Leap of Faith
by WellPlayedPenny

Summary

Penny needs a change and decides to go to her whack-a-doodle neighbor for help. While assisting in the effort to ‘better’ her Sheldon unexpectedly discovers what life is all about.

Notes

A/N--I really don’t know what to say about this story except for the following:

There’s a **Major Character Death**—although it doesn’t seem to deter him from carrying on in the story.

The story takes place sometime in Season Five. There are scant references to Season Six such as Alex and Professor Proton but they’re only mentioned in passing as I haven’t been watching too carefully this season to properly employ them.

Some characters do some douche things but I tried to keep it within the scope of possibility. I’m rather frustrated as to how characters are portrayed in Season Six; there is now a nastiness to the lot of them that makes me at times question why they’re still friends much less in relationships. For a more positive vision of the show and how things ‘should be’ (albeit from a Shenny perspective) you can try my other story, ‘Daily Occurrences’, which was done in the spirit of Seasons One and Two.

This story came to me Boxing Day morning and I’d hoped it would be more of a traditional narrative since that’s what I have to work on. I don’t think I’m particularly successful but, eh, I tried.

Come take a leap with me. *Lynn

Thank you to Rene’ for her enthusiasm for this project.

Each day is separated by a xTBBTx. Note that the days are NOT consecutive.
Events happening on the same day are separated by a XxX.

Of course I don’t own ‘The Big Bang Theory’. I just like to play in their world.
…Science cannot exist except in that which lives. For nothing which is not alive learns anything, and science cannot be in a thing which does not learn. –St. Augustine


Sheldon checked his watch—it was ten after six and Penny still hadn’t come to the table. At this rate her tip would be miniscule on his part. Leonard tried several times to explain to Sheldon that Penny’s tip should be consistent given that she was their friend. The lanky man thought this was poppycock. Rewarding lackadaisical performances only led to mediocrity passing as the new standard.

A sudden flash of blond hair at the bar caught his attention and in a moment he saw Penny approach with a tray full of drinks.

“Good evening, Penny,” Sheldon said. “It’s nice you could join us given that our table is situated in your serving area.” Penny mashed her lips together and smiled sarcastically as she handed out the drinks.

“And what can I get you kind sirs tonight?” she said with a little too much saccharine. Leonard frowned at his girlfriend.

“Penny is there someth—”

Sheldon interjected. “I’ll have the barbecue bacon cheeseburger, barbecue sauce, bac—”

“What a bitch!” Penny snapped. The table was silent.

“Who is?” asked Leonard.

“My agent.” Penny put her hand on her hip. “Do you know what I could be doing right now?”

“Taking our order?” suggested Sheldon. The waitress and the physicist glared at each other.

“Wrong. I could be at an audition with Trisha. The role was for a mid-Western blond and hel-lo! Blond from Nebraska here! But did I hear about it? Nope.”

“Maybe your agent forgot to call you. I’m sure he or she has lots of clients,” soothed her boyfriend. Penny pulled out her pad and pencil and began writing.

“That’s what I thought so I called her and gave the old ‘what the hell’ and you know what I got from her?”

“An order for a barbecue bacon cheeseburger?” scowled Sheldon.

“No,” Penny snapped. “She said I was ‘too mid-Western’. How the hell can I be too mid-Western for a mid-Western role?”

“Language, Penny,” Sheldon murmured. At this rate Penny was going to owe him for his dinner.
Leonard tried to keep Penny’s experiences at the junior rodeo and fixing the family tractor from his mind as he cleared his throat. “That seems hard to believe,” he said neutrally.

“I know!” Penny picked up her tray. “So I called her on it and do you know what she said? I’m done. Kaput. No one’s going to hire me because I’m not what producers want. I’m a dead client and she was waiting for the star shine to leave my eyes so she could talk to me woman to woman about my future.”

“Hardly,” Sheldon tutted. “If anything your agent was unscrupulously taking your money willy-nilly until you smartened up to the notion that your ‘acting career’ would never materialize.”

Penny caught another table waiving for her attention. “Gee thanks, Sheldon. Maybe I should have made you my agent.”

“Oh I don’t think so,” he countered evenly. “After hearing your attempts at singing while rehearsing for Rent we would have parted ways years ago.” Penny’s jaw dropped.

“Sheldon!” Leonard snapped.

“What?” Sheldon stared at his roommate. “I could have gotten a ride to cousin Leo’s drug intervention with Raj so you could have attended her performance.”

“So how is Leo doing?” Leonard said in a chipper than usual tone.

“He’s at his second half-way house since the relapse but things look promising,” said Sheldon. “Of course you’d know all of this if you’d bothered to read the Christmas card he sends each year.”

“And this deals with my problem, how?” asked Penny.

Sheldon cocked his head to the side as he regarded his menu. “Drug dependency does entail deceit in all its forms including monetary theft and bold-faced lying. Perhaps your agent has been leading you on to fuel a drug habit?”

Penny turned and stomped towards the order kiosk.

“Where is she going?” Sheldon closed his menu and set it at the end of the table. “She didn’t take our orders.”

Leonard put an elbow on the table and leaned his head into his hand.

XxX

‘What the hell am I going to do now?’ Penny opened the bottle of wine and began pouring herself a glass.

“Besides kill this bottle, I mean,” she said drolly. She tucked her pink fleecy pantsed legs on the couch and leaned wearily against the throw pillows piled at the end. Counting back from when she moved out of her parents’ house at eighteen Penny realized that she’d spent six years following her plan: go to California and become a movie star. She took her father’s advice to heart about having a backup plan in case things didn’t work out the way she thought it would. If plan ‘A’ didn’t come to fruition in the first year she was to resort to plan ‘B”: become a television star. Penny rolled her eyes as she sipped. In hindsight she couldn’t believe what a naïve airhead she sounded like. No wonder her dad went out to the back of the barn and shot up a bunch of old cans the night before she left Nebraska.
She finished off her glass and poured another. She was twenty six years old and only had her high school diploma. There was no doubt she’d have to go back to school given this recession.

“Guess I’ll finally have that degree Leonard’s always wanted,” she snorted before taking a sip. 'Be nice Penelope.' Leonard was only trying to be—what? She sighed. Leonard was always trying. Penny couldn’t say their relationship would fail from a lack of trying on both parts. Not that their relationship was in any danger of collapse. She told Leonard she loved him. She told herself the same thing. Sure it wasn’t a butterflies in the stomach or wetting of the loins kind of love she saw in romance films but then again this was real life and Leonard Hofstadter was her leading man.

As if on cue there was a knock at her door.

“Come in,” said Penny and Leonard entered and closed the door behind him.

“Hey,” he said kindly as he sat on the couch. “How are you doing?”

“Pretty shitty, Leonard,” Penny snapped. She looked at her boyfriend and sighed. “Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not everyday we get our dreams smashed.” ‘Like when you broke up with me at the bowling alley….‘ "So what are you going to do?"

Penny ran a hand through her hair. “The only thing I can—go back to school. I don’t want to be a waitress forever.” Here she brightened. “At least I’ve got that history course under my belt so it’s one less elective to take.” Immediately Leonard began nervously rubbing his thumbs together at the memory of her paper on slavery.

“There’s that,” he said in an uncommitted tone. Penny raised an eyebrow and he gave an exaggerated smile. Penny was wonderful but definitely not academically inclined. And yet he wouldn’t change her for the world. Well, maybe if she read more she’d fix her sentence structures and broaden her vocabulary and knowledge base but that’s about it. He’d already told her about wearing too high a heeled shoe and for the most part she’d been amenable. Unless she was pissed with him. That’s when the conundrum came into play because Leonard detested the height difference but at the same time her ass and breasts were prominently displayed; not to mention that Penny couldn’t catch his eyes appreciate the aforementioned body parts which he did in liberal doses. In a way it was a close call at what he liked to see more: Penny’s body or the eyes of guys who checked her out and then looked enviously—okay perhaps incredulously would be the better word but this was Leonard’s fantasy—at the physicist.

“I don’t want you to make a big deal out of this,” Penny warned. She downed her glass and set it on the coffee table. “I have to be able to do this on my own.”

“Of course. But you know that you can always ask me for help when—if—you need it. A lot.” She glared. “Or a little. Or maybe not at all.” Leonard’s mind raced like a hamster. “The down side is that I won’t get the chance to see you act again.”

“Yeah,” Penny pouted. “Just when I thought my acting classes were really paying off.”

A little smile came to her boyfriend’s face. “Well we could always do a little acting here.”

“Oh?” said Penny with a smile before giggling at Leonard’s wiggling eyebrows. “And what are we tonight? ‘The Pizza Boy and the Slut’?”

The physicist put a hand on her thigh. “Lactose, remember?” He leaned over and they kissed. “We can always try the old standby: ‘The Physicist and the Slutty Cop’.”
Penny smiled. “Okay. Only this time I get to play the physicist.” Leonard nuzzled her neck.

“You know physics?” he murmured.

“Physics comes from the ancient Greek word ‘physika’ meaning ‘the science of natural things’.” Her boyfriend raised his head in shock to look Penny in the eyes. She winked and he smiled.

“Do you have any idea how fast you were driving, missy?” he said in a gruff voice.

xTBBTx

“Bill, bill, bill—ooo a credit card application!” squealed Penny as she went through her mail. This one had a six month introductory low rate she could take advantage of by transferring her current card’s debt. “Things are looking up.” She closed her mail box and tossed the book bag on her shoulder and ascended the stairs. For the last three hours she’d been at Pasadena City College going over her options at the guidance office with a very sexy and very gay man who knew how to work a tight pair of jeans. He decided that since Penny was unsure as to what she wanted to do it would be best if she kept her options open and therefore suggested she take her universal breadth requirements of math and English. The waitress was a little dubious about the math but the counselor assured her that it wasn’t much above high school level.

“Out of the way!” A voice from behind—Raj’s. Suddenly Penny heard what sounded like a herd of Tauntauns—God I can’t bo-leeve I know that!—coming up the stairs. “Howard, I’m going to pee my pants if you don’t let me pass!”

“Too bad your math skills didn’t employ earlier. Sixteen ounce bladder. Thirty two ounce Slurpee,” teased Howard. “This is what denial does to you, my friend.”

“If you don’t move there’ll be a Nile flowing down the staircaaaa….?” Raj quieted as Howard and he turned the corner and saw Penny.

“Hey guys,” she said brightly as she unconsciously put a protective hand on her book bag while flattening herself against the wall. Raj smiled weakly before tearing past her. She smirked at the grinning engineer. “Going after him?”

“Ew,” said Penny although she found she couldn’t take her eyes off the carpet ahead of her as they continued to the fourth floor.

“So, any luck finding a new job?” asked Howard. Penny was shocked.

“Did Leonard say anything to you?” she said, more than a little upset. The little man chuckled.

“Penny, you pretty much said your dreams went off a cliff at the restaurant. I might not have a doctorate but I’ve been known to put two and two together.”

“True,” blushed the waitress. “I’m looking into my options.” ‘Not that there are many.’ “You know, I don’t want to jump into anything.” ‘Like I did my ‘acting career’.’

Howard nodded and the pair finished their climb in silence. For as long as he’d known Penny he couldn’t say that they’d had a lot of heart-to-heart chats so he’d come to the end of his line of conversation. Truth be told, ever since he’d married Bernadette he barely spoke to the waitress since it wasn’t exactly proper to hit on another woman. Even for Howard Wolowitz.
With a smile Penny parted from the engineer and entered her apartment. After she set her book bag on the coffee table she went into the kitchen to pour herself a glass of wine and put on a pot of water to boil. As she sipped her wine Penny looked first at her books and then the rest of her living room. Suddenly an idea popped into her head and she went to her entertainment stand. Setting her glass on the floor she plunked down beside it and removed the dvds from the drawer. She leaned back to snag the book bag and proceeded to store the books in the drawer and shut it with a click.

Penny took a sip of wine as she thought about dinner. Would it be mac and cheese? Mac without cheese? 'The choices, the choices.' Her phone rang and she scooted over on her butt to reach her purse. She dug out her phone and checked to see who was calling.

“Oh, hey Amy,” she said.

“Hello Bestie. How is my budding ray of sunshine?”

“Eh, not bad. You?”

“Grand. I’ve just submitted a proposal for another addiction study. These tobacco companies are doing their best to show their product isn’t addictive and aren’t afraid to shell out the bucks to do so.”

“I thought cigarettes were more addictive than cocaine?”

“Heroin too. Let’s just say that by the end it was a good thing Ricky hadn’t had access to any switchblades because he was edgy enough to gut me good when I forgot to get him a pack of smokes.”

“Yikes.”

“As for the purpose of my call I thought since I now had some free time we could catch up. What do ya say? Wanna be my ample-bosomed buddy?”

“Sure. ... How about Ikea? I need something to store my dvds in.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“I’ve got dinner on the stove so I’ll call you after I’ve eaten.”

The two women said their goodbyes and Penny set the phone on the counter as she lifted the lid on her boiling water. She checked her stove clock and realized she’d have to eat quickly if she wanted time to shop. With a 'why not' shrug of the shoulders she pulled out a soup mug and poured in the hot water.

“Cheese soup it is,” Penny said as she went to the drawer for a spoon.

XxX

“Talk to me, Cortana,” purred Raj as he clicked merrily away on the game controller.

“Actually it’s more amazing you can talk to her,” grinned Leonard before joining Howard and Sheldon in a snicker. Raj pursed his lips.

“Yeah, well, you suck,” huffed the astrophysicist.

“Now, now,” soothed Howard. “Maybe you’re on to something Leonard. First there was Siri and now Cortana—”
“Excuse me but my crush on Cortana came with Halo 2—well before the beautiful Siri came into being,” amended Raj. Sheldon raised an eyebrow.

“How can Siri be aesthetically pleasing? She isn’t corporeal.”

“The power of the mind,” replied Raj.

“You mean the power of the desperate,” laughed Leonard.

The engineer scoffed. “Aka Leonard’s pseudo relationship with Penny during the first two years of knowing each other.” Now it was Leonard’s turn to pout as his friends guffawed.

“As a bright side, the Japanese are making great strides in android technology,” said Sheldon.

“Until they get to the quality of Cameron the Terminator I’m not interested.” Raj sighed as he thought of his train trip with Summer Glau. Things were going so well until Howard pointed out that the beer was nonalcoholic. ‘Thanks ’pal’.”

“John Connor was a fool. I know if I reprogrammed her she’d have a few more party tricks up her sleeve if you know what I mean,” smirked Howard.

“Yeah, she’d be a regular Stepford Wife,” replied Leonard. “Shop for groceries, do the laundry and crush you like a tin can between her thighs.”

“In the meantime, Raj, you could always find a young, impressionable woman, perhaps from the Mid-West and modify her behavior through positive reinforcement,” offered Sheldon as he hid his avatar behind a wall so he could get a sip from his bottled water.

Howard laughed at Leonard. “You were training Penny? I thought you were the whipped one?”

“Of course he wasn’t training her, I was,” sniffed Sheldon. “And doing a very good job at it I may add.”

“And yet Amy has you whupped like a dog so don’t act all superior,” Leonard reminded him.

The lanky man frowned. ‘Amy Farrah Fowler doesn’t have me ‘whupped’.’

Leonard paused the game. “Okay Sheldon, fill in the rest of this phrase: when Amy argues with your friend—even if she’s wrong and belligerent towards him—you must always…” A twitch passed over Sheldon’s face. The curly-haired man smirked. “That’s right! Shelly must always ‘side with her’.”

Sheldon jumped at the sound of Raj’s whip sound App from his phone.

“Who’d ever think that Sheldon could be emasculated?” said Howard before taking a swig of pop. “Well, by someone other than a female family member.”

“I am not emasculated,” scowled the theoretical physicist.


“Hardly.”

Leonard wiped his hand on his pant leg before resuming the game. “Face it Sheldon, you’re a ‘Stepford Husband’ just like the rest of us.”
“The ‘Stepford Wives’ were humans replaced by robots, Leonard,” reminded his roommate.

“The same principle applies,” shrugged Howard. “Only Amy’s replacing the Shelbot with a human.”

Raj glanced at Sheldon, his friend flushed with emotion, and realized that the humanization of Sheldon Cooper began long before Amy came into the picture. Leonard had done a lot to improve his sociability over the years but it took the magic of a certain blond-haired waitress moving in across the hall to push Pinocchio into becoming a real man.

XxX

“Sheldon is positively frustrating sometimes,” sighed Amy as Penny and she wandered down the path in IKEA towards the living room furnishings.

“What’s he done now?” Penny asked, distracted by a cute storage container.

Amy huffed. “It’s more like what hasn’t he done. I got him to be a Junior Engineer, played Star Trek ‘doctor’, made his favorite meal—including Strawberry Quick—and you know what I’ve gotten in return? Bupkiss.”

’Nope, I’d need two and got no room for that.’ Penny set the container down and resumed walking. “So what is it you’re expecting?”

“Anything at this point: a kiss on the cheek, a snuggle *he* initiates, minor public displays of affection like hand-holding.”

“Well you know he’s a germaphobe,” Penny said slowly. “It took him a while to hug me and even then I had to cough up Leonard Nimoy’s DNA.”

“I shouldn’t have to ‘cough something up’. He’s my boyfriend. Boyfriends are supposed to get giggly and I’m ready to be giggled.”

They took the ‘secret passage’ that cut directly into the living room area. Penny immediately spotted the media section.

“What if Sheldon isn’t ready?” asked the waitress.

“Of course he’s ready,” snapped Amy. “Face it: I’m the best girlfriend Sheldon’s ever going to get. I’m intelligent, sassy and can stand his idiosyncrasies.” The neurobiologist stayed in the aisle as Penny waltzed between the various dvd racks. “After waiting two years he owes me. He owes my eggs.”

Penny turned to her friend, mouth open. “You want kids?”

“Kids, a ring on my finger, steamy sex every night.”

The waitress cracked a smile. “And this is Sheldon we’re talking about?”

A crooked smile came to Amy’s face. “Penny, it’s not like I’ve had a plethora of boyfriends to choose from. Whether he likes it or not Sheldon’s ‘it’ and like heck if I’m going to let him get in the way of my becoming Amy Farrah Cooper.”

“Gotcha,” Penny answered. Amy was a good friend and a good person yet for some reason Penny felt a twinge of sympathy for the reluctant physicist. There was nothing worse than being forced to
deepen the level of commitment in a relationship if you weren’t ready for it. Fortunately she didn’t have that with Leonard. Penny loved him. She said so and so did he so everything was okay.

Right?

Penny flipped her pencil onto her math textbook in disgust and took a sip of wine. She’d been at this for nearly two hours and still had a whack of questions to go. This is what she got for procrastinating all week. There was a mini quiz tomorrow and she needed to know the formulas.

“Come on, Penny, think,” she mumbled to herself. She turned and stared at her door. There was no way she’d ask Leonard for help. He’d hold it over her head forever. Besides, she wanted to do this on her own. She came out to California on her own—okay with Kurt but she paid half the rent at their apartment; she took care of her own bills—except for the times she needed loans from Sheldon and Leonard; she ran her small business—after Sheldon organized it and Howard, Leonard and Raj helped produce a thousand Penny Blossoms…. Penny frowned. Okay, maybe she did get a hand or two every once in a while. Nothing wrong with that, right?

She got up and grabbed her notebook and pencil. Leonard was off at a non-Sheldon approved theater tonight and Penny knew his roommate was at home so this was the perfect opportunity for her to sneak across for help. Sheldon would complain about the interruption from reading comic books or playing video games but as this offered him the opportunity to demonstrate his intellectual superiority Penny was sure she could rope him in.

Sheldon was at his computer as Penny entered apartment 4A.

“Hey Sheldon,” she said cheerily.

“Leonard’s not here,” he replied, not taking his eyes off the screen.

“Yeah I know.” She crossed over to stand behind his shoulder. “Since you’re only playing Tetris I was wondering if you could give me a hand with something.” Sheldon snorted derisively.

“Penny, I’ve an IQ of one hundred and eighty seven”—here she rolled her eyes—“and as such can multitask with little effort. In this case I’m puzzling out the implications if it’s found that the discovered Higgs boson doesn’t follow the standard-model Higgs. Depending on its properties it may be a Higgs I’d expect in a supersymmetric model.”

The Nebraskan stood for a moment watching the Tetris blocks disappearing at an alarming rate. The physicist might not be athletically inclined but if video games could give great cardio he’d beat the Kenyan marathon runners any day of the week.

“Well, this will give you a chance to add another pin to your juggling act. It’s math-oriented so it’s right up your alley.”

“Are you calculating the luminosity of a black body by the Stefan-Boltzmann formula?”

“No.”

“Are you calculating the operators of the second quantification of Quantum Field Theory?”

“No.”

“Then I doubt you’re doing something worth my effort,” he said dismissively.
“Come on Sheldon. I really need your help and I don’t have a lot of time before Leonard’s home.” Sheldon sighed.

“What is it you’re working on?”

“Algebra.”

“Leonard would be your better option since his formulas are similarly basic. Ask him.”

“I can’t,” pouted Penny. “I want to do this without him.”

“Why does it matter who helps you since the purpose is to render aid?” Sometimes he really didn’t understand his neighbor. She often made things more complex than they needed to be.

Penny pursed her lips. “So you’re telling me if you had a problem with your math you’d go to Leonard for help?” The physicist paused his game and turned his chair to face her.

“Not that such a scenario is possible but nevertheless I see your point.” He took Penny’s proffered notebook and scanned the pages as they crossed over and sat on the couch.

“You’re not applying binomial theorem properly,” he said as he pointed to a question. “In this instance \((a + b)^3 = a^3 + 3a^2b + 3ab^2 + b^3\).”

“Oh. Okay.” She jotted down the answer as Sheldon got up. He looked at his board before crossing over and dragging Leonard’s board to the center of the room. He scanned the formulas before wiping them with the dry eraser.

“Leonard, Leonard, what are you thinking?” he tsked. Sheldon took up a marker and began writing out equations on the board. “As you know,” he said to Penny. “Binomials start out as basic problems such as \((a + b)^1 = a + b\).”

“Yeah I got that.”

“The trick is to discern whether a binomial is a binomial or subject to the laws of exponents.” He wrote them out beside the other formulas.

\((am)(an) = am+n\ . \text{ Got it.}\)

“Then we get to your problem.” He wrote down the equation. “And this is solved by using?” Penny scanned the formulas and looked at the question. “Oh! It’s an exponent.” She began writing.

“Very good,” Sheldon said evenly. “Now for the solution.”

Between them they finished off all the questions Penny had trouble with. Beaming, the waitress stood up and stretched.

“That’s that. Thanks so much, Sheldon.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You mean you don’t want to correct the other questions?” Penny’s smile faltered.

“What do you mean?”

“You have quite a few errors: 2a, c, d, g; 3b through e, g, h; 4—” Penny dropped to the couch, her knees weak.
“That’s nearly half.”

“Sixty three percent actually,” corrected Sheldon.

The waitress stared at her book before dropping it on the table.

“I don’t fucking believe this!” she hissed. The lanky man pursed his lips.

“Language, Penny.” He erased the last question and wrote out question 2b. “Now, since we’ve gone over the formulas this should be easy even for you.” He turned to see Penny still sitting with her head down. “It would help if you paid attention.” A sudden sob from his neighbor brought instant horror to his face. “What are you doing? There’s no crying in math.” This only made his friend cry harder. Sheldon bit his lip. He really wasn’t very good at consoling, particularly when he wasn’t sure as to why she was so upset. “There, there,” he said tentatively.

“I’m going to fail tomorrow,” she said in tears.

“The odds aren’t in your favor, no, particularly when you take time out for an emotional collapse. Now grab your pencil and let’s continue,” he said in what he hoped was an upbeat tone.

“You don’t get it,” sniffed Penny as she wiped an eye with the heel of her palm. “I’m a failure, Sheldon. Me. My acting career’s over and I’m stuck in a dead end job.”

“Technically an acting career is comprised of more than one paying gig and a single commercial hardly—” He stopped talking as she glared at him. A twitch came to his face. “Go on,” he said, even though he wished she wouldn’t. Why didn’t she call Amy? The neurobiologist was more than able to provide comfort.

“This course is supposed to be a Gen. Ed. but I suck at math. I don’t even know why I picked it.”

Sheldon cocked his head. “Penny, why are you at school?”

“I need a degree or something.” The physicist pursed his lips.

“Or something’. Good Lord.” He erased Leonard’s board and wrote down ‘school’ in the center. “Why do you need a degree?”

Penny’s green eyes lifted as she sat back on the couch. “I need a better job.”

“Alright. So your goal isn’t schooling but to secure satisfactory employment.” He erased the board and put ‘career’ in the center. “Right now we’re here”—at the top he wrote ‘waitress’. “One of the ways we can get to our goal is through education.” He drew a line and wrote ‘school’. “Since this is proving difficult and will also incur a monetary cost you can ill afford given your current state of affairs a far simpler method would be for you to procure another job.”

“All I’ve ever done is work on the farm and at the Cheesecake Factory—and before you start, no, I don’t want a better waitressing job.”

“So what deters you is an inadequate résumé,” he said as he jotted the word in big letters. “Therefore we need to bolster your credentials. The simpler way to do that would be through education but that’s dependent on what you wish to do.” He turned to his neighbor. “Since acting is not an option what do you want to do?”

“I don’t know.”
“Let’s work on what you do know. What do you like doing?”

Penny bit her lip as she thought. “I like meeting new people so long as they aren’t jerks. I love talking on the phone and I don’t mind working long shifts although I wouldn’t be too keen on lots of overtime. Well, unless it’s before Black Friday. Could always use the extra cash then.”

“So you’d like a subordinate role where you deal with civilized clientele both in person and on the phone with structured hours.” Penny snapped her fingers.

“I could be a secretary!” Sheldon rolled his eyes.

“Have you seen the state of your apartment?” he asked incredulously as he thought about the assorted laundry and magazines strewn across the room. “A clerical assistant requires organizational skills you have yet to demonstrate.”

“I know how to clean and organize, Sheldon,” Penny said with a frown. “Just because I’m lazy at home doesn’t mean I’m a slob at work.”

“Alright,” Sheldon said after a moment. “Let’s say you’re correct and you can manage to constrain your chaos. What do you need to do?” At this Penny popped off the couch.

“I can see if they have a secretarial course,” she said excitedly.

“Clerical assistant,” Sheldon amended.

“Maybe I won’t have to take math after all,” she grinned as she took up her notebook. “Thanks Sheldon.” Before he could say another word she zipped out of the apartment.

“Huh. That didn’t go too badly.” He looked back at the board in thought. Surely there was a better algorithm than this….

xTBBTx

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

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Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Penny opened the door to find her neighbor standing in the hall with his hands behind his back and a pleased expression on his face.

“Yes, Sheldon?”

“Not that I care but social protocol dictates I ask how your test went?” At this Penny grabbed his arm and yanked him into the apartment, checking to make sure the hall was clear before closing the door.

“We don’t talk about schooling around Leon— Oh my God you didn’t tell him about last night did you?” Her face went ashen.

“Why would last night be of any concern to Leonard?” asked a puzzled Sheldon. At this Penny smiled in relief.

“You’re right. It isn’t.” She went to the counter to get her glass of iced water. “Anyways, I probably bombed it but at least I gave it a try. Oh, but in more important news I looked it up and
The college does have a receptionist course. It’s already booked for the fall but I can start it next year when I’ve got money saved up.”

“Clerical assistant,” corrected Sheldon. “Yes, well, I’ve given your problem thought and have drawn up a satisfactory course of action.”

“Continue,” Penny said formally before taking a sip of her water.

“Your problem is that you’ve managed to create a series of infinite loops thus leaving you unable to attain your goal.” Penny’s blank face wasn’t exactly encouraging but he decided to soldier onward. “You want a better job but you lack the skills and funds necessary to persevere so you’re relegated to working at the Cheesecake Factory.”

“YuP.”

“Furthermore we’ve yet to determine whether or not you are suited to work as an assistant so it would be beneficial to find out before incurring the expense of school,” he continued.

“Know anyone who needs a secretary with no experience?” the Nebraskan chuckled.

“Not ‘need’, no,” he said with a twitchy mouth. “Although I do know someone who is willing to ‘take you on’ as it were to ‘show you the ropes’.” Penny raised an inquisitive eyebrow to which Sheldon responded with an exaggerated smile.

She nearly choked on her water. “You?”

“Not only will you learn proper office procedure but you will also have something to add to your résumé in your chosen field.”

“So I’d be working with Alex?” said Penny with a frown. “I don’t know if I can do that.” Not after the way the tramp had gone after Leonard.

“A alex is in Europe for the year working on her thesis.”

“Ah ok. Sure, I could do what she did—only no reading any poop journals.”

“You won’t be doing that,” assured the physicist. “You lack the skills necessary to be even an adequate research assistant.”

“Gee thanks,” Penny said flatly. Still it would give her a taste of being a secretary without costing her anything. ‘Except maybe my sanity.’ “All right I’ll do it.” Sheldon nodded.

“So solves the first loop. As for your schooling you require a loan to secure your placement in class which I’m willing to provide.”

“Sheldon, I can’t take your money,” Penny protested.

“‘Borrow’.” His blue eyes were serious. “Penny, you’re twenty six. You need more than your comeliness and a high school education to get you by, particularly in a recession.”

Penny shyly shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know when I can pay you back.”

“When you’re able,” he said simply.

“Thanks Sheldon.” Penny crossed the floor to stand in front of him. “Please don’t tell Leonard about this.”
“As you’ll be at the university he’ll know eventually,” he pointed out.

“Just tell him I’m helping you out. I want to surprise him when I get a receptionist job.”

“Clerical assistant.” Sheldon pursed his lips. “You know I’m not good at lying.”

“It’s not a lie,” said Penny. “I will be helping you out.” Green eyes met blue.

“Well, we’re off to an auspicious start as we work under the cloak of subterfuge,” the physicist huffed.

“Thank you Sheldon.” He stiffened as she wrapped her arms around him in a hug. Penny stood back and grinned.

“Rule one,” Sheldon said evenly. “No hugging your boss.”

xTBBT

Complex math questions: Yahoo Answers

Algebraic Formulas: site is not allowing me to post them properly. Please excuse.

Thanks for reading!
Chapter Two

Chapter Summary

Reference to: ‘The Higgs Boson Observation’

Penny just made the cut off for the winter enrollment in the Office Assistant program. Thanks to Sheldon’s loan she could reduce her hours at the Cheesecake Factory—except for Tuesdays of course—so she could work two days a week at the university without worrying about bills. All she had to do was get herself to Sheldon’s office for nine am and her stint as ‘Girl Friday’ would begin even though she started on a Monday.

She crossed the hall and opened the door to 4A. Fortunately there was Sheldon sitting on the couch and no Leonard in sight.

“Hey,” she said. In response the physicist clicked on the captioning feature on the television.
“Okay I’ll be quick. I checked out the Caltech website and was wondering if you knew where the visitor parking was?”

“There’s a pass on my desk. Attach it to your mirror and you can park in my spot which I’ve indicated on a map,” he said idly, not taking his eyes from the screen. Penny picked up the pass and paper that sat on a stack of documents.

“Thanks sweetie.” Anything that saved her a few dollars a week was bonus as far as she was concerned.

“The rest of the papers are also for you. They outline your position and expectations. You’re to read them over before work tomorrow.”

Penny picked up the papers and fanned them with her thumb.

“Kinda thick,” she replied with a smirk. “It’s not that hard fetching coffee and typing letters. Even I can handle that.”

Sheldon’s gaze flashed to her face. “I don’t drink coffee. In face I don’t even like the smell. You’ll refrain from bringing the vile substance into my office. That’s on page nine under ‘Office Restrictions’.”

“I understand kimosabe,” saluted Penny as the door opened and Leonard entered carrying a bottle of detergent.

“Hi,” he said to his girlfriend.

“Heya.” She went to the door and gave him a kiss. He looked at the papers in her hand.

“What’s this?”

“Oh, it’s an old script I had floating around,” she said evenly, impressing Sheldon with how easily the lie came from her lips.
“Ah.” Leonard rubbed her arm. “I’ve got forty minutes to kill until the washers are done. Wanna hang out?”

“Actually I’m kinda busy at the moment.” Her boyfriend raised an eyebrow. “Maybe later?”

“Sure,” said Leonard after a moment. They kissed again and Penny was gone. Leonard waited until she closed the door to her apartment before he did the same. “Huh. This is the fifth night in a row she’s been busy.”

“Oh?” Sheldon’s eye twitched. “I hadn’t noticed.”

“Each time I came over she was on the computer and closed it when I entered the room.” Here he smirked. “That’s a lot of shoe shopping, even for her.”

For some reason Sheldon was annoyed. “Yes, well I’m sure it’s something more important than procuring foot apparel.”

“Like what?”

Sheldon was silent as his great big brain froze before it began spinning in overdrive. “How should I know? She isn’t my girlfriend. Even if she were I wouldn’t keep track of her every movement. Penny is free to do what she wants without being scrutinized.”

Leonard was taken aback. “I’m not stalking her. I was just curious.”

“Of course.” Sheldon stood up and went to the kitchen. “I think I’ll make some tea.”

“Sheldon is there something going on?”

“Why would there be something ‘going on’?” A tic came over his face as he reached into the cupboard for two mugs.

“Because you’re acting weird. Weirder than normal.”

Sheldon tutted. “First Penny, now me.” He grabbed the tea strainer from the drawer. “No one seems to measure up to your expectations today, Leonard. I believe you’re in need of a hot beverage.”

Leonard shrugged his shoulders. “Yeah I guess….”

xTBBTx

Penny had to ask directions from a wide-eyed scientist but she eventually found Sheldon’s office and, happily, she was five minutes early. She took a breath as she reached for the handle and realized with a little laugh that she was nervous.

“Come on,” she said to herself with a smirk. “This is Sheldon not the President.” She opened the door and Sheldon was standing with his back to her looking over his whiteboard. “Hey Sheldon.”

The room was silent as he contemplated.

“Knock before entering,” he said at last as he corrected a number. Penny rapped on the door. “Come in.” He turned to see his neighbor. “You’re four minutes early. In future you’ll be here fifteen minutes early so you can settle in before work.”

“Yes sir,” Penny saluted. She looked over the office and realized that everything was already in
place. Having a germaphobe neat-freak for a boss did have its perks. “So what do you want me to do first?”

Sheldon stepped to his desk. “You need to fill out some paperwork.” He handed her a clipboard. The Nebraskan read over the application sheet.

“But you already know me,” she countered.

“Protocol, Penny.” With a roll of the eyes she sat and began filling out the forms. She stopped as she read over the second part.

“Wait, I’m going to get paid for this?”

Sheldon nodded. “You’re being employed and as such will be earning a paycheck so as to bolster your work experience. Granted it’s only minimum wage but I hope you’ll see it as the nominal token it’s meant to be instead of an indicator of your efforts.”

“That’s great,” she said happily before reading further. “It says you’re hiring me, not the university.”

“Correct. The university requires I hire an assistant from the graduate pool. You are a personal assistant and as such will come from my own wallet as it were.”

“Aw, sweetie, you don’t have to do this.”

“Penny, you don’t expect me to lie on your résumé do you?” Sheldon said with a twitchy mouth.

“Thank you,” she smiled and completed her forms before handing them over to Sheldon. He collected the paperwork, looked it over and signed where appropriate, before placing it in a red folder.

“So,” Penny said brightly. “What’s the gist, physicist?”

“First thing’s first,” he said evenly. “Go home and change.”

Penny’s mouth dropped. “What?”

Sheldon sat down at his desk. “Your clothing is inappropriate for a clerical assistant.”

Penny looked at her yellow tank top, hipster pants and flip flops. “Sheldon, it’s just you and me.”

“Penny between the hours of nine and three on Mondays and Thursdays you are my employee and as such fall under the code of conduct you initialed in your contract. Section One detailed punctuality and appropriate work apparel. This is a university not IHOP.”

“You’re wearing a Green Lantern T-shirt!” Penny replied incredulously.

“As your employer what I’m wearing is irrelevant in regards to how you conduct yourself,” explained the physicist as he looked over a document on his computer. “You wish to embark in a profession. It requires you to show self-respect.”

“This is ridiculous!” his neighbor snapped as she folded her arms over her chest.

“So you won’t go home and change?” he said to clarify.

“What I’m wearing is fine.”
“So be it.” He opened the red folder and took out Penny’s paperwork. “Consider your employment terminated,” he said evenly as he tore the papers in two.

“What the hell?” Penny couldn’t believe what she’d just seen.

“Don’t worry Penny, I’ll be sure to properly shred and dispose of the document. Close the door on your way out.”

She got out of her chair. “Sheldon I—”

“Good day Penny,” he said as he began typing at his lap top.

“You’re impossible!” she snapped.

Numb, Penny stepped out into the hall and leaned against the wall facing Sheldon’s now closed door. She’d never been so rebuked in all her life and she was absolutely pissed. Sheldon was being pig-headed and bat-crap anal like always. Sheldon ‘no one touches my food or sits in my spot’ Cooper. She read his door plaque:

Dr. Sheldon Cooper
Sr. Particle Physics

“Whackadoodle.” Still she stared. ‘Particle Physics’. She realized she had no idea how particle physics was different from *physics* physics. Sheldon knew. That was the reason why he sat on the other side of the door. Okay it also helped that he was a freaken genius. Two doctorates. University at age eleven. Toddler poop journals that read more like university textbooks than the words of a three year old. Sheldon might be her Dr. Whackadoodle but she was his blond monkey.

Penny knew he was smart but it came to her in a flash that she never respected him for his accomplishments. What he did at the university was ‘just a job’: he got up for work Monday to Friday and logged his hours for a paycheck to fund his comic book collection and trips to the paintball field. She only knew a small part of Sheldon Cooper and not a drop about *Doctor* Cooper. From what she gathered he was more accomplished than Leonard and that the university put up with his whackiness because he was that good. He was a success and Penny was a twenty six year old waitress.

She stared at the door.

XxX

At the knocking on his door Sheldon looked up from his computer. It wasn’t yet lunch so it couldn’t be Leonard or Raj. As for the other faculty members if they wished to converse with Sheldon they more often than not emailed him. Face to face interactions were kept at a minimum which suited the physicist just fine.

“You may enter,” he said.

The door opened and his eyes widened in surprise but for a moment as he took in Penny wearing a white cardigan over a reddish orange sundress and heeled shoes.

“Sheldon?”

He looked back at his computer. “This is my office. Why are you at my office?”

“I need your advice.”
“You know I’ll be home at four thirty.”

“It can’t wait.”

“Alright.” His blue eyes caught her breath, they were so encompassing.

“I really screwed up this morning. A friend of mine offered me a job as his assistant and I didn’t take it seriously. I thought it was like one friend helping another out, nothing formal, and I acted like a complete douche when he wanted me to be professional.”

“Sounds like quite a pickle. I’m not sure what you want me to do about it.”

“I need to know how to make this right,” continued Penny. “Not the job part. That was my screw up and I’m not expecting a second chance. I just want to make sure that our—that the—friendship is ok and that I don’t want it to seem that I’m ungrateful for what he offered.”

Sheldon nodded slightly. “I’m sure an apology such as what you just delivered would suffice.”

Penny smiled, relieved. “Thanks, Sheldon.” She turned to go.

“Penny, I must say your apparel is much improved over your usual attire.” Their eyes met.

“You know it is fortuitous you came here this morning as I find myself in need of an office assistant.” Sheldon opened up several documents on his laptop.

“I don’t really have much experience.” The lanky man looked at her. “I don’t have any experience,” she amended sheepishly. “But I am registered for school next term.”

“I see. I’ll need you to fill out some paperwork,” he said as the printer to his right fired up and began printing. “There’s nominal pay for the position and the use of my parking spot.”

“Sounds good,” Penny beamed.

“You’ll have to be punctual and professional.”

“I understand.”

He got up and took the pages from the printer and attached them to a clip board. “During your work hours you will refer to me as Dr. Cooper.” He glanced at her and Penny knew this was important.

“Absolutely,” she said seriously.

“Excellent,” he said cheerily as he handed her the board and a pen. “Fill this out, Penelope, and then I’ll go over your duties.”

“You can still call me Penny, y’know,” she said with a smirk.

“Penny is a pet name between friends. Penelope is much more age and position appropriate.”

“Whatever you say, Dr. Cooper.” Penny began filling out the paperwork.

xTBBTx

The word had made its way to through the physics department: there was a woman in Sheldon
Raj and Leonard looked at each other with the same thought in mind—Missy!—before tearing down the hall towards their friend’s office. As they rounded the corner they saw a healthy gathering of colleagues trying but failing to be inconspicuous as they hung around Sheldon’s door.

“Excuse me,” said Leonard with a smirk that said ‘yes, the nut job with the pretty girl is my friend’ while Raj cut through the crowd and stood in shock at the entrance.

“Penny?” Leonard gasped, confused as he saw his girlfriend in a gray skirt-suit and red blouse sitting beside Sheldon’s desk sharpening a pencil while the lanky man stood in front of his whiteboard.

“Hi guys,” she said lightly. She measured the newly sharpened pencil to another before sticking it in a pencil holder point-down.

“What are you doing here?” Penny made no mention of coming to the university today and Sheldon sure didn’t say anything on the car ride to work. Leonard felt a twinge in his stomach.

“Sheldon needed help so I volunteered,” she explained.

“I see.” The curly haired physicist brightened. “Well that’s great you’re here. Maybe we can check out my lab later.”

“Penelope only has a half-hour lunch which would be better used for eating rather than socialization,” replied Sheldon. He turned his head and looked at the pencil in Penny’s hand before returning to her face with a raised eyebrow. Penny immediately resumed sharpening. “Raj, please close the door on the way out. I’ll see you both at lunch.”

“Sure,” mumbled Leonard even though at this moment he was anything but. Raj smiled at Penny before closing the door.

Penny finished sharpening the pencil and placed it in the specially designed holder that kept the points from touching bottom.

She turned to her boss. “All done. Want them on your desk?”

“Pencils all the same height?” Sheldon asked absently without turning.

“Yes.”

“Erasers still have that dusty, unused look?”

“Yes.”

“Labels facing one direction?”

“Yup.” Sheldon pursed his lips.

“You mean ‘yes’.” Penny smiled as he set the marker on the ledge and went to inspect her handiwork. He raised an eyebrow. “Excellent.” He set the pencil holder down and went around the desk to his drawer. “Put it on my filing cabinet behind the Hoberman rainbow sphere.”

“Kind of makes them hard to reach,” said Penny as she moved the sphere in order to place the holder.
“Oh I don’t use them. I use mechanical pencils,” Sheldon explained.

Penny involuntarily turned her head towards him. “Then why did I just spend half an hour sharpening them?”

“I am nothing if not prepared, Penelope. And for the record, you’ve just incurred a strike. You’re hired for your office assistance not for input unless it’s requested.”

“I’m sorry, Dr. Cooper.” Penny knew better than to argue since the issuing of ‘strikes’ was in the contract. There was an incentive bonus of a paid lunch if she kept her slate clean. Of course the chances of that happening were slim to none so she didn’t hold her breath. “So, what’s next?”

Sheldon reached into his side drawer and pulled out a cardboard box. “I have some erasers that need to be gone over. The edges should be sharp and….”

Penny inwardly rolled her eyes as she took the box.

XxX

Leonard turned his head and gave Penny a kiss on the cheek as they lay in bed. The asthma medication had done its trick so he could ask the questions he formulated during sex.

“So when did you start working for Sheldon?” he asked.

“Today. He said he needed help and I could use the extra cash.”

“Oh. He’s paying you.” He began to worry his lip. “What about the Cheesecake Factory?”

“They cut my hours so I combined shifts so I could take Sheldon’s job.” In reality Penny had to pull double shifts and work every second Sunday to leave Mondays and Thursdays open. Sheldon might be doing her a favor but it was a favor that could put her in the hospital on stress leave if she didn’t pace herself.

“So what days are you at the university?”

“Mondays and Thursdays.”

“That’s terrific,” grinned Leonard. “We can commute to work together and eat lunch together and perform some experiments in the lab when I’m not busy.” He slid a finger around the curve of her right breast.

“Actually I’ll be taking my own car. My job ends at three and I don’t want to be hanging out at the university until four.”

“Even if I make it worth your while?” he murmured with a smirk.

Penny lolled her head to give him the full brunt of her eyes. “I don’t want to blow this Leonard. I can use Sheldon on my résumé.”

“I guess,” pouted Leonard. “Although I don’t know how it’ll get you another waitressing job.” He brightened. “Hey, maybe you can work at the school’s cafeteria!”

“Oh boy,” Penny said in mock cheer.

“Yeah,” Leonard gushed as he snuggled against her. “And best of all everyone will see that my girlfriend exists.”
Penny frowned but said nothing. Soon after she heard Leonard’s heavy breathing and not long after she was asleep.

“The past two weeks everything that was possibly anything had been straightened, sharpened, aligned and wiped down with antibacterial cloths. Except for his whiteboards. No one touched them without his express permission and that rarely happened.”

“I need you to shred these,” Sheldon said as he indicated a pile of papers on his desk.

“Very well.” Penny grabbed the stack and went to the communal office down the hall. She flipped through the pages and saw that they were mostly department memos, nothing that looked particularly top secret. She smiled and shook her head as she entered the room.

“Weww, ewww, Woxanne. This is a supwise,” said Barry Kripke with a smile as he waited for his photocopies. He had turned to the door at the sound of high heeled shoes clicking down the hall. To hear them in the physics department often indicated that someone was lost and he was always willing to take advantage of the vulnerable. Besides, it allowed him the opportunity to talk to a woman.

“Oh, hey. Kripke, right?” said Penny neutrally as she crossed over to the shredder and turned it on.

“Bawwy. So what awe you doing hewe? Hofstadter wowks on the othew side of the buiwding.”

“Actually I’m working for Dr. Cooper.” She fed the sheets into the machine.

“Doctow Coopah?” chuckled Kripke. “Wow. So when did he get high and mighty?”

Penny shrugged. “Until three o’clock he’s my boss.”

“What ever he’s paying I’ww doubwe it. Then we can pway ‘doctow and intewn’.” He wiggled his eyebrows.

The shredder quieted at the flick of a switch. “Listen creep,” Penny said in a raised voice. “If you think I’d ever go near your pathetically gross—”

“Penelope enough.”

Both Kripke and Penny turned at the stern voice of Sheldon Cooper, who stood in the doorway with some additional papers for the shredder. “If you’ve concluded your task, return to the office. I’ve a new pack of folders I need you to sort.”

Penny glared at Kripke before turning on her heel and leaving the room.

“You suwe have hew in hew pwace,” Kripke chortled.

Sheldon pursed his lips. “Your vulgarity towards Penelope won’t be tolerated.”

“Aww, youw chivawwy is adowabwe.”

“It’s not chivalry. She is my employee and as her boss it’s my duty to ensure that she has a safe work environment. This includes her right to work without being sexually harassed. If you choose to persist I’ll have no choice but to go to Gablehauser and file a complaint.”
“Don’t bothew,” Kripke said huffily.

“Good.” Sheldon returned to his office to find Penny pacing.

“Have you finished with the folders? You know I expect them to be folded on the first—”

“I’m just calming down,” Penny growled.

“I see.” Sheldon returned to his desk, setting the papers to the side to be disposed of later. “If something like this happens again you will immediately return to the office and tell me.”

She stopped pacing and scowled. “Sheldon, I can take care of myself.”

“Dr. Cooper and no, I’m not questioning your capability,” he explained. “The point is that you should not have to put up with behavior like that and should rely on company reprimand rather than the ‘junior rodeo’. There’s a chain of command for a reason. In this instance it is my responsibility as your employer to maintain a proper work environment for you. All you have to do is act professional and perform your duties and your part of our agreement is satisfied.”

Penny sat down and opened the pack of file folders. “Thank you for standing up for me.”

“There’s no need for—” He caught her glare. “You’re welcome. However, I am giving you a strike concerning your language in the copy room.”

The Nebraskan’s jaw dropped. “But Kripke’s the one who started it!”

“That doesn’t mean you join the lowest common denominator. You have to remember you’re better than that.” Sheldon located where he left off and resumed typing.

Penny nodded and began sorting the file folders. The last time she heard something like this came from her father when she threw a particularly bad ball while they played catch. ‘You’re better than that, Slugger.’ She had felt a combination of embarrassment and determination. Dad’s belief in her, that she really was *something*, gave her the guts needed to compete in the Junior Rodeo and pack her car and travel half way across the country to follow a dream. Over the past five years she’d slowly succumbed to doubt as she began to question why she remained in California. She had zip chance as an actress and really, she could waitress in places a hell of a lot less expensive than Pasadena. Of course she had Leonard. If she hadn’t moved she’d never have met him. Her boyfriend. The man she loved. Penny smiled to herself as she reached for another folder.

xTBBTx

Research journal, entry six. Subject has successfully acquired knowledge in basic office maintenance. I no longer have to instruct her to wipe down communal objects and assure that my printer is primed with paper.

Strikes were issued this week for placing memos on the left side of the desk when I requested the right and for talking with her mouth open during lunch. Subject argued that since she was ‘on her own time’ she shouldn’t be subject to strikes but I pointed out that her potential coworkers and employer would much rather see her closed-mouth smile than her bologna sandwich. Subject agreed and was careful of how she ate thereafter. This experiment is proving beneficial in regards to understanding basic behavior modification. Subject is more conscientious of adapting to my orders so change occurs at a much more rapid pace than during my previous attempt which relied on chocolate alone as the motivating factor.

I am in the process of installing new operating systems for subject’s laptop so I can load a copy of
my filing program. I shall also include several typing programs to make sure subject’s speed is sufficient for dictation as well as ensure that her fingering is correct. The ‘Alpha Munchies Typing Game’ should be an adequate starting point.

xTBBTx

The sounds of smooching echoed in the laser room.

“This is nothing…compared to the…x-ray laser,” explained Leonard between kisses.

“Oh?” replied Penny as she ran a hand through his hair. “So you’d rather…play with your laser… than little ol’ me?” Immediately Leonard broke the kiss to stare incredulously at his girlfriend.

“I meant my laser is nothing compared to the x-ray laser,” he amended.

“That’s okay,” Penny said with a wink. “You’re more than making up for your little laser.”

“It’s not *that* small,” huffed the physicist. “It’s reliable and hard-working.”

“If a little quick on the trigger.” She grinned and kissed the tip of his nose before glancing at the wall clock. “Oh balls, I’m going to be late.”

“You still have five minutes to get to Sheldon’s office,” whined Leonard as Penny stepped away to straighten her shirt.

“Damn, I need a mirror.” She looked around and used the chrome countertop as a guide to tidy her hair.

“See you tonight?” Leonard said hopefully as Penny grabbed her jacket.

“You betcha.” Lips met and she was gone, breezing past two researchers as they made their way into the lab. The two men stared after her and then looked at Leonard.

“Wasn’t that Cooper’s assistant?” asked Ron.

Leonard puffed up to five foot six. “She’s my girlfriend,” he said with a goofy smile.

“Her?” said Steve with a cough. “How’d you manage that? Clone her from DNA found on a pop can?”

“She’s my neighbor. We got to know each other and things went from there,” explained Leonard.

“Ahh. You used proximity and repeated exposure to your advantage,” mused Steve.

“Absolutely,” smiled Leonard as he busied himself resetting the experiment. “I am a scientist after all.”

“So’s Cooper. He’s got himself quite the little Petrie dish in his office to interact with your girlfriend,” said Ron. “Any warm-blooded mammal would try to hit on her at least once after weeks of interaction.”

There was a pause as all three men looked at each other before bursting out laughing at the thought of Sheldon Cooper—lady killer.

XxX
Penny cursed herself under her breath before opening the office door. To no one’s surprise Sheldon was behind his desk typing away.

“Sorry I’m late,” she said apologetically as she crossed over to her seat and little table where her laptop sat.

“No you’re not,” the physicist replied evenly without looking up. “You’re sorry you have another strike.”

“The half hour lunch is a little tight.” Penny smoothed her skirt under her before sitting. Her task this afternoon was to practice her typing and learn different letter formats.

“Hence why it would be better spent here as opposed to Leonard’s lab.”

“But there’s no one here to talk to,” she pouted. Sheldon regarded her with a raised eyebrow.

“I’m sorry, Penelope. I’d mistakenly thought you were here to learn office skills not engage in social gibber-jabber,” he said with a bit of a twang. “By all means, take your time. Come in when you like.”

Penny sighed. “That’s not what I meant and you know it.” A twitch crossed over Sheldon’s face.

“Between eating and refreshing yourself you have little time to be lonely before I return to the office.”

“Yes but when you’re here we don’t talk,” she pointed out.

“My job isn’t to entertain you nor you, me. We’re here to work.” He resumed typing. “You might want to remind yourself of that the next time Leonard invites you to lunch.” Penny blanched.

“So much for ‘Dr. Hofstadter’,” she said with a little smile to ease the tension.

“When Leonard decides to act like a professional he’ll deserve the distinction, Penelope.” Sheldon got up from his desk and walked to the door, turning at the entrance to face the Nebraskan. “You’ll refrain from bringing ‘Penny’ to the university.”

Penny sat back with a frown. “What are you talking about?”

He cocked his head. “You are someone who’s resourceful, reliable, presentable and capable. I didn’t hire a crass hippy who thinks she can wander in here three minutes late wearing a rapidly reddening splotch on her neck,” he said stiffly. Horrified, Penny guiltily placed a hand on Leonard’s love mark. “Perhaps it’s best if you take the rest of the afternoon off. I don’t want anyone to see you in this state and infer that I’m the cause of your present condition.” His eyes were hard. “You have to think about more than just yourself.”

“I’m sorry, Dr. Cooper,” Penny said softly.

Sheldon walked out the door.

XxX

As soon as she got home Penny jumped into the shower and gave herself a proper scrubbing. She felt absolutely dirty and was ready to kill Leonard for—

'No. It’s my fault.'
She sighed as the apple scented conditioner rinsed through her hair. What the hell was she thinking making out with Leonard at work? Penny snorted. He sure didn’t think about his job when they’d had sex in the lab. He sure wasn’t thinking at lunch when he gave her the slight hickey. Immediately she thought back to her first day at work when Leonard got off early and showed her around the building. He’d made it obvious to anyone they met that they were a couple by the way he kept repeating ‘this is my girlfriend, Penny’ with that goofy grin he used when he was extremely pleased with himself.

Penny turned off the water and stepped out of the tub. She grabbed a towel and proceeded to dry her hair, catching her image in the mirror. The red splotch on her neck was small but distinct on her light skin.

“Time to put up or shut up, Penelope.”

She waited until there were witnesses at 4A before going over.

“Hi Penny,” squeaked Bernadette. “Nice scarf.”

“Thanks,” the Nebraskan replied, her eyes drifting off to Sheldon as he sat in his spot reading a takeout menu.

“So,” the petite woman continued with a smile. “How’s working with Sheldon?” She stepped forward and stage whispered: “I bet he’s a little demanding.”

“Exacting,” amended Sheldon without looking up.

“It’s been okay,” Penny said before flashing a hesitant smile. “I’m learning a lot.”

“Like what motor oil Sheldon drinks before lunch in order to feed the inorganic parts of his body,” quipped Howard, garnering a glare from the physicist.

“You know I abhor the idea of cyborg technology,” Sheldon reminded the engineer. “The last thing I need is to be taken over by the Machine Overlords.”

“Like we’d notice,” grinned Leonard as he sat down in his chair.

Sheldon pursed his lips. “Of course, were I to be a cyborg I’d definitely have a laser put in my right eye for moments such as this.”

“Then you’d be like Superman,” said Penny before doubt washed over her face. “He is the one with the laser vision right?”

“Heat vision emanating from the absorption of solar energy,” corrected Sheldon as Amy came down the hall.

“Don’t encourage him, bestie,” she admonished lightly. “It’s hard enough getting him out of his lame-o superhero t-shirts on date nights and that’s with me rolling my eyes and sighing heavily.”

Raj leaned over and whispered in Howard’s ear, causing the engineer to nod in agreement.

“Comics are entertaining and informative,” he translated. Bernadette snorted.

“Yeah, really ‘informative’ like showing how someone with triple ‘G’ breasts can run full tilt without throwing out her back.” She patted her chest. “I needed a chiropractor to get through gym class at high school.”
“My shirts aren’t ‘lame-o’,” Sheldon said with a twang. “It’s not like I’m wearing Ben Affleck’s Daredevil or Ryan Reynolds’ Green Lantern. Then I’d need my head examined.”

“Trust me, Sheldon, there are plenty of reasons why you should get your head examined,” chuckled Howard, causing Leonard and Raj to snicker.

“Yes, well, you’re short,” the lanky physicist snapped before folding his arms in a huff.

“So, pizza,” Penny said with a clap of the hands. “We gonna get some or what?” Leonard checked his watch.

“We called it in fifteen minutes ago. It should be ready soon.” He got out of his chair. “Wanna ride shotgun?”

“Sure,” Penny said after a pause.

“Remember—” began Sheldon.

“Sausage, mushrooms, light olives,” muttered Leonard as he opened the door.

“Penny, please ensure Leonard isn’t so distracted that he forgets to check the order,” Sheldon said evenly, his blue eyes locking on hers. In response she nodded and he turned back to the television.

“What was that all about?” asked Leonard as Penny and he left the apartment and made their way to her door.

“You know Sheldon: paranoid as always,” Penny said hurriedly as she entered and grabbed a sweater off the couch. “Damn, let me go to the bathroom.”

She crossed through her bedroom into the little room and relieved herself. As she washed her hands she again looked in the mirror. Maybe Leonard could stay over tomorrow.

She had a lot of thinking to do tonight.

Penny adjusted the scarf around her neck before turning off the light as she exited.
Chapter Three

Sheldon returned to his office to find Penny sitting at her desk reading ‘Hamlet’.

“Broadening your horizons?” he asked as he took out an antibacterial wipe and cleaned his hands. Penny sighed.

“I need this for the English course I’m taking.” She set down the book face open causing Sheldon to inwardly wince at the strain on the spine. “You know, given my background in acting you’d think I wouldn’t find Shakespearian English so difficult.”

“‘You haven’t heard Shakespeare until you’ve heard it in the original Klingon’,” the physicist said with a twitchy smile. “Chancellor Gorkon from Star Trek VI.” Penny raised an eyebrow. “TaH pagh taHbe’. DaH mu'tlheghvam vIqelnIS. ‘To be or not to be: that is the question’.”

“You’re pulling my leg,” the Nebraskan laughed. Sheldon cleared his throat and began reciting as he sat down and tidied his already tidy desk for the afternoon.

“Quv’a', yabDaq San vaQ cha, pu' je SIQDI'? / Pagh, Seng bIQ'a'Hey SuvmeH nuHmey SuqDI'—”

“Okay, okay, I believe you,” Penny chuckled.

“Never doubt me, Penelope,” he said evenly although there was a twinkle to his eyes.

Penny picked up her book and stuck in a bookmark before plunking it onto her purse by her feet. “I never thought Star Trek would be so thespian since it’s all about Tribbles and Vulcans.”

“Are you mad?” Sheldon said incredulously. “Star Trek is ripe with Shakespearean allusions from episode titles to plot to actual quotation. For instance the episode titles ‘Dagger of the Mind’ and ‘All Our Yesterdays’ refer to Macbeth. The plot of ‘Catspaw’ has the intrepid crew of the U.S.S. Enterprise beam down to the surface of the planet Pyris VII. Once on the ground, they investigate and are confronted by three witches who chant: "Winds shall rise / and fog descend / So leave here all / or meet your end.””

“Huh.” Penny started typing out a practice letter. “Maybe I should pay more attention when Leonard watches his television shows.”

“It couldn’t hurt,” agreed the lanky man. “At the very least it’d give you a topic of conversation that isn’t related to shoes, unicorns or menstrual difficulties.”

“So it’s okay to believe in Spock but not unicorns?”

“Granted, Spock is a fictional character but he, through his Vulcan philosophy, has had an influence on mainstream culture,” sniffed Sheldon.

“Yeah, yeah, ‘Live Long and Prosper’ and other hippy dippy stuff.”

“Hippy dippy stuff? How can you even— I can’t even believe that you’d—”

“Sheldon, it’s one o’clock. Is Star Trek work-appropriate conversation?” Penny said innocently. A massive twitch passed over Sheldon’s face.

“You’re right,” he said in a higher pitched voice and with a strained smile. He returned his focus to his computer but Penny could see he could barely contain himself.
After a half hour Penny quietly began humming the original Star Trek theme song as she leaned back and saved her work.

“Baiting your boss is a strike,” Sheldon muttered while looking over a journal article.

Penny grinned as she opened the filing program. But so worth it.

XxX

“So what do you want to do tonight?” asked Leonard as Penny and he snuggled on the couch. “You know, once-Sheldon-leaves-the-room,” he said with emphasis as he glared at his roommate busily typing away at his desk.


“I don’t know where my girlfriend is but I’m keeping you.” Penny stuck out her tongue and he gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“That’s a great idea,” Sheldon said cheerily as he logged off and went to his spot on the couch. “We can watch ‘Catspaw’.”

“Sounds great,” Penny smiled as she settled against Leonard.

“Yeah, great,” huffed the curly-haired man with a frown. Realizing his roommate wasn’t about to move Leonard got up to ready the DVD player.

“You’re in for a treat,” Sheldon continued. “There’s a particularly amusing little nuance that Shatner throws into his performance during Kirk and Spock’s second incarceration in the dungeon as he looks over at the skeleton hanging beside him and cocks his head sideways to mimic its position.” In response Penny cocked her head, rolled her eyes and stuck out her tongue.

“Also the dead officer makes quite a beautiful fall off the transporter pad,” added Leonard as he settled back on the couch.

“I just want to see the witches,” said Penny.

“And afterwards we can see ‘The Undiscovered Country’,” offered Sheldon. “There’s ‘Shakespeare aplenty’ there.”

“Oh yay,” grumbled Leonard.

XxX

“Boy they sure milked a lot out of ol’ Will,” said Penny with a stretch of the arms. She looked next to her to see a sleeping Leonard and gave him a gentle nudge. “Hey sweetie,” she said softly. “Time for bed.”

“You on top,” he mumbled. Penny blushed and Sheldon said nothing as he got up and ventured to the kitchen.

“I said ‘sleep’.” Leonard opened his eyes and blinked a couple of times to clear his vision.

“Coming?” he said to his girlfriend.

“I have to get ready yet. I’ll see you in a bit.” Leonard nodded and trudged to his room.
“Please don’t engage in coitus tonight,” Sheldon sighed. “It’s late enough and I need my rest.”

“Don’t worry,” Penny replied as she rose from the couch and wandered over to the dvd shelves. “I’ll just give Leonard a few minutes to settle in then I’m off to my apartment.” She recognized Stargate and the different Star Trek shows as she had walked in on her neighbors watching them over the years. “Hey, how come you guys never watch Babylon 5?”

Sheldon’s eye twitched. “Because it’s drivel.”

“Looks like you have the entire collection.” She pulled out Season One and read the back cover.

“It’s Leonard’s,” Sheldon said firmly.

“What’s it about?”

“Set between the years 2258 and 2262, it depicts a future where Earth has sovereign states, and a unifying Earthgov. Colonies within the solar system and beyond make up the Earth Alliance and contact has been made with other space-faring races. The ensemble cast portray alien ambassadorial staff and humans assigned to the five-mile-long Babylon 5 space station, a center for trade and diplomacy.”

“Wait, I remember a Star Trek show taking place on a space station.”

“Deep Space Nine.”

“Ah, so Star Trek copied Babylon 5,” nodded Penny.

“I beg your pardon,” Sheldon said with a twang. “Deep Space Nine, although flawed, stands apart from Babylon 5 due to Gene Roddenberry’s vision.”

“The hippy-dippy stuff?” Penny said with a grin. Sheldon tsked as he shook his head.

“This is what you get for learning your science fiction from Leonard. Roddenberry was an unabashed Humanist who typified an idealized altruism-leaning version of Marxist-Leninist Socialism that was embraced in Star Trek’s time, even though this ideology is prone to bureaucratic corruption and very much open to abuse at present.”

“That’s what you get from pointy-eared Spock and I-can’t-keep-my-shirt-on Kirk traipsing around the galaxy?” Penny said, impressed.

“It was a five-year *mission*; they weren’t galavanting around the galaxy willy-nilly.”

Penny came over and sat on the couch. “So it was to ‘seek out new worlds and civilizations’. Sounds more complicated than Babylon 5 where everyone’s already there.”

“Indeed.” Sheldon took two bottled waters from the refrigerator and settled in his spot on the couch. “Not to mention that they utilized a laissez-faire mercantile Calvinism / 20th Century American Capitalism so it merely showed what is as opposed to what could be.”

“And you prefer Star Trek.”

“Obviously.”

“Why Sheldon, you’re a romantic,” she smiled as she took the proffered water.

“Hardly,” scoffed the physicist.
“No, no, this makes sense now. The comic book stuff, the superhero t-shirts, ‘Truth, Justice and the American Way’. You act all ‘according to protocol’ but at the heart of it all you’re a dreamer like me.”

“I’m not like you,” Sheldon said with a scowl. “I have an IQ of one hundred and eighty seven, an eidetic memory, two PHDs, a successful career at a prestigious university and clean my apartment weekly.”

“And stare at the stars with your telescope exploring your ‘strange new worlds’ while I used to lie in the bed of my dad’s pickup truck and get lost in the sky.”

“Humph.”

Penny chuckled. “Don’t tell me you don’t get lost in the clouds.”

“A cloud is merely a visible mass of liquid droplets or frozen crystals made of water or other chemicals suspended in the atmosphere above the surface of a planetary body,” recited Sheldon from memory. “I no more waste my time finding arbitrary shapes in the sky than I do following the stars in determining my fortune.”

“You’re right. I look for bears and unicorns in the clouds. You fly in them, Superman,” Penny said with a wink before taking a swig of water.

“Maybe,” Sheldon murmured and similarly took a drink although his neighbor did detect a dash of color on his cheeks.

Penny settled back in the couch. “So tell me more about the Star Trek vision.”

“Alright,” Sheldon said with a little smile. “Its premise is ‘To boldly go where no man has gone before’ and….”

xTBBTx

Sheldon was bleary-eyed as he unlocked the door to his office.

“I’ve created a monster,” he muttered to himself.

Since he’d introduced the idea of Shakespeare and Star Trek to Penny she’d been at the apartment nearly every night for the past two weeks watching dvds. That wouldn’t be a problem in itself but Leonard became aroused at the sight of Penny involving herself with Star Trek and their frequency of coitus had disturbed Sheldon’s circadian rhythm. Again, the lanky man wouldn’t object if they moved to Penny’s apartment; instead the cuddling commenced on the couch and almost always dragged itself to Leonard’s room. If it were possible to assign strikes to Penny he would but as it was Leonard that was in violation of the Roommate Agreement for not announcing twelve hours in advance that Penny would be over for coitus—and even then it was for the first night only as from then on the curly haired man provided a write up every morning with a consistency that even Sheldon grudgingly approved—Sheldon couldn’t legitimately punish her for his roommate’s transgression.

The sounds of clicking heels echoed in the hall before Penny appeared looking polished in her grey skirt suit with green blouse although she did seem to be less peppy than normal.

“Hey,” she croaked as she set down her green tea on her desk and turned on the computer. This ‘no coffee in the office’ thing was going to kill her.
“Before we start I want you to send over Monday’s work so I can see if your entries are satisfactory,” he said with an equally froggy throat.

“Gotcha.”

“And quit being so ‘folksy’. This is a university in California not a hoedown in Nebraska.”

“Boy, someone’s a grouch,” tske Penny as she sat and logged in to her university account. As she wasn’t an official member of the university she wondered if she was supposed to have internet access. Of course this wouldn’t be the first time she’d piggybacked on another person’s wifi so she didn’t let it bother her.

Sheldon checked his watch: eight fifty eight. Too early to warrant a strike.

“While I like my fair dose of Star Trek trivia even I acknowledge there’s a time and place for such and one forty-five in the morning is not one of them.”

“Sorry about that sweetie,” said Penny with a little smile. “Guess I got a little into it with all the Shakespeare stuff. Okay, file sent.”

Sheldon opened his Outlook and checked his emails. “And for the record Leonard’s head is too big to be a Tribble.”

“Excuse me?” blushed Penny.

“You kept saying ‘come here my little Tribble.’ Tribbles range in size from golf ball to softball in diameter. Leonard might have curly hair but that hardly warrants such a designation.”

“Tribble-s’,” Penny said with a smirk. “I was talking to his other fuzzy, round buddies.” Sheldon thought about this for a moment before his eyes widened and jaw dropped.

“Oh.” A look of disgust. “Good Lord.”

“You asked,” she replied with a shrug.

“I didn’t ask. I merely relayed an observation,” replied Sheldon.

“And I merely amended your erroneous conclusion,” Penny grinned.

“Spell ‘erroneous’,” Sheldon said evenly.

Before Penny could reply the alarm on her phone went off signaling nine am.

“I’ll tell you at lunch.”

“After you’ve consulted a dictionary.”

“Of course not,” she said in mock indignation. “Why go through the hassle of loading up a dictionary when I have spell-check?”

“Indeed,” Sheldon snorted as he looked over her document. “Penelope, come here. You’ve made an error in your date notation.”

“What is it?” she replied as she leaned over his shoulder to peer at the screen.

“The program automatically sorts by time and date sent but I’d like you to record when you looked
“But I do. See?” she pointed at the column.

“That’s when you receive it. You forgot to expand the next column which you’ll use to record when you’ve read it. Make your corrections and resubmit the document.” He erased the file and the screen went back to Outlook.

“How am I supposed to remember when I read the files?”

“Hence the reason why you record the time immediately after doing so,” he admonished lightly. “Fortunately for you this was another test as I’ve already looked over the documents and filed them correctly. I’ll send you the relevant details however you do get a strike.”

“Another strike,” Penny sighed as she walked back to her desk. “Well, since I’ve got a strike all I’ve got to say is that you’re anal retentive wanting everything triple-checked.”

“Thorough,” Sheldon amended. “And no, that’s not why you got a strike.” Penny looked at him in surprise. “Your breath smells like coffee. It’s distracting and unappealing. If you must imbibe remember to freshen your breath before approaching another person.”

In response Penny held up a hand to her mouth and inhaled a couple of her breaths.

“Gotcha,” she said with a wrinkled nose. Sheldon pursed his lips. “Got you.”

“I’ll send you a list of approved breath lozenges. Not all of them are effective at combating foul odors and the last thing I want is to smell a mix of bad breath and peppermint.”

“Is there a topic you don’t have a list for?” Penny laughed.

“Not to my knowledge,” he replied. Sheldon raised an eyebrow in her direction. “Less talk, more work.”

“Yes boss,” Penny chuckled as she retrieved her mail.

xTBBTx

Sheldon sat down on the couch and adjusted the screen of his laptop so he could easily see it without kinking his neck. He checked his watch. Three. Two. One. A short British telephone ring came from his laptop and he clicked on his Skype.

“Hello Amy. How are you this evening?”

“Hello Sheldon. In terms of overall physical health, grand, although I do admit to a little emotional turmoil.”

“I see. Well, as under the Relationship Agreement it’s my place to inquire as to what ails you I now formally ask: ‘what’s wrong?’”

“As we gathered last night to have dinner and watch the movie I couldn’t help but observe several changes to Penny.”

“Oh?”

“For one thing she didn’t chew with her mouth open nor speak when it was full. Moreover I noticed that you twice cleared your throat and she sat straighter on the first occurrence and stopped talking
“About her shift at the restaurant at the second.”

“These sound like positive changes. I don’t see how they could be deemed ‘troubling’.”

“What’s going on, Sheldon?”

“What makes you think anything’s going on?”

“Fine. Don’t tell me. I’ll just assume Penny’s decided to become more conscientious about her demeanor solely of her own accord.”

“…Alright, since you’ve asked. You’re aware that Penny’s working for me twice a week at the university?”

“Of course. Mum’s the word to Leonard but she’s prepping for a clerical assistant course.”

“Correct. While she is improving in terms of organization and basic office maintenance I couldn’t help but notice that she had other traits that would detract from her being an asset to any office. I therefore thought it prudent to condition out these inappropriate behaviors.”

“How are you doing that?”

“A combination of positive and negative reinforcement. I assign a ‘strike’ for each transgression and award a paid lunch if she manages to go through a work day without procuring a strike. Needless to say I’ve yet to dole out a nickel.”

“Ignificent.”

“Thank you. These early results weren’t entirely unexpected. My first experiment altering Penny’s behavior via a chocolate reward system proved most effective until she began to complain of weight gain.”

“You’ve managed to improve upon perfection.”

“Penny is hardly ‘perfection’. She pumices her feet on my couch and I can sometimes catch her whistling in her apartment.”

“Eye of the beholder, Sheldon. And believe me my eye holds her often.”

…I do have one concern, though. Where will we fit into her life once she attains a better economic and social position? Part of what has Penny associating with our group has been her self-esteem issues. Not that I’m saying we’re the bottom of the heap in terms of the social pecking order but from hearing stories of Penny’s first few years here in California we truly are a downgrade in fun.”

“‘Fun’ as in prolific use of alcohol and countless liaisons with strange men? Hoo ha. More of a recipe for cirrhosis of the liver and herpes.”

“You’re seeing the glass as half-empty, Sheldon.”

“Amy, you haven’t had the experience of a drunken Penny barging into your apartment, invading your personal space with a combination of salt water and mucous demanding to know why ‘fill in the blank’ cheated on her and is a complete, well, anal entrance. I’ve had to endure the wailing more times than I care to remember and as we know I don’t forget.”
“It’s rather sad to think that her relationship with Leonard should be considered a moment of stability.”

“Good Lord. Don’t get me wrong, Leonard is my best friend but if I had my way with Penny she would terminate the relationship. As I’ve said numerous times before: their relationship isn’t healthy and will only end in heartbreak.”

“Sometimes you have to let the drama unfold on its own, Sheldon.”

“I suppose. It’s still an imposition on me, however.”

“Perhaps I can simultaneously make amends for your hardship as well as celebrate your success.”

“You want to take me to the Los Angeles Live Steamers Railroad Museum?”

“I was thinking more along the lines of dinner at my place followed by an evening of snuggling on the couch.”

“Bazinga.”

“We can watch that Star Trek box set you gave me.”

“Actually I find myself all Star Trekked out at the moment. Penny has had a veritable film festival over the past few weeks.”

“I see. Well I’m sure we can find something else to do.”

“Indeed. Text me tomorrow when you have an itinerary of the night’s events.”

“You don’t know how sexy that sounds.”

“I’m not sure how to respond to that.”

“Never mind. Goodnight Sheldon.”

“Goodnight Amy.”

xTBBTx

“Hey dumbass, just letting you know that Gablehauser approved my extension for using the electron laser,” Leslie Winkle said with a smug look as she met Sheldon and Penny in the hallway.

“Unacceptable,” the theoretical physicist sputtered. “I told him I needed the laser. My experiment should take precedent because it’s obviously more important.”

“I’m sure your collaboration with Dr. Seuss will stun the world.”

Sheldon pursed his lips. “Dr. Seuss is dead.”

“So is your line of research,” smirked Leslie.

“Yes, well, you’re obviously misinformed,” the lanky man spat back. “Come Penelope.”

“How cute, dumbass hired a waitress to clean up after him. Better tell her to be careful with the crumbs she sweeps up because they could be your ideas.”

“Ignore her,” Sheldon muttered to Penny under his breath as he unlocked his office door. To her
credit she held her tongue although she did give the optical physicist her best glare before entering the office. Sheldon followed her in and closed the door.

“You put up with that all the time?” Penny asked.

“Not all the time,” Sheldon replied as he went to his desk and immediately fired off an email to Gablehauser expressing his displeasure with Winkle. “And it’s not any of your concern.” At this the Nebraskan frowned.

“Just because you’re my employer doesn’t mean I can’t care,” Sheldon continued typing. “Besides I remember Leonard saying that her view of the universe was whacked and that’s why their relationship ended.”

“Quantum Loop Theory is complete balderdash,” agreed Sheldon as he clicked ‘send’ on his email and sat back in his chair. “I have no idea why she continues to be employed here.”

“As they say in Nebraska, even the prettiest butt needs an…anus.” Penny logged in to her computer and began sorting out the day’s emails.

“Indeed.” Sheldon immediately popped up from his seat and went to the door. “I think I’ll have a word with Gablehauser in person.” He paused. “And two strikes to you for inserting yourself in an awkward situation between two superiors and insulting a superior—even if it is Leslie Winkle.” He closed the door after him.

“Oh balls,” Penny sighed. She was this close to ending the day strike free.

“And another strike for language,” he said through the door.

Sheldon shook his head as he proceeded down the hall. For every step forward Penny took towards becoming an adequate assistant she had moments like this that tarnished an otherwise acceptable day.

“‘Even the prettiest butt needs an anus.’” In spite of himself Sheldon laughed.

’Penny, Penny, Penny, what am I going to do with you?’

xTBBTx

Sheldon stepped into the office to find Penny at her computer. As she had just completed her two month probationary period he’d decided to reward her with an extra fifteen minutes to her lunch with the understanding that this was a privilege not a right. Normally when he returned from lunch Penny was away refreshing herself so it was a bit of a surprise to see her working.

“Sheldon, what’s the difference between a helium-neon laser and a free-electron laser?”

“A helium-neon laser or HeNe laser, is a type of gas laser whose gain medium consists of a mixture of helium and neon inside of a small bore capillary tube, usually excited by a DC electrical discharge. A free-electron laser, unlike gas, liquid or solid-state lasers such as diode lasers in which electrons are excited in bound atomic or molecular states, uses a relativistic electron beam as the lasing medium which moves freely through a magnetic structure, hence the term ‘free electron’.”

“Huh.” Penny rubbed the side of her cheek with her tongue.

“What are you reading?” Sheldon peered over her shoulder to see the Caltech biographical write-up of Leonard. “Ah, light fiction.”
“How is this fiction?” Penny said with a frown as she looked up at her lanky neighbor.

“The information is correct. It’s just the whole premise that Leonard’s work is important enough for such a write-up that’s in question.” Sheldon clasped his hands behind his back and went to look at his whiteboard.

“And I take it a ‘photomultiplier’ isn’t a fancy shmancy name for a photocopier?”

Sheldon gave a gaspy laugh. “Clever. No, it’s in the class of a vacuum tube, more specifically vacuum phototubes, and is an extremely sensitive detector of light in the ultraviolet, visible, and near-infrared ranges of the electromagnetic spectrum.”

“Of course,” muttered Penny. “What was I thinking?” She stared at the computer screen and sighed. ‘Bose-Einstein condensates. Dark matter. Super solids. What the frak’s solider than a solid?’ “Sheldon, what’s a—”

“You know your time would be much better spent reading over your tasks for the afternoon.”

“I know. Just one more question and I’m done.”

“Very well.”

“What’s ‘quantum mechanics’?”

Sheldon turned to look at her incredulously. “You’re kidding.”

The Nebraskan shrugged. “I figure it has nothing to do with star maintenance because that’d be too easy.”

“Star maintenance’. Good Lord. Penny, I doubt I have enough hours in a day to explain quantum theory to you.”

“Too complicated for you, huh?” Penny closed her web browser, oblivious to the twitch in Sheldon’s right eye.

“Nothing’s ‘too complicated’ for me. I meant that the subject is too vast to be covered in”—he checked his watch—“six minutes.”

“It’s no biggie. I’ll look it up on Wikipedia.”

“Oh yes, that’ll provide you with concise information,” he replied with a roll of the eyes. “The most tangible way of expressing the essence of quantum mechanics is to say that we live in a universe of quantized angular momentum and the Planck constant is the quantum.”

“‘Plank’ like a board?”

“No, as in Max Karl Ernst Ludwig Planck, the father of quantum mechanics.”

“Damn. That was the only word I thought I understood besides ‘universe’. Could you dumb it down a little so the little people can get what you’re saying, Doc?”

Sheldon pursed his lips. “Calling me ‘Doc’ is a strike. Never give your boss a ‘pet name’.”


“Quantum mechanics is a branch of physics dealing with physical phenomena at microscopic
scales where the action is on the order of the Planck constant—which is a very tiny amount typically on the distance and momentum scale of atoms. An atom is—”

“I remember that part,” Penny said, thinking back to her previous lesson with Sheldon. “So Leonard does quantum mechanics.”

“*Employs* quantum mechanics to demonstrate previously structured posits.” He noted Penny’s blank expression. “Leonard tries to recreate other people’s experiments to make sure the results are accurate. Occasionally he attempts original work but as he’s done nothing worth mentioning I won’t explain further.”

