, they’re my wishes. No renovations either. Not even a nail in the wall.”

Emily looked at the lady’s stern face, deliberating whether to pursue questioning in this respect. She didn’t mind at all; she didn’t need or want to renovate – she just wanted to discover the reason for this strict rule. Ms. Green’s expression convinced her to drop the subject, however. Instead, she mentioned the popping sound from the previous evening.

“Electrical noises,” replied Ms. Green quickly enough to show that she had had the answer prepared, “these old houses have such antiquated equipment – these old fuses and circuits will pop and fizzle and buzz all day long. Don’t worry, they’re not dangerous, and soon you won’t even notice them.”

“What is *that*?” uttered Emily, changing the topic as the pair entered the rear bedroom, now the study. On each opposing wall was a strange sculpture in the shape of an oversized flower; the type with a long flute rather than a wide bloom.

“Art deco,” replied the lady, “it’s a sculpture. Please don’t touch it, and don’t, for *any* reason, put anything in it.”

Despite the oddity of these instructions Emily continued her inspection in silence until she noted that there was a multitude of thin cables suspended across the high ceiling in practically every room. Ms. Green provided the electrical excuse once again. Also in many of the rooms Emily noticed that the skirting board was different on the lower edges of the walls going across the width of the room –that is, parallel to Wilson St.– to those running along the length of the room. Those going *across* the room had an extra part, namely, an odd smooth strip on the floor providing a thin space of refuge from the soft carpet along the entire wall, and which glinted in the light. Upon closer inspection, Emily observed the glinting to be a pair of thin gleaming wires located in the middle of this smooth strip, running parallel along the length of the wall. At either end, at the perpendicular walls, the wires terminated in a small panel coloured slightly differently to the wall. This time Emily didn’t even bother querying the landlady, but she received a comment anyway.

“Fixes the carpet. They didn’t staple it back then; they held it down with these strips.”

Moving to her new bedroom, Emily saw one of these ‘carpet fixing strips’ running across the centre of the room – not even attached to a wall. She had lain her thermal mattress on top of it the previous evening.

“Oh,” commented Ms. Green with disapproval and obvious restraint, trying to sound reasonable, “it’s best not to block these.”

“*Block* them?”

“They’re electrical too – those wires. Don’t put anything on top of them.”

Emily rolled her eyes invisibly to Ms. Green. It wasn’t yet enough to make her regret accepting the apartment, but she began to gauge the reason for the very inexpensive rent.

The electrical-current-inducting-carpet-fixing-strips were in every room. They only ever ran across the width of the room, sometimes at an angle if they were in the middle of the carpet as in Emily's room, but most were attached to the skirting board and ran simply parallel to the wall – down in the corner, out of the way.

When she had seen all the rooms and hadn't found anything else odd enough to comment upon, Emily gently led Ms. Green back to the door for some privacy, and as she waved to her from under the eaves she asked about the other neighbour, in number 41.

"Oh that's Mr. Klein," replied Ms. Green, "he's quite old and a bit sick and doesn't show himself much."

Emily turned to look at the house in question, and at that precise moment there was a creak as the door swung open, and an overdressed figure leant out into view. His arm waved awkwardly, touched a gloved finger to an old-fashioned fedora hat that concealed his forehead and shadowed his face, before the figure sprung back inside.

Stunned, Emily returned her attention to Ms. Green, who stood smiling contentedly before disappearing into her own house. Emily shook her head in utter confusion; somewhat dazed with the morning's oddities, but the arrival of the removalists brought her thoughts back to practical issues and her excitement rose for the tasks at hand – always an enjoyable one.

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By late that same evening Emily had transformed the mostly-empty strange old house into a liveable and warm little nest. She had taken care to adhere to Ms. Green's instructions as there was no point creating friction. She avoided the electrical-current-inducting-carpet-fixing-strips like the plague, and in her bedroom she had even positioned the bed somewhat askew of centre so that one bed-leg in particular didn't stand on it – the strip ended up going under her bed from one side to the other.

The oddities hadn't ceased appearing throughout the day though. Emily discovered more wires suspended carefully through her cupboard, and sighed at the sight of yet another strip on the floor of the cupboard, around which she had to carefully arrange her shoes so as not to 'block' it. In the bathroom, she had been delighted to find a bath, but found it indeed strange, since it wasn't a bathtub as such, but was simply the end section of the room, with a wall bricked up to knee-height and tiled on all surfaces, save the floor which was thankfully rounded for comfort. Moreover, it was already full. A note lay on the bench.

*Do not empty the bathwater. This is not a bath; it's a small spa. Instructions for heating attached. Charlotte.*

Sighing, Emily resolved to retire to bed, and was coaxed to sleep by the gentle popping-rattling, and once again woken by the soft scraping sound and flickering of lights.

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Emily awoke splendidly, basking in the warmth and soft sunlight that filtered through the yellowy curtains in the front bedroom, naturally unaware of the turn of events that would dictate the surreal nature of the day ahead of her. She stepped out onto the small upstairs terrace somewhat brazenly in her underwear, since the surrounding greenery gave an effective impression of isolation and privacy, before the sound of children chatting on their way to school ushered her back inside, but not before she noticed more of those strange strips on the balcony – even where there was no carpet for them to fix, as Ms. Green had claimed.

The morning heat followed her inside and after enjoying a luxurious shower she donned a short and very loose skirt –her preference for working on a hot day, as she had to continue writing her thesis, since the one moving-in day was all the time she could spare from the demanding work– and a light top that could be better classed as a singlet, which she knew would be insufficient to decently cover her voluminous chest if someone should knock at the door, for which reason she retrieved a proper T-shirt, just in case, and tossed it over the banister on her way downstairs for breakfast.

Half an hour later she seated herself at the desk upstairs, thankful that it was nice, since Ms. Green had expressed that didn't want it removed, and assessed the workplace with admiration. The desk was pressed up to the rear window overlooking the backyard, and stretched completely from one side wall to the other in the narrow house; a snug fit with a total of perhaps four metres length. It was a lovely mahogany desk and Emily took care not to scratch it as she positioned her lamp and notebook computer, noticing yet another oddity when she looked for a power-point, her attention caught by the fact that there were small panels in the walls at tabletop height at either end of the desk – similar to those at each end of the electrical-current-inducting-carpet-fixing-strips, but here without a strip.

Shrugging, she finished her arranging before retrieving her small alarm clock, the in-built radio of which usually provided her with a bit of pleasant background noise, and plugged it into a socket on the floor behind her. The clock-radio had a hopelessly short antenna and she was pleased to be able to receive a station playing something reasonable; an old jazzy-sounding tune that sounded like an unidentifiable mix of anything and everything between the '20s and the '50s, and she pulled her chair up, relaxing into her concentrating mode.

The new scenery inspired her, and Emily got to a great start with her thesis. Almost two hours passed of solid working and typing before she rose to make herself a cup of tea. When

she returned she pulled her chair away from the desk, leant back and enjoyed the tea, and being somewhat closer to her clock-radio, she began to make out the DJ's words, spoken in a noble-sounding accent that she couldn't pin-point; certainly not the ranting, moronic trash that most idiotic DJs waffle away amid fake laughter each morning.

*...lovely morning of festivities, and while we celebrate, the Heiress, our new Queen and Divine Mistress, toils away benevolently, presumably planning her rule of our humble kingdom and the laws that will govern us...*

"What a strange text," said Emily aloud. Her first thought was that something had happened to the Queen, and that her successor had already taken the throne. *I thought Charles was next*, she frowned, before deciding that it must have been the recital of a book or play, and discarded it without further thought.

During her short break, she heard the popping-rattling sound once more, this time coming from inside the very room, and she whirled, clearly too late to see its source, and saw instead simply the empty room with its two strange tube-like sculptures projecting from the opposing walls.

Ten minutes later she was revived and pulled her chair up to the table, tugging her loose skirt out over the sides of the seat since it was far too short to tuck underneath her, and crossed her legs under the table.

Emily was so concentrated on her work that she didn't notice the brush against her thigh under the table.

Nor the second.

In fact it was only upon the third occasion of a slight tickle passing across the top of her thigh, that Emily became aware and pushed herself away from the table in fright, slapping at her legs to repel what she perceived to be a spider. Upon discovering nothing, Emily kneeled to the ground cautiously and peered up into the dimness under the table.

Wires. There were a set of those little 'electrical' wires suspended from several points under the table. Emily was about to tear them out in frustration when she recalled Ms. Green's stern face and halted. However, she noticed an object as her eyes adjusted to the light. Something dangled from the small cables, tugging them down where it hung. She reached to inspect it but without effort it came unstuck and she found herself accidentally holding it in her hand; a little rounded box painted dark blue, with a prong on its roof, presumably from which it had hung, and shiny panels that reflected the sun into Emily's eyes as she held it in her palm. Annoyed, she rose and clambered back onto her seat, dumped the unidentified object on the desk to her side, and continued the important sentence that had occupied her before the disruption.

Soon, however, her work wouldn't occupy her for much longer, nor would any other particular sentence therein.

After a few minutes the flow of Emily's words began to dam and her shoulders relaxed, hands resting as her mind raced with what to write. Her gaze drifted and absently rested on the little blue box by the lamp to her side.

When one is deep in thought, the brain tends to accept anything and everything, and as such the miniature movement around it didn't bother her at first.

*Now do I mean 'ensure' or 'insure'?* she was thinking as her eyes slowly focussed on the indiscernible motion. *What the!?!*

Now she stopped, and froze. Her head cocked forward, stupefied.

"What is *that?!?*" she uttered aloud. Emily could see something moving –numerous things moving in fact– around the little blue box that she had discovered, which she now only subconsciously perceived, reminding her of something. Her full attention was on the miniature activity, and she leaned forward, peering closer.

When the moving blurs took on shapes; arms, and then legs, and heads, and bodies, Emily's mind reeled. In any unbelievable situation the mind races through all possible explanations, and her mind did precisely that, but when no feasible explanation could be concocted, and when she found herself peering wide-eyed at objects ten centimetres from her nose, that could not be mistaken for anything other than human figures waving wildly and energetically up at her shocked face, she blacked out.

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The few minutes rest had given Emily's mind time to prepare itself, and when she lifted her face groggily from the tabletop, her gaze fell on the guilty objects this time without fainting. She froze in dazed wonder and shock.

Emily was naturally curious and indeed quite brave. Instead of fleeing, she lowered herself cautiously to her knees before the table, and her face descended to tabletop-height before she realised there was plenty more action taking place. A whole flood of impressions hit her simultaneously.

She saw the figures –those impossible, miniature human figures– and the blue box, which this time she immediately identified; a gondola – a cable car. It was about five centimetres long, and without the sun reflecting and blinding her, she saw that the glinting panels were glass windows. She could see right through it. Behind it moved a new object, which required no effort to identify as a car. It tootled slowly over the smooth mahogany desk and was shaped with rounded edges in a '40s or '50s style. Emily's jaw dropped, her mouth widening larger than the car itself.

Utterly stunned, her motions were automatic. Her arm snaked up over the edge of the table and the familiar vehicle with these unfamiliar proportions fell into shadow as her hand descended upon it. Sometimes one hesitates while performing something unusual – that is, while Emily had driven a car, ridden in one, entered one and even pushed one and maybe climbed on one, she had never picked one up in her hand. It defied normality. Therefore her brain halted with her hand suspended above the belittled vehicle until finally, slowly, her fingers widened into a massive vice-grip, looking like the immense mechanical claws that tear into hapless old car wrecks at the junkyard, and descended on the vehicle. Her thumb first touched the doors on the passenger side, and with her nervous trembling she unintentionally nudged the car onto only two wheels, before her forefinger clamped onto the driver's side and without Emily exerting the slightest effort, all four wheels left the surface, spinning wildly.

Emily lifted the car into the air with unnatural ease. It floated up to her face between her thumb and forefinger as she straightened, leaning away from the table. She peered into its windows breathlessly. Eyes wide, she shook her head in denial as a man waved up at her from within.

“Oh my—” to complete the sentence there was no word or even expletive sufficient for the occasion.

Her mind reeled. In her studies she was accustomed to questioning reality, but that was done in a lecture theatre – not in... *reality*.

“You – what are you?” she stuttered. Emily's thoughts instantly went to some of her common philosophical topics; the usual suspects: black holes and time-space-continuums. “You've been... *shrunk!*”

It was unfathomable. Emily perceived that somehow, somewhere, perhaps back in the fifties, these people and these vehicles had passed into a black hole and ended up here, fifty years later – on her desk!

“We have to get you to a doctor – to the authorities!” she exclaimed, though she felt something amiss even as she spoke her own words. Something told her –her own instinct– that she needed to find out more before running to the police or to ...God knows whom.

Lowering the car from her view, she reached with her free hand and plucked the gondola by the small metal arm that would have held it to the cable. Glancing through its empty windows as she held it dangling in her pinched grip, and seeing the scattered miniature figures on the table, she knew that they would be safer within and she lowered the passive vehicle to the mahogany desk and commanded the people to enter it.

“Get in. Get in...” she began, before feeling the need to elaborate to these figures of human beings who were absolutely powerless in her hands, “I don't know what's going on or what's happened to you, but it seems pretty clear that I'm responsible for you.”

It felt strange attempting to communicate with people who had no way of responding; like talking to a pet, and it came through in Emily's voice. She spoke condescendingly. She could not be criticised though – it was difficult not to talk condescendingly to people as tall as your thumb is wide. "That's not a suggestion – that's an order. Get in."

The tiny, indiscernible figures swarmed and spilled into the box as if it had sprung a leak in reverse. As soon as boarding was complete the flight departed; the gondola whisked into the air between the fingers of the colossal female who found herself thrust into an adventure that she could yet scarcely fathom. Despite not being able to appreciate the situation, Emily felt herself drawn towards the door, simply for lack of other options. While she wasn't yet convinced that going to the authorities was the correct course of action, she couldn't think of a real reason why not, and there appeared certainly no benefit in remaining in the house. Thus she found herself awkwardly wriggling into the T-shirt that she had left on the banister, her hands full of miniature humanity praying and clinging desperately to anything solid within their respective vehicles as they were thrown about in a most terrifyingly turbulent manner.

Just as Emily was tugging the garment over her hips with the two free fingers of each hand, she saw the frosted glass panes of the front door darken as a figure approached. *Oh no*, she groaned. Before she could react the figure outside leaned forwards, holding a hand to its forehead, both becoming clearly defined as they pressed to the glass – it was Ms. Green peering in. To Emily's dismay she realised that the lady had seen her figure instantly, as she remarked loudly and tapped on the door.