Penny giggled. “So he’s like ‘Inspector Twelve’ in the Haines underwear ad?” Now it was Sheldon’s turn to look puzzled. “You know, she inspects the quality of the work to make sure the undies are up to snuff.” The physicist thought this over before emitting another gaspy laugh.

“Indeed.” He checked his watch. “I need to talk to Dr. Koothrappali about our strategy session on Friday.”

“Ah yes, the paintball meeting,” Penny teased with a smirk. She swore Sheldon looked sheepish for a moment. “I’ve got the fort, boss.” She logged into the filing program. “Thanks for clearing things up: Leonard does quantum mechanics and you do particle physics.” She smiled, pleased with herself.

Sheldon’s hand froze on the door handle.

“You don’t ‘do’ quantum mechanics, you use it,” he amended. “I use quantum theory as well.”

“I thought you were a particle physicist?” At this Sheldon straightened as he turned to his assistant.

“Particle physics is the study of all elementary particles and their interactions. The building blocks of the universe, as it were. Quantum theory is just the generalized set of rules that at the macroscopic level the universe can be approximated successfully at. It’s like writing a book; you need to know the letters of the alphabet and grammar. Quantum mechanics is the grammar structure of the macroscopic world.”

Penny brightened. “I actually got that!” A twitchy smile crossed Sheldon’s face as he opened the door. “Leonard and you use quantum mechanics to basically do the same thing.”

Sheldon closed the door.

“We do *not* ‘do the same thing’,,” he said indignantly. “As I said before, Leonard is an experimental physicist: he tests and replicates experiments to verify data. I am a theoretical physicist: I come up with the posits people like Leonard test.”

“Ah. So he’s Kirk and you’re Picard.” Sheldon cocked his head, listening. “You know, he’s all action and Prime Directive be damned while you stare out your Ready Room window looking at the stars thinking through the implications to the Prime Directive before coming up with a plan.”

“I never thought about it like that before,” admitted Sheldon.

“Kirk’s fun to watch but I learn more from Picard. Kirk’s a captain. Picard’s a leader.”

Sheldon nodded. “Picard over Kirk—”

“—But original series over Next Generation,” completed Penny as she got up to go to the printer.
It took Sheldon several seconds before he realized he was staring at the Nebraskan before he exited the room.

Penny sipped her iced coffee as she mounted the stairs at 2311 Los Robles Ave. She’d just come off the morning shift at the Cheesecake Factory and wanted to shower and change before she went for some groceries. Upon opening the door to her apartment she immediately saw what looked to be all of her shoes laid out in front of her couch.

“What the frak?” she muttered before hearing a sound in her bedroom. Picking up the bat she kept beside the door she crept to the bedroom. “Sheldon!” she gasped. “What the hell are you doing?” The physicist set down a silky red sleeveless top on one of three piles of clothing on her bed.

“Hello Penny,” he said evenly as he picked up his clip board and made a note. “You’re here just in time.”

“For what? Kicking you’re a—” She saw her closet was empty. “Seriously?” she huffed. “I’ve got the evening shift, Sheldon, and I have to get to the grocery store. I don’t have time for crazy.”

“This is important,” he said. “I’ve gone through your clothing and have calculated that your ratio of adequate work apparel to casual clothing is grossly disproportionate.”

“I look okay at work,” she said defensively.

“I’ve done some research on women’s office fashion and have concluded that your style is out of date. Moreover, over the weeks I’ve seen just about every combination imaginable with your gray skirt suit and black skirt. As much as I shudder to say these words: you need more clothes.”

“Kinda short on funds at the moment,” she replied as she leaned the bat against the wall. “Otherwise I’d be right there with ya with the shopping.”

“We’ll discuss that later. Right now we have a more pressing issue,” indicating the mounds of clothes on the bed. “Your closet can’t contain all of this without wrinkling the articles—something which I chose not to mention on two occasions at the office although I did assign strikes. Besides,” he said brightly. “This will give you the opportunity to dispose of apparel that isn’t age-appropriate.” Penny folded her arms across her chest.

“I *have* gone through my clothes,” she grumbled. In response Sheldon dug through a pile and pulled out a pair of sweats.

“And wearing pants with the word ‘juicy’ splashed across your derriere is appropriate for a twenty-six year old? Or anyone else for that matter?”

Both waitress and physicist glared at each other.

“You make it sound like I’m forty.”

“You make it sound like ‘youthful style’ requires revealing cleavage and skin tight apparel,” Sheldon replied matter-of-factly. “If you want to be respected for something other than your body you need to be more like an Audrey Hepburn instead of a Lady Gaga.”

“I’m surprised you know who Lady Gaga is,” Penny said with a little smile.

“I am a physicist. Working knowledge of the universe.” A pause. “I also glance at magazine covers
Penny looked at her clothes. “You better not be saying I should get rid of everything or you and I’ve got problems, bub.”

“No. I’ve pulled out pieces that are work appropriate according to Harper’s Bazaar. The second pile has juvenile clothing that should be disposed. It’s the large pile that needs your attention as it’s a combination of ‘club clothes’ and ‘everyday wear’.”

“What’s with these?” Penny asked as she saw her long sleeve red patterned shirt and baby blue t-shirt off to the side.

“Casual wear I thought were appropriate,” Sheldon said carefully. His eyes briefly flashed her face before lowering to stare at his clip board.

Penny blinked, unsure if she was understanding what she thought she was—Sheldon Cooper actually noticed her in some of her clothes. And had favorites!

“Leonard and I have to do some shopping at the supermarket,” the lanky man said. “Text me what you need and I’ll pick it up.” He gave her a twitchy smile. “Although I don’t ascribe to it I wish you ‘good luck’.”

“Thanks,” replied Penny. Sheldon stopped at the door.

“Keep in mind that one third of your closet space will be for work apparel. There is no compromise on this issue.”

“Yes boss,” she called after him as he left the apartment. Penny looked at the mountain of clothes and her closet. There was no way even half would make it back in there without being smushed. Still, if she got rid of enough clothes she’d have to go shopping. She stripped out of her uniform and reached for a top.

xTBBTx

“I don’t get why we’re here since you haven’t let me buy anything,” scowled Penny as Sheldon and she walked through the Glendale Galleria.

“We’re not here to browse; we’re going to a specific store to pick out specific items,” he tutted without looking up from his phone.

Penny rolled her eyes. “It’s amazing how you can suck the joy out of clothes shopping.”

“And it’s a wonder you can find racking up your credit debt buying shoes in any way therapeutic when oftentimes the source of your troubles is a lack of sufficient funds,” he countered. He put away his phone and at a glance caught Penny’s tongue as it retracted into her mouth. Without another word Sheldon veered to the right and walked into a clothing store. Immediately Penny’s mouth dropped.

“Sheldon!” she stage whispered but the physicist had ventured too far into the store to hear her. The waitress straightened her shoulders and followed after him. She smiled stiffly at the clerk, who mirrored the action as she took in Penny in her long sleeve red top and black Capri pants. Penny caught up to Sheldon and put a hand on his shoulder. “Sheldon I can’t afford this place,” she said quietly.

“I consulted several fashion sites online and concluded that Nordstrom had an adequate clothing
line to peruse.” He caught the attention of a clerk—and really, with his khaki pants, red robot evolution t-shirt and blue thermal undershirt he already had it—and she ventured over. “I’d like to see your work apparel in the Classiques Entier collection.”

“Right this way,” the clerk replied and took the neighbors to a section of the store. “Is there something specific you’re interested in?”

“We need a dark pantsuit, skirt suit and a ‘soft’ suit,” he said evenly. He turned to Penny. “I’ve provided you the list. The styling is your own prerogative although I have final say.”

“‘Final say’?”

“Since I’m loaning you the money for this venture I’d like it to go to something practical,” he sniffed.

“I didn’t ask you for a loan, sweetie,” Penny replied with a strained smile, aware of the clerk’s presence.

“It’s an investment,” he amended. “You need to upgrade your apparel and having a few ‘classic’ pieces with a modern touch will radiate professionalism.”

The clerk nodded in approval. “Let me pull a few items for you. We got in a new line of tweed jackets.”

“Tweed is acceptable.” Sheldon went back to his phone as the clerk hurried off.

“I already owe you for school,” Penny said softly.

“You’ll pay me back when you can,” he mumbled, distracted by the online Comics Direct magazine. “Now chop, chop—and no deviating from the list. Remember, men have to be comfortable with you, not looking at you as a woman but as an executive assistant.”

“I thought I was a clerical assistant?”

His blue eyes caught her green.

“Not when I’m through with you,” he said matter-of-factly.

Penny felt a blush on her cheeks and so turned away only to see the clerk put a gorgeous gray tweed cardigan jacket in a fitting room. The Nebraskan quickly went to join it.

XxX

Penny’s eyes lovingly gazed at her new clothes hanging neatly in her closet. As soon as she got home she tossed a few more items out of the closet to make sure she had ample room for her beautiful, beautiful, clothes. Never in a zillion years did she think she’d be wearing a suit much less three but damn she was awesome in them! Though she didn’t pick up any tops she tried on a few in order to see what worked with the suits. There was a warehouse store open the last Saturday of the month that offered discount designer clothes at eighty to ninety percent off. As long as she stuck to more classic garments she should be all right with the selection.

“‘Classic garments,’ she snorted. “God, now I sound like Sheldon.” She oogled her organized closet.

Maybe being a little anal retentive wasn’t so bad after all.
Wikipedia: Cloud; Babylon 5; Free-Electron Laser; Helium-Neon Laser; Photomultiplier; Quantum Mechanics; Introduction to Quantum Theory; Particle Physics

Bones Blog: Star Trek versus Babylon 5

Catspaw: Nitpicker’s Guide to Classic Trekkers

Shakespeare and Star Trek: wsu edu

Yahoo Answers: Quantum Theory vs Particle Physics
“So, what ya think?” asked Leonard cheerily as he turned off the television. Since Penny was now watching Star Trek he thought he’d expand her science fiction base by treating her to Babylon 5. Sheldon was over at Amy’s so this gave him the perfect time to air one of his favorite shows uninterrupted.

“Okay, I guess,” Penny replied diplomatically as she munched on popcorn.

“‘Okay’?” her boyfriend said in a hurt tone. “I thought you were all into science fiction now?”

“Must just be a Star Trek thing,” she said with a shrug. “Popcorn?”

“No thanks.” Leonard sat still and except for the sounds of munching popcorn the apartment was silent.

“So, anyways,” Penny began. “Maybe tomorrow we could—”

“What’s wrong with Babylon 5?” Leonard blurted. Penny blinked, taking in the short man’s annoyance.

“I dunno,” she said at last. “It’s too soap opera-y.”

“I— It’s *what*?” A pause. “What about Sex and the City? You watch that and that’s melodramatic!”

Penny pursed her lips. “It also has shoes, Leonard. And besides, anyone knows that fashion adds a lot to a story.”

“What about all the alien races on the station? The Narn body armor used ostrich feathers and the Minbari robes used only a certain type of blue shading not to mention the French court-like costumes of the Centauri. Original series Trek used blue, red and gold curtains found in the back of the studio to make their uniforms and Next Generation suits look like kiddie jumpers for cryin’ out loud!”

“I don’t know what you want me to say, Leonard,” Penny said curtly as she set the popcorn bowl on the coffee table and got up. “You asked me if I liked the show, I said it was drivel, and now you’re mad.” The physicist’s jaw dropped.

“Since when do you say ‘drivel’?”

“I don’t know,” Penny said with a frown.

“You don’t say ‘drivel’. Sheldon says ‘drivel’. You got this nonsense from Sheldon.”

“What the frak are you talking about? I can’t have an opinion on the show I just watched? It was
boring, okay?”

“Boring!?”

“You heard me!”

“And watching Big Brother wasn’t like putting a cordless drill to my frontal lobe?”

“Oh stuff it!” Penny marched out the door past a surprised Amy and Sheldon, both of whom jumped slightly as the Nebraskan slammed her apartment door.

“Leonard?” inquired Sheldon as he stepped into the living room. “Are you finished arguing for the evening or should we come back?”

With a frown Leonard marched into his room.

“What was that all about?” asked Amy as the pair went to the couch.

“Ah,” Sheldon said knowingly as he picked up the DVD case. “This is precisely why I don’t allow Babylon 5 to be shown in the apartment.”

xTBBTx

“I must say, I really like that gray tweed jacket you wore last week,” gushed Raj before taking a sip of his beer.

“Thanks,” beamed Penny as she came over to sit next to him on the couch. “I thought it’d go with a few things in my wardrobe.”

“Especially the pencil skirt,” agreed the astrophysicist.

“When did you go clothes shopping?” asked Leonard as he set the pizza down on the table. “I thought you were saving up for school?”

Penny blinked. “Of course I am. It’s just something I had in my closet.”

“Really, Leonard, for someone who still has his eighth grade corduroy suit hanging in his closet you should know the surprises that lurk in there,” Sheldon said as he returned to the table with three bottles of water in hand.

“I suppose.” Leonard took a slice of his cheeseless pizza and put it on his plate. “Penny was sure surprised at some of the things in my closet.”

“I think the word you’re looking for is ‘horrified’, sweetie,” the blond replied with a smile.

Raj took a sip of beer as he thought over what had just happened: Penny lied to Leonard and Sheldon covered for her. The astrophysicist knew she was lying because he saw the tweed cardigan jacket in the fall lineup of In Style magazine which he read to keep up with the latest in dermatological treatments. More to the point the jacket was a Nordstrom and he knew there was no way Penny could afford new apparel from there. Besides, the new skirts and especially the black power suit she wore over the past three weeks just screamed ‘I cost a few bucks’. Say what you will, there was a definite difference in quality when you spent one hundred versus four hundred for a suit.

“The trick is to buy timeless pieces that have a modern twist,” Raj said. Sheldon nodded.
“Clothes set the standard for an executive assistant,” he sniffed. He’d greeted Penny one morning with a sealed envelope with his recommendation and an application for the executive assistant program at the college so there was no turning back for the Nebraskan.

“So why does Penny have to dress up when you’re dressed like you?” asked Leonard between bites. Again the lanky man and his neighbor exchanged looks.

“It’s an experiment,” replied Sheldon slowly.

“About what?” asked his roommate. Sheldon’s eye began to twitch and he grabbed his bottled water and smiled apologetically at Leonard before taking a long swig.

“Experiment my butt. It’s a bet,” Penny clarified. “Sheldon doesn’t think I can keep up the professional look and I bet him that I could.”

Raj raised an eyebrow. “What’s the wager?”

“The winner gets to pick the next ten movies we watch together.” Penny grinned at Sheldon. “Hello, Sex and the City 2.”

“Yes, well, fortunately saner minds prevail tonight and we watch the best of the original Star Trek movies,” replied Sheldon before taking a bite of his pizza.

“Star Trek IV is not the best movie,” countered Raj. “Everyone knows it’s Wrath of Khan.”

“Oh I don’t think so,” sniffed Sheldon. “Star Trek II is ripe with errors.”

“And The Voyage Home isn’t?” laughed Leonard. “We have a pair of whales that find out their race is extinct in the—”

“Hel-lo! Haven’t seen it yet,” piped in Penny.

“Saavik swears while undergoing the Kobayashi Maru. What self-respecting Vulcan does that?” the theoretical physicist shot back. “And Khan recognizes Chekov even though the Russian wasn’t a part of the bridge crew when Khan was aboard the Enterprise.”

“Just because Chekov wasn’t a part of the bridge crew doesn’t mean he wasn’t on the ship,” countered Raj. “Maybe he worked on another deck.”

“Oh, now you’re just making things up,” said Sheldon with pursed lips.

“Wrath of Khan employs the work of Moby Dick, has Spock’s haunting dying words to Kirk, the funeral, the death of Khan, just everything,” gushed Leonard. “You can’t tell me the movie is inferior to IV.”

“You know what I didn’t get? Why were they playing checkers?” All three physicists turned to Penny. “I mean Khan was supposed to be the leader of these supermen, right? And what do these brainiacs spend their time doing? They play checkers.” She laughed. “I mean Kirk and Spock play three dimensional chess all the time and Kirk’s no genius. What’s up with that?”

“Yeah,” agreed Sheldon with a smug look. “‘What up with that?’”

“Maybe they got bored of playing chess,” offered Raj.

“Lame, Raj,” Penny teased. She pointed her bottled water at the television. “Boldly Go, gentlemen.”
“Give me one good reason why we should watch IV?” huffed Leonard.

“We can act out our favorite parts later,” his girlfriend replied, wiggling her eyebrows.

A goofy grin came to Leonard’s face. “IV it is!” And with that went to fetch the movie. “Oh, by the way, Professor Sorrenson is coming into town and he invited me out to dinner.”

“Who’s that?” asked Penny.

“Professor Sorrenson is an emeritus professor from MIT,” replied Raj.

“His area’s applied physics so it’s nothing too spectacular,” Sheldon smirked. Leonard shot his roommate an incredulous look.

“Anyways,” the curly haired man continued. “I can bring a guest and since you’re my girlfriend I’m taking you.”

“What am I going to say to an emeritus?” Penny wasn’t sure about this.

“Nothing about shoes or reality tv shows,” tutted Sheldon. The Nebraskan rolled her eyes.

“Not that clueless, Sheldon.” She looked to her boyfriend. “I’ll think about it.”

“It means a lot to me,” Leonard replied with puppy dog eyes. “Please?” Penny sighed. “Fine, I’ll go, but you owe me, mister.”

“And I’m more than willing to make it up to you,” Leonard grinned.

“You’ll make it up to me if we stop with the jabbering and get to the film,” Sheldon said in a mildly annoyed voice. The lanky man looked at Penny with a slight frown only to turn away when he realized that the astrophysicist was staring in his direction.

Raj set his beer down on the table. With all the crazy thoughts about Sheldon and Penny coming into his mind tonight he was cutting himself off at one.

xTBBTx

“This is a nice place,” Amy said with a smile as she perused her menu.

“Although it takes a ridiculous amount of time to get seated,” tsked Sheldon. He studied the menu and made note of the questions he had concerning ingredients, preparation and presentation.

“It might have something to do with your insistence on a table in this section.”

“It was the only sane place to eat, Amy. It’s out of the main walkway and is at the mid point to the washroom. Furthermore, it’s far enough away from the air vent that we don’t get too warm and yet not so far that we’re chilled.”

“Of course,” his girlfriend said diplomatically as the waitress approached.

“Hey, welcome to The Kalam,” she said brightly. “Is there anything I can getcha?”

“You can *bring* us two bottles of Perrier water,” Sheldon said stiffly.

“No problem. You guys ready to order yet?” Sheldon closed his menu.
“As we’ve been sitting for less than three minutes do you really think we’ve had time to peruse the entire menu and make our selections?”

“Okay, I’ll be right back,” the waitress said with a smile before leaving.

“What is it with waitresses and chit-chat?” Sheldon said. “Although Penny usually waits until we order our food before babbling about some inanities.”

“Well she has been a waitress for over six years,” said Amy. “Shall we order some hummus with baked pita chips for an appetizer?”

“As this restaurant claims to be Lebanese there should be more intense garlic to the tahini mixture. Fortunately I anticipated harsher than normal breath after eating and have brought breath mints accordingly.”

Amy perked up. “Because we know what else the use of breath mints signal.” Sheldon nodded.

“Coffee drinking. I’ve given Penny a list of acceptable breath mints to neutralize her coffee breath although I must say that breath ‘mint’ is a bit of a misnomer as some of the flavors are actually cinnamon-based.”

“I see,” said a disappointed Amy as the waitress came back and dispensed the waters.

“All ready for Freddy?” she grinned.

“Why are we waiting for ‘Freddy’?” asked Sheldon. “Is he the chef?”

“We’ll have the hummus with baked pita chips. As for me, I’ll have the curried lentils with rice and okra,” ordered Amy.

“I’ve got a question about the tandoori chicken,” said Sheldon.

“Yes?” said the waitress.

“Tandoori chicken is an Indian, Bangladeshi and Pakistani dish and this is a Lebanese restaurant.”

“Uh huh,” the young woman said, unsure where this was going.

“So is the chicken traditionally spiced according to Indian, Bangladeshi or Pakistani palates or is it a Lebanese variation?”

“I’m not sure. I can ask if you like.”

Sheldon sighed. “Well I’m not asking you about the chicken because I’m passing the time.” The woman bit her lip.

“I’ll be right back,” she said with a weak smile.

“Penny always knows the specials,” he sniffed. “She’s tried every dish at the restaurant. Of course most of them were patron rejects but her palate got a basic understanding of the food at hand.”

“You’ll miss her when she moves on,” the neurobiologist noted before taking a sip of her drink.

Sheldon sighed again. “I don’t know if I can endure training another server. Of course there’s also the trust factor. Penny knows what I like and how I want it prepared.”
The waitress returned. “The chef said the chicken’s a mix of Indian and Lebanese.”

“And how is it ‘Lebanese’?” asked Sheldon with a raised eyebrow.

“I guess they use some Lebanese spices.”

“You ‘guess’?”

“Sheldon,” Amy said with a sigh of her own.

“Never mind. I’ll have the falafel platter with the tabouli and rice separate and the tahini sauce on the side.” He handed back the menu and the waitress hurriedly left the table. Sheldon tsked before taking a sip of water.

“Anyhow,” Amy said in an attempt to clear the air. “Speaking of training we got a new shipment of monkeys at the lab. This time we’re going to show them how to roll their own cigarettes to see how they manage their own addiction.”

“Hopefully the tobacco is less addictive than gum.”

Amy cocked her head. “Oh? What brought this on?”

“I practically had to do a search of Penny’s oral cavity during the first two weeks of work since she ‘forgot’ she was even chewing it. She’d pop one in after lunch, after break and after work. At the very least I hope it’s all sugar-free.”

“I’m sure it is,” Amy said with a slight frown. “Sheldon, are you aware that in the past ten minutes you’ve brought up Penny five times?”

“Have I?” he said in mild surprise.

“Yes.” A pause. “Is it possible that you’re thinking a little too much about Penny?”

A smirk came to Sheldon’s face. “I assure you organizing Penny takes up a miniscule amount of effort on my part.”

Amy shrugged. “I’ve learned from experience with Ricky that a scientist can get attached to her subject.”

The physicist shook his head derisively. “While Penny is my neighbor and Leonard’s girlfriend I’m approaching her training from a scientific point of view; as it is it’s almost impossible for logic to discern her actions and decisions. Nevertheless I enjoy challenges and this experiment has already been a trial.”

“So long as you remember it is an experiment,” Amy said matter-of-factly. “You have to leave Penny with some independence, no matter if her decision proves disastrous. She isn’t your child or lab rat. Or girlfriend for that matter.”

Both scientists took a drink of their water.

xTBBTx

“I’m curious,” said Raj as Sheldon and he raced along the complex curves that existed in the world that is Mario Cart. “In ‘Spock’s Brain’ when McCoy tries to convince Kirk to allow him to don the Teacher he says there’s a chance to retain some of the medical techniques and bring them to the ‘world’. Which world? Wouldn’t McCoy say that he might bring them to the ‘Federation’ or the
‘galaxy’?"

“It’s a figure of speech, Raj.” admonished Sheldon before he sucked in a breath and suddenly lurched his wheel to the right. “McCoy is known for his folksy hometown doctor mannerisms. Come on penguin! Out of the way!”

“Fair enough. But when McCoy loses the Teacher’s knowledge while trying to return Spock’s brain to his body Kirk allows him to bumble along with his natural abilities instead of having another member of the landing party use the Teacher.”

“Hence another example why—oh drat!—Kirk needs Spock. It’s the Vulcan’s logic that provides insight and allows the Captain to succeed at his endeavors. One cannot rely on basic human skills alone.”

“I dunno, my basic human skills just kicked your homo novus ass,” the astrophysicist said with a grin. Sheldon gave him a glare as both men set down their driver’s wheels.

The apartment door opened and Penny entered with her laptop.

“Sheldon, did you change the wifi password again?” she asked.

“‘Flipflopsarenotdailyapparel’. One word.”

“Ok, thanks,” she said with a smirk and began typing in the code. “Do you know anything about how to use utensils at a fancy, schmancy dinner?”

“In terms of setting the table or their use?” Sheldon took out the game cartridge and began packing away the machine.

“Using them. Leonard said the dinner’s at the Stella D’or and I looked the place up. It’s really upscale.” Raj nodded and gave the thumb’s up. “You’ve been there?” Again he nodded before rubbing his tummy and making an ‘mmm’ look on his face.

“I see,” replied the lanky man. “Well, Eliza, it looks as though you’ve got a date with the Ambassador’s Ball.” Penny pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes.

“So I take it that’s a ‘no’ on knowing how to do this?” she prodded.

“Of course I know how to do it. I—” Sheldon stopped talking as Amy’s words from the restaurant came to mind. “However you should do this on your own,” he said with a twitchy mouth before lowering his head to concentrate on wrapping the cord around the driving wheel.


Raj slowly raised a fist to his mouth and gave as inconspicuous a throat-clearing as was humanly possible to catch the Nebraskan’s attention. He gestured first to himself, then Penny before setting imaginary utensils on a table.

“Why thank you, Raj,” Penny said in a loud and smarmy voice although her eyes did flash to Sheldon, who now had his back to her. “I’ve got some rum so this won’t be a silent demonstration. Later, Sheldon.”

“Goodbye, Penny.” Sheldon replied, turning his head at another one of Raj’s throat clearings only to catch the astrophysicist’s scowl as the South Asian man left the apartment. As soon as the door
clicked shut Sheldon let out a long breath he hadn’t known he’d been holding. He finished putting the game consol away and cleared the coffee table of water bottles and Pringle chip cans.

“Penny’s bright enough to grasp a basic internet tutorial,” he murmured to himself as he busied himself wiping down the table with an antibacterial cloth. “Besides she has Raj to assist her.” He threw out the cloth and pulled out his sanitizer to wash his hands. “I’m sure he’ll go over the basic layout of dishes surrounding the cutlery.” Sheldon put a sandwich plate on the counter and placed a butter knife on top before fetching the bread from the refrigerator. “Penny is not my lab monkey.” He had taken out a slice when his attention was drawn to the plate. Carefully he moved it so that it faced towards the center of the table. A twitch came over his face as his jaw stiffened.

Sheldon put the slice of bread in the garbage and again wiped his hands before venturing to the cutlery drawer and drawing out the precise number of forks, knives and spoons necessary before exiting the apartment.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”
Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”
Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

“It’s open,” Penny called. With a frown Sheldon entered and saw Raj and her sitting on the couch with a set of utensils, empty shot glass and laptop before them on the table.

“What are you doing?” the theoretical physicist asked.

“Having an imaginary dinner with Mr. Snuffleupagus,” Penny smirked, garnering her a glare.

“Where are the bread plate, water, wine and liquor glasses?” he frowned. “Raj, this is an incomplete setting.”

“She just asked about cutlery,” Raj countered. Sheldon sighed as he rolled his eyes.

“Well, then, it’s a good thing I came over. Bring me a small plate, bread knife, wine glass and water glass.” Penny made to get up. “Raj can get it. You need to concentrate on the cutlery first.”

“This should be a snap since I work with knives and forks all day at the restaurant,” she said with a chuckle.

“I don’t think the ‘ol’ wrap a cloth napkin ‘round the eatin’ irons’ is going to cut it here,” Sheldon said with a bit of a twang as he sat down on the couch. Raj brought him the items from the kitchen and the lanky man set them in their rightful positions. “Remember: the bread knife is solely for that. You don’t want to upset the sensibilities of your hosts by using the same knife you cut up your steak with to butter your dinner roll.”

“Gotcha,” the waitress said.

“You will also return your glasses to whence they came. This keeps the table orderly and makes it easier for the server or table mate to refresh your drinks.”

“Yes boss.”

“Penny, dining is serious business. You don’t want to look foolish in front of distinguished hosts,” Sheldon tutted.
“I thought he was ‘just an applied physicist’?”

“As is Leonard. Not that he is anywhere near becoming an emeritus but I’m sure Leonard would like to pretend he’s distinguished, even if it’s only at dinner.”

“Yeah, we’ll be a bunch of posers for sure,” said Penny.

“In what way?” Sheldon inquired. “After tonight you will have mastered basic table etiquette.”

“You know, I’m just a waitress—”

“Executive assistant.”

“Whatever. I’m not like these people,” she said sheepishly.

“You mean you don’t eat?” Sheldon said a little too harshly, causing Raj to stare at his friend. “Obviously you converse and imbibe alcohol—although in this instance you’ll limit yourself to two glasses of wine. You’re heads and tails over most people in terms of your comeliness and if you wear the red dress with the long sleeves you’ll command attention.”

“Thank you Sheldon,” Penny blushed.

“There’s no need to thank me. It’s the truth,” he replied, his eyes on hers before he turned his gaze to the utensils. “So, what’s the order for forks from left to right?”

“Salad, dinner, dessert.”

“Correct.”

“Yay Penny,” the blond giggled.

“Try to keep your exuberance to a minimum,” Sheldon said with a smirk. “We haven’t tackled the spoons.”

As Raj sat at Penny’s kitchen counter watching the neighbors interact with each other he noted several things: Sheldon wasn’t being a particularly condescending boob, Penny and the physicist were sitting rather close together—well within Sheldon’s personal space—and Sheldon’s body was relaxed as opposed to its usual rigid state.

“—Knife, small spoon and soup spoon,” Penny finished.

“Correct,” Sheldon agreed.

“Good,” she said as she popped off the couch. “Let me see if the dress needs to be pressed.”

“I have a steamer,” Sheldon replied as she skipped into her bedroom.

“Dude, she’ll be fine,” Raj chided lightly.

“Of course she’ll be fine,” the lanky man replied. “Under my tutelage she’s blossoming. It will be intriguing to see how far I can take her.”

“So this is just more of your grand experiment—I’m sorry, ‘bet’?”

“What else could it be?” Sheldon asked.
“Well?” said Penny as she emerged from the bedroom in her red dress and matching heels.

“Awesome,” gushed Raj.

“Elegant,” Sheldon agreed.

“Ex-cellent,” Penny said in a Mr. Burns voice before returning to her room. “Let me get this off before I wrinkle it.”

“I’ll steam it this evening,” said her neighbor. Sheldon took up the cutlery and put them in a jumble and moved the glasses and bread plate to the side. “This time she’ll have to reconstruct the table setting.”

“I’m sure she’s got it, Sheldon,” smirked Raj. His friend’s blue eyes were steadfast as they rose to meet his.

“I want to be certain,” he said. Raj nodded as Penny came out of the bedroom with dress in hand. Immediately Sheldon stood and took it from her. “Recreate the place setting while I hang this up in the apartment.”

“Are you sure? I can always take it to the cleaners,” Penny said as she sat on the couch.

“I wouldn’t have offered otherwise, Penny. This way the dress will be cleaned to my satisfaction.”

“Thanks,” she smiled and he nodded his head before exiting.

Raj poured himself another drink and downed it in one gulp. Since when did Sheldon call Amy ‘elegant’ and want to steam her clothing?

“Experiment, my ass,” he mumbled.

“What?” Penny asked. The astrophysicist blushed.

“I, ah, passed some gas.”

“Lovely,” Penny said with a wrinkled nose as she returned to her place setting.

Raj let out a silent breath.

xTBBTx

“Huh,” said Penny as she read a folded newspaper while sitting on top of a dryer. “Guess I’ll have to do some thinking this evening.”

Sheldon finished loading his dryers and set them into motion. “As opposed to any other time? Perhaps if you interspersed your thoughts throughout the day you might find yourself in less difficulty.”

“Gee, thanks.” Penny went back to the newspaper. “Sometimes I miss things unless my horoscope points them out.” Sheldon rolled his eyes as he returned to the folding table and began wiping it down with an antibacterial cloth.

“Hokum once again. Penny, as I’ve recounted to you several—”

“You’re too stubborn to listen to destiny,” she said without looking up. Before he could answer she continued. “Listen to this: ‘Sagittarius, you may be in a difficult situation at home today because
interpersonal dynamics are complicated and you might read a situation wrong. You could even believe that someone else holds the key to your current happiness. You don't like it when you lose control over your life, especially when you're standing on shaky ground. Regaining your center of gravity is easier than you think; just concentrate on being truthful and the resistances you face will begin to melt away.' Wow.’

‘Wow’ indeed,” snorted Sheldon. “Only in this case ‘wow’ refers to your gullibility if you believe for a moment that this refers specifically to you.”

“It isn’t specific,” Penny argued. “It gives me something to meditate on over the day.”

“Oh really? As you spent the morning with Leonard enjoying a post-coital breakfast before the two of you ventured to the market followed by dinner at our apartment before commencing laundry at what point did you misread ‘interpersonal dynamics’ and conclude someone other than Leonard ‘holds the key to your current happiness’?”

“Astrology is mysterious.” Again the physicist snorted. “Obviously it doesn’t literally mean what it says.”

Sheldon paused. “Then why would the writers publish it?”

“Again, something to meditate on. It makes me see my day in a whole new perspective.” Sheldon folded his arms across his chest. “For instance,” she said insistently. “Leonard and I got into an argument when I wanted to pick up this necklace that would look killer with my blue and green blouses.”

“Obviously he was trying to curb your spending habits,” Sheldon said evenly.

“He said I didn’t need the necklace because it pointed to the center of my chest and that my breasts were noticeable enough,” Penny said with a twinge of irritation to her voice.

“I see,” Sheldon said diplomatically. “Perhaps Leonard didn’t want you to draw attention to your cleavage because—”

“He’s insecure,” Penny finished. “He made it sound like I was some kind of cheap slut right in front of the vendor.”

“As you continually exceed your net income you’re hardly ‘cheap’.”

“*Thanks* Sheldon,” Penny said with a glare. “I’ll try better to be the spendthrift ho.”

“Lessening your financial stresses would benefit your overall self-worth,” he said. “Although I’m unsure as to why you want to procure money for sex.”

Penny rolled her eyes. “I don’t *want* to; Leonard just made me feel like I was.”

“I’m sure that wasn’t his intent. Leonard might be socially inept but he does mean well.” A pause as Sheldon found his jaw unexpectedly tight. “And he is extremely fond of you.”

“I know,” she said with a sigh before returning her attention to the newspaper. “You said you’re Taurus, right?” She glanced over his horoscope. “‘If you have big plans for your future, you might become overwhelmed thinking about how much time it will take to reach your goals’.”

“My goals are both grand and life-long and do not phase me in the least,” Sheldon amended. “In fact I’d expect no less from myself.”
“Okay. ‘You're committed to succeeding, but you may need to apply yourself harder than you imagined’.”

“Impossible.”

“Let me finish! ‘But even if the upcoming week looks like a busy one, kick back and chill today while you still have the chance. A little rest and relaxation improves your attitude and your energy, revitalizing you for your next adventure’.”

Sheldon raised an eyebrow. “Well there’s a little accuracy in the last part since I’m planning to retire to my bedroom to finish reading the latest Batman comic.”

“While I’ll find my ‘center of gravity’ watching dancing videos on Youtube,” said Penny. “I want to make sure I’m not doing so much of the bump-n-rub when I dance with Leonard. He mentioned that the restaurant also has a bar area upstairs and that Professor Sorrenson likes to do a little dancing. Apparently the missus and him are real twinkle toes.”

“Yes, it’d be best if you didn’t ‘press the matter’ as it were, especially if Dr. Sorrenson asks to dance with you.” Penny chuckled.

“At least it’d be a dance he’d never forget,” she grinned as her neighbor gave her a frown. “Anyways, I’m off to dance with Prince Charming.”

“You can’t leave your clothing unattended,” warned the physicist.

“You’re here.”

“Watching my clothes. Yours are a completely different matter since I am not you and the items, not mine.”

Penny hopped off the dryer. “Give me a break, Sheldon. Leonard’s coming over after laundry to watch a movie and I want to practice before he comes.”

“You can always dance here,” Sheldon blurted out.

“There’s no room,” observed Penny. Sheldon immediately remedied the situation by pushing the table to the wall. “And music?”

“Dancing has its own internal rhythm,” he replied.

“Wow, I never knew you were such an expert, Mr. ‘I-Don’t-Dance’.”

“I might not partake but that doesn’t mean I don’t observe.”

“All right. Observe this,” smiled Penny and twirled around the floor with her hands raised.

“Your arms are too high to approximate Leonard’s shoulder height and you’re moving too fast,” Sheldon said evenly. His neighbor slowed and lowered her arms. “And you’d be better off with clasping your left hand with Leonard’s right. This makes the dance less intimate which will be critical when you’re dancing with Dr. Sorrenson.”

“Gotcha.”

Sheldon continued to watch Penny move around the laundry room. He noted to himself that she was light on her feet and that her hair swooshed gently across her back. Would she have it up or styled so it lay curled around her shoulders? His mind drifted as he pictured Penny in her red dress
and heels, her hair a lion’s mane of curls around her face and shoulders. Her green eyes and ruby red lips smiling a smile that dared him to feel her power.

As the real Penny began humming Sheldon’s eyes focused on her: she was a force like Sue Storm, her curves far, far, from invisible even in her pink Hello Kitty pants, green tank top and brown slippers. Her belly was taut and her buttocks rounded but not terribly protruding and as for her breasts—

“Good enough?” asked Penny as she stopped to regard her ‘coach’.

“Good enough,” Sheldon replied. “For the first attempt.” He caught her smirk. “Don’t get me wrong, you’re obviously more than adept at dancing. I believe it’s the height adjustment with Leonard that’ll throw off your rhythm, particularly when you’re in heels.”

“Yeah, maybe I should forget about the heels and wear flats.”

“No,” Sheldon said firmly. “You will not submit to Leonard’s insecurities.”

Only the spinning of the clothes in the dryers could be heard in the room.

“You’re right,” Penny said.

“Of course I am,” the physicist said in his usual haughty tone. He moved the table back to its original position. “Your problem is that you choose not to heed me.”

“That’s not true,” countered Penny as the first buzzer rang on Sheldon’s dryer that was set for ‘delicates’. She thought for a moment as the physicist went to retrieve his t-shirts. “Well, okay, maybe it’s true most of the time but that’s because most of the time you’re speaking ‘whackese’.”

“Oh?” he said with a raised voice and twang. “Do tell.” He pushed up the sleeves on his purple thermal and proceeded to lay out his plastic clothes folder.

“Who asks a girl if she’s having her period so she can be a hormone-crazed sexpot who hits on her ex-boyfriend to make him seem like a stud in front of his new girlfriend?”

“Research has shown that female primates respond to sexual challenges involving their mate,” sniffed Sheldon. “Granted the scenario was a tad stretched given that both Dr. Stephanie Barnett and you were supposed to be fighting over Leonard—”

“Hey.”

“Penny, he’s lactose-intolerant, myopic, asthmatic and under 5’6. Please tell me how he’s desirable breeding stock?” At this the Nebraskan blanched.

“Whoa, whoa. Who said anything about Leonard and I having kids?”

Sheldon placed a folded t-shirt to the side and grabbed another one. “I’d assumed since you were pair-bonded that such discussions would be brought up. You’re twenty six. Optimal breeding age is under thirty.”

As he continued blathering about studies on breeding stock and blah-blah-blah, Penny’s eyes were on his hands as he deftly folded the t-shirt and added it to the pile. His fingers were long and tapered—definitely not the hands of a general laborer. However his forearms were muscular, though lean, and noticeably flexed as he folded his laundry. He worked in a rhythm, even if the beat was set to ‘crazy’, although she had to admit the end result looked amazing compared to her
hand-folded technique.

“Science, schmience,” she interjected. “I’ll have kids when I’m ready and not a minute before.”

“Unless the condom fails. They’re only ninety nine percent effective.”

“Sounds like good odds to me.”

Sheldon stopped what he was doing to stare at her. “It only takes one percent to alter your life. As it is you’re already in the midst of change. Adding a child to the mix will only complicate things.”

“So you’re saying Leonard and I shouldn’t have sex?” she said with a crooked smile.

“Of course not. Such a request is folly to even suggest.” A pause. “Be careful,” he said seriously.

“I’m on the pill. Believe me the last thing I want to do is get knocked up.” The buzzer on her dryer sounded. She opened the door and began putting her clothes on top of the dryer.

“What are you doing?” Sheldon said, horrified. “Penny, people put their dirty baskets on top.”

“They’re not *that* dirty,” she scoffed as she continued emptying the dryer. “Besides you’re using the table.”

“At least wipe down the surface,” he chided as he dug into his pocket for an antibacterial wipe. “Here.” Penny crossed over to retrieve it. “Although I don’t know how effective this will be given that your clothing is already contaminated.”

“You are always doom and gloom.”

“And you’re always cavalier.”

Penny grinned. “Yeah, I’m always putting a little cavalier on your crackers.”

“Your sarcasm is noted,” Sheldon said and continued to fold his clothes.

xTBBTx

Wikipedia: Babylon 5

Star Trek trivia: Nitpicker’s Guide for Classic Trekkers

Horoscopes: Dailyhoroscopecom
Chapter Five

Chapter Summary

Reference to ‘The Cooper-Hofstadter Polarization’; ‘The Pulled Groin Extrapolation’

She didn’t complain when she was shafted on her tip. Nor did the smile vanish from her face when the baby’s spit up got on her arm. The Nebraskan was all cheer as she cleaned up the mess.

“Yo, Penny,” grinned Janet as the other waitress arrived at the ordering kiosk. “Looks like short stuff’s got your mojo going.”

“What?” blushed Penny.

“You’ve been walking around on cloud seventeen. Dial it down a notch or people will think you’re on drugs.”

“Yesterday was wonderful,” Penny admitted. “We had sex and then went to the market and had some dinner and then I did my laundry and practiced dancing”—his blue eyes sparkled as she tossed out a sarcastic pun; his hands looked soft and she wondered what they would feel like—Janet laughed. “Yeah I get the picture: Penny’s a happy girl for having a gift of a boyfriend.” At this Penny’s back stiffened.

“So I’m not supposed to say anything besides, ‘Yes, Boss’ and ‘How many copies?’”

“Friendly banter between superior and subordinate should be limited unless he or she introduces a new topic that’s work-appropriate.” Sheldon’s hand froze, marker touching the board. “In this instance, as I’m aware Leonard spent the night at your apartment I can readily deduce from your haggard condition this morning that you obviously didn’t spend the night playing checkers.” He resumed writing.

The office was silent save for the sounds of clicking keys at Penny’s computer.

“From what I gathered from Leonard you’re a natural at the game.” Sheldon pursed his lips as he admonished himself for the error before erasing and correcting the blunder on his board.

Penny paused. “This is chess—the game—we’re talking about, right?”

“What else could it be?”

“You’re right,” smirked Penny as she continued with her letter. Apparently Sheldon had a problem with the ending to Batman’s ‘A death of the family’ and had decided to address the issue personally with the powers that be at DC comics. All seventeen pages. Single spaced. Double-sided. With footnotes.

“We’ll have to play sometime,” the lanky man continued. “Leonard isn’t much of a challenge.”

“My Klingon versus your Vulcan, huh? Name your date and your fate will be sealed. It *will* ‘be a good day to die’,” she said with a throaty growl.

“Your overconfidence will be your downfall.”

“So says the pot to the kettle.”

“I’m not overconfident,” Sheldon said haughtily as he stood back to ponder his board. “I’m merely stating that my victory is the most logical conclusion to our match.”

“You do realize that Kirk kicked Spock’s butt all the time,” Penny warned.

“Roddenberry chose to highlight his wins by airing them but that doesn’t mean Kirk won ‘all the time’. That’s like saying Leonard and you have more in common than coitus just because he took you to the market on Saturday.”

“What happened to ‘nothing personal at work’?” she said a little testily. “Or is this an instance where my superior has opened a topic for discussion?”

“It’s not a topic, merely an observation.”

Penny raised her eyebrow and did her best to appear nonchalant although her voice was a little too saccharine to complete the look. “Well on a similar topic are you ever going to ‘seal the deal’ with Amy?”

Again Sheldon froze. “That’s none of your business,” he said at last.

“All I’m saying is that after two years her patience is wearing a little thin,” she warned. Sheldon turned to his assistant with a puzzled look on his face.

“While I’ve known Amy Farrah Fowler for two years five months and twelve days we hadn’t altered our paradigm until Stardate 101017 so I fail to see how she could be ‘in the wings’ as it were for as long as you suggest.”

“The heart wants what it wants, Sheldon.”

“Which is a good reason why Amy and I share a relationship of the mind.” He turned back to his board.

The room was silent.
“Besides which, I’m not ready to proceed,” the physicist said quietly.

“Fair enough,” his neighbor replied equally as soft before resuming her work.

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“That was terrific,” gushed Penny as Leonard stopped the dvd.

“And ‘Ghost World’ is based off a graphic novel so just think: you actually like a comic book,” he said with a goofy grin, causing his girlfriend to stick out her tongue.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. This doesn’t mean we’re going to make popcorn and watch ‘Daredevil’.” Leonard was shocked.

“But it has Ben Affleck in it. In tights no less.”

“I saw the opening sequence with him and the crook. Good enough,” she shrugged, causing the curly haired man to frown.

“When did you see that? We didn’t see ‘Daredevil’.”

“Sheldon had me write a letter to this Quesada guy about how Daredevil used his ‘radar-sense’ and I asked him what it was so he showed me.”

“When did he do this?” Leonard felt an inexplicable tightness in his stomach.

“At work a couple of weeks ago.” Here she laughed.

“You know if he put even half of his time he puts into comic books into physics he’d have his Nobel Prize by now.”

“What about me?” he said, voice cracking.

“What about you?” His stomach dropped.

“I guess if I spent less time with comic books and all that other stuff I’d have my Nobel Prize too, right?”

“I guess,” said Penny. “Although I thought you tested other people’s theories instead of making your own?”

“That’s not *all* I do,” he said defensively. “I also make my own experiments. For instance, remember my paper on Paradoxical Moment-of-Inertia Changes Due to Putative Super-Solids I gave at the Bose-Einstein condensates conference you attended?”

“That was that thing you did with Sheldon, right?” Penny had done her best to forget that lecture but some parts still haunted her like Howard Wolowitz taking her picture and calling her his girlfriend.

“Uh, yeah,” Leonard mumbled. That paper was a major breakthrough for his career and Sheldon had basically crapped all over saying that it was beneath the theoretical physicist’s quality of work to warrant a public presentation.

“Speaking of Sheldon, I better see how my laundry’s doing.” Penny got up and went to the door.

“He’s doing your laundry now, too?” the physicist asked hoarsely.

“Only my work tops. He claims they sometimes smell ‘lemonier than lemon’,” she said with a roll
of the eyes. “Anyhoo, I’ll be back.”

She closed the door and flip-flopped her way down the stairs to the laundry room.

“How she blow, cuppa Joe?” she quipped as she entered to find Sheldon folding the last of her clothes. “Hey, I was going to do that.”

“‘Why, thank you Sheldon’,“ he said with a twang. “‘Since I’ve irresponsibly left my garments unattended while I watched a movie upstairs I am grateful to you for guarding my apparel lest they be stolen’.”

“And that, too,” she grinned as she noticed her blouses were on hangers. “That’s weird.” She hadn’t remembered seeing him with hangers when he came down to the laundry room and he definitely didn’t return to the apartment to fetch them.

“What? Seeing your garments on hangers instead of scattered around your apartment?” Sheldon made a last flip with his board and he was finished with Penny’s Capri pants.

“You know I don’t do that anymore.” His blue eyes rose to meet hers. “Okay, much,” she conceded. “You can’t say I haven’t improved.”

Sheldon pulled out an antibacterial cloth and wiped down his folding board before placing it in his own laundry basket. “True. Although you really had set the bar rather low to begin with so any effort would seem a grand achievement.” Penny narrowed her eyes and gave him a glare.

“You know, with all these compliments it’s hard to believe I don’t try harder,” she said sarcastically.

“Penny, I realize you typically require acclamation from others to bolster your ego. I don’t ascribe to such nonsense.”


“Having a basic expectation that dirty clothes should be in a hamper instead of strewn about a twenty-six year old female’s apartment is not an insane notion,” he said crisply. “Your actions are juvenile.” He paused as he took in Penny’s expression and realized there needed to be an alteration to his oration. “But improving,” he added.

“There ya go,” she smirked. “That wasn’t too hard to say.”

“Indeed.”

“Oh, by the way, coach, I caught this totally awesome turn on Youtube the other day,” Penny said brightly. “It’ll knock the sock off of ol’ Sorrenstein—”

“Dr. Sorrenson.”

“Whatever.” The waitress took a step away, raised her arms and made a turn. “See?”

“There’s a negligible difference to what you showed me last weekend.”

“There’s a big difference,” she amended. “It’s all in the hips.” Again she demonstrated.

Sheldon watched her hips lazily roll from side to side as she made her turn. At the moment he conceded that her movements were indeed different from last week he also realized that he felt more than a little parched as his mouth seemed particularly dry.
“Noted,” he said neutrally. “Although I’m not sure it’s appropriate to use with anyone other than Leonard.”

“Oh come on, it’s not that bad,” she chided. “Look.” She grasped his hand and dragged him away from the table, feeling the physicist’s reluctance with every step. “Relax, Sheldon, I took a shower after work.”

“You know I’m not comfortable with contact,” he said but didn’t resist as Penny drew him close.

“This is important,” she countered. “I don’t want to bring the sexy to Leonard’s friend.” She waited but Sheldon didn’t move. “Look, you have to lead or this isn’t going to work.”

“I don’t dance.”

“Well I don’t like cauliflower but my mom told me to shut my pie hole and eat it.”

“Your story hardly applies to this situation as your mother’s concern for your nutritional—”

“Just take a step and turn me. That’s it. No dancing.”

“It’s still a dance.”

“Quit stalling and do it.”

Green eyes met blue and then Sheldon took a step and turned and felt Penny’s hips measure his own causing him to take a step back.

“Too intimate,” he said with a twitchy mouth.

“Damn. How about like this?”

Again she stepped into his personal space and his body betrayed him as it took a step and made the turn. This time there was just a hint of hips and before he knew it he’d turned again. He heard Penny coo out a “There ya go” and was more than aware of the apple scent of her shampoo as her head was in close proximity. He found himself drawing in a breath even as his fingers played with the tips of Penny’s hair.

“What the hell?”

Immediately Sheldon dropped Penny’s hand as if shocked and retreated from her as the pair turned to find Leonard standing in the doorway with a stunned look on his face.

“Oh, hey Leonard,” Penny said and quickly took up her clothes basket and hung clothes. “Let me just hang these up and we’ll start the other movie.”

“I’ll be there in a sec,” he said absently and she smiled before disappearing up the stairs. “Wanna catch me up?” he said to his roommate.

“I’ve finished Penny’s laundry,” Sheldon said evenly as he turned to his own basket. “It will be a pleasant experience on Monday when she comes into the office smelling less like a citrus cart.”

“I meant with the dancing,” Leonard said a little too harshly.

“Penny was just ‘showing me a move’. ” The lanky man placed his detergent and fabric softener in separate bags.
“Since when do you dance?”

“I don’t.”

“You just did.”

“Point. I didn’t and now I don’t again,” Sheldon amended.

“I see.” Leonard’s brows met. “Penny and you are sure spending a lot of time together.”

“I disagree. There are one hundred and sixty hours in a week. Aside from seeing Penny working at my office Monday, at the Cheesecake Factory Tuesday, sporadically Wednesdays on Halo night, Thursday again at the office followed by Chinese food Friday at the apartment and laundry on Saturday I have the rest of my hours to myself.”


“We play paintball on Sundays, Leonard.” The shorter man took a breath.

“You don’t think that’s an inordinate amount of time you spend with Penny?”

“Well she is my neighbor and employee. Plus she’s my regular server and Halo partner—”

“And my girlfriend.”

“Of course she is,” agreed Sheldon as he took up his laundry accoutrements.

“And you’ve got Amy.”

“Indeed.” Both men locked eyes.

“I’d appreciate it if you kept some distance between you and Penny,” Leonard said crisply.

“She’s my friend who’s asked for my assistance,” Sheldon said with a frown of his own.

“Nothing more.”

“Nothing more,” agreed the lanky man.

“Good because it’s social protocol to respect boundaries with friends’ girlfriends. Even if you’re friends with her.”

“Even if it’s Penny you mean,” amended Sheldon.

“Yeah.”

“I see. I’ll remember that for next time.” He passed Leonard and proceeded up the stairs.

It took Leonard a minute or so to follow because he needed to process what struck him about his conversation with his roommate: Sheldon never apologized for spending so much time with Penny.

He said he’d remember to keep his distance next time.

“What about this time?” Leonard murmured to himself.

xTBBTx
“So what do ya think?” asked Penny as she held up a mirror to Amy.

“Subtle and yet it really does enhance the eye,” Amy replied, pleased as she took in her eye shadow and liner. “I prefer it without the mascara; it makes me feel a little too whorish.”

“Hey now,” Penny said with a smirk. “I wear mascara.”

“I’m not suggesting you’re a slut,” amended the neurobiologist. “Although with your eyes all dolled up you look smoken hot.”

“Thanks.” Penny took a sip of her wine and began to prep her own eyelid for coloration.

“You’re lucky,” Amy said after a moment. “Apart from the time we went dancing as a communal activity Sheldon’s never taken me out to twirl on the floor.”

“Obviously you’ve never danced with Leonard,” grinned Penny. “It’s taken me time to get his feet into proper rhythm where he doesn’t trip himself or step on my toes.”

“I’m aware. At the wedding we attended the only dance Leonard managed to pull off was ‘The Chicken’.”

“You are what you dance.” Both women laughed and Amy took another sip of wine.

“You are satisfied with Leonard, right?” asked Amy.

“Of course I am.” Penny resumed lining her eyes. “Why are you asking?” She turned to her friend. “Did Leonard say something to Sheldon?”

“No. I was just curious. Oftentimes pair bonded couples spend an inordinate amount of time together. Lately it seems as though you’ve been busy with Sheldon,” Amy said, poker-faced.

“Yeah, he’s been awesome,” said Penny as she blended the color a little more at the corners of her eyelids. “I don’t know where I’d be without him.” Here she chuckled. “Never in a zillion years did I ever think I’d be so thankful to have Sheldon Cooper in my life.”

“I am,” Amy said quietly. Penny noted the tone.

“Oh honey, I’m not saying he isn’t, um, desirable. You two make a cute couple.”

Amy sighed. “When we’re together. Nowadays he seems to be extraordinarily busy.”

“He’s been crunching a lot of superstring thingies lately,” agreed the waitress.

“He used to text or email me at lunch. He no longer does so.” Amy took a sip of wine as she eyed her friend.

“I didn’t know,” Penny replied. As of late Sheldon was spending his lunches with Penny talking about everything from the physics of Star Trek to why comics are great literature. He’d also gone over her English paper and actually erased a whiteboard to create a new outline for her to follow. In Sheldondese he basically said her paper wasn’t bad, but it wasn’t good either. Of course anything less than perfect was substandard to the genius so she couldn’t be too critical.

“I wonder if he’s bored with me?” Amy said seriously.

Penny turned away from the mirror to face her friend. “Never. You’re two peas in a pod.”
“We are intellectually compatible, yes, but when it comes to comeliness I’ve little to offer.”

“Sheldon isn’t into looks—and you’re far from ugly, Amy. Although I have to admit your wardrobe does need a little work.”

“Not everyone’s like you where men fall at your feet with a bat of the eye and a swish of your booty.”

“Amy—”

“I’d be devastated if Sheldon dumped me, Penny,” Amy replied matter-of-factly. “I’ve worked extremely hard to get him comfortable with my touching him and I don’t want to see that go to waste.”

The Nebraskan was shocked. “You’re touching him now? Like touching him touching him? Or just touching?”

“He held my hand of his own accord at Howard’s space launch as you well know. Aside of that we sit in proximity to each other and he does submit to my requests for hand-holding at the movie theater.” Here Amy flashed a little smile. “This is great progress for Sheldon and his mysophobia.”

“Yeah,” Penny mumbled before draining her wineglass. As things stood Sheldon had hugged Penny twice and twirled with her in the laundry room—mildly protesting in the last instance, mind you, but he’d done it nonetheless. Maybe Sheldon was more comfortable with her because he’d known Penny longer? Of course he’d only known her for a little over a year when he first hugged her whereas he’d known Amy for over two.

“Ah well,” Amy said with a smile and a shake of the head. “At least I’m safe knowing he’s spending time with you. After all, it’s not like you two are compatible by any stretch of the imagination.” A pause. “And you have Leonard.”

“That I do,” Penny said in a higher pitched voice as she refilled her wineglass.

She knew this was going to be a hard drinking night.

She just didn’t know why.

xTBBTx

Penny entered the office, saw Sheldon working at his desk, and so deposited her things on her seat before venturing to the washroom to fill her water container. Upon her return she settled in and turned on her computer.

“You didn’t say ‘good morning’,” he said evenly without looking up from his computer.

“I didn’t want to disturb you.”

“Your very act of entering the room and settling in ‘disturbs me’, Penelope. Adding a ‘good morning’ is merely putting a socially conventional cherry on top.”

“Sorry. Good morning, Dr. Cooper.”

“Don’t bother me, I’m working,” he muttered and continued typing.

In spite of herself Penny smiled. As long as she lived she’d never get over how whacked this guy was although at the moment she acknowledged that this was kinda cute. Immediately she blanched.
Not that she thought Sheldon was cute; only that what he did and said was cute. 'Get a hold of yourself!' Obviously Amy’s talk had shaken her more than she realized although for the life of her she couldn’t figure out why. With a shake of the head she opened Outlook and checked Sheldon’s messages.

As long as she’d known Amy she had considered the neurobiologist to be a bit of an odd bird but harmless. Sure Amy tended to assert herself in weird ways like how she almost immediately considered Penny her ‘bestie’ and did that ‘experimenting with lesbianism’ thing at the sleepover but the waitress only chalked that up to her lack of friends growing up.

Perhaps that was the reason why Amy was all paranoid about Sheldon. Penny’s eyes flashed to her boss’s form as he stared thoughtfully at his computer. There was no way in a zillion years that Sheldon would ever dump her much less cheat on her. Again Penny smiled. To dump Amy would mean he recognized they were in a relationship, something which Penny occasionally doubted. Yes, the Shamy spent time together with Amy later gushing to Penny how Sheldon brushed her leg with his knee or let her pick the documentary she wanted even though it was his night to choose. Penny would be excited for her but secretly gave a roll of the eyes. That was Sheldon’s idea of dating? Letting Amy choose what to watch on the frakken tv?

A thought struck the Nebraskan: maybe letting her choose wasn’t Sheldon’s idea of dating. Maybe this was all Amy, finding whatever token of love she could get from him no matter how small. After all, Penny got Sheldon to watch The Notebook and he allowed her to piggyback on the wifi and it wasn’t like they were dating. In the time she’d known the East Texan he’d loaned her money and helped her with her small business and had taken her to the hospital and let her eat his emergency soup and now he was helping her with school and training her to be the best executive assistant she could be. There was no way Sheldon Lee Cooper would ever let Penny do these things. Quite simply he allowed it to happen and that meant a lot for the uber control freak.

Sheldon got up and went to his whiteboard.

“He’s wrong,” he muttered to himself.

Penny could feel the tension in the room rise as Sheldon was stock-still. She grabbed a large folder of papers to be scanned and shredded and stood. This would take her the bulk of the morning. She closed the door behind her and walked down the hall until a sudden thought stopped her. Taking out her phone, she texted Sheldon:

Email Amy at lunch.

It wasn’t much but it was the best Penny could do.

xTBBTx

Sheldon’s foot was tapping as he sat at his computer.

“Compactified or a three-dimensional submanifold?” he murmured to himself. One led to a Nobel Prize and the other a footnote in history at best and in this instance he felt far less than his best. Amy had insisted they go out for dinner on Wednesday even though it was Halo night. She’d insisted it was non-optional even though there was nothing in the Relationship Agreement compelling him to go. Sheldon sighed.

“Something wrong?” asked Leonard as he sat in his stuffed chair watching television.

Sheldon spun his chair around to face his roommate.
“Amy has decided to insert her presence into my life at an inopportune time. She feels we haven’t spent enough time together even though we text and email each other daily, Skype on Sundays and do the couple ‘thing’ every Date Night. Right now my research is so close to completion I can taste it and yet the final answer continues to elude me,” he growled.

“What does your gut say?”

“The extra six dimensions are compactified in the form of a Calabi-Yau manifold. Of course in M-theory they would have to take the form of a G2 manifold.” Sheldon raised an eyebrow. “It also says I’d like a blueberry muffin.” He got up and applied hand sanitizer to his hands as he made his way to the refrigerator.

“I meant about Amy,” Leonard said neutrally. “She obviously misses you.”

“As I haven’t gone anywhere I don’t see why.” The lanky man put the muffin on a plate and reached into the drawer for a knife. His eyes glossed over the other utensils.

Leonard used the remote to apply the captioning feature. “People like to know they’re needed.”

“But I don’t need anyone,” Sheldon replied as he stuck the muffin in the microwave. “I choose to associate with Amy.” He shook his head. “This is all Penny’s fault.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Until she began associating with Penny, Amy Farrah Fowler was level-headed, less emotionally demanding and we talked on a plethora of topics. Now it’s ‘why haven’t you texted me?’ or vast discussions on the principles of hand-holding or trying to find out if I’m allergic to latex.”


“In this instance I don’t like it,” frowned Sheldon as he took his muffin out of the microwave and cut it with the knife. “I may have gained a girlfriend but somewhere in the paradigm shift I seem to have lost my friend.”

“Now you’re just being silly,” scoffed Leonard. “I mean look at Penny and I. Sure we don’t talk about anything science or science-fiction oriented and she doesn’t like comic books but I don’t like shoe shopping and Sex and the City. That hasn’t stopped us from finding other ways of communicating.”

“You mean coitus.” Sheldon finished buttering his muffin and took a bite.

“Well yeah,” Leonard said with a wide grin. “But there are other things too.”

“Like what?”

A pause. “That’s not the point, Sheldon.”

“Isn’t it?” Sheldon took a swig of water to wash down the muffin. “Coitus is ultimately what this is all about and I have no interest in engaging in such an act.”

“With anyone,” clarified his roommate.

“Exactly,” agreed Sheldon before finishing off the muffin.

Leonard sat in thought as the lanky man went to the sink to wash his plate and knife.
“Even if she’s pretty. And in close proximity,” the shorter man said.

“I believe that’s more your modus operandi.” Sheldon dried his hands with a paper towel and tossed it in the garbage. “As for me, a girl must first and foremost be a friend and friends at least tolerate each other’s interests if they can’t outright support them.”

“Like Halo and Star Trek,” Leonard said flatly.

“Exactly. Amy is doing her best with Star Trek but her unease makes my viewing experience with her less enjoyable.”

“Good thing Penny likes it.”

Both men locked eyes.

“It is fortuitous, yes. Speaking of Penny I have to go over her work schedule,” and with that Sheldon made his way to the door.

“You just saw her today. Why can’t it wait until Thursday?”

A tic washed over Sheldon’s face and he was thankful he had his back to Leonard. “It needs to be done first thing in the morning and I don’t want her wasting time.” He closed the door and went across the hall.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

He heard a clinking of metal before the door opened and Penny was before him in her comfy pants and yellow tank top.

“Oh. Hey,” she said hesitantly. At once Sheldon’s nose twitched.

“You’re drinking,” he said flatly.

“I needed one,” she replied defensively.

“Perhaps. It’s the several after that will be problematic in the morning.”

“What do you want, Sheldon?”

“It just occurred to me that we haven’t gone over your cutlery drills in several days and I thought to rectify the situation,” he said evenly.

“I think I’ve got it.” Here he tutted.

“‘Think’ indeed. We need certainty.”

“Fine. I’m *certain* I’ve got it.”

The subsequent pause was both awkward and obvious to the point where even Sheldon was unnerved.

“I’m not sure of the protocol here,” he began tentatively. “I’m gathering something has you
distressed and—"

Penny unhooked a bag from the doorknob and handed it to her neighbor.

"Thank you for the use of your utensils and for all your help," she said.

"Penny—"

"Go spend time with Amy," the waitress said and with a sad smile she closed the door.

Sheldon was at a loss as to what had just occurred. Normally he’d approach Leonard with the conundrum but something told him not to this time. He returned to the apartment.

"That was fast," Leonard said lightly. He noted the bag in his roommate’s hand. "What did she give you?"

"She had borrowed some of my—of our—utensils and has now returned them."

"Great," grinned Leonard. "Because she has her own utensils to use so there’s no need for her to borrow any from you."

Suddenly feeling odd Sheldon gave his roommate a nod and proceeded to his bedroom. He set the bag of cutlery on his bed, the clattering of metal on metal causing his jaw to tighten. There was no doubt something was going on that he couldn’t grasp because there were too many variables at play. What did Amy have to do with Penny’s cutlery lesson? Surely the neurobiologist already knew about formalized place settings. Then there was Penny’s excessive drinking. Usually she overindulged when she’d done something particularly loathsome—more often than not to herself—and preferred to forget. Granted she seemed less bubbly, for lack of a better word, at work but he’d seen that as a positive step as she maintained her proficiency while augmenting her newfound professionalism. There wasn’t any chit-chat or other social inanities to contend with.

He was annoyed. Give him quantum mechanical formulations and he could tabulate and quantify to his heart’s content, but immerse him in a quagmire of social complexities and his vast intelligence was all but useless. Even more frustrating, he couldn’t approach Penny or Amy with the problem since they seemed to be part of it. There was always Leonard but the very thought of his roommate made Sheldon purse his lips.

"Not Leonard," he muttered.

Taking out his Conversation Log Sheldon realized he’d have to go over the last few days to see if anything odd came to light. All he knew was that there was something wrong with his social circle and he needed to fix it before he did something to make the situation worse. That’s why he made for his room. Not because of Penny and Amy but to curb his sudden impulse to wipe the grin from Leonard’s face.

xTBBTx

“…In conclusion if I never see monkey feces again it’ll be too soon,” chuckled Amy before wiping her mouth with a cloth napkin. Perhaps this wasn’t the best table conversation to be had at a restaurant but she thought the amusement factor trumped protocol.

"Indeed," Sheldon said absently. The neurobiologist cocked her head.

"Is there anything wrong, Sheldon?" His blue eyes focused on her face.
“Of course not,” he said with a bit of a twang. “Although I admit I’m puzzling over a couple of matters.”

“Such as?”

“They’re nothing,” he said and did his best to smile.

“Sheldon we never talk anymore,” Amy pouted causing her boyfriend to raise an eyebrow.

“We’ve been conversing from the moment you picked me up at the apartment and haven’t stopped.”

“Yes, but it’s been about work and articles we’ve read and documentaries we’ve seen.”

“You’re trying to point something out but I’m not following,” he replied neutrally. “Please refrain from using subtleties and get to the point or we could be here for a while.”

“How are things at work?”

“I already told you I’m having difficulties deciding between super—”

“I mean with Penny,” she said evenly.

At once Sheldon’s eyes were looking at Amy’s wine glass. “She’s improving week by week. I believe she has the makings to be an adequate executive assistant.”

“That’s terrific.” A pause. “So then it won’t be long before she’s completed her training?”

“We’ve gone over basic office protocol and essential databases. She still needs to work on her letter-writing skills. It amazes me how someone who talks as much as she does can have problems forming words into correct sentences.”

“But she can work on that at home,” Amy pressed.

“I suppose she could,” he admitted. For some reason his stomach felt tight. Perhaps he shouldn’t have finished off the potatoes.

“I mean it’s got to be a chore for her to dress up and go to the university like she does.”

“She never said it was a burden,” countered Sheldon. Pause. “Did Penny say something to this effect?”

“No,” Amy said quickly. “I meant that having her work from home would give her more time to do things with other people than just yourself.”

“The time she spends with me at the university was initially booked with shifts at the restaurant so I fail to see how not being at my office would increase her social availability. This is in addition to the basic notion that all of us are at work during the day so we don’t see each other until evening or the weekend.”

“But now Penny’s working on Saturdays and doubling up on Sundays. Surely her work schedule would return to a less hectic state if she had Monday and Thursday free.”

“I’ll—mention it the next time I see her,” he said quietly.

“Besides,” Amy said brightly. “It’s not like you don’t see her. She is, after all, your roommate’s
girlfriend and as such will be in your apartment.”

“Amy?”

“Yes Sheldon?”

“Why don’t you want Penny to work for me?” he asked seriously.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Amy said poker-faced although her hands curled into fists on her lap. “I’m merely suggesting a different course of action given your complaints over the past few weeks that you haven’t the time for frivolities since you’re working on your supersymmetric problem. Penny is a distraction you can’t afford at present.”

“She’s not a distraction,” he countered adamantly. “She’s actually been quite helpful handling my correspondence and—”

“I see your point,” Amy said flatly as she thought quickly. “Then perhaps you should refrain from fraternizing with her outside of work hours.” Here Sheldon rolled his eyes. “After all she won’t be in a similar situation with her future employer. She needs to know it’s a social protocol to respect boundaries.” Sheldon blinked at Amy’s words—words that seemed a little too familiar. “She needs to separate her working life from her social interactions lest there be an inappropriate overlap.”

“I see,” he said crisply.

“You’re angry,” she retorted. “This wasn’t my intent.” She looked at the dessert menu. “Perhaps we should order?”

XxX

Sheldon opened the lobby door and practically sprinted up the stairs, taking them two at a time. A tic very nearly closed the physicist’s right eye as he tried desperately to keep his mouth clamped shut until he got home.

The door was unlocked and he entered to an empty apartment. “Leonard!” he called angrily as he practically slammed the door. “Leonard!” A moment later and the shorter man made his way down the hall.

“Yes?” he asked innocently.

“You talked to Amy!” Sheldon spat. “You had no right to talk to Amy!”

“Why Sheldon, are you saying I can’t spend time with your girlfriend?”

“It’s not the association but the content of your conversation which I object. I’ve spent the last two hours and thirteen minutes being interrogated by Amy concerning my involvement with Penny.”

Leonard folded his arms across his chest as he leaned against the wall. “So you admit it?”

“Admit what?” snapped Sheldon. “Of course I’m involved with Penny: she’s my neighbor, employee, server—”

“Sheldon—”

“Why are you so against my seeing Penny?”

“Because you’re moving in on my girlfriend!” Sheldon was taken aback.
“I’m doing no such thing,” he replied.

“God, she even sounds like you. ‘Babylon 5 is drivel’,” seethed Leonard. “You’re molding her into a mate for you!”

The lanky man was incredulous. “You’re misconstruing everything. Penny asked for my help with…it’s irrelevant.”

“Like hell it is.”

“The point, Leonard, is that Penny requested my aid in attempting to improve herself in all aspects including her relationship with you. We talked about what you’re doing in physics—”

“Oh yeah, thanks for that. I do more than test other people’s theories, you know.”

“Good Lord she sleeps with you,” Sheldon said in an exasperated voice. “Even though she’s been known for promiscuity when single she’s minimally demonstrated serial monogamy if not outright commitment. She said she loves you.”

Leonard’s shoulders slumped. “I guess.”

Sheldon rolled his eyes. “‘You guess’. Good heavens.”

“I made a mistake,” mumbled his roommate.

“Your apology is accepted,” sniffed Sheldon. “Now as for your conduct with Amy—”

“No, my mistake was suggesting you stay away from Penny.” Leonard’s face was stone. “This time I’m telling you. You’ll be in violation of the Friendship Clause of the Roommate Agreement if you continue.”

Sheldon was shocked. “How?”

“Section fifteen addendum J: In the event of a relationship dispute with a girlfriend the roommate is to keep out of the way until the dispute has resolved itself.”

“And what is it you’re disputing?”

“You.”

“I see,” said Sheldon slowly. “Well that’s quite the pickle, inserting myself into a situation where I’m the problem. Only I don’t understand why I’m a problem?”

“Sheldon, you’re getting in the way,” Leonard sighed. “I know you don’t mean to. Hell you probably don’t even understand how you’re doing it but believe me you are. It’s got to stop.”

Sheldon’s eyes were at his roommate’s feet. “It seems as though I owe you an apology.” His blue eyes flashed Leonard’s face. “Sorry.”

“Thank you,” replied Leonard. “I’m sorry about Amy.”

Sheldon nodded. “Well, now that that’s settled I believe I’m due for my evening shower.”

He stepped into his room and prepared himself, all the while more than aware of a queasiness to his stomach. Before he left he took up his thermometer and checked his temperature.
“Normal,” he murmured, surprised at the result. He certainly felt less than normal at present. He’d have to note his condition in his Medical Log in case the feeling lingered.

xTBBTx

Wikipedia: Superstring Theory
With a sigh Raj inserted a bookmark into his novel and closed the book. No matter what he did—the incense, the music, the comfy pillow and blanket on his couch—he couldn’t get himself to relax. If he was bat-crap crazy like Sheldon he’d have a Conversation Log of his own. As it was he had to rely on his memory to discern what was happening.

Sheldon was conducting an experiment on Penny of which she was aware and seemed to approve. Part of it had to do with her working at the university and the upgrading of her clothing and dress. Not only was she immaculate and professional working for Sheldon but her everyday style was less revealing although still clingy enough to show off her curves. Suddenly she seemed to realize that she didn’t have to give away the goods to bring people into her store. While Raj missed the extremely low-cut tops and the ‘Juicy’ sweat pants he had to admit Penny now dressed with flare: using funky fabrics and playful cuts to attract the eye. The question was, why the change? And what did it have to do with Sheldon?

Raj sat up and took a sip from his bottled water. ‘Penny said her acting career was over. Now she’s working for Sheldon.’ He snapped his fingers.

“She’s trying out a new career!” he grinned. “Way to go, Rajesh.” A pause. “Only why was Leonard surprised to see Penny at the university? … Obviously she didn’t want him to know her true purpose—or be involved—so she went to Sheldon.”

That explained the background but didn’t even begin to describe the recent mood shift at Sheldon’s office. Normally Raj popped in to see Sheldon on Fridays but changed it to Thursdays since it also allowed him the opportunity to see what style combination Penny was wearing that week. Sometimes he’d hear the sounds of her typing or the printer in motion but there were also times when he heard Penny and Sheldon talking. There’d be a twinkle to her eyes as she greeted Raj and Sheldon would be in a good mood even though he was still frustrated with his equation. There was a refreshing air to the office that made Raj wish he still shared accommodations until he realized that while Penny was temporary, Sheldon was forever. Besides, with Penny there Raj could never speak and his career was already suffering enough as it was from the psychological condition.

And then something changed.

When he went to the office to have Sheldon recheck his dark matter formula Raj immediately noticed a chill to the air. He shook his head. Not a chill so much as a lack of warmth. Penny typed away at her desk and said hello to him like always but the playfulness was gone. When he gave Sheldon his question the lanky physicist asked Penny to take a break and she did with a prim ‘Yes, Dr. Cooper’ that alarmed the astrophysicist. But it was Sheldon’s reaction to his inquiry about Penny’s mood that truly shook Raj as Sheldon’s eyes were ice as his curt tone claimed ignorance of the change and moved on to Raj’s problem. Sheldon was the Sheldon of old: formal and extremely serious.
Thinking the two friends had a fight Raj mentioned the strangeness to Leonard at lunch only to hear an ‘Oh really?’ in a tone he could only call pleased:

“What’s going on, Leonard?” asked Raj with a frown.

“Things were getting a little weird between them so I had to curtail Sheldon’s enthusiasm for Penny’s personal growth,” replied the experimental physicist.

“You know how Sheldon is when he’s interested in something. He doesn’t mean anything personal.”

“Sheldon’s getting personal?” chuckled Howard. “That would require things like a personal-ity and inter-personal skills.”

“I just had to make sure we were clear on a few things,” said Leonard as nonchalantly as possible.

“Getting something that’s personal ‘clear’ to Sheldon requires a diagram and sock puppets,” smirked the engineer, who perked up as he saw the lanky man approach the table. “And like Beetlejuice he appears. Eating with the men-folk now are you?”

“Penny’s moved her lunch to one o’clock,” Sheldon said matter-of-factly, his eyes met Leonard’s approving gaze before they turned to his salad.

The rest of the conversation was about the usual stuff although Sheldon was quiet and was subdued at every lunch time since.

Raj had given Penny and Sheldon time to sort things out but after two weeks of this nonsense he’d had enough. The difficulty was that he couldn’t bring it up with Penny at work since he couldn’t drink and found that Nyquil messed up his thought processes too much. That left group nights where the astrophysicist noted a stark contrast in his friends. While Howard and Bernadette seemed normal he found that Amy and Leonard were extraordinarily happy while Penny and Sheldon seemed to be much less engaged. They were there for their partners: Penny smiled at Leonard’s jokes and Sheldon replied to all of Amy’s inquiries but there was something missing. The spontaneity was gone.

Of the two Penny was the least worse for wear as she smiled at funny comments although the humor never seemed to reach her eyes. She was more engaged with Leonard than normal as if trying to prove something to him. Or herself. Sheldon, on the other hand, had absolutely regressed. There were no ‘bazingas’. He barely made eye contact. Odder still was that he argued with Raj or Howard if he disagreed with them but if Amy or Leonard made a point he let it pass. There was little to go on in judging Penny and Sheldon’s interactions as save for words like ‘Pass the soy sauce’ they didn’t talk to each other.

That’s why, bottle of Nyquil in hand and career be damned, Raj made his way to Sheldon’s office while the theoretical physicist was away at his scheduled three-twenty washroom break. Since Sheldon wouldn’t talk his only hope was that Penny would open up. Her already subdued mood soured as soon as Raj brought up Sheldon although she claimed not to notice anything was amiss. When Sheldon returned to the office Penny excused herself so the two men could talk. As she left the room Raj caught a look in his lanky friend’s eyes—sadness—before Sheldon began questioning him about his work in a clinically detached tone.

“That’s why, bottle of Nyquil in hand and career be damned, Raj made his way to Sheldon’s office while the theoretical physicist was away at his scheduled three-twenty washroom break. Since Sheldon wouldn’t talk his only hope was that Penny would open up. Her already subdued mood soured as soon as Raj brought up Sheldon although she claimed not to notice anything was amiss. When Sheldon returned to the office Penny excused herself so the two men could talk. As she left the room Raj caught a look in his lanky friend’s eyes—sadness—before Sheldon began questioning him about his work in a clinically detached tone.

“Leonard and Amy are happy. Penny and Sheldon are sad,” Raj said aloud as he sat back on his couch and ran a hand through his hair. “Sheldon and Penny were friends. Penny and Sheldon now
not friends? Why would Leonard and Amy be happy they weren’t friends? It makes no sen—” His
eyes widened. “No way.” He thought about how Sheldon covered for Penny’s clothing purchases.
“He must have bought them for her.” Then there was the moment when Sheldon sounded annoyed
at Penny and Leonard’s dinner date. “I thought I was hearing things.” Sheldon the boss and Penny
the secretary. Together. Maybe too together?

Suddenly Raj wished he was drunk.

Penny had had a hard day at the Cheesecake Factory and just wanted to reach her apartment and
collapse on the couch. As she got to her door and pulled out her keys she caught a motion on the
upper stairwell.

“Raj!” she yelped. The astrophysicist gave a little wave. “What the hell are you doing?” From
behind his back he brought forth a bottle of wine. Immediately Penny was suspicious. “This better
not have anything to do with Sheldon.” He shrugged his shoulders and came to the landing. Raj
took in Penny’s glare and with another shrug walked away. Penny rolled her eyes and opened her
door. The last thing she needed was to get into, well, whatever this was. As for the first thing…. With a sigh she realized what she’d like was to pour herself a drink but knew she was out. She
paused but for a moment before tossing her purse on the couch and sprinting for the stairs.

“Raj!” she called as she descended. “Raj, wait!”

She’d made it to the first landing only to find Raj leaning against the wall reading the bottle’s
label. He raised an inquisitive eyebrow although there was a smirk on his face. Penny could just
kick herself sometimes.

“Oh what the hell,” she growled and climbed back to her apartment followed by the astrophysicist.
“Get the glasses,” she said as he closed the door. “Let me just get out of this thing,” and began to
peel off her uniform as soon as her bedroom door was shut.

She returned a few minutes later, hair held off her neck by a clip and wearing her Hello Kitty shorts
and pink tank top. Raj held up a glass which she readily took as she sat next to him on the couch.

“Bottom’s up,” she said and both parties drained their glasses. “Okay Silent Bob, what’s the deal?”

“Deal?” asked Raj innocently as he refilled their glasses. “Can’t two friends get together after a
long day’s work, have a few drinks and casually chat about their lives?”

“I suppose,” the waitress said dubiously before taking a sip of wine.

“For instance,” he said lightly. “I really like your gray tweed cardigan jacket. It really suits you.”