Emily had few options and her heart began to race. She had to hide the objects. While she was unsure of what to do, she knew that they had to remain secret at least for now – the last thing these poor stranded people needed was a clucking busybody. Emily scanned the hall in desperation. It was still completely bare. She couldn't retreat because Ms. Green had seen her and would instantly become suspicious. There weren't even any pockets in her skirt or top. She was about to thrust the gondola into her other hand with the car, in order to free up at least one hand, when she cringed at the thought of the miniature vehicular destruction that would occur in her very palm if she carelessly smashed the two precious objects. When she glanced at the cable-car and saw the tiny spike-like metal arm, the only possible option occurred to her. As she stepped slowly towards the door, Emily tugged her skirt upwards slightly, reached up under it with the hand in which she held the gondola, and pushed the metal arm through the material like a pin. Barely a metre from the door, she let her skirt hang free and breathed a sigh of relief that the cable-car stuck fast; suspended and concealed in the material inside her skirt and brushing gently against her inner thighs. With her one free hand she opened the door, trembling with nervousness, and since the whole episode had taken only the few seconds as she had approached the door, she had successfully escaped her neighbour's suspicion.

"Hello, my dear," said Ms. Green warmly, "were you on your way out?"

“No,” lied Emily, tucking the car under her two smaller fingers and resting her hand on her hip to conceal it, “just coming downstairs.”

She waited for Ms. Green to state her business, which took an oddly lengthy amount of time.

“Oh, well, yes,” stuttered the visiting neighbour, “I just came over to... see if you needed a hand unpacking.”

Emily declined politely and after the briefest of pleasantries concluded the conversation and retreated into the house, breathing a sigh of relief. She realised instantly from this minor encounter, that her actions had been too rushed, and indeed she would have to stay put and think the situation through before attempting some course of action.

Besides, now she had to untangle a gondola from the inside of her skirt, and she grimaced as she waddled away from the door, taking care not to crush it and its human contents between her shearing thighs.

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After having seated herself on her bed, legs parted with the inside of her skirt upturned, Emily had been forced to evacuate the gondola’s passengers into her lap while she fiddled with the frustratingly small hooked pin in her attempt to free it from the garment. She glanced at the people every now and then while she tugged and pulled, and the magnitude of the responsibility she would have to burden slowly dawned upon her. The people were like bugs; utterly helpless. She had to remind herself that they were human; that is, at first she bordered on carelessness, accidentally allowing a couple of little men to tumble over the edge of her skirt and through her thighs, disappearing in the gloom of the crevice, before she realised that this seemingly insignificant little mishap was to them a ten-storey plummet.

Executing additional care, Emily finally freed the cable-car from her lap, widened her legs and located the bug-men between them, and reloaded the box with its human cargo, before returning to her desk, upon which she deposited the two vehicles-of-sorts, resting her chin on her fists with her elbows either side of the belittled objects and peered down at them, unaware or unconcerned that the view of the little people consisted almost entirely of the underside of her colossal breasts looming threateningly above them.

Her plans to save the people and return them to normal grew no closer. All she could think of was the philosophical and metaphysical implications of her discovery. Suddenly she found herself typing furiously – she found it impossible to resist documenting her incredible thoughts, whether for her thesis or not.

“I have to get this down,” she told the inert little shapes by her side apologetically, “since I have to work this out before... before we do something to help you.”

It was a half-truth and it satisfied at least her. Enthusiastically, she tapped out wild theories and wonderful prose, imaginative concepts and philosophical insights, energised by the real-life experience of this phenomenon about which she and all her colleagues and peers had chatted, fantasised and squabbled for years.

She typed for an inestimable amount of time, unaware of all else in the world, including the resumption of the popping-rattling behind her. The only measure of time was her hunger, which finally peaked late in the afternoon and caused her to groan with pain and annoyance at this mere mortal concern. Unwilling to waste a single second, she spun, jumped from her seat and darted for the door, perfectly simultaneous to one of the mysterious pops that would be followed by a rattle.

It should have been followed by a rattle, but it wasn't.

Emily exclaimed in surprise as she felt the sharp tug on her hair, stopping dead in her tracks in the centre of the room; directly between the two strange sculptures on either wall. She spun, heart leaping at the clear sensation she had felt despite the emptiness of the room. Seeing nothing, her movements slowed in fright. Cautiously, she lifted her hand to her hair, not knowing what to expect. She had barely touched her locks when she felt the cold, hard sharpness of a foreign object matted in her hair.

The morning's surreal events had desensitised her to surprise, and Emily untangled the object bravely and without hesitation. It required a frustratingly suspenseful amount of time to free the cold object, the shape of which was as yet unidentifiable in her fingers, but finally Emily loosened it and brought it under her gaze.

"What the..."

It was another victim of whatever quantum phenomenon had brought the other two into her world. This one, however, had *flown* in.

It was clearly an aeroplane. Or perhaps not... the wings were stubby and there didn't appear to be a propellor or jet engine, and as Emily held it up before her, her fingers forming a wide 'C' with her thumb and forefinger tips on its wingtips, she quickly realised that it looked more like a space shuttle. With a long body and these unusually short wings, it looked like it wasn't meant to fly but perhaps to glide or coast. The notion of it being a spacecraft gave more credibility to her thoughts on black holes (though didn't yet explain how gondolas or road cars made it through too). It was about twelve centimetres long, and upon closer inspection she made out glass windows and dozens upon dozens of faces staring in amazement out of them. Emily tried to imagine what their view was like and attempted to comprehend the shock and awe that they must be feeling as they gaped out in horror at a shapely feminine face taking up the entire view.

Deeply puzzled and concerned at this third appearance, Emily placed the flying craft with the other two objects and slowly made her way down the stairs, eating in silence and deep in thought.

Upon resuming her work, her ideas became scattered and troubled and she found herself no closer to an answer. When she realised that in her fervour for her work she had failed to care for the miniature beings by forgetting to feed them she felt a pang of guilt and abandoned her work, reminding herself over and over that they were real people and not... *bugs*.

After depositing a small portion of varied edibles between the three vehicles on the desk before her, Emily breathed deeply and resolved to turn her attention to *their* problem and no longer to her own work. Even as she watched the passengers –there had to be forty more in the spacecraft– cautiously exiting and approaching the massive morsels that to Emily wouldn't even satisfy half a bite, her gaze was caught by movement in the corner of the desk. The panel that she had earlier observed (similar to those at either end of the strips on the ground) appeared to open, and from it emerged another car.

Emily's jaw dropped and her eyes widened.

Heedlessly she reached out, and the car was grasped by immense fingers and found itself flying through the air to a vast female figure looming over the small landscape that was the mahogany desk. It was just as real as the first. Emily's gaze shot back to the panel, which by that time was back in place.

*Does that little panel lead to a wormhole?* she wondered, suddenly doubting her assumptions and all her fantastic notions. As she considered this anomaly, she realised how quickly she had jumped to the conclusion that quantum physics was responsible for the miniaturisation of the objects before her. Groaning, she realised that she hadn't even stopped to wonder why the gondola had been hanging from a tiny cable under her desk, which in itself was even more inexplicable than the panel in the wall.

Suddenly Emily felt her head swimming. She rose, and felt dizzy; several days' fatigue and a day's worth of impossibility catching up on her in one terrible instant.

"This is too much," she said aloud at the sudden pounding in her head. Stumbling back to the table, her palms slammed into the surface as she leaned to support herself, shaking every tiny figure from their feet, "I can't handle this all at once. Don't move – stay there and I'll help you once I've rested."

Emily staggered to her bedroom, slipped out of her clothes, collapsed into the covers and instantly fell into a restless, troubled sleep. She had only intended to rest her eyes and settle her mind, but even after a few moments she was far, far away from the troubles in the neighbouring room.

\*

Emily awoke from a pleasant dream to the bright warm sunlight, and it took her a few moments to recall the previous day's events, during which she wondered if they were real at all or if they had simply been a dream. Naturally she tended towards the latter explanation and lay in her comfortable bed listlessly as she pondered her fragmented and dazed memories.

However the illusion wasn't to last long, and the confusing onslaught of inexplicable appearances was destined to continue, which is precisely what occurred even as Emily lay dreamily dozing.

It was the scraping sound that stirred her. Opening her eyes, she glanced in the direction of the noise and as soon as her eyes fell on the source of the disturbance, the realisation that her dazed memories were in fact true, flooded into her mind. It must be said, however, that Emily was a quick-witted and collected person, and despite this rude shock so early in the morning, she took in the sight with impressive composure.

Unlike the spacecraft of questionable identity, this object was unmistakable. Her gaze was cast directly to the other side of the room, along the end wall of which ran one of the strips with the little panels at each end. One of these panels was open, and it spewed a foreign object into the room – 'foreign' referring more to its presence being foreign rather than its appearance. Its appearance was quite familiar, since it was a train.

When Emily caught sight of it, the last few of about half a dozen carriages were emerging from the little panel into the bright light of Emily's room. She watched it, bemused, as it chuffed along the wall, emitted the scraping sound that Emily now realised to be the grinding of its wheels along the shiny metal lines embedded in the strip. It was halfway through the room before Emily saw the panel on the opposite wall open, realise it was about to disappear, and jumped to action. Flinging the covers from her bare legs, she sprung off the bed and her feet struck the floor with enough force to shake the train momentarily from its rails. Her chest bounced unrestricted in her thin, loose top as she bound over the carpet, each massive step sending a resounding shock through the floor to the hapless train with its terrified passengers watching the most immense creature conceivable – a woman, her giant towering legs bare up to her underwear and her shapely form heaving as she increased in size in their view – bearing down upon them with her overpowering gaze fixed on their hopelessly slow little transport.

To Emily though, the miniature train was craftily quick, and by the time she reached it and had dropped to her knees the locomotive and first three carriages had disappeared into the darkness in the opening in the wall behind the small panel. Her hand shot out and slammed down on the last carriage, lifting it effortlessly as her fingers wrapped around its entire frame. It looked as if Emily were catching a fleeing snake as she huddled over the bottom

corner of the room, the rest of the train jolting heavily as her grip caught this last carriage. She lifted it from the ground and it pulled the next carriage up by the couplings. The locomotive, invisible somewhere in the wall, struggled in vain, the scraping sound becoming a squeal of rubbing steel echoing up to Emily's ears from the tiny hole that seemed to swallow the carriages, but with a gentle tug she easily overcame the mighty engine and dragged the struggling snakelike form back through the hole, one carriage appearing after the other, and each lifting gently into the air as Emily's hand ascended away to her side. Finally a coal tender, reminiscent of the early days of rail transport, came into the light and into Emily's gaze, and she lowered her free hand over the opening, ready to pounce on the engine. As this finally came into view; a jet-black cylindrical shape of powerful pistons whirring and wheels spinning, Emily lowered her hand over it, wrapped her fingers around it and gently lifted it from the rails, its drivers yielding in panic and clinging to the handles in their cockpit, which no longer looked out onto the endless shining rails but into the wall of creamy skin of the fingers of the gigantic woman in whose possession their meagre selves were and upon whose whim their lives were now dependent.

Remaining knelt before the strip, now identified as a railway, Emily raised her arms and lifted her prize into the air. With the locomotive and last carriage in the grasp of either hand she felt like she was holding a chain of thick frankfurters, but drew a sharp breath at the reminder that she was dealing with flesh of a much more delicate and consequential nature, since within the toylike carriages were trapped hundreds upon hundreds of human figures, which she could see pressing themselves to the windows in awe while the carriages at the lowest point of the arc swung gently back and forth above her lap.

Emily closed her eyes and took a deep breath to assess the situation. Rising, she returned to her bed, carrying the belittled locomotive chain, then sat down on the covers and lowered each end beside either hip so that the middle length of the train stretched over the top of her thighs, inadvertently spilling the minute specks of coal from the tender all over her bed sheets.

"This is getting better by the minute," she complained aloud to her new acquisition. Her wormhole theory was shot to pieces, "what the hell are you? And what on Earth is going on here?"

Noticing the carriages stretched between her thighs tipping on their side, she cast her mind to the unfortunate passengers inside and how they must be tumbling about helplessly. She uttered an apology and rose carefully, then stretched the long snakelike entity out on her bed, keeping it upright by propping her still-warm covers underneath it. Only when she stood above the long, diminutive train, hands on hips, did she become aware of her undressed state and went red with embarrassment as she imagined the miniature people gawking out of their windows at a towering female in nought but her underwear. The nearest item at hand was her skirt, which she whisked on, but after pulling it up over her hips, all she could do was chuckle at the irony when she looked down at the train at her knee-height and understood that the view upwards was precisely the same as without the

short skirt. She was about to fetch a pair of pants instead when she halted, realising that she didn't care a bit. This was so far the most unique experience of her life and she wasn't going to waste her time being bashful.

Instead her thoughts went back to her problem. *Who are these people and what are they doing here?* Now, however, the train provided a definite link, and Emily cast her mind back to her inspection of the house and all the oddities that her new landlady had attempted to explain away.

*Ms. Green.* If she weren't the answer, she would lead Emily to it in any case.

\*

"Good morning, Emily," said the face poking cautiously through the crack in the door, brightly but unable to conceal the nervousness in her voice.

"Good morning, Ms. Green."

"What can I do for you? Everything working out nicely?"

"Yes, quite nicely. Just a couple of little things I wanted to ask you about though," said Emily carefully, and she kept her gaze on the other lady's face as she brought her hand from behind her back and opened her palm to display its contents, "this, for one."

"Hmmm," replied Ms. Green slowly and almost absently, "so that's what happened to the 9:56."

\*

The two ladies strolled side by side through the leafy suburb, upon Ms. Green's request, who had taken the locomotive and was toying with it in her hands as she began.

"I don't know how to put this or where to begin," she said slowly, "but my dear Emily, you have been *chosen*."

Emily remained silent.

"You see, number 42 needs a resident who..." resumed Ms. Green, choosing every word, "...who is responsible, caring. Intelligent. Open-minded. Perhaps most of all – someone who can be *trusted*."

“Trusted with what?”

“Not with ‘what’, but with ‘whom’.”

“Go on.”

“Well, Emily, these people whom you have discovered... nobody knows of their existence. Nobody *outside*, that is. And it needs to stay that way – for their sake.”

“I can grasp that,” replied Emily, “but what *are* they? I mean, look! That train is miniature! Those people... they’re barely half an inch tall! How is it possible?”

“I don’t know either. Perhaps nobody ever will,” answered Ms. Green calmly, “but regardless of where they came from, you must remember what their civilisation is: *delicate*. You’re right; look at them. They’re minute. Miniature. They cannot survive in our world. Number 42 –your house– is a sanctuary for these little life-forms and their precious, delicate way of life. That is why you have been chosen – to protect them.”

“Just number 42?”