“Thanks,” she replied with a smile.

“Nordstrom, right?”

Penny paused before answering. “I’m not sure,” she said at last. “I shop at a lot of places.”

“In fact I think it’s in their winter catalogue.”

“I only shop the discount racks,” Penny stammered before taking a sip.

“Penny, did Sheldon buy it for you?” Raj asked seriously. His friend froze before she swallowed
and slowly set her glass on the table.

“It’s not like that,” she said carefully. “He loaned me the money.”

“For shopping?” Raj was genuinely surprised.

“It was for the bet. I was supposed to dress nicely while I worked for him.”

“To see if you liked being an assistant?” Penny regarded him with a shocked expression which he countered by wiggling his eyebrows. “Penny, I’m not a genius like Sheldon but I am a genius.” It took a moment before Penny and he burst out laughing.

“Man, I need stupider friends,” chuckled Penny as she took up her glass and drank.

“So why all the secrecy?”

“I didn’t want Leonard to know,” she said slowly as she traced the rim of her glass with her finger. “He means well but he really ruined school for me the last time and I didn’t want him to blow this too.”

Raj was pleased. “You’re back in school?”

“Taking English until the clerical assistant course begins although Sheldon says I’ll be good enough to take the executive assistant course”—here her face fell—“well, if I keep being his assistant.” She drained her glass.

“Why wouldn’t you continue?” The astrophysicist refilled her glass.

“Don’t get me wrong, he’s taught me a lot but I can just as easily practice here at home on the laptop.” Perhaps her explanation would have seemed more credible to Raj had she looked at him as she spoke.

“There’s more to this than that,” he said evenly. “You’re not spending time with Sheldon and what time you have together at work is strained.”

“I’ve been crazy busy with my work schedules,” Penny said nervously. “It’s taking its toll and it’d be easier on me if I quit working for Sheldon before I—”

“He misses you.” Raj stared at Penny. “I think you miss him, too.”

“Look, I’m thankful for everything he’s done. Without Sheldon I’d be stuck at the Cheesecake Factory forever and now I’ve gotten a chance to get out of there.” Her green eyes met his. “I’ve got a second chance and I’m not going to blow it.”

“With Leonard?”

Penny paused. “What does Leonard have to do with this?”

“Isn’t he a part of your second chance?” Raj said, thankful for the quick thought.

“Of course he is,” she blushed. “Good Ol’ Leonard.”

Raj snorted. “That’s about as passionate as Kripke reciting Shakespeare.”

Penny scrunched her nose at the astrophysicist before taking a sip of wine. “With Leonard it’s more than passion.” Raj rolled his eyes. “We have sex,” she said adamantly. “Lots of sex.”
“Penny, Penny, Penny,” Raj said as he shook his head. “I might not have had as many relationships as you but even I know that sex doesn’t equal love.”

She squared her jaw. “I love Leonard.”

“I love Big Boy.”

“Ha, ha, Raj,” she said mockingly.

“This isn’t funny. At all.”

Again Penny set her glass on the table. “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

Raj cocked his head thoughtfully. “Sheldon’s a strange dude. Sometimes he does things and it takes his brain a while to catch up. He’s put a lot of time into you.” Raj looked knowingly at the Nebraskan. “He didn’t know how much of himself he did, too.”

“We’re friends,” she protested.

“I know.”

“He’s with Amy and she’s my friend and—why am I even talking about this?” She put a hand to her forehead and shook her head. “God, Raj, Amy gave me the ‘leave my man alone’ speech.”

“Really?”

She flumped against the back of the couch. “It was in ‘Amyese’ but I got the gist. What the frak was that about?” Penny turned her head to face Raj. “And now you’re all up about Sheldon and I not spending time together. I mean what the hell!”

“Just be happy,” he said quietly.

“I *am* happy!” she snapped then looked sheepishly away.

Raj got off the couch. “I’m sorry if I’ve upset you.” Pause. “At the very least don’t give up on Sheldon. If you’re his friend, stand up for him.”

Penny was confused. “What do you mean?”

“Leonard has put you off limits.”

“He *what*?”

“He basically told him to back off from you,” Raj said seriously.

“And Sheldon listened to him? He *never* listens to Leonard.”

Raj leaned against the apartment door with his arms folded across his chest. “I don’t think it’s that simple.” He had Penny’s full attention. “From the way they’ve been acting and looking at each other I’m willing to bet Leonard talked with Amy. It’s interesting how Amy has the talk with you and Leonard confronts Sheldon, don’t you think?”

Penny thought back to her conversation with Amy and how genuinely upset the neurobiologist was at the prospect of losing Sheldon.

“Son of a bitch,” she whispered.
“At the very least, don’t stop being Sheldon’s friend. If Leonard’s his ‘best friend’ he definitely needs you,” said Raj and with that he opened the door and gave Penny a nod before leaving her to own thoughts and the rest of the wine.

Since she had finished with the reports and Sheldon was out of the office Penny decided to conduct the monthly inventory. She grabbed the clip board and made her way around the room taking stock of things like file folders and printer paper. Then it was on to his desk drawers including the packs of staples, emergency tape and two boxes of multicolored thumbtacks even though he didn’t own a cork board.

“What are you doing?” said Sheldon as he opened the door to find Penny rooting around his desk.

“Inventario time,” she replied. “You don’t want to be caught short on Red Vines, do you?”

“Point.” He applied hand sanitizer as he made his way over to his whiteboard. After a few minutes of staring and calculating he gave out an exasperated sigh.

“Having problems with your string thingy?” Penny asked as she made a couple of notes on her inventory sheet.

“I don’t have time for social chit-chat,” he said testily. “That’s a strike.”

Penny pursed her lips. “I’m giving you a strike, too.”

“Oh?” he said absently.

“Since your return your negative attitude has permeated the room creating an atmosphere that is both less positive and less conducive to work,” she said matter-of-factly. Sheldon stared at her, shocked, as she reached into the drawer for a box. “Red Vine?” she said sweetly as she held out the package.

“Thank you.” He took a licorice. “You checked the best before dates?”

“Of course.” She patted the clip board. “Listen, I think we need to talk.” Immediately Sheldon was on edge and paused in his chewing.

“We’re at work. We don’t socialize at work.”

“Of course we do,” she said with a frown. “What do you think this is?”

“An interaction.” He finished his licorice and proceeded to clean his hands.

Penny hugged her clip board. “Okay, timeout. This isn’t working for me.” Sheldon’s stomach dropped. “It hasn’t been for a while.”

“You wish to terminate your employment?” he asked evenly although he couldn’t meet her eyes. His assistant sighed.

“Maybe the better question is: do you want me to quit?”

“You’ve mastered office protocol and have shown vast improvement in handling documents. You have the filing systems on your laptop. You can access them from your apartment if that’s what you want.”
“You’re avoiding the question,” Penny said with pursed lips. “If you want me to quit, just say so. You don’t have to accommodate me if you feel weird about it.” The physicist shrugged.

“It would aid your résumé if you stayed on,” he said with a twitchy mouth.

“Sheldon….”

“Dr. Cooper.”

“I’ll call you that when you start acting like a doctor,” she snapped and the neighbors glared at each other. “Over the past few months you’ve shown me what you do here and it’s amazing. Yeah, I don’t get it but I know enough to appreciate that you’re doing some impressive things. Here you’re Master of the Domain and no one tells Dr. Cooper what to do or what to say.” She smiled grimly. “I used to think that also applied to Sheldon but I guess I’m wrong.”

“It’s not that simple,” he said softly. Penny shook her head.

“It’s very simple, Sheldon. You’re my friend and I want what’s best for you. That’s what any friend wants for the other. If that means you want me to quit I’ll quit and that’s that. End of story.” Suddenly feeling less secure than she sounded Penny smiled stiffly and passed by the physicist and put the clipboard on her desk. “I’m going to make some copies,” she said in what she hoped was a light tone.

“Stay,” he said as she got to the door. Penny turned around and was caught in his blue gaze. “I want you to stay.”

“Fair enough,” she said with a grin. “Although I still have to use the photocopier.”

“Don’t disturb me for the rest of the morning,” he said in a more confident tone. “I need to correlate these numbers before lunch.”

“Go get ‘em, Tiger.”

“Indeed,” he replied and as one the physicist made for his board as his assistant left the room.

xTBBTx

“First we dine, then I kill him,” Penny muttered as she did a last check on her makeup.

At the sound of knocking at her door she put her compact in her purse, took up her keys and went to greet her date.

“Wow.” Leonard looked his girlfriend up and down, taking in her red dress, heeled shoes and killer smile. “You’re tall.”

“Call me ‘Mommy’ and I leave you in a ditch,” she said as she stepped out and locked her apartment.

The door to 4A opened and Amy and Sheldon exited. Immediately the physicist took in his neighbor’s attire, secretly approving of her decision to wear her hair up to show off her neck. Penny looked sophisticated and completely out of Leonard’s league.

“You look lovely,” Amy gushed to her friend before turning to Leonard. “I’ll live vicariously through you this evening.”

“Thanks,” he tentatively said and took Penny’s hand. “So where are you two off to tonight?”
“We’re going to the theater to see a documentary on volcanic activity in the south pacific. It should be hot.” The neurobiologist raised her eyebrows.

The couples made their way down the stairs and out into the parking lot.

“Have fun,” Penny said lightly, catching Sheldon’s eyes. He nodded and proceeded to Amy’s car.

“You’ll like Dr. Sorrenson,” gushed Leonard as he put the car in gear and backed up. “He’s really quite engaging.”

“‘Engaging’ like Spock would like him or ‘engaging’ like speaks like normal people do?”

“Both. Think Sheldon but with social skills, personality and a sense of humor.”

Penny frowned as her head turned to face her boyfriend.

“Sheldon has a sense of humor. Mind you it’s warped but it’s not like any of you are Gabriel Iglesias.”

“When did you get so close to Sheldon?” Leonard’s stomach no longer looked forward to eating.

“Hel-lo, I work with the guy.”

“But I live with him.”

She shrugged and looked out the side window. “Not my fault if you don’t see it.”

Leonard bit his lip and kept driving.

XxX

After finding the acoustic sweet spot Sheldon and Amy settled into their theater seats.

“Speaking of pumice rafts, NASA satellite images have revealed that the floating mass of pumice in the South Pacific originates with the underground Havre Seamount volcano,” said Sheldon before taking a sip of his Icee.

“It’ll be nice to see the pictures taken by the Maiken voyage on the big screen,” Amy replied happily. “It was quite fortuitous for the crew to be at the right place at the right time to see the birth of an island.”

The lights went down and Amy leaned her hand over to her boyfriend.

“I told you to get your own Icee,” he said. “I’m not sharing.”

“Your hand, Sheldon,” she said crisply.

He switched his drink to his left hand and dried his right on his slacks before taking the proffered hand. Amy intertwined their fingers and grinned as she watched the coming attractions.

XxX

Penny had to admit that for a physicist Dr. Sorrenson was a down to earth guy. His wife explained to Penny that they were amateur ballroom dancers and though he’d deny it to his grave he was a devoted fan of ‘Dancing with the Stars’.
“You know how it is,” said Sorrenson to Leonard. “Every lady has to be taken out for a little ‘D & D.’”

“Dungeons and Dragons?” replied the curly haired man.

“‘Dinner and dancing’,” amended Penny.

“Ah,” Leonard said with a flush. “Well, it’s an easy mistake to make.”

“Leonard’s not much for dancing,” the Nebraskan said smoothly as she smiled at her boyfriend. “We’re more of a dinner and movie kind of couple. It gives me a chance to get off my feet.”

“Oh?” asked Mrs. Sorrenson. “What keeps you up and about?”

“I’m an assistant to Dr. Cooper.”

“She’s also a waitress,” Leonard blurted out.

“I’m a Jane of All Trades at present,” she said evenly although there was color on her cheeks. “I’m waitressing and working for Dr. Cooper while I’m in school.”

Leonard was shocked. “You’re in school? When did you start school?”

“September,” she replied in a light tone.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Dr. Cooper,” Sorrenson interjected diplomatically. “Dr. Sheldon Cooper?”

“You got it,” grinned Penny.

“Well, you must have some stories coming out of that office.”

“Yes, Penny, why don’t you tell us what goes on in Sheldon’s office?” Leonard said in too saccharine a voice.

Penny cleared her throat and did her best to ignore her boyfriend. “So how do you know Dr. Cooper?”

“I remember meeting Sheldon when he was working on his doctorate. Truly a remarkable young man.” Sorrenson turned to his wife. “Think of Einstein lecturing his nephew on the Newtonian properties of soap bubbles in reverse as it’s the eight year old telling him what physics is all about.”

“A child prodigy. How interesting,” remarked Mrs. Sorrenson. “I hear they can be quite difficult to work with.”

“Not really,” smirked Leonard. “Once you get past the overinflated ego, the condescending tone and pumice-like abrasiveness he’s really quite charming.”

“He’s not that bad,” chided Penny. She addressed the Sorrensons. “He’s precise and demanding, not just of others but himself. And he’s really brilliant.”

“How would you know?” countered Leonard, garnering a dark glare from Penny. “You couldn’t tell the difference between Sheldon’s whiteboard and mine at the apartment.”
“Excuse me,” said the waiter as he arrived at the table. “Would you like more coffee, the bill or will you be transferring to the lounge?”

“Dancing,” said Mrs. Sorrenson a little too enthusiastically.

“Transfer the bill,” her husband said as he gave the waiter his credit card.

“Thank you,” said Penny. “The dinner was lovely.”

“Time to dance some of it off,” winked the older man.

XxX

“That was most informative,” Sheldon said as the neurobiologist drove them back to his apartment. “Perhaps I haven’t been completely fair to the geologists for insisting their work is analogous to children playing in a sandbox without the addition of dinky cars.” Here he gave a gaspy laugh. “Who could ever come up with a whacky idea like that?”

“I’ll have to take your word for it. Mother never let me near the cars because they were called ‘dinky’.” She paused. “On an unrelated topic, would you like me to come up to your apartment?”

“It’s late,” he replied. “And Leonard has to take me to the comic book store tomorrow morning before our scheduled paintball match with the chemistry department.”

“That hasn’t affected Leonard’s plan,” she commented as they pulled in front of the building.

“Yes, well, he isn’t critical to the team’s success so it shouldn’t matter if he’s tired or not. Of the lot I’m the most proficient player. Well, as long as we don’t take Penny into account.”

“Which we aren’t,” Amy said quickly.

Sheldon gave an awkward smile and unbuckled his seatbelt. “Thank you for this evening.”

“Sheldon,” his girlfriend said as she put a hand on his arm to hold him back. “It’s time we altered our valediction to include a goodnight kiss.”

“On what grounds? We’ve been saying goodnight like this for two years and it’s worked for us. Why buck the system?” he twanged.

“We’re a couple. It’s a non-optional social convention.”

“You know I’m not a conventional person.”

Amy rolled her eyes. “Sheldon, it’s imperative to our identity as a cohesive unit.”

Their eyes met and she raised an expectant eyebrow. Sheldon’s mouth twitched before he leaned over and she kissed his lips.

“Thank you, Sheldon,” she said happily.

“Goodnight, Amy,” he replied and got out of the car.

He took out his keys and entered the building. As he ascended the stairs he noted that his lips felt tingly and he rubbed them with the back of his hand. “Oh Good Lord,” he said in disgust before taking out and applying his sanitizer. What was he thinking touching his mouth with a filthy hand?
As he got to the fourth floor landing his eyes inadvertently turned to Penny’s door. He checked his watch and surmised that the dinner party must have concluded by now and she was out on the dance floor with Leonard. Hopefully she’d managed to compensate for his diminutive stature as—her soft hand in his as her hips pressed his—she hadn’t practiced in her heels.

Sheldon entered 4A and locked the door before venturing to his room to prepare for his evening shower. Again he rubbed his lips and wondered if he was allergic to Amy’s lip gloss but then realized she no longer wore any since he mentioned it made her lips look too slippery. Of course when he first met the neurobiologist she didn’t wear lip gloss.

“Penny,” he tsked as he closed the bathroom door and proceeded to strip. Meeting the Nebraskan had altered Amy to no end with the addition of lip gloss and makeup and hand holding and goodnight kisses. He filled the wash dish with antibacterial soap and warm water before immersing his feet. Not that the Amy he knew had completely vanished. They still conversed and he enjoyed the intellectual conversation although it would be nice if they were more frequent than they were as of late.

He stepped into the tub and commenced with the shower; the first thing he did was immerse he head and wash his face, his fingers again rubbing his lips. His relationship with Amy was superb when it was of the mind. The only problem was that she now wanted more and as her boyfriend he was expected to provide. Aside from his family members kissing him on the cheek he’d only been kissed by two women a total of four times: Beverley’s kiss had shocked him; he was fascinated by Amy’s drunken smooch as it was an experience outside of their defined paradigm; his third was a mistake as he realized too late that buying the tiara grossly overcompensated for his previous insensitivity.

Tonight’s kiss had been an obligation and of the four he found it the least desirable. He paused while lathering his belly as it struck him that maybe the problem was that he wasn’t attracted to Amy ‘in that way’. More to the point he’d never been attracted to anyone in that way.

Sheldon scowled. ’That’s not true.’ He remembered the first day he saw Penny in her apartment with her baby blue top and blunt cut hair.

“Aesthetics,” he spat and rinsed himself under the water before turning off the tap and stepping out. The neighbors had little in common. It was merely a physical response to her comeliness but he was better than Leonard, Raj and Howard. He didn’t succumb, wasn’t wrapped around her finger every time the Nebraskan batted her green eyes.

After drying himself off and cleaning the tub a now pajama and housecoated Sheldon made his way to the living room, rubbing his lips as he sat at the computer. He fired off an email to the neurobiologist before loading up a scanned copy of The Relationship Agreement.

He began to read….

XxX

“Well that was nice,” Leonard said overenthusiastically as he drove. “Don’t you think?”

“You are such an ass, you know that?” Penny growled.

“What did I do?”

“You just had to tell the Sorrensons that I was a waitress, didn’t you?”

“Well you are a waitress,” he countered.
“I’m also Sheldon’s clerical assistant. Why couldn’t you have just stuck with that?”

Leonard frowned. “Don’t you mean ‘Dr. Cooper’?” He shook his head. “God, I couldn’t believe you kept calling him that.”

“He is my employer,” she snapped.

“He’s your ‘whackadoodle’ neighbor! Something which you seem to be forgetting.”

“And he’s your *friend*,” Penny said in a raised voice. “Something which *you’re* forgetting.” The physicist was silent. “I have no idea what’s wrong with you. Why are you so hung up on Sheldon? Is it because he’s helping me?”

“I should be helping you.”

“Because you’re my boyfriend? Christ, Leonard, you’re not my keeper.” Here she scowled. “And where did you get off telling Sheldon to stay away from me?”

He glanced at the Nebraskan. “He told you?”

“No. I figured something was going on. Hel-lo, Penny’s got some brains too, y’know.”

For the life of her she’d never rat Raj out.

“I never said you didn’t.”

“You only treat me like I don’t.” She rolled her eyes. “God, now I can’t even pick my own friends.”

“You can have as many friends as you want.” A pause. “Just not Sheldon.”

“I’m not quitting and I’m not going to ignore him, Leonard.”

“If it’s about the money I’ll hire you.”

“To do what? Realign your laser?”

“I’d find something for you to do.” He stopped at a red light and turned to his girlfriend. “Why can’t it be enough that I don’t want you to be with Sheldon?”

“I’m not ‘with’ Sheldon I’m with you, though at this moment I’m really wondering why,” she said, exasperated. “I can’t believe you’re jealous of Sheldon.”

“I’m not jealous,” he pouted as the light turned green and he proceeded. “I’ve just noted that you’re spending an inordinate amount of time with him when you should”—he caught her glare—“could be with me.”

“Maybe because there’s only so many hours we can have sex.”

“What?”

“That’s all we ever do, Leonard: fuck or watch movies. When’s the last time we’ve been at the boardwalk or dancing or, God, just about anything?”

“And your solution to ‘I’m bored, Leonard’ is to not tell me and hang out with Sheldon?”
“Why are you making this sound so dirty? I’m not sleeping with him, Leonard! I said I loved you, didn’t I?”

Leonard pulled into his spot in the parking lot and killed the engine. Immediately Penny got out of the car.

“Penny, wait,” he called as she stormed into the building. He locked the car and ran to catch up. “Penny, I’m sorry,” he whined.

“Just leave it, Leonard.” She stomped up the rest of the stairs, the physicist following close behind, and entered her apartment, closing the door without a second look.

“Way to go, Leonard,” he muttered to himself as he opened the door to 4A and saw Sheldon standing by the refrigerator pouring milk into a mug.

“I see your evening has concluded unsatisfactorily,” mused the lanky man.

“Why do you say that?” replied Leonard, face reddening.

“You’re here instead of at Penny’s. It’s my understanding, given your usual pattern of behavior, that a ‘night out’ culminates in coitus unless something disastrous occurs.”

“Oh go to hell!” Leonard stormed off to his room.

“Right again, Dr. Cooper,” said Sheldon as he placed his mug in the microwave.

xTBBTx

Sheldon checked his watch as he raised his hand to the door. Three, two, one.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Silence.

He knocked again.

Silence.

He knocked aga—

“What, Sheldon?” Penny squawked as she practically tore open the door. Sheldon took in her white tank top, blue shorts and wildly messed up hair.

“Good morning Penny,” he said amiably although he did take a step back for safety’s sake. “It’s eleven o’clock.”

“And?”

“You said not to knock before eleven.”

“I know that. I mean why are you knocking now?”

“Stuart texted me that my ‘Flash of Two Worlds’ model has come in and I need a ride to the comic
book store.”

Penny sighed. “Why can’t Leonard take you?”

“After last night I decided not to bother him,” the lanky man said diplomatically. “This leaves me without a ride and hence requiring your assistance.”

“I don’t feel like going out, Sheldon.”

“You don’t have to go out. You can wait in the car.”

Penny rolled her eyes as she closed the door.

Sheldon paused. “I take it you’re not getting ready to go?” Another pause. “I guess she’s not,” and with that returned to his apartment to don his bus pants.

“I have no idea why people pursue relationships with all the personal turmoil they cause,” he tutted after locking his door and descending the stairs. He’d have to hurry if the bus was on schedule. Of course the likelihood of that was slim given that it was a Sunday but he didn’t want to chance it. He walked the half-block until he came to the bus stop. As he checked his watch Sheldon realized he was annoyed. Thanks to Penny the East Texan would be off schedule unless he cut his visit short at the comic book store.

As he was in the middle of rehearsing his reprimand Sheldon heard an engine roar and turned to see a car hopping the curb towards him.

Mama’s blue eyes looking at him in the crib—Meemaw emerging from the kitchen with a plate of cookies—sitting on Pop-Pop’s lap explaining Newtonian Time—Winning the Stevenson Award—Running from neighborhood bullies—seeing Heidelberg from the airplane—holding Flash 123 in his hands—Carl Sagan at the court hearing—the look on Leonard’s face as he talked about the electric can opener—Zazzy the cat—baby blue t-shirt and green eyes—Blackness.

XxX

Penny waited until the fourth ring before she answered Leonard’s call. ’Let the bastard stew.’

“Hello Leonard.”

“Penny, you have to get to Huntington Memorial,” he said in a tone that immediately dropped her stomach. “Sheldon’s been in an accident.”

“Omigod.”

“It doesn’t look good.”

“Okay,” she whispered and hung up the phone. She grabbed her keys and purse and left the apartment.

'Ohmigod please….'

XxX

The emergency room was crowded as Penny entered. Not seeing Leonard she approached the information desk.

“I’m here to see Sheldon Cooper,” she said in a calm voice that belied her level of stress. “I was told he was in an accident.” The attendant clicked on his keyboard. “Go through the doors and turn
left. There’s a waiting room about half way down the hall,” he said. The Nebraskan thanked him and numbly pushed open the door and walked.

“This isn’t happening,” she softly said to herself. ‘This is your fault Penelope!’

She saw closed double doors ahead labeled ‘Step Down Ward’. To the right was a little room and as soon as she entered Amy sprung up from a chair and enveloped her bestie in a hug.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” sniffled the neurobiologist.

“When did this happen?” Penny croaked as she stroked her friend’s head. “What happened?”

“He was hit by a car this morning,” Leonard said in a somber voice. “I had my phone off so I didn’t get the message until a few hours ago.”

“Why didn’t you call me?” Penny guided Amy to the chairs and they both sat.

“I’ve been busy with the admission and calling Mrs. Cooper and Amy and Sheldon was in surgery and—”

“Omigod,” Penny mumbled.

Amy took Penny’s hand and the two women sat in silence. For the first time in quite a while the Nebraskan prayed.

Forty five minutes went by and other people, traumatized by the fates of their own loved ones, came and went. The phone on the side table was a direct line to the ward. Every time it rang the tension in the room elevated when Leonard picked up the phone before passing it off as the call didn’t concern Sheldon.

By the time Howard, Bernadette and Raj arrived they had the room to themselves.

“Did you hear anything?” Bernadette asked Leonard as she sat and took Amy’s other hand.

“Only that he was out of surgery,” he replied. “But that was hours ago. Then they moved Amy and me to this waiting room and….”

Penny’s grip on Amy’s hand tightened and she found it hard to breathe.

“It’s not a good sign, is it?” she said quietly, already knowing the answer. She looked to her boyfriend who shook his head.

“Mrs. Cooper?” asked Howard.

“On her way,” said Amy as she loosened her hands to grab some Kleenex from her purse.

“She’s taking a cab from the airport,” confirmed Leonard.

The phone on the end table rang and Penny just about jumped out of her seat. Knowing that they were the only ones in there Leonard prepared himself before answering.

“Hello? … This is Leonard Hofstadter. …Okay.” He hung up the phone and turned to his friends. “Sheldon’s in his room. They’ve just got to clean him up and then we can…we can see him in about fifteen minutes.”

Time went by and Penny felt each tick as her eyes began to water. ‘This is all my fault.’ She sniffled
and felt Amy’s fingers entwine her own. The two women, eyes red, looked at each other.

“It’s time,” said Leonard and as a group they made their way to the double doors where he rang the bell. With a buzz the doors unlocked and swung open. Quietly they passed through and walked a short corridor until they entered a wide area with a circular nurse’s station in the center and little rooms on either side.

“He’s in room three,” said a curly-haired nurse.

As she entered the room tears immediately fell from Penny’s eyes as she took in Sheldon: his head a mass of bandages and the right side of his face was so swollen he was nearly unrecognizable. Amy went to his side and took his hand.

“Hello, Sheldon,” she said brokenly. “We’re all here.” The friends gave a sad greeting save for Raj, who started crying. Penny went to the other side of Sheldon, minding the tubes and cords that led to an I.V., heart monitor and oxygen cart. She wanted to take his hand but his entire arm was wrapped so she didn’t want to take the chance of hurting him. Instead she lightly caressed the bandages, her eyes unwavering from his face.

The curly-haired nurse came into the room and closed the curtain behind her.

“I’m Trisha,” she said kindly. “I’ll be Sheldon’s nurse.” She looked around the room. “Is there family present?”

“His mother’s on her way from Texas,” Leonard said hoarsely. “I’m his emergency contact. His girlfriend,” indicating Amy with his head. “And the rest are friends.”

She nodded. “I can’t get too specific without family. How long before his mother arrives?”

Leonard checked his watch. “About two hours.”

“Sheldon was hit by a car this morning. He’s had surgery to fix broken bones and relieve swelling. You’re all more than welcome to stay. I’ll be at the desk. Please don’t hesitate to call me if you need anything.” Nobody said anything and Trisha quietly left the room.

Silence save the rush of oxygen through the ventilator.

XxX

“Sweet Jesus,” breathed Mary Cooper as she stepped into the room. Immediately Amy got out of the chair by Sheldon’s side to make room for his mother. Mary thanked her with her eyes before turning her attention to her son. “Oh Shelly, look at what yuh’ve done,” she said softly as she brushed his cheek.

The curtain by the door moved aside and Trisha entered followed by an older woman wearing dark clothes and a crucifix.

“Mrs. Cooper?” Mary nodded. “I’m Sheldon’s nurse, Trisha. This is Reverend Jackie Taylor. We’d like to talk to you, if that’s okay.” She looked at the gang. “Would you like privacy or—”

“They’re his friends,” Mary said. “Come to bear witness on muh boy.”

Trisha nodded. “Sheldon was admitted to the hospital at eleven twenty three this morning after being struck by a car. He’s sustained multiple fractures to his right femur, pelvis and shoulder as well as several ribs and a forearm but what’s of most concern is his head wound.” She cleared her
throat. “His skull is fractured in several places and there was swelling of the brain. When someone comes in with this kind of injury we do a series of tests including MRIs and CT scans to determine the extent of the injury and measure brain activity and pressure. Activity was noted and he was rushed into surgery to relieve the swelling.” Trisha took a breath. She really hated this part. “During the procedure the doctors noted trauma to the right side of his brain. Over the next few hours we continued to monitor Sheldon’s brain activity, which declined significantly.”

“How significantly?” Leonard asked quietly.

“EEG tests came back negative. There’s no discernable activity. Subsequently we performed reflex brainstem tests which also came back negative. Finally we turned off his ventilator to see if he could breathe on his own but that, too, was negative.”

Mary was ashen as she continued to stroke Sheldon’s face. “Is he in pain?”

“Unlikely,” said the nurse. “We have three options here: we can wean Sheldon off the pain medication and transfer him to medication that will treat his body’s restlessness; we can continue with the pain medication but the side effect is that it’ll lower his blood pressure, which is low already; or we can turn off the ventilator and let nature take its course.”

Penny let out a breath she didn’t know she was holding. If she was hearing what she thought she was the nurse was offering Sheldon a way out. He didn’t need the pain meds. She looked at her friend lying in bed.

“There’s no chance is there?” she squeaked.

“I’m afraid not,” Trisha said softly.

“Let’s pray,” Mary said and turned to the Reverend. “If yuh wouldn’t mind?”

“Of course not,” the older woman said. “Let us join hands.” They all complied. “Don’t forget Sheldon. Bring him into the circle.” Penny reached down and took his hand in hers. “Oh Heavenly Father, we come to you on behalf of our beloved Sheldon. Thank You Lord for bringing him into our lives. Now is a trying time for his loved ones, Lord. May Your Love give them strength in this, their time of need. Bless Sheldon and his mother. Bless his friends. Blessed Thou art. In Jesus’ name, Amen.” Bernadette crossed herself as the rest mumbled their ‘amens’.

“Mrs. Cooper?” asked Trisha gently.

“Muh boy’s time is short,” said Mary. “Ah want it to be peaceful.” She raised her red-rimmed eyes —eyes which looked positively ancient to Penny. “Ah don’t want him in pain.” The nurse nodded and left the room.

“Before the medication is administered perhaps we could take a moment to say our private goodbyes,” said the Reverend gently. “Mrs. Cooper, we’ll give you time with your son.”

“Thank yuh,” Mary said.

The gang moved to the hall. Penny was absolutely heartsick. ’This can’t be happening.’ This was some kind of nightmare that she’d wake up from and she’d go running into 4A and hug her whackadoodle neighbor. Her friend.

A few minutes later Mary came out of the room. She gave a brave smile to the group.

“Amy, perhaps you’d like to go in next?” offered Leonard. The neurobiologist nodded and went
behind the curtain.

Penny felt anxious as the minutes ticked by until Amy emerged, face blotchy and eyes puffy. Leonard gave his girlfriend a nod, squeezed her hand and led her into the room. Immediately they went to Sheldon’s side and she took up his hand.

“Hi Sheldon,” she said weakly before a sob escaped her lips. “I’m so sorry!” She turned and Leonard took her into his arms.

“I’m here,” he said softly. “Let it out.”

“You don’t understand, Leonard. He came to me this morning for a ride and I said ‘no’. This is all my fault.”

“No it isn’t,” he said soothingly. “Penny, this is no one’s fault. Not yours. Not Sheldon’s. It just is.” He held her close. “We can’t leave the rest waiting too long, Pen.”

Nodding, the Nebraskan pulled away and turned to the lanky man.

“He’s gone, isn’t he?” she whispered as she brushed Sheldon’s head.

“Yes,” Leonard replied as he looked over his prostrated friend with sad eyes. “We’re going through the motions with the pain meds for his mother’s sake.”

Penny sniffled. “Hey Sweetie.” She choked back a sob. “It’s Penny and Leonard.” She leaned over and gave Sheldon a kiss on the forehead. “It’s almost over, Moonpie,” she whispered. “We love you so much.” She turned to her boyfriend. “I can’t say goodbye.”

“Then don’t,” he said. Penny nodded and looked one last time at Sheldon before Leonard led her from the room.

Amy stepped forward and the two women sobbed as they hugged each other. All Penny wanted to do was be brave for her friend but her body ached with sorrow.

After Howard, Bernadette and Raj had paid their respects everyone went back into the room. Trisha entered carrying three syringes.

“We’ve got a line with clear fluid in Sheldon,” she said gently as she undid the cap on his I.V. “That’s to make sure things continue to circulate.” She took off the first syringe cap and loaded the medication into the line; she did the same with the second and then the third. “I’ll be back later,” she said quietly and departed.

As the hours wore on Penny lost count of how many times Trisha came into the room with a set of needles. What she did keep track of was the clock. It was eleven thirty and Sheldon was still here.

“He’s always been stubborn,” Mary said wistfully as she held her son’s hand.

“Strong heart,” agreed Leonard.

Around twelve thirty Sheldon began making a wheezing sound and Mary pressed the call button.

“What’s wrong with his breathin’?” she asked Trisha as the nurse arrived.

“A disturbance in the airway. I can give him some medication to clear that.”

“No,” Mary said. “No more drugs.” The room was still. “The Lord don’t need Shelly to be on
machines tuh work a miracle. He’s in His hands now. Turn off the machine.”

“You’re sure,” Trisha confirmed. Mary straightened her shoulders.

“Send muh baby home.”

The nurse went to the machine and clicked off the master switch and suddenly the room was silent. Penny’s eyes were on Sheldon’s lips, hoping, praying they’d open for a breath but no breath came. Trisha pulled out her stethoscope, put it to Sheldon’s chest and listened. She checked her watch before looking at Mary.

“He’s gone,” she said simply. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Suddenly the room was alive as en masse the group began to cry.

Sheldon Lee Cooper was dead.

XxX

“Sheldon Cooper,” said a man’s voice.

“Dr. Sheldon Cooper,” Sheldon replied as he looked around at the white nothingness that surrounded him. “Where am I?” He sensed rather than heard someone behind him and turned to see a blond haired man in his forties wearing an untucked white button down shirt open to the chest, white pants rolled to the knees and white loafers.

“At a crossroads,” the Man replied.

The physicist wracked his brain. “I was in an accident,” he said slowly. “Am I in a coma?”

“You were.”

Suddenly it dawned on Sheldon. “I’m dead?” He gawked at himself as he took in his red Flash t-shirt, blue thermal and brown plaid pants.

“You’ve crossed over,” the Man said cryptically.

The East Texan was curious. “Over to where? Where am I?”

The Man smiled. “It’s decision time, Dr. Cooper. I offer you true knowledge of the origins and workings of the universe.”

“Or?”

“What lies through that door.” Sheldon turned and saw an ordinary white door.

“Which is?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” the Man said with a shrug.

“A choice between knowledge and ignorance,” muttered Sheldon. “In this case, as I have all my life, I choose knowledge.”

The Man smiled and extended his hand. “Come with me, Dr. Cooper,” he said, and the two men walked as the door behind them faded away.
**End of Part One**

xTBBTx

Wikipedia: Eccentricity (behavior)

Maiken Voyage: Hoax-Slayer: Floating volcanic stones and new island
Mary Cooper decided that Sheldon would have his funeral in California and a memorial in Galveston where his ashes would be laid to rest. Her first inclination was to get him as far away from the heathen State as possible but thought better of it as his friends were all here. Aside of his family there was no one in Galveston. No friends. No colleagues. Besides, if she was already going to be in trouble with her son for having a funeral service she could at the very least accommodate the locale.

It was twenty five minutes after ten when Penny and Leonard arrived at the funeral home. As the funeral assistant took their coats the waitress looked around at the dark paneled walls and red carpeting. The whole place had a solemn quality to it that made the experience all too surreal, as if the hallway led to an otherworldly place. Perhaps it did.

The couple noted the various objects hanging on the walls as they walked the corridor. Sheldon was resting in the larger room since the funeral would be held in there.

“Ready?” Leonard asked softly. In response she squeezed his hand and together they entered the room. Rows of chairs were before them and at the front was Amy, Mary and the rest of Sheldon’s family. They were invited to the funeral home a half-hour before the general public so they could have time alone with Sheldon.

Sheldon.

Penny’s eyes registered the coffin at the end of the room but turned away before they could focus on what was inside. Who was inside.

“Leonard,” Mary said warmly. “Penny. Please don’t be shy.” They approached Mrs. Cooper, who took both of their hands. “Thank you for comin’.” She turned to her daughter. “Yuh, of course, know Missy.”

“Hello again,” the tall brunette said with a bit of a smile. She stood beside a man Penny instantly recognized as Sheldon’s brother. He was stalkier and about two inches shorter but as he approached his mother Penny could see he had blue eyes like Sheldon although not as vibrant.

“George, this is Leonard, Shelly’s roommate, an’ Penny, their neighbor,” Mary said.

“So ah finally get tuh meet the man brave enough tuh live with muh brother,” George said with a grin as he shook the physicist’s hand. He turned to Penny and nodded. “Ma’am.”

“He was a handful but I didn’t mind,” replied Leonard.

Mary stood aside. “Best we let them go pay their respects. There’ll be plenty of time for chattin’
Penny grasped Leonard’s hand and slowly they made their way to the coffin. She took in every aspect of the wooden box: from the grain of the wood to the white color of the satin inside. And its length. Suck it up, Penelope. Her eyes lowered to Sheldon’s still form. He wore the black suit she helped him pick out to accept his award. His hands rested one atop the other and Penny marveled that even they were coated in makeup. Sheldon would have a fit.

But it was his face, his light pallor masked by a colored base to hide the bruising, that broke her heart. It wasn’t the obvious distortion to his features caused by the accident but rather his lips which were positioned in a little smile that held not a drop of condescension or awkwardness. They were comfortably at peace, allowing Penny to take in their delicacy.

“They did a good job,” Leonard said softly. Penny nodded before reaching out and touching Sheldon’s hand. It felt nothing like it did at the hospital. It was empty.

She gave the coffin a series of three knocks only Leonard and she could hear.

“Sheldon,” she whispered lovingly.

Knock Knock Knock “Sheldon.”

Knock Knock Knock “Sheldon.”

Her breath hitched and Leonard squeezed her hand. She turned to see him, his eyes red as he stared at his friend.

“I’m going to miss you,” he whispered sadly.

Now it was Penny’s turn to provide strength with a hand squeeze even as tears streaked down her face. After a moment more the couple stepped softly to the side, taking in the various flower arrangements. To distract herself she read the place cards from Mary and family, Raj, Bernadette and Howard, George Jr. and family, Amy, the Caltech physics department and Leonard and hers. There was a simple arrangement of baby’s breath and dainty little blue flowers tucked in the corner at the foot of the coffin. Penny let out a soft ‘oh’ as she read the card pinned to the foil:

‘I love you, Moonpie. Meemaw’

“Meemaw,” she said. “He loved his Meemaw.”

“I know,” Leonard replied and gently led Penny away as out of the corner of his eye he spotted Howard, Bernadette and Raj arrive.

“Come on, bestie,” Amy said with a little smile. “Let’s go get you cleaned up.” Both women held hands and were off to the washroom.

“God, I’m a wreck,” Penny said as she looked in the mirror and dabbed her eyes with a tissue.

“Never mind. None of us are at our peak,” Amy said evenly.

Penny regarded her friend. “How are you holding up?”

“As can be expected.” A tight smile crossed Amy’s face. “I was a basket case last night.” She shook her head. “You’d think being a neurobiologist would make me tougher stuff. After all I dissect brains for a living.” Suddenly Amy looked incredibly sad. “What’s doubly tragic about this later.”
is that Sheldon wanted his brain given to science. Unfortunately, given the extent of the injury, it was not to be.” Her eyes caught her bestie’s in the mirror. “I feel like I’ve let him down,” she said, tears flowing from her eyes.

“Oh, Ames,” Penny cooed softly and held her friend. “You didn’t let anyone down, least of all Sheldon.”

“He was ready,” the neurobiologist said as she stood back and grabbed a tissue from the box. Penny looked at her questioningly. “The night before the accident we kissed.”

“Oh wow,” the waitress said.

“He later emailed me, saying he wanted to meet up the next day. Sadly it wasn’t meant to be.” Amy blew her nose. “So much for my four year plan to matrimony.”

“Shit happens,” sighed Penny.

“Your language isn’t Sheldon-approved,” countered Amy.

“Like I said before: his ken can kiss my Barbie.”

The two women chuckled.

XxX

“You know this is improbable,” Sheldon said to the Man as they walked.

“And yet here we are,” the Man chuckled.

“Yes, well, I said improbable not impossible as obviously it isn’t since we’re here,” sniffed the physicist. Out of the nothingness ahead of him he spotted something. “What’s that?”

“Where we’re going.”

Sheldon was surprised as they came up to a whiteboard complete with a dry erase marker and eraser.

“*This* is the font of all knowledge?” he scoffed.

“*You never know unless you try,”* the Man shrugged. “You spent a lot of time using boards haven’t you?”

“Yes, and I wasn’t planning on spending my afterlife using them, either.” Sheldon cocked his head. “Of course I wasn’t expecting there to be an afterlife so I suppose even one spent at a whiteboard is more than I could hope for.” He picked up a marker and drew two triangular brackets that pointed into the center and attached them with a wavy line which he labeled with a ‘y’. “From the Feynman Diagrams,” he said simply. “The electron and positron annihilate.” He pointed to the wavy line. “Thus producing a photon.” He paused and a little smile came to his face. “This was the first bit of physics I demonstrated to Pop-Pop on my crayola writing pad. He was so impressed I tore off the sheet and gave it to him.”

“How old were you?”

“Four.”

“Impressive.”
“It was only a reproduction,” shrugged Sheldon. “A trained monkey could do the same.”

“It’s still brilliant.”

“No, Feynman’s idea was brilliant.” Sheldon erased the board and wrote out a particularly complex series of equations. “This is the path integral formulation. It defines the probability amplitude to go from one field configuration to another.” He stood back and regarded the board. “Magnificent, isn’t it?”

“Yes it is,” said the Man as he looked beyond the whiteboard. Sheldon followed his eyes and gawked at the sight of two balls floating in the air with three pulsing lines attached between them: one curved like an arc of a circle, one wavy and one a scribbly mess.

“Oh my,” the physicist breathed and walked past the whiteboard to the objects ahead. “These are three of the paths that contribute to the quantum amplitude for a particle moving from point A”—he indicated the ball to the left—“at some time to point B”—he pointed to the other ball—“at some other time.” He regarded the Man. “How did this get here?”

“You formulated it.”

“Yes, on the board not here. I didn’t create this.”

“Are you sure?” the Man smiled as Sheldon returned and erased the board. Immediately the balls disappeared.

“Remarkable. With this I can finally see moving particles the way they were meant to be seen.” Here he smirked as he picked up the marker. “Who needs to see the Large Hadron Collider? I can make my own Higgs boson.”

The air beyond came to life as two balls collided and decayed immediately into four visible lines of hadrons and electrons.

Sheldon laughed aloud. “I stand corrected. This is remarkable.” He called out to the air: “Show me a graviton.” The model before him changed and the physicist was beside himself with laughter. “I *knew* it! I knew you existed! Show me how you work.” He felt a tug in his fingers and then the marker shot out to the board and began to write out a formula. As it wrote the model kept up, demonstrating each step in the equation.

“I’ll leave you to it,” the Man said with a chuckle as he stepped away.

For the second time in his life Sheldon was truly happy.

XxX

Sheldon’s family and Amy came out from behind the curtain that partitioned the coffin from the rest of the room. The neurobiologist came and sat next to her bestie and dabbed her eyes with a Kleenex. Penny rubbed her friend’s shoulder. A few minutes later the curtain was pulled back to reveal Sheldon’s closed coffin. The Pastor came to the podium.

“Friends,” he said. “We’ve come to mark the end and new beginning for our brother, Sheldon Cooper.”

'*Doctor* Sheldon Cooper', thought Penny.

“For centuries people have taken comfort from the Holy Scripture and in particular the Twenty-
third Psalm. It is among the most familiar, so much so that even people who are not religious or very knowledgeable about Scripture recognize these words.” Here the Pastor gazed at the crowd Mary had warned would be full of scientists. “There are many images in this Psalm which hold particular meaning such as the verse: Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. The Bible does not say, ‘God will keep you from danger,’ but rather it describes that there will come times, and they come for all of us, when we feel like we are walking through a dark, dangerous valley -- a ‘valley of the shadow of death.’”

As the Pastor talked Penny felt more annoyed than comforted. This was Sheldon’s funeral and yet there was no mention of science. Sheldon was all about the science. This service might make Mrs. Cooper feel better but it all but erased Sheldon’s beliefs. A scowl came to her face when the Pastor referred again to Sheldon by name. ’He doesn’t even call him ‘Doctor’ . He wasn’t Sheldon’s buddy. He never knew him.’ The waitress looked around her. People she’d never seen before today—Leonard had introduced them as Sheldon’s colleagues at work—were there. Hell even Kripke and Leslie Winkle were there. Did any of them really know Sheldon? She thought of her friend with his poop journals that read like science books and yet laughed and screamed as they roared through Space Mountain before he got sick on her shoe. A little smile came to her face. Sheldon really was bigger than life. No wonder he was such an egotistical pain in the ass. He was right: he was homo novus.

“I’d like to now invite Leonard Hofstadter to say a few words,” said the Pastor. The curly haired man got up and came to the podium. He cleared his throat as he pulled out some cue cards from his pocket.

“Mrs. Cooper,” he began. “Missy, George, Amy, friends and esteemed colleagues. It is with great sadness that I stand in front of you today to celebrate the life of my friend—my best friend—Dr. Sheldon Cooper. His life was taken away from us too soon and it is hard to understand why tragic things like this happen. Statistically speaking there is an eight thousand to one chance of being struck by a motor vehicle—I imagine even less given that Sheldon was standing on the sidewalk at the time.” Pause. “Although it dawns on me that this entire point is irrelevant.” Leonard nervously looked over his cards and flipped a couple to the back of the pile. “Instead, let’s celebrate Sheldon’s life and remember all of the remarkable things he accomplished and how extraordinary his life was…."

xTBBTx

“Lord, ah swear Shelly has more toys now than he did when he was a child,” Mary Cooper said with a smile as she packed the documents Leonard had prepared for her in her suitcase. After her children went back to Texas Mary had stayed in Sheldon’s room and went through legal paperwork with Leonard.

“He sure loved his super heroes,” agreed Penny with a little smile. If it wasn’t for Mary’s presence in the room the waitress didn’t know if she’d have the guts to enter on her own.

“Remind Leonard that he’s tuh provide some mementoes tuh Raj and the little Jewish fella.” Here Mary smiled. “Yuh pick somethin’ too.” She closed her suitcase and set it on the floor. “Ah already told him tuh put some things aside for Shelly’s nephews. Except for his personal effects, which ah want returned, sell the rest and whatever don’t get sold gets donated to the Salvation Army.”

“Will do,” Penny said. She hesitated a moment before closing the bedroom door. Mary cocked an eyebrow but said nothing.
“Sheldon gave me some money for school,” Penny began as she dug out a cheque from the pocket of her jean shorts. “This isn’t all of it. I’ll send the rest when I’ve got it. Sheldon never put a timeline on when I could pay him back since he knew it’d take me a while and—”

“Penny, we ain’t starvin’. That deal yuh have’s ‘tween yuh and Shelly. Yuh can square up with him the next time yuh see him.” Penny made to protest but Mary wouldn’t have any of it. “Shelly and his friends were a sorry bunch ‘fore they met yuh. Ah knew the moment he called ‘n’ asked me whether ah liked chocolate before, during or throughout my menses that somethin’ dramatic happened in his life.”

“He didn’t!” Penny was crimson.

“Don’t worry, ah set him straight on askin’. Ah did a few inquiries of muh own and found out that yuh’d moved in across the hall.” She took Penny’s hands. “Keep the money. Yuh took care of muh boy an’ ah think it’s fittin’ that his gift to yuh is an education since schoolin’s been what he was about his whole life.” Penny’s eyes watered.

“I didn’t take care of him. He asked me to take him to the store and I said no and then he got hit by the car,” she sniffled. “He waited until eleven o’clock and I should have been awake but I was still pissed from the night before and—” She stopped and the tears flowed. “I’m so sorry, Mrs. Cooper.” The two women hugged and Penny couldn’t help but sob into the older woman’s shoulder.

“Yuh have nothin’ to feel sorry about,” Mary said softly as she stroked Penny’s hair. “It wasn’t yuhr fault or Shelly’s fault or that poor driver who had the heart attack. Sometimes the Lord weaves a weird one and yuh just have to go with it.”

Mary stepped back and wiped the tears from Penny’s cheeks. “Now ah want yuh to seize the day, yuh hear? Take this money, work yuhr tail off at school and show the world what a fighter yuh are.” The Nebraskan nodded as Mary took the cheque from her hand and tore it in two. “The only thing ah’m expectin’ is an update on how yuh’re doin’. And ah don’t mean yearly,” she chided lightly.

“Yes Ma’am,” Penny said with a sniffle and smile.

xTBBTx

Leonard had set up a series of boxes in Sheldon’s room in order to sort out his roommate’s effects. Since Penny couldn’t alter her shifts at the restaurant until the following week she still had Monday free so she spent the afternoon in 4A. Quickly she realized that she couldn’t separate Sheldon’s toys from Leonard’s in the living room so she decided to work on Sheldon’s clothes.

She tied a knot to close the garbage bag and placed it next to the other two. The Sally Ann was going to have a surprise with some of this stuff although she wasn’t sure what would be more eyebrow raising: the Star Trek uniform or the purple plaid suit. Penny pulled another bag from the package and fluffed it out as she approached his dresser. She smiled as she opened a drawer to see an assortment of striped, polka-dotted and colored socks stacked into precise piles.

“Monday,” she said as she picked up a pile and deposited it in the bag. “Tuesday, Wednesday, Thurs—” Underneath the socks was a magazine. “Well, well, well.” She turned over the magazine to see what got Sheldon’s mojo going. Was it bikini babes? Muscle chicks?

On the cover was a picture of an extremely toned green skinned and haired woman wearing a purple bikini and shades. Penny grinned as she flipped through the magazine and saw a variety of
aliens and super heroines in various swimwear. She didn’t know what was weirder: seeing a silver-haired woman with four arms wearing a thong bikini or having the magazine itself as concrete proof that Sheldon Cooper did in fact have a ‘deal’ even if it was a little odd.

“Un-boleevable.” She tossed it in the designated garbage box before clearing out the rest of the drawers. Hopefully the Sally Ann wouldn’t wonder why donated underwear and suits of pajamas had days of the week stitched into their lining.

Penny’s heart stopped when she opened the last drawer and saw the bold yellow lightning bolt on Sheldon’s Flash shirt. She set it on top of the dresser and put a couple of shirts in the garbage bag. Her hand paused on the Robot Evolution t-shirt. It, too, was set aside. By the time she finished she had a nice stack of t-shirts for herself. The clothes were supposed to go to charity so it’s not like Penny was stealing per se.

“I’ll top up the kettle next Christmas,” she vowed as she picked up the shirts. Penny’s eyes drifted to the garbage box. The magazine was the only piece of refuse so it stood out like a sore thumb. She crossed over and grabbed it, vowing to dispose of the magazine on her own. The last thing she wanted was for the guys to get a chuckle over Sheldon’s choice of pornography.

She crossed to her apartment and deposited the clothing on her bed and stuffed the magazine in her recycling bucket. Leonard wouldn’t be home for another hour so it would give Penny enough time to finish what she could with Sheldon’s room and then prepare for dinner. It was Thai night, after all.

XxX

“Leonard, you’ll have to give me Mrs. Cooper’s address so I can properly thank her for the gift,” said Raj as he tossed his food container in the garbage.

“You could always just call her,” replied Howard.

“The astrophysicist rolled his eyes.

“Oh yes, getting drunk in order to talk to a Christian fundamentalist about my ‘Third World demons’ won’t make the conversation awkward enough without thanking her for giving me her dead son’s Vulcan lute.” Howard was thoughtful.

“Put a word in for me in the letter,” he said at last.

“Write your own note and I’ll stick it in.”

“Done.”

“After we’ve finished going over the collectables we should get a start into the comics since it’ll take a while,” said Leonard as he tidied the containers on the table.

“Surely Sheldon had a list of his comic books. He had a list for everything,” Howard snorted.

“It’s probably in his computer,” agreed Leonard. “I’ve tried but I can’t get into it.”

“I can always give it a go,” offered the engineer. The physicist shook his head.

“It gives me something to do at night.” He looked across at his girlfriend. “You want the last dumpling?”

“I thought I had the last....” She stared at the lone dumpling in the container. Of course there would be one left. “It’s tradition, I guess,” she said with a little smile. Taking her chop sticks she gripped
the slippery little morsel and popped it in her mouth. The room was silent as she chewed.

“Next Generation’s on,” sputtered Leonard as he checked his watch.

“It’s over in a half hour,” Howard reminded him.

“It’ll give us time to digest.” Raj glanced at Howard and Penny sitting on the couch and rested his eyes on Sheldon’s spot before wheeling over the lanky man’s computer chair and taking a seat.

XxX

“So how’d it go?” asked Penny as she snuggled into her pillow. After spending the day at apartment 4A she really looked forward to a night in her own bed after a refreshing shower.

“Sheldon has a lot of comics we want so we’re going to make a collective offer to Mrs. Cooper for the lot, excluding the ones in the safety deposit box. We want a few from there but the rest should be sold since I doubt Mrs. Cooper will see them as the investment they truly are,” replied Leonard as he stared at the ceiling. He cleared his throat to calm himself. “So anyways, I was doing some thinking.”

“This can’t be good,” chuckled his girlfriend.

“Since Sheldon’s…gone…and, uh, it’s a two bedroom apartment and”—Penny’s stomach dropped —“you need to save money for school I was wondering if maybe you’d like to—”

“I can’t,” she blurted. “It’s too weird right now.”

“ Weird as in us moving in together weird or weird as in—”

“I don’t know how comfortable I’ll be living in his room.”

“We could always make that the spare room and my room can be ‘our’ room,” the physicist said hopefully.

Penny mulled it over. “I think I’d like to keep things as they are. I have to get used to the new normal before I make another change.” Leonard nodded.

“Okay. I’ll ask Raj.”

Penny felt a kiss on her shoulder as Leonard curled against her. If he’d noticed the tension in her body he never mentioned it.

xTBBTx

As Penny turned the corner on the stairs she saw a strange man leaving 4A carrying Sheldon’s DNA model.

“You’re sure you don’t need help getting it to the car?” she heard Raj ask.

“I’m good. Thanks again,” he said.

Penny got to the landing and smiled politely, waiting until he had passed before entering the apartment. Raj waved his fingers before closing the door.

“I see you finally sold it,” she said as way of conversation.
“Yup,” replied Leonard distractedly as he clicked away at Sheldon’s computer. Just over a month had gone by since the physicist passed away and still Leonard was unable to gain access to the laptop. If he didn’t crack it soon he really would have to hit up Howard for help.

Penny waited but her boyfriend didn’t say anything more—he never said much when he was working on Sheldon’s computer—so she flumped on the couch. Raj poured her a glass of wine.

“So how was school?” the astrophysicist inquired after he’d taken a sip of his own.

“A-1. I covered all of this office stuff in the first two weeks with Sheldon.” Here she smiled. “Actually, I was told I’m much more efficient than I have to be.” Raj chuckled.

“Sheldon would disagree. There’s no such thing as being ‘too efficient’.”

“Too anal retentive, maybe.” Penny took a sip of wine. “Maybe it’s a good thing, though. I think I’m the only one in the class who isn’t working as an assistant.” Thanks to Sheldon’s loan-turned-gift she’d been able to drop to part-time at the restaurant although she did insist on working the Tuesday evening shift.

“You’re doing fine, Penny,” soothed Raj. He looked to Leonard and frowned as the shorter man was oblivious to the conversation.

“Thanks Raj,” she said happily.

Raj went to the kitchen. “Dinner? It’s only chicken and fettuccine since I started late but you’re welcome to some.” The Nebraskan thought about the tuna and pasta she was going to mix together for herself.


“Sounds good,” he said distractedly. “We’ll celebrate later.” Raj rolled his eyes.

“And they say romance is dead. Penny, be a dear and set the table. The napkins and candles are in the drawer.”

“Just let me go freshen up and I’ll be back,” she said as she popped off the couch and took up her school bag. “I’ve got a cheesecake that needs finishing. I’ll bring it over.”

“Sounds good. I can work it off at pilates,” Raj said while braising the chicken.

After dumping her stuff and collecting the cake she returned to the apartment. As she stepped in she was struck by how things had changed: the furniture was the same but Raj’s Asiatic accents around the room, not to mention the smell of sandalwood incense, added a more sophisticated air. Leonard rather liked the new ambience and agreed to keep his Star Trek and superhero paraphernalia in his room.

By the window were boxes of Sheldon’s models and action figures that Leonard had advertised on Craig’s List. This was the last hurrah of the East Texan’s belongings in the apartment.

Once dinner was ready the trio sat around the coffee table.

“Can you pass the pepper?” asked Raj. Penny went to oblige but stopped.
“This is ridiculous,” she said and moved onto Sheldon’s spot.

The room was silent until Raj slid over to Penny’s old seat.

“Thanks,” he said quietly and grabbed the pepper.

One last push and it’d be as if Sheldon never existed.

xTBBTx

Penny had just finished her coffee and was in the process of rinsing the mug when the phone rang. Since Leonard was in the shower and Raj had taken an early yoga class she crossed the living room and picked up the phone.

“Hello?” she said cheerily.

“Um, hey, Penny?”

“Oh, hi Stuart. What’s up?”

“Oh, not much. I was just going to let Leonard know that I still have Sheldon’s stuff here.”

“Oh.”

“I can put the comics back but the statue’s already paid for so it should be turned over to the estate.”

“I’ll pick it up this morning.”

“It doesn’t have to be a rush. I—”

“It’s no biggie. I’m on my way to grab some bagels anyways so it’ll be a quick stop.”

“Okay. … It’s always great to see you.”

“Great to see you, too, Stuart. Bye.”

She hung up the phone and went to the washroom.

“Leonard,” she called out. “I’ve got things to do this morning.”

“Okay,” he said from the shower.

Penny retreated to her apartment, showered and dressed quickly and with purse and car keys in hand departed to the comic book store. Her heart rate was elevated as she drove. This statue was the reason why Sheldon wanted to go to the store. ‘The reason why he wanted *me* to go to the store.’

She parked in front of a meter and walked the few storefronts to the entrance. When she opened the door she immediately felt a sense of comfort as she was stepping into a plethora of superheroes and comic books.

“Hey, Penny,” Stuart said with a shy though amiable smile. “It’s been a while.”

“Yeah, been busy with work and school. Besides, comic books aren’t really my thing.”

“It’s not for everyone, no. If it was I’d own my own house instead of renting a creepy bachelor.”
Again he smiled before grabbing a box and putting it on the counter. “Here you go.”

“Thanks, Stuart.” Penny took the box.

“I didn’t check the contents so bring it back if it’s damaged.” He paused and looked a little sad. “I never knew if Sheldon was going to keep his things sealed or not.”

“Yeah,” the waitress replied as she remembered the debate over Leonard and him opening their Star Trek transporters she’d given them as gifts. “Anyhoo, I’ve gotta run. Thanks.”

“No problem,” Stuart said with a little wave. “Come back anytime, y’know, when you’ve got time. If you’ve got….”

“I’ll come out sometime with Leonard.” Penny smiled warmly and left for her car.

When she entered 2311 Los Robles she hoped against hope she wouldn’t run into Raj or her boyfriend. For some reason she wanted to see what was inside the box in private. ’After all, this is what Sheldon got ki—’ She ever so quietly turned the lock on her door and slipped into her apartment. Carefully she set the box on the table and with her key slit the tape. She reached in and pulled out the statue.

There was a brick wall separating two men as they ran—the one on the left she recognized as the Flash. The other wore a long sleeve shirt with a lightning bolt similar to Sheldon’s t-shirt, jeans and a silver helmet with wings. Along the base was a copper plaque with the inscription: The Flash of Two Worlds.

Minutes ticked by as she stared at the statue, admiring the details from eyebrows to dirt on the ground.

“Sheldon would approve.”

Suddenly she wondered what would happen to the statue, envisioning it sitting in the pile of Sheldon’s belongings to be disposed. At the very least she should give it to Leonard to decide what to do with it. After a moment’s thought she got off the couch and went to her shelving unit, clearing the large shelf with one hand before placing the statue squarely in the middle.

Penny stood back and smiled. She hadn’t picked out her memento because she wasn’t sure what she wanted.

She knew now.

xTBBTx

Sheldon stretched. He’d gone through hundreds of posits and felt like he needed a break. He was stunned to notice as he checked his watch that the face was blank.

“Curious,” he said, eyebrow raised.

“What is?”

Sheldon turned to see the Man standing with his hands in his pockets.

“My watch is blank.”

“And?”
“How long have I been here?”

“Since you’ve crossed over,” the Man said evenly.

“Which was?” the physicist prompted.

“When you passed.” Sheldon rolled his eyes.

“Obviously. I mean at what time: date, hour, second?”

“Those have no meaning here.”

“And yet I can create quarks and see photon emissions?” Sheldon said incredulously. His tongue rubbed the side of his cheek. “Time is a function of motion or displacement. That would mean we’re in a place of absolute stasis. And yet we’re moving. We traveled from my point of origin to here thus falling under the realm of relativity.”

“But where did we travel from?” asked the Man with a smile.

“Over there.” All Sheldon could see was the whiteness. “Point,” he said after a moment. “I’ll have to count my footsteps from now on.” A thought struck him. “How big is this place?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why did I think you’d say that?” the lanky man said with a smirk. “This place seems determined to be defined by its indeterminacy.” He paused as he thought before jumping in place. “Gravity works so not all phenomena are null and void.” Here he gave a gaspy laugh. “Heisenberg would find this amusing.” The Man looked at him questioningly. “In quantum mechanics the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle asserts a fundamental limit to the precision with which certain pairs of physical properties of a particle, such as position and momentum, can be known simultaneously. The more precisely the position of a particle is determined, the less precisely its momentum can be known, and vice versa. In this instance I have neither position nor momentum nor any unit of time with which to calculate my bearings. We’re truly at the heart of uncertainty.”

“And yet here we are,” said the Man with a wink.

“Indeed. No time, infinite space. No one else around.” Sheldon cocked his head. “Except for you. Why is that? Where is everybody?”

“You’ll have to be more specific.”

Sheldon crossed his arms. “I’m not the first person to die. Where is everyone else?” His eyes brightened. “Where’s Pop-Pop?”

“He’s not here.”

“How do you know that?” the physicist said with a frown.

The Man spread his arms. “You see anyone around?” Sheldon knew there was nothing to see but he couldn’t stop himself from looking.

“So we’re the only two here?”

“It depends on what you mean by ‘here’.”

“So where is Pop-Pop?” Sheldon asked quietly.
“Not here.”

“But he’s somewhere else.”

“He’s not here.”

“I know that! Just tell me that he’s somewhere!”

“I can’t help you, Dr. Cooper. All I can say for certain is that he’s not here.”

Sheldon’s shoulders slumped as he turned back to the whiteboard, silently staring at the equation.

“Uncertainty in the many-worlds interpretation follows from each observer within any universe having no knowledge of what goes on in the other universes.” He cleared his throat as his eyes hardened. “Show me a tetraquark.”

The marker danced across the board.

xTBBTx

A/N: Still with me?

Wikipedia: Uncertainty Principle; Many-Worlds Interpretation

Sermon pointers: Sermoncentralcom

Eulogy pointers: Yourtributecom

UK Mirror: Scientists calculate odd ways to die
“I’m so proud of you, Penny,” squeaked Bernadette. “You must be excited.”

“Relieved is more like it,” the Nebraskan replied after swallowing her bite of Chinese food. “Making time for the placement while working and finishing classes was something else. As long as I make it through this month all will be good.”

“Then it’ll be on to sending out résumés and going to countless interviews,” Leonard said between bites.

“Thanks oh ye of little faith,” his girlfriend scowled. Amy patted Penny’s knee in comfort.

“Don’t listen to him, bestie. Although we’re in the midst of a recession and the economy is still hemorrhaging jobs like a cut artery there’s still a chance you’ll land a job. How quickly will be the question.”

Penny sunk back in the couch and took a sip of her water.

Howard set his food container on his lap. “Raj told me you finally got into Sheldon’s computer,” he said to Leonard.

“Yeah. The password was a seventeen number-letter combination based off of Feynman’s path integral formulation and the stellar position of Wolf 359.”

“Sounds like Sheldon,” grinned the engineer.

“Wolf 359. That’s from Star Trek, right?” asked Penny.

“That’s where the Federation had their battle with the Borg in Next Generation’s ‘The Best of Both Worlds’.” Raj grinned. “The best two-part Star Trek ever.”

“So what’s the ‘path integral formulation’?”

Leonard smiled at Penny. “A physics formulation—”

“Written by Feynman,” she said with a smirk. “Yeah, I got that, genius.”

“It’s kinda complex,” her boyfriend said hesitantly.

“So? Sheldon managed to teach me about quantum mechanics. That’s pretty complex.”

“When did he do that?” Amy asked, poker-faced.

“When I was working for him. I was trying to figure out what Leonard did and Sheldon explained it to me.” Here she smiled brightly. “Leonard recreates other people’s experiments to make sure the results aren’t faked.”
“I told you that’s not *all* I do,” said Leonard testily.

“No, Penny’s got it pretty much on the head,” countered Howard. “Ever since that project with Sheldon you’ve been pretty much working on verifications.”

“I’ve been doing my own work on the side,” the curly haired physicist huffed.

“Oh?” Raj was intrigued. “On what?”

“I’d rather not say until I get it hammered out.” Leonard shrugged. “I’m too used of Sheldon ridiculing my efforts to say anything before I’m sure.”

“Leonard, you’re still not sure if Deanna Troi and Will Riker are based off of Ilia and Will Decker,” chuckled Raj.


“No, I’m mocking,” amended his roommate with a grin.

“Hoo boy,” Penny said as she got up to put her food carton in the garbage.

“Penny, can you bring me another beer?” asked Raj.

“Sure thing.”

Leonard brightened. “Well that’s one bonus to your years of waitressing: you’ll know how to fetch coffee for your boss.” He felt everyone’s glare and withered. “I’m just saying it makes her résumé look more relevant than it is,” he mumbled.

“Perhaps it’s best if we start the movie,” Amy said diplomatically.

“Good idea.” Raj picked up the remote and pressed play.

XxX

“So what did Sheldon have on his computer anyways?” asked Raj as Penny and he cleared the table.

“What you’d expect,” replied Leonard as he sat at his desk. “His mortal enemies list, his apocalyptic scenarios for the end of the world and his emergency plans.” Pause. “Actually Sheldon was a lot quirker than I thought.”

“That’s hard to believe,” Penny snorted.

“Seriously,” continued her boyfriend. “We only got the tip of the iceberg with what he kept track of like bowel movements and fiber contents. For instance, he counted how many steps it is to wherever: Penny’s apartment, my parking space, the bus stop, his office, the cafeteria, the comic book store, you name it. He also weighed everything he ate. If it was his usual he just listed it—cashew chicken, mi krop—but if it was something new he’d mention a weight.”

“I never saw him weighing anything,” said Raj with a frown.

“This is where it gets weirder. Beside the first mentioning of the food he’d mark the weight as an estimate then he’d put a confirmed weight and date.” Penny’s jaw dropped.

“You mean he went back and ordered the same thing just so he could weigh it?”
“More often than not the next day,” added Leonard. “He must have done it while at work because I never saw him eating anything out of the ordinary at home.”

“Maybe he didn’t eat it,” shrugged the astrophysicist. “After all, he wouldn’t eat kung po chicken on pizza night and he did have lunch with us at the cafeteria—well until Penny came.”

“Yeah, but I never saw Sheldon weighing anything,” the waitress countered. “Although he did leave the office from time to time.” Here she smiled. “Maybe he had a secret lab or something.”

Immediately Raj blushed as he thought about the storage room as Howard and he had followed the physicist in order to see what he was doing in there. “Maybe,” he mumbled. Penny caught his embarrassment and he smiled sheepishly before venturing down the hall and into the washroom.

“Well I’ve got to get to bed,” Penny said and crossed over to kiss her boyfriend. “Four more weeks of drudgery and it’s all over.”

“It’ll be nice getting my girlfriend back again,” Leonard agreed with a smooch. He hesitated for a moment before he handed her a stack of papers.

“What’s this?” She glanced over the official-looking documents.

“Something else Sheldon had on his computer. It looks like your progress reports from work. I—thought you’d like to see them. You know, to check if you’ve got any bad habits he picked up but didn’t mention.”


She kissed her boyfriend again and went back to her apartment. After finishing her bedtime ritual she slipped into bed and turned off the light. Penny lay there for several minutes but she felt antsy. With a start she bolted upright and turned on the light before getting out of bed and venturing into the living room. Her eyes were on the stack of papers that sat on her coffee table and she took them up as she sat on the couch.

A smile came to her face as she read through the pages. Sheldon had really taken this experiment thing to the utmost, referring to her as ‘Subject’ and jotting down every little thing she did wrong. She realized with a blush that he paid much more attention to her than she’d noticed:

*sits with her legs crossed, right over left, leaving a pressure mark on her right calf. Must instruct her to sit with legs neatly pressed together in a diagonal lean with ankles crossed.

Or

*Subject’s keystroke rhythms indicate the length of her Dwell time is affecting her Flight time. I shall have to create a biometric template of a more proficient typing pattern for her to follow. Next is the more delicate task of asking her to cut her nails….

Sometimes Penny cringed like when she read Sheldon’s abrupt entry the day she made out with Leonard:

*Subject has returned from lunch exhibiting signs of having participated in pre-coital activities. My inclination is to terminate her employment as this is egregiously unprofessional but feel obligated to continue given our status as ‘friends’. I am nevertheless disappointed.

Other entries jogged Penny’s brain as she recalled days she’d intentionally garnered strikes just to get a reaction out of the physicist when he was too serious.
As she got to the end she stretched and noted that it was well past midnight. Penny skinned the remaining pages, only stopping at the end as the last two pages were different. It was a letter and was addressed to the admissions office at Pasadena City College. With a start she realized this was the sealed reference letter he gave her to submit with her application to the executive assistant program.

Nervously she read and as the paragraphs continued tears ran down her face.

*…Penelope has a command of office protocol thus allowing me to concentrate on my own tasks uninterrupted. She is instinctive in anticipating my needs and would be an exceptional asset to any company. I, therefore, highly recommend her…. *


xTBBTx

“Enough,” sighed Sheldon and the marker rested on the ledge of the whiteboard.

“Something wrong, Dr. Cooper?” asked the Man.

“I need a break.” The physicist turned to his companion. “Know a place where I could get some comic books or an Xbox?”

“Not around here,” the Man chuckled. Sheldon smiled grimly.

“I surmised as much.” He clasped his hands behind his back and began to pace. “So I’m to spend eternity with a whiteboard?”

“I thought you agreed it was better than oblivion?”

“Given that as the other choice, yes.”

The Man cocked his head. “What makes you think that final death was the only other option?”

“The other door,” he breathed. “But you said you didn’t know what was behind it.”

“I still don’t.”

“You’ve never been there.”

“Never been.”

Sheldon raised an eyebrow. “How can you be so sure if you’ve never opened the door?”

“It wasn’t my door to open,” the Man said simply. Sheldon nodded and resumed pacing.

“Ah, it was my decision and therefore my door. If my assumption about this place holds true”—he squinted at the nothingness ahead—“then the door will have disappeared since I’ve chosen my fate.”

“That’s a possibility.”

“Alright then, after two weeks of nonstop calculating I want a change.”

The Man was puzzled. “‘Two weeks’? Where did you get that?”

“As I worked I paced and in a five second interval I traveled six steps. This would mean I walk
seventy two steps a minute and as there are one hundred and three thousand six hundred and eighty steps in a day it was simple math to extrapolate how many days I’ve been working.” Here Sheldon was a little sheepish. “Of course this is only an estimate as my timing isn’t precise.”

“Impressive,” the Man said with a smile.

“No, what’s intriguing is the fact that I’ve had no need for rest much less sleep and I haven’t eaten since the morning of my demise. Of course I’ve no physical body per se—or at least one that requires maintenance to which I’ve been accustomed.” Pause. “What are we comprised of?”

“I’m not sure,” the Man shrugged. “All I know is that I’m ‘me’ and you’re ‘you’.”

“Cogito ergo sum. Yes, yes,” huffed the lanky man. “As I have consciousness with or without a physical body what constitutes ‘me’ is obviously an energy of some sort. A ‘soul’ as my mother would say.” He stopped walking and gathered himself. “Is there a God?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’ve never met Him or Her or Them?”

“I didn’t say that.”

Sheldon narrowed his eyes. “Do you have a god?”

“Yes.”

“But I don’t? ‘You don’t know’,,” he said before the Man could answer. “Fascinating. And yet we’re both in the same place. Mother will be disappointed.” His eyes gazed at the white nothingness surrounding his feet. “I won’t know when my mother dies will I?”

“No.”

“And Pop-Pop is already ‘here’”—he used air quotes with his fingers—“as is my dad.” Sheldon’s blue eyes met the other Man’s face. “I want to make another choice.”

“I’m sorry, Dr. Cooper. I don’t grant them.”

A series of tics passed over Sheldon’s face as he fought to compose himself. “I see,” he said finally. Suddenly he brightened as a gleam came to his eyes. “Alright then let’s try from another perspective. You’ve been to places other than here, correct?”

“‘Here’ as in—”

“As in this spot now not the plane of existence.”

“Yes.”

“Can you take me there?”

“No.”

“So I’m stuck here forever,” Sheldon said quietly.

“Unless we travel further,” said the Man gently.

The physicist’s jaw dropped as he looked in the direction he assumed was ‘ahead’ and saw another
door.

“That wasn’t there before,” he muttered as he began walking towards it.

“You hadn’t decided to continue.”

“Oh shut up,” Sheldon snapped, causing the Man to smile.

When they got to the door the lanky man took a breath before turning the handle and opening it. He was met with the sounds of hundreds of people in mid conversation. What completely floored him was that he knew them!


“Schliessen Sie die Tür, Junge. Es gibt einen Luftzug,” said a brown haired man wearing a coat, waistcoat and breeches. Sheldon was speechless. The man paused and gave a friendly smile. “Wir beiBen nicht.” Sheldon stepped into the room.

“Doktor Leibniz?” the lanky man asked.

“Zu Ihren Diensten, Herr Doktor?”

“Cooper. Doktor Sheldon Cooper.”

“Willkommen Doktor Cooper. Treffen Sie mienen Freund Albert. Er ist ein kluger Bursche.”

With a nod and a boyish grin Sheldon followed the scientist through the crowd.

“…And lactose-free fajitas for you,” Penny said as she set the plate in front of Leonard.

“So Penny, did you hear back from the agency yet?” asked Amy. The waitress pursed her lips.

“Struck out again,” she sighed.

The neurobiologist nodded. “You’re handling it well; your acting career has adequately prepped you for doing multiple interviews and having nothing to show for it.” Penny scowled and Amy shrugged her shoulders. “It’s an asset.”

“It’s true,” added Howard. “Look at how many times Leonard’s been rejected by women and now he’s an amazing whiner.”

Leonard’s jaw dropped. “And we don’t talk about how many women you’ve chased after?”

“If you notice, I *have* my woman,” the engineer said as he held up his ring finger.

“Well I have my woman, too,” the physicist snapped.

“And what a prize she is,” smiled Amy.

Penny snorted. “You make it sound like I’m some kind of trophy.”

“One that I deserve after all the work I put into landing you,” laughed her boyfriend.

“Sounds like you had to tire her out,” replied Howard. Raj whispered into the engineer’s ear and
the two chuckled. “He turned Penny into his usual prey: the sick or the lame.” Leonard glared at his friends.

“Excuse me?” Penny said with a raised eyebrow. Raj shrugged in an ‘oh well’ kind of way and started to eat.

She rolled her eyes and left to serve her other customers. As she worked she did her best to keep the frown off her face. 'I am not lame.' She returned to her friends’ table.

“I am *not* lame,” she said testily. “I mean, yeah, I’ve been in a rut for a while but I went back to school and am looking for a better job.” Here she smiled. “Besides, I’m sure you guys had a few bumps along the road when you started your careers.”

Amy shook her head. “I was tapped to work at the lab before I graduated.”

“After grad school I applied to Caltech and was accepted,” said Howard.

“Caltech was my first choice because it was as far as I could get from my mother while remaining in the continental U.S., excluding Alaska.” Leonard smirked. “Although to be fair if the University of Alaska Fairbanks had a better physics department I might have gone there.”

“Raj?” Penny said with a hint of desperation. “Your problem talking with women must have gotten you bumped from a few positions.” He whispered into his best friend’s ear.

“He was lucky enough to work at an all-male research station in Hanle which got him enough accreditation to be transferred to Caltech,” the engineer translated.

“Oh,” Penny said dejectedly.

“Of course all of us have had setbacks to our careers,” Howard said. “We’re not where we thought we’d be by now.” He smirked. “Although I have been in outer space.” Raj whispered. “Raj has been in People Magazine.”

“I’ve been lead article in Neuron,” added Amy.

“I won the Newcomb Medal,” said Leonard.

“Of course none of us could have been members of the Corn Queen’s Court,” Amy said with a smile.

“Yeah,” Penny said stiffly and departed to fetch a customer’s bill.

XxX

“Sick and lame’,” muttered Penny as she opened the lobby door of her apartment building. She crossed to the other side of the room and opened her mail box. “I’m sick alright.” She sorted through the pile of bills. “I’m sick of being broke.” Flip. “I’m sick of being tired.” Flip.

She brightened as she saw the card from Mrs. Cooper. Quickly she opened it and read the congratulating note regarding her graduation:

You did it! I’m so happy for you, Penny. Shelly would be proud.

“Sheldon was a professor at fifteen. I’m a twenty seven year old unemployed secretary wannabe.” Penny dragged her way up the stairs to her apartment. After showering she flopped down on the
couch and turned on the television, flipping through the channels before pressing the off button. She got up and made herself a cup of tea before grabbing a notebook and settling herself on the couch. Again she read Mrs. Cooper’s card before she began to write:

Dear Mrs. Cooper,
Thank you for your card and best wishes. I have to admit that I’m a little scared about what comes next since I’ve put out several résumés and gone to interviews but have had no luck. Still, ‘Rome wasn’t built in a day’ as Sheldon used to say. I’ve got more interviews lined up over the next two weeks and….

xTBBTx

For the first time in Sheldon’s life he was silent as other people talked around him. He couldn’t get over the fact that he was listening to Albert Einstein in the midst of a spirited debate with Sir Isaac Newton:

“…The equations of physics that model the time evolution of systems without embedded observers are sufficient for modeling systems which do contain observers,” said Newton.

“Provided ze theory is linear with respect to ze wavefunction, be it Schrodinger’s equation, quantum gravity, etcetera,” added Einstein.

“Or relativistic quantum field theory or string theory,” Sheldon interjected. Both men turned to the physicist.

“And you are?” sniffed Newton.

“Dr. Sheldon Cooper.”

The Englishman noted the Flash t-shirt and plaid pants. “I see that fashion has further devolved over the centuries.”

Einstein chuckled. “Now, now, ze physicist is a creature of eccentricity.” He fluffed his white hair with a hand. “What is your fascination with electricity?” he asked Sheldon as he indicated his shirt with his eyes.

“While it is a bolt of lightning it’s meant to represent the speed inherent in the comic book hero The Flash.” The German physicist laughed.

“Ze Flash. My grandson read about his exploits. I remember using ze hero to demonstrate friction and ze movement of sub-atomic particles.”

Newton raised an eyebrow. “So these ‘comic books’ are for children and yet you continued to read them?”

“Of course ze child is ze most creative,” replied Einstein.

“Perhaps. Although, Dr. Cooper, I highly doubt you’re here to debate the goings-on in children’s fiction. What is your area of expertise?”