“No. Well... I think I’d better show you something,” resolved Ms. Green after a pause, at which point she wordlessly turned heel and indicated for Emily to follow her back to the house.

\*

The pair of nervous ladies passed number 42 and Emily cast a questioning look at Ms. Green, but she appeared concentrated and Emily remained silent while the other walked up the path to number 41, where Mr. Klein lived.

“I think you can call me Charlotte, by the way,” declared Ms. Green almost as if she had been mulling the decision for half an hour, as she strode up to the door of number 41, producing something from her pocket.

“OK, ah... Charlotte. Um... hadn’t you better knock?” began Emily before she became curious at the object in Charlotte’s hand, which looked like a remote control for a garage door.

“You’ll see,” she replied, before standing aside as if presenting the doorway to Emily, glancing about to see that no one was coming, then stating proudly “...I give you; Mr. Klein!”

With that the lady clicked the control enthusiastically, and the door swung open. The clumsy figure in the fedora hat lunged out and raised an awkward hand to its head in greeting, and Emily gasped as she made out its rubbery features. Mr. Klein was an animated puppet. The suspense grew at this discovery – what was going to be behind that door?

The hall was normal; just part of the facade, but had an extra, otherwise-unnecessary door blocking the view from outside when the front door was open. Behind this second door was the surprise. Charlotte swung it open and let Emily take in the view.

“Good heavens,” she gasped. What she saw could barely be recognised as the interior of a house. She felt she could be looking out into a science-fiction city, and in fact her mind cast back to an image for which she had had a strange fascination as a child; an image from H.G. Wells’ *War of the Worlds*, of the human civilisation moved underground. Beginning at her feet stretched a city outwards through a long cavern, flooding and filling every nook of what used to be the floor with buildings and houses squeezed in awkwardly wherever there was space. Where they reached the walls, construction went upwards; towering facades rose into the air, jutting out here and there but mostly clinging to the walls for safety, all the way to the high Victorian ceiling. The buildings looked like ivy; some awkward constructions even clinging precariously to the ceiling, which was matted with a tangled system of wires dotted with the cable-cars of which Emily had already secured an example. Spanning across this vast cavern of civilisation –in reality nothing more than the narrow hallway of the terrace house– were enormous bridges with gaping arches, across which trains identical to that which she had captured only half an hour before. The scene was dazzling, and Emily was lost in wonder – it gave the impression that it was vast and huge; simply because every constituent of the view was a real, familiar object, and staring at it made her forget its impossible proportions. Lost in the landscape around her and no longer aware even of her own proportions, Emily lifted her arm and inadvertently struck a structure on the wall beside her. The building exploded in a puff of dust and she gasped in horror as the fragments began raining down on the streets at her feet.

“Don’t worry!” exclaimed Charlotte speedily, before Emily had time to realise the horror of her actions. “They are master builders – something will be back up there within a week.”

“Oh my God – I’m so sorry!”



“I said don’t worry. Seriously.”

“But what if there were people inside?”

“They are unusually rugged. Unbelievably rugged. You know that you can drop an ant from ten metres and it will be fine? These people are the same.”

Emily saw Charlotte bending to retrieve a man for a demonstration, holding him between her thumb and forefinger at her own shoulder height and ready to let him plummet to her feet, but Emily quickly declined; the logic was sound enough anyway.

“Go on,” coaxed Charlotte, changing the subject, “explore.”

“What?”

“Have a look at the place.”

“How can I possibly—” began Emily, but stopped when she saw the pattern of squares. That is; not geometrical squares, but town squares – empty piazzas and open spaces at intervals slightly staggered so that they made a pattern that Emily instantly realised to correspond to an exaggerated human step (that is, exaggerated for a *normal* human, such as the massive towering female figures looming over the surreal landscape).

“That’s right!” chuckled Charlotte proudly. “Go on, they’ll get out of your way.”

Emily was nervous but intrigued and excited nonetheless.

“OK,” she declared, not to her neighbour but to the city before her, “I’m coming through.”

She peered towards the nearest square and lifted her leg, shaking her head in wonder at the sight of her own foot clad in her familiar high-heel, soaring over rooftops, with the background behind her shoe of thousands of scurrying figures visible in small alleys and laneways between the buildings, and her own shadow passing momentarily above them. She was conscious of her skirt stretching tight across the top of her thighs as she attempted this wide step, and suppressed the feeling of bashfulness that she had already felt that morning, which was in fact difficult to achieve when she beheld the sight of the silhouette of her stretched skirt, past which thousands of upturned faces peered up in awe into it. Her gaze returned to her foot as it descended into the first town square. Those figures present had already scurried to the edges and though her foot landed in open space, she was unpractised at the required delicacy and the thud of her high-heel on the paved area sent a tremendous shock through the adjoining buildings, and knocked every man, woman and child off their feet.

“Oops,” apologised Emily and waved clumsily at the hundreds of people crowded around her foot. She saw that as soon as she was motionless, they sprang to their feet and rushed for her. Hundreds of little bodies began to swarm around her polished high-heeled shoe, some climbing onto it and scurrying over and tumbling off her skin. She winced, helpless.

“Don’t worry – they’ll do that,” comforted Charlotte.

*Thanks; really comforting,* thought Emily.

With this first step Emily had brought herself close to the open doorway into the next room; the living room. The view there was just as spectacular; the same, ivy-like buildings spread throughout the entire room and creeping up the walls. Here, however, were columns towering from the floor to the ceiling; spiralling structures that narrowed from a wide base to a very thin peak at the ceiling – it was difficult to tell if they were built around a pole that had been deliberately installed or if they had grown from scratch. Clearly their purpose was to increase the amount of usable building space in the room, but they gave the room the appearance of an ancient underground cave, because they looked uncannily like stalagmites.

Emily steeled herself for another step, raised her foot and guided it over the rooftops and over a major-looking road with cars and long lorries racing along in both directions in her shadow, and planted the toe of her high heel in the square beyond, the slender heel clacking as it slammed onto the paved stones. Turning her attention to her other foot, she cringed as she raised it slowly, shaking the humanity from her shoe and uttering apologies as the people were strewn, tumbling, over each other. By this time her other foot too was covered with swarming people and Emily grimaced nervously; this was perhaps too much at once and she was indeed doing well to cope with it so open-mindedly.

She had reached the foot of the stairs, and before continuing her current, long step, she paused with her foot in the air, taking hold of the banister to steady herself, when her attention was caught by shining silver strips on the surface of the banister underneath her clasped palm; they were more rails, but at a slope impossible for a train. Her gaze followed the lines up the banister, where she caught sight of a descending object; a skewed-looking tram-like carriage that she realised was a funicular train rapidly approaching her blockading fingers. Apologetic once again, she released her grip and peered back down to her raised foot, wavering as she began to lose balance. Emily hurriedly swung her foot forward over the buildings, feeling her skirt stretching over her thighs again as she executed this wide stride, but in the very instant that she was going to plant her foot she saw several miniature figures occupying the square beneath her descending toes. Off-balance and panicking, she didn’t comprehend Ms. Green’s calls of “they’ll move! They’ll move!” and she cringed in fright and stumbled, swinging her foot away from the miniature humans as she lurched forwards uncontrollably.

Emily’s dismayed shriek was echoed by a terrible crunch.

From around her foot emanated a burst of dust and debris as her high heeled shoe ploughed down onto the hapless building beside the town square. A torrent of miniature bricks spewed outwards in all directions and a column of smoke began to waft up her calf from beneath her foot.

“Well that’s *one* way to make an impression,” contributed Ms. Green with deliberate casualness in order to calm the new neighbour.

With her legs parted wide in this large step, Emily could not regain her balance and she remained faltering in this awkward pose, her high-heel rising out of the ruins of the unfortunate structure, while she repeated desperate apologies, cringing in terror at what she had done.

“I’m telling you,” continued Charlotte, “don’t worry about it. They will consider it as a sacrificial ritual or a rite. They will consider it a blessing to that site – they’ll probably build a church there. It’ll be up within a week.”

“What *are* you talking about?” demanded Emily with a frown, finally ceasing her apologies to the beings around her feet upon hearing these strange words, and turning awkwardly to face the speaker.

“I said they’ll build a church there.”

“What? Why?”

“To honour their God,” replied Charlotte softly and calmly, exaggerating the word ‘their’ so that it got Emily’s attention.

“Who’s ‘their God’?” she demanded.

“You are.”

\*

Emily was once again alone in her new house; or rather, Charlotte Green was simply not there. She was not entirely ‘alone’ as it were, considering the innumerable miniature humans occupying the various tiny forms of transport with which it appeared the entire house was infected.

It had become clear when Charlotte had given her a brief peek into her own house; number 43. It was strewn with miniature buildings just like the surreal interior of number 41, but not to such a great extent – it was much more liveable for a normal-sized human being. Just how ‘liveable’ Emily did not yet know since her neighbour had not granted her a sufficient view; only just enough of a glance so that she understood...

... that is, so that she understood that her house, number 42, was simply a *transport route*.

Emily’s mind swam. Just two days earlier she had excitedly moved into a seemingly normal – in fact, *perfect*– dwelling, and now she was questioning reality. It was too much – too

surreal. She was having trouble coping with the simple facts, let alone the details and the unanswered questions, such as; why 41 and 43? Why not 42? Who are they? Where did they come from? Why are they tiny?

*Why can this train fit in my hand?* echoed in her mind as she sat on her bed with her fingers wrapped around the locomotive, her vision dimming confusedly as the impossible situation finally began to catch up on her and take its toll. The body has ways of coping with emotional stress and Emily's did her the favour of sending a wash of fatigue through her veins and she shuffled into the middle of the covers, train clasped to her chest, and drifted quickly off to a peaceful sleep.

\*

It was mid-afternoon when Emily awoke and she felt a wave of relief; refreshed and energetic to meet the challenges thrust upon her by destiny.

The only thing out of place was the cramped, sticky sensation of having slept in her clothes and she rose from her bed enthusiastically, keen for an invigorating shower to complete the transformation she needed. However, when she thought of the bathtub –or, rather, 'small spa'– her heart leapt with excitement and the shower was forgotten in favour of a luxurious, steaming hot bath – or spa, *or whatever*.

As she collected a towel and fresh clothes from her cupboard she surveyed her new room, astounded to see a train emerge from underneath her bed and tootle along the tracks that ran audaciously through the centre of the floor. *I'm going to have to be careful*, she thought nervously, recalling her destructive introduction to number 41. Even as she shut her cupboard door her gaze was caught by yet another train chuffing along in the opposite direction, tucked behind the line of neatly-arranged high heels that towered over the miniature locomotive. Emily frowned and sighed.

She undertook a detailed inspection of the bathtub; she didn't want any surprises – particularly of the miniature, living type. After the bathtub passed the examination since nothing appeared out of place (there certainly weren't any panels in the wall or wires in the water – the cliché black and white tiles didn't take her fancy but she wasn't going to fail it on that criterion alone), Emily prepared herself a snack while she waited the half-hour before the water heated up.

When the bath was almost ready, she had a sudden thought and glanced upwards. The ceiling, as with every other room, was lined with tiny gondola cables. Even at that moment she counted half a dozen cars trundling back and forth with a permanent view of the top of her head. *And down my top*, she frowned. *Looks like I might not get a great deal of privacy here.*

Emily tipped a generous amount of sweet-scented bath foam into the water and whipped it into a thick layer of luxurious, and moreover concealing, bubbles. While the miniature beings didn't seem quite significant enough to make her entirely uncomfortable about their presence hanging from the ceilings or tootling along the edge of the walls, she had limits, and she wasn't about to willingly bestow them with an unrestricted view of her outstretched body.

Satisfied, she wriggled out of her skirt and disrobed, holding her chest protectively. Precisely when she stepped out of her underwear, letting them lightly fall down her smooth legs, a previously-unnoticed panel opened in the wall beside her feet, and a train driver found his locomotive hurtling at the base of two immense creamy towers, between which descended a form of immense dainty fabric of a very feminine quality.

Emily glanced down her body as she caught movement out of the corner of her eye, and watched the train dash between her feet and plough into her lace underwear.

"Can't take you anywhere, can I?" she grumbled with admirable humour, stooping. She was being fantastically open-minded in the face of such a life-changing experience as the introduction to this race of impossible beings. However it appeared that her patience was going to be tried, probably repeatedly, in the times ahead of her.

She blessed the tiny, helpless locomotive by lifting the massive obstruction, whereupon the various mechanical protrusions caught in the tangle of lace caused the train to be derailed as she tugged the light fabric away. Once more she bestowed her infinite benevolence by stooping further, taking hold of the engine between thumb and forefinger, and nudging it from side to side until a settling click told her it was in place on the rails, and in moments the train passed through her legs and out of sight. She chuckled at the humourously brief and surreal episode, before sliding luxuriously into the hot, bubbly water.

She had twelve, perhaps fifteen, minutes of relaxing peace and quiet.

All was pleasant and still; broken only by the occasional whirring of a train zooming over the floor between shoes, skirt, shirt and undergarments scattered everywhere but on the tracks, and Emily lay back, watching the gondolas glide back and forth above, when there began a gentle breeze blowing pleasantly on her face. Her eyes closed relaxedly.

When they opened a few seconds later, she was startled by an uncanny sight and jolted with fright. Directly before her eyes there glided an apparition through the bubbles and thin steam rising from the hot water; the bows of a ship, its masts and gently-billowing sails appearing like a ghost ship advancing mysteriously through thick fog as it ploughed through the foam, rocking from Emily's movements in the water. She reacted by drawing her feet up, and her knees rose on either side of the ship like islands emerging from the sea; glistening with cascading hot water that carried hills of bubbles down her thighs. The sailing ship was tossed from side to side, and when it settled, her knees were higher than its hull.

“Where did *you* come from?” she blurted, amazed, as the vessel continued along its path directly up her submerged body, emerging from between her widened thighs as she concluded the sentence. It was at that moment that she made out the dark shape in the background, previously concealed behind the wide sails, and cocked her head to see a gaping hole in the wall where three large tiles had been removed and through which the water level was constant. This question answered, she then demanded “and where are you *going?*”

This question too was easily answered. She sat upright and twisted her neck behind her to see the tiles upon which she had leaned only seconds earlier opening to form a similar cave. However there was no way the boat was going to be able to reach it past her body; a fact hit home when she felt a tap on her chest and turned to see the vessel’s bowsprit poking into her flesh several inches below her breasts, which loomed high above the ship and rained soapy water and suds onto its forecandle, and over which she slapped her arm protectively upon seeing the multitude of bright faces gawking up in amazement from the diminutive boat’s decks. With her other hand she nudged the ship backwards through the bubbles, but the breeze, which emanated from the gaping cavern by her feet, nudged it back. Obviously there was only one way out of the situation.