“String Theory,” said Sheldon.

“Excellent,” Newton said. “For a moment I was worried you were here to spout some nonsense like loop quantum gravity.”
“Hardly. Loop quantum gravity is nothing but hokum,” said Sheldon. Take that, Leslie Winkle.

“So then, what has string theory learned by your time?” asked Einstein.

“Well,” began Sheldon. “We’ve just discovered the Higgs boson.”

“No graviton?” the German physicist said. “How disappointing.”

“If you’d been less promiscuous when alive we would have solved gravity years ago,” said Sheldon evenly. Einstein laughed. “But if you need to know about advances in quantum gravity you should talk to Dr. Feynman if he’s here.”

“Dr. Feynman is incommunicado,” the Englishman said seriously. He looked over Sheldon’s shoulder and the physicist turned but couldn’t see his fellow American.

“That’s too bad. I would have liked to have met him.”

“Perhaps you should,” said Einstein. “Perhaps your youth could draw him out, yes?”

Sheldon nodded. “I can try although I’m not noted for my sociability. He’s over there?”

“The couches by the corner,” said Newton. “I’d say good luck—”

“—But I don’t ascribe to such a notion,” Sheldon completed. The two men nodded and the lanky man departed. As he walked through the crowd his mind went into overdrive as he recognized Nikola Tesla arguing with Dr. Heisenberg and an obviously medieval man rattling off figures to what looked like a young Dr. Oppenheimer.

Sheldon made a last push and spotted Dr. Feynman sitting by himself on a couch busily working away in a spiraled book. He wore a white buttoned shirt with sleeves rolled to his elbows and grey slacks and his longish hair was a mix of salt and pepper. The East Texan took a breath and stepped forward.

“Dr. Feynman?” he said evenly although his heart was racing.

The man looked up, his brown eyes curious. “Yes?”

“I’m Dr. Sheldon Cooper and it’s a great honor to meet you.”

“Pleasure to meet you.” Feynman smiled. “I see you’re a Flash fan.”

“DC comics in general although the Flash is a favorite.”

“You must be relatively ‘new’ here.”

“I had a car accident a few months ago. I was going to say ‘fatal’ but obviously my presence here dispels that notion.”

Feynman continued working as he spoke. “I hate to dispute but the only thing you and I are sure of is that you’ve only recently found this room. Who knows how long you’ve been ‘here’ in the grand sense.”

“I have been known to lose track of time at a whiteboard,” Sheldon admitted. “I take it you were also greeted by our host?”

“You mean the blond fellow dressed as if he’s going to walk an ocean beach. Oh yes, we’ve met,”
Feynman said with a touch of acid and a grim smile. “Although he’s less of a host than a guide—and a half-assed one at that.”

“His cryptic nature does annoy, I agree. And he didn’t even know Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle.”

“And if you live around here you know there’s certainly a lot of uncertainty,” chuckled Feynman. Sheldon turned to glance at the room.

“After encountering the whiteboard it’s hard to believe there’s much to go over,” he said.

“Ah yes but is the whiteboard showing us what is, what could be or a bunch of gobbledygook?”

Sheldon cocked his head. “Just because I see the calculations as live models doesn’t mean they exist. This goes against Kiri-kin-tha’s First Law of Metaphysics—nothing unreal exists.” Feynman chuckled. “So the whiteboard is a special effects generator capable of displaying any answer.”

“Except for the big one.” Sheldon looked at him questioningly. “What was the first question you asked our guide, Dr. Cooper?”

“Where am I?”

“And what did he say?”

“At a crossroads.”

“At a crossroads,” Feynman repeated. “And of course we all know who was buried at crossroads.”

“Criminals and suicides.” Sheldon paused. “I’m certainly no suicide.” His eyes widened. “Are you suggesting I’m a criminal? For what?”

“Didn’t mean to upset you. Just a little philosophical talk. Good thing I never worked a crisis line.”

“To be a criminal implies there’s a judge. I don’t believe in God.”

Feynman stopped working and gazed at the lanky man.

“So where do you think we are?” he said seriously.

Sheldon thought. “Well the many-worlds interpretation denies the actuality of wavefunction collapse. Somehow we’ve managed to slip from one dimension to another.” Pause. “Or we are comprised of an extra dimensional energy that was anchored to earth prime, as it were, by a physical body.”

Feynman was pleased. “And so where do we come from?”

“Not here,” Sheldon said firmly. “The guide indicated choices could be made so long as there was a progression. My choices led me here. Therefore additional choices should take me elsewhere. Well, that is if I can figure out what my next choice will be.”

“If there is one,” Feynman said with a smirk.

“I hardly consider this place a hell, Dr. Feynman. Especially when I am in a place of equals.”

“And with that answer I gather you’ve never read Animal Farm?”
“‘Some are more equal than others’. Yes, well, my mother told me not to lord my intelligence over people—even if most are inferior. That’s why it’s a breath of fresh air being able to talk to someone like you. I don’t have to explain myself repeatedly. In crossing the room to find you I heard at least a dozen conversations I wanted to delve into whereas on earth-prime there were barely a dozen conversations in my lifetime that truly engaged my faculties.”

“Well, I should let you get at them.”

Sheldon nodded. “I’m sorry to have interrupted your work,” he said as he indicated Feynman’s paper pad.

“It’s ongoing and apparently I’m in no hurry.”

“What is it you’re working on, if you don’t mind me asking?”

Feynman turned the book around and Sheldon saw a highly detailed pencil sketch of a dark-haired woman with an infectious smile and a dimple on her left cheek.

“My first wife, Arline.”

“Oh.” Sheldon didn’t know what to say so he gave an awkward smile. “Well, I should let you continue.”

Feynman raised his eyebrows in salute before returning to his sketchpad.

The East Texan removed himself and scanned the crowd.

“Why there’s Clyde Tombaugh. Wait until I tell him Tyson demoted Pluto from a planet to a dwarf planet.”

Sheldon wove his way to the astronomer.

xTBBTx

“I think the power suit’s your best bet,” said Bernadette as she made herself more comfortable on Penny’s couch.

“Trust me go with the skirt suit,” countered Amy.

“The suit gives her credibility and shows confidence.”

“Yes, but the skirt suit demonstrates a tailored femininity—not to mention bestie has killer legs that she’d be a fool not to use,” added Amy. Bernadette thought about this.

“Okay, I’m convinced. Go with the skirt, Penny.”

In the bedroom Penny laid out the suit on her bed. ‘Where the frak are the shoes?’ She got onto her knees and began sorting out the shoe boxes in her closet. Despite having pared down her clothes shoes were still a weakness and she had picked up a graduation pair along with an interview set and spare just in case. As she moved aside a bagged box her hand brushed against a plastic case. Suddenly she was still save her fingers which traced along the edge of the lid.

There was a knock at the door.

“Who is it?” asked Amy as she got off the couch.
“Leonard. Coming in to rescue my girlfriend from a night of female wickedness.” Amy opened the door.

“Also known as fun,” the neurobiologist sniffed. “Although I should warn you we have been imbibing alcohol, fatty carbohydrates and spreading titillating gossip so don’t be surprised if your testosterone takes a hit.”

“We’re just waiting for Penny to change into her interview suit for tomorrow,” piped in Bernadette.

“Another one, huh?” He gave a little smile. “She should get points for tenacity.”

“Having partaken in the ‘junior rodeo’ I’m quite certain Penny’s familiar with the notion of getting back on the horse,” Amy said evenly as the bedroom door opened and Penny emerged wearing her navy suit and heels with a red blouse.

“Works?” she said with a grin.

“Turn around,” said Amy and the waitress spun. “Works for me.”

“Ditto,” grinned Bernadette.

“I’ve got another pair of shoes with a strap across the foot.” Penny straightened her jacket with a Captain Picard tug and smiled at her boyfriend. “Look okay?”

“Definitely hot enough to be my assistant,” he said approvingly.

“Of course you do respect me for my brains,” she replied with a smirk.

“Always,” he said diplomatically. “Although the legs help.” She stuck out her tongue and made for the bedroom.

“Let me get this back on a hanger and I’ll be out.”

“I should really be going,” Bernadette said as she stood up. “Howie’s always a little antsy whenever I’m driving on a wet night.” Amy nodded as she grabbed her purse.

“I’m on call tomorrow morning as we’re in mid experiment for phase one of the new addiction study.”

Penny emerged from the bedroom in her comfy clothes.

“That sounds good. I really want to take a bath before bed,” she said. “Thanks for coming over.”

“No problem. Good luck tomorrow,” Bernadette said as she departed.

Amy gave her own best wishes before following the microbiologist out.

“I take it you’re not up for a little ‘good luck sex’?” Leonard said with a wink.

“Nice try.” Penny sashayed over to her boyfriend. “This girl needs to think serene tonight.”

“Fair enough.” They kissed. “Good luck, Pen. I hope you get it.”

“Thanks.” Another kiss.

“And even if you don’t there’s plenty of other opportunities out there as long as you try and I know
you’re trying and—"

“Thinking too hard again, Leonard.”

“Yeah. Sorry.” He grinned widely. “Good luck.”

Penny escorted him to the door and closed it after he left. She turned on some light music and went into the bathroom to put up her hair in a clip as she ran a bath. Tomorrow would be the fifth interview she’d been on after sending out literally hundreds of résumés. While she was all smiles with her friends she really was worried. Thankfully Mrs. Cooper was a great ear and sent back good cheer and a promise to pray for her at church. Penny liked the motherly wisdom and comfort without the price tag she got at home. Not that her parents were mean or anything but with her brother in and out of jail and her sister living in a trailer park they had a lot of expectations for their youngest daughter. Needless to say running away to California to become an actress didn’t exactly fit the bill.

As she bathed Penny had to take a deep breath a couple of times as she realized how much was riding on her shoulders. She wanted to show her parents she’d finally grown up. She needed to be a professional in the eyes of her friends instead of a pretty waitress. Most importantly, she had to prove to herself that she was capable. Since she’d come to California with Kurt things had spiraled out of control, leaving the Nebraskan devoid of the confidence that moved her here to begin with. She didn’t know why this had happened; she was in a better position with Leonard than she ever was with Kurt. She thought she had loved that muscle-bound cheater but her real Prince Charming was myopic and lactose intolerant.

When she told Leonard she loved him she knew the moment it slipped from her lips that it was a game-changer. That it was no longer a game. Grownup Penny needed a grownup relationship and whether she was ready or not she was in it up to her neck. She hoped that she could pull all of this off: Leonard, her career. What she needed was a little confidence.

“What I need is the other pair of shoes,” she said as she toweled herself off. She slipped into her robe and padded her way to the closet and dug for the other pair of navy shoes. After Sheldon had mentioned Audrey Hepburn the waitress looked up modern day twists on the bombshell’s sophisticated look. Penny opened the box and pulled out a shoe.

“This is definitely Sheldon-approved,” she said with a little smile. She’d picked up the phrase from Leonard and began saying it whenever something was correct in the scheme of things. ‘Protocol’ as Sheldon would say.

Sheldon.

Penny set the shoes aside and dragged out the plastic container. Lifting the lid she was immediately greeted by the smell of his washed in ‘summer breeze’—although he liked the smell Sheldon couldn’t fathom how the company had determined what comprised a summer breeze—t-shirts. She gently picked up a Green Lantern shirt, careful not to mess Sheldon’s perfect folds.

He believed in her at a time when she didn’t believe in herself.

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“Time for some self-respect, Penelope,” she said evenly.

There was no way in hell she’d let Sheldon down. He prided himself on always being right and she’d show him that his belief in her wasn’t misplaced.

She traced the Green Lantern logo with her finger.
**A/N: Think of my renditions of physicists in the similar way that there is the real Wil Wheaton and the fictional Wil Wheaton on the show. In particular I mean no disrespect towards Dr. Feynman. According to my cousin (a physicist) he was the greatest physicist in the second half of the twentieth century. Plus the man played a mean bongos.

Wikipedia: Many-worlds Interpretation; Richard Feynman; Keystroke Dynamics

Cogito ergo sum: I think, therefore I am.

„Schliessen Sie die Tür, Junge. Es gibt einen Luftzug”: Close the door, boy. You’re letting in a draft.

Wir beiBen nicht: We don’t bite.

Zu Ihren Diensten, Herr Doktor?: At your service, Doctor?


Kiri-kin-tha: Vulcan metaphysicist
Chapter Nine

Chapter Summary

For those of you not liking the science this is the heavy chapter dealing with it. It's all easy peasy after this. I just really wanted to show what Sheldon is puzzling over in a fairly realistic way. Perhaps I overdid it but *shrug* it is what it is. *Lynn

As far as Sheldon was concerned he was having the time of his life. He had engaged in countless debates on a multitude of topics with scientists from virtually every age and earthly geographic location. What the physicist got a kick out of was hearing things like string theory and quantum mechanics out of the mouths of early scientists—there was even a man wearing fur and leather reminiscent of the Ice Man circa 3255 BC who corrected Niels Bohr’s quantum mechanical model.

“As I said before, ze observer effect at a quantum level does provide a physical explanation of quantum uncertainty,” said Dr. Heisenberg to Sheldon, snapping the East Texan from his reverie.

“But the observer effect does not apply. It’s become clear that the uncertainty principle is inherent in the properties of all wave-like systems, and that it arises in quantum mechanics simply due to the matter wave nature of all quantum objects.”

“And I’m telling you the observer effect *does* come into effect,” the German huffed. He made to say more but instead made a slight growl and took Sheldon’s arm.

“Where are we going?” the lanky man asked, alarmed at the speed at which the pair were making for the door.

“To put you back in place.” Heisenberg opened the door but Sheldon balked.

“I don’t want to go!” he squawked.

“It’s just to ze grease board, Doktor Cooper,” the elder man said gently.

“So we can come back?”


Sheldon kept a hand on the German as they exited and approached the whiteboard. He looked over his shoulder at the now closed door.

“Two grease sticks,” Heisenberg commanded and another marker appeared on the ledge. “So.” He began writing out his formula. “Ze observer effect on a physical process can often be reduced to insignificance by using better instruments or observation techniques. However in quantum mechanics it is not possible to observe a system without changing the system, so the observer must be considered part of ze system being observed.”

“While this coincides with an alternate version of the uncertainty principle it is not how the term is commonly used in practice.” Sheldon took up his marker and wrote. “The uncertainty principle in its standard form actually describes how precisely we may measure the position and momentum of
a particle at the same time — if we increase the precision in measuring one quantity we are forced to lose precision in measuring the other.”

“But it must account for ze disturbance ze observer has on a system and ze error incurred.”

“I”—Sheldon stopped as a thought struck him. “Doktor, how big do you think this place is?”

“As big as it needs to be.”

“Or perhaps as small?” Sheldon looked at the board. “Erase,” he commanded and the board was cleared. Again he wrote. “You’re correct: in quantum cases we can’t observe a system without changing it. In this case I’ve tried my best to keep track of time while I was out here with our Guide but he insisted that the concept didn’t exist here. This place simply is. The time that’s passed is simply my observation. My choices that led me here determined the geography of this land. I can’t see this place for what it is because I can only see what it is for *me*.”

Heisenberg smiled. “Ah, so you’re ze observer?”

Sheldon rubbed the side of his cheek with his tongue. “Again, I am but I’m not. My immersion has altered the experience yet there is one constant we all share—our Guide. He is with us yet lets us choose our fate. His is the pure observation. Well to a point as his presence does alter our behavior.” Sheldon put down his marker. “So is our Guide the ultimate Observer or merely the tool by which we are observed?” Here Heisenberg chuckled.

“Now you’re sounding like Feynman.” Sheldon looked at him questioningly. “Ze man had come up with similar observations about our plight.”

“Fascinating,” mumbled Sheldon distractedly before turning his attention to his board. “We need more information,” he said firmly.

“We have a room of people at our disposal.”

Sheldon nodded and darted back into the room. He noted that the crowd had changed as some people were gone while new ones had appeared. Unfortunately one of the missing was the man he was looking for.

“Excuse me, Sir,” he said to Henry Cavendish. “But have you seen Dr. Schrodinger?” The Englishman shook his head.

“But he must be around here somewhere. He’ll turn up sooner or later.”

Sheldon thanked him and turned to see Dr. Feynman still sitting on the couch working away in his spiral sketchbook before the lanky man returned to his companion at the whiteboard.

“Success?” asked Heisenberg.

“Not as yet. Schrodinger’s away.”

“Well you know what they say when ze cat’s away,” the German said with a glint in his eyes.

Sheldon thought about this for a moment before he let out a gaspy laugh. “A play on Schrodinger’s cat. Amusing.”

A significant amount of hours? Days? Weeks? Went by as Sheldon and Heisenberg puzzled through a vast array of implications involving the uncertainty principle from Einstein’s slit to the
many-worlds theory. Every so often the East Texan would pop back in to see if he could find Schrodinger but to no avail. While more people fluctuated in and out of the room Sheldon did note that Feynman was the virtual constant sitting in his spot on the couch. Perhaps he had seen the Austrian physicist?

Sheldon crossed the room and cleared his throat politely.

“Excuse my intrusion but I was wondering if you’ve seen Dr. Schrodinger?”

Feynman set his sketchbook on his lap.

“And why would you be seeking him?” he inquired lightly.

“Dr. Heisenberg and I have been discussing the implications of his uncertainty principle in a variety of situations including our present one,” explained Sheldon.

“Well, I might not be Schrodinger but I can listen.”

“Alright,” Sheldon said with a smile and sat next to the Nobel Prize laureate. “We were discussing our current situation in the context of the uncertainty principle which interestingly seems to fall more into Dr. Heisenberg’s idea of an observer effect. It’s interesting since he hypothesized that such an effect would only occur at the quantum level.”

“So we’re particle-sized?”

“I believe we’re both and neither,” Sheldon replied. “Irrelevant, really. We exist in an air of uncertainty thus are defined by our indefinable nature. Of course our very presence makes certain phenomena definable but only from our observer’s standpoint.” He shrugged. “Which isn’t helpful when I’m trying to understand our plight as a whole.”

“It’s hard to critique the taste when we’re part of the soup,” chuckled Feynman as he continued drawing.

“Indeed.” The two men were silent as Sheldon watched his fellow American form two sets of eyes and then began the task of shading. “You told Dr. Heisenberg that our Guide is merely a tool for observation.”

“I may have said something along that line, yes.”

“That of course leads to the question of not just who is the ultimate Observer but why?”

“So you’re saying we’re being judged?”

“No, we’re being measured.”

Feynman grinned even as he worked. “And the calculations?”

“That’s why I need Schrodinger. The many-worlds interpretation replaces wave function collapse with an ensemble of deterministic and independent universes whose distribution is governed by wave functions and the Schrodinger equation.”

“Which means?”

“Well, as we both know, Schrodinger’s equation describes not only molecular, atomic, and subatomic systems but also macroscopic systems, possibly the whole universe. Of course this only applies to our known universe. The only link we have between earth-prime and this place is us.”
“Which makes us?”

“Meow,” Sheldon said with a twitchy smile.

“‘Meow’, indeed, my fellow Schrodinger cat.” Feynman was pleased. “You’re an insightful man, Dr. Cooper.”

“I prefer ‘visionary’ myself,” the lanky man said evenly. Out of the corner of his eye he spotted the man he was looking for. “Oh! There’s Dr. Schrodinger. Excuse me, Dr. Feynman,” he said and rushed off. “Zoom! Zoom! Zoom! Out of the way!”

“Gone in a Flash,” Feynman quipped to himself and laughed. Dr. Cooper was certainly making things interesting.

Penny waited as the woman with bobbed red hair made some notes in her file.

“And that just about takes care of that,” the HR woman said. “Just a couple of curiosities left.”

“Certainly,” Penny replied evenly. So far she felt she answered Mandy’s questions honestly and completely without being too formal. From what she gathered they were looking for an exceptional candidate with the skills of an executive assistant at an office assistant’s salary. That meant Penny had to show the right proportion of restraint and enthusiasm. Some sophisticated ‘down home charm’. Mandy seemed to be enjoying herself in the interview. Whether this turned into a job offer remained to be seen.

“I noticed you had a Dr. Sheldon Cooper as your main employer, excluding the Cheesecake Factory of course, and yet he isn’t down as a reference.”

“My position wasn’t terminated. He passed away.”

“I see. What was his area of specialty at Caltech?”

“He was a senior particle physicist.”

Mandy raised an eyebrow. “Wow. You understand any of that stuff?”

“Bits and pieces.” Here Penny smiled. “That is if you count crumbs. Fortunately I didn’t need to know what he was doing to keep the office running smoothly.”

“And how did you get your position with him?”

“He was my next door neighbor.” 'Truth.' ‘He needed help and I offered.’ 'Lie.' “It turned out for the best as I not only found what I wanted to do but he was also an amazing teacher.” 'Truth and truth.' “In fact I was practically over-prepared for the executive assistant course—although Dr. Cooper would say there is no such thing as being ‘over-prepared’.”

“Yes, I noted that one teacher had said you had an attention to detail that was almost obsessive.”

“Dr. Cooper even had a preference for how he wanted his file folders folded and pencils sharpened.” Mandy chuckled.

“Well we aren’t that critical here but it is your attention to detail we need. As you are aware these are lean times and as such we need to ensure that anyone we hire can not only pull his or her own weight but will blend in seamlessly into the company.”
“I understand.”

“Well then,” Mandy said. “I believe we’ve concluded.” Both women smiled as they stood up and shook hands. “We’ll let the agency know our decision once we’ve finished interviewing the other candidates.”

“Sounds good.”

As they walked out of the office Penny glanced at a nervous looking woman sitting on the couch. Immediately the Nebraskan noted the difference between their clothing as Penny’s higher end apparel said that she not only should be at the company but that she belonged. ‘Thank you Sheldon!’

Penny passed through the glass doors and made her way down the hall to the elevator. She was proud of herself; her acting classes had come into play big time as she felt she delivered the best interview she could ever do. Strike! That is, unless she needed to do another one. Then she’d be even better.

The elevator door opened and she stepped in to be greeted by a good-looking executive wearing an Armani suit cut just right. His smile said he liked what he saw both in Penny and in himself. In response she flashed him a smile she’d come to master from years at the bars when she wanted to look cute but distant. To emphasize her disinterest she pulled out her phone and texted Leonard that her interview went well and that she wanted to go out for dinner.

She made her way to the car, noting with a chuckle that it was easy to pick out her Volkswagen as it was the only vehicle that wasn’t a BMW or Audi in the row.

“Note to self: upgrade car.” She hopped in and exited the underground parking lot. Now that she was away from the building Penny let out a big sigh of relief. She knew she looked good and sounded like she belonged. If she could only convince herself then all of this would fall into place.

“Still, it’s not like Mindy said I *don’t* belong so until I hear back from them I do.” With a satisfied grin she turned on the radio and caterwauled away until she got home.

Noting that Leonard’s car wasn’t in the lot she pulled out her phone and scrolled through her texts. Amy and Bernadette had wished her good luck as had Leonard but they were all sent before her interview. Penny grabbed her mail, shoving the junk mail into the disposal slot, before ascending the stairs. She gave a one-knock rap at apartment 4A before opening the door.

Raj was on the couch enjoying both a book and Sheldon’s spot.

“Hey, Raj, where’s Leonard?” The astrophysicist picked up his phone from the table and sent a text:

*At the university. He said he was working late.*

Penny’s mouth formed a pout. “Oh.” Immediately Raj continued typing:

*How did your interview go?*

“Amazing.” Here she gave a little smile. “I guess I just wanted to keep the feeling going before I took off the suit.”

*Let me get my jacket and we’ll go out to eat. My treat.*
“Raj you don’t have to,” his neighbor said as he bookmarked his spot and went to the closet for his green windbreaker. He stopped, raised a finger in a ‘just one moment’ gesture, and darted to his room. As she waited Penny glanced at the book her friend was reading. ‘The Mortal Instruments’ Book Five: The City of Lost Souls. She noted the flame-haired beauty in the arms of her muscled beau on the cover and turned to read the back. It sounded interesting but not interesting enough to read. If it became a movie though she was in like Flynn.

Raj entered the living room adjusting his tie under his sweater vest before slipping on his dark suit jacket.

“Look at you,” Penny gushed causing the astrophysicist to look blushingly at the ground before zipping out his phone.

*You look amazing so I had to do something! :)*

“Why thank you,” she said, smiling.

He grabbed his keys from the bowl and the pair exited the apartment.

xTBBTx

“Perhaps *you* should use your so-called ‘quantum suicide machine’,,” snapped Schrodinger as Sheldon stormed through the door, slamming it with force. His action didn’t disrupt the conversations in the room as the scientists were more than used to monumental arguments and gigantic egos.

Not knowing where to go but wanting to be alone Sheldon searched in vain for a quiet place in the room. His eyes drifted to Feynman’s corner and he made for it. He stood at the far end of the couch and took a series of deep breaths to calm himself.

“Kids playing rough?” Feynman asked lightly as he drew. Sheldon turned towards him.

“*Children* is right,” he huffed. “I’ve never encountered more arrogance championing the cause of idiocy in my life. Too arrogant to admit that I am right and they are a bunch of poopie heads.”

“Humbly put,” chuckled the Nobel Prize laureate.

“Indeed.” Sheldon began to pace. “I don’t know what kind of life this is: no comic books or game consoles or even hacky sacks.” He stopped and raised an eyebrow. “How is it you have a sketchpad and pencil while I have nothing?”

“Our Guide gave it to me. I guess the Observer didn’t like me covering his whiteboard with doodles.”

“Doctor, where do you stand on the many-worlds interpretation?” asked Sheldon as he folded his arms across his chest.

“If I believe it I stand in all of it,” smiled Feynman. The lanky man rolled his eyes. “Parts of it are intriguing although I’m more interested in how things apply here.”

Sheldon nodded. “It seems as though we have two problems: one, what are we exactly as obviously our notion of what constitutes life must now include the fact that we exist consciously independent of our physical bodies; and two, where we are now.”

“And what did the great minds conclude?”
“We are an energy whose source is external to the known physical universe. Like the Biblical notion the physical body is merely a vessel for this energy.”

Feynman stopped and looked up. “So if we’re an energy originating elsewhere how is it that we have no consciousness prior to our ‘arrival’ in the physical universe and that after our physical death we retain our consciousness and more importantly our identity as can be seen by our ‘bodies’ looking like they did when we were physically alive?”

“String Theory,” Sheldon said firmly. “It posits twenty six dimensions as well as extra-dimensional states. How we appear in each of these dimensions is based on the laws in a particular dimension.”

Feynman flipped to another section of the sketchpad and revealed a picture of the Seven Blind Men and the Elephant along with a few mathematical equations.

“The real quandary is to figure out in which dimension the whole process kick-started or else we started spontaneously,” he said.

“And what started the process of ‘Being’ as a whole,” added Sheldon. “Which means we were initially in a state of wholeness and now, with our death in the physical universe, we are Schrodinger’s Cat: alive and yet dead.”

“A by-product of this exercise is the notion of our ‘immortality’. Does our death in one dimension form a black hole in which the rest of us eventually enter? Is it like losing a sensation like a man losing his sight—an inconvenience but not a death sentence?”

Sheldon sat down on the couch. “Our Guide said time has no meaning here. Perhaps some of our essence got trapped in a dimension devoid of physical limitations thus making at least part of us ‘immortal’?”

Feynman grunted. “Which makes it impossible to know if leaving here would be fatal. Under the many-worlds posit it’s impossible to know what goes on in the other universes once our path has diverged.”

“Why would you want to leave here?” Sheldon asked, eyebrow raised.

“Why indeed?” The older man gave a short laugh. “There’s more to life than physics, Dr. Cooper.” Sheldon snorted. “You sound like my father. He declared before I even left the womb that if I was a boy I was going to be a scientist. As a toddler he taught me the basics of pattern recognition using spare floor tiles which led me to having the most complex paper weavings in kindergarten.”

“Not to mention grasping the underlying principles to mathematics,” added Sheldon. “I should have been so lucky. The most my dad taught me about numbers and patterns dealt with football. My ‘eureka’ toys were beer caps as I gathered them and constructed complex geometric formulations when I was one.”

“Impressive.”

“I have an IQ of one hundred and eighty seven and an eidetic memory,” sniffed Sheldon.

“Beats my measly one twenty four,” Feynman said, amused. Sheldon was incredulous.

“I hardly think someone of your obvious intellect ranks lower than Leonard. Of course I’ve always said that standardized IQ tests are inaccurate.”

“Irrelevant.” Feynman gestured to the room. “I’ve had spirited debates with everyone worth talking
to lasting who knows how long and yet there was only one person who could trump me every
time.” Sheldon raised an inquisitive eyebrow as the physicist flipped a few pages in his pad until he
revealed a portrait of another woman. “All Gweneth had to say was ‘Shut up, Dick’, and I was
finished. Immediately my brain went into overdrive as I thought about what I’d said and the result
before doing my best to amend.”

“Your ken kissed her Barbie,” Sheldon said with a twitchy smile. Feynman paused before he let out
a strong laugh.

“I suppose it did,” he said once he recovered.

“It was something Penny said to me.”

“Very witty.”

Sheldon cocked his head. “I suppose she is. In practical terms she was a disaster when I met her: an
aspiring ‘actress’ who worked as a waitress at the Cheesecake Factory and spent her free time
imbibing alcohol and having coitus with muscle-bound apes. It took me several years of
straightening her out to get her to where she is. As we speak she must have completed her course
and is employed as an executive assistant.”

“How long were the two of you together?”

“Penny and me? Hardly,” the lanky man scoffed. “She was my roommate’s girlfriend. Besides, she
was beneath me intellectually.”

“Still there had to be some reason why you spent your time ‘straightening her out’?”

“I abhor chaos and Penny brought disorder to my life. She ruined laundry night and made me watch
horrendous romantic movies and stole the wifi and took food off my plate and talked me into
making Amy Farrah Fowler my girlfriend.” Sheldon paused. “She called my mother!”

“Sounds like Penny had you under her thumb,” Feynman chuckled, stunning Sheldon.

“She did not! I’m homo novus—a creature of intellect.”

“So how did you end up watching sappy movies on the sofa?”

“It was her hippy-dippy ways that left me frustrated because of their inherent disorder,” said a red-

ticked East Texan.

“You clashed.”

“She’s mule-headed and didn’t acknowledge my intellectual authority. Penny bucked me at every
turn and baffled me with her sarcasm.” He paused. “Until she worked for me. Granted she didn’t
understand what I was doing but she did grasp its importance.”

“Penny liked you, Dr. Cooper.”

“We were friends. Of course she liked me.”

Feynman shook his head. “I mean Biblically. And you liked her.”

Sheldon’s jaw dropped. “I did not! She was Leonard’s girlfriend. He brought her into my life.
Besides I had Amy who was far and away more intellectually compatible with me.”
“That’s the thing about nature, Dr. Cooper, it doesn’t care how smart you are. You can still be wrong.” Feynman noted an approaching Schrodinger. “Looks as though your respite is over. Do me a favor and take it away?”

Sheldon stood as the Austrian approached.

“Dr Feynman,” he said. “Still doodling away or have you come back to us?”

“Still doodling,” the American said with a grin. “I take it you’ve an unfinished conversation with my companion here?”

“Very much so,” Schrodinger said happily as he turned to Sheldon. “We have something you need to see, Dr. Cooper.”

“I doubt I’ll be impressed but alright.”

The two men walked off, leaving Feynman to his own devices.

With a flourish Penny opened the door.

“I got the job!” she squealed.

“Congratulations!” Leonard cheered as Raj clapped his hands.

She turned to her boyfriend. “You are taking me out to dinner. Then we’re going to have sex.” She spun on her heel and left.

It took Leonard less than one heartbeat to spring from the couch and follow.

“Not bad,” Feynman said as Sheldon completed his tale. “So how did they take it?”

“Surprisingly well. Schrodinger said he’d use the addition to recalibrate his equation for a more immediate use,” Sheldon said with a twitchy smile. He hesitated for a moment before continuing. “I was wondering if I could have a sheet from your sketchpad.”

“Oh course.” Feynman tore out a blank page and handed it over. “I’m sorry but I only have the one pencil.”

“Not necessary. Thank you, Doctor.” Sheldon crossed the room and exited. He was pleased that no one was there. Crumpling the paper into a tight ball he went to stand by the whiteboard. He dropped the ball only to kick it repeatedly with his foot.

“One, two, three, four, fi—” The paper hit the ground. “Four,” he said to the whiteboard and the number appeared. He picked up the paper ball and started again.

Penny took a breath before she pushed through the doors of Fenris Investments.

“Hello?” said a woman with curly black hair that sat behind a long desk.

“Hi. I’m Penelope—”
“Penelope!” the woman smiled broadly as she stood. “I’m Esperit. Sophie said you were coming in today.” The two women shook hands. “Fifteen minutes early. I’d say she’d be impressed but it is what she expects. Anyways we can talk more at lunch. She’s the office to the left. Good luck and don’t forget to knock.”

Smiling, Penny nevertheless tightened the grip on her purse as she approached the open door. Inside was a willowy woman wearing a tailored pinstripe suit, her blonde hair pulled into a bun, who was filing some papers in the cabinet.

Penny knocked three times.

“Enter,” said the woman.

“Hello. I’m Penelope—”

“Given the time of morning you couldn’t be anyone else,” the woman said evenly. She closed the cabinet and stepped forward to shake hands. “I’m Sophie. I manage the office. If you have any questions or concerns you come to me.”

“Okay.”

The woman raised an eyebrow and it was then Penny noted her clear blue eyes.

“Alright,” the Nebraskan amended.

“We are in the midst of a merger hence the office is more hectic than usual. It’s also the reason why you’ve been brought aboard as I require an assistant to keep papers organized.” Here Sophie’s eyes narrowed. “I’ve been assured by HR that you are meticulous.”

“I try to be. My previous employer was particular.”

“Please see that you continue. Now come with me and I’ll show you your desk.” The two women exited the office. “You’re never to be without your IPad if you’re asked to an office. Afterwards, you’re to record with whom you spoke and then detail the order. This not only streamlines the process but also protects you should trouble stir.”

“I understand.”

They arrived at a simple desk with a telephone, desktop computer, IPad and a little stack of papers sitting on top.

“Fill out the paperwork and hand it to Esperit. She will then detail the office routine. Once you are sufficiently oriented you will report to me.” She checked her watch. “I’ll expect you at nine forty five.”

“Sounds good,” Penny smiled. Sophie nodded and departed.

The Nebraskan sat down in a surprisingly comfortable chair. She opened the bottom drawer and tucked in her purse before snooping through the other two drawers. They were stocked with the basics, Penny noting that they used mechanical pencils.

“Well at least I won’t be sharpening any here,” she chuckled. She looked over and signed the forms as they dealt with Penny’s computer and laptop. The last sheet was marked ‘For Your Eyes Only’ and detailed the following:
Show up fifteen minutes before work.
Do NOT say ‘okay’ to Sophie.
Knock at every door, even if it’s open.
If something impedes office efficiency bring it to Sophie’s immediate attention.
Sophie is a perfectionist so don’t take it too hard if she criticizes you into next week!
Stay on Sophie’s good side.
See me if you’re unsure about anything!
Esperit.

Papers in hand she got up from her desk and went to see her guardian.

“Well you don’t look frost-bitten after meeting Sophie so that’s a good sign,” the Jamaican said in her musical lil.

“She actually shook my hand so that puts her better than my last boss. He was a germaphobe.”

“As long as you’re neat that’s all that counts,” Esperit said as she sorted out Penny’s papers and began to file them in the gigantic wall of files behind her desk. “So, as you can see I’m the Keeper of All Things Paper. If you need a document come and see me and I shall provide.”

“Thanks.”

“I’ve been here fifteen years. I’ve seen computer systems come and go and believe me, when they go they go. Nothing wrong with a little paper backup. Speaking of which, the low lady on the coconut tree is my backup when I’m away and that means you.”

“I thought I was Sophie’s assistant?”

Esperit chuckled. “Child, you’ll find you’re everyone’s assistant. Although Sophie’s orders take precedent. Well, unless one of the ‘The Powers That Be’ tells you different. Don’t forget to log that if it does happen. That log will be your very best friend.”

“Is it company policy?”

“‘Sophie’s Law’. She’s no-nonsense even to TPTB but they’d be lost without her.” Esperit checked the clock. “What time did Sophie give you?”

“Til nine forty five.”

“Then we’d better vamoose. If there’s anything you’ll appreciate about her she provides adequate time so long as you don’t chit-chat.” Here she smiled. “Which means we’re going to be back early from lunch so I can complete the tour because I can’t stand an office without chatter.” She emerged from behind her desk. “First we go to your desk to get your IPad and then I’ll introduce you to the ladies.”

“I wonder if Sophie hands out strikes,” the waitr—No wait!—the assistant said with a smirk. Esperit raised an eyebrow.

“‘Strikes’?”

“I’ll tell you at lunch,” grinned Penny and the two went on their tour.

xTBBTx

Life, or whatever this was, continued for Sheldon Cooper. From his many conversations with
Schrodinger and Heisenberg he bounced to other physicists to see if he could get a better handle on the physical universe and perhaps his current one to boot. The general consensus among the string theorists—and even the quantum gravitists—was that until a theory of everything was established and, in particular, a successful theory of quantum gravity, the many-worlds interpretation that circled his brain couldn’t be ruled out although it was highly doubted.

Since even these great scientists were ‘years’ away from a grand theory of everything—perhaps it would take an eternity to work things out—Sheldon decided to spend his free time working on something smaller and yet no less remarkable: Sheldon, himself. While he was homo novus in terms of his intellectual capabilities he’d been unable to come to terms with his current manifestation.

He looked over the whiteboard, its face covered in a mass of calculations.

“Erase,” sighed the physicist. The board complied. “Alright, Dr. Cooper, back to the beginning.”

He took up the marker and began to write.

He was physically alive. Now his physical body was dead but he has maintained consciousness. So by this notion was he in a state of quantum entanglement since he was a combination of the states of two systems—his conscious self and physical life—that once interacted but were then separated—he was now physically dead—and were not each in definite states?

“No,” he muttered. His physical self was in a definite state—it’s dead—so it wasn’t a case of entanglement. “Erase.”

If Sheldon were to simplify, to be ‘alive’ meant he was living not dead. He was physically dead yet still cognizant therefore it could be argued that the physical Sheldon and what he was now were states of being ‘alive’ as ‘Sheldon’. So a more precise question would ask if Sheldon was ‘Sheldon’ before he was physically born? If so, why was there no recollection?

With an eidetic memory he could recollect everything since the day he stared from the crib into his mother’s blue eyes. He remembered every gift, every wedgie; from every word of encouragement from his Pop-Pop to go into science to every screaming match between his parents. Sheldon prided himself for his memory. Knowing was a core part of what made Sheldon, *Sheldon*. That’s why he got into physics: he detested not knowing and physics was the key to knowing everything. He couldn’t function in a state of near-ignorance like Penny, who thought Fig Newtons were named after Isaac Newton.

Although she did know who Radiohead was and he didn’t.

“Irrelevant,” he said and continued writing.

What if it was the act of being physically created that was responsible for making ‘Sheldon’? If so, then consciousness was a byproduct of physical life. He began to write more frantically. Perhaps there was no recollection because there was no capacity for doing so prior to the physical body.

‘Sheldon’ therefore became organized—was measured—by the act of physicality. The Copenhagen interpretation said that the state of the two systems collapsed into a definite state when one of the systems was measured. In this case the physical measures the energy thus collapsing it into a definite state—consciousness!

“The only problem is that consciousness is a product of the brain,” he said as he put the marker on the ledge. “Therefore without the physical brain there is no consciousness. Yet here I am. Whatever I am. Wherever I am.” Sheldon sighed. “Erase.” He stared at the white board, willing the answers to appear.
Physics comes from the ancient Greek word physika. Physika means the science of natural things.

“Then why do I feel like Penny’s hokum can give me a better answer? Am I a spirit?” He rolled his eyes. “Good Lord now I am insane.”

He walked over and opened the door to the room. Immediately his ears were inundated with the sounds of chatter as he stepped through. He made his way to the couch and flumped down beside Dr. Feynman.

“Been a while,” said the Nobel Prize laureate. “Hopefully your work has borne fruit?”

“It’s a good thing I can’t get hand cramps from writing because I’d most certainly be in a cast by now,” scowled Sheldon. “I keep running into infinite loops and am ready to strangle the chicken and break the egg.” He paused. “You said I’ve been away for a length of time.”

“Substantial.”

“How would you know if there’s no time here?”

Feynman shrugged. “Perhaps there’s time in this room but not outside. I can’t say I’ve been on pins and needles waiting for your return, Dr. Cooper. It’s merely an observation given that since you were last here I’ve managed to get a lot done.” Here he fanned about an inch worth of paper.

“At least one of us has had some progress.”

Feynman laughed. “Not as much as you might think. Perhaps I need a distraction.” He set the sketchpad on his lap. “So what’s got your goat?”

“It’s a side puzzle not groundbreaking physics,” Sheldon said sheepishly. “It has taken too much of my time as it is.”

“All I’ve heard about here is physics, physics, physics. My brain would welcome a distraction.”

Sheldon shifted in his seat. “Only if we can change spots.”

“Let me hear what you’ve got and then I’ll decide,” countered Feynman.

“Very well. I’ve been trying to puzzle out what exactly we are since we’ve managed to ‘live on’ past our physical death while maintaining an awareness of self. As far as I can tell, consciousness is a product of the brain that extends beyond physical life but that does not mean physical life is the start of ‘me’, especially if ‘I’ am energy in ‘my’ pure state.”

“Go on,” the elder man said.

“I only remember being alive since I was physically ‘born’, therefore I was in a previous state of superposition and became a concrete state when I was ‘born’. Since I survived the birthing process all I remember is being alive.”

“So in this instance consciousness is merely a sense to measure external content like sight or hearing.”

Sheldon nodded. “Exactly. Now that I’m ‘dead’ I’ve returned to a superposition of states as conscious energy. Will consciousness and energy again separate—i.e. will I lose consciousness and merely ‘exist’ as energy given the right circumstances?”

“Or is this conscious energy a new state of being?” offered Feynman. The lanky man shrugged his
“All of this is dependent on my being ‘Sheldon’ as energy prior to being conscious Sheldon but there is no way to determine that because I was not conscious.” He glanced sideways at his companion. “This would be so much easier if I believed in my mother’s God.”

“She was religious?”

“She was a fundamentalist in every sense of the Word.” Sheldon gave a gaspy laugh.

“It must have been a joy having a physicist for a son,” chuckled Feynman.

“We’d come to a mutual decision that I would pursue science and she’d pray for my soul.”

“That sounds reasonable.”

“She was until her marriage began to implode. Then it was off to the church and ‘Jesus this’ and ‘Jesus that’.” A pout came to the young man’s face. “She whapped me on the head with a Bible because I wouldn’t eat my brussels sprouts. As if Jesus could make them taste better; he couldn’t make her marriage better, either.”

“People often take comfort in the supernatural,” said Feynman. “Especially when they find themselves powerless. I remember when Arline died of tuberculosis. I was at Los Alamos at the time so couldn’t be with her. Now next to her bed was an old clock and she used to tell me that the clock was a symbol of the time that we had together. The day she died the nurse gave me a note indicating the time of death. Interestingly, the clock had stopped at exactly that moment.” Here he smiled thinly. “People have asked whether I ever drew an association.” He shook his head. “Nonsense. I immediately began to think how this could have happened. And I realized that the clock was old and was always breaking. That the clock probably stopped some time before and the nurse coming in to the room to record the time of death would have looked at the clock and jotted down the time from that. I never made any supernatural connection, not even for a second. I just wanted to figure out how it happened.”

“And now that you’ve found yourself living beyond ‘death’?”

Now it was Feynman’s turn to shrug. “As we seem to have no contact with the physical world my opinion hasn’t changed: Arline didn’t stop the clock.”

“Mother would have proclaimed ‘the voodoo’ and Penny would conduct a séance. She kept trying to fill my head with her astrology nonsense and Leonard told me she believed in ghosts and psychics but that crystals were hokum.”

“Perhaps she’s not as vacuous as you think.”

“I tried to teach her physics. One of the most frustrating evenings of my life.”

“When I was relaxing in the lounge at Caltech I overheard a conversation between two girls. One was explaining that if you wanted to make a straight line you go over a certain number to the right for each row you go up—that is, if you go over each time the same amount when you go up a row, you make a straight line—a deep principle of analytic geometry! It turned out that one girl was explaining to the other how to knit argyle socks. I, therefore, did learn a lesson: the female mind is capable of understanding analytic geometry.”

“Amy Farrah Fowler is more than capable of analytic geometry. In fact, she’s a neurobiologist. Granted it’s no where near as groundbreaking as physics but nevertheless it is an accomplishment.”
Sheldon said distractedly as he glossed over the equations on Feynman’s sketchpad. “That’s a curious use of the Schrödinger equation. What are you solving?”

Feynman looked down at his work. “Just some doodlings. I believe there’s an exit to this place.”

“Really?” Sheldon couldn’t explain the flow of excitement through his body. “Where?”

“Behind that wall,” Feynman indicated with a nod of the head.

Sheldon popped off the couch and went to the wall. He placed his hands on it.

“Feels solid to me.” He made his way to the corner and felt along the crease to no avail.

“It is but it isn’t.”

“How?”

“Using my path integral formulation I’m trying to calculate all the probabilities that brought us to our current place.” He patted the sketchpad. “It’s taken a while but as time is not a factor I suppose it’s all a matter of patience.”

“So what are the probabilities?”

“I’m still working on that. I’ve narrowed things down but—”

“Let me help,” Sheldon said earnestly. Feynman scanned the East Texan’s face before giving a short nod. “Let’s change seats and we’ll begin.”

Feynman snorted. “Hardly. This spot is the farthest place from the center of the room without cornering myself. It faces sideways so I’m not in any main lines of traffic yet can easily see people coming towards me. The angle also makes me appear as if I require solitude yet not so isolated that people wouldn’t approach if it was important.”

“Quite right on all counts,” agreed Sheldon. “I shall do my best to adjust.” Again he squirmed in his seat.

“The key approach is assigning a mathematical value to metaphysical ideas,” Feynman said as he flipped to the beginning of his sketchpad. “As you can see I….”

xTBBTx

Wikipedia: Schrödinger’s Equation; Uncertainty Principle

Feynman Anecdotes on Clock and Argyle Socks: fotuva.org

Here’s an anecdote I had to share: On another occasion I was with both Gell-Mann and Feynman and the subject of kooky letters and phone calls came up. Feynman started relating the story of how one crazy woman called the office about some ridiculous theory of magnetic fields. He just could not get her off the phone. Gell-Mann responded, ‘Oh, I remember that woman. I got her off the phone in less than a minute.’ ‘How’d you do that?’ Feynman asked. ‘I told her to call you. That you were the resident expert in the topic!’
Chapter Ten

The first month went by in a blur as the merger at Fenris Investments proceeded at a rapid pace. Penny did her best to keep up with Sophie but the office manager worked at warp speed. Thank goodness Esperit was there to bolster the Nebraskan’s confidence at lunch time. The Jamaican always seemed to have a dish or two about the office to share which was surprising since Penny hadn’t noticed a moment when the woman was away from her desk.

That’s why Penny was surprised when she got to the office and another woman sat in her friend’s place.

“Penelope! Thank God you’re here,” the woman said, her bracelets jangling as she gave an enthusiastic wave.

“Hey Jackie. Where’s Esperit?”

“Sick. The woman is, like, never sick and now that we’re up to our eyeballs in work this’d have to be the time her immune system lets her down.” Jackie got up from behind the desk. “She’s all yours, captain.” Penny blanched.

“I have to clear this with Sophie first I—”

“Sophie knows. She’s busy this morning so had me snag you out here.”

“But I don’t know what to do.”

“Easy peasy. Just greet people and answer the phone. The extensions are listed in the red book by the phone. If anyone hands you any paperwork just put it in this folder and leave it in the top drawer at the end of the day.” Jackie smiled at the apprehensive look on her coworker’s face. “Don’t worry, Penelope, we know you’re not Esperit. We’ll take it easy on you.”

Penny took a few minutes to put her lunch into the refrigerator and grab her IPad before returning to the reception. She raised her seat before sitting and glanced at the extension folder. A bright side to following Sophie around was that she got to know almost everyone in the office. She’d met three of the six senior partners and the others she knew by name so she hoped she wouldn’t screw up their calls.

The phone rang. With one motion Penny picked up the receiver and brought it to her ear.

“Good morning, Fenris Investments, Penelope speaking.”

XxX

‘So far so good.’ Penny’s morning had passed uneventfully. Once she got into the groove of things she even managed to update her Facebook status without missing a beat as there really wasn’t much else to do. So it was a bit harrowing to find Sophie waiting for her as she returned from lunch.

“Penelope,” she said evenly. “The photocopier’s saying there’s a jam but there isn’t nor will it reset itself if turned off or unplugged. Obtain the contract from the files and contact the company for repairs.”

“Certainly.” The Nebraskan turned to the wall of files. “Well, it’s a photocopier so why not?” She
checked under ‘P’ but there wasn’t a file for photocopier. ‘It’s a Xerox.’ Nothing under ‘X’. ‘Office equipment?’ Nada.

“Think, Penelope, think,” she hissed. Appliances? Copiers? Her cheeks were flushed as she found herself more and more exasperated.

She went to her phone and dialed Jackie for advice but the woman couldn’t offer anything beyond what Penny had thought.

“This is *stupid*,” she growled.

“What is?” asked an older gentleman in an Armani suit who Penny recognized as one of the partners. He was just walking by as she had uttered her appraisal of the situation.

“Oh, I can’t find a file,” she said with a blush. The man chuckled.

“I’m always amazed how Esperit keeps track of everything. What are you looking for?”

“I need the contract for the photocopier.”

“I take it you’ve looked under ‘P’?”

“Photocopier, copier, appliances, office equipment, Xerox. I got nothing.”

“That’s a puzzler;” he said as he set his file down on the desk. “What about scanner? I believe the copier also does that.”

Penny checked. “Nope. There isn’t even a file for a scanner.”

“Well that’s silly. Check faxes.”

“No faxes.” Here a frown crossed her boss’s brow.

“We have an independent fax. Of *course* we have a fax.” He stepped around the desk and started searching the files but couldn’t find a ‘Fax’ file. He turned to Penny. “You’re right. This *is* stupid.”

Together they spent the next fifteen minutes searching the files for whatever terms they could come up with but to no avail.

“Well I’m tapped,” the boss said. “Call Esperit.” Penny looked up the woman’s home number and called.

“Hello, Esperit? It’s Penelope. I’m at your desk and can’t seem to find the file for the Xerox photocopier….Oh. Okay. Thanks. Feel better soon. Bye.” She hung up and went to the wall and pulled out a file. “Success!” she said as she checked its contents.

“So what was it?” asked her boss.

“Main Room–Office Appliances.”

“Of course,” he replied with a smirk. “Just comes off the top of anyone’s head.”

Penny grinned. “Thanks for helping.” He saluted her with his file and departed.

With a big sigh to release the tension she sat at the desk. Just what she wanted: not only did she
appear as an incompetent boob at her job but she also wasted her boss’s time as well. Sophie would be mortified if she knew—which of course she would as Penny would have to record her interaction with a boss on her IPad.

“Call first. Type later.” She picked up the phone and dialed Xerox.

xTBBTx

The only way Sheldon could tell that time had passed was the amount of pages used in Feynman’s sketchbook. For longer calculations the East Texan would go out to his board but he quickly learned he had to be careful with what he wrote. An interesting quirk of the whiteboard was that it couldn’t interpret raw metaphysical equations; invariably it would respond with Schrodinger’s equation. One time it even seemed to mock the physicist as it modeled a cat in a box to his query.

Nevertheless he was undaunted, partly because he wasn’t in this alone. Dr. Richard Feynman was absolutely brilliant and Sheldon often tested the limits of even his own vast intelligence as the two men clashed and compromised as they collaborated. When they took breaks Sheldon would ask the Nobel Prize laureate about a particular drawing they’d passed in a section of the book and Feynman responded with tales from his life which the young man found interesting even if some of the experiences were baffling:

“Once we were out driving in my van in downtown Pasadena when I averted my attention to a beautiful girl walking down the sidewalk. Instantly I slowed down the van and narrowly missed another car, which gave out an angry honk. ‘Geeze,’ said my friend Al, ‘Didn't you see that guy?’ And I said, ‘No, I only see the women, the rest is all a blur.’”

“I don’t follow. Were you cognitively impaired like the time you got a concussion from hitting your head on the sidewalk?”

Feynman always responded to Sheldon’s queries with questions of his own concerning the young man’s life: his hobbies and interests; his home life including why he was closer to his grandparents than his parents:

“As I said before, Pop-Pop encouraged me to go into science. He didn’t call my experiments ‘wastes of time’ or ‘sissy’. I might have been five years old but he treated my ideas with respect. He listened to me. Meemaw listened to me too although the science was over her head. Nevertheless she was there with cookies and affection when I was particularly frustrated with a problem whether it be my siblings, neighborhood bullies or my parents fighting. …I could be me without consequence.”

“You could be you and be accepted.”

“You could say it that way, I suppose.”

Only once did Sheldon experience Feynman’s anger: the older man was absolutely floored that he said and did nothing to defend his reputation when Leonard, Raj and Howard sabotaged his monopole experiment:

“What the hell were you thinking? They could have ruined your career!”

“They hadn’t expected me to email my findings. I—”

“So it was your fault you got excited? I would have done friggin’ cartwheels on the plane if I found the monopoles. Ridiculous, Dr. Cooper. You should have defended yourself.”
“I would have lost my friends.”

“Damn it, friends don’t do that! They talk each other off LSD highs and sit with you through boring as hell lectures. I’ve ridiculed when their science was shoddy not sabotaged their careers because they were ‘anal retentive’. Stupidity in otherwise smart people irritates me and for a bunch of smart men your so-called ‘friends’ are nothing more than selfish assholes although their stupidity is nothing compared to yours for not standing up for yourself.”

It took a long time before Sheldon could be in the same room with the man without feeling shame.

Now they were at a different crossroads as both men found their calculations vastly different from the other. For the sake of peace Sheldon had moved to the whiteboard and continued his work as best he could given the board’s limitations. As far as he could tell it was a positive sign he was getting somewhere when Schrodinger’s equation came into view. As it was, Sheldon had encountered the infamous cat approximately one hundred and sixty one times before a change came to the end formula: Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle!

“Now we’re cookin’ with gas!” he said with a broad smile.

He ventured into the room with absolute purpose towards the couch only to stop short as Feynman wasn’t there! Instead the Nobel Prize laureate stood at the wall as he read from his sketchbook.

“This is a surprise,” said the lanky man as he came to stand by his colleague. “A breakthrough?”

“More of a breakout,” chuckled Feynman with a glint in his eyes. “I’ve solved it.”

Sheldon was delighted. “It has something to do with Schrodinger and Heisenberg doesn’t it?”

“All this wasted time when I had the ruby slippers all along.”

“I don’t follow.”

Feynman smiled as he searched the wall for something Sheldon couldn’t see. “I remember one student asking me how I was able to remember all of the equations for the class since I never had any notes and lack your remarkable memory. I told the lad that as long as I can remember the first principles I can always derive what was needed. Remember that.” He gave a satisfied sound and with a press the wall opened to whiteness beyond. The two men were silent.

“So what’s out there?” Sheldon asked quietly.

“Everything. Nothing. Who knows?” Feynman took a step and felt a restraining hand on his arm.

“Why are you taking the risk?” Sheldon felt sick to his stomach. He needed to do something but wasn’t sure what.

In response the older man locked eyes with his companion.

“Because I want to go home, Sheldon,” he said simply. He handed the East Texan his sketchbook and pencil and stepped beyond.

Instantly Feynman vanished and the wall began to close. Sheldon realized time was of the essence if he was to follow but his feet were seemingly rooted to the ground. This might not be an ideal life but it *was* life. Who knew if Feynman hadn’t just dissipated or disintegrated or just simply went ‘poof’ the instant he ventured ‘out there’?
The wall closed.

“Excuse me, Doktor?” Sheldon turned to see a short man with wide eyes and dark receding hair standing in front of the couch. “I was wondering if you’ve seen Doktor Feynman? I have some things to discuss.”

“He’s not here,” Sheldon said neutrally. “Should I see him I’ll tell him you’re looking for him, Doktor Pauli.”

“Thank you.” The man indicated the sketchpad. “What have you here?”

“Just some doodles.” The man chuckled.

“We all need our hobbies.” Pauli nodded his head before going on his way.

Sheldon flipped to the last page of Feynman’s work and read. With a frown he flipped to the page before. Then the page before that.

As far as he could make out the equations were all gobbledygook.

xTBBTx

“You look in a mood,” Penny said as she took in Esperit’s pouty face.

“The catch on the door’s broken so someone has to stay here until it’s fixed.” She pointed to herself. “The last time this happened he didn’t show up until five thirty and the whole job took about five minutes to do.”

The Nebraskan went to the door and examined the catch and locking mechanism.

“Yeah, I see what you mean. It isn’t that difficult. I’ll see what I can do at lunch.”

“And afterwards I can overhaul your car engine,” grinned the receptionist.

“Oh ye of little faith.” Penny gave a wave as she went to her desk to deposit her items and boot up her computer. Sophie had given her a stack of forms to scan and archive. As soon as she had seen the database Penny smirked as it was reminiscent of Sheldon’s format. It was too bad he didn’t live to meet Sophie because she seemed more anally compatible with his idiosyncrasies than even Amy.

Penny finished her work about a half hour before lunch so she grabbed her IPad and went to Sophie’s office. The door was open—in fact in nearly eight weeks Penny had only seen it shut three times—and she knocked.

“Enter,” said the office manager from behind her computer screen. “Is there a problem?”

“I’ve finished archiving and handed in the documents to Esperit.” At this Sophie looked up from her computer.

“I see,” she said after a moment. “You’re more adept at this task than I anticipated. In that case I’ll have Toby transfer the case logs to you. You’ll find a file box at your desk after lunch. Use the Danec database. I’ll email you your password and cc it to IT security.”

“Alright. So what do you want me to do until lunch?”

“Go to Esperit and have her show you her filing system. From now on if you find yourself with less
than a half hour between tasks you will work with Esperit until you feel you’ve mastered her system.” Sophie nodded curtly and went back to her computer.

Penny returned to reception.

“You’re mine until lunch,” she said to Esperit. “You’re showing me your filing system so I don’t have to bother you at home.”

“Sounds good,” the receptionist said with a smile. “I don’t know what’s so hard about looking up a few files but I’m more than willing to help.” The Nebraskan used every ounce of her acting ability to keep an incredulous look from her face.

“How about we start with the files I just gave you?” she said as the third quarter outcome measures came to mind.

“What would you file them under?”

“Outcome Measures-2013-10-04’,” Penny said casually.

“Nope.”

“Outcome Measures-3rd Quarter 2013’?” Esperit’s smile became strained. “2013 3rd Quarter Outcome Measures’?” The receptionist sucked her teeth.

“Maybe we’ll start at the beginning,” she said diplomatically.

XxX

Penny returned from lunch with the tools necessary to fix the door. Thanks to spending a boring afternoon with Leonard as he went for model rocket supplies she learned of this place that sold a variety of micro tools. She took off her jacket and knelt on one knee to examine the clasp and lock. After a few pokes with a screwdriver she realized that the lock was okay: the clasp had merely slipped from its moorings and needed to be reset.

As they came into the office Penny’s coworkers were all eyes as they saw her in the midst of taking the handle off the door.

“Remind me to call you if I lock my keys in the car,” joked Jackie.

“Forget that,” said an older woman with tasteful salt and pepper hair. “I could use her to break into my ex-husband’s place so I can get my food processor back.”

Penny reset the clasp and restored the handle, giving it a few test turns before standing with a grin.

“All done,” she said.

“How do you know this stuff?” asked Esperit.

“I said I grew up on a farm. I rebuilt the tractor engine when I was twelve. Believe me, this is no big deal.”

“That’s nice to hear,” said a voice.

Penny and Esperit turned to see Sophie standing with her arms folded over her chest.

“If you’d be so inclined as to continue with what you were assigned,” she said evenly.
The Nebraskan took her jacket from the receptionist and turned to go.

“Penelope, we have people who attend to inconveniences like the door. In future, keep your instinct to repair in check.” She glanced at her watch. “It’s one minute after.”

Esperit dashed behind her desk as Penny fled to her own.

Sophie looked at the door handle and a flash of a smile crossed her lips before she returned to her office.

“You seem pensive my friend,” Heisenberg said in passing as the two men stood at a now-empty whiteboard. “For quite a while if I had a guess to hazard.”

“Dr. Feynman left me a riddle to solve,” Sheldon replied. “I’m having difficulties.”

“Perhaps I can take a look? Since Herr Doktor has hidden himself away I can offer a fresh set of eyes.” Sheldon shook his head even as he held Feynman’s sketchbook close to his chest.

“Thank you but no. This challenge is for me and I will solve it.”

“Very well.” Heisenberg gave a nod and departed for the room.

Once the Nobel Prize laureate left Sheldon’s shoulders seemed to curl inwards as he hugged the sketchbook. Since Feynman left the East Texan immersed himself in the goings-on in the room. He’d gone over the range of supersymmetric models with Newton and stood in awe as Einstein thoroughly undressed the Englishman on the topic of gravitons. Then it was off to Heisenberg and Schroedinger and Von Neumann and Tesla and Kepler and various other scientists. These were good times; Sheldon’s intellect had never gotten such a workout when he was alive and there were moments when he was so pumped he felt he walked on clouds.

It started as a sudden pang as he solved Einstein’s puzzle—the feeling of wanting to share his success with someone. The scientists offered congratulations once a theory was properly vetted through rigorous testing but it wasn’t the same.

He wanted Feynman.

As ‘time’ went on Sheldon realized that it wasn’t the man himself he missed—although he liked Feynman as well as he could like anyone—but what they talked about: the irrelevancies that were unimportant to everyone else in the room were gold to the Nobel Prize laureate. Now Sheldon understood why. More and more his thoughts were invaded by memories of Penny’s clothes hanging from the telephone wire and wrestling with Leonard at the Bose-Einstein condensate presentation and the office war with Raj and counterfactual nights with Amy.

He even missed Howard.

What frustrated the lanky man most of all was Feynman’s last equations as they made no sense and yet they had to since the formula had worked and the man was—somewhere else. This was another thing that gnawed at Sheldon: what if Feynman killed himself by leaving the room? He didn’t want to die but he didn’t want to stay here.

Sheldon took up the marker and wrote for the one hundred and twenty sixth time Feynman’s last formula and proceeded to work his way backwards with the path integral formulation.
The result was Schrödinger’s equation.

He tried another path.

Schrodinger.

Another path.

Schrodinger.

He continued doing this until he’d gone through all the variables he could imagine.

Nothing.

With a weary sigh he wrote out the one alteration that got him Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle. It still didn’t solve anything but at least it was different. In this case different was good and he needed somewhere to start even if it was in the heart of nowhere.

Sheldon set the marker on the ledge and returned to the room. He bypassed people as he made his way to the one place he needed.

“Excuse me, Dr. Hertz, but you’re in my spot,” he said as he arrived at the couch.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” the doctor replied amiably and both he and Doppler left for another seat.

Sheldon sat down and closed his eyes, his hands resting on the sketchbook that sat on his lap. He took a deep breath to steady himself before opening his eyes and reaching into his pocket for the pencil.

He opened the sketchbook to a fresh page and began to write.

xTBBTx

“So how are things at work?” Bernadette asked Penny before she took a sip of wine.

“Infinitely less mind numbing than the Cheesecake Factory. Sheldon was right about that when he worked there for a bit.” Here Penny smiled. “It was actually pretty liberating quitting that place.”

“Of course you’re not going to fly too far,” Amy said quickly. “I mean your nest is filled with other cool chicks who like to hang with ya even though you occasionally get a peck on the head when mama returns with a fresh, juicy worm.”

“Uh, yeah,” the Nebraskan said, unsure as to where this was going. She picked up the bottle opener and stuck it into the cork but instead of evacuating the metal spring went flying and the opener separated from the screw. “Damn it.” She pulled on the screw but only a piece of the cork came out. “Double damn.” She got up. “Let me get Leonard’s. It’s a traditional screw.”

Here Bernadette chuckled. “I wouldn’t expect anything less from Leonard.”

“Ha ha,” Penny said sarcastically before leaving for apartment 4A. She opened the door to find Leonard working away on Sheldon’s laptop. “Still trying to beat his high score at Tetris?” she quipped as she crossed over to the kitchen and got the cork screw from the drawer.

“Something like that,” he replied. “Need something?”

“Bottle opener bit the big one so I need a screw. *Cork* screw.”
“You said it not me,” he grinned. His girlfriend came over and lightly smacked him on the head.

“Hey, this isn’t Tetris.” She looked at the screen and saw a bunch of mumbo jumbo math. Leonard clicked on the task bar and the Tetris window opened.

“It’s a habit I picked up from home. I close down a game whenever I hear footsteps because I’m reminded of my mother. She even made me feel guilty watching Sesame Street because the character interactions were a waste of time.” Penny kissed him on the head.

“Well, your mother’s not here so you can watch as much Sesame Street as you want,” she soothed as she made for the door.

“Gee thanks.” He waited for her to leave before he returned to the equations.

“We are back in business, ladies,” the assistant said as she closed her door.

“I don’t know if I should drink much more,” said the microbiologist. “I have to drive home yet.”

“We could always have another sleepover,” Amy said brightly.

“I don’t know. It’s a work night,” replied Penny as she popped the cork on the bottle.

“Since when do we let a little work get in the way of fun? Part of the bonding process lies in the three of us sharing the bathroom and the shower as we scramble to make ourselves presentable to the world,” grinned the neurobiologist.

“Maybe next time,” Bernadette said hesitantly as she glanced at Penny.

“Well we could drink it up tonight, bestie. We don’t need Bernadette to have our own fun.”

“I was going to have one more glass and that’s it.” Penny smirked. “Actually I haven’t drunk during the work week since the last time we got together.”

“Good for you,” Bernadette blurted out before putting a hand to her mouth and blushing.

“It’s nice to know you make an exception for us,” Amy said. “Not that we need to drink to have a good time because we always have a good time so it’s not like you need to get new friends or anything.”

Penny cocked her head. “Why would I—what?”

“To friendship,” Amy said as she raised her glass. The other two women joined her.

xTBBTx

Sheldon sat, oblivious to the sounds around him and pondered his formula. It was convoluted and so metaphysical it made the logical side of his brain cringe but it was the only way this all made sense to him.

Over ‘time’ he had cannibalized Feynman’s formulas up until the point their equations diverged. For the life of him he still couldn’t decipher the Nobel Prize laureate’s concluding formulas. Suddenly Sheldon’s mouth dropped as a thought struck him.

“Perhaps I’m not meant to,” he breathed. “This is another door. Another choice.” Excitedly he flipped back through his pages of notes and hundreds of pencil sketches Sheldon had made of his family and friends to find what he was looking for. “It was right all along. This is a case of
Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle! Feynman and I are the same yet not the same so our variables are similar yet different enough to require new calculations.”

He turned to a fresh page and scribbled madly. As far as he could tell he was an energy state of some sort and thus was comprised of particles so that he should be subject to the physicalities of spacetime yet he was not. Time didn’t apply here.

“When we die we lose the physicality but we retain the consciousness. There are three possible outcomes: at some point we shall lose the consciousness as we revert or contract to our core energy state and a) stabilize out as energy b) blink out of existence. OR we contract to our core energy state with consciousness and a) stabilize out as energy b) blink out of existence. OR our energy is continuing to expand outward and our energy has in its travels acquired consciousness by passing through a physical state. Like a metaphysical Higgs Field it slowed down the energy enough for it to be sucked into physical form.”

Sheldon flipped through his notes. “That means everything in the physical universe is flowing with this energy: every star, every tree and rock and person and housefly. But not everything has achieved consciousness like human beings.” He cocked his head. “Luck of the draw I suppose.”

He continued to write and as he did so came to the realization that where he was now was a result of his having consciousness. So what was next? Was there a next? Sheldon got up from the couch and went to the wall. Heisenberg said that the more one is measured the more the other remains unknown. Position and momentum. In this instance he knew neither. Sheldon was sure he was Sheldon. Everything around him was unsure.

The Undiscovered Country.

So if he was to understand his surroundings he had to let go of his notions of what he was. His hand began to search the wall. If he was to open the wall he had to be the quantum outcome where he was unknown and the wall, known.

He had to believe.

A soft ‘click’ was heard and the wall pushed outwards to the white nothingness beyond. Sheldon tossed the notebook and pencil on the couch. No one seemed to notice what he was doing or that the wall had opened. He swallowed heavily to steady himself before taking a tentative step, then another, until he ventured beyond. Immediately after he let go of the wall he seemed to be surrounded by a white fog. Sheldon looked behind and could see the room and its inhabitants. Again he took a breath and proceeded forward.

“Dr. Feynman?” he called out.

Nothing. He was alone.

“Hello? Dr. Feynman? Anyone?”

He began to see shapes in the mist and approached what looked like the start of a forest. The trees were tall silver birches and were solid to the touch. Sheldon took a moment to gather his resolve before stepping past the first few trees. Almost immediately the sounds of chatter from the room ceased even as the fog dissipated.

“Dr. Feynman!”

Sheldon moved slowly forward, stepping over roots as he walked the mossy ground. After being surrounded by the whiteness for so long all the browns and greens and silvers were a delight to his
senses. He did his best to maintain a straight line, taking his time to gather his bearings from a particular tree or upturned root even as he counted his steps in his head. In all the forest was beautiful but eerie as not even his footfalls made a sound.

Off to his right he caught an obvious indentation in the moss. He looked closer and grinned—it was a shoeprint! Noting its direction Sheldon carefully scanned the ground for more signs and sure enough found a heel print here and a partial toe print there.

“Dr. Feynman!” He caught a flash of movement ahead and rushed forward. “Wait!” His heart rate was elevated although he didn’t feel fatigued and surged ahead.

After a few minutes of cat-and-mouse Sheldon came to a halt. Obviously whoever or whatever was ahead had no intention of stopping.

“Fine! Be a poopie head!”

He turned around so as to retrace his steps but was shocked to find that he’d left no footprints in the moss! Sheldon squatted and pressed his fingers into the green, noting that the moss slowly but surely retracted to its previous state.

“Well, Dr. Cooper, time to put your eidetic memory to the test,” he mumbled to himself as he set off.

From time to time he found a familiar tree or root but somehow couldn’t find his original trail. Moreover as he walked he found his shoes ever so slightly begin to stick in the moss as if the ground was getting swampy.

“This is impossible,” he breathed as he came to what he was sure was the first tree he encountered in the forest. Ahead of him was forest as far as he could see instead of the white fog. Sheldon turned again and counted his steps to the next familiar root and there it was.

A shiver passed through his body as he realized he was totally lost.

xTBBTx

Penny smiled as she checked her phone before answering the call.

“Hello Mrs. Cooper,” she said brightly as she busied herself at the stove.

“Ah still say the call display takes the mystery out of who’s callin’.”

“Sometimes it’s a blessing to be able to screen calls.”

“Ah still don’t think it’s somethin’ Jesus would use but ah’m not here tuh judge. So how are things at work?”

“So far so good. No major catastrophes to report.”

“Is that manager of yours still fussin’ over the corners on a circle?”

“I swear it’s like working for Sheldon sometimes. It’s good. I’m learning a lot and Sophie hasn’t had to read me the riot act for anything.”

“Yuh ‘n’ Leonard are doin’ well?”

“Yup. He’s busy working on a project so we make our moments together count.”
“Yes, Shelly mentioned yuhr nightly bareback ridin’. Yuh do realize that there are other ways of communicatin’ than extendin’ the fellowship of the thighs?”

“Of course there are. …And it’s not like Leonard and I have sex all the time. …I mean we do have it a lot but not a lot a lot….”

“Just get yuhr priorities straight and yuh’ll be fine. Maybe yuh should spend more time lookin’ outside the circle if yuh catch my drift? Sometimes a changed perspective works wonders.”

“Actually, Jackie invited me out with the other office girls for cocktails this Friday. They go every week to unwind and shoot the breeze.”

“The mice are playin’ away from the cat.”

“Yup. Plus it gives me a chance to know more people. Over the past four years it seems as though I was either with Leonard or Amy and Bernadette. Now that I’m out and about I need a change.”

“Change is healthy. Just not too much change else ah’m over yonder paddlin’ yuhr behind.”

“Yes Ma’am. Oh! That reminds me, I’m learning how to bake. I kept some of Sheldon’s recipes because his loaves were always so amazing. Got any advice for a first-time cook?”

“Grease the pan instead of usin’ those fandangled sprays. Ain’t good for nothin’.”

“But it makes it low cal.”

“Yuh want yuhr loaf low cal or easy tuh get out of the pan?”

Penny picked up the can of Pam and tossed it into the garbage.

xTBBTx

Realizing that sulking beside his original starting point would do him no good Sheldon decided to make his way towards what he hoped was the wall of the room. As he had nothing else to do he counted his steps: one hundred became a thousand until he’d covered hundreds of miles. He noted that the ‘sky’ above was the usual whiteness and the overall brightness of the forest was more of a grey morning. The ground seemed dryer so his pace was light.

Every once in a while he called out to Dr. Feynman; Sheldon realized that the chances he’d encounter the physicist were remote but he had to at least try. His shouts never echoed and from the stillness of his surroundings he wondered exactly how far sound carried. Wouldn’t it be horrendous if Feynman had been nearby but Sheldon couldn’t hear him?

“Dr. Feynman!”

“I’m not a doctor but I am a fine man,” said a voice to Sheldon’s right. The physicist stopped dead.

“Come where I can see you,” Sheldon said nervously as he peered deeper into the forest but could see no one. “I don’t mean you any harm.”

“And what makes you think I won’t harm you?”

“You could have ambushed me but you chose to parlay instead.”

The voice giggled. “Parlay. Parlez vous Francais?”
“Je parle un peu.”

Again the voice giggled. “Hear that? He speaks French.”

“What a gent’man,” said a deeper voice in the same general area as the first. If Sheldon didn’t know any better he’d swear it was the same man poorly masking his voice.

“I’m Dr. Sheldon Cooper. Who are you?”

“Nobody.”

“Everybody is a somebody. What is your given name?”

“Many people gave me many names: son, brother, father, friend, lover, enemy. Take your pick, I answer to all or else I am none.”

“Good Lord I’m caught in a bad Shakespearian parody,” the lanky man muttered to himself. “But you have a given name.”

“I lost it.”

The physicist’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean you ‘lost it’? You mean you can’t remember?”

The voice laughed bitterly. “Oh, I remember alright. I remember so much I yearn to forget. I must forget. If you know what’s good for you, you won’t be asking questions like these.”

“I don’t understand.” Sheldon made a step towards the voice.

“Stay back!”

With a sigh Sheldon turned and began walking.

“Suit yourself,” he said. “I’ve a wall to find.”

“Are you mad?! Are you insane?” The voice was keeping up with him. “Nobody goes looking for the wall. The wall finds you.” Again Sheldon stopped.

“How does it find me?”

“You have a name. Trust me, it’ll find you. But when it does you have to run away as fast as you can.”

“Why?”

“You’ll see things that will tear your heart and make you want to rip your eyes from their sockets.”

“How will I ‘see’ these things?”

“Beware the wall of sorrow, Dr. Sheldon Cooper,” said the voice faintly as if further away.

“Don’t go!” Sheldon darted in the direction of the voice but after a healthy run he abandoned his search.

xFBBTx

Feynman Anecdotes on Van: fotuvaorg
Chapter Eleven

Chapter Summary

Reference to and dialogue from ‘The Desperation Emanation’

“It’s not as bad as you think,” soothed Esperit as Penny took a sip of her martini.

“I guess,” the assistant sighed. “I just feel like such a dumbass. Sophie was pissed.”

Esperit laughed. “No she wasn’t. Believe me, hon, you don’t want to see her roiled. What you got was a run-of-the-mill ‘annoyed’.”

“Yay Penny.” She took another small sip. At fourteen dollars a martini she made sure to nurse her glass like it was her own child. She liked hanging out with the girls after work so it meant sticking to a budget if she wanted to make this a weekly venture.

“I was wondering if you were a ‘Penny’. Somehow I couldn’t see ‘Penelope’ ruling the Junior Rodeo or fixing the tractor.”

“A friend of mine told me that ‘Penelope’ was more appropriate for work.” Here Penny smirked. “I’m still getting used to it. At the restaurant I was always hearing my name: Penny! Table two wants a bill. Penny! Ready for table five. Penny! Crazy guy at table three. ‘Penelope’ sounds like a whole different person and I am.” Esperit sucked her teeth.

“A job’s a job, hon. What you bring to it is what counts. You’re not different because we call you ‘Penelope’—”

“—I’m ‘Penelope’ because I feel different.” The two women clinked glasses. “To Penelope: still alive after disappointing Sophie.”

“Actually, you’re doing quite well.”

Penny shrugged. “As long as I don’t do the same mistake twice I’m good. My last employer had no patience for repeat mistakes.” The assistant laughed. “God, he’d look at me like I was mentally ill.”

“Sophie has a look that pins you to the spot like my brother’s bug collection,” grinned Esperit. “Then she corrects you and leaves with a ‘don’t do it again or you’re toast’.”

“You know what I got? ‘While HR might promote enthusiasm in the workplace I find its effect unsatisfactory in terms of actual output.’ So I said, ‘No more bubbly. Got it.’ And then she said, ‘I don’t even like bubbles in my champagne.’ Kicked the smile off my face, let me tell ya.”

Esperit nudged her friend’s arm. “Believe it or not that was Sophie cracking a joke.”

“Really? She sounded like the Ice Queen.”

“It’s not how she says things but what.” The receptionist grinned. “She likes you, Penelope. That means you’re a good worker.” Here her eyes narrowed as she leaned her head closer and said in a low voice, “Only don’t ever let her know that you know she likes you or that she should cut you
some slack for old time’s sake. One girl did that a few years ago and Lord knows we didn’t need
the air conditioning in the office for weeks. I was positively furious!” Again she patted Penny on
the arm. “That’s why I’m pleased as punch with you. It takes Sophie a while to warm up to
someone and that she has with you this quickly means you work hard and smart.”

The two women spent time chatting away about celebrity gossip until Esperit had to use the ladies.
Penny pulled out her phone and checked her messages before texting Leonard:

*Hey u. What u doing?

About a minute later came his reply:

*Working.

Penny frowned. Leonard had been working away like a fiend over the past few weeks. When she
went over for her morning coffee she’d find him at his computer or whiteboard scribbling a few
calculations. It really was a déjà vu feeling to her although he wasn’t the physicist she brought to
mind.

*Too busy for dinner?

*Already ate.

*Oh.

*Let me get this out of the way.

*Then we can talk?

*B4 or after sex? ;)

*:P

Penny shook her head as she tucked her phone in her purse.

xTBBTx

“…Barnard’s Star,” Sheldon said as he passed a tree. “One, two three, four, five, six, seven, eight,
nine, Wolf 359. One, two, thr—”

“Sheldon,” sighed a familiar voice.

Immediately he stopped, his heart hammering in his chest.

“Penny?”

“Sheldon.” To the left and further away than last time.

“Penny!” Like a shot he took off into the forest. He had no idea what was happening. Had Penny
‘died’? Was this some kind of prank? Was he hearing things? After a few hundred meters he came
to a halt. “This isn’t funny,” he scowled. He strained his hearing but could detect nothing beyond.
“Drat.” Turning back, he realized he was even more lost than he was before as he’d separated
himself from his celestial body named trees.

He took a breath and proceeded to walk. “Proxima Centauri’s the nearest star. The celestial bodies
that follow are: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, Alpha Centauri A. One, two,
three, four…"

Penny was all smiles as she entered the office. Last night had been a surprise as Leonard was less predictable in bed than normal. He really was on a roll with his work and his enthusiasm spread into other aspects of his life—much to Penny’s enjoyment.

“Morning, Penelope,” said Esperit. “Get yourself settled then report to Sophie.”

“What’s up?” The receptionist shook her head.

“I could get the correct time from the sphinx before Sophie would tell me.”

“Okay. So what does the grapevine say?” said Penny with a smirk.

Esperit leaned forward. “You’re temping for someone. From what I gather the EA went on early maternity leave unexpectedly and since everyone’s busy with running the office through the merger you’re the candidate to fill her shoes.”

“Wow, I—”

“Your boss is Derek Starke. He’s over six feet, dimple on left cheek when he smiles—which is often. He’s the charmer in the other firm. Clients love him.”