Emily yielded and lowered her hand, freeing her breasts in all their soapy glory for the enjoyment of the scores of miniature men gazing up in awe from beneath them, and took hold of one end of the hull, her other hand rising up through the water to take hold of the other. She felt the long keel under her fingertips and sensed the detailed surface of the wooden hull as she gently lifted, raising the ship from its natural realm and into the unfamiliar territory of the air. It was an impressive little thing; perhaps forty centimetres long with three masts, the tallest of which was about thirty centimetres and threatened to poke her in the eye. The sails shook and quivered in her grasp.

Emily sat up straight and attempted to manoeuvre a turn in the narrow space, shifting awkwardly with both hands occupied with the ship floating at her chest height. It was so cramped that she inadvertently pressed the vessel to herself and sensed its hull squeezing up against her breasts (and though she would never know it, the French window of the captain’s cabin was shattered inwards by the sensitive pink protrusion on the tip of her breast, which then thrust itself uninvited into the cabin, startling and exciting the captain immensely and providing the crew with a story to be told and retold for aeons afterwards).

Finally she executed the manoeuvre and despite being twisted awkwardly in the bathtub managed to guide the ship’s bows into the dark cavern and lower it gently to the water, where it rocked calmly with relief before she sent it dashing through the waves with a tap of her fingertip on its stern. In moments the tiles slid shut and Emily breathed a sigh of relief as the breeze vanished.

However her reprieve wasn’t to last very long.

Only minutes later she felt a tickle on her back and groaned when she turned to see the tiles reopening, immediately sensing a breeze on her skin; that is, this time in the opposite direction.

“Oh for goodness’ sake!” she exclaimed as a bowsprit poked itself out of the dark cavern.

This time she was unwilling to undertake the awkward and clumsy manoeuvre, and after being tapped impatiently several times in the back by the tiny wind-propelled ship, she leaned forward, grasping the sides of the tub, and heaved herself upwards. Leaning on the wall for support, Emily stood carefully in the smooth bathtub to full height, and parted her feet.

Looking directly down her body, Emily clasped a hand over her private area as she watched the bows of the ship come into view between her feet, as if it were emerging from her belly button, while soapy water cascaded down her body and rained in hot sheets upon the decks of the vessel from high in the heavens above, scattering men who ran blindly, rubbing their stinging eyes.

When the ship had cleared her ankles, Emily sank behind it. Clasping the sides of the bathtub, she widened her legs either side of the ship and lowered her rear into the foam, the waves from her body sliding into the water tipping the vessel uncontrollably, while she left her knees protruding high into the air above it before she slid her feet forward and let her legs sink, disappearing, into the sea of bubbles around the boat.

When, moments later, the ship became motionless, she realised she had blocked the breeze from the cavern behind her, and Emily leant forward until her face loomed above and behind the disabled vessel. With a gentle but lengthy puff of warm breath she filled its sails and the ship drifted forward, slicing through the bubbles. Without noticing, she had also inadvertently scattered several sailors into the foam, and after she had leant back to relax they swam endlessly through the hot water under the layer of bubbles and above her colossal submerged body, before collapsing ashore in the inlet between her island breasts.

Later they would be carried out of the bathtub, stuck to her chest in the dampness and flung throughout the world by the rubbing of her towel – another story to be told in the taverns for the rest of their lives.

\*

That day Emily began attempting to adjust to living with these miniature cohabitants; accepting them.

She was fairly certain that there couldn’t be much more that she hadn’t yet seen – what form of transport from number 41 to number 43 hadn’t they exhausted?

In the meantime she had figured out the mystery of the popping, rattling and the small spaceship-like craft. She had been correct; it was not powered and was indeed able only to glide or coast. It had to do with the funnels that Charlotte had explained were sculptures, and it appeared to be the most rapid form of transport the people had available – the small craft was shot, propelled by compressed air from one funnel (thus explaining the pop), coasted briefly through the air with only minor guidance required, and landed in the other (thus explaining the rattle). She understood now how one had ended up in her hair as she had passed between the two devices in the walls.

Only very slowly though, throughout the afternoon and evening, did the excitement and wonder give way to practical questions. What were the implications of the notion of actually staying in this house with its unbelievable, unnatural secret? She had been so preoccupied with the awe and novelty that she hadn't even considered such aspects. Furthermore, she still had a trillion questions for Charlotte Green, though she had had enough of her enigmatic neighbour for one day.

Her thoughts came to one dead end after another in her mental quest for answers; her search for some spot of inspiration that would guide her to the correct course of action in this very surreal time, which obviously had the potential to be a major turning point in her life – though naturally the problem was that as yet it was not clear as to whether it would be for the good or bad. Finally she concluded that she needed more information. The only course at this stage was to attempt to live her life and continue her other undertakings, amongst the little people. If it didn't work out she could always back out.

Or could she?

\*

That evening saw Emily return to her thesis, though much of her time was spent idly watching the traffic move between the panels on opposite ends of her desk. This was not a railway but a road; along it tootled the classic-looking cars she had already observed, plus lorries and sometimes buses. Sometimes they would swerve close to her laptop to overtake, and once or twice some daring young men even drove up to Emily's elbow, before her glance made them scurry off in fright.

At night she lay in bed, pondering for hours upon hours, watching the trains go by. The flickering that she had observed on the first nights was not in fact the headlights of a car outside glancing through the curtains, but was the dancing glow of carriage lights of the trains that glided along the walls or tootled in and out under her bed, sometimes also a crack of light appearing from inside her cupboard. When moonlight began to shine strongly

through the curtains, she noticed that it glinted off the numerous gondolas floating close to her ceiling, and made a scenic starry dance that gently coaxed her to sleep.

Her observation of the trains passing through her room that night allowed her to notice the change in the morning. There was an *extra* strip; so now there were two that passed directly through her bedroom and not snugly out of the way against the walls. It must have been constructed with astounding speed and mastery, since after breakfast it was already active. It was a highway, and while she watched the traffic zooming to and fro Emily found herself feeling somewhat peeved that they had the audacity to construct a highway on her floor without consulting her (although she had no idea how they could have). She stepped over it delicately on her way to her cupboard, where she deliberated for two minutes how to change without being observed by a full complement of peak-hour travellers, before relenting with a huff, disregarded the intruders, and disrobed brazenly in full view – as she should be able to in her own room.

Emily was stepping back over the highway on her way to the study when curiosity got the better of her and she stopped with one foot on each side, bent down low and nimbly caught the closest lorry, swooping it into the air with fingers wrapped around the trailer and her thumb steadying the cabin to prevent the coupling loosening. She stepped daintily back to her bed and wriggled her thighs as she sunk into the covers upon seating herself.

“Well, mister,” she informed the driver of the unfortunate lorry in a strongly cheeky tone – perhaps a bit of revenge on her part for the impudence with which the highway was erected during the night, “I’m sorry, but I must confiscate this vehicle. Scientific purposes.”

As the miniature male figure tumbled out into her palm she had the sudden curious urge to undertake the demonstration that Charlotte had previously wanted to display, and despite the apparent cruelty, she convinced herself that no harm would come to the man, and lifted his writhing figure high into the air, squashed gently between her thumb and forefinger. She noticed that his limbs were barely visible outside the silhouette of her thumbnail, and remarked this obvious fact to him as she suspended him above her knees, “you’re very small, aren’t you?”