“Huh. Well, I—”

“You’ll be busting your butt. Apparently Marilyn—that’s his assistant—works about a million miles a minute but I know you’ll do fine so there’s nothing to worry about.”

Penny smiled. “Anything else I should know?”

“I’ll let you know if I hear anything,” Esperit said seriously before answering the phone.

The Nebraskan put her things away at her desk, collected her IPad, and ventured to Sophie’s office.

“Enter,” her manager said as she sat behind her desk reading a document.

“Esperit said you wanted to see me?”

“We have a minor situation. As you know we’re in the midst of a merger. Since we run a superior office we will be incorporating executives and partners from the other firm into our rotation. Not all executives will survive the merger but those that do will retain their EAs.” Sophie placed her signature on the form before putting it in her outbox. “In this instance Mr. Starke’s assistant is on maternity leave as of this morning. Therefore effective immediately you will take her place.”


Sophie raised an eyebrow. “Of course you will.” She got up and the two women exited and made for the far end of the office.

“You’ll report each morning to the desk outside Mr. Starke’s office. Your sole responsibility is to function as his assistant while continuing to follow office procedure,” Sophie said as they walked down the hall. “Under no circumstances are you to engage in other tasks. Let me know immediately if anyone tells you otherwise.”
“I understand.”

They stopped in front of a closed door. The manager checked her watch before proceeding to knock.

“It’s open,” came a male voice from within. Sophie pursed her lips before entering, followed by Penny.

Immediately the Nebraskan’s mouth felt a little dry as she took in the mid-to-late thirties man with tousled brown hair sitting on the corner of his desk. He finished up on his Blackberry before slipping the phone into his pocket and smiled broadly.

“Let’s meet my next victim,” he said.

“Mr. Starke, this is Penelope. She will be your assistant,” introduced Sophie.

“Penelope.” He took in the blond Nebraskan. “Hello Penelope.” He paused. “Penelope. Penelope. Mind if I call you Penny?”

“Penelope* will transition you to our office procedure. Should you have any questions do not hesitate to ask her,” the manager said crisply.

“Thanks Soph,” he said and gave her a wink before proceeding to his desk chair.

“You will call me Sophie,” she amended.

“Sorry. Thank you, Sophie.”

“Nebraska.”

“Michigan, here.” His phone buzzed in his pocket. “I’ll try to take it easy on you but I have to warn you that I’m a bear on Mondays.”

“When I was younger I used to have a ‘wake me before eleven am and I’ll punch you in the throat’ rule,” smirked Penny. Derek laughed.

“Duly noted.” The phone buzzed again and he took it from his pocket and checked his messages. Penny left for her old desk to gather her things, only stopping for a moment to see Esperit.

“You forgot one thing,” she whispered to her friend. “Mr. Starke’s gorgeous!”

“Must have slipped my mind,” grinned Esperit, who chuckled quietly as Penny rolled her eyes.

This time the physicist kept his wits about him as he did his best to orient himself to Penny’s voice. Nevertheless he did experience a feeling of ‘butterflies’ in his stomach even as he began counting his steps softly under his breath to keep himself calm. As he passed the fifteen thousand mark he reminded himself that he didn’t have anywhere else to go so it didn’t matter if he kept on in the direction he was going.

Fifteen thousand became one hundred and fifty thousand steps although the length of his stride had
decreased. His enthusiasm had faded and again he was left with a feeling of loneliness. Hearing his neighbor’s voice was truly a double-edged sword and he loathed to hear it even though he’d give just about anything to hear it again.

“Ridiculous, Dr. Cooper,” he said to himself. “I’m grasping at the familiar. It wouldn’t matter who called my name were it Amy or Leonard or How—”

“Sheldon.”

His pace quickened to match his heart rate though he refused to run. In the distance he caught sight of a flash of red and made for it. As he neared he realized his t-shirt was the source for the red moved as he did. The trees further ahead were not real but reflections and as he stepped from between the last of the trees he stopped on the dirt ground in front of a vast line of mirrors. They seemed to stretch as far as the eye could see in either direction and stood about ten feet in height. The panels, while reflective, were of varying shades from modern mirror clear to a look of tarnished silver.

Sheldon went to a clear mirror and tentatively poked it with his finger.

“Solid,” he said. He rubbed his finger along its surface. “And smudge-proof.” His reflection caught his eyes and he noted he looked relatively the same as he did when he was ‘alive’. The only thing was that his skin was unusually pale, like he’d spent the winter indoors away from the sun. A thought came to him and he opened his mouth wide before quickly closing it. His uvula was still misshapen.

Unsure of what to do he walked over and sat with his back against a tree. Penny’s voice came from around here so he was loath to leave even though he was curious to see how far the mirrors went.

“I’m dead and I’m still waiting for you, Penny,” he tsked.

xtBBTx

Penny picked up the phone.

“Good Morning, Mr. Starke’s office, Penelope speaking.”

“Hello, this is Sandra from Mr. Lemon’s office. I sent Mr. Starke a memo on Friday asking if he’d meet with Mrs. Osborne this Thursday but haven’t received a response.”

“Let me find out for you,” Penny replied. “Hold one moment.” She put the phone down and went to the office door. She heard rhythmic tapping of a pen or pencil on the desk before proceeding to knock.

No answer.

She waited a moment before returning to her desk and picked up the phone.

“Hi Sandra, it looks as though he’s not available,” she said diplomatically. “I’ll leave a message on his voicemail telling him to call you.” Sandra snorted.

“Here’s hoping you’ve got better luck than me.”

Penny dialed Derek’s number and relayed the message to his voicemail before continuing to reorganize his files to Sophie’s specifications until lunch.
“So what do you think?” asked Esperit as the two women munched on their salads.

“Hard to say,” Penny replied. “He was all smiles this morning as he went into his office but then pfft—incommunicado. No phone calls. No answering the door. Nada.”

“Must be a busy guy.”

“I guess, although I could hear his pencil tapping like he was listening to music.” Esperit sucked her teeth. “No grapevine with that one.”

“See an blind, hear an deaf,” the Jamaican nodded.

Upon her return to the office Penny checked her messages:

*“Hello, Penelope, this is Sandra again. I still haven’t heard anything from Mr. Starke and Mr. Lemon isn’t impressed here. Mrs. Osborne is a major client and we need an answer today by four.”*

Again Penny went to her boss’s door and knocked.

“Mr. Starke?” No response. ‘Did he go out?’ Perhaps she’d leave a note on his desk in case he hadn’t checked his phone messages although the chances of an executive leaving his Blackberry in his pocket for ten minutes much less several hours were next to none. She wrote a note on a yellow Post It and gave another knock before opening the door. Derek was on his cell phone and stopped pacing to point Penny out of the office with a frown.

Immediately Penny’s heart froze as she scurried from the room. 'Omigod I’m dead!' Her face was ashen and she did her best to calm herself by continuing with her work but she continued to chastise herself. Here she was on her first major assignment and she blew it just like that. Just because her idiot boss didn’t know how to return a stupid phone call.

At three forty five Jackie showed up with a form to be signed.

“I’m not sure if he wants to be disturbed,” Penny said.

“This is from the Big Kahuna. Believe me this gets signed and returned to Sophie ASAP.”

Penny steadied herself, took the form, and proceeded to the door and knocked.

“It’s open,” said Derek and, relieved, she entered. “What can I do you for, Penelope?”

“I have a form from Mr. Burke that needs your signature,” she said in as calm a voice as possible.

“Anything for you,” he said with a grin. He took the form and glanced over it before popping the pen and affixing his signature.

“While I’ve got you, Sandra called from Mr. Lemon’s office regarding a Mrs. Osborne.”

“Ah, yes, Elaine.” He picked up his phone.

“I’m sorry I interrupted you earlier,” Penny continued. “Sandra needs to know by four o’clock and —”

“No worries. I was in a meeting,” he said as he texted.

“Oh. It wasn’t scheduled.”
“Yes it was.” He opened the scheduler app and turned the screen towards her.

“Well it wasn’t on my scheduler. Perhaps we need to coordinate?” she said diplomatically. Derek grabbed a pad from under a stack of papers on his desk and scribbled out a mix of numbers and letters.

“My password. Check the schedule every morning since I change things during the night.” He held onto the slip of paper even as Penny meant to take it. “I’m putting my life into your hands.”

“Your secret’s safe with me, Iron Man.” He gave her a wink and a smile before gathering up his phone. Penny felt her stomach do a little flip only to come crashing down to earth as she noticed among the piles of papers and folders on his desk a framed picture of a beautiful redhead and young boy.

‘Ah well. Doesn’t mean I can’t look’, thought Penny as she closed the door.

“Elaine, this is Derek Starke,” he said into his phone. “I’m sorry I just received your message. … I see. Perhaps I can make up this misunderstanding by turning Thursday’s get-together into a lunch? …Great. I’m looking…..”

As she walked to her desk it took Penny a moment for her brain to catch up with what she heard.

“Wait a minute. If he just got the message now how did he know about the meeting on Thursday?”

xTBBTx

“Sheldon.”

The physicist glanced to the left and saw a moving image three mirrors down. Immediately he popped up and dusted his butt even as he walked to the mirror.

His jaw dropped as he saw himself wearing his Green Lantern t-shirt and khaki pants writing away at his whiteboard while Penny sat in his spot (!) applying makeup.

“You’re in my spot,” Sheldon said under his breath as he stared at the moving images. Watching the scene unfold he realized that they had no such interaction when he was alive.

Penny was talking and must have said something spectacular as the Sheldon in the mirror stiffened before glancing over his shoulder to give her a glare. Penny rolled her eyes and began putting on lipstick as her neighbor lectured her on some point or other. She checked her watch as she stood, leaving her makeup all over the coffee table, and grabbed her grey tweed cardigan that was draped over the arm of the couch. Her hand made a ‘talk talk’ motion as she marched to the door, opening it to reveal a tall man with tousled brown hair and sophisticated business attire. The man smiled and Penny closed the door behind her.

The image went dark and then Sheldon and the forest were reflected in the mirror.

xTBBTx

‘Crap on a cracker.’ Penny picked up the phone and dialed Derek Starke. The documents he was supposed to look over and promised to get back to her hadn’t arrived and she was yet again playing phone tag with him.

“Good afternoon Penelope. What can I do you for?” he said as, to her surprise, he answered his phone.
“Two words for you: Goldstein report,” she retorted.

“Didn’t I get that back to you?”

“Nope. The calls have started and I’m feeling like I’m avoiding creditors. Want to help me out and give back the file before the PR department comes with torches?”

“Sure, sure. It’s on my desk.”

“Great.”

“Only I have some questions about part of it. I’ve made notes in the margins and would appreciate if you could forward those along.”

“I live to serve.”

“You’re a doll.”

Penny hung up and went to her boss’s office. Immediately she sighed as she saw what a disaster his desk was: folder after folder were stacked haphazardly on top of each other and a whirlwind of papers about half an inch thick were strewn about.

“Sheldon would have a bird,” she muttered as she began tidying.

When Derek got to his office the next morning he not only found his papers organized but also his pens aligned, clips all facing forward, in a caddy he didn’t know he had.

“I wonder if she does windows?” he chuckled.

xTBBTedx

The only way he could keep basic track of time was to pace so Sheldon wore a little trail in front of the mirror where Penny and ‘he’ had appeared. After the second time he watched a confusing scene with his neighbor he wanted to know if the images appeared at a particular interval, hence the pacing.

As for the images themselves they were no less baffling as, again, he observed a scene that didn’t occur in real life. Like the first it took place in apartment 4A only this time Penny and Leonard were having coffee at the counter while Sheldon was eating cereal in his spot and his blue jay ate from her bowl on the coffee table.

“Sheldon.”

The mirror shimmered and he stopped pacing to watch the forthcoming images:

Again Sheldon was in his Green Lantern t-shirt standing at his whiteboard while Raj and Howard sat on the couch and the strange man from the first run of images sat in Leonard’s chair. The apartment door opened and Penny entered with the bags of take-out and set them on the table before sitting in Sheldon’s spot. Almost immediately Howard, Raj and Penny scooted over one cushion as Sheldon walked past the couch to the window where a stand and feeder were situated. He poured some bird seed into the trough and from the hallway his blue jay streaked into the room and onto the stand.

The gang plus the stranger were already eating by the time Sheldon sat and they chatted while obviously watching television. A moment later and again the door opened and Leonard came in.
He plunked his satchel on his desk before wheeling the computer chair over to the couch.

Outside the mirror, Sheldon could see that an argument was brewing as it looked as though there was no food for Leonard. His roommate abruptly stood up and stormed down the hallway. The stranger got up to leave and Penny followed him out. The rest of the gang went back to watching their program.

The image went dark and the mirror was restored.

“Curious,” Sheldon muttered as he pondered what he just witnessed. “This is the second sequence where my blue jay was present and the second time this stranger is in my apartment. Apparently he is familiar with Penny since she left with him in both instances.” He began to pace. “Moreover it looked as though Raj was conversing with Penny and yet I saw no alcohol on the table. There was no ring on Howard’s finger and most importantly what was that drivel on my whiteboard? Algebra?

“So, after roughly twenty two and a half hours between images I see a person I’ve never seen and participate in events I’ve never done.” He stopped walking. “That’s not completely true. I’ve eaten Thai food and watched television. I’ve also seen Leonard storm off to his room.” Sheldon’s eyes widened as a thought came to him. “I’ve also written simple algebraic formulas on my board—when I was assisting Penny!

“If I combine all the relevant facts: sequences consisting of a jumble of real and fictional people and events that is preceded by Penny’s voice calling my name. Obviously these images don’t come from me so where do they—” His mouth opened and he stepped to the mirror.

“If Penny?!” he said quietly and put out a hand to touch the mirror’s surface. His fingers felt along the edges; he didn’t know what he was looking for—perhaps a way in? If he could make a door out of a blank wall why not a mirror?

If Sheldon was right about this the images would return.

After all, Penny had to sleep sometime.

xTBBTx

Penny came from her bedroom clipping an earring to her ear even as she jammed her left foot into her heeled shoe. She took up her purse, turned off the light and locked her door before scurrying over to her boyfriend’s apartment.

“Sorry I’m late,” she said as she opened the door. “Traffic was a nightmare and—”

“It’s alright,” Leonard said with a big grin as he sat on the couch with Howard. “Bernadette’s not here yet so we’re good.”

Down the hall the toilet flushed and the sound of splashing water.

“Are you sure we can’t bring Raj?” Penny asked.

“It’s been a while since we’ve done things as couples,” replied Leonard. “Besides, he said he was cool with it.”

The door opened and Raj came to the living room. He gave Penny a little smile and wave of the hand before venturing to the refrigerator for a bottled water.
“All set for tonight?” Penny asked brightly. The astrophysicist gave a slow shrug with a silent sigh.

“It’ll be better than our night,” Howard said, trying to bolster his best friend. “Try sitting around a table listening to girly talk all evening.” Impossibly, Raj seemed even sadder so the engineer was relieved when his phone chirped. “That’s Bernadette. She’s downstairs.”

“Okay, well, have a good night,” Penny said with a sympathetic smile to Raj before following Howard and Leonard out the door.

“Why would I want to go to a fancy dinner when I can sit home, eat leftover chicken and watch Jeopardy?” pouted Raj before taking a sip of his water.

In front of the building Leonard opened the car door for Penny before swinging around and jumping in.

“Hi guys,” squeaked Bernadette as she put the car in gear and drove off. “Penny I like your dress.”

“Thank you,” smiled the assistant. “I got it for my three month anniversary at the firm but this is the first time I got a chance to wear it.” She had returned to Nordstrom and picked up a red dress reminiscent of Audrey Hepburn with wide shoulder straps and a fitted waistline. The white cardigan and silver chunk necklace completed the outfit.

“It’s a perfect night to celebrate,” said Leonard lightly. “I’ve got some great news: I finished my paper.”

“Yay!” grinned Penny. “More nights seeing your face than the back of your head at the computer.”

“Now that it’s done what is the top secret project?” asked Howard.

“It’s about the proton debate. I call it ‘Taking a Proton Out for a Spin: Calculating Spatial Angular Momentum of Quarks in Contrast to S-Wave Predictions’.”

Bernadette stopped at a red light before looking at Leonard in the rear view mirror. “Sounds intriguing. Can I read it sometime?”

“Sure. I can send it to you once it’s polished or published. I’ve already got a reply back from the Journal of Particle Physics from my abstract. They’re interested,” beamed the physicist.

“That’s terrific,” said Howard. “Actually, Bernie got some good news too, right honey?”

“Yeah, I got a raise. I’ve gone from a butt-load to a boatload of cash,” the microbiologist grinned.

“So anyways we’ve started to talk about children,” said Howard. “Bernie wants to keep working and hey, I’ve been to outer space so my career has already hit its high note.”

“Wow,” said Penny, stunned. “So you’re going to quit?”

“I’ll see what the university wants to do,” shrugged Howard. “I want to take a full year off for sure, maybe two. Part of me says that the university has a great daycare but then I think of my mother who stayed home with me until my dad left. I wouldn’t trade those years for anything with the homemade cookies and a ready-made audience for my magic tricks. She sewed me my first Bat-Man cape.”

“It’s great, isn’t it?” said Leonard. “You’ve got Bernadette. I’ve got Penny. We’ve all got careers and yet you’ve decided to take the backseat to your spouse.” He turned to Penny. “See? When we
have kids you can make play dates with Howard.”

Penny frowned. “Not that I’m saying I’m ready for kids—which I’m not—but what if we did have a kid and I wanted to keep working?”

“You can always be my secretary,” Leonard said brightly. “You know, manage the kids and the house while keeping my office tidy. It’ll be great.”

“Yeah, ‘great’,” Penny mumbled to herself as she looked out the side window.

xTBBTx

The ground was covered in equations that Sheldon had scratched with a stick. Over and over the dream images appeared and he failed in his attempts at gaining access. Granted, he still had no idea if he could enter the mirror. Still, the numbers he’d amassed after every failure seemed to indicate that a solution was possible.

“Sheldon.”

The mirror came to life and the physicist read over his latest equation before standing in front of the reflected surface. He pressed a spot about a quarter of the way down from the top edge and to his delight the mirror opened! Beyond him was apartment 4A and Penny flumped down on the couch in her pink Hello Kitty shorts and yellow tank top munching on popcorn while ‘Sheldon’ was at his board working.

As soon as he stepped into the room Sheldon was inundated with Penny’s tirade:

“—he’s already got my eggs fertilized and I’ve got nothing to say?” she growled before munching another hand of popcorn.

“As they’re your eggs and you have no desire to extract any for the purposes of donation”—here ‘Sheldon’ turned to face her, eyebrow raised.

“Of course not!”

He turned back to the board. “Then Leonard’s ‘got nothing’ to say about it.”

“That’s right.”

“Well, unless the condom breaks,” he added as he amended his formula.

“Gee, thanks Sheldon,” she said, glaring.

“He’s just relating the facts,” offered the ‘real’ Sheldon. For her part Penny got off the couch and began to pace.

“Oh, and you know what else he said? When—when!—we have babies I can quit my job and be his secretary! He gets one stupid paper published and he’s all Stephen King.”

“Stephen Hawking,” amended Sheldon as he quickly got out of Penny’s way. He made for the couch and sat down in his spot. It wasn’t as comfy as his real spot was but it gave him psychological satisfaction.

Dream Sheldon snorted. “Obviously you’re better than that. You were my underling after all.” He turned to face her. “And it’s executive assistant. Remember what I said about respect.”
Penny’s shoulders sagged and she again flopped on the couch. Sheldon couldn’t feel her motion nor any vibration through the couch as she sat.

“I worked so hard, Sheldon. I don’t see why I have to give everything up,” she sighed.

“‘Everything’ is an absolute,” said Dream Sheldon as he put the cap on his dry erase marker and set it on the ledge of his board. “You’ll still have your liberty, for instance, and the right to breathe.” He put his hands behind his back and raised himself on his toes. “Of course you’d be an idiot to quit your job.”

Penny ran a hand through her hair. “So what do I do?”

“It’s not like Leonard’s waiting for an answer so don’t give him one. Just go about your life whimsically like you normally do.”


“That would be acceptable,” smiled ‘Sheldon’ and he made his way to the couch.

Immediately the ‘real’ Sheldon moved away and let his mirrored self take his seat. He turned to the television and saw the beginning of original Star Trek.

For a moment everything was clear and then the television began to fade. Sheldon turned to the couch and saw Penny and ‘Sheldon’ also fading to black. Quickly he made for the mirror and exited. Once he got back to the forest side the mirror closed and returned to its former reflective self.

“Fascinating,” he said as he regarded himself. From how ‘Penny’ and ‘Sheldon’ reacted he gathered that they could neither see nor hear him in the apartment. He couldn’t say that he ‘felt’ the couch only that he was sitting on something.

“Perhaps I was in some way holding myself up?” he murmured. “After all it’s not like I experience any muscle strain. I’ll have to make note of this the next time I’m there.”

Because there was no doubt he was going back.

xTBBTx

Wikipedia: Proton Spin Crisis
Chapter Twelve

Chapter Summary

Reference to and dialogue from: ‘Pilot’

Esperit and Penny walked into the office from lunch to find Sophie at the receptionist’s desk sorting out papers to be filed.

“Hello,” said Penny amicably to her manager. “What brings you to this neck of the woods?”

Sophie raised an eyebrow. “‘Neck of the woods’? This is the entrance to the office proper from which all corridors are accessed. It would be more of a quandary if I appeared in the office without coming through here.” She turned to Esperit. “These are to be filed and the two at the end are to go to archives.”

“Absolutely,” smiled the Jamaican. “Just let me get settled in first and I’m all yours.”

“Of course.” Sophie checked her watch. “You have six minutes,” she said before returning to her office.

As soon as her manager was out of earshot a grin came to Penny’s face as she chuckled.

“That is so Sheldon. I thought I was gonna crack up when she described the reception area.” Esperit looked at her questioningly. “When I first met Sheldon I sat in his ‘spot’ on the couch. He asked me to move because ‘in the winter that seat is close enough to the radiator to remain warm and yet not so close as to cause perspiration. In the summer it’s directly in the path of a cross breeze created by open windows there and there. It faces the television at an angle that is neither direct, thus discouraging conversation, nor so far wide to create a parallax distortion.’”

“No wonder you get along so well with Sophie. Since you get this from your boyfriend it’s old hat,” smiled Esperit.

“Sheldon isn’t my boyfriend,” Penny said hurriedly. “He was a friend of mine who got me prepped for my new career.”

“‘Was’?”

“He was hit by a car.” Esperit sucked her teeth.

“Lord have mercy on him. Sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah. The sad thing is that I never properly thanked him for turning my life around.” Penny gave a small, sad smile. “I’d still be a waitress if it wasn’t for him.”

“The Lord works in mysterious ways, my honey,” Esperit said soothingly. “He was your angel
when you needed him. Honor him by doing what you’re doing and things will balance out in the end.” Penny nodded. “So does that mean you’re single?”

“Nope. I’m dating Sheldon’s—I mean Leonard used to be roommates with Sheldon. We’ve been in an on-again off-again relationship for five years.”

“And this time it’s on?”

“Oh it’s on alright,” Penny said in such a way that left Esperit unsure of what to say. “Anyhoo, back to the grind.”

Penny returned to her desk and checked her messages:

*“Penny, it’s Gabby from PR. Mr. Starke hasn’t gotten back to us on who’s supposed to be there at the presentation. If you could find out it’d be appreciated. Thanks.”*

“And here we go again,” sighed Penny. She clicked onto the scheduler to see where her illustrious boss was this afternoon. “Out with clients.” She picked up the phone and dialed. If she was lucky she’d catch him before his appointments since he didn’t have anything booked for lunch.

“Good afternoon most revered scribe.”

“Yeah, yeah. Listen, I got a message from PR, something about some kind of presentation?”

“Ah yes, the Chappelle Institute. It’s a think tank for rich people who want to pretend they can think. Want to go heckle with me?”

“I’m dating a physicist. Believe me, if I want to hear big-worded babble I’ve got it in spades at home. Anyways, PR said you were supposed to send them some sort of confirmation list about who’s attending.”

“Hmm. I’m still in the air about that at the moment. I’ll email them when I’ve got it sorted out.”

“And when will that be—in case they call again.”

“Shouldn’t be too long. Hopping into the car now. Make me proud.”

“More like, ‘make me insane’, ” Penny said with a roll of the eyes as she hung up.

xTBBTx

“Sheldon.”

The physicist went to the mirror and pushed but it wouldn’t move!

“No, no, no!” he said in a panic as he rushed to where his last equation was to ensure he pressed in the right spot even though with his eidetic memory he knew he had.

He began another path integral formulation and the resulting numbers showed a slight variation to the mirror. It was as if the very act of opening it had shifted the mirror in its dimensional moorings. If Sheldon wanted to keep using the portal he would have to account for this shift before applying the formula.

By the time he was ready the scene had played itself through and faded from view.

xTBBTx
Esperit put on her jacket, grabbed her purse and made her way down the hall towards Penny’s desk. Usually the Nebraskan was waiting for her to finish working since the receptionist was at the office a half-hour before and after everyone else. Except for Sophie, of course.

She sucked her teeth as she arrived at Derek Starke’s office to find her friend sifting through a mound of paperwork on his desk.

“How does he find anything in here?” the Jamaican asked.

“Simple, he doesn’t!” growled Penny.

“Can I help?” The assistant sighed.

“I know what I’m looking for, I just can’t find it.” She tucked a few strands of hair behind her ear and straightened. “He needed a file from archives and I stupidly gave it to him when I should have sent him a copy since he’s so damn disorganized.” She lifted a pile of papers to make a clear spot before she began sorting.

“You can always look for it on Monday,” Esperit said soothingly.

“Nope. Got an email saying he’s meeting with the client Monday morning and to have the file ready to go first thing. I asked him where he put it and he was all, ‘it’s on my desk’.” Here Penny snorted. “I bet the Declaration of Independence is here too.”

“No kidding.”

“Hey, don’t wait for me,” Penny said.

“You sure?”

“Yup. Believe me, I’ll need more than a single cocktail to unwind with after this and it’s best I do that at home.”

“Alright. See you Monday.” Esperit smiled and left Penny to her own devices.

“Now if I was a file in the hands of an absentminded man where would I be?” Penny murmured to herself as she continued to clean.

Time ticked by as she found more and more of the desk’s surface. She realized that a lot of these papers should be with Esperit, in archives or else shredded. Penny knew she needed at least a good half hour with Derek to sort things through, particularly with this other pile of forms she was uncovering from before she started with him that looked ominously official.

“How this guy isn’t fired is beyond me,” Penny muttered.

“From what I gather he’s exceptional with the clients,” said Sophie’s voice from the door.

Penny looked up, startled. “Oh. Hey,” she blushed. “I thought I was alone.”

“I archive documents on Fridays. People are in a rush to leave thus allowing me to work uninterrupted.” Sophie looked around the office. “I see your organizational skills need work.”

“I don’t know how he does it. He’s rarely here and when he is it’s a disaster,” sighed Penny. “His previous assistant must have been a miracle worker.”

“She did her job,” her manager said evenly. “Exactly what I had assigned you to do.” Penny felt her
“Something which seems to be beyond your capability.”

“It’s not,” Penny said hurriedly. “It’s just different since my last boss was better organized.”

“There’s a level of respect between an executive and his assistant.” Sophie’s eyes hardened. “What you think of Mr. Starke outside of the office is irrelevant to me. While you are here, however, you will be respectful, despite his idiosyncrasies.”

“I’m sorry. I was just frustrated.”

“No excuses, Penelope. This is your only warning.” A pause. “Get it together,” she said crisply before leaving.

Penny wanted to crawl into a hole and die.

As soon as he heard his name Sheldon was through the mirror and into ‘his’ apartment. He could hear Penny arguing with a man in the hallway so he made his way to the bookshelves. The titles were all correct on the spines and out of curiosity he tried to pick up a book. His hand felt ‘something’ but couldn’t grasp the book proper.

“So much for passing time,” he sighed. Of course even if he could access his library he doubted there’d be anything to read: Penny hadn’t read the books so her unconscious couldn’t fill the pages. Here he snorted. If he ever made it to Penny’s apartment he could probably read an Enquirer from cover to cover.

Now curious, he went to the apartment door and tried to open it but it was stuck.

“Apparently I’m dependent on someone opening the door.” The argument outside got more heated and he retreated towards the center of the room. He might be ‘dead’ but he still didn’t like arguing.

Neither, apparently, did Dream Sheldon as he put down his marker before venturing into the kitchen to pull out the blender. He added ice and turned the contraption on, drowning out the words from the hall. A few seconds later the apartment door opened and Penny stormed in, slamming it shut behind her.

“Okay, Sheldon, we’re done fighting!” she said loudly. Dream Sheldon turned off the blender and stared at her with clear blue eyes.

“Promise?” he said softly.

“I promise.” Immediately the physicist perked up and began cleaning out the blender.

“Of course, this is what you get for bringing your work home with you,” he tutted. “Dr. Gablehauser knows where I live but I’ve never invited him over.”

“I never invited Mr. Starke over,” Penny growled. The ‘real’ Sheldon’s eyes widened as he regarded his friend.

“You work for Iron Man?” he said, intrigued.

“He just showed up,” Penny continued. “He always just ‘shows up’. How the hell he can attend meetings on time I’ll never know.”

“Language, Penny,” both Sheldons said at once.
“Yeah, yeah.” She sat on the arm of the couch. “Sheldon, I can’t lose my job.”

“What makes you think you’re going to?” Dream Sheldon asked as he dried his hands with a paper towel. “Just because you had an altercation with your boss doesn’t mean you’re ‘done for’.”

Penny snorted. “You had a fight with your boss and he canned you.”

“Point.”

“We didn’t fight; I merely pointed out some truths he didn’t particularly like,” ‘real’ Sheldon sniffed as he ventured to the whiteboard to read over the equations.

“So what do I do?” his neighbor sighed.

Dream Sheldon crossed his arms in front of his chest. “Are you adequately performing your tasks?”

“I guess.”

“You ‘guess’? Penny, you either are or aren’t.”

“It’s just so hard. I mean every time I get something done he’s already undone it and made it even worse.”

“For instance?”

‘Real’ Sheldon was only half-listening to Penny’s tales of woe as he was distracted by the errors on the whiteboard.

“Good Lord, it looks like Leonard’s,” he tsked. He picked out the beginnings of one formula that was then mixed with something completely unrelated. “Well, I now fully understand how Penny ‘sees’ physics. It’s like trying to make sense of the third ‘Matrix’ movie.”

“—and then there’s—”

“You’ve made your point,” Dream Sheldon said to cut Penny off. “You sound as if you’re unprepared for the task at hand.”

“That’s what Sophie said,” pouted the Nebraskan.

“*I* trained her. Penny’s more than capable,” ‘real’ Sheldon said stiffly, frowning at a particular formula on his board. “Oh this is intolerable,” he growled as he recognized it as one of Leonard’s. “I refuse to see my board soiled with this garbage,” and reflexively wiped his hand across the equation.

Much to his surprise the markered numbers were gone. He checked his hand but there was no marker stain on it. Tentatively he reached out and wiped a number from the board with his finger.

“Now this is unexpected,” he said curiously. For the heck of it he reached for a marker and was delighted to find that he could lift it! Quickly he erased and fixed the errors on his board. As he wrote he looked over his shoulder but Dream Sheldon and Penny didn’t react to the changing numbers. In fact when ‘Sheldon’ came to the board he merely picked up a marker and resumed writing nonsense equations.

The real physicist rolled his eyes and sighed.

“You’re impossible,” he hissed before turning accusingly to Penny. “Although this is your fault for
not paying better attention to my ‘Introduction to Physics’ class.” He stood beside the other ‘Sheldon’ and made to write out a message at the top of the board but all he could get out was a ‘P’ before the marker stopped writing. Sheldon made a successful scribble in the corner of the board before returning to the ‘P’ but he couldn’t write the rest of the letters in Penny’s name. Out of morbid curiosity he dashed off a quick formula and the numbers and letters appeared as normal.

The door opened and Amy entered wearing a Cheesecake Factory uniform.

“Bestie! It’s six o’clock! Don’t forget we’re on for the dinner shift.” At once Penny darted out the door with a “Damn it” and the scene went to black.

Sheldon stepped through the mirror, his shoulders slumped.

“Obviously communicating with the ‘living’ isn’t supposed to be easy or else everyone in the physical world would be inundated with otherworldly messages,” he murmured.

He looked to the white sky, unsure of what to do.

xTBBTx

“Come on, out with it,” Esperit said as Penny and she sat at Cultures restaurant eating salads.

“Out with what?”

“You’ve been glum since the moment you dragged your toes into work.”

“As bad as that, huh?” Penny put her fork down, deciding to give her cherry tomato a break from being moved from one side of the container to the other. “I must be slipping. This face used to tell my parents that my bag of weed was potpourri.”

“Well this face is saying you’re stalling. Out with it Penny.”

The Nebraskan sighed as she looked out the window at the people bustling down the sidewalk.

“Sheldon died one year ago today.” Her eyes flashed to her friend but Esperit waited patiently for her to continue. “He asked me to drive him to the store to pick up something and I said no. Then he was killed by a car as he waited for the bus.”

“Sweet Lord. Honey, I’m so sorry.”

“He used to drive me nuts. He’d knock on my door in threes,” Penny said and proceeded to knock out his ritual, doing her best to imitate his voice. Both women laughed lightly. “If I didn’t let him do it three times he’d slip in a little knock and ‘Penny’ at the doorframe or else he’d fidget the entire time he was there.”

“Sounds like he had some kind of compulsion,” observed Esperit. “A friend’s son has obsessive-compulsive and does all sorts of weird rituals around the house like opening all the doors every two hours. His family is good about it, though.”

“Sheldon was a textbook of quirks: germ phobic, ritualized to the point where specific foods were eaten on specific days. Hell, I can’t think of Monday without craving Thai food. Thai food Mondays, barbecue bacon cheeseburger on Tuesdays, pizza Thursdays, Chinese food Fridays.”

“Doesn’t leave a lot of time for home-cooked meals.”

“Actually Sheldon was an amazing baker. I’ve tried his banana bread recipe but I can’t get it right.
Anyways,” she scrolled through her phone until she found a photo Howard took of Leonard, Sheldon and Penny sitting on the couch. “Sheldon’s the one on the end in the green t-shirt.”

Esperit chuckled. “He looks like he wants to be anywhere but there. Shy?”

“Awkward. He talked too much to be shy.”

“It’s not how much you talk but what you talk about that marks shyness, Penelope. He might blather all day on”—she prompted Penny with her eyes.

“Physics and comic books.”

“—Physics and comic books but how much did he talk about his feelings?”

“Point. Although he did have them. You should have seen him when I gave him a personalized autograph from Leonard Nimoy.” Penny looked at the picture. “It’s amazing how I can live across from someone for over five years, date his roommate and yet when it comes down to it I don’t know a whole lot about him.”

“We all live in our own little world, hon.”

“I guess,” Penny shrugged. “And yet he made time to help me get into the EA course—which was kinda funny since he always acted like he only tolerated me.”

“From how uncomfortable he looks sitting there I think I’d take it as a compliment that he tolerated you.” Esperit angled her friend’s hand to get another look at the picture. “The other one with the glasses must be Leonard.”

“Yup. How did you know?” asked Penny, amazed.

“Girl, if he was any closer to you he’d be in your lap.” The Nebraskan laughed.

“We were only friends when this was taken.” Now it was Esperit’s turn to laugh.

“You mean *you* were just friends. He looks like he’d carry your babies if he could.”

“He’s not that bad.”

Esperit raised an eyebrow. “So he doesn’t want your babies?” she asked, causing her friend to blush. “Aha!”

“Oh look, time to head back,” Penny said with a smirk as she put her phone in her purse.

“Peneelope,” Esperit said seriously. “Grieve a little but live a lot.”

Penny nodded and the two women left the table.

XxX

“So what do you want to do?” asked Leonard. All evening Penny was down and he wasn’t sure how to lighten the mood. She sat next to Sheldon’s spot instead of in it and barely picked at her food.

“I dunno. Amy wanted to be alone tonight and now I can see why,” his girlfriend sighed.

“Well you don’t have to be here on my account,” pouted Leonard. “I mean it isn’t like Sheldon
wasn’t my best friend or anything.” Penny blanched.

“I’m not saying he wasn’t. I just….” Her cheeks reddened. “Leonard, I still feel like I killed him.”

The physicist put his bottled water on the table. “Penny, you didn’t kill Sheldon. Hell if anyone was going to kill Sheldon in our group I’m sure it was down to Howard or me.” Instead of a laugh Penny seemed to shrink.

“All he asked was to get a lift to the comic book store and I couldn’t do that.”

“He asked people to do everything for him. You couldn’t always say ‘yes’.”

Penny frowned. “Leonard, he helped me get my life together.”

“You got your life together. It wouldn’t have mattered if it was Sheldon or Raj or me that helped you.” Pause. “Because I would have helped you if you’d asked me.”

“I wanted to do it on my own.”

“You had Sheldon.”

“Sheldon’s different.”

“He was a physicist nerd living across the hall from you. How exactly was he ‘different’?” Penny’s jaw dropped.

“If you have to ask how Sheldon was different from everyone on the freakin’ planet, Leonard, you’ve got problems.” The short man sat up in his chair.

“I don’t mean that way. Of course he was different. I just mean that we’re going out. You should have come to me.” Penny made to speak. “Not because you need me to fix things for you but because I care.” He smiled kindly. “I mean it’s not like Sheldon did this from the goodness of his heart.”

Penny regarded her boyfriend. “What do you mean?”

“When you went to him for help he probably saw this as another opportunity to train you.”

“Train me?”

“Remember when he was feeding you all that chocolate?” She shook her head. “It was about three years ago. He kept giving you chocolate whenever you did something he liked. It’s called positive reinforcement.”

Instantly Penny recalled Sheldon’s journal notes where he referred to her as ‘subject’. Her stomach dropped.

“But this took a lot of effort,” she countered. “He took me on, prepped me for school. He even paid me.”

“You were a part of his social routine. He could no more let you go back to Nebraska than eat Thai food on a Wednesday.”

“Gee thanks, Leonard,” she scowled. He shrugged.

“Don’t take it personally. Sheldon never did.”
“Then why did he have a ‘mortal enemies list’? I was even on it for a while.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I just got off of it the year before.” Leonard was silent.

“So I was right,” he said slowly.

“About what?”

“You and Sheldon.” Penny’s mouth dropped.

“We are so not getting into that again. Not today. We were just friends.”

“So how come I never made his list? Hell I sabotaged his experiment and he never put me on it.”

His eyes narrowed. “Kind of interesting that you came off his list the same year he met Amy.”

“I don’t know what I did to get on or off it,” she admitted hotly. “I didn’t fuck him if that’s what you’re saying.”

“I’m not saying you did,” he soothed quickly. “But maybe he thought you liked him when you didn’t and when you went out with me you, you know—”

Penny rolled her eyes as she stood. “Oh great so I not only kill the guy but I also break his heart first? Thanks for cheering me up, pal!”

“I’m not saying—”

“You’ve said enough!” she snapped as she walked out of the apartment and crossed the hall into her own.

Penny went to the kitchen and grabbed herself a mug and a bottle of wine before settling herself on the couch.

xTBBTx

“Well this looks ominous,” Sheldon mused as he stepped into what looked like a funeral home. Ahead of him was row after row of seated individuals wearing black. At the front was a brown coffin and a podium complete with preacher.

“Let us bow our heads and pray for our brother, Sheldon Cooper,” he droned.

“Dr. Sheldon Cooper,” Sheldon said crisply through pursed lips. He walked down the aisle, noting that the majority of faces were unrecognizable to him. There was an occasional surprise as he picked out Barry Kripke and Leslie Winkle.

“They must be there to gloat.” The physicist came to the front where his family and friends sat.

“I said specifically in my will no preacher,” he admonished his mother lightly. He regarded her stoic face as she capped off the preacher’s words with an ‘Amen’. “I miss you, mommy.”

“Now I invite his neighbor, Penny, to say a few words,” said the preacher and she rose from her chair and made her way to the podium.

“I first met Sheldon Cooper as he stood outside my apartment door. His eyes flashed to my face before he turned away and I thought to myself, ‘what an awkward and shy man’. And then he
opened his mouth.” Here the crowd chuckled and Sheldon folded his arms across his chest and scowled at his neighbor.

“In a matter of one take-out dinner I learned about his ‘spot’ on the couch which was his 0,0,0,0 coordinate on the Cartesian map and, though he probably thought he was being subtle, I got his dig about my belief in astrology.”

“I fail to see how I was being subtle,” muttered Sheldon. “I said it proved that you participated in the mass cultural delusion that the sun’s apparent position relative to arbitrary defined constellations and the time of your birth somehow affects your personality.”

She cleared her throat. “What he probably also didn’t think I got was the look on his face when we looked over his whiteboard and I called him a ‘beautiful mind’. His eyes brightened and he gave me what I later learned was a rare sight to see: a genuine Sheldon Cooper smile. Normally he was such a condescending ass; a smile from him meant he was putting me down for being a dumb waitress—”

“I never called you ‘dumb’,” amended Sheldon. “I said talking to you was like talking to a monkey and as Amy Farrah Fowler talks to her monkeys I don’t see it as an insult.”

“—even though he never heard of the Black Eyed Peas or Radiohead. I mean he had no idea who the Kardashians are and that’s just sad.”

“You mean ‘sane’,” the physicist scoffed.

“Actually, you know what was even sadder? He died a virgin.”

“Penny!” Sheldon looked at his mother but she seemed to be taking it all in stride.

“Thirty one years old with beautiful blue eyes and a cute butt and pfft!” Penny clapped the sides of the podium. “Nope, his first love was science. Believe me I know that. He saw me naked and copped my breast and did he get wood? Nope.”

“He saw you naked?” Leonard said from the crowd.

“It wasn’t like that, Leonard,” she replied. “He was getting me to the hospital.” She smiled. “He also got me into bed but that’s neither here nor there.” The crowd got a little restless but she didn’t seem to notice.

“That’s not how it was!” Sheldon cried desperately as he turned to the congregation. “I tucked her into bed because she was unable in her drug addled condition.”

Penny shook her head. “For a guy who could figure out how the universe began he couldn’t get what a tie on the door handle meant. I don’t know how many times he interrupted Leonard and I having sex by knocking on the door or the wall or the window. We’re on the fourth floor and he was out on the ledge! Of course I shouldn’t have been surprised. After all he got my bras and panties off the telephone wire somehow.” She smiled at Leonard. “Thanks again for his mother’s number.”

“Traitor!” Sheldon spat at his best friend. “I knew it had to be you!”

“I keep her number on speed dial,” Penny continued. “Never knew when Dr. Whackadoodle would spaz out and give me a strike for breathing.”

“You touched my food,” growled Sheldon. “And sent me a ‘lolcat’. Hardly trivial offences.”
“I guess what it all boiled down to was that no matter what I did there was no pleasing Sheldon, not that I think anyone could. He was anal-retentive, obsessive compulsive—”

“You shush now,” said a woman’s voice.

Sheldon and the seated gatherers turned as an old woman stood up.

“Quit trying to make yourself feel better,” she said crisply. “The world is not better because my Moonpie is dead.” The physicist’s jaw dropped.

“Meemaw?” he said softly although the woman looked nothing like his grandmother.

Penny blanched. “I’m not saying it is. He helped me with school and my career and even though I wasn’t anything more than an experiment I still owe him for that.” She looked at the coffin. “It’s just that…I mean I…” A sob came out. “I’m sorry, Sheldon!” The assistant ran from the room, quickly followed by Leonard as the scene faded to black.

“What’s Penny sorry about?” murmured Sheldon as he emerged from the dream. “Sorry I’m dead? Sorry she ridiculed me? Sorry she miscast my Meemaw?” He shook his head.

“Dreams are cryptic by nature, Dr. Cooper.” Sheldon turned to see the Man standing with his hands stuffed into his pockets with a grin on his face. “It’s been a while, relatively speaking.”

“Indeed,” the physicist said matter-of-factly. “Come to see where your pet scurried off to?” The Man laughed.

“You’re not a pet. Far from it.”

“So why are you here?”

“Why not?”

Sheldon pursed his lips. “Well you sure made yourself scarce when I was with the other scientists.”

“I didn’t want to interrupt,” replied the Man. “You were, dare I say it, having fun.”

“To a point.” A thought came to Sheldon. “Have you run into Dr. Feynman?” The Man shook his head.

“Can’t say I have.”

“Although this time you can’t say we’re all alone since I talked with a man in the woods.”

“So who was the blond giving the eulogy?” asked the Man.

“You’re ignoring my statement,” scowled Sheldon.

“I don’t have anything to say one way or the other. I haven’t run into anyone out there and you’re far from crazy so I take your word that you talked to someone. Who, I’ve no idea.”

“Must be another escapee.”

The Man shook his head as he smirked. “And now the answer to my question.”

“Penny. She was my neighbor.”
“Good looking.”

“She is comely, yes.”

The Man cocked his head. “So whose funeral was it?”

“Mine. Although it’s odd that it should be happening now given that I’ve been dead for a while. Odder still that she gave my eulogy. I would have expected Leonard; he is my best friend after all.”

“There’s no time here, Dr. Cooper.”

“Yes, you said that earlier.” He indicated the wall with his head. “These mirrors, I assume there’s one for every living being? At least those that can dream?”

“I’m not sure,” replied the Man. “I’ve never really thought about it.”

“I’m hearing Penny call my name and seeing moments directly or indirectly involving myself. As we spend a significant amount of time dreaming and do so nightly the fact that the dreams occur randomly and infrequently means that the mirror allows the gazer to only see images that contain some semblance of self whether from memory or imagined.”

The Man looked into the mirror. “So the images are from you?”

“Penny. That’s why some of the scenarios are puzzling to me as I lack sufficient knowledge to ‘make head or tail’ of it.” Sheldon’s mouth twitched. “Penny has baffled me most of my life. Her dreams are merely an extension of her unconscious self.” He stood back and gazed as far as he could to the right, following the mirror wall. “Somewhere around here is my Meemaw and mother. Surely they muse about me from time to time.”

“Sure are a lot of mirrors,” noted the Man. Sheldon nodded.

“They could be anywhere,” he admitted. “Of course, it’s not like I have anything important to do.” He began to walk.

“You’d be surprised,” the Man murmured before following.

xTBBTx

Beep! Beep! Beep! Beep!

Penny reached across and slapped the snooze button before flopping back into bed.

“God, my head.” It had been a while since she’d drunk so much. She wanted to call in sick but knew that was a slippery slope she didn’t want to start. Besides, Sophie was practically psychic so she’d know in an instant if Penny was lying. “Gotta bite the bullet, Penelope.”

She swept back the covers and made her way to the bathroom. The first thing she wanted to do was brush her teeth to get the fuzziness from her mouth. She very nearly dropped the toothbrush in the sink as she looked in the mirror and noticed she was wearing Sheldon’s Flash t-shirt.

“Man, I really was hammered.” Penny stripped out of the shirt and tossed it on the bed before attending to her bathroom needs. Once showered and aspirin popped she quickly dressed and left. Her stomach wasn’t up to breakfast at the moment so she thought she’d leave early in case she changed her mind at the office and needed time to sneak down for a muffin.

The door was already open at the firm so Penny entered. It was too early for even Esperit to be
there so she assumed it must be Sophie.

“She must power down and sleep in a closet,” the Nebraskan chuckled under her breath as she made her way to her desk. After booting up her computer she settled herself and checked her messages. As Gabby from the PR department explained that she’d resent some information to Derek and was still waiting for a response Penny rolled her eyes.

“Un-boleevable.” This time she didn’t have a copy of the document in case Derek lost it in his office as Gabby foolishly decided to speak with him directly.

She continued to keep herself busy until she heard the sound of someone approaching.

“I thought I heard someone back here,” smiled Esperit. “Hon, you look like a dog’s breakfast. When I said ‘live a lot’ I didn’t mean to celebrate with the worm at the bottom of the bottle.”

“Yeah, things kinda got out of hand,” Penny replied sheepishly. “Still, I made it here so that’s a victory in itself.” The receptionist nodded.

“It’s a good thing you’re keeping on your toes.” She stepped close to the desk and lowered her voice. “Word from the higher ups is that downsizing is about to happen due to the merger.”

“Oh great,” Penny sighed. “Well since I’m the last hire we know my ass will be axed.”

“Sorry to be the bearer of bad news.” The assistant gave her a smile.

“It’s okay. At least this place has given me something to put on my résumé.”

The phone rang.

‘I’ll see you at lunch’ Esperit mouthed before walking away.

Penny caught the call display and recognized Derek’s number.

“You’ve reached the desk of the all-knowing,” she quipped.

“Oh, you’re there,” was his reply. “I was just going to leave a voicemail.”

“Well you’ve got the genuine article so babble away.”

“I need you to mail me a copy of the Maxwell acquisition form. I’m due for a meeting at the other end of town so it’d be a pain to have to come into the office to get it.”

“Right away. Oh, listen, PR called and they want your input on Caroline’s—”

“Caroline! That’s right! … Umm, I can’t say I have an opinion one way or the other at present.”

“You have no idea who Caroline is, do you?”

“Hey, at least I sounded enthusiastic. But seriously no. Do you have a copy of the info?”

“Nope. They gave it to you.”

“Have them resend the information. This time have them send you a copy as well.”

“Absolutely. Anything else?”

“Keep smiling. The sun won’t shine without you.”
With a smile Penny hung up before she dialed PR.

“Maybe his last EA didn’t go on maternity leave. Maybe she’s in the ‘hoo-ha house’.”

XxX

'Only one more flight of stairs and I’m home,' thought Penny as she dragged herself up the steps. Suddenly the door to 4A opened and Howard, Raj and Leonard stepped out. 'Oh balls….'


“Hi,” he said timidly, only briefly looking at her face.

“Hi,” she said back, equally as awkward.

“We’re off to the comic book store,” her boyfriend explained. “New comic book night.”

“Wednesday. That’s right.” She gave a tired smile. “Well you have fun.”

Leonard glanced at his friends before regarding his girlfriend. “Maybe we could talk later?”

“Tomorrow. I really need to crash.”

“Okay. Sure. Tomorrow.” He put on a brave face. “Have a good night.”

“You too.” Penny unlocked her door and turned on the light as she stepped into her apartment. She kicked off her shoes and dumped her purse on the couch before crossing over to the kitchen to grab a glass of water. She clicked off the light and made her way to her bedroom.

After turning on the bedside lamp she set the glass of water on the end table and proceeded to strip out of her clothes. She was so tired she was about ready to drop.

“Brush teeth later,” she mumbled as she got into bed. When she flicked the covers over her a red shirt clung to the side of the bed. She picked it up and ran her eyes over the yellow lightning bolt on its front. On a whim she brought it to her face.

Although faint, it still smelled like Sheldon.

She put on the t-shirt, turned off the light and closed her eyes.

***End of Part Two***
Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Summary

“You can only come to the morning through the shadows.”

-J.R.R. Tolkien, The Lord of the Rings

xTBBTx

Reference to: ‘The Staircase Implementation’; ‘The Thespian Catalyst’

Penny stepped from the elevator with a strained smile on her face. There was nothing more horrible than being trapped in a closed space with a man who’d overdone his cologne. Knowing the taste of people who worked there she realized she’d probably been gassed with a spray that cost a day’s wages.

“Hello, sunshine,” Esperit grinned as the Nebraskan entered the office. “Cutting it kind of close this morning.”

“I had a passionate love affair with my pillow.” For the past six days Penny had been rushing around integrating Derek Starke’s files and clients into the office system as well as keeping the man organized. As for her home life she’d made up with Leonard on Thursday night. Okay and Friday, too. Saturday sex was planned so that didn’t count.

“Oh, I understand those. The one bright side of being an ‘empty nester’.” The receptionist picked up the phone. “Here we are five minutes before starting and I’m already a social butterfly.”

“See ya at lunch,” Penny replied and made her way to her desk to settle in.

“Please no messages, please no messages,” she murmured under her breath only to see the light flashing on her phone. “Balls.”

*“Hello Penny. Gabby again from PR. Another day, another report we’re waiting for from your boss. Can you work your magic again and have it here before three? Be appreciated. Thanks.”

“Might as well get it ready for him.” She braced herself before opening the door to his office. With a sigh she went to the desk, her eyes scanning the piles of paper for the file in question. She pulled out her phone and logged into Derek’s scheduler. He was away for the morning but would return after lunch.

“Well, looks like I know what I’m doing,” she said as she picked up some papers and began sorting.

XxX

Derek Starke was all smiles as he walked by Penny’s desk.

“Good afternoon, Penelope,” he said and coasted into his office before she could reply.
“Nice try,” she muttered under her breath. She took up her IPad and a file folder and knocked once on the door before entering.

“Is there something I can help you with?” he asked as he sat at his desk.

“Two things: One, your scheduler for Friday is blank. Are you in the office or did something go wrong?”

“I’m unsure as of yet. Trevor has to get back to me on whether we’re meeting in the morning or afternoon.”

Penny clicked away on her IPad. “Okay, so I’ll tentatively schedule you in Friday morning with a note that it might change to the afternoon.”

“If we have it at all,” Derek added. “You see why I left it blank?”

Penny pursed her lips. Somehow she could see herself spending another night going through her boss’s scheduler before bed. It was getting to be that Derek was the last man she thought about before she closed her eyes.

“Second, PR called—again. They say you have a report they need by three.”

“Which one is that?” His eyes looked over the clean desk.

“The estimations for the third quarter Carter—”

“That’s right! It should be on my desk.” Derek noted the neat piles of paper with sticky notes denoting what each was.

“I looked. It’s not here,” Penny said crisply.

“Odd.” He fanned a pile of papers with his thumb. “You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Okay, because I never take paperwork home.”

Penny took an internal breath. “Mr. Starke, I am positive.” She handed him the folder. “I took the liberty of printing you another copy.”

“Thanks,” he said. “Tell PR I’ll have the report in to them tomorrow.”

“They need it today. They gave it to you two days ago.”

“Penelope, I can’t just pop off a report like that.” He snapped his fingers. “I mean look at all this paperwork.”

“Speaking of paperwork I need a few minutes of your time to go over it,” the assistant said. “I’ve sorted them into ‘Inbound’, ‘Outbound’, ‘Archives’, ‘Shred’ and a ‘Misc’ pile at the end.”

“I really don’t have time.” He opened the file. “As you can see I’ve a report to finish.”

“Just five minutes. It’ll take at least fifty percent of the papers off your desk so things will be easier to find.”

“I’ve every confidence I’ll find stuff,” Derek said absently as he read a page. “I’ve got you, haven’t
He jumped at the sound of his door slamming shut.

“What’s wrong with you?” Penny snapped. “You think that PR and Archives don’t have better things to do than resend you copies of files you already have? You’re an executive at a good firm not a paper-pusher at Fed-Ex. I don’t know what you’re used to but Fenris Investments has a level of conduct that each employee is expected to follow. A level of respect. And respect, Mr. Starke, is a two way street. I’m your assistant, not your mother. I have things to do. Yes, keeping you organized is one of them but that doesn’t mean I have to open the door to see a disaster in your office. This makes you look bad. This makes me look bad. Every time I field a call from some department asking about files or reports or even just a simple yes or no answer I feel like a schmuck because I’ve got bupkiss from you. This stops now. On days when you don’t have a meeting scheduled if I give you a report in the morning you will have it to me the next morning at the latest. You will have your appointments scheduled by six o’clock so I can have something else to think about before going to bed each night.

“By the way,” Penny said matter-of-factly. “See how the office is now? This is how it’s going to stay. You take it out, you put it back. Kapish?”

“Kapish,” her stunned boss replied.

She stared a moment longer before turning on her heel and exiting the office. As soon as she stepped into the hall she noted the silence as her immediate coworkers had stopped what they were doing to listen before they continued working in an exaggerated rush.

Penny sat at her desk and opened her scheduler to mark in Derek’s Friday appointment.

Friday was also the day when the pink slips would be issued at the firm.

‘At least I’ll know when I’m unemployed.’

XxX

“You really freaked on him?” Bernadette was both shocked and tickled at the notion of reaming out a boss.

“Yup. Even threatened him to boot,’’ smirked a tipsy Penny as she sat on her couch in her comfy pants and green tank top.

“At least you didn’t hogtie and castrate him,” Amy offered with a smile.

“No, but it came close.” All three women laughed.

Penny shook her head. “Seriously, I have to be cursed with stupid. Now I won’t even have a reference for my résumé.”

“Maybe it won’t be as bad as that, bestie,” soothed the neurobiologist. “Surely your office manager will understand the situation.” Penny snorted.

“What do you think Sheldon would say if he was the manager?”

“Completely unprofessional,” replied Bernadette.

“Inappropriate,” added Amy.
“Inexcusable,” concluded Penny. She held up her glass. “Three strikes rule applies, ladies.”

“You forgot the other rule of three,” Amy said cheerily as she held up her own. “One for all and all for one.”

The women touched glasses.

After taking a sip Bernadette set her glass on her lap. “So what are you going to do?”

“Get back on the horse,” said Penny. “I think I’ll just skip Fenris and say I’ve been unemployed since school finished.”

“Are you sure? It makes you sound kind of ‘loserish’ if you know what I mean,” said the microbiologist.

“Well, perhaps we could use a little deceit.” Amy brightened. “We can say you worked as my assistant.”

“What could I do at a lab?” asked Penny dubiously.

“I’m gathering research for a book. You could be my ‘Girl Friday’ to my ‘gumshoe’.”

“Well I suppose it’s something.” Penny sighed. “Why do I keep having to be bailed out? Why do I screw up?”

Amy put a hand on her friend’s shoulder. “Granted, not everything you do is blessed with the forethought it deserves but if there’s one thing I’ve admired about you it’s that you aren’t a doormat.” Pause. “I wish I had even half of your gumption.”

“Here, here!” squeaked Bernadette. “Penny, you didn’t deserve to be treated like that and if HR doesn’t understand that then it’s not the company for you.”

“We’re the company for you,” Amy said with a little smile. “You’ll always be the sunshine as we toil in our demanding yet satisfying careers.”

“Eyah.” Penny drained her glass and Bernadette poured her another.

xTBBTx

“My, these really do go on a long way,” muttered Sheldon as he stopped walking. Ahead of him were mirrors as far as the eye could see. “So how many do you think are here?”

Silence.

The physicist looked about but the Man was nowhere to be found. In the distance he faintly heard Penny call his name. Sheldon’s jaw tightened as he thought about going on only to turn around and begin his walk back to ‘Penny’s mirror’.

His neighbor might not be his Meemaw or mother but at least he knew where Penny was.

xTBBTx

“Good morning, Penelope,” Derek Starke said with a tentative smile as he handed her a file. “Here’s the Wilson quarterlies.”

“Terrific stuff.” Penny gave her boss a reassuring smile and he visibly relaxed.
Over the past two days Derek had made himself scarce although he did make it a point to have any file Penny requested signed and on her desk first thing in the morning. Since he had a meeting in the afternoon he thought it best to test the waters as he’d have a place to run to if Penny was still out for his blood. Seeing his assistant smile and talk to him as if nothing had happened gave him the confidence to respond in kind.

“I’m with Trevor this afternoon so—”

“I’ve got a couple of things for you to look over on Monday,” Penny replied. “They’ll be in the Inbox on your desk. So as long as you don’t get anything tossed your way by Trevor you’re free to play hooky this weekend.”

“I wish. It’s off to the Spring flower show. I couldn’t care less but Daphne loves these things,” he sighed.

“Ah, the things we do for love,” winked Penny. “Oh, by the way, I’ll be busy next week training my replacement so I’ll—”

“You’re going?”

Penny lowered her voice. “It’s pink slip day because of the merger. I’m afraid they stuck you with the low man on the totem pole when they handed me to you so it’s a no brainer that I’ll be bumped by someone more senior.” She grinned. “Don’t worry, I’ll have her into ship shape in no time.”

“O-kay.” Derek made to say something more but his phone rang. He raised a farewell hand before leaving her to her own devices.

As soon as lunch came Penny had worked out what she was going to say. She munched on a protein bar while Esperit ate only to leave the receptionist and head back to the office early. She passed by Jackie temping at reception and headed to Sophie’s office. She knocked three times.

“Enter,” replied the manager. She regarded the assistant. “What can I do for you, Penelope?”

“I’m glad you asked.” She cleared her throat. “I know I’ve only worked here for a short time and haven’t always been the best employee but as this is my first job in my field it’d really mean a lot if I could get a recommendation.” Sophie raised an eyebrow. “I mean if you want to give me one. I —”

“Are you going somewhere?” the manager asked evenly causing Penny to balk.

“I just thought that with the downsizing going on I’d be bumped for someone else.”

“I see.” Pause. “HR was going to call people this afternoon starting at one in order to discretely terminate their employment.”

“Ah. Jumped the gun. Sorry to have disturbed you.” Penny made to leave.

“You will, of course, continue to assist me as we transition to a single corporate entity.” Penny’s eyes widened in surprise as she turned back to her manager. “To this end I expect you to continue assisting Mr. Starke until his assistant returns from maternity leave. I trust you will ensure that he stays in line?”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Of course you will.” The corners of Sophie’s mouth lifted in a hint of a smile before she returned
to her IPad.

'Maternity leave! That’s at least a year more of work!' Penny did her best to keep the smile off her face until she left the office.

She grinned like a fool all the way to her desk.

xTBBTx

Sheldon stepped through the mirror to find his dream self and Leonard on the couch watching television. Standing by Leonard’s stuffed chair he observed the opening sequence to the ‘Cat’s Paw’ episode of Star Trek. He congratulated himself for introducing the Nebraskan to the finer nuances of science fiction television. If he hadn’t he’d be stuck here watching reruns of Jersey Shore.

The apartment door opened and Penny entered wearing a red tank top, green shorts and flip-flops.

“Hello my kiddies!” She bounded over to the couch and plopped down beside Leonard. Immediately she grabbed his head and gave him a tonsil-checking kiss. Dream Sheldon pursed his lips and did his best to wiggle to the end of the couch. As for the ‘real’ Sheldon, he rolled his eyes and went to his whiteboard to fix the errors on it.

“What was that for?” gasped Leonard after they parted. “Not that I’m complaining.”

“Just wanted to say ‘thank you’,” Penny grinned and made to straddle his lap.

“For what?” he squeaked.

“For work.” She began to nibble his earlobe. “Giving me the confidence to go. Getting me set up.”

“Like I didn’t have anything to do with your transition from waitress to executive assistant,” sniffed Sheldon as he amended a formula. “Don’t credit the dead guy.”

Leonard grinned and moved Penny’s hair over her shoulder. “So things are okay at work?”

“Couldn’t be peachier.” She leaned back and grabbed the hem of her shirt before pulling it over her head. Immediately Dream Sheldon bolted up from his spot. Leonard took this as a hint and lay down with his head where his roommate usually sat.

“That’s my spot,” pouted Dream Sheldon. “Leonard, you can’t be in my spot.” Penny giggled as she lowered herself onto Leonard and they began kissing. “Penny, that’s a strike for leaving your shirt on the floor, a strike for being partially nude on my couch and a third for clearing Leonard’s throat passage with your tongue in my spot!”

“Leonard is in violation of the ‘Roommate Agreement’,” noted ‘real’ Sheldon. “He needed to give you notice twelve hours in advance if he was going to have a girl over for the purpose of sex. Even if it is Penny.” He caught a whoosh of movement in his peripheral vision as his double left the room before hearing a door slam down the hall. “So much for that,” he shrugged and placed the marker on the whiteboard ledge.

Thinking that the dream was at an end he turned to go only to find that the living room had been replaced with Penny’s bedroom complete with Care-Bear collection. As he watched Penny and Leonard sucking face while they disrobed he frowned.

“So much for these dreams needing my dream self’s presence in order for me to see it,” he said
aloud.

“Get the light,” Penny gasped and the room went dark save for the streetlight’s glow from her window.

“Well, I’ve no interest in viewing this.” Sheldon made for the exit.

Penny groaned. “God, you’re amazing Moonpie.”

Sheldon stopped dead before turning around to see green shorts and red tank top on the floor along with a Green Lantern shirt, red thermal and khaki pants. His eyes just got a glimpse of a tall and lanky person in bed with Penny before the scene went instantly black. A force knocked Sheldon flying from the mirror and onto his butt on the ground beyond.

XxX

Penny woke with a start, her heart pounding. She noted the arm strewn across her body and turned her head to see Leonard sleeping away. She took a breath to steady herself before rolling over and closing her eyes.

xTBBTx

Leonard was typing away at Sheldon’s computer when Penny opened the apartment door while reading a letter.

“Hey,” he said. “Whatcha reading?”

“Letter from Mrs. Cooper.” Penny glanced over the printed list on the back. “Apparently she doesn’t trust ‘the internet’ to get the registry list right so she wrote it out for me.”

“Oh that’s right, the wedding.”

“Yup. It’s in two weeks so we have to get it together. Gosh we haven’t even bought our present yet.” In fact the year seemed to just fly by what with Penny keeping her boss in line and Leonard busying himself with experiments at work. She’d kept in touch with Sheldon’s sister but the approaching day just didn’t dawn on the Nebraskan until now.

Leonard shrugged. “I’m sure Missy will be fine with whatever we get her. It’s not like she’s Sheldon.”

“I don’t know,” Penny smirked. “I’d just pick up a gift card for the comic book store.”

“A woman after my own heart.” He caught her raised eyebrow. “Not that I’d put that on my registry.” Pause. “That’d be for my bachelor shower.”

Penny leaned on the arm of the couch. “‘Bachelor shower’?”

He spun his computer chair to face his girlfriend. “It’s only fair. You get your own gifts at the bridal shower. Why can’t the gander get the same thing?”

“You mean like Howard and Raj handing you a little number to wear that they thought looked cute at the lingerie store?”

“Maybe I’m just being oversensitive,” Leonard said after a moment’s thought.

“So. Present. How about Saturday afternoon?”
“I dunno. Can’t we just order something online?”


“I don’t really have to be there. You know what I want to give them.”

“What’s that?”

“Whatever you say we’re giving them,” he said with a wink. Penny laughed.

“Shopping for the gift is part of the process. You can’t just cop out and let me do all the work.”

“I’ll make it worth your while.” The couple grinned at each other.

“I’ll hold you to that, Mister.” She turned to leave.

“Oh, and if you should happen to find a little number to wear while at the lingerie store I won’t object to you buying it,” he said in mock seriousness.

“Dream on,” Penny giggled as she closed the door.

xTBBTx

“What do you think?” asked Penny as she held up a red polka dot bra and matching g-string.

“Tantalizing,” breathed Amy. “Not like you aren’t delicious on your own. It’s like a cherry at the top of a hot fudge sundae.”

“I mean for Missy,” the Nebraskan chortled as she put it back into the rack.

“Oh yes, the wedding present. As I’ve only met Missy the once I’ve little to offer in the line of suggestions for her taste in intimate apparel.” A little smile crossed Amy’s face. “Were this Sheldon we were talking about I would suggest something along the superhero line at Target.” The two women giggled as Penny continued shopping.

“I still can’t get over that they’re twins.”

“Au contraire, bestie. Both Sheldon and Missy are brunette, above average in height and have long limbs and fingers.”

“I mean mentally.” ‘Perhaps a teddy?’ Penny began looking through the silk tops. “Missy was all into pedicures and rearranging Sheldon’s privates for a stupid comment while Sheldon was, well, *Sheldon*.”

“Sheldon was the exception to the rule,” replied Amy. “The genetic combination responsible for his monstrous intellect and memory are almost certainly a result of mutation and not breeding stock.” Penny gawked at her friend. “I’m not saying Mrs. Cooper isn’t pleasant. She just isn’t as intellectually capable as Sheldon was. Given his stories about his father I highly doubt Mr. Cooper could account for his son’s intellect.”

“So Sheldon really was a freak of nature, huh?” Penny pulled out a gold teddy and held it to herself.

“In a manner of speaking.” Amy cocked her head. “I notice you keep picking colors that are applicable to your color palate and not Missy’s. Perhaps you’re distracted.”
Yeah, it’s just weird picking out lingerie for Sheldon’s sister.” Penny put the teddy back on the rack. “So what are you getting her?”

“I’ve already given my regrets for not attending and best wishes for the event.”

“But it’s Sheldon’s sister,” Penny said incredulously.

“Not Sheldon,” the neurobiologist amended. “My interest was with Sheldon not his family.”

“Oh.”

Amy shrugged. “It’s nothing personal: Sheldon’s gone so there’s no need for continued contact.”

“I guess. I always kept up with Missy on Facebook after she came to visit so I guess it’s different for me.”

“You’re always worth the exception,” Amy said seriously as the two women went to the front cash so Penny could pick up a gift card.

“That’s the thing about a gift card—it always fits,” grinned the Nebraskan. The two women exited the store and made their way to Amy’s car.

“Speaking of ‘fit’ I’m unsure whether I’ll be at the lab much longer,” Amy said slowly. Penny stopped walking and put a hand on her friend’s arm.

“What are you talking about? You’re an amazing neuro-person.”

“My abilities are not being questioned,” soothed Amy. “It’s all a matter of funding. With the crisis in the Middle East things have become rather awkward for my ‘fiancé’ Faisel to keep funding his American sweetheart.”

“Your fiancé?”

“Long story short: he liked the way I dissected a brain when we met at the university where his father was making a donation. He wished I could touch him like that. I said I was more than willing to slice his brain the moment he made it available. He smiled. I smiled. It was a match made in neurobiological heaven.”

“Okay.” Penny’s eyes widened. “Wow. Okay. So, what are you going to do?”

Amy shrugged. “I’ve got an offer to go to Boston but I’m unsure if I should take it.” The two women resumed walking.

“Is it a step up or a step down?”

“A step up, actually. Since my article in Neuron I’ve become hot property.” Here she swept her hair dramatically over her shoulder.

“Well good for you.”

“So you think I should take it?” Amy said in a high pitched voice.

Penny smiled. “It sounds like a real opportunity. I mean look at Bernadette: she’s hand over fist in dough and doing what she loves to do. You’ve got a chance—go for it!”

“It will mean starting over again.” Amy glanced shyly at her friend. “I’ve become accustomed to
having a bestie in my life. I don’t know if I could be friendless again.”

Penny put an arm around her shoulder. “We’ll still be besties. We can still Skype and visit each other on holidays because you are so going to put me up in your living room so we can explore the East Coast together.”

“Promise?” Amy’s eyes were watery.

“You betcha.”

Both women smiled.

XxX

“Well, they’re not exciting but they’re bought,” smiled Penny as she dropped the Victoria Secret and Costco gift cards on the coffee table.

“That’s sure some interesting wedding registry,” noted Leonard as he put a bookmark to note his place. He hick his voice: “Ah’ll have ah teddy an ah club pack of steak.”

“Mine is not to ask the reason why.” Penny went to the kitchen for a bottled water. “So anyways I had an interesting talk with Amy.”

“Oh?”

“She might be going to Boston for a job.”

“Wow I—Boston? Huh.” Penny turned to her boyfriend.

“What’s so ‘huh’?” Whenever he sounded sputtery like that it meant something was up.

“It’s nothing.” He began flicking his thumb nail with his other hand. “Boston’s a nice city. We should go sometime.”

“As soon as she’s settled I’ve got dibs on her couch.”

Leonard lightly tossed his book on the table. “Actually maybe we could go sooner.” The Nebraskan sashayed over to the couch and sat down in Sheldon’s spot.

“A weekend getaway? Sounds fun. When do you want to go?”

He paused before answering. “How about next weekend?”

Penny chuckled. “Nice try. The wedding’s next week.”

“Yeah. About that.” He swallowed as his eyes flashed his girlfriend’s face. “You see there’s this conference at MIT that weekend and Professor Galley can’t make it so—”

“You want to ditch the wedding?” frowned Penny. “Not a chance, bub.”

“Penny, they want me to fill in and give a presentation.” His eyes lit up. “I mean it won’t be a big thing because it’s early Sunday morning but still it’s a big deal for me.” Penny pursed her lips. “Plus I won’t be that far from my dad so I can visit.” Pause. “You’ve never met my dad. I promise you he’s nothing like my mom. You’ll like him.”

“Leonard, I told Missy a long time ago we were going. I can’t just ditch her for a shopping trip.”
She indicated the table with her bottle. “Besides I bought the gifts already.”

“I’ll cover them,” soothed Leonard. “And we can express post them to Galveston along with our regrets.” He smiled tentatively. “This is big for me, Pen.”

She put the cap back on her water. “If my friend ditched my wedding to go to Boston with her boyfriend I’d never talk to her again.” Leonard made to speak. “I’ve got to go, I said I would and Mrs. Cooper’s already got a room for me at her house.” She noted her boyfriend’s pouty expression. “I’ll tell them you couldn’t get out of the conference but that you send your best wishes. Wins all around?”

“I guess,” muttered the physicist. He felt a foot rub his calf.

“There’ll be other conferences. I promise I’ll even sit through a lecture with you.”

He brightened. “Really?”

Penny laughed. “Why am I regretting this already?”

xTBBTx

“So are you ready for a new brother-in-law?” Penny grinned as George Jr. drove them from the airport.

“I cain’t say no now else Mama’s gonna kick muh butt.” He caught Penny’s eyes in the rear view mirror. “Not that ah’m complainin’. Pete’s a great guy an’ he’s wanted tuh make an honest woman of Missy for a while.”

Penny nodded but said nothing.


“Yeah, yeah. Look, I’ve already promised myself I wouldn’t get trashed at the reception. The last thing I need is for your mother to see me tanked.”

“Yup. She’d whup ya over her knee the next mornin’ an’ believe me it don’t matter how old y’are.” The truck pulled up in front of a bungalow with the front porch light on. “Ah hate tuh bail but ah’ve got fish tuh fry.”

“It was cool enough you picked me up. See you Saturday.” Penny opened the door, took her suitcase out of the back and made her way to the house. The door opened before she got to the porch.

“Hello Penny,” Mary Cooper beamed. “Yuh made good time.”

“It helps I didn’t have a lot packed so I got through the lineup fast.” Mary nodded.

“Well let me get yuh to yuhr room so yuh can freshen up an’ ah’ll make us a pot of tea.”

She led Penny through the living room and down the hall to an orderly bedroom. As soon as the light clicked on the Nebraskan knew this was Sheldon’s room; not that there were any comic books or toys present because the room was quite tastefully decorated. The layout of the furniture was exactly as it was in Sheldon’s room at apartment 4A. ‘No way that’s a coincidence.’

After she unpacked Penny made her way to the kitchen, only stopping for a moment in the hall as she took in Sheldon’s graduation photo surrounded on either side by his two doctoral diplomas. He
was a gangly teenager with an awkward smile on his face and immediately Penny thought back to what she was doing with her life when she was sixteen. ‘Not pregnant! Yes!’

“So how are things?” asked Mary as she poured the tea. “Work doin’ yuh well?”

“So far so good.” Penny scooped a teaspoon of sugar into the cup and stirred. “It’s been a relief going back to being Sophie’s assistant. As far as I’m concerned Marilyn can have Mr. Starke.”

“Some men need a good woman tuh keep ‘em in line else they wouldn’t know a broom if they fell over one,” nodded Mary before taking a sip.

“Except for Sheldon,” grinned Penny. “He used to come over and help me clean my apartment.” Here she chuckled. “Actually sometimes he snuck over when I was at work and cleaned it.”

“He was an odd duck, Lord love him. He wouldn’t touch nothin’ once it hit the floor after watchin’ one of them sciencey shows on germs when he was a toddler. Even when his daddy gave him a spankin’ for bein’ stubborn he’d grab the spray bottle of diluted javex I kept in the cupboard an’ wiped down the toys.”

“So that’s where he picked up his phobia,” nodded Penny.

“Maybe. Shelly never was much into touchin’ things. Always had tuh prod him into a hug or a kiss. Well, except for his Meemaw. Muh mother could get him tuh kick a cow chip on a hot day.” The two women laughed. “Speakin’ of Shelly”—here Mary’s voice quieted—“Ah know your time here’s short but ah was wonderin’ if yuh wanted to see him at the cemetery?”

“I’d like that.”

“Ah’ll let mother know as she’s goin’ there tomorrow.” The room was silent as both women sipped their tea.

“Excited about the wedding?” asked Penny to change the subject.

“More excited that a shotgun’s not required.” Mary smiled. “So am ah goin’ to hear any weddin’ bells comin’ from yuhr direction some day soon?” The blond shrugged.

“I don’t know.” Pause. “It won’t be for a while.” She again looked at Mary and shrugged, a blush coming to her cheeks.

“Yuh gotta be sure on these things,” nodded Mary. “The first thing yuh’ve gotta do when yuh find yourself in a hole is tuh stop diggin’.”

“I’m not in a hole. It’s just…..” Penny sighed. “Leonard’s talking about marriage and kids and I feel like I’ve only started my career. I’m not like Sheldon or Leonard who got their doctorates early on so they got to do what they loved for years. Besides, I’m not even thirty.”

Mary patted the young woman’s hand. “Yuh do what’s right for you. If Leonard’s the one for yuh he’ll wait. The good ones always do.”

Penny nodded and took a sip of her tea.

xTBBTx

From his stories of baking cookies with his Meemaw Penny had drawn an image of a spirited old woman with white hair and glasses and a ‘grammy’ sweater covering her shoulders. So it was a
real effort not to drop her jaw when a red Ford Taurus pulled up to the house and honked the horn. The Nebraskan said goodbye to Mary and made her way to the car. Inside was an older woman with light burgundy hair swept up into a bun wearing a short sleeve black knitted top and black slacks.

“My, yuh’re as pretty as a September peach,” Meemaw said brightly as Penny got settled. The two women smiled at each other. “Ah’m so glad tuh finally meet yuh, Penny.”

“You too, um, Meemaw.”

“Muh name’s Jane, hon. Though yuh can call me what makes yuh comfortable.” Jane put the car in gear and drove away.

“It must be exciting that Missy’s getting married,” Penny said as she watched the streets of Galveston pass by her window.

“She’s muh fourth grandchild tuh get married. It’s old hat now.” Here a chuckle slipped out. “Although it’s different not wonderin’ if the weddin’s gonna conclude ‘fore the bun falls out of the oven.”

“Sounds like my sister’s wedding,” grinned Penny. “When she came in to tell my parents that she was getting married my dad said something about having the cart before the horse since she was about six months pregnant by then.”

“Yuh parents must be proud of yuh movin’ tuh California an’ becomin’ an executive assistant.”

“I’m sure they’d agree it was a long time coming.”

“Don’t matter how long it takes so long’s you make it.” Jane pulled over into a parking spot in front of a small flower shop. “Ah don’t know if yuh wanna pick somethin’ up for Shelly but ah’ve got a standin’ order.”

“Sure. Thanks.” Penny got out of the car. It was as they were walking that she noted Jane was taller than she was with the same lankiness to her body as Missy. Sheldon would still have towered over his grandmother by a good five inches but somehow Penny doubted the woman was intimidated. If anything, Meemaw was a force unto herself as she raised her sunglasses onto her head as she entered the shop.

“Howdy Jane,” said the gentleman shopkeeper.

“’Mornin’ Carl.” She brushed Penny’s shoulder. “This is Shelly’s Penelope.”

“Ma’am.”

“Penny,” the assistant said with a smile. “Mind if I take a look around?”

“By all means,” replied Carl. “I’ve got yuhr order ready,” he said to Jane as he pulled out a small bundle from the counter behind him.

Penny might like flowers the same as the next woman but that didn’t mean she was an expert. She wandered the store until her eyes caught sight of a bunch of red and orange flowers that looked strikingly similar to her Penny Blossoms. She took a small bundle and added a few daisies to the mix. Way, aye, blow the man down….

“Coreopsis and daisies. Nice choice,” said the older gentleman as he wrapped the flowers.
Penny and Jane paid and said their goodbyes before returning to the car and resuming their ride.

“Carl’s known the family a long time,” Jane said as she drove. “The first time he met Shelly we were in there buyin’ flowers for Snowball’s funeral.”

“Yeah, I still can’t believe he built a CAT scanner,” chuckled Penny.

“He right impressed the people at the hospital. Ah remember the doctor sayin’ that he had the makin’ of bein’ a MD but Shelly already had his heart set on physics. Well, when it wasn’t on Star Trek.”

Penny raised her hand in a Vulcan salute. “I find your words—logical.” Both women laughed.

“Sheldon actually turned a short story he wrote about him going to the future with Spock into a one act play.”

“He couldn’t get enough of Spock.”

“Only this time I turned the tables and had him play his mother while I played Spock. Once Sheldon got rolling he kind of short circuited when he made up a conversation between his mother and himself.” Penny’s eyes searched the dash as she recalled the moment. “She said something like, ‘I love you Shelly, even if you creep the bejesus out of me’ and he started crying.”

“Mary did her best but ‘tween her marriage tuh George and divin’ neck deep intuh religion she didn’t have much left tuh cope with havin’ a genius son.” Jane regarded Penny through the rear view mirror. “Don’t get me wrong, she loved that boy somethin’ fierce but Shelly needed a little more attention than he got.”

“He always talked about you. Always ‘my Meemaw’ this and ‘my Meemaw’ that. You really filled a hole for him.”

“Ah knew when muh husband died that I had tuh watch over Shelly. Ty always said that Shelly was a sensitive one an’ when he let himself feel he felt very deeply.” Jane signaled and turned into the cemetery and drove along the dirt road. “The two of them used tuh scribble their sciencey stuff with crayons and build atoms out of play doh and pipe cleaners.” She put the car into park along side the road and killed the engine. “Ah can just imagine the talk they’re havin’ right now.”

The women went to the trunk to unwrap their flowers and then began the trek through the grave stones. Penny’s eyes scanned the rows even though she had no idea what the grave looked like much less where it was.

When Jane bee-lined to a white stone Penny could feel her heart pound in her chest. It was one thing to see Sheldon at the hospital and then the funeral home but to see his name carved in stone brought home the finality of everything. There would be no more Penny Blossoms sea shanties or prank wars or whackadoodle moments.

“Hello Moonpie,” Jane said as she placed a hand on top of his stone. “Ah’ve brought someone special tuh see yuh.”

Penny felt her throat tighten and she quickly swallowed. “Hi Sheldon,” she said softly.

“Now don’t be shy,” Jane smiled and plunked her glasses on top of her head before kneeling down to pull out dried baby’s breath from a patch of small blue flowers growing in the dirt—the same flowers, Penny realized, that were on Sheldon’s coffin at the funeral.

“What are they?” asked the Nebraskan.
“‘Forget-Me-Nots,’” replied Jane as she distributed her fresh baby’s breath around the growing flowers. “Shelly always liked them best cuz he said they didn’t forget things just like him.”

Penny handed Jane her bouquet and the older woman neatly arranged it before standing. Under the hot sun the two women stood with heads bowed in front of the grave of a most unusual man.

“I owe him so much,” Penny said quietly. “He believed in me when no one else did.” She gave a short laugh. “When I didn’t believe in me.”

“Ah know.” The blond regarded her. “Shelly always told me what was goin’ on in his life. He mentioned he was guidin’ yuh along.”

“Yeah, I was his pet project alright,” grinned Penny.

“Yuh were more than a project, Penny. He cared about yuh.” Here Jane chuckled. “The questions he had for Mary and me concernin’ the ways of womenfolk were almost comical were they not straight from the heart.” Penny laughed.

“Yeah, Mrs. Cooper already told me about the menses thing.” She smiled at Sheldon’s grave. “I could have killed him for that alone.”

“Believe me, he didn’t mean nothin’ creepy by that. If there was anythin’ Shelly hated more it was not knowin’ and we were the closest source of womanliness he had. Ah remember Mary was nearly beside herself when he began askin’ about stuff. Never in a million years did she think Shelly would ever interest himself in a girl.” She smiled. “Yuh were the answer to her prayers.”

“Sheldon and I were just friends.”

“Ain’t no such thing as ‘just’ anythin’ with Shelly. Yuh was his friend and that meant everythin’ tuh him. Oh, he complained constantly about yuh and yuh ‘folksy ways’ and party-girl shenanigans but the moment he realized yuh was serious about movin’ tuh another buildin’ he just about had a conniption.”

“He lent me money for rent,” nodded Penny. “He did a lot of things for me.”

“Whether yuh know it or not yuh did a lot of things for him.” Jane flashed her blue eyes on Penny’s face. “Ah’ll always be grateful.”

Penny closed her mouth and nodded. She didn’t know what she had done to warrant such affection from Sheldon’s family. She’d done her best to understand the physicist but felt she came up short more times than scored a touchdown.

“Ah have somethin’ for yuh,” Jane said after they returned to the car. She opened the trunk and pulled out a small wooden box. Penny immediately recognized it as a Chinese puzzle box similar to the one he had in his room. “Once a year Shelly and ah would exchange the same two boxes in the mail. He told me tuh never open ‘em and tuh hold ontuh it until it was time tuh mail it back tuh him.”

Penny shook the box and could hear something rattling inside. “So how come you never opened it?”

Jane shrugged. “He was right adamant about keepin’ it shut. Ah just don’t have the heart.” She patted Penny’s arm. “Keep it safe now, yuh hear?”

“I promise,” the assistant said earnestly. Jane smiled and closed the trunk.
After his last encounter Sheldon was a little hesitant about entering the dream. It seemed innocuous enough: Dream Sheldon was working away at his whiteboard while Penny sat on the couch. They appeared to be talking.

With a deep breath Sheldon opened the mirror and stepped through.

“—so then Admiral Thrawn—”

“*Grand* Admiral Thrawn, Penny,” amended Dream Sheldon as he continued his formula.

“Whatever. Anyways, he’s supposed to be in it.”

‘Sheldon’ turned from the whiteboard to address his neighbor. “And what a refreshing change he’ll bring. Unlike Darth Vader who worked with threats and punishment Grand Admiral Thrawn promoted creativity among his crew.”

“Eh, I’m just curious if Carrie Fisher can get small enough to wear her princess outfit.”

Dream Sheldon pursed his lips and returned to his board. “It’s like talking to a monkey.”

Penny laughed as the ‘real’ Sheldon sat down in his spot.

“You are such a toy I don’t have to wind up,” she giggled. Sheldon pursed his lips.

“But you did wind me up. Always with some folksy idiom or sarcastic crack. Every time I thought I had you cornered you’d find some way to break through my intelligently crafted net.”

“So are you going to come see it with us?” continued Penny.

“I don’t think I can,” Dream Sheldon said after a moment. “As you know I’m otherwise occupied.”

“Pfft. You can always take a break. ‘All work and no play’ and stuff.” Here she grinned. “We never get to spend time together anymore.”

“You’re busy,” sniffed Dream Sheldon.

“I’m busy? Honey, I work nine to five and don’t take my job home with me. You’re the one working on your string thingies in your living room.” ‘Sheldon’ lowered the marker and turned to his neighbor.

“Then why didn’t you drive me to the comic book store to get my statue?” The smile faded from the Nebraskan’s face.

“I’d gotten into a fight with Leonard.”

“About what?”

“About you, alright! Look it doesn’t matter.”

Dream Sheldon sniffed. “You mean I don’t matter.”

“Sweetie, of course you do. I saw you today.”

“Gone to see where they buried your victim. How gauche, Penelope.”
“My death wasn’t Penny’s fault,” ‘real’ Sheldon snapped.

“I didn’t think you’d get killed, Sheldon. I mean God you were just taking the bus!” Penny began chewing on her bottom lip. “If I knew this was going to happen I’d—”

“You really think you’d have done things differently?” snorted Dream Sheldon.

“Of course I would have!”

“When it comes down to the three of us you always side with Leonard. It’s human nature.”

Penny popped off the couch. “I chose you, you idiot! Leonard wanted me to dump our friendship but I told him to stuff it.”

“And yet when I ask you to do a simple thing like take me to the comic book store you couldn’t be bothered to assist. Thanks ‘friend’.”

“I’m sorry, Sheldon,” Penny whispered.

“I’ve always been accused of being selfish yet when it comes down to brass tacks I’ve been there for you. You couldn’t give me the same courtesy.” Penny’s face fell. “I helped you with your flower business even though I knew it wasn’t viable and loaned you money although I knew I was only perpetuating bad life choices—”

“*Enough*,” ‘real’ Sheldon growled as he got off the couch.

“—and helped you with your schooling because you were utterly hopeless and set your career path because you’d otherwise be spending the rest of your life floundering like a fish out of water.”

“I did my best,” squeaked Penny.

“No, you scraped by on minimal effort. I did my best. I was the best and now I’m dead. I won’t get my Nobel Prize. I won’t solve the universe. All thanks to you, Penny.” He cocked his head. “Maybe I spoke too soon. You did finish something after all—me.”

Tears streaming down her cheeks Penny ran from the apartment.

‘Real’ Sheldon glared at his mirrored self before sprinting after Penny. Fortunately she left her apartment door open so he entered and followed her sobs to her room where she lay on her bed.

Not knowing what to do Sheldon sat down by her head.

“Penny, this isn’t your fault.” He reached out a hand but stopped short before touching her hair.

“I’m so sorry,” Penny sobbed into her pillow.

“Soft kitty, warm kitty,” Sheldon sang softly. “Little ball of fur….”

Penny sighed deeply and cuddled her pillow close to her chest.

“Happy kitty, sleepy kitty, purr, purr, purr.” He stared at his neighbor.

“There, there,” the physicist simply said. “Sheldon’s here.”
Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Summary

Reference to: ‘The Pants Alternative’

“Just think: this time next week you’ll be unpacking in Beantown,” grinned Penny as she taped up a box marked ‘books’.

“And your very own condo to boot,” added Bernadette while wrapping assorted knick knacks in newspaper.

“Yes, it was generous of Fiasal,” agreed Amy. “He could see the logic to breaking our ‘betrothal’ but insisted he wanted to ‘see his girl right’. ” She took a wrapped item off the coffee table and placed it carefully in a box. “The condo was unexpected but appreciated.”

“And the new furniture?” prompted Penny.

“Bonus!” giggled Amy. She hi-fived the microbiologist. “Again, if either of you want anything from here let me know and I’ll keep it aside when the movers come. I’m sending it to the Goodwill so the less fortunate can benefit from my good fortune.”

“I could use your bookshelves,” Bernadette said after a moment’s thought.

“Consider them yours. The movers will be at your place Friday morning before they’re off with my belongings.” Here the neurobiologist smiled. “To Beantown.”

All three women picked up a wine glass and toasted each other before taking a sip.

“So when do you want us to come visit?” asked Bernadette. “Need help settling or give you a while to settle in?”

Amy shrugged. “Either is acceptable. It would be fun exploring Boston with a companion.” She eyed Penny.

“Let me see what I can do,” Penny said. “If I go now it means I won’t be up to another trip ‘til next year.”

“I think I’d appreciate the instant courage you provide,” decided Amy.

“Okay then. Two weeks from now?” offered Bernadette. “Leave Friday afternoon and take the red-eye back Sunday?”

“I’ll have to clear it at work but if it’s a go count me in,” Penny said cheerily.

Amy felt her ears flush and took another sip of wine. “Thank you. I really couldn’t do this without you.”

“Sure you would have,” Bernadette smirked. “You’re bright and talented.” She picked up her glass. “You just wouldn’t have packed drunk is all.”
“To wine, women and packing tape,” Penny laughed. The two women stared at her. “Okay, either you’re driving me home,” she said seriously to Bernadette. “Or else I’m calling couch dibs now.”

“Dibs! Dibs! Dibs!” Amy clapped gleefully. “A sleepover for my last weekend here.” She popped off the couch. “I’ll go get our pajamas.”

“I don’t have any pajamas, sweetie,” Penny said.

“Sure you do,” countered Amy from her bedroom. “I took the liberty of procuring sleepwear for you should you unexpectedly decide to stay overnight.”

“Wow,” Penny’s eyes were wide as she looked at Bernadette.

“That’s, uh, thoughtful of you,” the microbiologist offered.

“I’m afraid all I’ve got is a t-shirt for you, short stuff,” Amy called from the bedroom.

“That’s okay,” the diminutive woman replied. She wiggled her eyebrows at Penny garnering a stuck out tongue in her direction.

Penny could hear the soft jazz music emanating from apartment 4A but decided to make herself casual before stepping over. Raj was moving the bowl of braised chicken and steamed peas to the table as he noticed her and gave a wide smile in her direction.

“Remind me again why we never dated?” She could feel her mouth begin to drool.

He raised a finger as he poured a bit of wine into his glass and took a sip.

“The gods would be too jealous of our love,” he grinned. “Plus Leonard would whine.”

She chuckled. “Not that you’re much of an ass when you’re drunk.”

“But my eyes sparkle when I’m tipsy.”

Penny laughed as Leonard happily skipped his way down the hall.

“Someone’s frisky,” his girlfriend said as she sat in Sheldon’s spot and filled the other two wineglasses.

“In more ways than you think,” he practically giggled back. He handed her a bundle of paper.

“Doctor Hofstadter,” she read. “It is with great honor that I congratulate you for being this year’s Young Physicist’s Award recipient for your paper on calculating proton spin rates.” Penny’s eyes lit up. “Congratulations!” Leonard leaned over and they kissed. “That is so awesome that your work on”—she flipped the letter aside to read the title of Leonard’s paper—“Calculating Spatial Angular Momentum of Quarks in Contrast to S-Wave Predictions.” She scanned the first two pages to see if she could get anything concrete out of them but quickly gave up. Instead, she smiled sweetly and handed back the papers. “Reads like a winner.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Leonard replied and took a sip of his wine. “Anyways I’ve got some time coming to me so I thought we could fly there on Friday, do the awards thing and then relax for a day or two before coming back.”

Penny raised an eyebrow. “‘Fly’? Where is it?”
“Chicago.” He pulled out his phone. “I’ve been looking over some flights and there’s one leaving in the morning at—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. First of all, when is this?”

“The twenty-sixth.”

“Okay.” She tallied some numbers in her head. “So it’s on the Saturday?”

“Saturday night starting with six thirty cocktails.”

“Okay, so if we got there Saturday afternoon it’d still give us time to hit the hotel and—”

Leonard frowned. “What about leaving Friday?”

“I already took off a Friday when I moved Amy down. I can’t be making long weekends all the time. Besides, it’ll be tight enough just floating the airfare. The budget went off the cliff when I was shopping in Boston.”

“Since when do you have a budget?” asked her boyfriend.

“For a while,” she replied. “When Sheldon got me sorted out for school he helped me with a budget so I could pay for things better than I was.” Leonard didn’t need to know about the loan. The budgeting seminar was a mandatory catch to Sheldon giving her the money.

“I’ll help you catch up,” Leonard said with a smile. “The ‘Bank of Hofstadter’ is always available for microloans.”

Penny shook her head before taking a sip of wine. “I already tapped into my backup funds to pay for Amy’s trip. I would have been fine if I’d just gone to the wedding but now a third trip?”

“You didn’t make my speech,” he scowled. “You owe me.”

“You didn’t make Missy’s wedding and I covered for you. We’re even,” she countered.

“I can go,” Raj said in a tone more enthusiastic than he felt at the moment. He knew a brewing storm when he saw one and the looks on his friends’ faces when they gave him a ‘butt out’ glare told him all that he needed to know. “I think I’ll go look at something that’s important to see now but not so important that I can’t overhear what’s going on.” He went around the corner in the hall and stopped to listen.

“I can’t just show up by myself,” Leonard snapped.

“I can go with you Saturday and come back Sunday.”

“I want to stay longer.”

“I can’t afford it and work won’t let me.”

He folded his arms across his chest and slumped into his chair. “What’s with you? You always jumped at a chance to go to different cities.”

“I was a waitress, Leonard. I could move shifts around.” She snorted. “And did you notice that I lost hydro and cable a few times? That’s how I paid for my trips: candlelit dinners of Ichibon noodles and sneaking my laundry into other people’s machines so they’d get washed. I’ve grown past that.” She sat forward and placed a hand on his knee. “Look, we can go Saturday, come back
Sunday and have a celebration the following weekend with Howard, Bernie and Raj.”

“We’re already having a celebration. My next article has been tentatively accepted. I want something special for me.”

“This is *all* for you. God, now you’re starting to sound like Sheldon,” she sighed.

“I am not!” he snapped and stood up. “Sheldon was an anal retentive egotist who thought the whole universe revolved around his crazy ass just because he had an idea or two.” His hands curled into fists. “Well I have ideas too! My career started without Sheldon and it’s back on track without Sheldon so—”

“What about that paper on the Bose-Condenthingie that I went to? You said that was a big deal.”

“Sheldon was the primary,” Leonard seethed. “I mean when I’m in charge. *My* ideas.” He picked up his papers and shook them. “*This* is a big deal! *I’m* a big deal!”

“You’re a big something alright,” Penny growled as she got up from her seat.

“Oh sure, when Sheldon strutted around here all cock-proud that was okay but I show a little pride in my work and I’m an ass?”

“No, you’re being an ass because you’re competing with a dead guy! You do good work.”

“Like you’d know.” Immediately he clamped his mouth shut even as his girlfriend cocked her head.

“Yeah, like dumb ol’ Penny’d get all the big physics words her boyfriend uses.”

Leonard was ashen. “Penny—”

“That’s been the problem, Leonard: none of us are good enough for you. Sheldon was a shitty friend and now I’m a shitty girlfriend.”

“No, I—”

“It’s been nearly three years since Sheldon died and you’ve got two papers published and an award.”

“Actually it’s five papers. I’m working in collaboration with—”

“Whatever.” She pursed her lips. “I guess it is a good thing Sheldon died. He was really holding you back.” She marched to the door. “I won’t keep you from your destiny either Doctor Vader.” She slammed the door and the apartment was quiet.

“‘Darth’ Vader,” Leonard said softly.

xTBBTx

As Sheldon stepped through the mirror he could hear Penny and Leonard arguing in what he assumed was the short man’s bedroom. Dream Sheldon was in his blue housecoat and pajamas fixing a mug of warm milk.

“This is intolerable,” the mirror man muttered as he placed the milk in the microwave and pressed ‘start’.
“I agree,” said ‘real’ Sheldon as he sat in his spot. “How those two manage to assert their pair bond is sound is really beyond me.”

The bedroom door flew open and Penny stormed down the hall followed by Leonard.

“Just say it!” she hollered. “‘Penny’s too stupid to know what I’m doing!’”

“You’re not too stupid,” Leonard placated.

“Just stupid.”

“Only about science stuff,” he said calmly causing Dream Sheldon to snort.

“Didn’t you say that you wished Penny knew more about Star Trek and Babylon 5 or could pick up a book and learn something about the last fifty years that didn’t involve the Kardashians or Lindsay Lohan or—”

“That’s enough, Sheldon,” Leonard scowled.

“You should talk,” ‘real’ Sheldon said haughtily. “After two weeks frolicking with Leslie Winkle you actually tried to make loop quantum gravity plausible even in the face of the Fermi-Gamma Ray Telescope results. Tell me that isn’t stupidity at its highest.” He shook his head derisively.

“Well I’m trying,” Penny went on. “I’ve asked Sheldon about quantum mechanics and particle physics and even whatever the hell it is you do for a living.”

“I couldn’t describe Leonard’s career any better,” smirked Dream Sheldon as he took his milk from the microwave and ventured down the hall.

“I know you are,” sighed Leonard. “Let’s just forget about this stuff and go to the awards, okay?”

Dream Sheldon stopped in the hall. “Award? You didn’t say I was getting an award?”


‘Real’ Sheldon rolled his eyes. “Now I know this is a dream.”

“That would insinuate you’d done something of note,” Dream Sheldon said with a smirk.

“I have! It’s on protons. Penny, be a dear and hand me the paper on my desk, will you?”

“Oh yes, Dr. Hofstadter,” Penny seethed. “Right away Dr. Hofstadter.” Immediately Leonard stiffened.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” he said curtly.

“Just checking,” the assistant replied. “After all it’s not everyday a little ol’ secretary like me can handle things like”—she read from the paper—“calculating spatial angular momentum of quarks in contrast to S-Wave predictions.”

Sheldon’s mouth dropped. He turned to his neighbor. “What did you say?”

“I’m not expecting you to read it,” growled Leonard. “Just appreciate me for what I’m doing, alright?”

“Keep spinning your protons, pal.” She slapped the paper on the coffee table in front of Sheldon
and turned to go.

“Don’t you dare leave!” Leonard stormed to the door and turned his back to it. “Penny, I need you.”

Sheldon leaned forward and incredulously read over the title of Leonard’s paper.

“Impossible,” he gasped. He scanned the first page and recognized the structure of the paper.

“I don’t need this, Leonard,” Penny replied with a sigh.

“I know, I know. Look, let’s just agree that this one’s a washout and live to fight another day.” A little smile came to the curly haired man’s face. “Okay?”

“Leonard?” Sheldon whispered. “This is my paper.” He turned to face his best friend. “Why do you have my paper?”

“Okay,” Penny replied. She kissed her boyfriend. “I’ve got to get packing if we’re off to Chicago.” She kissed him again and left the apartment.

The scene went dark and Sheldon staggered his way out of the mirror. He couldn’t understand what he had witnessed. How did Penny know about his paper? She must have read it; at least she read the first page because it made sense to him. But why would she—

'Leonard?’ He was confused and light headed and his stomach— Sheldon bee-lined to a tree where he began to dry heave.

xTBBT

“—Then I said that he must be thanking his lucky stars Sheldon was dead since he’d had nothing but good luck since then,” growled Penny before popping a cherry tomato in her mouth. Esperit sucked her teeth.

“I’ll walk a limb here and say things didn’t end well,” she said diplomatically.

“Nope.”

“Ah.”

Penny’s eyebrow rose. “Have something to say, Dr. Phil?” The receptionist chuckled.

“When the hurricane’s blowing the last thing I want to do is stand by the window and hand it the china.”

“Sorry.” Penny sighed. “It’s just that I’m tired of being looked at as ‘Good Ol’ Penny’ who’d blow work for a hangover or a trip to San Francisco she couldn’t really afford but went anyways because it was, like, fun,” she valley-girl twanged.

“Telling you to skip work was wrong,” agreed Esperit. “But believe me you weren’t exactly there with your thinking cap, either.” Penny’s jaw dropped.

“What do you mean?”

“Penelope, he was getting an award for his work and all you were concerned about was how much this trip was going to cost you.”
“So you’re saying I should skip Friday?” scowled the assistant.

“Of course not. But you should have talked about this later. He needed his time to bask in the sun. He worked hard and all you did was give the man piss water.”

Penny blanched. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“And we won’t even get into how you said he must be happy his friend’s dead.”

“God.” The Nebraskan clapped a hand to her forehead and slouched against her chair. “I’m such a bitch.”

“It sounds like Leonard’s been overlooked in the henhouse one too many times. He wants to crow. Let him.”

“It’s his mother’s fault.” Penny took her napkin and plopped it into the remains of her salad. “Leonard’s a genius and yet no matter what he did it was never good enough.” She smiled grimly. “Sheldon was the son she always wanted. It was frightening how alike they were.” Penny sighed. “Do you know Leonard actually built a hugging machine when he was a kid?”

“Looks like he’ll be digging it out of the closet,” Esperit said pointedly. “Unless he’s got a real one at home?”

Penny nodded. “You bet he does.”

XxX

The apartment door opened and Penny entered to find Raj and Leonard watching television.


The astrophysicist got up from the couch and made his way down the hall so he could hear what was going on. Just because he was polite enough to leave didn’t mean he wasn’t a douche not to overhear.

Penny moved over and sat in Sheldon’s spot. “I owe you an apology,” she started slowly.

Leonard crossed his arms. “Go on.”

“I didn’t make a big deal about your award even though it is. Not that I’m saying it like you needed a pat on the head,” she said hurriedly as Leonard made to speak. “Yeah, I can’t skip work but we should have talked about that another time. Last night was your night to shine and I was a complete bitch.”

“And?”

Here his girlfriend blushed. “I’m also sorry for saying you’re happy Sheldon’s dead. I know he was your best friend. I really crossed the line and I’m sorry.”

“Thank you,” the physicist said. “I didn’t mean to be a suck. It’s just that I was so happy and I wanted to be with people who’d also see it as a big deal.” He shrugged. “I mean, I emailed my mother today and you know what I got? ‘How humbling after ten years in the field to still be labeled a ‘young’ scientist.’”

“Crap on a cracker.” Penny reached out and Leonard took her hand.
“She means well. I think.” Again he shrugged.

“Well, I know it might seem a little cheap now but we can still celebrate your award.” Penny gave his hand a tug. “You know, if you want….”

Immediately he was out of his chair and Penny stood.

“This time I’m the physicist,” he smirked. The pair kissed.

“I’m proud of you, Leonard.”

“We’re going to my room now, Raj,” Leonard called out and as they approached the hall they could hear the astrophysicist’s door close with a slight ‘click’.

xTBBTx

The mirror opened and Sheldon stepped into the foyer of his apartment building. Penny had just grabbed her mail and was going up the stairs.

“Penny,” Sheldon said as he caught up to her. “Penny, you’ve got to listen to me.” He stepped past her and put out an arm.

She walked through him and rounded the corner.

“Drat.” He turned and again caught up to her. “Penny, I know you can’t hear me and this is utterly stupid on my part to keep talking to you as if you can but you’ve got to listen to me.” She pulled out her phone and began to scroll her messages. “How did you know about my paper? Did someone go on my computer? Was it Leonard?”

They got to the proper landing and she went to her apartment door.

“No. You need to see Sheldon,” the physicist growled. He tried the handle to his own apartment but it wouldn’t turn. Realizing Penny had opened her own he made it with several quick steps into 4B before she closed the door.

“God, I’m going to be late,” Penny muttered as she dumped her mail and purse on the couch and marched into her bedroom.

“Penny,” Sheldon said as he followed only to stop short as he saw her shirt hit the ground in front of the bedroom door. To be doubly sure he didn’t see anything he turned his back. “You’ve got to go to my apartment. I need my whiteboard.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

“It’s open, Sheldon,” the assistant called from her bedroom. The door opened and Dream Sheldon entered wearing his robot evolution shirt, orange thermal and brown plaid pants.

“Penny, it’s nearly three o’clock. The plane leaves at four thirty.”

“I know, I know.” She emerged from her bedroom in the red dress she wore out with Leonard wheeling a black overnight bag. “Thanks again for driving.”
“You know I’m apprehensive about this all. I don’t want to be rushed.”

“Okay, all set.” Penny beamed.

“Let’s get Leonard and my jacket.”

The pair left the apartment and ‘real’ Sheldon followed. As soon as Dream Sheldon opened the door the ‘real’ physicist darted in and went to the whiteboard. Frantically he wiped the board clear with his hand and began writing.

“Leonard, chop chop,” said Dream Sheldon as he grabbed his jacket off his computer chair.

From the hallway Leonard appeared wearing a black tuxedo and carrying an overnight bag. Suddenly he stopped dead and checked his pockets.

“Damn. Tickets.” He set his bag on the chair and returned to his room.

“That’s why I pack the night before,” tsked Dream Sheldon.

As for Sheldon he finished his proton formula and stepped away from the board.

“Please Penny, read the board,” he implored.

“I did pack the night before,” Leonard called out. “I just thought of the tickets now.”

“Someone’s mind is on the award,” grinned Penny.

“It’s not like he gets them very often so no wonder he’s flustered.” Dream Sheldon walked to his board and began reading.

Sheldon held his breath.

“When’s the last time *you* got an award?” snapped the curly haired man as he returned to the living room.

“I’ve been busy doing real research.” Dream Sheldon picked up a marker and wrote a bunch of nonsense at the end of Sheldon’s formula before returning the marker and heading to the door.

“Now our departure time is two minutes behind schedule. Let’s move, people!”

The gang went out the door and the scenery around him changed to the building’s parking lot but he didn’t have the heart to stay and instead made his way out of the mirror. He turned to watch the three friends in Penny’s car talking and laughing away.

Never in his whole life did Sheldon feel this helpless.

xTBBT

“…And without further adieu I present the 2015 IOP Young Scientist of the Year award to Dr. Leonard Hofstadter.”

Penny gave her boyfriend a kiss and watched as he made his way to the stage and podium. From the way Leonard shook hands with the presenter and took the award Penny thought her boyfriend must have grown a foot taller in an instant because he looked so unlike the awkward Leonard she knew at home who hunched up and hid in his sweatshirts and army green jacket.

She put down her phone after taking several pictures and braced herself for what she expected
would be a tedious acceptance speech. In a flash she thought of Sheldon’s speech where he ditched his pants and began singing to the crowd. True, he might have been a condescending ass but there’s no way anyone could call his acceptance speech boring.

“Thank you, ladies and gentlemen and esteemed colleagues,” began Leonard before he glanced at his cue cards. “I have to admit I was genuinely surprised and delighted to receive this award. Never in a million years did I imagine that the kid whose science fair project tested the growth rate of plants to classical music would end up dedicating his life to understanding why sub-atomic particles move the way they do. I know my mother was floored although I’m sure she’ll find some way of applauding herself for her parenting skills which obviously led to this moment in my development. That’s the joy you have in your life when your mother’s a psychiatrist and neuroscientist.” He paused at the polite laughter from the crowd. “In terms of protons, I wondered one day why they….”

xTBBTx

“It’s been a while since we’ve been together. It’s nice,” Leonard smiled.

Howard agreed. “I have a lot of things to get done before I go.”

“Go?” asked Raj. “I didn’t know you were going anywhere?”

“Oh, I’ll still be here. I just won’t be at the university anymore.” Penny’s jaw dropped.

“No way!” She gawked, wide-eyed and open mouthed, at her friends. In response Bernadette grinned as she patted her belly.

“Bun’s rising as we speak,” the little woman beamed.

“Oh my god,” Raj gasped before hugging the engineer.

“How far along are you?” asked Penny.

“About five weeks,” the microbiologist said.

“I can’t believe it!” Raj sat back and wiped the tears from his eyes. “I’m going to be an uncle.”

“More than that,” Bernadette said. She regarded her friend. “Howie and I want you to be our baby’s God-parent.”

“I’d be honored.” Again Raj embraced his friend.

“So when are you going to resign from the university?” Leonard asked the engineer.

“I’m hoping about two weeks before the due date but you never know with these things. Bernie wants me to quit the month before just in case but we’ll see.”

“This is just incredible,” Penny said as she shook her head. “Howard Wolowitz—a dad.”

“Hey, it happens,” he replied with a grin.

Bernadette smirked as she poked her husband with her elbow before addressing Penny. “Believe me when you and Leonard have a baby of your own you won’t know what hit ya.”
“Eyah,” the Nebraskan said before taking a big gulp of wine.

“Oh come on, you’ll be a cute couple,” teased Bernadette. “With your brawny hands and Leonard’s lactose intolerance your baby will be a standout at daycare.”

“Or a gorilla pen,” winked Howard.

“Yeah, well, thanks to Penny my baby will at least be able to reach things on the counter before he’s twelve,” Leonard laughed.

“But think of how much money Bernie and I will save paying child prices until my son’s seventeen.”

“Howard, you can still go Trick-or-Treating,” admonished Raj lightly.

Penny poured herself another drink. “So when are you going to take maternity?” she asked her friend. Bernadette shrugged.

“I’m thinking about a week before the baby’s due until, I don’t know, maybe one to three months? Something like that.”

“Then it’ll just be you, Howard,” Leonard warned.

“Nope. Ma’s offered to come over for the first bit once Bernie’s back at work and then we’re going to make afternoon play dates at the house. She’s really good with children.” He turned to Penny. “I’m sure she’d love to be your sitter, too.”

“That’s great,” Leonard smiled. “Penny mentioned she wanted to go back to work after the baby.”

“Whoa, whoa. Bernadette’s the one who’s pregnant. Quit finding babysitters for my eggs,” said Penny.

“No rush,” Leonard said as he raised his hands. “Still, things are kinda falling into place, y’know?”

“You better believe it, pal,” Howard said as he reached for his wine glass. “To the future and all it brings.” The others gathered their glasses and toasted.

XxX

It was one twenty five and Penny couldn’t sleep. Quietly she slipped out of bed without waking Leonard and made her way down the hall to the bathroom. After relieving herself she caught a look in the mirror as she washed her hands.

Could she be a mother?

It wasn’t a case of her not having a stable partner. Leonard was gainfully employed and completely devoted to her.

“I’m not finished raising myself,” she sighed and turned off the light before exiting.

As she stepped into the hall she heard someone hitch a breath in the living room. She clicked on the light and found Raj in his pajamas sitting on the couch.

“Raj?” When she was near she noted the glass of wine in his hand and a second bottle on the table. “Sweetie, what are you doing up?”
“Celebrating,” he said quietly as she sat next to him. His eyes flashed to her face. “I’m going to be a God-parent.”

“I know.” She took the glass from his hand and set it on the table.

“The only thing is that I don’t want to be a God-parent. I want to be a real parent.” His hands balled into fists on his lap. “My best friend’s gotten married and has a baby and you and Leonard are practically married—”

“—Dating, not married, but go on.”

He sighed. “You know what I mean. You’re together and in love. I have no one.” He sniffled and Penny drew him into a hug. “What’s wrong with me, Penny?”

“Nothing’s wrong with you, honey,” she sighed and rubbed his back as he quietly sobbed.

xTBBTx

Sheldon stared at the images on the screen as he sat on the ground. Since his last try to get Penny’s attention failed he found himself without the energy or inclination to get up much less venture into the dream world. Instead he let over two dozen dreams flick on by and stared at the sky or ground or his reflection in the mirror when they were absent.

He knew it was a dream and that he couldn’t take everything that was said or done literally but for the life of him he couldn’t see how Penny could have made up Leonard’s name on *his* paper. She most certainly didn’t make up the thesis. Not that it was one of his major projects but the principle still stood—it was his.

The mirror went dark before resuming its reflective hue. 'Like it matters.'

He leaned back against the tree and closed his eyes.

xTBBTx

“That was amazing,” Penny smiled as Leonard and she ascended the last of the stairs to their floor.

“Thank Raj. He recommended the restaurant. It was a place Howard and he used to frequent on those special occasions like birthdays and what-not.”

“Be nice,” Penny tutted. “Raj really misses Howard.”

“I know.” Leonard pulled out his keys and unlocked the door. “I keep hoping he’ll meet someone but nada.” He extended his arm. “Nightcap, milady?”

“Why certainly.” Penny entered to find candles lit around the room and a spicy incense she couldn’t name. “Raj must be home.”

“Nope,” Leonard replied and took her jacket, placing it on the back of his computer chair.

His girlfriend sat down in Sheldon’s spot and straightened her dress hem. The physicist took a breath and, with a smile fixed in place, sat down in his comfy chair and reached for the chilled bottle of wine.

“If this is your push at getting laid tonight you’ve succeeded,” giggled Penny as she took the proffered glass.
“That would be a satisfactory end to the evening,” Leonard said with a nervous smile. He took a sip of wine. “Actually, I have some things I’d like to discuss with you.”

“Oh?”

Leonard cleared his throat. “I’ve got some news on the work front. Remember Dr. Sorrenson?”

“Yup. How is he? Still tearing up the dance floor with his wife?” The physicist chuckled.

“Somehow ballroom dancing never comes up in our conversations.” Pause. “Maybe you can ask his wife yourself.”

“Planning another trip to Boston?” Penny asked. “Amy’ll jump for joy.”

“I’m sure she will.” Another pause. “I bet she’d be even happier if we could stay there.”

Immediately Penny’s breathing hitched. “Oh?” she said before taking a sip of wine.

Leonard put down his glass and moved to the edge of his seat.

“I’ve been working with some people at MIT over the last year and a half that Dr. Sorrenson introduced me to. Things have gone really well and our results are amazing. The administration is very impressed.” Pause. “They think it’d be a shame if we couldn’t keep working together on a more permanent basis.”

“Don’t want to break up a winning combination,” Penny said evenly.


“I thought you were a ‘Young’ scientist?” She took another sip of wine.

“Young as in born after 1978. Senior in that I’ve been in the field for twelve years.” Pause. “It’s a real opportunity for me, Pen.”

She put down her glass. “I think you should go for it,” she said at last. She put on a brave face. “I’m so happy for you.”

“I wouldn’t be so happy yet. You see, there’s one problem. The woman I love is in California.”

“Yeah.” Suddenly her throat felt dry. “Hell of a commute for sex.”

Leonard nodded. “I can’t do what Amy did and hang out for hours on Skype while Sheldon and she did their own thing. That was too weird.” Pause. “I need you with me.”

“I dunno. I mean, I’ve got my apartment and my career and—”

“There are tons of office assistant jobs in Boston. I know. I looked.”

Penny smiled stiffly. “This is pretty serious stuff. I mean I moved out here with Kurt and now I’m supposed to move to the opposite side of the country with another boyfriend? It’s taken me a long time to get serious with my life.” She bit her lip. “I dunno.”

“Penny, I’m serious. About you. About us.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a white box causing his girlfriend’s eyes to widen. “Listening to Howard go on at work about his life I—”
“I’m not ready for kids, Leonard,” the Nebraskan said breathlessly, her stare locked on the little box in his hands.

“Neither am I,” he quickly assured. “At least not right away. My career’s really taking off now and I’m sure you’d like to get settled first.”

“Leonard, I—”

“Penny, I love you. If you won’t do it for me do it for Amy.” In spite of the moment the couple laughed. Leonard opened the box to reveal a beautiful ring. He moved the coffee table aside before descending to one knee. “From the moment I first saw you I knew our babies would be smart and beautiful.” He smiled hopefully. “Penny, would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

'This is it.' She imagined herself alone in Pasadena. No Leonard to come home to. No warm body to curl against. Immediately Raj flashed to mind and how heartbroken he was to be alone. How he said Penny and Leonard were practically married anyhow. She looked into her boyfriend’s eyes and realized that he wasn’t the Prince Charming of her dreams but he was dependable. He loved her. And of course she loved him.

“Yes,” she said softy. Leonard gasped for air as he resumed breathing. Penny straightened him up as he reached into his pocket for his inhaler and took a puff.

“Sorry about that,” he wheezed after a few minutes.

“At least you didn’t pass out,” she joked lightly.

He took the ring from the box. “Your hand milady?” In an instant it was on her finger and they kissed. “‘Mrs. Penny Hofstadter’,” he grinned. “Has a certain charm to it don’t you think?”
Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Summary

Reference to and dialogue from: ‘The Gorilla Experiment’; ‘The Fuzzy Boots Corollary’

Reference to: ‘The Gothowitz Deviation’; ‘The Higgs Boson Observation’

The last thing Sheldon would ever admit was that he was lonely but from all the empirical evidence he couldn’t conclude anything else.

“There’s always denial,” he sighed.

“Sheldon.”

His stomach contracted and he turned to the mirror to see his dream self scribbling like mad on the whiteboard in the apartment.

“Better cover up your work before Leonard comes home,” the physicist said bitterly. “Of course you’re not dead there so I doubt he’d take your work.”

The apartment door opened and Penny entered. She said something to ‘Sheldon’ before taking a roll of tape from his desk and departed. A few seconds later she returned and took a pair of scissors. When she returned the third time ‘Sheldon’ shrugged his shoulders in frustration and turned to her with a scowl on his face. He said something and Penny went down the hall, returning a moment later with a box in hand. She set it on the floor beside the comfy chair and proceeded to the kitchen cupboard. ‘Sheldon’ continued with his writing as Penny grabbed a stack of plates and brought them to the coffee table. She sat down and took out some newspaper from the box and began wrapping the plates.

Now curious, Sheldon got up from the ground and dusted his pants before venturing to the mirror.

“I’m going to regret this,” he murmured but nonetheless entered.

“—Content sale on the weekend,” Penny said. “All my stuff’s at the new apartment.” She stopped wrapping and shook her head. “Boston. Who knew I’d end up there?” Dream Sheldon snorted.

“No, the deeper conundrum is how Leonard ended up at MIT.”

Sheldon’s stomach dropped even as his heart quickened.

“Because he’s brilliant,” Penny replied defensively. ‘Sheldon’ paused in his writing to let out a gaspy laugh.

“Leonard is adequate. I am brilliant.”

Penny put the plate down on the table and crossed her arms. “Then why did they make Leonard a senior experimental physicist and not you?”
“I’m not interested in moving. And for the record I am a senior particle physicist.”

“So you got an offer to MIT?”

“…That’s not the point. Leonard shouldn’t be going either.”

A sympathetic smile came to the Nebraskan’s face.

“Oh honey, we’re going to miss you too.”

Dream Sheldon again snorted. “Why would I miss you? You’ve proved to be nothing short of a distraction over the years. Now I’ll be able to work in peace.”

Penny put a wrapped plate in the box and started on another one. “Yeah, yeah. Have you found a roommate yet?”

“Raj is more than acceptable. He’s already given notice and has perused the Roommate Agreement.”

Leonard entered the apartment carrying three empty boxes. He dumped them on the floor and closed the door.

“Hello traitor,” ‘real’ Sheldon scowled.

“Hi honey,” Penny said cheerily. Her boyfriend came over and they kissed.

“How’s the packing going?” he asked.

“Finished my place so I’m starting here.”

“Great. The moving guys will be here for the bed and couch on the weekend.”

Sheldon’s eyes widened. “Not my spot! You can’t have my spot!”

“I still don’t see why you get the couch,” pouted Dream Sheldon.

Leonard rolled his eyes. “I bought it so it’s mine. Besides Raj has a couch. You can use his.”

“Hardly comparable,” sniffed ‘Sheldon’ as Leonard came over to stand by his friend.

“You’ve got an error,” Leonard said and took up a marker.

“No I don’t,” his roommate replied testily. “Hypothetically if I did have an error where would it be?”

The shorter man began scribbling out a formula. ‘Real’ Sheldon came over but saw that it was nonsense.

“See? That’s why it’s a standard Higgs,” Leonard said.

“Of course it is,” snapped Dream Sheldon as he studied the board.

Leonard pointed to his equation. “You see the supersymmetric model says that the constant thingie needs to supercede parity of zero and take the new Higgs bosons—”

“—Because the Higgs field is not a single boson but a complex web of five different bosons,” ‘real’ Sheldon whispered.
“—Because there are five bosons stuck together,” concluded Leonard.

“No!” Sheldon snapped. What Penny had Leonard say was complete gobbledygook except that some of the words in the order he had it in were eerily familiar to Sheldon’s musings on the Higgs boson he had the night Penny came to him for help. He didn’t say anything to her about it; only after he wrote out her algorithm did he jot down his musings—

“You have my laptop,” he seethed to the curly haired physicist.

“The moving men will be here at nine am,” Leonard said as he walked to the couch and sat in Sheldon’s spot.

“Get out of my spot!” Sheldon’s voice cracked and he turned to his mirror self who was puzzling at the whiteboard. “Do something! He’s taking everything and you’re just standing there!” His lip began to tremble and with a sob he turned and ran from the apartment. As soon as he was away from the mirror he grabbed the stick he was using to write equations in the ground and threw it with all his might at the mirror.

It bounced back and the mirror stood without a scratch.

Sheldon was breathing heavily through his mouth as his fists repeatedly clenched. His eyes were red although no tears fell. He watched Leonard and Penny lean over and kiss. With a growl Sheldon turned and stormed into the woods.

“The voice was right,” he sobbed. “It is madness.”

Over time his pace slowed as did his breathing but he didn’t stop walking. Somewhere out there was the physics room and he was hell bent on finding it.

Occasionally he heard Penny’s voice calling his name and it tugged at his heart. He wanted to outrun her and yet she was his only contact—only the news she had to tell him wasn’t good. Everything he cherished was gone. Nothing was left. He’d be a footnote at the bottom of a physics textbook as the resolver of the Black Hole Information Paradox but that was it.

His steps became heavier and he looked down to see that his shoes were sinking into the muddy mess the ground had become.

“Lovely,” Sheldon sighed. He took another step and this one seemed to sink further.

“If you say so, Dr. Cooper.”

Sheldon turned to the Man. “Sarcasm,” he scowled. “I don’t like it here. I want to go back to the room.”

“I can’t help you.”

“Can’t or won’t?” The Man shrugged.

“I don’t know where the room is.” He looked about. “Quite the mess you’ve gotten yourself into.”

Sheldon noted that the Man’s shoes were perfectly white as he seemingly stood on solid ground. The physicist moved towards him but continued to slog in the mud.

“Move,” the lanky man said and the Man obliged but as soon as Sheldon stepped where his companion had stood his foot sank. He gave a deep sigh and his foot sunk deeper.
“I can’t win,” Sheldon said softly. His red-rimmed eyes stared at the Man. “Leonard’s stolen my work and used it to procure a position at MIT.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Penny’s going with him and she has no idea he’s a fraud.” Sheldon closed his eyes. “He’s even taking my spot.” His eyes opened. “It’s not fair.”

“Life isn’t fair, Dr. Cooper,” amended the Man gently. “That’s why it’s best you don’t know what happens after you’ve crossed over. You can’t change anything.”

“That’s not completely accurate,” Sheldon said slowly as a thought came to him. “I can change the equations on the dream whiteboard.” He nodded his head. “I can change the equations.” With a squared jaw he regarded his companion. “‘Can’t change anything’? Just watch me.” Awkwardly he turned around in the mud and began making his way back. “Coming?” he called.

“I wouldn’t miss this for anything,” replied the Man with a smile.

xTBBTx

“You must be excited,” Esperit said as Penny and she sat at the lunch table.

“How about scared shitless.” The receptionist laughed.

“Not the emotion I was hoping for but understandable. A lot’s going on.” She leaned closer. “So have you told Sophie yet? Ah, this will kill her.”

“No, I want to keep it quiet for now. Just until things are more concrete.”

“And a ring on your finger and your fiancé off to Boston to find an apartment isn’t ‘concrete’?” Esperit sucked her teeth. “Girl, you’ve got problems.”

“Yeah I know,” sighed Penny. “It’s just, I dunno.” She bit her lip. “It’s happening too fast. I mean it’s stupid to be thinking like this since I’ve known Leonard for eight years.” Her eyes flashed her friend’s face. “Am I grown up enough to do this? Marriage means no turning back. It means kids and PTA meetings and I don’t know if I can do that.”

“Does Leonard want kids?”

“I think so.” Esperit shook her head.

“You’d better decide quick if you want them because if you don’t that’s something you’ve got to bring up before the wedding,” she said sternly.

Penny took a sip of her diet soda. “I’m not saying I don’t want kids. I just….” Again she sighed. “Is it right to feel happy yet trapped?”

“Girl, you just defined marriage,” giggled Esperit causing Penny to laugh.

“God, I’m being a nut. I wish I was sure like Leonard. He said from the moment we met he knew he wanted to be with me.”

“See? It’s destiny.”

Penny smirked. “Sheldon said destiny was a bunch of hooey. Of course he also said that Leonard and I wouldn’t last.”
“And yet here you are,” said Esperit.

“Here we are,” Penny agreed.

“Not bad. Now say it with a smile that doesn’t look like you’re getting a root canal and we’re in business.” The Nebraskan gave her an exaggerated smile.

“Happy?” she teased.

“Extremely,” said the receptionist. “The question is: are you?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Penny stammered. “I’m getting married.” She took up her fork and began munching on her salad.

Esperit regarded the younger woman as she ate.

Sheldon paced back and forth in front of the mirror.

“You’re going to wear out the ground,” the Man chuckled.

“Believe me I’ve paced here so often if the ground was going to lose integrity it would have a long time ago.” The physicist smirked. “Time or no time friction is still friction.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“Sheldon,” sighed Penny’s voice. The mirror came to life and both men could see Dream Sheldon at his whiteboard and Penny on the couch sanding her foot with a pumice stone.

The East Texan steeled himself and entered the dream.

“—Skin follicles are covering my couch. Thanks to you my evening building the Lego Death Star is ruined as I’ll be vacuuming and wiping down my upholstery,” Dream Sheldon said snarkily as he wrote at his board.

“I clean up,” Penny replied. “I’m not a slob.” He regarded her incredulously.

“Whose idea of cutlery storage involves leaving the drawer on her couch?” ‘Sheldon’ tutted.

“I’m getting better,” she pouted and began sweeping up the skin follicles into a pile on the couch cushion.

“Unless you’ve regressed since the last time I’d been at your apartment I concur,” ‘real’ Sheldon said to Penny. “Of course anything would be an improvement over the first time I was exposed to your clutter.”

With pursed lips his mirror self made for the kitchen. “Let me get you a paper towel. Not that it’ll make much of a difference hygienically speaking but perhaps it will curtail the disaster.”

Now that the whiteboard was free Sheldon wiped it clean and again wrote out his proton equation.

‘Sheldon’ came to Penny with a damp paper towel before returning to the board. He picked up a marker, seemingly scanned the equation and resumed writing his nonsense.

“Thanks, Sheldon,” Penny said sweetly and continued sanding her foot.
As the physicist wrote ‘real’ Sheldon immediately erased the nonsense numbers and wrote out his Higgs field calculation. They continued like this until Dream Sheldon abruptly stopped and, with a frown, reexamined his work.

“Come on man, think!” growled ‘real’ Sheldon. “Your formula is literally changing in front of your eyes. You’ve seen it before when Penny read the paper. You’ve—” His words trailed off as he turned to Penny. “Of course even if you did recognize the equation you’d have no idea what it meant.” He came over and sat on the arm of the couch. Even though he couldn’t touch her dead skin cells the very thought of them had him avoiding his spot.

“Because Penny wouldn’t know,” he concluded. A short laugh escaped from his lips. “Here I am: one of the foremost minds in physics trapped in the dreams of a woman who thought Fig Newtons were named after Isaac Newton. Incredible.” He chewed on his lower lip as he thought about his situation.

After a few moments he rose and walked out of the mirror. The Man wasn’t there, not that Sheldon noticed as he began pacing with his hands clasped behind his back.

“I can write on the whiteboard but my parameters are determined by Penny’s limited knowledge of physics. What does she know?” A memory of him teaching physics to his neighbor came in a flash:

*“Leonard is attempting to learn why sub-atomic particles move the way they do.”*

“Really? That’s it? Well, that doesn’t sound so complicated.”

“It’s not. That’s why Leonard does it.”*

“Let’s see how much you remember, Penelope,” Sheldon said with a little smile. He took up his stick and began writing out some equations.

xTBBTx

The shower might have cleansed her body but it did nothing to put out the fire in Penny’s heart. Since Raj took Leonard to the airport she’d stewed in her apartment even as she methodically cleaned. Once her home was organized the only thing left to tidy up was herself so she tweezed and shaved and scrubbed and washed herself until she was practically a whole new person.

Except that she was still engaged to a douche.

A knocking at the door got her off the couch to answer. Raj stood in the hall with a bottle of wine and two glasses.

“Things go okay?” she asked as she let him in. Raj nodded and proceeded to the coffee table to open the bottle. The Nebraskan flumped on the couch and waited for her friend to finish pouring before he handed over a glass. “To Leonard: a man who never knows when to keep his yap shut.” They clicked glasses and drank.

“You want to talk about it?” Raj asked politely. Penny snorted.

“You mean you didn’t overhear?”

“I was in the washroom so I couldn’t make out what you were yelling about in your apartment,” he grinned. “I’m good but not Sheldon good.”

“Apparently Leonard hasn’t noticed there’s a recession going on. He thinks just because he got
picked for a job that it should be easy as pie for me to land one in Boston.” She took a sip. “I’m an EA. We’re a dime a dozen.”

“It’s tough times for physicists too,” Raj replied as he sat back on the couch. “I’m lucky I got started when I did because a lot of professors and researchers are clinging onto their jobs.” He made a face. “I was actually served a latte about six months ago by a person with a doctorate in engineering.”

“Exactly.” Penny gulped down her wine and poured herself another glass. “I went over the list of jobs and because I didn’t get an interview Leonard’s all on my case.”

Raj shrugged as he held out his glass for more wine. “I don’t see what the problem is. I’m sure with his promotion Leonard’s making more money and it’s not like you’re living in New York. You just need time.”

Penny took a sip. “I worked damn hard for this diploma, Raj, and I’m a damn good assistant. If I can please Sheldon and my manager I can please anyone on the planet.” She turned to her friend. “If you had problems finding another job in physics and your fiancée said you could always go back and waiter what would you tell her to do?”

“It depends,” the astrophysicist said diplomatically. “If we were really financially stressed I’d take any job but I wouldn’t give up on physics. I enjoy it too much.”

“It’s just that Leonard has his dream job. Why can’t I have mine?” she pouted. “When I moved to California it was to be a movie star. I can’t move to Boston with the idea of being a waitress.” Raj was silent as he thought.

“Does Leonard know you feel this way?” he said at last.

“He does now.” She took a sip of wine.

“So what did he say?”

“Like usual: ‘We’ll talk about it when I get back,’” Penny said with a roll of the eyes. “Nothing’s ever decided right there and then with Leonard.”

“When it comes to you,” Raj said with a smirk. “He stood up more to Sheldon than you and as we know Sheldon almost always got his way.” The South Asian cocked his head. “Actually, Leonard only really confronted Sheldon head on when he was with a girlfriend. Remember when he was with my sister and broke the Relationship Agreement after how many years living with it?”

Penny balked. “Wait, are you saying that I bully Leonard?”

“You’re strong-willed,” Raj amended. “Leonard’s used to kowtowing to his mother and sister his whole life.” He couldn’t conceal his grin. “Besides, you have sex with him.” In spite of herself she laughed.

“Yeah, there’s that.” Raj topped up their glasses and the two friends leaned back comfortably on the couch. “I’ve got a question for ya,” Penny asked as her eyes drifted onto Sheldon’s statue. “What’s with ‘The Flash of Two Worlds’?”

Raj rolled his head to look. “Ah, it’s recreating the iconic cover of Flash 123 where the modern Flash, Barry Allen, managed to vibrate his molecules enough to slip between dimensions to Earth-Two. As he explores he comes to realize that he knows the place because he’d read about it in comic books as a child. So what does he do when he knows the secret identities of the heroes?”
“He looks them up,” smiled the Nebraskan.

“Exactly. He looks up Jay Garrick who was Earth-Two’s Flash and together they defeated three of his foes before Barry returned to his own world. The comic is pivotal because it introduces the concept of a multiverse to DC Comics.”

“Huh.” Penny rubbed the rim of her glass before taking a sip. “I remember Sheldon telling me something like there were an infinite number of Sheldons in an infinite number of universes.”

“The many-worlds interpretation.”

“I guess.” She stared at the statue. “So that means that somewhere Sheldon’s still alive?”

“Yes, although he hasn’t disappeared from here,” Raj said. Penny turned to her friend. “In Hinduism souls are eternal. The body is separate and so when it dies all that happens is that the soul rests and rethinks its life before picking a new trajectory and is born again.”

“How long does this go on?”

“Until we learn fully from our mistakes and realize our completeness. Then we take the path of the sun never to return as we’ve entered the lands of the gods.”

“So we really do become homo novus.”

Raj raised a finger to his lips. “Shh. Sheldon might still hear you.” Penny giggled and they both drank.

“So why is there an afterlife if all that happens is that we’re reborn?”

“It’s a place to reflect; a place to remind you of the true purpose for your existence.”

“Then it’s back to Earth to try, try again.”

“Exactly.”

“I still think about him, you know,” Penny said with a wistful smile. “Every time I screw up I can hear Sheldon tsking me and telling me to smarten up.”

“You gave him the opportunity to amass good karma. Every time he helped you he was moving towards enlightenment.”

“And then I killed him,” she said flatly.

“No. It was his time. As Tulsidas said, ‘Our destiny was shaped long before the body came into being.’” Raj gave a slight smile. “Whenever I think about karma Carrie and Mr. Big always come to mind.”

“It’s been a while since I’ve watched the series,” admitted Penny. “I’ve got some popcorn.”

“Let me get into my pajamas,” Raj said excitedly as he set his glass on the table.

“Sure. It’s been a while since I’ve kicked back and had a girls’ ni—” Raj blushed as Penny regrouped. “I mean a fun night with a friend.”

“I’ll be back,” the astrophysicist said and departed.
Smiling, Penny went into the bedroom to fetch her comforter and pillow.

Penny opened the door to find a stuffed elephant with a note tucked under its trunk:

*I’m sorry.

She picked it up and tossed it on the couch before venturing over to 4A.

“Hey,” she said as she entered to find Leonard sitting in his comfy chair. Immediately he popped out of his seat.

“Hi,” he replied, encouraged that she wasn’t yelling at him.

“I heard from a little guy with a big trunk that you have something to say to me?” She sat down in Sheldon’s spot and crossed her legs.

“Actually I’ve a lot to say.” He settled himself back in his chair. “First of all I’d like to apologize for my suggestion that you go back to waitressing. I’m just excited about going and want everything to be perfect and I—”

“Thinking too much again, Leonard.”

“Yeah, uh, sorry.”

“So what else ya got?” she asked politely.

“Two things that puzzled the hell out of me. The things I learn staying with Amy.”

“Oh?” Penny was curious.

“First of all I found it kind of odd that she knew we were moving to Boston but didn’t know we were engaged.” Leonard began twiddling his thumbs nervously.

“I thought I did tell her,” Penny blushed. “Was she mad?”

“A little hurt,” he replied. “Both of us were.”

“I’m sorry. I’ve had a lot on the go with hunting for jobs and working and whatnot.” She stared at the coffee table to regroup before looking at her fiancé with a bright smile. “Hey, I’m wearing your rock on my hand, right?”

“I suppose,” he mock pouted. She lightly kicked him on the shin causing him to smile. “Anyways I’ve got a tidbit for you about Amy that I doubt you’ll ever guess.”

“She already said she’d made some friends,” Penny mulled. “I know she went with a work buddy to get her colors done and some wardrobe suggestions.”

Leonard couldn’t contain himself. “Did she say anything about Andrew?”

Penny’s jaw dropped. “She has a boyfriend?” The physicist grinned. “She has a boyfriend and didn’t tell me?”

“Maybe she was busy. You know, a new job, a new city, a——”
“Yeah, yeah, smartiboots. So did you meet him?”

The curly haired man moved to settle himself beside his fiancée. “Yup. He’s a nice guy and, unlike Sheldon, he knows he’s a boyfriend.” He picked up her hand and kissed it. “I can’t wait until we’re there.” He brightened. “My colleagues can’t wait to meet you.”

“Really?” Penny said. “I thought you science guys didn’t talk about homey stuff?”

“Of course we do. Especially when she’s gorgeous.” He smiled even as he planted a kiss on her cheek. “I practically had to wipe the drool off my phone when I showed your picture.”

“You’re making me sound like a trophy wife,” Penny said with a smirk.

“I worked hard to get you.” He leaned over and their lips met. “I won you over fair and square and I want you so badly at this moment I’m going crazy.”

Penny laughed. “So you come home, give me a short apology, tell me my best friend’s keeping secrets from me and that I’m to flash your coworkers and now I’m supposed to have sex with you?”

“You don’t have to flash my coworkers,” Leonard said hurriedly. “You just have to show up and prove you’re real.”

“Oh, I’m real alright,” she purred.

“And it doesn’t matter if you don’t have a job because—”

Penny stopped to glare. “Shut up, Leonard.”

“Shutting up,” he agreed.

xTBBTx

Penny hung up the phone as she entered apartment 4A wearing grey sweat pants and a black hoodie. She plunked herself down on the couch.

“You’re in my spot,” both Sheldons said as they stared at the whiteboard. With a glare she slid over one cushion.

“Shouldn’t you be at work?” Dream Sheldon said absently as he made an addition to his calculation.

“I’m sick,” she sighed. Immediately her neighbor looked at her in a panic.

“And you came *here*?” he yipped as he lifted the collar of his shirt over his nose and mouth.

“Not that kind of sick, Sheldon.” She sighed again and closed her eyes.

“Ah. You’re in need of a hot beverage.” ‘Sheldon’ set down his marker and went to the kitchen to put on the kettle.

“You ever think things are going well and then find they’re not?”

“Not really,” he replied as he prepared the tea bag for the mug.

“You’d be surprised,” ‘real’ Sheldon snorted at his mirror counterpart.
Dream Sheldon unplugged the kettle and added water to the mug. He got a teaspoon from the drawer and brought the beverage to his neighbor.

“There, there,” he said awkwardly before returning to his whiteboard.

“That’s it?” Penny said incredulously. “You’re not going to comfort me?”

Dream Sheldon rolled his eyes. “You know what I’m going to say about Leonard so what’s the point?”

Penny sighed as she stirred her tea. “I just don’t get him.”

“What’s to ‘get’?” scowled ‘real’ Sheldon. “He’s a fraud and false friend who wears too much hair gel.”

“I want him to like me for me and he says he does but I’m just a waitress at the Cheesecake Factory dreaming of being an actress.” The Nebraskan took a sip, grimaced at the temperature, before setting the mug on the table.

“And a community college dropout,” added ‘Sheldon’.

“Yeah, thanks, Sheldon,” she said with a scowl.

“You’re welcome,” he said evenly.

She folded her arms across her chest. “He’s off to MIT and I’m supposed to be a waitress.” A pout came to her lips. “I was supposed to be an executive assistant.” She looked at her friend. “Why can’t I be something else?”

Dream Sheldon cocked his head, puzzled. “No one’s saying you can’t.”

“You have changed,” ‘real’ Sheldon said earnestly.

Again Penny sighed. “I just feel like every time I get my life on track I get bowled over.”

An idea came to Sheldon and he scrawled a formula on the board:

\[ F = 0 \implies \frac{dv}{dr} = 0 \]

“Which is surprising given that you have your father’s feet,” Dream Sheldon remarked as he returned to his board and read. “Their length and width should provide you with better balance.”

With a frown on her face Penny stood. “I don’t know why I even came here. Oh wait, I was stupid enough to think that you’d actually cheer me up.”

“Inertia,” Dream Sheldon said.

The real physicist stopped breathing.

“What?” Penny asked.

“What you have is a conundrum similar to Newton’s First Law of Motion,” ‘Sheldon’ said.

“Go on,” ‘real’ Sheldon said excitedly.

Penny rolled her eyes. “And that is?”
“In order for the motion of an object to change, a force must act upon it.” Dream Sheldon smiled. “Inertia.”

“Okay, and what does this all mean, genius?”

The smile faltered from the physicist’s face. “Which means what? Penny, weren’t you listening?” He turned to the board and began writing. “Physics comes from the ancient Greek word physika.”

“Later, Sheldon.” The Nebraskan turned on her heel and walked out the door.

The scene faded as Sheldon made his way out of the mirror with a wide grin.

“Well?” asked the Man politely.

“And Penny said she was too stupid to learn physics,” Sheldon tutted.

“Did she understand you?”

Sheldon shrugged. “Hard to say. Her ‘Sheldon’ knew what I was talking about but her ‘Penny’ didn’t. That means a part of Penny did comprehend my lesson even though she thinks otherwise.” He pursed his lips and sighed. “This would be easier if she had a better self esteem.”

“It’s hard to imagine someone that attractive having confidence issues,” said the Man evenly. “Of course good looking people tend to fall back on the one thing they have going for them.”

“Penny is more than just ‘good looking’,’” Sheldon said with a scowl. “She’s kind and brave and honest, not to mention an exceptional Halo partner and crack shot at paintball.”

“So even though she means this much she still feels poorly about herself?” The Man shook his head sadly. “It’s hard to know what else you could have said to lift her spirits.”

“I didn’t tell her,” Sheldon said softly. “We agreed she was my blond monkey.”

“Ah.”

Both men were silent under the white sky.

xTBBTx

“Okay,” said Esperit as she sat down with her lunch tray. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” replied Penny. She slid into the booth and began opening her salad container. The receptionist sucked her teeth.

“Don’t give me that ‘nothing’. It’s been five weeks and you still haven’t handed in your resignation.” Penny didn’t say anything so she continued. “When’s Leonard going?”

“End of the month.” The Nebraskan popped her straw out of the package and into her drink.

“Penelope, you have to give three week’s notice here and what about your apartment? Thirty days?”

“Sixty.”

“Oh Lordy.”
“It’s okay,” Penny said as she munched on a crouton. “I still haven’t found a job there yet and I don’t wanna move until I do. Leonard gets that.”

“He might ‘get it’ but I doubt he likes it,” tutted Esperit. Penny shrugged.

“It’s not like I’m not going,” she said testily. “I just want to do things right.”

“Right for who?”

“Right for the both of us,” Penny said with color on her cheeks. “Look, can we drop this?”

The two women ate their salads.

“So did you hear what Mr. Starke’s done now?” Esperit asked.

“Nope,” Penny replied. “Although I’d guess it somehow involves Archives or PR.”

“You’re psychic. Anyways he….”

XxX

The call came at nine thirty eight.

“Hi Mrs. Cooper.”

“Hello, Penny.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Bad news ah’m afraid. Meemaw passed away this mornin’.”

“Oh my God. I’m so sorry. What happened?”

“They say she had a stroke. When she didn’t show up for bridge at the community center they called me and ah went over to find her on the kitchen floor.”

“Oh my God. Let me know when the funeral is and I’ll—”

“Ah don’t expect yuh tuh come, Penny. Yuh’re busy with the engagement and movin’.”

“But Meemaw is important.”

“Yuh can’t help her now. ‘Sides, Leonard needs yuh. Ah just wanted yuh tuh know since she mentioned she called yuh once in a while.”

“Yeah. Have Missy send me the link to the funeral home, I want to send flowers. Can you also get me Carl the florist’s number? I want to send them through him.”

“Alright. Thank yuh very much.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“Pray for Meemaw.”

“I will.”

xTBBTx
Sheldon hadn’t felt this antsy since the Arctic expedition when he barely slept a wink after he’d ‘found’ the monopole. Secretly he wondered if he hadn’t violated some taboo by contacting Penny since there hadn’t been a single dream since that time. Even the Man had wandered off down the line of mirrors until Sheldon could barely make him out.

“Come on, Penny,” Sheldon pleaded.

More time went by.

He’d amassed a goodly pile of sticks and twigs and was in the middle of constructing a railroad trestle when the mirror came to life. Quickly he got to his feet only to stop in front of the images as he took in the situation. He was disappointed to see that Penny and his friends were at a funeral home.

“Maybe things will shift back to the apartment.” He waited but the actions seemed to move so slowly as the characters interacted with the likes of Kripke, Winkle and President Siebert.

The doors to the lounge opened and Mary Cooper stepped in followed by Missy and George. In an instant Sheldon was through the mirror.

“Hello, Penny,” Mary said warmly as they embraced. “So glad yuh could make it.”

“Of course we’d be here. He really meant a lot to her,” the Nebraskan replied as she wiped her nose with a tissue.

“That he did.”

“Who did I mean a lot to? Meemaw? Amy?” Sheldon was puzzled and he looked around for the neurobiologist.

“Hello, Mrs. Cooper,” Leonard said quietly. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“No you’re not,” scowled Sheldon. “Get away from her!” he spat as the short man gave his mother a hug.

“Thank you honey,” Mary replied. “Still it makes yuh wonder how things happen. Ah don’t know what Shelly would have done without her.”

“He really did love his Meemaw,” Leonard agreed. Sheldon’s mouth dropped.

“Meemaw? Something happened to Meemaw?” His stomach dropped and his ears began to pound. “Mommy,” he begged Mary. “What happened to Meemaw?”

“That’s why we’re buryin’ him in the same cemetery. Ah’d have him share plots but yuh know how Shelly was about his space.”

The pastor came in. “Time for the service,” he said gently and the gang made to follow.

Numb, Sheldon exited the mirror. He’d already been to his own funeral so didn’t need to repeat the process. Besides, he had something more pressing to think about. His Meemaw was dead. He stood back to regard the wall of mirrors. There was no need to find her mirror now.

Like a bolt of lightning it struck him and he immediately perked up. There was no need to look at the mirrors because Meemaw must be here too!

“But where?” he breathed. He walked to the edge of the forest and peered within. He had
absolutely no idea of how to find her.

“Meemaw!” he called. Turning towards the mirror Sheldon watched as Leonard stood at the pulpit in front of his casket. With a shake of the head he ventured into the woods.

“Meemaw!” His step was light and the ground solid beneath his feet as he walked. The chances were remote that he’d find his grandmother out here but for now he wanted to delude himself with the fantasy. It also gave him time away from the mirror—something which he realized he needed in order to preserve his sanity. Not that he wasn’t perilously close to madness to begin with. He’d passed his sanity test at the institution when he was younger but his mother never said by how much. All he remembered is that once they got back from Dallas she started praying whenever she caught him conducting one of his experiments in the back shed.

The thing was, Sheldon knew he was different almost from the get go so what other people took as strange conduct on his behalf was simply an inability on their part to see the ‘big picture’. Take Penny for instance: she might be able to crack jokes and ride Space Mountain without getting sick but it was ‘whackadoodle’ Cooper who came to her with his sea shanties and meticulous organizational skills that got her on track with her ‘Penny Blossoms’ business. Of course she didn’t continue much past his departure from the venture.

“That’s the problem with Penny: she’s all enthusiasm without the follow through,” Sheldon said as he walked. “Although I did manage to put her on track with the assistant training. From what I’m gathering she’s still gainfully employed.” Here he frowned. “Although she’s sounding more like her former self complaining about waitressing and Leonard.”

Leonard. At the very thought of his roommate his hands curled into fists. Leonard: his ‘best friend’ who stole his work at the first opportunity.

“Probably because his own work was so subpar,” Sheldon snorted derisively. Over the years the pair had collaborated on projects—teasers, really, to give Sheldon a break from his own work. But they were fun to do. And Leonard really was a proficient experimental physicist even if his research was shaky. Sheldon told him that several times but perhaps he could have been nicer about it. Maybe then Leonard wouldn’t have stolen his stuff.

Raj used to talk a lot about Karma but for the life of him Sheldon couldn’t understand it. Especially now as he watched his roommate take credit for his work and get a job at MIT and Penny— Here he pursed his lips. He didn’t like how she was showing signs of the ‘old’ Penny with her doubts and esteem issues.

“You’d think if he cared about her Leonard would do something about the issue besides engage in coitus.” Sheldon stopped in his tracks. “Perhaps the ideas aren’t mutually exclusive.” He thought over the number of times Leonard and Penny had sex after drinking or arguing. “And as I’d observed earlier sex seems to be a bigger motivator than chocolate. Look how often Leonard did things he found deplorable in the hopes of procuring sexual favors from Penny. It was if they used each other in a sexual dance in order to get what they wanted from the other.”

Sheldon shook his head. “Where’s the respect?” Penny just had to shake her derriere and Leonard came running, dropping whatever he was doing—even his friends—for a chance at coitus. And with Penny being unsure of herself there must be plenty of opportunities for coitus on both their parts: Penny for validation and Leonard for the win.

Leonard always won. It seemed like his transgressions didn’t matter—Leonard was a ‘nice guy’ and that made everything he did okay. Sheldon was the freak. What did it matter if his experiment was sabotaged thus making him the subject of ridicule? It was only Sheldon. Oddball Sheldon
who’d saved Leonard from death and incarceration over the rocket fuel mishap. That didn’t count, however. It was the least the East Texan could do for all the bat crap craziness he put his roommate though.

At the end of the day everything that went wrong at apartment 4A was laid at Sheldon’s feet. Now that he was gone Leonard had two choices: grow up or find someone else to blame if he didn’t get his way. Immediately Penny came to mind.

“She’s stood up to me on more than one occasion. Surely she can take on Leonard.” And yet whenever they fought it meant a trip to the liquor store for some Nebraskan self-medication. It meant yelling and brooding and more drinking until things came to a head and all was forgiven. Not necessarily resolved, mind you, but laid to rest until the next time the sleeping monster of insecurity rose.

*“Well now,” Sheldon said. “There’s always the possibility that alcohol and poor judgment on her part might lead to a nice romantic evening.” Leonard brightened.

“You’re right, alcohol, poor judgment, it could go well.”*

When Penny cried on his couch over her school work the despair had nearly swallowed her whole.

Sheldon hated to see her give up. She might not have been on track for a Nobel Prize but that didn’t mean she couldn’t be the best at whatever she decided to do. Penny had dreams but lacked the drive to see them through.

Sheldon was a machine when it came to self-motivation.

“Perhaps I can’t help myself but at least I can help Penny.”

With resolve in his step he made his way back to the mirrored wall.

xTBBTx

Wikipedia: List of Unsolved Problems in Physics; Karma in Hinduism; Flash of Two Worlds

Yahoo! News: A second Higgs Boson?

Death and Afterlife in Hinduism

[F= 0 => dv/dr = 0: Another messed up formula thanks to ff.
Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Summary


Penny was surprised to find a package from Mrs. Cooper in the mail. Once she settled herself in her apartment she opened it and read the accompanying letter:

*Dear Penny,

Just a short note regarding the package before you. Meemaw had it ready but hadn’t mailed it. To be honest I wasn’t sure if it was to be mailed as it sat in her napkin folder for months. Now that she’s gone I reckon that whatever she meant to say might as well be said.

Take care, darlin’ and we’ll talk soon.

Now curious, Penny ripped into the envelope and pulled out a small stack of letters. As she read over the first page she realized that it was from Sheldon to his grandmother:

*Dear Meemaw,

First of all I want to apologize to you for asking about your menses. Mother has informed me that such questioning is both uncomfortable and inappropriate and I shall not ask further. As a last note on the subject it seems as though Penny shares your love for dark chocolate.

“Sheldon,” Penny chuckled as she shook her head. She flipped to the next letter and scanned the page:

*…Leonard is attempting to woo our new neighbor by taking her mail accidentally on purpose so he’d have an excuse to talk to her. I don’t know what seems so difficult about the whole conversation paradigm. Granted, I’ve little interest in the subject as a whole so it matters little to me but I find it both odd and intolerable that Leonard spends his time moping around the apartment listening to depressing songs and looking at images of cats because he thinks Penny’s rejected him when the fact is he’s never asked her out! (Yes, as you can imagine, the logic in his science papers is equally as baffling.)

And the next:

*…To answer your question Leonard said that his date with Penny was ‘Awesome’ but I’ve seen no evidence that their paradigm has shifted one iota. Perhaps his memory of the event is flawed because of the concussion he procured during their date. To think of all the times Mother tried to get me ‘fraternizin’ with the girl folk’ and what it could have meant to science as a whole if I’d been injured in the process!

To be fair, Leonard’s attempt was pitiful from the outset as he’d conned Penny into thinking dinner
would be a group activity when in fact only Leonard was going to show up. I’m not, thankfully, an expert on ‘dating’ but it seems to me that both parties need to know they’re participating in order for the event to be considered a ‘date’. For instance, was I to have broached the subject of an intimate meal with Penny I most certainly would have waited until she’d come to terms with her relationship with ‘Doug’ before pursuing. Furthermore, I would seek out her company without the need for subterfuge as deception can only bring disaster to an already perilous situation. A suitable companion should ‘bring out the best’ not necessitate the enacting of nefarious deeds.

“So it was a date!” Penny laughed. “I knew it!” She continued reading:

*…As you know I’m in no way endorsing Intelligent Design—although my presence in our family’s gene pool could be seen as ‘God’s Touch’ by some—but sometimes the result of DNA pairing can be quite striking. It appears that aside from her comeliness my neighbor Penny is also a natural at Halo. From the moment she took up the game controller she had me hard pressed and on the run. Despite my best efforts I was cornered and subsequently executed by an assassin cleverly disguised as a folksy Nebraskan waitress.

Needless to say she’ll be on my team the next time we play.

“He thought I was pretty,” Penny murmured, pleased at the notion. Thinking back to the first time she saw him in the hall she had to admit that Sheldon was a little gangly for her but he did have the most amazing blue eyes.

*…I was ill last Sunday. Penny had returned from her trip to Nebraska and had contaminated my apartment with her ‘down home’ germs when picking up her mail. Must my health always bear the brunt of altruistic acts?

Penny did her best to make amends by tucking me into bed and putting vaporub on my chest while singing ‘Soft Kitty’. It was the least she could do for infecting me.

I should have Mother send her the recipe for split pea soup and homemade croutons so Penny will be prepared for the next time she compromises my immune system.

Penny smirked. “Huh. So that’s why she sent me the recipe.” She flipped to the next letter.

*…Leonard has finally amassed the fortitude required to ask Penny on a date. The reason why I note this is because of a strange conversation I had with Penny. She made an assortment of claims as to their incompatibility without first conducting the necessary experiment to see if her assessment was justified. She asked me for my opinion and all I could offer her was the ‘Schrodinger’s Cat’ analogy translated into their particular situation: she’ll never know if their ‘cat’ is alive or dead unless they go out. Personally, I find Penny’s assessment of Leonard to be sound so I don’t particularly like their chances. Not that I care one way or the other. I just want all of this nonsense behind me so I can have peace.

“Guess you were wrong, Shellybean,” she said, suddenly feeling the weight of her engagement ring on her finger. She turned to another page.

*…Penny has placed me in a most undesirable pickle. First she asks me if Leonard would ‘eventually get bored’ with her if they dated. Then she tells me that she lied to him and said she graduated from community college when in fact she hadn’t. She said she lied because she didn’t want him to think she was ‘a stupid loser’. I don’t know where she came up with that conclusion. Granted she doesn’t know quantum physics or speak Klingon but that doesn’t mean she’s without merit: she told me to ‘buck up’ when I had to contend with Dennis Kim. (Yes, I know you told me the same thing. Perhaps I merely required the reinforcement.)
Good Lord, I seem to have digressed, obviously a trait I picked up from associating with Penny. I shall have to be on guard. As I was saying she wants me to keep the school lie a secret from Leonard. I know and you know I can’t keep a secret but I can’t seem to convince Penny of the gravity of the matter. She’s placed an additional burden on me by asserting that I have an obligation to maintain her confidence because we are ‘friends’. Meemaw, I have no idea how this woman decided entering an apartment to have dinner with two strange men was a sound decision much less understand how we’ve become ‘friends’. I’ve never had a female friend before. I don’t know the protocol and frankly Mother will be no help since every time I ask her a question about Penny’s physiological or psychological quandaries she’s ‘Praise Jesus’ this and ‘Lordy’ that.

And another:

…I find myself unsure of what to do and as we both know I abhor such a condition. I introduced Penny to ‘Age of Conan’. (Yes, another ‘video game’. As I promised you when I was seven my school work is done before I play and I’m in bed with face washed and teeth brushed at a reasonable hour.) Since that time I haven’t been getting proper REM sleep because she’s in my apartment practically all night playing the game. Meemaw, she even called me at work! I’ve told her to cease and desist but her intrusions have now infiltrated my bedroom! What do I do?

What leaves me hogtied with the situation is that I believe her obsession with the game is directly linked to her earlier statement that she was ‘a failure at everything’. She’s been in Los Angeles for nearly two years and has yet to land an acting job. Moreover, she’s yet to obtain a raise at work and hasn’t engaged in coitus in six months. How do I tell her that, yes, she’s in a bad stretch but obsessing in a video game to the point where she’s disrupting the circadian system of a future Nobel Prize laureate is hardly a winning strategy.

Penny absently wiped the tears from her eyes as she laughed aloud.

…I’m anticipating that this letter will arrive after Mother has talked to you about my altercation with Penny. I still object that I had to apologize to Penny because she started the whole process by violating my email with internet banality before touching my food and defiantly sitting in my spot on the couch. To be fair, after her banishment from the apartment I did offer a peaceful resolution in the form of her taking my online course but she escalated the situation by insinuating that she tampered with my hamburger at the Cheesecake Factory.

Mother insists I went too far when I hung Penny’s laundry on the telephone wire but Meemaw she deliberately used all the machines on laundry night! Perhaps it was for the best that I retrieved the laundry because her brassiere straps got tangled in the wire and took some maneuvering on my part to get them down.

I’m not sure what to do if she continues to thwart my rules as she ignores my ‘strikes’, refuses to take my course and has programmed Mother’s number into her phone.

Penny. Is. Impossible!

“Wow, I really got ya hot under the collar, Moonpie,” the Nebraskan grinned.

…I have without a doubt received the best Saturnalia present ever. Penny got me a signed Leonard Nimoy napkin! ‘To Sheldon, Live Long and Prosper.’ To think I even have his DNA since he wiped his mouth with it to boot! If only I could have access to an ovum. Penny indicated that she only offered the napkin for a present. Perhaps I could amend my practice against birthday presents and hint that an ovum makes a practical gift?

I’m left with a further dilemma as all I had to offer Penny in return was bath and body products,
hardly a fair trade. What I gave her anyone could have procured but she went out of her way to get me something I will always treasure. She got it for me, not Leonard, even though he also has Star Trek collectibles.

Aside from you no one’s ever been so thoughtful towards me.

I don’t know how to even begin to thank her.

This is where you provide suggestions.

Leonard took the napkin as his memento of Sheldon. He hung it on the wall next to his ‘my precious’ ring.

*…In the midst of locating a key in my room Penny had inadvertently found your letters to me. What is intolerable is that she actually read them. Meemaw, she calls me ‘Moonpie’! No one can call me that but you. I asked Mother to have a talk with Penny about her teasing me but ‘Jesus bless my heart. Does she now?’ was her response. Obviously my suggestion of getting Mother ‘deprogrammed’ warrants a second look.