With that she released her pinched grip and watched a speck of colour shoot through the air between her knees. Leaning forward in suspense, she peered down to the ground apprehensively and breathed a sigh of relief as she saw the figure wriggling to his feet, from which he seemed to drop back to his knees, holding his hands high in praise.

“No need to thank me, little,” she responded before leaning back and turning her attention to his vehicle. The lorry, like all the other miniature objects, looked old-fashioned. It wasn’t a modern, standardised, square-looking thing, but had a large tray covered by a material solid enough to withstand the contents tipping and tumbling as Emily lifted the truck and turned it over in her hands before her face. She slid a fingernail into the cover of the trailer and peeled it off like a can of sardines. Underneath were uninteresting crates of unknown

contents. A slice of her fingernail through the now empty cabin tore the front of the vehicle in half, and she pried apart the mechanical machine as if gently cracking open an egg, before discarding the empty half; that is, keeping the half in which the interesting engine remained. It was definitely not like normal large diesel engines, but was much simpler in appearance, and she concluded that it must work in a slightly different way to real engines, perhaps with only one cylinder or something else appropriate to such a miniature drivetrain.

Her curiosity satisfied but feeling cheeky, Emily slid her foot forwards onto the highway and watched traffic screech to a halt, admiring the reflection of a red double-decker bus –about four inches high– in the toes of her shoe. She leaned down and grasped the bus by its roof, granting the passengers a panning view of her calf whisking past their windows as she lifted it past her legs, between her knees to her face, where she placed it on the palm of her free hand and admired its friendly, chirpy appearance.

“I like those red buses,” she commented aloud to the dozens of passengers glued to their windows in awe at the tremendous goddess in the palm of whose hand their trundling transport now precariously perched. She had no ill-intentions however, and after a satisfactory inspection of the indisputably cute bus she placed it back on the freeway and slid her foot away to allow traffic to resume.

*It would be a wonderful social experiment, she remarked as she watched the pattern of the tiny cars, trucks and buses accelerating, to observe the tiny civilisation.* It had nothing to do with her current thesis topic but was of course fascinating and was a definite advantage weighing in favour of the idea of remaining in strange Number 42 Wilson St.

Her thoughts diverted back to this question and she resolved to put off her work and consult Charlotte Green instead.

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“Good morning, Emily,” replied Ms. Green hesitantly, always as if expecting bad news.

“I have a few questions,” began Emily but the other lady remained motionless, indicating for her to continue but unwilling to move from her sheltered location, instead poking her head through the door. “May I come inside?”

After a bit of persuasion Charlotte agreed, lowering her defences. It was clear that she was unaccustomed to having other people in her house.

Number 43 was unique and spectacular in a different way to number 41, and Emily passed through the concealing screen behind the front door in a daze of wonder. It certainly was not as *full* as number 43, though the floor was still dotted with sprawling buildings and houses and the walls partly overgrown with the ivy-like vertical constructions, but it was

remarkable due to the jumbled blend of normal-sized necessities with miniature developments. For example, in the hallway a hat stand stood in the usual position with a narrow chest of drawers along the wall a few metres behind it, decorated with several not unusual items; a photograph in a frame and a couple of porcelain ornaments, however, the hat stand was bound to the chest by several wires with dangling gondolas in between – and Emily noticed a miniature, spectacular tower piercing upwards within the frame of the hat stand– and the ornaments on the chest were ringed with small cottages and quaint little laneways. She had to carefully tread through the hall between roads and railways (and in the cramped spaces quickly discovered the practicality of being able to place her foot with toes on one side of a road and high heel on the other, forming a temporary little bridge above the little trains and cars that then passed through this arch in her shoe), before following Charlotte through the first door into the dining room. A quick glance around the room showed settlements on dressers, gondola cables tangled around the chandelier, picture frames themselves framed by ivy-like dwellings clinging to the walls, the original pattern of the carpet replaced by a weaving pattern of tiny transport routes. She noticed that the chairs around the dining table had been effectively concreted in place as buildings had been erected around their very legs.

*Not that she will have guests,* thought Emily with a sudden pang of realisation of the effect that the responsibility of the tiny civilisation would have on her social life; her normal life. She glanced at Charlotte and wondered if she had any friends or family left.

However Emily's gaze was drawn to two large objects on the dining room table, which as yet was clear of constructions. They were suitcases; old-fashioned hard leather suitcases opened wide, and Emily carefully stepped over the buildings at her feet to approach.

"What are these?" she uttered, mouth agape.

"Those," replied Charlotte solemnly, "are a pioneering expedition."

What Emily beheld might have been mistaken for a jumbo-ultra-mega-bonus-pack-with-complimentary-carry-case of matchbox cars. In the open suitcases were layers upon layers of stacked compartments containing dozens upon dozens of vehicles of different types, plus large bundles of stacked various materials and a drum-like object, the function of which soon became clear. The vehicles were all on their sides, nestled in foam for protection, and it was clear that when the suitcase was closed and lifted by the handle, they would be upright. The purpose of the drum then became apparent – it was located on spindles at either end, and when the suitcase was rotated, it would rotate too so that it was always upright. The only reasonable assumption was that it contained people. The two suitcases held, packed and ready, an entire civilisation with all the necessary tools and materials to ground a new settlement. They were, as Charlotte had said, two suitcases of pioneers.

Emily was silent with wonder and it was Charlotte who continued.

“There is no space here. Soon this house will be full, then only number 42 will be liveable. I and these volunteers—” she motioned towards the suitcases, “—will begin another settlement and their civilisation can continue to grow.”

“But if you go with them, then who—”

Emily halted mid-sentence as she was filled with a feeling of dread.

“*You will,*” anticipated Charlotte correctly.

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Emily had to act fast.

Either she had to escape now, before Charlotte left, so that the pioneers’ departure could be postponed long enough for Charlotte to find another more willing carer (or more correctly, a new ‘God’) for the civilisation in numbers 41 to 43 Wilson St., or Emily had to commit herself to the task. The preparations were clearly ready, and now that Emily had discovered everything, Charlotte could leave at any time and Emily’s chance would be gone. She pondered the thought of abandoning the miniature people *after* Charlotte had gone, but she banished the idea. She was too responsible – sooner or later someone would knock at the door and discover nobody home... Emily closed her eyes and blocked that train of thought.

She was in a state of limbo-like indecision. How could one possibly decide something so significant with so little time?

She could be a Goddess. She would command and care for an entire civilisation; it would be the most fascinating and unique experience any person –let alone an inquisitive, intelligent person like Emily– could imagine.

On the other hand, she could live a normal life.

The two options were mutually exclusive – she couldn’t choose both.

*If I leave now, I can’t face Charlotte.* She could bolt, flee and then hire removalists to collect her belongings. *If I stay, I will have to stay forever.*

Standing in the doorway, torn between two utterly different lives, Emily did the only thing possible. Drawing a coin from her pocket, she drew a deep breath and promised that she would do what the coin commanded. Gravely she assigned the sides; *heads – stay... tails – leave.* Slowly, she lowered her hand before flinging the shining disc into the air, the sight of the tangled web of gondola cables on the ceiling behind the sight of the coin making a vague impression on the nervous figure whose destiny depended on the glinting piece of metal that began to descend, rotating, with suspenseful and surreal slowness. It found Emily’s

outstretched palm, which clasped tightly over the coin, before opening like a blooming flower, to reveal Emily's fate.

A strange sensation of relief washed over Emily as she saw the result.

Really, deep down, it was what she had wished for.

THE END