“But you were ‘nummie nummie’,” Penny laughed. “Especially when you gave me the Vulcan death glare.”

*…As the last topic of note Penny is recovering from a dislocated shoulder due to a lack of adhesive ducks in the bathtub. I, too, am recovering as I had to drive (!) us to the hospital (!) and settle her in when we returned.

She said that I was akin to Wall-E. I am ‘full of love’, apparently. While I don’t know how to process this I find myself appreciative of the sentiment.

“You’re welcome, sweetie,” she said softly.

*…No matter what Mother says about forgiveness I still hate Wil Wheaton.

In other news, Penny and Leonard are no longer having coitus. I’m unsure as to the protocol regarding Penny. Are we still friends even though she is no longer with Leonard? Meemaw, it’s taken a lot of work to accommodate her into my life. I’d hate for the effort to have been in vain.

Penny didn’t know what to say.

*…You’ll be pleased to know that Penny and I have reaffirmed our friendship. In fact she cooked dinner for me on Friday. We had ‘Eye-alian’ spaghetti with little hotdogs in Mama Italia marinara spaghetti sauce. On Saturday she took me to Disney World and it was pure magic! We rode Space Mountain and bought Mickey Mouse ‘ears’ and ate churros. She said as soon as I get my project on M-theory effects on the early universe finished we can go again!

They never did the return trip to Disney World. About six weeks later Sheldon was introduced to Amy Farrah Fowler and from then on his time with Penny decreased until they were little more than moments at the mail box or communal meals with the gang.

Penny flipped a thumb over the rest of the letters but decided not to read them. Her ‘Moonpie’ was in the letters she read. The later Sheldon was a stranger until he took her on as his assistant.

In that moment Penny had found more than just a career.

She found her friend.
Raj inserted the bookmark and closed the novel with a sigh. He just couldn’t get enough of vampires despite the zombie craze. Especially cute ones with dreamy eyes. He checked his watch and suddenly remembered his talk with Howard from earlier in the day. Taking a swig of his sparkling strawberry zinfandel to kill the glass he stood and made his way to apartment 4B and knocked.

“Hey Raj,” Penny said amicably as she opened the door. “What’s up?”

“Not much. Leonard was talking about the move at lunch today and it got Howard and I thinking about the apartment situation.”

“Oh?”

“Since both apartments will be empty I was hoping I could switch leases with you since I’m going to be alone forever anyways,” he said with a sigh.

“You won’t be alone, Raj,” Penny replied as she clasped him on the arm. “Sweetie you have to think positive about this.”

He shrugged and continued. “Howard and Bernadette have expressed interest in Leonard’s apartment as they’ll need two bedrooms when the baby comes. That way their babysitter will be just across the hall.”

“I’ll get on it,” Penny said.

“Better get started on packing, too. Time’s ticking away,” he reminded her as he glanced beyond her into the apartment.

“Yeah I know,” sighed Penny as she leaned against the door. “Only the kitchen table and chairs and a dresser are going so it won’t take a long time to clear.”

“You also have dvds and clothing and knickknacks to pack.” His eyes twinkled. “You’re procrastinating.”

“I am not. I’m just lazy.” Raj nodded.

“Things are falling into place so I suppose it’s easy to become complacent.” A little smile curled the corners of his mouth. “I’m like a rock in the stream as my friends pass me by.

“Rocks are strong and dependable,” Penny countered. “They’re sure of themselves and aren’t flowing here or there like water not because it wants to but because the current tells it where it has to flow.” The astrophysicist cocked his head.

“Penny, you don’t ever have to do what you don’t want to. Well, unless it’s a colonoscopy.” Despite his effort she didn’t smile. “You sound like you don’t want to go,” he said seriously. That seemed to snap Penny back to her senses.

“Of course I do!” she said with a strained smile. “Leonard and Amy are practically tripping over themselves with excitement. How can I not want to go?”

Raj stared at her a moment more with an unreadable expression on his face. “Get back to me on the lease thing as soon as you can.” He said his goodnight and went back to his apartment leaving Penny standing in her doorway.
Sheldon entered the mirror to find Penny flumped on the couch wrapped in her comforter while his
dream self worked away at his whiteboard.

“If you persist with this downcast demeanor I’ll have to buy more tea,” Dream Sheldon
admonished lightly as he wrote.

“I’m not downcast,” Penny countered in a flat voice. “I’m just tired.”

“‘Tired’ as in moping around the apartment in your hoodie before flopping on my couch and
lamenting your fate?” He shook his head. “Seems to me you could only be tired if you actually did
something and from the state of your apartment it’s obvious you haven’t packed.”

Out of habit ‘real’ Sheldon picked up a marker and corrected the errors on the board although he
did pay careful attention to the conversation.

“I’m getting around to it,” Penny countered.

“You’re procrastinating.”

She rolled her eyes. “God, now you sound like Raj.”

Dream Sheldon turned to his neighbor. “Penny, as long as I’ve known you you’ve been a beacon of
unbridled optimism until you find yourself at a dead end.”

“I’m not at a dead end,” she growled. “I’m going to Boston.” A strange look came to her face.
“Leonard’s counting the seconds until we’re there and I won’t even get started on Amy so how can
I be at a dead end? Things are just starting. I mean, we’re engaged for frak’s sake.”

At this ‘real’ Sheldon froze and stiffly turned to spot the ring on Penny’s finger.

“This just gets worse and worse,” he muttered.

“So then why are you on my couch?” asked Dream Sheldon.

“Because I don’t want to go!” Penny clamped her mouth shut with a hand and took a breath.

“I believe I already intimated that,” Dream Sheldon sniffed and returned to his board.

The Nebraskan leaned against the back of the couch. “Sheldon, what the hell’s wrong with me?”

“Well for starters you pumice your feet in my apartment and—”

“No, I mean why don’t I want to go?”

Dream Sheldon shrugged. “We can always do a comparison chart.” He took the eraser and cleaned
his board before dividing it in two. “So, let’s see what’s in Boston. Apartment?”

“Not yet. Leonard’s still looking.”

“And you’re not?”

Penny shrugged. “He wants it close to the school and he’s been there before so it’s better he pick it
out.”
“Employment?”

“Got nothing. Maybe I should go back to waitressing until—”

“Unacceptable,” ‘real’ Sheldon snapped.

“—things pick up,” she concluded.

“I see,” Dream Sheldon said. “Social companions?”

“Amy’s there. Although she’s got a boyfriend so I don’t know how much we’ll hang out.”

Sheldon’s eyebrow rose. “Fascinating.”

“Leonard’s got some friends at the school so I suppose we’ll be with them,” added Penny.

‘Real’ Sheldon scanned the board with his counterpart before taking up the marker and wrote:

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“So what’s the prognosis, Doc?” Penny said.

“‘Diagnosis’,” Dream Sheldon said. “And a strike for the ‘Doc’ crack.” He tapped the board with his marker. “As for your quandary it’s obvious that you’re in violation of Newton’s Third Law of Motion.”

“Of course. What was I thinking?” Again Penny rolled her eyes.

“Any time a force acts from one object to another there is an equal force acting back on the original object.”

“‘Force’ like Jedi Force?” Both Sheldons rolled their eyes.

“In your case you’re pulling on a rope but the rope isn’t pulling back on you,” Dream Sheldon said. He took in Penny’s blank stare. “In moving to Boston you’re leaving behind your apartment, career and friends to move to where Leonard picks so he can have his career and friends. Of course you have Amy but as she’s otherwise occupied that leaves you for the most part on your own.”

“Pulling on a rope that isn’t pulling back.” Penny glanced at the list on the board. “There’s no give and take,” she said at last.

Dream Sheldon cocked his head. “Granted I’m no expert on relationships but it seems to me there needs to be reciprocity between partners. All I’m seeing is sacrifice on your part for Leonard’s happiness. Don’t make your happiness part of the sacrifice.”

Penny nodded and got off the couch. “Thanks sweetie,” she said and exited the apartment.

The scene went to black.

“You’re welcome,” Sheldon said and exited the mirror.

xTBBTx

Penny sat at the lunch table with a flavored water. Esperit noted the lack of food with a raised eyebrow and took a drink of orange juice to clear her mouth.
“So are we still pretending there’s no problem and that you had a big breakfast or what?” she joked although her eyes were serious.

“We talk. Although the ‘pain of death if repeated’ clause is invoked.”

“I understand.” The receptionist leaned forward expectantly.

It was as if someone let the air out of Penny as she slumped against her seat.

“Leonard’s busy emailing and Skypeing with his colleagues at MIT about the move and their projects and stuff. He’s already packed and offered to pack me but I said I can do it and yet when I’m alone I find I can’t do anything.”

“And by ‘anything’ you mean—”

“I’m not sure I want to go,” Penny said at last.

“And the truth boils out of the pot.” Esperit patted the younger woman’s hand. “Maybe this is a lot of nerves talking.”

“I thought it was but now I’m not so sure.” Penny took a sip of water.

“You’d better talk to Leonard.”

“And say what? ‘Leonard, you’re not pulling your end of the rope’?”

The Jamaican frowned. “What’s he not doing?”

“I’m the one giving up everything because it’s expected,” sighed Penny. “I have no input into where I’ll be living; I have no job; I have one friend who’s in the middle of breaking in her new boyfriend and a fiancé who’s hitting the ground running at the university with a new project.” She pursed her lips. “When I thought about us at this point I always saw Leonard and I on equal footing with successful careers and friends and everything.”

“Sometimes we have to sacrifice for those we love.”

“It’s taken me so long to get to this place in my life. If I go to Boston I’ll have to start all over again.”

Esperit raised an eyebrow. “You’ll have Leonard.”

“No, what I have is a case of inertia part two.” The receptionist eyed her questioningly. “Inertia is the force causing an object to change direction. Saying ‘yes’ to the proposal has shoved me out of my career and apartment to a new city where I have no idea what I’m going to do. Leonard knows what he’s going to do. Amy’s already doing what she’s supposed to.” Penny’s eyes flickered to her friend’s face. “Why don’t I know?”

“Inertia’,” chuckled Esperit. “Girl, you hang out with too many physicists.” Both women laughed lightly. “Change is scary because at the heart of it all it means the end of what we know and the beginning of a whole new experience.”

Penny snorted. “God, now I sound like Sheldon.”

“I haven’t heard you knocking in threes yet,” grinned the Jamaican.

“You know what I admired most about Sheldon? He was always so certain about things. When
things didn’t work out he had a logical explanation as to why it didn’t even if it was from out of left field. He just picked a direction and walked in it and as long as he had the proper fiber content and Thai food on Mondays from Siam Palace he was ready to rock.”

“From what you’d said earlier I thought he was also a pain in the butt?”

“Oh a royal jackass sometimes.” Penny cocked her head as she thought, “You know the only reason why I have this job is because of him. I was going nowhere with my ‘acting career’ and waitressing job. He just picked me up, dusted me off and said, ‘Penelope, you’re going to be an executive assistant’ and that was that.”

“Inertia!” Esperit added with a smile. Penny stuck out her tongue. “So he picked out your career?”

“No, he wrote out this algathingie chart and we went over my options until we narrowed in on my job.” Penny smirked. “I was registered as an ‘office assistant’. He’s the one who insisted I upgrade to ‘executive assistant’.” She deepened her voice to imitate her dead friend: “‘Penelope, when I’m through with you you’ll be the best executive assistant in LA’.”

“You’ve got Sophie’s praise so that means you’re close,” agreed Esperit. “So what were you and Leonard doing while Sheldon was teaching you?”


“So all this change was happening in your life and he didn’t notice?”

“He noticed. Kind of.” Penny began to chew her bottom lip. “I think he likes dating an EA better than a waitress but it’s always been more than that between us.”

“So then why can’t you just talk to him?”

“I don’t want to burst his bubble. He’s been in such a groove lately. He keeps saying everything’s falling into place and I don’t—” Penny let out a deep sigh. “I feel like such a bad person.”

“Hon, you’re not a bad person. You just need to talk things out.”

“I guess.” The Nebraskan shook her head. “Things always screw up when we talk.”

Esperit did her best not to smile. “Well that takes the guesswork out of what you do when you’re ‘hanging out’.”

“Yeah,” blushed Penny.

“Well my dear, my science is pretty rusty but it appears to me that you don’t like the direction you’re going in because it’s too much too soon. You did a lot of change with Sheldon but his general level of kookiness aside he took things step by step with you, involved you in the decision-making. That’s the difference. Don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater but at the same time slow things down to a manageable level.”

“I guess.” Here Penny chuckled. “What I wouldn’t give for another one of those algathingies.” Her eyes became soft. “Sheldon’s grandmother gave me some letters he wrote to her when I moved into my apartment. There were so many things that I’d forgotten like the time he got sick and showed up at the restaurant like some homeless guy and practically infected my work station. I had to take him home and rub vaporub on his chest and sing ‘Soft Kitty’—don’t ask.”

“I’m still wrapping my head around the vaporub on his chest part,” grinned Esperit.
“We had an interesting relationship: Sheldon looked down on my ‘folksy ways’ and yet helped me out with rent and organized a small business I had for a while.” A short laugh burst from between her lips. “Of course he also hung my bras and panties from the telephone wire outside the building.”

“You’re kidding!”

“Yeah, he was upset because I used all the washing machines on his ‘Laundry Night’ which I only did because he cut me off the wifi all because I teased him about touching his hamburger since he kicked me out of the apartment for stealing an onion ring from his plate and sitting in his spot on the couch and—” Penny stopped and let her friend catch her breath.

“This from the ‘ice man’?” Esperit gasped as she wiped her eyes with a napkin. “And what was Leonard doing all this time?”

“Driving Sheldon nuts with all the schemes he had for asking me out.”

“With all that energy being spent it’s a wonder you didn’t date Sheldon.”

Penny blanched. “Naa, it wasn’t like that between us. For the most part our interaction was a ‘Hello Penny’ and a ‘Hello Sheldon’ when we saw each other at the mailbox or in the hall. If it hadn’t been for Leonard I doubt I would have met Sheldon.”

“God works in mysterious ways,” Esperit said with a smile.

“Believe me, so did Sheldon.” Penny checked the time. “Fifteen minutes.”

Esperit wolfed down her lunch before both women scampered back to the office.

“Wanna catch me up?” Leonard said as he stared incredulously at his fiancée. “You want to marry me but you don’t want to go to Boston?”

“I didn’t say that.” Penny tapped the arm of Leonard’s couch with her fingertips. “I’ll move, just not right away.”

Leonard sighed. “Which means?”

“I want a job first, Leonard.” He rolled his eyes.

“Pen, I can float us until you get something.”

“I don’t want to be floated. I want to paddle my way across.” Their eyes met. “Kurt and I didn’t have much to live on when we got here but we got jobs and, well, got by. I know it’s not even three years since I gave up the Cheesecake Factory but Leonard it feels like a lifetime away. Another Penny away.” Leonard frowned in confusion.

“I thought we decided that you weren’t going to waitress again?”

“Unless things get financially tight,” Penny said, remembering Raj’s words. “Then I’ll have to”—here Leonard made to speak—“not that I’m saying we will be tight. I just—” She sighed. “Leonard I’m nearly thirty years old. I want to walk away from California with my head high and knowing my direction.” After a moment the physicist nodded.

“I thought we decided that you weren’t going to waitress again?”

“So how long do you think it’ll take for you to know your route?” he asked quietly. “We—I—
move in two weeks. I’ve signed the lease on the apartment so it’s a go.”

“Give me ‘til the end of the month. I’ll give notice then whether I’ve got something or not.” She lightly nudged his leg with her foot.

“Okay,” he said with a little sigh. He thought a moment longer as Leonard Hofstadter was always wont to do before a smile came to his face. “Maybe I’ve got something that’ll sweeten the pot for you to come.”

“Oh?” Penny was intrigued.

He got out of his chair and picked up a silver box on his computer desk and handed it to his fiancée.

“Before you get your squeals going it’s from Amy,” he smirked as he resumed his seat.

The Nebraskan opened the box and her mouth dropped. Tentatively she reached inside and pulled out a diamond tiara. Underneath was a note in Amy’s succinct handwriting:

*Bestie,

When I went through my drawer looking for something irrelevant to my point I came across this and immediately I thought of Sheldon and I in your apartment. It brought a plethora of feelings to the forefront. Penny, I cried about my dead boyfriend to my current boyfriend. Somehow I think I violated protocol but Andrew assured me he was ‘ok’ with it.

I need to move on but I’m too chicken to just out and out sell the tiara in case I change my mind. Instead I’m giving it to you. After all, if it wasn’t for you Sheldon would never have asked me out and most definitely would never have gone to a jewelry store much less purchase a tiara.

I hope I’ll see you wearing it one day. Sheldon and you are always in my heart.

Counting the days until you’re here.

Despite her wet lashes Penny’s eyes examined the little diamonds on the headdress.

“Guess that takes care of ‘something borrowed’, Leonard said gently as he moved to the couch and put an arm around his fiancée.

“Yeah,” she whispered.

“You know what?” Leonard said as he took the box from her lap and set it on the coffee table. “I’ve just hopped off a plane after a successful weekend apartment hunting and had a delicious roast beef sandwich waiting for me at home made by a beautiful woman so there is no way in hell this evening ends in tears.”

“You’re right,” Penny said and smiled at the physicist. She put the tiara in the box and closed the lid. “So, what should we do to celebrate your successful hunt?” She gave an exaggerated smile. “I know! We can play ‘Counterfactuals’!”

“I’ve got one for you,” Leonard said as he nuzzled her neck with his cheek. “In a world where a hot young blond from Nebraska moves in across the hall from two physicist nerds how long is it until Leonard Hofstadter wins the Nobel Prize?”

Penny grinned. “Longer than it takes for him to get her to his bedroom.”
“We don’t even have to go that far,” Leonard said soothingly before they kissed.

“Oh, you better believe you’re ‘going that far’,” Raj said sternly as he came from around the corner. “It took me the better part of Saturday getting the living room straightened out and you’re not going to mess it up.”

“Thanks Sheldon,” his roommate said crisply. He grabbed Penny’s hand and the two of them scurried down the hall.

“Night Raj,” Penny called before Leonard’s door closed.

The astrophysicist took a bottled water from the refrigerator and settled himself in the stuffed chair. He noticed the silver box and opened it. Immediately he recognized the tiara as the one Amy wore at Howard and Bernadette’s wedding. There was a note at the bottom and his nosy nature got the best of him. As he read tears came to his eyes. He never knew Sheldon had bought her the tiara much less had Penny help him pick it out.

Raj lovingly picked up the tiara and, after taking a moment to look around, placed it on his head.

“I am England’s Rose,” he sighed happily.

xTBBTx

Sheldon was waiting with a frown on his face in the hallway as Penny ascended the last of the stairs.

“Again with that uniform,” he muttered while Penny walked past him in her Cheesecake Factory top and skirt and opened her door. “You’re an executive assistant,” he continued as he followed her into the apartment. “I have no idea why you persist in—”

Her phone rang and immediately she tossed her purse on the couch and answered.

“Hi!...I didn’t get it did I?...Uh huh…Okay…Yeah better luck next time…bye.” She hung up. “Son of a bitch!” She set the phone on her entertainment stand and marched into the bedroom. “God, I can’t even buy a break.”

“You’re not an actress, Penelope,” Sheldon said calmly as he stepped into the room. “As I said before you are—” Quickly he averted his eyes as she gripped the hem of her shirt and pulled it over her head in one smooth motion.

“Just for once in my life I want a break. Just one!”

The motion in his peripheral vision caught the rest of his eye and he inadvertently glimpsed his neighbor in her naked glory as she stepped out of her skirt and marched into the washroom. The sound of water running followed by the higher pitched whine of the shower starting meant Sheldon would have little to do so he turned to leave only to come face to face with his mirror self. He barely had time to get out of the way as Dream Sheldon stepped to the washroom door.

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

Knock Knock Knock “Penny.”

The shower stopped. A moment and then the door opened and Penny appeared wrapped in a towel.
“Yes Sheldon?” she asked impatiently.

“You’re having a shower,” he said.

“No kidding.”

“You don’t have any ducks.” She batted her eyes in confusion.

“Ducks?”

“Adhesive ducks.” He handed her a sealed package of tub adhesives shaped like a duck carrying an umbrella. “We don’t want you to dislocate your shoulder again.”

“Yeah.” She took the package and stared at it before meeting her friend’s gaze with tears in her eyes. “Thanks Sheldon.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Penny, is there something wrong?”

“Everything. Except this.” Both Sheldons were unprepared as she tackled his Dream Self in a strong hug and began sobbing.

“There, there,” he said awkwardly and patted her pack. He took a few steps back and led the both of them to her bed and sat them down, breaking the hug.

“I’m sorry,” Penny sniffled. “It’s been a while since anyone’s done something nice for me.”

“I see.” ‘Sheldon’ cocked his head. “That could explain why you felt so tense. Turn around.”

To ‘real’ Sheldon’s shock his dream self pushed up his sleeves and put his hands on Penny’s shoulders and worked her blades with his thumbs. Immediately Penny let out a happy sigh.

“God that feels good,” she purred. “Since you’re such a germaphobe I didn’t think you’d be into massage.”


The Nebraskan closed her eyes. “Then maybe you can explain to me why I’m twenty nine and still a stupid waitress.”

“Twenty nine?” ‘Real’ Sheldon’s jaw popped to the side as he thought. If her age was accurate he’d been ‘deceased’ for three years in the physical world. He shook his head. “Time must be asynchronous between the two dimensions. There’s no way I spent only three years in the physics room. Heck, I spent months at the initial whiteboard.” A smirk came to his face. “Fascinating.”

“A conundrum,” Dream Sheldon said to his neighbor as he rubbed. “Especially since you can do so much more.”

“You really think so?” Penny asked. “Mmm, a little more to the left.”

“Of course I do. You’ve proven capable when you decide to apply yourself. My office hasn’t looked sharper since you organized it. You’d make someone an adequate executive secretary.” Penny snorted.

“Who’d hire me?”

Dream Sheldon leaned forward even as his hands slowed in their ministrations.
“Who wouldn’t?” he said softly. “You’re resourceful.” He kissed her left shoulder. “Inventive.” Another kiss was planted on her right. “Pleasant when you want to be.” A kiss on the side of her neck.

Penny turned to face the physicist. “Leonard always says I’m pretty. You don’t.”

“It’s irrelevant to me.”

“Oh.”

“But you are.”

Lips met and hands removed both clothing and towel.

‘Real’ Sheldon was absolutely stunned as he watched ‘himself’ lay back on the bed as Penny’s mouth descended to his breast and began to suck. Legs shifted and the sounds of lips smacking echoed around the room.

Feeling confused and embarrassed Sheldon exited the mirror. He turned to see Penny and ‘him’ come together, her head thrown back as his mirror self pumped for all ‘he’ was worth. Sheldon’s mind told him to look away but he couldn’t. Instead he stood transfixed and took in the sights as his memory provided the sounds of fornication.

If he could see himself Sheldon would be surprised that his pallor maintained its paleness because he felt incredibly warm.

His hand absently drifted to his erect penis.

xTBBTx

Newton’s Law: Physicsaboutcom Laws of Motion
“All packed?” Bernadette asked before sipping on her ginger ale. Leonard smiled.

“Packed, labeled and ready to ship. I’ve got to finish a project this week so we decided to send our stuff when Penny’s about ready to go so she’ll be there to receive it.”

“We’ll have to have a packing party at your place,” the microbiologist said to the Nebraskan. “Amy might not be here but we can always invite Raj.”

“I’d be honored,” he said with a slight bow. A thought came to him. “Oh, Howard, I won’t be at lunch tomorrow; I have to make up time since I’m dropping Leonard off at the airport in the morning.”

“No problema. I’ll grab something and eat in the lab. Gives me more time to work out the plans for the crib.”

“Still designing it to look like a spaceship?” Leonard asked.

“Yup,” the father-to-be grinned. Bernadette rolled her eyes.

“Raj and Howie want to put stars on the ceiling with glow-in-the-dark paint but I’m not so sure about the idea.”

“Oh come on,” pouted Raj. “I loved my ceiling at home. Once the servants got the constellations properly placed I spent my time picking them out before bed.”

“And it’d be so cool with the rocket crib,” gushed Leonard.

“Is there something wrong, Penny?” Bernadette asked. “You’re really quiet tonight.”

“No,” Penny replied. She smiled thinly and took a sip of wine. “Just a lot going on right now.” Bernadette nodded. “The job hunt—”

“Still going,” Penny said a tad harsher than she intended.

“Things will work out how it does,” Raj said diplomatically.

“That’s right,” agreed Leonard. “Once your lease’s up you’ll be in Boston regardless and things will be okay.”

“Yeah,” Penny said evenly.

“Well, buddy,” Howard said as he sat at the edge of the couch cushion. “You’re flying the coop tomorrow. All the best to you at MIT.” He held up his glass and everyone followed suit. “To Leonard.” Glasses touched brims and all drank.
“Thanks,” the experimental physicist said with a wide grin. “Now I hate to be rude but I’ve got an early flight tomorrow and since it’ll be a few weeks before I see Penny I’d like to have a moment with her.”


“Something like that,” Leonard winked.

“Go on you two. I’ll clean up,” Raj said.

Howard took Leonard’s hand and shook it before Bernadette gave the curly haired man a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“Ready?” Leonard asked his fiancée. Penny smiled and took his hand and they exited and crossed the hall to her apartment.

xTBBTx

“Well, that’s that,” Penny slurred as she poured the remaining drops of wine out of the bottle and into her mug while Star Trek played on her television.

She’d been out of sorts all day at work as the thought of what she had to do when she got home haunted her. When she opened the lobby door at the apartment she turned the corner instead of going up the stairs. Taking a letter out of her purse she slipped it through the slot in the superintendent’s door and with that Penny’s notice was given.

She took a gulp and began to giggle.

“God, Sheldon’d be so pissed.” Penny stood up, put a hand on her hip and shook a pointed finger. “‘Drunk on a work night? That’s a strike, Penelope.’” She straightened and gave a salute. “Sorry Sheldor, but I’m not Penelope.”

She grinned and stumbled into the bedroom to change. A moment later and she appeared at the entrance wearing nothing but a Green Lantern t-shirt and a diamond tiara. “I’m Queen Penelope!” She made her way back to the couch. “Warrior extraordinaire!” She took up her mug. “Fierce and determined!” Held it up in toast. “Soon to be unemployed and homeless!” She drank deeply until the mug was dry.

Before she could react her knees gave out and she veritably plopped onto the couch.

She kicked her feet onto the coffee table and took up the remote.

“Warp factor three, Mr. Sulu,” Penny chuckled. “Aye, aye Captain.”

The Enterprise flew across the screen.

xTBBTx

“What’s for dinner, Wilma?” Penny said cheerily as she entered the apartment.

“And a good evening to you too,” Raj replied with an amused expression as he stood behind the kitchen counter chopping up vegetables. “Szechuan chicken with vegetables and rum cake with drizzled chocolate liquor.”

“After three weeks of your cooking it’s a miracle I still fit into my clothes.”
“See, that’s why you need to join my Sunday pilates class.” He swept the vegetables into a bowl and moved the cutting board to the sink.

“You’re on,” Penny said as she sat down at Raj’s computer and logged in to her email account. That was a bonus to upgrading her career: she had more disposable income to spend on things like impromptu exercise classes. ‘Guess it’ll be back to jogging in Boston…. I wonder if they have bear claws?’

As Raj came back to the counter to collect the marinating chicken he glanced at Penny who was in the middle of highlighting a block of unread emails and trashing them. He raised an eyebrow and went to the stove. ‘She must get a lot of spam.’

“Oh, don’t forget to email Amy about the yogurt recipe,” he said as he poured two teaspoons of sesame oil into the large skillet and stirred.

“Where is it?”

“On my dresser.”

Penny got off her chair and proceeded down the hall. Raj grabbed a paper towel and wiped his hands as he crossed over to the computer. He clicked on her trash can and saw that the emails were not from Nigerian princes but Amy and Leonard, the headings indicating that they were job postings. Raj returned to Penny’s inbox and went back to the kitchen before his neighbor came back.

“Actually,” the astrophysicist said, “could you set the table first? We’ll be eating in about ten minutes.” He put in a half teaspoon more of oil before adding the chicken.

The assistant went to the drawer and cupboards and pulled out the silverware, napkins and candles. Every home cooked meal with Raj was an intimate affair. It really was a bonus after a hard day’s work to come home to a metrosexual neighbor and his homemade potpourri smelling apartment. Even the food was lovingly laid out on the plates as Raj brought them to the coffee table. Before sitting down he turned on some light jazz.

“Oh my God,” Penny purred after taking a bite of chicken. “This is amazing!”

“Thank you,” Raj said with a pleased expression. “The secret is the marinating time. Too little is too late.”

“Yeah it’s the same with Ichibon noodles. Ya gotta let the powdered chicken sit in it or else the whole thing just tastes like plain noodles and, well, powdered chicken.” They both laughed. “Cripes, some woman is going to be lucky to have you.”

“Let’s just work on the first premise that some woman is going to have me,” he countered as he took a sip of wine.

“Now, now, what did I say about keeping your spirits up?” Penny tsked.

“So I am reprimanded.” He gave an adequate amount of pause time before he spoke. “Speaking of keeping up hope how is the job search going?”

Penny shrugged. “Not so good. It’s hard to find anything nowadays. Recession and whatnot.”

“I see,” Raj said neutrally. “Well, maybe it’ll be better next weekend when you’re in Boston. I’m sure Amy and Leonard will help you.”
It was agreed upon that Penny would move when her lease was up whether she found a job or not. Leonard had insisted she come out to Boston next weekend so she could get a feel for the place and with Amy help pick out the furniture for the apartment.

“Yeah.” The Nebraskan gave a stiff smile before taking a sip of her wine.

Raj noted the tone but said nothing.

XTBBTx

“Sheldon.”

The physicist stepped into the mirror just as his dream self came out of the apartment and ascended the stairs by Penny’s door. Quickly Sheldon followed until they arrived at the roof.

As Dream Sheldon stepped towards a lone Penny sitting on the skylight ledge ‘real’ Sheldon was awash in wonder as he stared at the night sky. There wasn’t a correct constellation to be found and planets were in the wrong place but he didn’t care. Anything was better than the whiteness that surrounded him in his new ‘world’.

“Hello Penny,” Dream Sheldon said as he sat next to his neighbor.

“Hey,” she said amicably as she stared at the moon and stars. “Whatcha doing here?”

“I could ask the same of you.”

She shrugged. “I like to come here sometimes, usually to have a drink.”

“Naturally.”

“Hey!” she pouted. “Not all the time. Sometimes I’m up here thinking about sciencey stuff.”

“Oh really?” ‘Sheldon’ scoffed. “And just what constitutes ‘sciencey stuff’? Making a quarter appear from behind my ear?”

“Quit being a jerk,” she scowled. “Either be nice or leave.”

They sat in silence under the night sky.

“Sheldon, why does the moon stay in orbit? I get the gravity stuff but what does that really mean?”

Dream Sheldon looked at his neighbor. “The curvature created by the Earth keeps the moon in orbit.”

“Which would mean on the Nickelodeon channel?”

“Let’s say you stretched out a bed sheet and attached the corners firmly to the posts. Now if we place objects of various weights on it we will observe two things: very light objects will make the sheet curve downward a little bit because of its weight and heavy objects will make a more dramatic curve.”

‘Real’ Sheldon smirked. He remembered this conversation after Penny and he had watched an astronomy program on the Discovery channel while she was waiting for Leonard. He mocked the simplicity of the science. She shyly said that it wasn’t that simple and so he explained.

“Dip,” Penny said to clarify. Dream Sheldon rolled his eyes.
Fine. ‘Dip.’” He turned to stare at the moon. “Now we’ll assume there’s a heavy object sitting on the sheet—on a cosmological scale it’s the Earth. Now we place a second, lighter, object on the sheet.”

“The lighter ball will roll to the heavy ball,” Penny said excitedly.

“Exactly. The curvature created by the Earth will cause the moon to ‘slip’ along the curve towards it, trying to reach a point of equilibrium where it no longer moves.”

“And the moon and Earth have reached such a balance.”

“More or less. As we speak the moon is slowly expanding its orbit. Who knows what that will mean for the Earth as the moon is partially responsible for the tides.”

“Yeah, what will the surfers do?” Penny quipped. ‘Sheldon’ shook his head.

“Tides are the rhythm of the ocean. They transport energy and some scientists posit that it was this ‘stirring’ of the ocean that made life possible.”

“Huh.” She stood up and Dream Sheldon did likewise. “When I was a little girl I used to lie in the back of dad’s truck and look at the Man in the Moon. Dad always said that I didn’t have to be afraid of the dark because he would always watch over me. Now you’re saying that the moon is slipping away.”

“It never will entirely. The moon is only receding at a rate of three centimeters a year,” he replied as they made their way to the door.

Penny turned to her friend. “So the Man will stay,” she confirmed as the door closed behind them.

“The Man will stay,” ‘real’ Sheldon said quietly as he stared at the moon until the scene went black.

xTBBTx

Penny ran the letter past Raj several times just to make sure it sounded okay. She arrived at work a half hour early in the hopes of catching Sophie in her office. To no one’s surprise the manager was seated at her desk going through paperwork. The Nebraskan knocked at the door and waited as Sophie finished reading a page.

“Enter,” the manager said absently. “You’re here early, Penelope. To my knowledge you don’t have any time to make up since you’re using a vacation day to catch your afternoon flight.”

“No, I’m good.” Penny took a breath as she felt her stomach burst into a million butterflies. “Actually I’m here to give notice that I’m resigning.” Sophie paused before looking at her assistant.

“I see.” She took in Penny’s expression with a neutral face. “You’re sure?”

“As you know my fiancé’s got a job offer at MIT and he’s gone ahead. I’ve been looking for a job there but I don’t think I’ll find one from here.” Pause. “I want to give you the full six week’s notice so it isn’t sprung on you all at once since I know you’d like an orderly transition.”

“Your consideration is appreciated.”

“I also want to thank you for taking me on. I learned so much from you and if it wasn’t for the
move I’d be here forever.” The manager nodded and proceeded to pull out a file from the desk drawer. She handed it to Penny.

“I’ve been waiting for this moment. I believe the recommendation is strong enough for you to obtain satisfactory employment.” Penny’s eyes began to water as she took the folder. “If there is anything more I can do please do not hesitate to call.” Sophie’s blue eyes softened. “You’ve been a model assistant and a clear asset to this office.” She rose and extended her hand. “Good luck, Penelope.” They shook.

“I’ll miss you,” Penny said with a sad smile. Sophie nodded and the two women went on with their morning.

XxX

The sounds of keys jangling and then the lock turned and Amy and Penny entered the condo.

“Home sweet home,” Amy said happily as she stuck her keys in a bowl by the door.

Penny couldn’t get over the change in Amy’s décor as the Middle Eastern cloth she kept on her door in Pasadena became the inspiration for her condo: deep copper painted ceilings and silk paneled curtains of gold, copper and green, exotic teak furniture and a dramatic original painting of Scheherazade and the One Thousand and One Nights given to her by her Arabian prince as a parting gift.

“The spare room’s all ready for you,” Amy continued. “I’ll let you freshen up although making you more alluring than you are now is really an impossibility.” She flashed a quick smile and went into her room. “I’ll be switching into my pajamas.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Penny said and quickly unpacked and changed into her own sleepwear.

“I have cranberry juice, wine or Yoo-Hoo,” the neurobiologist offered as she came into the kitchen. She heard a snort from the other bedroom. “Just kidding bestie. I’ll open the bottle.”

A few minutes later and both women settled themselves on the couch with glasses in hand.

“I can’t wait to show you around tomorrow,” Amy gushed. “Some of the furniture stores I found were amazing.”

“Just remember we don’t have the budget of Saudi Arabia,” Penny teased.

“Already taken into account. We’ll be practical—a after we take a tour of SoWa Vintage Market. Andrew showed me the place and you’ll absolutely love it.”

“Ooo,” Penny cooed. “Andrew, huh?” Amy blushed. “So how are things with you two?”

“Exhilarating. Titillating.” A big grin came to the neurobiologist’s face. “It’s a big ol’ five!”

Penny’s jaw dropped as both women laughed.

“Look at you!” she said to her friend and in that moment she did take in Amy Farrah Fowler. Besides her longer hair, designer framed glasses and silk (!) pajamas there was an absolute glow to the woman that Penny couldn’t ignore. Amy was relaxed and more forthcoming with smiles. “I can’t wait to meet him.”

“He’s on-call until eleven and said he’ll catnap in the afternoon until we meet at your apartment for
dinner.”

Penny took a sip. “That’s right, you said he was a pathologist.”

“Yup. It was quite the connection the first time we met. He came to the lab to consult on a malignant tumor he discovered during an autopsy and I happened to be in the middle of extracting a similar tumor from a donor brain. I gave him the skinny on the whole shebang and he asked me out to dinner.” Again Amy blushed. “All in all a fair deal.”

“I’ll say,” Penny replied with a sicky face as she thought about the tumor.

“It’s fascinating how the whole dating paradigm works,” mused Amy. “The moment our eyes met and he asked if he could watch me extract that tumor my heart went ‘hoo’. He complimented me on my steady hand and we both shared a chuckle over the microscope. By the time he left he had my full attention to go with my phone number.”

She lazily swirled the wine in her glass. “I felt nothing of the sort when I met Sheldon. I found him an intriguing individual with a startlingly brilliant intellect. As our friendship progressed I realized that he had nice fingers and a cute butt.”

“The eyes,” Penny interjected.

“Don’t get me started on those baby blues,” Amy agreed. “Sheldon Cooper was a package and that he actually liked me put me into the stratosphere.”

“Yeah, you two were two peas in a pod,” said Penny with a smirk.

“Until our paradigm changed and we began to date.” The neurobiologist took a sip of wine. “Every fantasy I’d ever had about having a boyfriend came to mind and I wanted Sheldon to be the man of my dreams. Sometimes I pushed him harder than I should have not to be a bitch but because I didn’t know what I needed much less how to express it. All I knew was that he wasn’t giving it to me.” She smiled wistfully. “I have no doubt Sheldon was trying but it wasn’t until I’d hooked up with Andrew that I realized that for as wonderful as Sheldon was I’d have missed out on so much if we had stayed together.”

“I still miss him,” Penny said wistfully.

“As do I.” Here Amy chuckled. “It was a hoot watching you tease him. He had the hottest glare I’d ever seen. It’s a wonder you never succumbed.”

“‘Succumbed’?” snorted Penny. “Those glares were battle wounds. Every time I stumped Mr. IQ of One Hundred and Eighty Seven it was like standing on him with one foot on his chest as I beat my own and let out a Tarzan yell.”

“I’d always imagined you in a cowgirl outfit with him hogtied. Yeehaw!”


“Believe me bestie, the dream was never complete without your presence.” She winked at her stunned friend before taking a sip of wine. “You could certainly herd Sheldon along. I was amazed at all the things you got him to do over the years.” Pause. “Maybe you should have dated him instead.”

“Me?” The Nebraskan gave a short laugh. “I was never smart enough to date Sheldon.” Amy shrugged.
“He liked trains and comic books. There’s a lot more to Sheldon than physics.”

“I guess.” Penny shook her head. “When we first met Leonard had a way of making me feel stupid without even trying and yet I never took any crap from Sheldon. I figured his weirdness kind of evened the playing field since he was so clueless about anything non-brainiac.”

“Penny, Sheldon liked you and he’s an idiot for not appreciating you the way I do.” Amy gestured around the room. “All of this is thanks to you: girls’ nights and makeup sessions and shoe shopping and Sheldon and now Andrew. Before meeting you I severely lacked life experience.” She paused as her eyes shyly flashed her friend’s face. “I was lonely. So was Sheldon. Leonard might have given him a social outlet for physics and hobbies but you gave him the encouragement he needed to grow as a person.” She cleared her throat. “On behalf of Sheldon and me, thank you.”

Penny put down her glass. “Oh sweetie, you’re very welcome.”

Both women embraced before sitting back and wiping their eyes.

“So, who’s up for a little more wine and gossip? Does Bernadette have swollen ankles yet?” asked Amy as she reached for the bottle.

“Yup. Although I think it’ll only be a matter of time before Howard has a fat lip for teasing her about them,” smirked Penny.

The two besties talked and laughed well into the night.

xTBBTx

Penny groaned as she looked at the five story brownstone.

“If the elevator’s out in this building I’m out of here,” she said lightly. “I refuse to carry my luggage up the stairs.” Amy chuckled.

“All in working order I assure you. Moreover you’re on the top floor.”

The two women entered the lobby and pressed the buzzer for apartment five oh four.

“Hello?” said Leonard’s disembodied voice.

“The two hot babes you ordered, sir,” Amy said matter-of-factly. The Nebraskan swatted her friend’s arm.

“Excellent. Come right up.” The door buzzed.

“Oh, I love the furniture,” Penny cooed as they went through the inner lobby to the elevator.

“Faux Bauhaus,” Amy said.

“Ugh. What am I doing?” Penny pressed the button and the elevator rose. “All afternoon with furniture and I’m still shopping.”

“Too bad there are cameras in the lobby.” A flash of a smile came across Amy’s lips. “Of course power outages are possible and the moon doesn’t shine every night.”

“‘Acclaimed neurobiologist arrested on robbery charges’. Sounds groovy.”

“It’s kind of titillating being the ‘bad girl’ in our relationship.” Penny gave an exaggerated roll of
the eyes as they came to the apartment door. A single knock and then they entered into an immediate hallway with the living room to the right and the kitchen straight ahead.

“Wow,” Penny said as she wheeled her overnight suitcase into the dark wooden paneled living room that reminded her of a study in one of those British murder mysteries. All it needed were wingback chairs and a moose head and it would be a regular man cave.

“Pretty cool, huh?” Leonard said as he came over and gave her a kiss. “Hi.”

“Hey,” Penny replied as she took in the stucco ceiling.

“I hope you were successful with the furniture hunting because I’m getting tired of sleeping on an inflatable mattress,” he joked.

“We shopped until we dropped,” Amy said cheerily. “We picked out a couple of things and the rest we’ve got pictures of so you can look for yourself and decide.” Leonard snorted.

“Yeah like it’s dependent on my decision.”

Penny stuck her head into the open concept kitchen before continuing down the hall to see the bedrooms.

“I figured one could be my office,” Leonard said from behind her. “There’s enough room for my bookshelves and a small desk.”

“Yeah.” Penny realized that most of the furniture she picked out wouldn’t work. The place with its dark wood paneling and fancy cove molding was so stuffy it would make her modern furniture look out of place.

“There’s a park in the vicinity and it’s close enough to Cambridge without being too far out of Boston.” He paused as he took in his fiancée’s silence. “Do you like it?” he asked quietly.

Penny slapped a smile on her face. “It’s you, Leonard.”

“I want it to be ‘us’.”

“Hey bestie, check out the bathroom,” Amy called.

Penny and Leonard came to the bathroom door as Amy stood within.

“I love the claw foot bathtub. They’re so romantic,” the neurobiologist gushed.

“Yeah,” Penny said as she noted the ancient shower nozzle. She’d have to open the bathroom window to let the steam out of the room when she showered. “So when did they build this place anyways?”

“Nineteen forty six,” Leonard said evenly. “It was part of the post-war building boom.”

“Ah.”

“You don’t like it.”

“I didn’t say that.” Penny brushed by her fiancé, who followed. “It’s just older than I expected is all. I mean a lot of old buildings have been modernized inside and I just assumed that this one would be too.”
“But the décor is the charm,” the physicist countered. “Besides, I showed you the pictures on the website.”

“I just didn’t think it’d be this dark.” She looked around the living room. “Hope there’s enough plug-ins because we’re gonna need a crap load of lamps.”

“We only really need good lighting for the kitchen and my office. It’s not like either is your domain so I’ll deal with it.”

“Hey, I cook,” she scowled.

“Yeah,” he said diplomatically. The couple returned to the living room just as the buzzer rang.

“Hello?” Leonard said as he pushed the call button.

“It’s Amy’s Andrew.”

“Come on up.”

A few minutes later and there was a knock at the door.

“Hello handsome,” Amy said as she let in her boyfriend.

“Hello yourself,” he replied and they kissed. Amy took his hand and led him into the living room.

“Penny, this is Andrew,” Amy beamed.

“And here I was thinking your name was ‘bestie’,” the man said drolly.

“Yeah, well, ya go with the flow,” Penny replied with a grin. Not bad, Ames. Andrew was about five foot ten with sandy brown hair and brown eyes. He had an aquiline nose and wore black-framed glasses which suited his face. Penny noted the contrast from Sheldon as Andrew was more of a bohemian hipster in style than teen-age comic book nut. He looked to be in his late thirties and reasonably fit.

“Since you’re leaving tomorrow that doesn’t give me a lot of time to show you my fair city but at the very least I can take you to dinner,” the pathologist continued. “Amy and I got to The Big Carrot. It’s a vegan restaurant in the Village.”

“Sounds interesting,” Penny said. “I’m sort of a vegetarian myself.”

“Although she loves steak,” grinned her fiancé causing her to flush.

“It’s alright,” Andrew said. “I love me a good feed of sushi. Besides, I don’t know how people can be strict vegans when there’s clam chowder in the world.”

“You’d be surprised,” Amy said with a roll of the eyes and a playful squeeze of his hand. “We’ll take my car. Parking spaces are a premium down there. You mind driving?” she asked her boyfriend.

“Sure,” he replied amiably as the group made their way to the door. “Only no complaining about how far away we park from the restaurant.”

“Spots in excess of five blocks are unacceptable. Especially in these shoes.”

“And explain to me again why you chose inadequate shoe apparel?”
“Breasts and buttocks, chum.”

Andrew raised an eyebrow. “So it’s my fault?”

“A woman likes to be appreciated for all her assets and it’s not our fault we’re smoken’ in heels, right bestie?”

“Yeah,” Penny replied even as she wished her flats could spontaneously grow a three inch heel.

XxX

“Ducky!” squealed a twenty something waitress as the group entered the small restaurant.

“Hey, Sandra,” Andrew replied. She led them to a booth and let them get settled.

“‘Ducky’?” Leonard asked with an amused expression on his face.

“Ducky’s the coroner on NCIS,” Penny replied.

“The closest I got to a cool nickname was ‘Sock Mouth’,” the physicist replied.

“Kids can be cruel,” Amy agreed. “That’s why when I choose to reproduce I’ll make doubly certain my progeny’s name undergoes the rigors of nickname resistance.”

“And I said that Amy’s being too paranoid.” Andrew smiled at his girlfriend. “As long as he or she isn’t named after a planet or state of mind it can’t be too bad.”

“What’s wrong with ‘Serene Uranus’?” chuckled Leonard. “Kind of has a ring to it, don’t you think?”

“Actually, Uranus has several rings,” Amy winked. “So effectively you’re ‘band’ from name selection.”

“And so the puns begin,” Andrew sighed.

“Yeah I guess,” Leonard said to Amy. “It’d be too much of a heads up that your child was off kilter.” The three scientists laughed.

Penny shook her head. “I don’t get it.”

“Uranus’s axis of rotation is tilted sideways so its north and south poles lie where the Earth has its equator,” explained her fiancé.

“Ah.”

The assistant was glad when the waitress returned and took their order.

“How are things at the lab?” the physicist asked Amy. She rolled her eyes.

“It seems as though my reputation precedes me. I’ve been tapped to look over the results of a smoking addiction study. Apparently hookah smoking is on the rise with the university crowd and my colleagues wanted to know to what extent it harmed the body.”

Leonard snorted. “No one I knew in university smoked much less smoked a hookah.” He turned to Penny. “You didn’t smoke, did you?”
“Not cigarettes, no,” she mumbled.

“A few of the guys in engineering did,” said Andrew, who then gave out a short laugh. “There was this one guy, Gavin, who smoked these God-awful cigarillos and was addicted to playing ‘Doom’. One time he and a few of the other engineers grabbed a bunch of speakers from the music department and figured out the resonance of the residence building. They actually made it shake.”

“A colleague of mine from the University of Chicago recalled a scavenger hunt where a ‘breeder reactor built in a shed’ was on the list,” Leonard began.

“They didn’t!” Andrew gasped.

“Used scrap aluminum and carbon sheets,” the physicist pumpkin grinned.

“How did they get the radioactive component?” asked Amy.

“They collected Thorium powder from the inside of vacuum tubes which the reactor turned into trace amounts of weapons-grade uranium.”

“Incredible.” Andrew’s eyes glinted. “But of course the question must be asked: how did they do?”

“Second place.”

“Second?” Amy raised an eyebrow. “What could beat that?”

As Leonard continued his story Penny glanced from one face to another at the table. She was the only one here bored out of her skull. Amy and Andrew asked pertinent questions and inserted laughter at just the right moments and Leonard was having a ball. The Nebraskan was amazed at all of the scientific mumbo-jumbo they all understood and from a multitude of disciplines to boot. To Penny, the bulk of the conversation sounded like, ‘and then he took the fiddledee and activated the scrumfuggle and ossified his rhiozumbah’. She smiled when the others smiled and suddenly she felt like Sheldon who sometimes laughed not because he caught the joke but because everyone else was laughing.

Looking back at the communal meals at apartment 4A Penny realized that the level of conversation wasn’t all ‘highfalutin’—something which Sheldon complained of as being her fault. She now appreciated how bored out his skull the physicist must have been whenever Amy and her discussed shoes or Raj brought up ‘Sex and the City’. It wasn’t a case of Sheldon being a jerk—okay, maybe he was being a goofball by whining about it—or Penny and Amy being ignorant. He was genuinely not interested in the conversation, much like she tuned him out whenever he brought up his ‘poop journals’. That didn’t mean that the topic of conversation was stupid. It just meant that they weren’t compatible.

Penny again smiled as her friends and fiancé laughed at another joke that went over her head. She couldn’t get over the change in Leonard in such a short time. He was more relaxed and Boston had managed to do what she couldn’t: get him out of his hoodie and army green jacket! He looked every bit the laid back professor wearing a tan casual suit jacket over his green recycling t-shirt. Amy had mentioned something about taking him clothes shopping but Penny assumed it would be to a t-shirt shop or something like that. ‘And she didn’t even have to have sex with him for him to change.’ Suddenly it struck her that the same could be said of Penny towards Sheldon.

The waitress arrived at the table with their order.

“Looks great,” Leonard said happily. “This is great.”
Amy picked up her glass of sparkling mineral water. “And just think: we have years of outings like this yet to come.”

“Yipee,” Penny said quietly and sipped her cranberry juice.

XxX

Leonard unlocked the apartment door.

“I wish you weren’t going tomorrow,” he said. “This was fun.”

“Andrew seems really nice,” Penny replied as the two entered and closed the door.

“Yeah. It was kind of funny seeing Amy with another guy at first but”—here he chuckled. “It’s nice conversing with them. Until I came out here I hadn’t realized how much of my conversation revolved around comic books and Star Trek.” He took Penny’s suitcase and wheeled it into the bedroom.

“So you’re giving them up?” she asked as she followed him into the room.

“Why can’t I have both? After all, I have both you and Babylon 5 in my life,” he said drolly as he took off his jacket and hung it in the closet.

“Still won’t let that one go, will ya?” Penny smirked. She took off her earrings and necklace and put them in her vanity bag.

“I still blame Sheldon for that one.” Leonard slipped out of his shirt and put on a white t-shirt for sleeping. “He corrupted you.”

“Oh really?” Penny laughed.

“It must have been all that time together at the university. Water on a rock.”

Penny got out of her dress and packed it into her suitcase. “Well he did manage to slip a little Star Trek into his lesson plans.”

“It was kind of funny,” said Leonard as he pulled up his pajama bottoms. “The guys in the department were teasing me about you spending so much time with Sheldon. Good thing he wasn’t programmed to respond in a normal fashion.”

“What do you mean by that?” Penny said a tad defensively as she slipped into her pajama shorts and teddy.

“You know, use the opportunity to hit on you.”

“Leonard, he had a girlfriend and I’m dating his best friend. Do you really think he’d intentionally hurt us?” He made to speak. “Besides, I was his friend and he was helping me as a favor.”

Leonard frowned. “I thought you were ‘helping him’?”

Penny could just kick herself. “You know what I mean.”

His mind went into overdrive as he watched his fiancée take out some clothes for the morning. “I’m still kind of hurt that you went to him for help and not me.”

“Because it wouldn’t have worked,” she explained slowly. “We’d be spending all our time together
and we’d drive each other nuts after a while.”

“We’re going to be spending the rest of our *lives* together,” he said incredulously. “What does it matter what we do with the time?”

“My entire world doesn’t revolve around you, okay?”

His mouth dropped. “When did I say that it did?”

Penny sighed. “Look, I’m tired. Let’s just go to sleep.” She turned off the light and the pair got into bed.

Silence.

“Penny, I want you to be happy.”

“I know.”

More silence.

“Are you happy?”

“…I don’t know.”

Leonard’s stomach dropped. “What do you mean you ‘don’t know’?” Again Penny sighed.

“I dunno, Leonard. I mean I’m happy *for* you but—”

“You don’t know about yourself.” He stared at the dark ceiling. “I’m sorry things are happening so fast.” Pause. “We don’t have to get married right away. Like I said I’ve got things going on at the university so I—” Penny turned back the blankets and got out of bed. “Where are you going?”

“I don’t know,” she said as she turned on the light and reached for her clothes. “I need to go for a walk or something.”

“Now?”

“Now.”

“You don’t know the city,” he said as he rose from the mattress.

“I don’t know a lot of things,” Penny said evenly before popping her shirt over her head. She regarded her fiancé. “All I know is that I can’t stay here.”

“I’m not just going to let you walk out,” he snapped.

“Oh, really?” Penny countered as she buttoned her jeans and slipped on her flats. “Somehow I doubt—” She stopped talking. “No. I’m not going to fight with you, Leonard. That’s why I have to go.”

“Maybe it’s best if you get it out,” he said seriously.

“The problem is that I don’t know what to say.” She picked up her jacket and purse. “Give me tonight and we’ll talk tomorrow morning.” He looked at her dubiously. “Please Leonard.”

“You text me the moment you’re at Amy’s.”
“I’m not going to Amy’s. I’ll catch a cab to a hotel nearby.”

“I don’t—” He took in her expression. “You’re coming back here tomorrow, right?” Penny nodded. Leonard sighed deeply before exiting the room.

Penny heard the bathroom door close and she took the time to pack her suitcase. She stepped into the hall and made her way to the bathroom.

“I’ll text you when I’m settled,” she said quietly through the door.

Leonard responded with silence and it was in silence that Penny left the apartment.

xTBBTx

Yahoo! Answers: Can the moon ever break free of the earth’s orbit?

The Top Five College Science Pranks

Physicsaboutcom: Einstein’s Theory of General Relativity
Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Summary

Reference to: ‘The Ornithophobia Diffusion’; ‘The Zarnecki Incursion’; ‘The Cornhusker Vortex’

Sheldon crossed over to find his mirror self in pajamas working at the whiteboard. He was surprised to note a garbled equation that resembled the Copenhagen Interpretation. In his explanation of Leonard’s and his work on the Bose-Einstein Condensate Sheldon had to delve into wave-particle duality. It had been a struggle but here was proof that Penny did get some of what he was talking about.

The apartment door opened and Penny entered wearing her pink fleecy pants and white tank top. She flumped on the couch.

“What are you doing here so late?” Dream Sheldon asked as he stared at the board.

“I want to sleep here tonight if that’s okay,” his neighbor replied.

‘Real’ Sheldon noted her tone and turned to see redness on her face indicative of having been crying.

“I suppose,” ‘Sheldon’ said after a moment. “Did you have another fight with Leonard?”

“We didn’t fight.” She shook her head. “I don’t know what we did.” The mirror physicist snorted.

“Sounds like your love anthem.”

“Yeah. ‘Penny’s too stupid to get jokes about vacuum tube uranium’,” she growled. Dream Sheldon put down his marker and turned around.

“Someone’s in a dour mood. I suppose you’re going to tell me what’s wrong?” he said with a sigh.

“I’m stupid,” she said at last. “I have no idea what Leonard sees in me.” ‘Sheldon’ rolled his eyes.

“Take a look in the mirror.”

“I mean besides that.” Penny bit her lip as her fingers absently picked at the lint on her pants.

“There’s coitus.”

“Besides that.”

Dream Sheldon sighed in exasperation. “Penny, I sense you have an answer in mind. It’s late. Let’s skip the guessing game, shall we?”

“Sheldon, I’m not into sciencey stuff like physics, I don’t read comic books or dress up in costumes and go to conventions or Renaissance fairs.” She gave a grim smile. “Leonard has so many hobbies it’s sick but not of them overlap with me.”
“What do you have in common?”

“I play a little paintball and Halo.”

“And why do you do it?” Penny shrugged.

“I dunno. Everyone was doing it and I wanted to go along.” A little smile came to her face. “Plus they use guns and I miss shooting.”

“You forgot the major commonality Leonard and you perform nightly,” Dream Sheldon said.

“Sex isn’t something we have in common it’s something we do,” she frowned.

“Alright then.” Dream Sheldon folded his arms across his chest. “So aside from ‘shooten’ things up’ you’ve got nothing. So what do you do with your time together?”

Penny thought. “I dunno. We kick back with a few drinks and watch a movie or tv and then we—” She stopped talking.

“Now *that* sounds like a solid foundation to build a relationship,” ‘real’ Sheldon said with a shake of the head.

“So in other words aside from watching shows the other can’t stand and the consumption of alcohol you engage in coitus.” Dream Sheldon nodded slowly. “You do what Leonard does or you do ‘nothing’.” Here he used air quotes with his fingers.

“That’s not true. We’ve been to the movies I’ve picked and hiked and did karaoke singing.”

“Why?”

Penny cocked her head, confused. “‘Why’ what?”

“Why did Leonard do these things with you?”

She thought back to the night they went to see the dam documentary. “To have sex with me,” she said softly.

‘Real’ Sheldon erased the whiteboard and began writing out a formula before stopping and erasing what he did.

“Too complicated,” he mumbled. He hoped against hope he could make a diagram and drew the borders of what looked like a water glass; in it he stretched from side to side a wavy line, a less wavy line and a curved line and a small formula—\(3h/2\)—at the top.

“Why did you do them?” Dream Sheldon continued.

“I dunno,” Penny shrugged. “Because they were fun. I used to do things like that all the time.”

“And now you don’t.”

“No.” A flush began to cover her face. “That’s stuff you do when you’re younger anyways. I’ve got a career now and I’m engaged and—”

“So Leonard’s giving up comic books and Star Trek conventions?” Penny didn’t reply. “What happened to your football parties and dancing and trips to the beach and rollerblading?” ‘Sheldon’ put a hand on the stuffed chair. “Where’s the Penny who started her own business and got my
WoW equipment back and stood up to me when I was overbearing and obnoxious? *That’s* the true riddle here.” He turned back to the board. “Wave-particle duality,” he snorted as he glanced at the diagram. “No more, no less.”

“I don’t understand,” Penny sniffled as tears began to run down her cheeks. “I told you I’m too stupid to get physics.”

“You’ve demonstrated time and again true ingenuity in maneuvering through social situations. You’re not ‘stupid’.” His lips pursed. “A particle moves like a particle and a wave, Penny. It isn’t either or. It’s not your fault Leonard only sees you through complementarity.”

She began crying harder. “I’m not a fucking particle, Sheldon! God, why can’t you just talk to me?”

The scene faded to black as she ran from the room.

“Because I can’t!” ‘real’ Sheldon called out to the darkness. “Penny, you’re a mix of natural athleticism and beauty, cunning and kindness. While the majority of what interests you is trite in my opinion that doesn’t mean you should give them up.” A twitch passed over his face. “Amy said that my interest in comics was ‘lame-o’ but that didn’t stop me from collecting them or wearing my superhero t-shirts. My interests are a part of who I am.”

He shook his head. “You’ve forgotten who you are, Penelope. You’re more than just ‘Leonard’s girl’. You’re a warrior-Queen. Now get out there and defend yourself.”

xTBBTx

Penny watched the sun come up through the window curtain. She’d spent the past half hour lying in bed thinking about things: life, Leonard and pieces of a dream she could barely understand. She picked up her phone from the hotel nightstand and dialed.

“Hello?” said a groggy voice.

“Raj, it’s an emergency. I need you to tell me about particles and waves.”

… CLICK

She rested and waited.

Five minutes later the phone rang.

“So what’s so important about particles that has to be said at…three thirty five in the morning?”

“Oh balls. I forgot the time difference. I’m sorry. It’s just that I don’t know who else to call.”

“It’s alright... What’s wrong?”

“I’ll tell you after. Right now I need to know about particles.”

“Okay, what about them?”

“How do they move? It's something about waves and something else.”

“Ah. Wave-particle duality. Particles move like waves and particles.”

“Go on.”
“It’s a central concept of quantum mechanics. You see classical concepts like ‘particle’ and ‘wave’ couldn’t describe the behavior of quantum-scale objects. Particles.”

“O-kay. Why not?”

“It’s a paradox. Standard interpretations of quantum mechanics calls it a fundamental property of the Universe. Aristotle thought—”

“The Greek guy, right?”

“Right. Anyways, he thought that light was a wave-like phenomenon. At the same time Democritus thought that all things in the Universe, including light, were comprised of indivisible sub-components. In modern terms, particles. Both camps held firm that their belief was right for centuries. It wasn’t until the twentieth century that all matter, including light, was seen to have a wave-like nature to go with their particle nature.”

“So what the hell was Sheldon talking about?”

“Pardon?”

“Raj, you’re going to think I’m a nut but I had a dream last night about Sheldon. We were talking about…never mind. Anyways I—”

“Penny, you’re talking to me about the Copenhagen Interpretation. This is definitely important.”

“…Leonard and I had a fight. Sort of. …We came back from dinner with Amy and her boyfriend and things got a little weird. … Leonard asked if I was happy and I didn’t know. … I still don’t know. And then I had this weird dream with Sheldon telling me that I was a particle that moved in two ways and that Leonard could only see one way.”

“…That’s an apt analogy. When did Sheldon talk to you about complimentarity?”

“What?”

“That’s what you’re describing. Complimentarity states that a phenomenon can be viewed in one way or in another but not both simultaneously.”

“I dunno. We went over a lot of science stuff when he taught me about Leonard’s work. Also he did go into some of the stringy things at the office.”

“Sounds like Sheldon and Leonard’s joint project.”

“Anyways.* So what does it mean? Leonard can only see me in one way but not the other. What way?”

“Why are you unhappy?”

“Think I’m unhappy. … I dunno. I’m going to a new city with my fiancé and my best friend’s there and we’ve got an apartment even though it’s right out of Sherlock Holmes. All I need is a job and things are set.”

“It won’t be that hard to find one. Why aren’t you looking?”

“I *am* looking.”

“Penny, I saw you trash the emails from your inbox. You didn’t even open them.”
“… Everything I should want is in Boston and yet I don’t want to go. Seeing Amy with her boyfriend and Leonard at the restaurant, they belong here. I felt so out of place. … Raj, I didn’t have anything to *say* to these people. … It was different than at home. When we hung out at the apartment we talked about all sorts of things. Yeah, I might not have been interested in half of it but at least we were all involved.”

“You felt excluded at the restaurant.”

“I don’t think they meant to snub me. They were relaxed and having fun, only their version of fun would take me several night school courses to understand.”

“I’m sorry you experienced that.”

“I just don’t get it. Things were going so well in Pasadena and now it’s going downhill.”

“…Are you sure things were good here?”

“Of course they were! I had you guys for friends and Leonard and my career.”

“Then why did you drink so much?”

…”

“I’m just saying that until Sheldon got you on track for the course and you got working you almost always drank.”

“You should talk.”

“Penny, I’m a thirty three year old man who’s dependent on alcohol to talk to a woman. You expect me to chastise you for medicating your life with booze? I’m just giving you an observation. You drank. Hard. And yet no one said anything. … We let you down.”

“You guys didn’t let me down. I was just having some bad luck. My acting career sucked and I hated my job and—”

“Go on.”

“And all of you were so successful with your degrees and careers. You were all so grown up—God, even Sheldon—and then there was Penny. … Huh. I have no idea why you guys hung out with me.”

“You were a pretty girl who actually talked to us. It’s how we all saw you at first.”

“Except Sheldon. Once he got comfortable with the presence of another human being in his apartment he treated me no different than you guys.”

“You were an ace at paintball and Halo. How could he not respect your prowess? Oh and getting his World of Warcraft stuff back. Just brilliant. … It’s funny, but I never realized until now how much Sheldon did for you.”

“Did for me? I killed the creepy crawlies in his bathroom and sang him ‘Soft Kitty’ when he was sick.”

“He brought out things in you that the rest of us never did.”

“Yeah, like homicidal rage.”
“Would you have gone over and kicked Zarnecki in the balls for Howard? Did you rub Vaporub on Leonard’s chest when he was sick?”

“I sleep with Leonard. I rub a lot more than vaporub on him.”

“And when you’re not having sex what else do you do?”

“I dunno. Stuff.”

“As Bohr would say: a particle is only what you measure it to be. How do you measure up with Leonard? More importantly, how do you measure up with yourself?”

“…If I’m the particle and Leonard can only see one part of me then that’s all he can measure, right?”

“Nothing is real unless it’s observed, Penny. That’s at the heart of the Copenhagen Interpretation.”

“Penny the pretty girl…. … Raj, I’ve got no where to go…."

“You can always come back here. Things with the lease haven’t been sorted out yet so you can crash with me until I have to move.”

“…Thank you…."

XxX

She had texted Leonard that she was coming over. As she walked down the hallway towards the apartment Penny took a deep breath. While she wasn’t completely sure about what she was going to say she knew she was in the ballpark. As nervous as she was she also felt a weight lift as she mulled over Raj’s words.

The door was slightly open and Penny entered the apartment. Leonard was standing in the living room looking out the window.

“Hey,” Penny said softly. He turned.

“Hi,” he replied in a tired voice.

“Did you sleep?”

“My fiancée was out wandering the streets at night in a city she doesn’t know after telling me she isn’t happy. Yeah, I slept just fine,” he said sarcastically. He took in her hurt features and his shoulders slumped. “Sorry.”

“No, I deserve it.” She let go of the suitcase handle and stepped towards him. “I did a lot of thinking last night.” Pause. “You said that I was Sheldon’s experiment yet you labeled our relationship a ‘beta test’.”

“I didn’t mean it literally.”

She pursed her lips. “You gave me a list of things to correct about myself.”

“It was just meant to improve you,” he countered. “Besides you gave me a list.”

“Only because you gave me one. Wear flat shoes so you won’t feel like you’re walking with your mommy? Read more so your conversations with me won’t be boring? Improving me for whom,
Leonard? God, you accused Sheldon of training me but it was the both of you.”

“Maybe it’s a physicist thing,” he said sheepishly as his fingers began to rub his thumbs.

“Maybe.” Penny glanced out the window. “Even if Sheldon helped me with school so I wouldn’t leave him he still made me do all the work.”

Leonard frowned. “You’re not his creation.”

“You’re right, I’m not. He saw what I could be at a time when I thought I was junk.”


“I was a drunk who fucked at the drop of a hat. I was lost, Leonard. Drowning. And nobody did anything to help me. It was poor Penny. Dumb Penny. Slutty Penny. Great to have around because I was hot and a good lay.”

“That’s not true,” Leonard sputtered. “I mean not to say that you aren’t hot and a good lay but that’s not all you are.”

“Leonard, besides sex what else do we have in common? What else did we do? It’s time to be honest with each other. You told me that you agreed with me on things just so I’d have sex with you. Who does that?”

“Yeah, well who shoved her tongue down my throat?” growled Leonard with a frown.

“I did it because I said I loved you,” she blurted out.

Her fiancé was hurt. “Said’ you loved me. You mean you didn’t?”

“I did. I do.” Penny bit her lip as Leonard did his best to compose himself. “I quit doing things I used to do and just hung out with you, with all of you until I had nothing left for myself.”

“You had your acting,” he said hoarsely.

Here Penny smiled grimly. “I think it’s fair to say that I hadn’t been putting my all into chasing down auditions.”

“So we brought you down.”

“No! Well, not completely.”

“Gee thanks,” Leonard said with a roll of the eyes.

Penny sighed. “You guys are so much smarter than me and it was a mix because in some ways you were so clueless and needed me, too. The only thing was as time went on you all caught on with social clues and music and makeup and shoe shopping. I mean you should have seen Amy and you last night with your hip clothes and sophisticated conversations.” She caught his eyes with her own. “You guys were awkward as kids and yeah it might have taken a while but you’ve finally grown into your own. For me it’s been a slide down ever since I got to L.A.” She took in his pained expression. “I had naïve expectations about my life and when they fell to shit I didn’t have a backup plan.”

“Well you’ve got one now,” the short man said softly. “You’ve got a career and a fiancé.”

“But I don’t have me,” Penny said simply. “Nearly everything I was when I left Nebraska is gone,
Leonard. I was a fighter. I watched football with friends and went dancing and—"

“We go places,” he countered although it sounded half-hearted.

“Because we want to or because we feel we have to, to make the other person happy?” He was silent. “Leonard, we barely have anything in common.”

“We have a lot in common,” he said. “I’m just too upset to come up with examples at the moment.”


“So did you.”

“I looked pretty. It’s what I do.” He frowned.

“I like you for more than that. You’re kind and funny and everything I’ve ever dreamed of having in a girl.”

“I want to grow.”

“So grow!” he snapped as he raised his hands into the air. “I’m not stopping you.”

“Leonard, I don’t think I can start over again. I don’t want to give up what I have in California. I’ve finally done what I set out to: arrive on my own with a career.”

Leonard shook his head and sighed. “Penny, I can’t go back.”

“I know. I wouldn’t want you to. You’ve outgrown Pasadena.” She smiled sadly. “You’ve outgrown me.”

“What are you talking about?” he said, shocked.

“I’ve done my job, Leonard. It’s like with Sheldon: I got him in touch with his emotions so he could be with Amy. You’re finally in your environment and you’re ready to take life by the balls. I’m not. I don’t fit in and I never will until I know who I am.”

“You’re the woman I love,” he said brokenly.


“I’m holding you back?” he gasped.

“I need to find myself and for the first time in my whole life I finally get it. I can’t live through other people to find my own happiness. This is the same thing all over again like when I was a teenager looking at the movie stars and wanting to be them so badly. I acted so I could be a star, not because I wanted to act.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I thought you enjoyed acting?”

Penny shrugged. “I do. It just isn’t for the right reason. I won’t be happy until it is.”

Leonard took a big breath and slowly let it out. “So what do you want to do?”

“Raj is giving me a place to stay for a bit and I’m going to beg for my old job back.” Penny again
shrugged. “It’s not a brilliant plan but it’s what I’ve got at the moment.”

“Maybe we just need some time to think about things,” Leonard said flatly.

“I have thought about things. I know what I have to do.”

“And being my wife isn’t it.”

“Leonard, we’re settling. We both are.” She wiped the tears from her cheek. “You know what I really want?”

“What?”

“The one thing Sheldon can’t have: tomorrow. You’re in a new city and at a new job. You’ve gotten a fancy shmancy award and I’m sure there’ll be others. Your tomorrow is now. I just want the same.”

“Penny, I—” He faltered but for a moment as if he had something to say but he steadied himself. “This is really happening.”

“We had to grow up sometime.” With a shaky hand she slipped the engagement ring from her finger. Leonard’s breathing hitched as he took it, staring at the diamond’s sparkle.

“I’ll never forget you,” he said as tears rolled down his face. Penny placed a hand on his cheek to raise his head.

“I’ll miss you, too.”

She turned and took her suitcase and left the apartment.

As the elevator door closed she realized she’d never see Leonard again.

XxX

Relief washed through her body as Penny saw the dark skin and horrible sweater vest of her friend as he stood in the waiting area at the airport.

Their eyes locked and Raj smiled sympathetically before she burst into tears. He stepped forward and wrapped his arms around her.

Once he got her calmed down and into the car Penny pulled out her phone. There were twenty messages—all from Amy. She’d tell the neurobiologist what happened but not now.

The ride ended as it began, in silence, and the pair made their way up the stairs until they arrived at their floor. Raj opened his door and left it ajar. He took off his jacket and hung it on the back of his computer chair before venturing to the kitchen for a bottle of wine and poured some of its contents into two glasses. He settled into the comfy chair and took a sip.

A few minutes later there was a soft tap at the door before it opened and Penny appeared wearing a red Flash t-shirt and pink Hello Kitty shorts carrying her quilt and pillow.

“I don’t want to be alone tonight,” she said and closed and locked the door. She put her own keys in the bowl and settled herself on the couch. Raj handed her a glass and they both took a sip.

“Thanks. For everything.”

“It’s no trouble,” the astrophysicist replied. They sat in silence.
“I don’t know what your plans are,” he continued after a bit. “But after you called this morning I talked with Howard and Bernadette. I told them I was keeping the apartment.” He noted Penny’s surprise. “They were cool with it. Since the elevator still hadn’t been fixed they weren’t looking forward to carrying a stroller up three flights of stairs.” He took a sip to steady himself. “Anyways, you can stay here until you get yourself back on your feet. We can move your bedroom furnishings into the spare room here and move Leonard’s bed and dresser into your apartment for pickup.”

“You’re sure?” Penny asked shyly. “It might take a while for me to get another job.”

“Penny, I won’t have you homeless. I’ll talk to my parents and they’ll float me some extra money for a couple of months.” A little smile came to his lips. “I’m sure the idea that their son is living with a ‘real live girl’ will be enough repayment.” They both chuckled and finished their wine.

“God, I’m exhausted,” Penny sighed.

“Time to sleep,” agreed Raj as he got up and cleared the glasses away to the sink. “I’ll set an alarm. Six thirty good for you?”

“Yeah.” Penny stretched out on the couch and fluffed her comforter over her.

“Goodnight, Penny,” Raj said and turned off the light.

“You’re a good friend, Raj.”

“Thank you.”

Penny sighed as she snuggled into the couch.

She was home.

xTBBTx

“You’re in early,” Esperit said with a smile from behind her reception desk. “How was Boston?”

“A bad case of inertia,” Penny said. She held up her hand and her friend’s mouth dropped as Esperit realized that the engagement ring was missing.

“Oh my God,” the receptionist hissed.

“We’ll talk later. Is Sophie in?”

“She should be in her office, although you better hurry things up since she’s got a meeting at nine with HR.”

Penny nodded and proceeded to her manager’s office and knocked at the open door.

“Good morning, Penelope,” Sophie said evenly and the Nebraskan entered.

“I need to talk to you about my job,” Penny began. The manager pursed her lips.

“You no longer think you can provide six week’s notice. Penelope, it’s company policy to—”

“No, I don’t want to.” Sophie raised an eyebrow. “Not that I wouldn’t if I wanted to but I—” Penny took a breath. “Let me start again. Sophie, I was wondering if I could use your reference here because I want to keep my job.”
“I see.” The manager picked up her IPad and made some notes. “You do realize that I submit documents at four pm on Fridays.”

“Yeah.”

“‘Yes’.”

“Yes.” The room was silent for a moment and then Sophie got up from her chair and took a familiar packet of papers from the inbox on her desk.

“However, I felt it was in the best interest of the office to hold off with submitting your resignation. Just in case you changed your mind.”

“I have,” Penny said and took the proffered papers.

“Make sure the quarterlies are ready by Friday. I’ll expect a progress report by Wednesday at the latest, sooner if problems arise.”

“Absolutely.”

“And Penelope.” A flash of a smile passed over Sophie’s lips. “Welcome back.”

“Thank you,” Penny grinned and returned to her desk.

**End of Part Three**

xTBBTx

Wikipedia: Wave-Particle Duality

Wave-Particle Duality: What is Quantum Physics? Thinkquestorg

3h/2: An approximation. FF won’t let me post the proper formula.
Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Summary

“There is nothing I would not do for those who are really my friends. I have no notion of loving people by halves, it is not my nature.”

-Jane Austin, Northanger Abbey

Reference to: ‘The Apology Insufficiency’; ‘The Bath Item Gift Hypothesis’; ‘The Electric Can Opener Fluctuation’; ‘The Large Hadron Collision’

It was a simple arrangement at apartment 4A: Raj cooked and Penny did the dishes. The move had been quick and easy as Leonard’s furnishings were sent to Boston and the remainder of Penny’s was either sold or else donated. The roommates settled in quite nicely with ‘Sandra Bullock’ night on Tuesdays, ‘Sex and the City’ Saturdays and pilates on Sundays to work off the ice cream from the night before.

Howard and Bernadette still came over until it became too awkward for the microbiologist to climb the stairs. As the months flew by it seemed as though Bernadette couldn’t get much bigger. It was therefore no surprise to Penny when she got a text from Raj saying that Bernadette’s water had broken. Both Howard and he left the university immediately for the Wolowitz apartment while the mom-to-be grabbed her hospital bag and waited.

At two thirty eight in the afternoon Howard and his beautiful, beautiful wife welcomed Mary Jane Wolowitz into the world. When Penny arrived after work she found it tough to decide who was the father as both Howard and Raj fussed over the baby with equal abandon.

“I still can’t get over her little toesies,” the astrophysicist gushed as he opened the apartment door. “Of course I can’t get over Howard’s tiny toes either so I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“Yeah I know the feeling,” chuckled Penny. “One shoe shopping trip with Bernadette and I felt like Big Foot. Not the greatest feeling to have when you inherit your dad’s feet let me tell ya.”

“You have very pretty man feet,” Raj said diplomatically as he sat down at his computer to edit and upload the baby photos to his Facebook page.

“Yeah, thanks.” She gave him a light swat on the back of his head and went to get ready for bed.

After she was washed, brushed and dressed she returned to the kitchen for a glass of water only to find Raj sitting in the stuffed chair staring at a picture of Mary Jane.

“She’s a cutie,” Penny said.

“She’s magnificent,” Raj sighed happily. “I am such a lucky man.”

Penny smirked as she got her glass of water before sitting down on the couch. Normally she would have thought that sentiment should be reserved for Howard but after seeing the assortment of toys
and accessories the astrophysicist had stored in his room to shower his God-child with she doubted Raj could be even an ounce less excited.

“Do you want children?” Raj asked as he sat back in the chair with a contented sigh.

“I—don’t know,” Penny replied. “I assumed I was going to. My sister has a couple. It just never came up with Leonard. What about you?”

He smiled. “I want lots of children.”

“I’m glad. You’d be a great dad.”

“You’d be a great mom.” Penny rolled her eyes.

“Right.”

“Seriously. The way you handled Sheldon was amazing. Before we met you he was condescending, arrogant, selfish—” The assistant laughed.

“He was still all that the day he died.”

“Yes but he was other things too,” Raj continued. “More aware of other people’s feelings. More accommodating. He never would have dated Amy without you.”

“Yeah I guess.”

A little smile came to Raj’s face. “It’s funny. The way you two acted in the beginning I was almost positive it would have been Sheldon and you who’d be dating, not Leonard.”

“Seriously?” Penny scoffed.

“You were good for each other. You balanced each other out, each helping the other grow. Then you just went for Leonard.”

“Yeah, well, I never said I was smart back then.”

“Yeah.” She lightly kicked him causing him to chuckle. “I miss all this. When it was just us guys and you. Wildly sowing our oats.” Penny looked at him with a smirk. “Ok you were sowing. We were at home counting our seeds. But still, they were great times.”

Penny got up and kissed Raj on the cheek. “We’ll just have to make new ones.”

After she left the room Raj touched his cheek and smiled.

xTBBTx

By the time the mirror came to life Sheldon had completed his stick trestle and was just putting the finishing touches on his switching yard.

“If only I took Penny to the train store,” he sighed as he dusted his hands.

His mirror self was again at the whiteboard but there was no Penny in sight. Sheldon stepped into the apartment and walked over to his bookcase to stare longingly at his ‘History of Locomotives in Pictures’.

The toilet flushed and then the sounds of running water came before the bathroom door opened and
Penny emerged. The Nebraskan flip-flopped her way down the hall and plunked down on the couch.

“You’re in my spot,” Dream Sheldon said without turning.

“Yeah, I guess I am,” she replied sweetly. He spun around with pursed lips and she snickered as she slid to the next cushion over. She regarded the board. “So what ya doing today, Mr. Wizard? Working on your Space Modulator?”

“You mean the ‘Illudium Q-36 Explosive Space Modulator’, and no, I leave that kind of engineering to Howard and Martians with Roman helmets. This is a simple exercise in entropy.”

“A particle you stuff and display in your ‘tropy’ room?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be going out with Bernadette?” he scowled.

“Not for a bit.” She leaned back against the couch. “Okay, Sherlock, so what’s entropy?”

“It’s a thermodynamic quantity representing the unavailability of a system’s thermal energy for conversion into mechanical work,” ‘Sheldon’ sniffed. “Of course this means nothing to you which is ironic since it describes the chaos of your apartment: lacking order or predictability as it gradually declines into disorder.”

“Hey. I’m improving,” Penny pouted.

Dream Sheldon snorted. “Energy doesn’t spontaneously flow ‘up hill’. Take my apartment for instance: everything has its place, labeled and clean. Energy flows from a high to lower potential. I am the spout and you are the sink,” he said haughtily.

“You know, I get enough of this high and mighty crap from Leonard without hearing more from you,” snapped Penny.

“I’m sorry, I’d just assumed you were accustomed to being treated with disrespect given how you treat yourself.”

“He wasn’t being disrespectful he was just explaining entropy,” ‘real’ Sheldon called aloud as he snuck a peek through his telescope. “You always take everything I say so personally.”

His neighbor folded her arms across her chest. “You think you’re such hot shit.” Dream Sheldon shrugged.

“I am homo novus. Although death seems to have ground me to a halt.”

“Now yuh quit that nonsense, Shelly. Yuh’re just fine.”

‘Real’ Sheldon immediately turned to see his mother standing by the couch with her hands on her hips.

Dream Sheldon rolled his eyes. “The Second Law of Thermodynamics says otherwise. I’m deceased, mother, there’s no such thing as perpetual motion.”

“Not true,” Mary replied. “God is perpetual, eternal.”

“God is fictional,” the mirror physicist tutted. “I’m talking about energy.”

“And ah’m talkin’ about energy too. The Spirit of the Lord.” Now it was ‘real’ Sheldon’s turn to
roll his eyes even as his counterpart let out an exasperated sigh. “We all feel it, Shelly. It’s called love.”

“There’s murder, theft.”


“Finite,” ‘Sheldon’ shot back.

“Are yuh tellin’ me that you stopped lovin’ me when yuh died?” Mary said with a frown.

“No,” both Sheldons replied.

“And Meemaw?”

Again a double “No”.

“And me?” Penny piped in. Dream Sheldon regarded his neighbor.

“You know the answer to that,” he said before turning back to his board.

“Come on, Penny,” Mary said amiably. “Shelly needs his alone time and we need tuh get yuh out of such a showy top before yuh go out in public.”

“I didn’t think it was that bad,” Penny pouted as the two women left the apartment and the scene went black.

“Now that was odd,” Sheldon said as he thoughtfully strolled out of the mirror. “I knew Penny for close to six years. She was my neighbor and Leonard’s girlfriend.” He turned to face the mirror and his own reflection. “I love my mother and Meemaw. You were my friend. I incorporated you into my routine.” He walked to a birch tree and sat. “If there was anyone I was fond of it was Amy. We were compatible even though she didn’t like Star Trek or comic books or paintball or Halo or my t-shirts or Doctor Who or—”

He paused. “Well, it’s not like Penny and I had that much more in common as she only played paintball and Halo although she did see the new Star Trek at the theater without being forced and knew Kirk cheated at the kobayashi maru. She knew next to nothing about science in general much less physics. It really was a mystery as to how we became friends.”

Dear friends.

“Even if you were exasperating,” Sheldon said with a little smile. Still, even when she got him into trouble like with the traffic ticket she did stand by him in court, bailed him out and made up for the whole thing by introducing him to Stan Lee! The most he got from Leonard, Raj and Howard for tampering with his monopole experiment was a half-assed apology. He returned with them to Pasadena not because they were any great shakes but because his option to stay in Galveston was no option at all.

Sheldon later found out that it was Penny who sent Leonard to retrieve him from Texas.

She got him the Leonard Nimoy autograph and gave up her trip to Europe so he could see the Hadron collider. Well, if the little vixen hadn’t contaminated him with her germs and Leonard hadn’t violated the Roommate Agreement by refusing to take him. She made him soup with little stars in it and sang him ‘Soft Kitty’ and got his WoW stuff back.
He inferred twice that, compared to him, she was a monkey.

Perhaps the real question wasn’t why he was friends with her but why she was friends with him.

xTBBTx

'That’s odd.' Penny noted that for once she wasn’t tantalized by the smell of exotic food as she ascended the final flight of stairs to the apartment. Even on nights when they babysat MJ Raj still managed to whip up ‘Chicken This au That’ or ‘Shrimp a la Yum-Yum’.

She opened the door to find Raj sitting dejectedly in the cushy chair.

“What’s wrong?” Penny asked as she closed the door and put her keys in the bowl. The astrophysicist indicated an open letter on the coffee table next to his empty wine glass.

“There’s a fundraiser dinner at the university. Siebert wants a scientist to be at each table to discuss their work.” He sighed. “What am I going to do? I can’t say no and I certainly can’t get drunk.” He eyed her sadly. “I’m going to lose my job.”

Penny took up the letter and read.

“It says you can take a date. We’ll figure it out.”

“You’ll come with me?” he said, a tad hopeful.

“We sink or swim together, bub,” Penny smiled. “But to let you know I’m a heck of a swimmer.” She folded the letter and set it on the table. “Come on, let’s get dinner. I’m starving.”

“Sorry I haven’t got anything prepared.” A sheepish smile came to Raj’s face. “Feel like a little Lean Cuisine?”

“Why not?” Penny went into her bedroom to change into her pajamas.

“How about Thai?” Raj called out.

“Why not? It’s Monday after all,” was her reply. Raj chuckled as he prepared the meals.

Penny returned to the living room wearing her sleep shorts and her Robot evolution t-shirt. It was Raj’s turn to pick out the night’s viewing and he asked her to trust him as he plopped in disk one of Firefly into the player.

“My career is in your hands. I can’t afford to piss you off,” he grinned.

xTBBTx

“So how goes the makeover?” Esperit asked as Penny and she sat down at the lunch table.

“Put the nail in the coffin with alcohol. God, the guy can’t even have a mouthful without turning into an ass,” the assistant grinned. She popped the cap off her water. After two weeks of having Raj speak with different types of alcohol they had come to the conclusion that drinking was definitely out of the question. If anyone were to ask he was to say that it was a Hindu thing.

“This should be interesting sneaking in his own rum cake,” laughed the receptionist.

“Nope to that but you’re right in finding something to eat.” Esperit waited as Penny pulled out a pack of gummy bears. “Do-it-yourself wine gums.”
“What do you use for alcohol?”

“Vodka. Although in this instance there’ll be so little vodka these little bears could drive
themselves home. We gave it a test run with some gummy worms I had and it worked like a
charm.” She put the bag of candy back into her purse just as her phone buzzed with an incoming
text. “Bears are the better way to go since they’re smaller and don’t look so wiggly.” She checked
her message.

“I’m still impressed he managed to get his doctorate without being able to talk to women sober. If
he can rattle off physics drunk I can just imag—”

Penny paled. “Crap on a cracker!”

“What?”

“Raj just got his table assignment for the dinner.” She looked at her friend. “Mr. Daly is going to
be there!”

“Wow,” Esperit whistled. “The more you try to leave work the more it follows you.”

“No,” groaned the Nebraskan. “You know what’s even worse? Not only has Sophie introduced me
to him but he was the big-wig who helped me find the warranty paper in your files.” She slumped
in her chair. “God, with my luck he’ll remember.”

“Penelope, that was nearly four years ago. I somehow doubt he’d remember,” the Jamaican
soothed.

“You don’t know my luck,” Penny snorted. “Besides I have no idea what I’m supposed to say.
Definitely can’t make anything up.” She sighed. “God, I’m supposed to be Raj’s moral support.
Who’s gonna support me?”

“You’ll be fine. Believe me. Now take a deep breath.” Both women inhaled. “And let it go.” They
did. “Better?”

“Better juice up a few more gummy bears,” Penny chuckled.

xTBBTx

“Sheldon,” Penny’s voice sighed.

The physicist was surprised to see his counterpart in the kitchen with his chemistry set. He stepped
through and approached the kitchen counter upon which was a mishmash of colored liquids in test
tubes. There was a gibberish ‘formula’ on the whiteboard Dream Sheldon kept referencing.

Penny entered the apartment and went to the physicists.

“What ya doing?” she asked as she reached for a test tube only to have ‘Sheldon’ slap away her
hand.

“Don’t touch,” he admonished. “I’m mixing rocket fuel for Koothrappali’s demonstration.”

“Cool. You’re going to be there?”

‘Sheldon’ snorted. “Rajesh attempting to speak to a mixed audience sober? I wouldn’t miss it for
the world.”
“Yeah, I’m supposed to introduce him and I’ve got zip to say.” Penny smiled grimly as she watched him carefully pour a blue liquid into a beaker with reddish liquid. “I’m going to look like an idiot in front of everyone.”

“Nonsense. You’ll be regarded as nervous and unprepared. Raj will be the fool.” Penny sighed. “I don’t know anything about science.”

“Amen, sister,” ‘Sheldon’ chuckled.

“And Radiohead is?” scowled his neighbor.

“Yes, well, maybe we should each stick to our own knowledge base.” The Nebraskan rolled her eyes.

“Yeah, like knowing the lyrics to ‘Boom Boom Pow’ will really impress my boss.”

‘Sheldon’ picked up the beaker and gently swirled the contents. “Penny, there’s a vast gamut of information outside of science. Granted, they aren’t relevant but surely you could master a topic or two.”

Penny brightened and slapped her hands enthusiastically on the back of the stool.

“You’re right! I can study up on current events and stuff.” She went to the door. “You know Sheldon, sometimes you’re pretty smart.”

She left the room as Dream Sheldon sputtered a “Pretty smart!?” and the scene went dark.

Sheldon took a moment to process everything before he let out a gaspy laugh.

xTBBTx

“Ha! I knew there was a way to get rid of ‘allergy eyes’,” Penny said with a smirk before turning the page of a Newsweek magazine.

“And North Korea?” prompted Raj as he worked away at his whiteboard.

“Crazy-ass dictatorship although it’s still up in the air whether the leader is actually running the country or else is a puppet for military bigwigs.”

“Exactly.”

The Nebraskan set the magazine down next to a medium stack of newspapers and magazines. Granted, she could have looked up things on the internet but she wanted the feel of paper between her fingers. Besides, she stared at a computer for a good chunk of the day at work so it was nice to give her eyes a break. If she had questions about a particular article Raj was quick to answer and quizzed her every once in a while on the subject matter and pressed her to form an opinion.

Sometimes she’d brave a look-see into Physics Today and scan the articles. She tended to stick to the short ones since they were less time consuming to struggle with and not understand.

Penny picked up the physics magazine and flipped to the section on little blurbs from around the world. She scanned the articles looking to find one with the fewest twenty dollar words in it when she stopped over a name.

“Hey, Leonard’s in here,” she said, a tad shocked. “‘Proton beams from a nanotube accelerator’.
“What’s that?”

Raj crossed over and took the magazine to read the article.

“Fascinating. Leonard and his colleagues are using a carbon nanotube to shoot a beam of protons.” He handed the magazine back to Penny. “A carbon nanotube is exactly that: a miniature cylinder made of carbon allotropes. They’re used in nanotechnology, electronics and even in carbon fiber baseball bats, golf clubs and car parts. Leonard’s hypothesizing using these nanotubes to fire off a stream of monoenergetic protons.”

“Huh. Kind of like a shotgun.” Raj’s eyes brightened.

“Exactly like a shotgun. See? You are learning this stuff.”

“Naa, I just know a lot about shooting things,” laughed Penny. “The tube sounded like a metal barrel and the protons, pellets.”

He returned to his board. “Still if it works it’ll be huge for medicine, fusion energy and materials science.”

“Well good for him,” Penny said firmly. It was just over a year since they ended their relationship. It was hard not talking to Leonard and she did have her cry fits in the early days but Raj and ‘Rocky Road’ got her through it. She knew her ex-boyfriend still spoke to Howard; Leonard’s relationship with Raj varied as sometimes he seemed a little bitter the astrophysicist took in Penny but at other times he was grateful to know she was safe.

“And that’s that for today,” Raj said with a smile after looking over his board.

“What is all that anyways?”

“An idea I have about black holes,” he said as he went to the counter to retrieve his bottled water. “You see, when a massive star exhausts its fuel, it collapses under its own gravity and produces a black hole, an object so dense that not even light can escape its gravitational grip. One theory says that the black hole appears without a bang or a flash: the star would seemingly vanish from the sky—an event we call an unnova.” He indicated the board with the bottle. “What I’m proposing is that just before the black hole forms, the dying star may generate a distinct burst of light that will allow us to witness the birth of a new black hole for the first time.”

“Wow. And you’ve proved it?”

“No, but as I’m going along I’m eliminating things that disprove it thus making my theory more likely.”

Penny cocked her head. “You sound like you know your stuff. Why aren’t you in here?” She flipped the physics magazine with her hand.

He smiled sadly. “My problems talking with women have limited my career.”

“No more,” the Nebraskan said as she reached into the bag of ‘vodka bears’ and tossed one to her friend.

“Nope,” Raj said as he held up the red bear. “Now we get to find out if I have anything worth saying.”

xTBBTx
Sheldon made his way along the wall of mirrors when in the far distance he heard Penny call his name. He ran like mad for several hundred meters before the realization set in that he was too far to get to the mirror in time. Out of habit he stopped and took a moment to breathe even though he wasn’t out of breath.

“Feeling stupid?”

The physicist glanced at the Man as he walked out from between the birch trees.

“The great Dr. Cooper running at the drop of a hat whenever a woman calls,” the Man continued.

“You mean when Penny calls,” Sheldon amended with a frown.

“And she’s not a woman?”

“She’s my friend.”

“I see. My error.” Sheldon started walking and the Man fell into step though he remained at the tree line. “So how are we doing?” he asked lightly as they passed a stick Sheldon had driven into the ground.

“I’ve counted thirty seven thousand eight hundred and seventy five mirrors to the right of Penny’s portal and forty three thousand four hundred and sixty four to the left and haven’t encountered anyone familiar.”

“Or at least someone who thinks of you,” the Man amended.

“There’s that,” agreed Sheldon with a shrug.

“You’re lucky you found Penny’s mirror.”

“I don’t ascribe to luck.”

“So what do you call this instance?”

“The culmination of my travels through the marshy terrain. Nothing more.”

The Man laughed. “You’re right. In more ways than you think.” Sheldon stopped walking.

“What do you mean?”

“You’re a smart man, Dr. Cooper. You’ll figure it out.” The physicist scowled and resumed his step.

“You know I get the feeling you’re herding me into an epiphany. It’d be easier for the both of us if you just came out and told me,” he growled.

“I can’t.”

“You won’t.”

“No, I can’t.”

Sheldon regarded his companion. “Is someone impeding you?”

“No.”
“Then why can’t you say anything?”

“Because I don’t know what to say,” said the man with a shrug.

“But you laughed,” Sheldon continued.

The Man smiled sheepishly. “Rude of me. I apologize.”

“But what was so funny?”

“I keep forgetting what a literalist you are.”

“I’m here because I heard Penny’s voice call my name,” Sheldon sniffed. “If she hadn’t called I wouldn’t have known to come here.”

“If you say so.”

“Are you insinuating that I knew to come here? I’ve never been here before so how would I know of Penny’s dreamscape? How would I know about any of this? I’m supposed to be dead.” He turned to find the Man gone from the scene.

“I hate it when he does that,” said Sheldon with pursed lips.

xTBBTx

Penny grabbed her purse and made for the exit.

“Good luck, not that you need it,” Esperit called from behind her desk.

“As long as the both of us have jobs tomorrow I’ll call it a victory,” grinned the assistant.

As she drove home Penny went over in her mind everything she had read over the past six weeks. Thankfully all the years of reading scripts got her used to memorizing vast amounts. Now if only she could understand what she’d read she’d be in the ballpark.

“Think positive, Penelope,” she hissed under her breath. To keep calm she turned on the radio and sang loud and proud and off-key all the way home.

When she got to the apartment she quickly got out of her clothes and jumped into the shower. Although Sophie allowed her to leave two hours early with the promise of making it up on Friday Penny was on a strict timeline before Raj got home.

Once she finished showering she checked the time and made herself some toast to tide her over. At four thirty she ran a bath and lit scented candles in the washroom.

A few minutes later a flustered Raj came into the apartment.

“To the bedroom and strip,” Penny ordered. “Your bath is ready.” Raj smiled appreciatively.

“Thank you.” As he walked by the bathroom he could smell the bath oil. ‘I might not know if I’m able to speak but at least I’ll smell pretty.’

XxX

“What do you think?” Raj asked as he appeared in the living room in the new slacks and jacket they picked up the previous weekend.
“I thought we agreed no sweater vest?” Penny said with a raised eyebrow.

“But I feel safer with it on,” the astrophysicist pouted. “It’s like my Iron Man outfit.”

“You don’t need to be Iron Man. Besides, you’ve got something better than a silly vest.”

“Oh?”

Penny put her hands on her hips and thrust out her chest. “You’ve got me.”

With a wide grin Raj took in her purple dress with long, tight sleeves and a hemline that lay just above her knees. She might not be showing cleavage but with her toned figure and ample bosom Penny gave the imagination a push into the right direction.

He took off his jacket and gingerly removed his vest so as to keep from messing up his hair.

“Lead on, oh knight,” he said as Penny opened the door.

“After you, oh princess,” she chuckled.

“Belle of the ball,” he corrected.

XxX

“Howard, thank God you’re here!” gushed Raj.

“Couldn’t get out of it. Famous astronaut and all that,” the short man said proudly. The university was loath to see him just leave so it gave him full alumni status and an ‘armchair advisor’ role at the lab.

“It’s good for you, Howie,” squeaked Bernadette. “Sometimes he talks to me in baby-speak,” she said pointedly to Penny.

“Kinda degrading, huh?” the assistant nodded.

“It’s actually cute. Unless we’re in bed. Then it’s kind of creepy.”

“Well, it’s quarter to six,” a blushing Howard said. “Time to sit ourselves down and await the masses.”

Raj reached into his pocket and pulled out a vodka bear and popped it into his mouth. He smiled nervously at Penny, who took his hand and led him to the table.

“Remember to keep breathing and if you find yourself freezing up just pop a bear,” she said soothingly as they sat. “If anyone asks just say they’re those gummy vitamin C and multivitamin bears from the commercials.”

“Gotcha.” He did his best to keep his hands dry by wiping them repeatedly on his thighs.

“Here he comes,” Penny said as two men approached the table. Raj and Penny stood to receive them.

“Ross Daly,” said a salt-and-pepper haired man in an expensive blue suit as he extended his hand to Raj.

“Dr. Rajesh Koothrappali.” They shook hands. “And this is?” He indicated the other man.
“My partner David,” Ross said.

Raj turned to Penny. “And this is my companion, Penelope.”

“Penelope,” Ross said as they all sat down. “You know, you look familiar.”

“You know us Nebraskans, we can turn up anywhere,” she joked lightly. Inwardly she felt like she was going to die. Ross smiled.

“Okay, now I’m sure we’ve met. Was it work-related or a social function?”

“Definitely work. We met at Fenris. I’m Sophie’s assistant.”

“Of course!” He grinned. “Now I remember you.” He turned to his partner. “This woman single handedly put Starke in his place.”

“Which was quite the feat from what I understand,” David said amicably.

“Herculean,” agreed Ross.

“That’s my Penelope, as breathtaking as a galaxy cluster but you don’t want to mess with her gravity well,” chuckled Raj.

“So we’ve got an astronomer,” Penny’s boss said.

“Astrophysicist, actually.”

“What’s the difference, if you don’t mind me asking?” said David.

Raj straightened in his chair. “In the twentieth century the field of astronomy split into observational astronomy—the ‘stargazer’ who acquires data—and theoretical astrophysics which ascertains the observational implications of computer or analytic models.” Here he smiled. “In other words it’s my job to explain the observed results.”

“We could use you at my firm,” David chuckled. “Sometimes I think it’d take a star chart to figure out where some of my clients are coming from.”

“We’re all ‘children of the stars’,” Raj assured him. “It’s just that some are a little more ‘spaced out’ than others.” They all laughed and Raj was pleased with himself.

‘This is perfect.’ Penny smiled and took a sip of her water.

XxX

“I still can’t believe you didn’t tell me your boss is gay,” chortled Raj as he split the rest of the wine between two glasses.

“I didn’t know, okay?” Penny laughed. “I swear I didn’t. Besides, it’s not like people wear an ‘I’m gay’ sticker on their chest.” She thought for a moment. “Although some guys you can tell they’re gay without even trying.” She playfully slapped Raj’s thigh.

“Metrosexual, thank you very much.” He leaned back against the couch and Penny joined him. “I can’t believe it’s over. I can’t believe I mingled with people. I talked to women.” He rolled his eyes to look at his roommate. “Thanks to you I’ve got a career.”

“Naa, you got your career all by your lonesome.” She pumpkin grinned. “Although I’m willing to
assume your ass is mine for the next month.”

“How gracious of you,” the astrophysicist chuckled before taking a sip of his wine.

“Yeah, I’m all class,” she grinned. “You know we’re going to be the only two people hung over at pilates tomorrow. Maybe we should skip it.”

“Uh uh. I had dessert tonight. It’ll go straight to my hips.”

“Fine, fine.” The pair downed their glasses and set them on the table.

Penny smiled warmly at her friend. “I’m so proud of you, Raj.” He took up her hand and kissed it.

“You are my Rani, my Queen, and I am forever your prince.”

A heartbeat, perhaps two, went by before Penny’s lips were on his. After recovering from the shock Raj wrapped his arms around her and deepened the kiss.

When they broke for air they regarded each other.

“Are you sure?” he asked hoarsely.

“Who needs pilates?” she replied.

A massive grin came to her lover’s face.

The Man stepped into the clearing to find Sheldon lying on his back staring at the sky.

“Looking for something?” the Man asked.

“Just doing a little flying,” the physicist replied, garnering him a puzzled expression. “There’s no alteration to the ‘sky’ in terms of color or movement. It’s completely homogeneous as far as I can tell and there’s no discernable light source. And yet there seems to be enough to sustain the trees and grass.”

“So what does all this mean?” The Man looked at the sky.

“Just an observation.” Sheldon held up an arm and pulled back the sleeve. “I’ve been out in the open here for who knows how long and I don’t have even an inkling of sun exposure on my forearms, hands or face.”

“I don’t really see a sun so that would seem logical.”

“Of course it could be just as plausible that my present incarnation is impervious to tanning. Though I feel my heart rate elevate and my breathing more rapid I not only don’t tire out when I run but I also lack the telltale redness to my cheeks signaling exertion. I also seem to lack the ability to lacrimate although my eyes redden. Similarly I can become erect but I can’t ejaculate although I do experience a heightened feeling of elation associated with orgasm.”

The Man chuckled. “You really are thorough.”

“The last experience was—unexpected,” Sheldon replied. “Now that I’m aware of my body’s ability I will be sure to be on my guard so there’s no repeat occurrence.”
“There’s nothing wrong with masturbation.”

“I’ve always had a dispassionate relationship with my body. Masturbation was a means of releasing tension, nothing more.”

“What about sex?”
Sheldon turned his head to look at the Man. “What about it?”

“You’ve never had intercourse?”

“Why would I?”

“Why indeed?” the Man smirked. “You’re an interesting man, Dr. Cooper.”

Sheldon returned his gaze to the sky.

“What is it?”

“I don’t know.”

Sheldon rolled his eyes. “Good Lord. You can’t say this or don’t know that. What kind of a guide are you?”

The Man put his hands in his pockets. “A crappy one, apparently.”

The two men were silent.

“I’ll call you Virgil,” Sheldon said at last. “If that’s amenable to you.”

“Shall I call you Dante?” the Man laughed.

“Dr. Cooper will suffice.” The physicist pursed his lips as he thought. “So you have a specific name, you just don’t know it.”

“Exactly.”

“And I can’t give you a nickname until we find your real one?”

The Man shrugged. “I can always call you ‘Melvin’ until we do.” He took in Sheldon’s glare. “Fair’s fair.”

The physicist turned his head. “You know my name already. Hardly fair.”

“Things are because they are, Dr. Cooper, just like the sky and the trees.”

“Poppycock. If people took that sentiment the sun would still be revolving around a flat Earth. There’s an explanation for everything.”

“So then who am I?”

Sheldon returned to the sky. “I’m working on it.”
“I’ll leave you to it,” replied the Man. He lingered a moment before stepping beyond the trees.

xTBBTx

Wikipedia: Entropy

Physicsaboutcom: Classical Mechanics

Sciencedailycom: New kind of cosmic flash may reveal birth of a black hole

Physicstodayorg: Proton beams from a nanotube accelerator

Yahoo Answers: What is the difference between an astronomer and an astrophysicist?
Chapter Twenty

*Dear Penny,

How nice to hear Rajesh and you are coming to Galveston for a holiday. I’ll be sure to have Missy show you the spots where the ‘reg’lar’ folks shop so you won’t get gouged by the touristy outfits.

Of course you know that my home is yours. Once again I extend the offer of having you stay—with the understanding that you keep separate bedrooms. I don’t care what heathen custom he might have about cohabitating but there’s no frolicking out of wedlock under this roof.

If you decide to stay elsewhere I insist you’re over here for dinners. Not only will it get some home cooked food into your belly but it’ll give us a chance to catch up and talk about things for you to see while you’re here.

Take care and we’ll see you soon,

Mary*

“‘Heathen custom’?” Raj said with a raised eyebrow as he stared at the letter.

“Yeah, I got a chuckle out of that one too,” Penny grinned. She put the back of her hand to her forehead as she leaned back against the couch. “Here I was: the virgin Western flower innocently minding my own business when suddenly—”

“You’re confronted by a man with mouthwateringly delicious caramel skin and coconut oil softened hands.” Raj made his way over to the couch and gently lay on top of his girlfriend.

“You sound like something from Dairy Queen,” Penny giggled.

“I must be,” the astrophysicist murmured as he began to leave kisses on her jaw line. “Like a tasty Blizzard I go straight to your hips.”

“That is so wrong in so many ways.”

He stopped his ministrations to look at her with a twinkle in his eyes.

“That’s not what you said on Friday,” he purred.

They kissed hard, the sounds of lips smacking and an occasional moan filled the air.

“So,” Raj said breathlessly. “Should we stay at Mrs. Cooper’s place?”

Penny smirked. “Well we can always pretend we’re there already and give up sex for a week.”

“You play dirty you know that?”

“Down and dirty, actually.”

“Your wish is my command,” Raj said with a pumpkin grin.

xTBBTx

Polite laughter came from the crowd and Howard smiled.
“But more than a scientist he’s been my best friend for a dozen years and so it gives me great pleasure to introduce the winner of the President’s medal for physics, Dr. Rajesh Koothrappali.”

The astrophysicist popped a couple of vodka bears in his mouth and chewed quickly as he got up and made his way to the podium.

Penny’s heart beat with pride as she watched her boyfriend give his speech with confidence. In two years he managed to turn his ‘little idea’ about black holes into a big deal. Forget People magazine, now Astronomy & Astrophysics magazine recognized him as a scientist to watch and, more importantly, be heard.

When the article came out Raj got a congratulatory email from Leonard. Things between them had settled as they grabbed Howard for a monthly evening shoot up of Halo online. Of course what helped the situation immensely was Leonard getting a girlfriend of his own. She was a fellow physicist and Penny was glad to hear it.

As for Howard, he was busy most nights with the rambunctious MJ as the two year old had to run to exhaustion if there was any chance of her sleeping. Bernadette and he still made it to Raj and Penny’s place every Wednesday for a midweek get-together and Raj babysat his God-child every Sunday afternoon to give her parents some time to themselves.

“Thank you again to President Siebert for the honor and for you, my esteemed friends and colleagues, to take the time to honor me this evening,” Raj concluded. He smiled at the applause as he returned to his seat.

“So how was my speech?” the astrophysicist asked the table.

“It was good, sweetie.” Penny gave him a kiss. “Although not as memorable as the last time I went to one of these things.” He grinned.

“At least I kept my pants on.”

“For now,” she said with a wink, causing her boyfriend to blush.

xTBBTx

“That was an exquisite meal,” Amy said as the two couples strolled down the sidewalk.

“Yeah, whenever Raj is on a Hindu kick we head to the Jerusalem for some vegetarian cuisine,” grinned Penny, garnering an amused glare from her boyfriend.

“And when he’s not?” asked Andrew.

“The Keg,” said the astrophysicist with a dreamy smile. They all laughed.

“So have you decided who’ll do the catering?” inquired Penny.

Amy nodded. “We’ve found a wonderful Portuguese bakery that will take care of most of the desserts except for the vegan ones which are already in the bank. As it will be a small reception we have some sandwiches and other munchable finger foods so people can mingle freely and socialize.”

“You forgot a healthy dose of Reactine and plenty of tissues,” quipped Andrew.

“Flowers and you don’t get along, huh?” Penny smiled.

“Oh, I’m good with flowers it’s grasses that get to me,” replied the pathologist. He squeezed Amy’s hand. “The things I do for this woman.”

“Noted and appreciated,” she replied and they kissed lightly.

“I’m just sorry we won’t have time to take Raj to the SoWa Vintage Market,” sighed Penny.

“That just means you’ll have to come back,” Amy said lightly as they arrived at the car. Penny and her bestie got into the back seat.

“So not long now and you’ll be Amy Farrah Lightfoot,” the assistant said.

“Just Amy Lightfoot. I was debating about keeping my maiden name”—here Amy’s voice dropped to a whisper—“but I find the idea of being claimed by a man oddly titillating.” Penny shook her head in amusement.

“By the by,” the neurobiologist continued. “I must again apologize for not making you Maid of Honor. It’s just that Andrew’s sister has been an invaluable assistant and—”

“No worries, Ames. The wedding’s in Boston and there’s a lot of work to be done.” Penny smiled reassuringly at her friend. “Besides, being a Bride’s Maid means I can party my ass off the night before and just have to worry about being presentable for the wedding.”

“Except in our hearts we’ll always know you’re the Maid of Honor,” Amy said with a little smile.

“Happy Anniversary,” Raj said as he clinked glasses with his girlfriend. They spent the day at a spa and were now relaxing in separate tubs.

“Three years and counting,” Penny grinned. They drank.

“Just think: in October Amy will be married and Bernadette is due sometime in July. It’s a great time,” Raj smiled.

“Yeah.” Her boyfriend stared at her, searching for something. “What?” she asked.

“Nothing,” he said after a moment with a little smile. “Just looking.”

“Believe me, later there’ll be a lot of touching,” Penny said with a wink

Again their glasses clinked.

Sheldon and the Man leisurely paced alongside the mirrors.

“Are you a resident of this dimension?” asked the physicist.

“No.”

“Where did you come from?”
“I’m not sure,” the Man said with a shrug.

“Alright. Do you have any memories prior to my meeting you?”

“Of course I do.”

“Like?” prompted Sheldon.

“Dr. Feynman is an exceptionally talented artist. He used to spend hours drawing on the whiteboard.”

“You gave him the sketchpad and pencil.”

“It was better suited for him than a dry-erase marker and easel.”

Sheldon regarded the Man. “Where did you get them from?”

“From?”

“Yes, from.” Silence. “You can’t tell me you just happened to have a sketchpad and pencil handy at the exact moment Dr. Feynman needed one.” The Man was silent. “Well?”

“You said not to tell you that I just happened to have a—”

Sheldon sighed. “Alright, then you’re somehow attuned to whomever you’re with.” He rubbed his tongue against his inner cheek in thought. “Do you know what I’m thinking?”

“Yes and no.”

“Explain.”

“Yes’ in that I know things as you relate them to me since you’re rather linear in thought. And ‘no’ I can’t read your mind like Professor X.”

“I see.” The physicist pursed his lips. “So you think your scrutinizing combined with a ‘guess and by golly’ approach allows you access into my ‘soul’?”

The Man laughed. “You make me seem like a thief in the night. I only know what you’re willing to reveal, Dr. Cooper.”

Sheldon gave a thin smile. “Who knew I was so forthcoming?”

“You’re an open book to those who know how to read.”

“Hardly.”

The Man raised an eyebrow. “Penny seemed to have a handle on you.”

“How would you know?”

“How could you not know?”

Sheldon pursed his lips even as the Man grinned.

“You’re as impossible as Penny,” the East Texan huffed.

The Man laughed.
“This was a great idea,” Bernadette said as she adjusted Jacob in her arms so he could suckle more freely. “It’s nice to get outside.”

Her second pregnancy was trickier than the first and she had to take the last two months off work so she could rest. Jacob was two weeks early but otherwise healthy. It was decided he would be the last and so Howard bit the bullet and had a vasectomy.

“Yup. We can sit back and relax while the kids play in the park,” replied Penny before taking a sip of her now-melted iced coffee.

“To be honest I don’t know what we would have done without Raj and you. Taking MJ on the weekends really gave Howard a break from tending to both of us. Then when Jacob came along….” Here a little smile crossed the microbiologist’s face. “As much as I liked Mrs. Wolowitz coming over during the week my voice was giving out from all the yelling.”

“It’s no problem. Raj had a ball.”

Bernadette grabbed a wipe and cleaned some spillage off her breast.

“So did MJ. We did our best but sometimes I think she felt lost in the shuffle when her brother came home.”

“I know. Sometimes she fussed at night and wanted you but Raj would sing to her in Hindi and she’d go to sleep and be right as rain in the morning.”

The two women watched as three figures broke away from the Pirate Park. Howard walked beside Raj who had MJ on his shoulders.

“You know, I bet in some world Howie and Raj make a good couple,” Bernadette giggled.

“They make a good couple now,” laughed Penny.

The little woman smiled wistfully at her husband’s best friend as he stretched MJ’s arms and began to run about like an airplane.

“Raj needs a child of his own. Someone this loving can’t go without children,” Bernadette said evenly.

“I know.” Penny heard the sounds of MJ and Raj laughing while Howard made like another airplane with his arms and gave chase. “Sometimes he says things, I don’t know if they’re on purpose or they just slip out. Sometimes he’s aware but there are times when he’s not and it’s those times that kill me,” she said quietly. “I love Raj. I really do.”

“But?” prompted her friend.

“I don’t know if I can do the domestic thing. It wouldn’t be like you and Howard; I don’t make enough money for Raj to stay home with the baby so it’d be daycare and running to appointments and all sorts of things.”

“Have you told Raj?”

“No.” Pause. “I don’t know what to do. I don’t want to lose him.”

“That’s not a reason to have a baby, Penny.”
“I know.” Bernadette eyed her sympathetically as the trio arrived.

“We need to recharge under these here trees,” drawled Howard as he collapsed next to his wife. “How are you ladies and little gentleman doing?”

“Great,” his wife replied. “Her juice is in the cooler.”

Raj took MJ off his shoulders and sat next to Penny. Howard handed his daughter the sippy cup and immediately the little girl sat in Raj’s lap.

“I think after someone has a n-a-p we can check out the swings and then get some i-c-e-c-r-e-a-m,” smiled Raj as he tugged playfully on MJ’s pigtail. “What a wonderful day,” he sighed happily and leaned over to kiss his girlfriend.

Penny smiled and offered him a sip of her iced coffee.

As Sheldon stepped through the mirror he heard the sounds of Penny screaming in anger and tossing things in her apartment. Mirror Sheldon seemed disinterested in the whole affair, choosing instead to work at his board.

“Well, I suppose she’ll be here soon enough,” Sheldon said with a shrug and joined his other self at the board. Occasionally he heard a “You bastard!” or an expletive sentence complete with a “Fuck you!” cherry on top from across the hall.

“Language, Penny,” he tsked.

After a particularly horrendous crash which sounded like Penny flipping her shelving unit a door flew open in the hall and a moment later the Nebraskan stormed into the apartment.

“You!” she snarled as she marched across the room. “It’s your fault!” Before Sheldon could react she marched right through him, shoved Dream Sheldon aside and began wiping the equations on the board with her hand.

“*What are you doing!*” Dream Sheldon shrieked and tried to intervene but the look on his neighbor’s face caused him to not only pause but take a step back.

“Pretty Penny on the couch playing Halo,” she said bitterly. “Playful Penny watching Star Trek and Firefly and Star Wars episodes one to nine.”

“Good Lord, here’s hoping they got someone to script and direct other than Lucas,” ‘real’ Sheldon murmured.

Dream Sheldon shook his head in confusion. “Penny, I fail to see why you’re—”

“I’m you!”

“You’re hardly me,” ‘Sheldon’ snorted. “I’ve an IQ of one hundred and eighty seven while you—”

Tears fell from Penny’s face. “I’m alone, Sheldon. Everyone’s gone.”

“I’m still here,” Dream Sheldon said as he slowly moved to his board and took up the eraser to finish wiping the marred formulas.

“Because you don’t have enough sense to leave,” she sighed.
‘Real’ Sheldon felt his stomach drop at her words.

“No, this is my home,” mirror Sheldon said insistently as he began to write. “You keep intruding.”

Penny sighed and her shoulders slumped.

“I miss you,” she said softly. “I miss this,” indicating the couch with her hand.

“Things change, Penny,” ‘real’ Sheldon said equally as quiet before exiting the mirror.

“What am I doing?” he said, positively heartsick.

“Problems?” The Man was concerned.

Sheldon turned to the mirror to watch Penny and ‘Sheldon’ talk. “I’ve been so obsessed with contacting Penny I didn’t consider the implications.” He paused. “I may have harmed her.”

“How?” the Man asked gently. “It’s not like you can directly converse with her.”

“It might be my influence on her board. Perhaps she can somehow sense my presence.” He sighed deeply. “She said that I didn’t have enough sense to leave.”

“She actually talked to you?”

“Not to me, no. My other self. But I think the sentiment is clear: she keeps thinking about me and the apartment as things were. I don’t see her thinking about tomorrow.”

The Man shrugged. “It’s not like I’m an expert on these things but didn’t you say that the mirror only showed dreams involving you? As you’ve crossed over you’re no longer in Penny’s present or future so why would she put you there?”

“I don’t want to hurt her.”

“You were helping her, Dr. Cooper. Your intentions were pure.”

“It doesn’t matter. I can no longer risk it. Risk her.”

The mirror went dark before returning to its reflective self.

xTBBTx

The wedding was small but a formal affair and Amy really did look every bit the bride as Andrew and she exchanged vows in the garden gazebo. Penny and Raj had to dab their eyes so they’d look presentable for the wedding photos.

“You look sad, hung over or extremely congested,” Penny teased Andrew.

“Cut myself off after three drinks since I knew I’d be pounding the allergy medication today,” he chuckled.

“Here’s hoping it’s the non-sleepy formula or else you’ll have one angry bride,” winked Raj.

“I find you don’t piss off a woman who knows how to dissect brains,” the pathologist drawled.

“It’s the same thing I tell Howie: ‘you do realize I can weaponize small pox like that,” Bernadette said with a grin and snapped her fingers.
“Yeah,” Howard agreed although with a lot less enthusiasm.

“Alright bestie,” said Amy as she took Penny’s hand. “There’s a double swing over by the willow tree with our names on it.” She practically dragged off the assistant.

The engineer laughed as he looked from Andrew to Amy and Penny.

“Why do I bet there’ll be more pictures of Penny in the wedding album than you?”

XxX

Since the gathering was small Amy opted not to toss the garter and instead gathered all the single people for the bouquet.

The crowd counted to three and then she let it go. From out of nowhere Raj’s arm shot out and solidly caught the flowers in a baseball grab.

“I played cricket as a child,” he said with a blush as he was congratulated.

“Here comes the blushing bride and his rodeo star,” his best friend teased.

“And I bet I look dreamy too,” Raj said with a wink causing Howard to choke on his champagne.

XxX

“What a day,” Penny said from the bathroom as she dried her hair with a towel. “Sorry we stayed until the end but Amy wanted me there.” Howard and Bernadette left the reception to meet up with Leonard and his girlfriend. Penny had suggested Raj accompany them but he declined.

She emerged from the bathroom wearing a blue teddy and shorts to find her boyfriend sitting cross-legged on the bed in his silk pajama bottoms with the bouquet in his lap. Penny crawled across the bed and sat across from him.

“You’re quiet,” she said softly as he lightly stroked the petals of the roses.

“Today has been overwhelming. Amy was a beautiful bride.”

“Yup.”

“Just like Bernadette was.” Pause. “Just like you’d be.”

Penny blushed. “You’d make a handsome groom.”

Silence.

“I want children, Penny. Not two years from now. I mean now.” He looked at her with longing eyes. “I want what Howard has. I want babies and my own special day.”

“I know. I just—” A wry smile came to her face. “I want to know I’m doing this for the right reason. I already had a relationship where I lived vicariously through Leonard. I lost who I was.” She shrugged. “Maybe that scarred me because the idea of being a wife and mother scares the shit out of me.”

He nodded. “I know.” Tears began to streak down his cheeks. “I’ve known for a while. I just buried myself in MJ and now Jacob because I didn’t have the courage to do what we should.” He smiled sadly. “I love you, Penny. That’s why this is so hard.”
A little sob escaped from her lips as she did her best not to cry although tears wet her face.

“I’ve waited for you to change your mind because you are absolutely wonderful and I feel blessed to have you in my life. It’s been three and a half years, Penny. I don’t want to be one of those guys who have children when they’re fifty. I want to be young enough to enjoy them and give them the father who plays cricket no matter how badly I play.” Here they both laugh-sobbed.

“You want tomorrow.” Penny took his hands.

“I’m going back to India if I can swing it with the University of Delhi,” he said softly.

“They’d be a fool not to take you.” She began to cry in earnest. “A fool like me…."

Raj set aside the bouquet and Penny came into his arms.

“Please don’t tell me I lose you,” she said as he stroked the back of her head.

“I’ll always be at your service, my Queen,” he whispered.

She nodded and held on.

“xTBBTx

“What do you mean you’re breaking up?” Esperit said, heartbroken. “You’re great together.”

“We’re comfortable together,” Penny said as she munched on a French fry.

“So?”

“What we want we can’t give the other. Raj wants his house and white picket fence and I want… not that. There’s romance but there’s something missing.” She shrugged. “Passion? I dunno.”

“How about ‘reality’,” snorted the receptionist as she set down her fork. “Get your head out of the sky, Penelope. It’s real life.”

“I know.” A little smile came to Penny’s lips. “Maybe Raj and I are delusional but we want it all and we won’t get it if we stay together.”

“Well, that’s two men down,” Esperit chuckled. “One for being too hard and the other, too soft. I’m going to call you ‘Baby Bear’.” The Nebraskan laughed.

“I thought I’d be Goldilocks?”

“Compared to you she’d eat dirt off the ground.”

“Gee thanks.” Penny popped another fry in her mouth. “I’m not that fussy,” she said as she munched. “I just want someone who loves me for who I am.”

“Raj does.”

“And will support me as I do what I need to do.”

“Raj would.”

“Nice try,” Penny smirked. “Raj is not the answer.”

“You know what your problem is? You don’t even know what the answers are.” Esperit shook her
head. “Lordy, Penelope, you’re thirty five years old and you still haven’t got things figured out.”

“Maybe I’m a late-bloomer,” Penny quipped.

“Well just make sure you get to blossom before it’s all said and done.”

Penny looked thoughtfully at her fries. “Sometimes I feel like I did blossom years ago. I might have been smoking crack for thinking that I’d be a movie star but I was young and pretty and so full of life, y’know?”

Esperit laughed. “Wait a minute. I meant you’re old enough to know better not old to be sent to pasture. You’re still young enough to change and, Lord, you’ve still got a body that hasn’t quit. As for the third, well, that’s up to you to decide if you are. Life’s what you make of it, my honey.”

“Yeah.”

“So what’s the plan?”

The assistant shrugged. “Raj has applied to Delhi University. We’re staying together until he goes and then I’ll look for another apartment. I could keep it if I wanted to live on KD and hot dogs but I’m past that part.” She patted her stomach. “Especially after having Raj feed me.”

“Hello Lean Cuisine.”

Penny rolled her eyes. “You really think after living with Raj for nearly five years I haven’t picked up a trick or two in the kitchen?”

“Of course not. You divided the work evenly,” Esperit said politely, albeit with a twinkle in her eyes. “Raj did the cooking and you did the eating.”

Penny stuck out her tongue as the receptionist laughed.

xTBBTx

The Man’s jaw tightened as he came out of the woods to find Sheldon still slumped against a tree staring somewhere between the ground and the bottom of Penny’s mirror. He walked over to his companion and stood in silence.

“Sheldon,” sighed Penny’s voice.

The mirror came to life. As it played out Sheldon didn’t move save for his gaze rising to watch the scene unfold.

Again it was in the apartment.

Again ‘he’ was at the whiteboard.

This time Penny was looking through his telescope. ‘Sheldon’ rushed over and shooed her away, no doubt lecturing her on touching scientific equipment. He then adjusted a few knobs and let her peer through the lens.

The scene went black and then the mirror reappeared. There was a moment as Sheldon caught his reflection in the mirror before his eyes lowered.

“It pains me to see you this way, Dr. Cooper,” the Man said gently.
“You don’t have to check up on me,” the physicist said flatly. “It’s not like I’m doing anything particularly important.”

Since his decision to abstain from venturing into the mirror he sat down, defeated, and watched the images flash by. Sometimes Penny and ‘he’ were alone and at other times the group was there watching something on television or eating dinner. The only sight that caused him to raise an eyebrow was when Penny left the room as sometimes she kissed Leonard and at other times Raj.

“You’re important,” the Man countered. Sheldon snorted.

“To whom?”

“To Penny for one.”

“Not for much longer.” A grim smile came to Sheldon’s face. “It seems as though my theory is correct. Since my absence from the mirror Penny’s dreams about me have become sporadic.”

The Man shrugged. “She might have other things on her mind.”

“Exactly, because I’m not in mind, literally as well as figuratively, to influence her thoughts.” He glanced at the mirror. “Given time I’ll be relegated to the depths of memory, missed but ultimately forgotten.”

“I’m sorry.”

The two men were silent until a thought struck Sheldon and he caught the Man’s eyes in the mirror.

“You said I was important to more than just Penny.”

“You’re important to me.”

“Why?” the lanky man asked, puzzled.

“I like you, Dr. Cooper,” the Man said with a little smile. “I only want what’s best for you.”

“So do I. The only thing is I don’t know what that is anymore.” Sheldon’s mouth twitched. “I doubt you have any insight you’d like to share?”

“Probably not what you want to hear,” the Man agreed. “But for what it’s worth I have faith you’ll figure things out.” Sheldon shrugged dismissively and closed his eyes.

“Please don’t give up,” the Man said softly. As Sheldon didn’t reply he took that as his cue and left.

xTBBTx

“Now I see where you’ve kept your chaos all these years,” laughed Raj as he opened the living room closet.

“Hey! Your stuff’s in there too, mister,” Penny mock pouted. Since the both of them would be moving at some point they decided to go through their things and plan both a sale and drive to the donation center. Penny had her pick of the furniture and a lot of Raj’s cool South Asian knick knacks as he wasn’t bringing them with him. Besides, he pointed out that he’d be inundated by ‘Indianness’ as soon as he got home.
The astrophysicist pulled out box after box until he was faced with a huge one sitting on the floor
with his own words scribbled across the top: Enter at your own peril. He chuckled as he dragged it out.

“Remember this one?” he said. “This was when we did a rush job on your room before your parents came to visit.”

The assistant laughed. “Yeah and we still missed one of my thong undies.”

“I still don’t have a satisfactory explanation as to why your mother looked behind the dresser.”

“Probably for the same reason why I went through your bath and body products to see which one I should buy for myself,” Penny grinned. Raj was shocked.

“You went through my creams without me?” Now it was his turn to pout.

“Hey, we had many nights since playing with home spa treatments,” she replied and gave him a kiss on the cheek before they both settled down beside the box. Penny popped open the top and began to delve into her belongings. She snorted as she pulled out a silk teddy. “I wondered where this went.” Here she grinned. “I thought you went all perv on me and stole it.”

“Penny!” Raj slapped her lightly on the arm. “I might be a lonely guy but that doesn’t mean I’m a creepy guy.” He blushed slightly. “As long as we don’t take my obsession with Hentai movies into account.”

Penny made a sicky face. “You know, I consider myself a big ol’ five but even I can’t figure out the sex with tentacles thing.”

“That one was ordered by mistake,” Raj countered adamantly. He looked desperately in the box for something to change the subject. “Hey! My stapler.” He took it out. “And one, no, two, three— No wonder we kept running out of masking tape.”

“Maybe that’s enough in there for a while,” Penny said with a flush on her face. Raj laughed.

“Don’t worry. It’s not like I’m taking them with me.” A brown and tan wicker box caught his eye. “This is pretty,” he said and held it up.

“That was Sheldon’s,” Penny said after a moment’s pause. “His Meemaw gave it to me.”

Raj felt the weight and gave it a shake. “There’s something in here.”

“I know. Meemaw said he had another box and that they swapped them yearly. He told her never to open it.”

“He’s been dead nearly ten years, Penny. I think it’s okay to peek,” her ex-boyfriend said softly. He handed her the box.

“Well, might as well solve it the same way I did the first one.” She went to squish it with the stapler but thought better of it as she didn’t know if what was inside was fragile. “Get me a knife.”

Raj went to the kitchen and brought back a pointed blade with a serrated edge. Penny turned the box on its side to make sure the mysterious item was at the bottom and pierced the top. She cut three sides and dumped the item in her hand.

“It’s a flash drive,” said the astrophysicist as he took the rectangle-shaped item.
“What do you think’s on it?”

“Only one way to find out.”

Penny bit her lip. Raj waited until she looked at him and gave a quick nod. They both got up and went to his computer. He stuck in the drive and they waited with baited breath as it loaded.

Raj scanned the folder headings. “It’s Sheldon’s backup for his computer.”

The assistant saw folders for things like published articles and works-in-progress as well as ‘Sheldon’s Log’ and countless more. Raj clicked on the ‘works-in-progress’ and several dozen files appeared. He gave a low whistle at some of the topics.

“Talk about a multi-tasker,” Penny chuckled. “Go back one.” Raj complied and went back to the main folders. “Look at these all. He must have documented his whole life.” She grinned. “Everything from poop journals to this,” and clicked on a folder labeled ‘drips and drabs’. To her disappointment it contained more science notes. She sighed. So much for secret files of lolcats or jokes or—

“Holy shit,” Raj breatheded.


“Just a moment,” he hissed. He did a skim through the thirty three pages. Penny inwardly snorted; only Sheldon could write something twice the length of her English paper and call it a ‘drab’.

“Holy Gods.” He turned to his ex-girlfriend. “Penny, this is Leonard’s paper.”

There was a pause as she peered at the document title: Spatial Angular Momentum of Quarks in Contrast to S-Wave Predictions.

“You’re sure?” she said in a quiet voice. Raj nodded. “How did Sheldon get Leonard’s paper?” Her stomach sank. She knew the answer. She just needed to hear it said out loud.

The astrophysicist checked the date of the file.

“This was written over two years before Leonard’s paper was published.” He went back to the paper. “Leonard’s paper is a lot more polished than this and there’s a lot more detail but in a nutshell this is Leonard’s paper.” Raj’s tongue rubbed the inside of his cheek. “You know, I thought it was strange that Alex came to interview me about Sheldon. She had some personal questions but her focus was on what it was that he was working on—weird since she was his research assistant.” He looked at the screen. “She had asked Mrs. Cooper if she could have Sheldon’s files because she wanted to write a book about him.” He raised an eyebrow as his eyes rolled to Penny. “Guess Leonard forgot to turn over a few things to her when he cracked Sheldon’s laptop.”

“What are we going to do?” Penny asked.

“If this comes out it’ll ruin Leonard.”

Penny pursed her lips. “This has to be a mistake. I mean Sheldon’s dead and maybe Leonard finished his paper and—”

“Then they’d share credit, Pen.” He clicked back to the folder screen. “I don’t know if this is the only thing. Leonard’s come out with a few papers since his first. This was his breakthrough paper.”
Raj sighed wearily.

“I know. I’m just being stupid.” Suddenly a snarl came to her face. “What an idiot! I can’t believe Leonard would do such a stupid thing.” Penny took a deep breath to calm down. “How could he do this to Sheldon? They were best friends.”

“I don’t know.” Raj smiled grimly. “Sheldon did say not to open the box.” He turned to Penny. “So little Pandora, what do we do now?”

xTBBTx

The Man appeared with his hands clasped behind his back. As he walked over he noted the physicist was still sitting although there were some equations scrawled around him in the dirt.

“How many theoretical physicists specializing in general relativity does it take to change a light bulb?” the Man said lightly. Sheldon looked up. “Two. One to hold the bulb and one to rotate the universe.”

“That’s an old joke.”

“It’s what I’ve got,” the Man said with a shrug. He regarded Sheldon. “How are you feeling?”

“Not happy but not any worse than before.”

“It’s a start.”

“Your attempt at optimism is noted.”

“As is your sullenness.”

“Given my plight how I feel doesn’t really matter.”

“Anything that doesn’t ‘matter’ has no mass,” the Man countered.

A pause then the physicist chuckled softly.

“I suppose it wouldn’t.” A little smile came to his face. “Thank you for coming back.”

“You’re more than welcome, Dr. Cooper,” the Man smiled warmly. “Welcome back, yourself.”

xTBBTx

Physics jokes: jupiterscientificorg

Anything that doesn't ‘matter’ has no mass: "Matter" is a physics term meaning stuff or substance. SO anything without substance has no mass. Ba-dum-dum.
Chapter Twenty One

Chapter Summary

Dialogue from ‘The Thespian Catalyst’

Reference to ‘The Habitation Configuration’; ‘The Electric Can Opener Fluctuation’

Sophie had said she wanted to briefly talk to Penny at lunch so the Nebraskan ate quickly and returned to the office.

“Come in,” her manager said after Penny had knocked. “Close the door.”

“Sure.” Immediately Penny was ill at ease.

“Please sit down.” The assistant complied. Sophie looked her in the eyes. “The following is confidential and strictly for your ears only.”

“I understand.” Penny’s throat felt tight.

“Apparently my work here has been scrutinized by those above me.” Penny was floored to see a slight flush on her manager’s face. “I’ve been promoted.”

“Congratulations!” Penny said in a mix of joy and relief.

“Thank you.”

“So what will you be doing?”

“Assisting the president with managing the overall operations of the company. I will be an ‘executive’.” Here she used air quotes giving Penny a flashback to Sheldon.

“Goodbye Sophie. Hello Ms. Wazniki.” The manager rolled her eyes.

“Of course this leaves me with the final task of finding my replacement. HR has an internal and external list of candidates. I have successfully argued my case that my replacement needs an immediate grasp of office procedure if the transition is to be seamless.” She paused.

“Congratulations, Penelope.”

Penny’s mouth dropped. “Me?”

“In eight years you’ve been an exceptional ‘Jane-of-all-trades’. As my assistant you’re familiar with protocol and conduct yourself professionally.” The corners of her mouth rose. “You don’t take ‘crap’ from your superiors, an asset in terms of protecting the overall integrity of the office. That is, when appropriately employed.”


“Exactly.”

Sophie nodded her head and Penny got up from her seat. The assistant hesitated for a moment
before she reached for a pen and Post It note.

“Since we won’t be seeing each other anymore I thought I’d give you my home email address.” She replaced the pen. “Don’t take this as an obligation or anything. Although a friend said I was to warn people before I send out a lolcat.” Penny smiled at her boss.

“Remember—”

“Discretion is my middle name.” She made a locking motion against her lips and left the room.

XxX

Penny swung open the apartment door, dashed across the room to the kitchen and planted a kiss on a very surprised Rajesh Koothrappali.

“I gather something went well today?” he said with a smirk after he recovered.

“Your sexy ex-girlfriend got herself a big ol’ promotion,” she grinned. Now it was Raj’s turn to crush her in a hug and plant a kiss on her cheek.

“Congratulations!” He leaned back to regard her. “I knew this would happen.”

“I did some snooping around at what an office manager makes—God I was so unproductive this afternoon—and if things work the way I think they will I can float the apartment myself.”

“No KD?”

“No KD,” she grinned.

“Excellent.” He kissed her on the tip of the nose before turning to the stove to stir the vegetables in the pan. “This is really great news. Now I can leave here whenever I land a job at home and know you’re okay.” Here he sighed. “Here’s hoping I have as good news as you sometime soon.”

“What did the university say?” asked Penny as she took a bottled water from the refrigerator.

“They’re impressed with my résumé but need to make sure there’s room in the faculty budget for me.”

“Believe me, even if they have to bump someone they’ll make room for you,” Penny said soothingly. “Your work is impressive.”

“It is, isn’t it?” he grinned. His ex-girlfriend swatted him on the butt and he giggled. “It’s about time I use my reputation for the forces of good. Even if it’s for my good.”

“Yeah,” chuckled Penny. Suddenly a thought came to her and she sobered. “Speaking of work and reputations what are we going to do about Leonard?”

The room was silent save for the sounds of sizzling vegetables.

“I’ll take care of it,” Raj said at last. “It’s been difficult trying to get in touch with him since he’s at Cern for the year.” Pause. “I just want to hear it from him before I say anything.”

“Okay.” She stood behind him and kissed his neck. “You think you could take care of me too this evening?”

“Celebration sex? I think I can manage that.” He turned to her in mock seriousness although his
eyes were twinkling. “Is this different than ‘I had a bad day at work’ sex or ‘I’m drunk, you’re drunk and it’s a Saturday’ sex or ‘Goodbye Rajesh’ sex, take eleven?”

Penny laughed heartily. “Hey it’s not like when we were dating. Then it was ‘nice boots, let’s fuck’ sex.”

“You know I really meant it. You do have nice boots. Especially the white go-go ones.”

“Crazy man,” she chuckled and went to get out of her work clothes.

xTBBTx

“This is an improvement,” said the Man as he found Sheldon standing in front of a tarnished silver looking mirror. “What are you doing?”

“This mirror has a different sheen to it,” the physicist said as he ran his fingers across its surface. “As I walked along the wall I noted the differing tones: either this tarnished look or else modern mirror.”

“Why do you think that is?”

Sheldon shrugged. “Since time has no relevance here the differing mirrors could reflect the level of mirror technology available during the dreamer’s lifetime.”

The Man thought about this. “Could be,” he said at last.

Sheldon turned to his companion, lips pursed. “You know you’re not exactly helpful.” The Man smiled.

“I’m not omniscient.”

“So I should limit my questions to what you do know. Alright then. Where do you go when you go into the forest?”

“Home.”

“Where’s that?”

“Beyond the forest.”

“I see.” Sheldon’s face sobered. “Can I come with you?”

The Man shook his head. “It’s not your home, Dr. Cooper.”

“It has to be better than here,” the lanky man said as he gestured to his surroundings.

“What makes you think my home’s any better? You ran away from your chosen home.”

“That wasn’t my home,” scowled Sheldon. “Meemaw and Pop-Pop are home.”

“I see.”

Sheldon’s mouth twitched as if he hesitated to say something. “Were they through the other door?” he asked meekly.

The Man shrugged sympathetically. “Like I said, I don’t know.” The physicist slumped against the
mirror.

“Tell me what to do,” he pleaded softly.

“What do you normally do when you’re stuck?”

“I talk to Leonard or Penny or Amy. Of course there’s no way I’d talk to Leonard now. As for Amy I feel like we haven’t truly conversed in a meaningful way since we altered our paradigm.”

“That leaves Penny.”

“I suppose it does.”

They began to walk back towards Penny’s mirror.

“I used to talk with her a lot,” Sheldon said. “She helped me through social conventions. I still don’t see the relevance of most of them but I do understand them now.”

“Why did you stop talking with her?” the Man said as he stuck his hands into his pockets.

“Outside of basic social interaction we had little in common,” Sheldon shrugged. “Besides, she was in her on again-off again relationship with Leonard and I was embroiled in my research. If I had extra time social protocol dictated I spend it with Amy since she was my girlfriend.”

“You made time for Leonard,” the Man countered.

“He’s my roommate.”

“And Raj.”

“My colleague.”

“And Howard.”

“You’ve made your point,” Sheldon snapped. They stopped in front of Penny’s mirror. “I don’t know why we stopped talking. Perhaps she’d outgrown her usefulness.” The Man was incredulous.

“Then why did you go out of your way to help her?”

“She was in distress. I couldn’t not help her,” Sheldon said pointedly.

“A non-optional social convention.”

“Exactly.”

The Man snorted. “And here I was thinking it was because you were friends.” He turned away, still chuckling, and ventured into the woods.

“I’m coming with you,” Sheldon decided and proceeded after him. As soon as he got to the forest edge he was amazed to see how much distance the Man had already covered. “Wait up!” he shouted and proceeded to sprint. There’s a flash here and there of white clothes and movement in the distance but no matter how fast Sheldon ran the Man seemed further away.

“Damn it,” he hissed and stopped running. Sheldon turned to retrace his steps but realized quickly that in his haste he’d twisted and turned so much he wasn’t quite sure where the mirrors lay. All was silent around him and he did his best to gather his bearings before he set off.
As ‘minutes’ became whatever constituted for hours in this place Sheldon tried first one direction then another, noting that he’d found another swampy section of forest as his feet began to sink into the ground as he stepped.

“Penny!” There wasn’t even an echo. Instead he seemed to sink even deeper into the mud.

“Please help me,” he whispered.

xTBBTx

“Take care of yourself, my Prince,” Penny sniffled as Raj and she held hands in the airport boarding area.

“I’ll text you the moment I land,” he replied, equally as emotional.

The line of people began to move.

“Missed our chance for ‘goodbye sex’ in the washroom,” she said with a low chuckle.

A little smile crossed his face. “I’ve got to go.” Their kiss was soft and lingering. He made to say something more but his lower lip began to tremble so he decided against making a scene and instead nodded his head once and departed through the gate.

Penny watched as the plane rolled across the tarmac.

She stayed as it soared up and away until it was gone from sight.

xTBBTx

“And that’s just about that,” Penny said happily with hands on her hips as she surveyed the apartment. It had been several years since she’d lived on her own although this was the first time she could call her apartment a home. It took her three months to find just the right furniture; save for the leather couch which she freshened up with a new throw over the back the rest of the furniture had been replaced.

Amy had found her a funky little side table at the Market which she sent as a housewarming present. Penny pulled out her phone and made sure to take a few photos of it in its spot beside the couch.

“Actually, I should send her the whole kit and caboodle,” and began taking pictures of the apartment to show off its funky South Asian with a modern twist décor.

After getting a shot of the book shelf now turned knick knack and dvd unit she lowered the phone. Everything looked like they belonged. Everything but one.

She went to the closet. She had kept the box. Perhaps she knew that this day would someday come.

Penny securely taped the bottom and set it on the couch before going to the shelf and took down Sheldon’s ‘Flash of Two Worlds’ statue. She held it in her hands and again took in its detail. After a moment she gave a wistful sigh and a little smile as she thought about her friend.

“Ah, Moonpie,” she said softly before carefully wrapping the statue and returning it to its box. She stored it in the living room closet before returning to the couch.

“Well old girl it’s just you and me,” she said as she patted the arm rest.
“Sheldon.”

The physicist gave a laugh sob at the sound of Penny’s voice and slogged his way through the mud in its direction. As he neared the clearing he found solid footing and took a moment to wipe his shoes only to see that the mud hadn’t stuck to them.

A flash of mirror in the distance caused him to quicken his pace until with a wash of relief he stepped beyond the trees. He caught his reddened eyes in the mirrors as he passed until he came to Penny’s portal.

Penny and his dream self seemed to be in a park of some sort jogging along a path. ‘Sheldon’ was wearing his Flash suit while the Nebraskan showed off her arms and legs in green shorts and a pink tank top. They appeared to be talking and the longer the conversation continued the more annoyed his neighbor seemed to become.

Ahead of them was a fork in the road and without hesitation Penny went to the right. ‘Sheldon’ stopped and jogged in place as he pondered both paths.

“Go right,” Sheldon hissed.

Noticing she was alone Penny turned around and jogged in place to see what her friend was doing. Dream Sheldon took the left path and she gave a shrug before resuming her run.

Not wanting the dream to end Sheldon’s fingers desperately felt along the mirror until it opened and he stepped through. He picked up his pace until he jogged comfortably next to his neighbor.

“I’m sorry, Penny. I know I shouldn’t be here but I can’t help myself,” he said apologetically.

The path widened ahead and suddenly Dream Sheldon merged in from the left wearing plaid shorts and a Flash t-shirt akin to Sheldon’s own.

“Nice to see you caught up,” Penny said with a grin.

“Caught up?” scoffed Dream Sheldon. “My dear Penny speed equals distance divided by time.” Penny laughed.

“You don’t even know how far we’re going.”

“To the end,” he said firmly.

“As long as I can get to work on time. I still need to shower.”

“We’ve got time.”

‘Real’ Sheldon ran with them until the dream vanished before returning through the mirror.

“So how’s India?” asked Penny with a grin. It’s how they began all their Skype chats.

“Still hot,” pouted Raj. “And crowded. Penny, there are so many Indian people here I sometimes can’t pick myself out on a reflective surface.” He sighed. “It used to be so easy; just look for the guy with caramel skin.”
“As compared to his three pasty sidekicks.”

Raj laughed as he thought about Leonard, Sheldon and Howard’s gaunt pallor. “True.”

The Nebraskan had a sip of her wine. “Classes going well?”

“Better than terms one and two.” A frown creased his brow. “Although I’m still called ‘Gummie’ behind my back for scarfing down my vodka bears before class and during break time.”

“Better than ‘Silent Bob’.”

“Sadly, I’d be called ‘Silent Raj’ as Raj is the second most popular name in India.”

“Aww,” Penny said with a smile. “Well, you’ll always be my Prince.”

Raj looked around before leaning close to the camera. “God I want a Big Boy burger so badly!” he whispered.

“I can always send you another picture,” she offered amiably. The last time he had whined about Big Boy she’d gone to the restaurant, ordered a burger combo and took a picture of it. The look of absolute desire on his face was priceless.

“No thanks.” He waggled a finger at her. “And that was very, very mean.”

“I figured it was like sending a naked pinup to a person in prison,” Penny chortled.

“Prison, thanks.” The smile faded from Raj’s face as a sobering topic came to mind. “Speaking of wrongdoing I talked to Leonard about, you know.” At once Penny was still. “I know it’s been a while but with the move to India and getting things settled here and classes I…. I didn’t just want to send him an email.”

The Nebraskan nodded. “What did he say?”

“He’s mortified that we know. At first he tried to dismiss it as a coincidence. I said to him that it’s possible that he inadvertently copied from Sheldon since they lived together and expanded on the work.” Raj smiled grimly. “He didn’t like that very much.”

“I guess not,” Penny said quietly.

“He asked what we planned to do and I said we didn’t know. That I thought that with us being friends that we’d give him the opportunity to set things straight.” The astrophysicist’s jaw stiffened. “That’s when he intimated that we should all have a clean slate and admit to what happened on the Arctic trip.”

Penny thought back. “Didn’t you guys do something to Sheldon’s experiment?”

“We fed him false data although we did keep the correct ones. The only thing was that Sheldon told everyone at the university that he’d found the monopole when he didn’t.” Here Raj lowered his eyes, embarrassed. “His reputation really took a hit.”

“Crap on a cracker. Would this ruin your career?”

The astrophysicist shrugged. “For those that met Sheldon I doubt they’d blame me for following along but for others…. He shook his head. “Even a hint of impropriety can make someone a pariah in the scientific community.”
“So we do nothing?” Penny growled. “Raj, this isn’t right.”

“I know.” Pause. “I owe Leonard. He helped me over the years. But I also owe Sheldon. He kept me in the country when he didn’t have to.” Raj’s eyes were steadfast. “Things will be made right, Penny. I promise. Leonard said he needs to finish off some projects so that he doesn’t tarnish other peoples’ careers.”

“What about *your* career? What about you?”

“They can’t take away the discoveries I did make. As for me, my parents are rich. I can always go back to school and be something else.”

“Oh Raj,” Penny said sadly.

He tried to look cheerful. “It’s my bed to lie in. Now enough of that. Did you get the bedspread and pillow covers I sent?”

“YuP. They’re gorgeous. Let me show you.” She picked up the laptop and proceeded to her bedroom.

“Ooo, a pretty girl’s taking me into her room.”

“Stuff it pal or I’m sticking you in the hall closet.”

“Meanie.”

Penny turned on the light and began her tour.

xTBBTx

The Man had a smile on his face as he saw Sheldon putting the touches on a little flat-roof house made out of birch bark, twigs and dirt.

“So what’s this?” he asked.

“Sheldonville,” the physicist replied. “I don’t have the means to recreate the skyscrapers of Sheldonopolis so I made a village.” The Man noted a strip of buildings in the town’s core.

“Storefronts?”

“General store,” said Sheldon as he pointed to each little building in turn. “Barber shop, model train shop, hardware and model rocket accessories and comic book store.”

“No grocery store?”

“No need. We have a farmer’s market over here near the baseball diamond and the general store carries the rest of our nutritional needs.”

The Man’s eyes noted the baseball diamond complete with dugouts and grassy outfield.

“I didn’t think you were much into sports?”

“I’m not,” the physicist replied as he stood from a kneeling position and carefully stepped out of his ‘town’. “But as they say, ‘build it and he will come’.”

“Who’s ‘he’?”
Sheldon shrugged. “I suppose I won’t know until he gets here.”

The Man regarded his companion and opened his mouth to say something but thought better of it. Instead he looked to the right of the town.

“I see there’s a roadway to the rail yard.”

“Oh yes,” Sheldon said brightly. “‘Sheldonville’ is a rail town. The Union Pacific Railway has a yard here.” He suddenly looked a little sheepish as he pointed to a series of short stubby sticks seemingly linked together by tiny ones. “Unfortunately the trains are crude but they’re the best I can do given my situation.”

“This is grand, Dr. Cooper.”

Sheldon was pleased.

“Come see my outline for the park and the Dr. Richard Feynman Amphitheater,” he said and moved to the other side of the town.

The Man grinned and followed.

xTBBTx

A man with glasses and reddish spiky hair came out onto the stage.

“Next up is Penelope—”

“Penny,” the Nebraskan amended as she called from the audience seating.

“Very well, ‘Penny’,” smiled the man as she got up from her chair.

“You’ll be wonderful,” Bernadette said in a stage whisper.

“It’s been a while so we’ll see,” the Nebraskan chuckled.

Since Rajesh left she spent her time with Bernadette and Howard; her Friday night cocktails with Esperit and some of the office ladies turned into Saturday get-togethers once a month. More often than not Penny was the host since she had the room and lacked the clutter associated with having a family.

One afternoon she had gone with the Wolowitzes to see ‘Shakespeare in the Park’ with the kids and had passed a table which had flyers for little community theaters. Penny noted one that was showing ‘The Crucible’ and went to see it. The set might have been crude by Broadway standards but it didn’t matter as she was swept away by the acting in this modern version which took place in the Deep South.

From there it was like a hunger came to the surface that had been neglected for years and she went to as many productions as she could. She didn’t want the glitz and glamour productions; she wanted plays that came from old converted churches and community centers.

It was the night she caught ‘A Streetcar Named Desire’ on television that changed her life. Penny began to reminisce about her days in acting class. As much as there were times when she wished the teacher just got on with it and showed her how to act like the movie stars did she admitted there were times when they acted scenes from plays that totally swept her away. In those moments there was magic—and then Penny would go home and watch Entertainment Tonight with its champagne
dreams and caviar wishes and the spell would be broken.

Penny wanted the magic back.

She began to look at small productions and found one that catered to more ‘senior’ folk. Bernadette and she had a good laugh at this since neither considered themselves ready for the old folk’s home even though that’s where the acting community seemed to push people who were in their late thirties plus.

The company was auditioning for ‘Arsenic and Old Lace’ and Penny felt a compulsion to go. It had been one of her favorite plays and admitted she had a secret crush on Cary Grant in the movie adaptation. Bernadette was more than obliging to go with her for moral support.

As she stepped out onto the stage Penny felt goose bumps on her skin and her heart accelerated. The audience before her of acting hopefuls and the director and his assistants were comfortable—in her mind too comfortable to the point of boredom from hearing monologue after monologue from classic plays.

It was time to shake things up.

“I’m auditioning for the role of Elaine Harper but really I’ll take anything,” Penny said cheerfully. She cleared her throat, stood as tall as she could and spoke in a formalized tone with a hint of an East Texas twang:


She turned around and took a step back. Immediately her posture changed to a sassy woman with a tilted hip and an exasperated look on her face. “Okay Sheldon, we get it. You set the scene now just read your mother’s line.”

She turned again and called out to the air in a heavy Texas accent: “Shelly! Shelly, how many times have ah told yuh not to leave yuhr sciencey stuff out on the porch? Goodness, ah’ll never understand that boy. But then again, ah’m a religious nut, and muh mind is closed to so many things.”

Again she changed positions. This time she stood straight and raised her eyebrow. “Woo-woo-woo-woo-woo-woo. Spock to Enterprise. Transport successful.”

“Glory be tuh Heaven, some sort of creature just manifested out of thin air. George, put down that Pepsi can full of bourbon that ain’t foolin’ no one, and get yuhr shotgun!”

A chuckle came from the crowd.

“Greetings, Mary Cooper. I am Spock.”

“Oh, my, yuhr sudden appearance startles me.”

“We have been monitoring your son Sheldon from the twenty-third century, and we have determined that he is now ready to join us. His unique genius is our best hope for bringing peace to a vast and troubled galaxy.”

“Ah understand. Oh, Shelly? A man’s here tuh take you away tuh the future! Be sure tuh pack
Again Penny was the sassy friend. “Okay, okay, let’s try that last line again, and this time, maybe try choking up a little. I’m gonna lead you in. Blah-blah, blah, blah, vast and troubled galaxy. Go.”

“Oh, Shelly?” she twanged in a tremulous voice. “A man’s here tuh take you away tuh the future. Be sure tuh pack clean underwear.”

To everyone’s surprise Penny seemed to shrink in stature even as her eyes opened wide. Immediately she looked pained.

“Mommy, why are yuh cryin’?”

She straightened up and resumed her Mrs. Cooper shtick. “Cause ah’m gonna miss you, Shelly-bean, even though yuh creep the bejeezus out of me.”

“Well ah’m sorry. It’s not muh fault. Ah’m just incredibly smart, and everyone around here is dumber than a bag of rocks.”

Again she became Mrs. Cooper. “Oh, now, don’t yuh start cryin’. Yuh get in that spaceship. Mommy’s late for Indian bingo.”

Penny stepped back to ‘her’ character’s place on the stage. “This isn’t in the script.” She held up a mock phone to her ear.

“Hello, Mrs. Cooper? I think I broke your son.”

With a big grin Penny curtseyed to a rousing round of applause and laughter.

“Where did that come from?” asked the director.

“It’s my interpretation of ‘Where No Sheldon Has Gone Before’,” she replied and left the stage for her seat.

Bernadette was in awe. “That was Sheldon to a ‘T’!”

“It’s a real script he wrote combined with a meltdown he had in my apartment,” Penny grinned.

From the aisle a young woman came to their seats.

“Don’t leave,” she told the Nebraskan. “The director wants to talk to you after the audition.”

They waited for the woman to leave before the two friends hi-fived each other.

xTBBTx

Sheldon stood in front of the mirror watching his other self, Leonard, Raj and Howard sitting around the coffee table playing ‘Talisman’. The astrophysicist rolled the dice and began moving his playing piece around the board when the apartment door opened and Penny entered. She squeezed herself between ‘Sheldon’ and Leonard on the couch and gave the shorter man a kiss on the cheek.

It was now Howard’s turn and he took up the dice. Sheldon pursed his lips as he watched the man roll.

“You helped falsify my data in the Arctic.” His eyes flashed to Raj. “You mocked me when Kripke
sabotaged my radio interview.” And Leonard. “You stole my work.” Lastly he turned to Penny. “You called my mother on me.”

“And what did I do in return?” he sniffed as he watched the group banter and laugh amongst themselves. Again he scrutinized his friends in turn. “I fixed your space toilet and went clothes shopping with your mother.” Pause. “I gave you a job to keep you in the country.” Another pause. “I helped you with your experiments.” … “I assisted in organizing your small business and loaned you money for rent and drove you to the hospital and took you on to train you in office procedure and management.” Sheldon shook his head. “And yet you are all my ‘friends’. I must be insane.”

“No one said life was simple, Dr. Cooper,” the Man said as he came to stand beside the physicist.

“Logic dictates I should have severed my relationships.”

The Man rolled his eyes. “Now who’s throwing the baby out with the bathwater?” Sheldon snorted. “You make it sound as if there was no reciprocity involved. You think you were a picnic to hang out with?” The physicist turned to the Man. “Who constantly patronized Howard for only having a Masters degree? Did you forget he gave your paper to Stephen Hawking?”

“He made me beg.”

“He wanted to hear a compliment from you. Why was it so hard for you to give? And who made Raj interview for your job opening when he was so desperate?”

“It was a joke,” Sheldon said defensively.

The Man folded his arms across his chest. “And scoffed at his knowledge of anything including his own country and religion?”

Sheldon was beginning to feel uncomfortable. “I was merely correcting him.”

“And yet he took you in when you decided to move out and still helped you with your formula even though you insulted his intelligence.” The Man pursed his lips. “He only wanted to be a colleague, not a subordinate.”

“But he wasn’t my intellectual equal.”

“Being a colleague isn’t about intellect, Dr. Cooper. It’s about respect.”

Sheldon looked down at his feet before raising his head to the sky.

“And Leonard?” he said softly.

“Who took a friendless, socially awkward and isolated man and gave him paintball weekends and Halo night and comic book Wednesdays and—”


“Pardon me. Like I said, I’m not omniscient.”

The physicist turned to look at his former roommate as he held hands with Penny. “Leonard pilfered my work.”

“And?” the Man prompted. Sheldon pursed his lips in thought.
“I ridiculed his experiments,” he said slowly. “Even though most of them were redundant in my opinion.” He glanced at his companion. “Nevertheless I should have been more supportive.” His jaw tightened. “I scoffed at his attempts at courtship. I compelled him to drive me everywhere and go to my restaurants and my movie theaters—although they were superior choices.” He paused. “I never let him watch Babylon 5.” A wry smile came to Sheldon’s face. “And it seems I’m paying for my shortcomings. As we speak Leonard’s profiting from my work. I never would have done that to him. Granted there’s nothing he’s ever done that I’d sign my name to but the sentiment’s there.” He stared at his friends. “Why hasn’t anyone done anything?” he said softly.

“Maybe they don’t know?”

Sheldon snorted derisively. “How couldn’t they know? Leonard’s never done anything close to that level of ability.”

The Man shrugged. “You’re assuming, Dr. Cooper, that what you’re seeing in the mirror is the truth.” The lanky man scowled.

“It’s Penny. I believe her.”

“Let me get this straight: you scoff and ridicule men with graduate degrees and yet take the word of a waitress no questions asked?” the Man said incredulously.

“Executive assistant, and yes. Penny and I have fought over the years on a variety of subjects but she’s always ‘had my back’. Even in our friendship’s infancy she took care of me when I was sick. She took me to Disney World and got my World of Warcraft equipment back.” He paused. “She sang ‘Soft Kitty’ to me.” Unconsciously Sheldon’s hands clenched.

“As for my part I belittled her first attempt at reentering community college. I distanced myself from her without cause to the point where I said that the only reason why I liked her was that Leonard made me.”

The Man looked at him, shocked. “Why did you say that?”

Sheldon’s shoulders slumped. “I don’t know.”

“Is it true?”

“If it wasn’t for Leonard I’d never have been introduced to her so in that respect I’d never have been friends with her without him.”

“There’s a difference between being introduced and liking someone,” the Man said with a smirk. A twitch passed across Sheldon’s lips. “And yet isn’t it interesting how often she thinks about you?”

“I *am* memorable,” the physicist sniffed. The Man laughed.

“You’re right about that, Dr. Cooper.”

xTBBTx

“Okay Raj, you’ve been giggly all night. Spill it,” Penny prodded.

The astrophysicist grinned broadly on the computer screen.

“Remember Eila?”

“That girl your parents set you up with in December?” The Nebraskan’s face brightened. “Oh my
“We’ve asked our parents to arrange the marriage,” he said happily.

A part of Penny felt a little pang as closure came to their relationship but it was quickly overwhelmed by the absolute joy she felt for her friend.

“That is so awesome!”

Raj grinned. “We both want to start a family right away.” Here he winked. “Don’t tell anyone but we’ve been practicing for a while.”

“Rajesh!”

“Shh!”

They both giggled.

“So when’s the wedding?”

“October. It’s past the height of summer and monsoon season. I’ve talked to my cousin Kanwar and he said he can set up a webcam so you can see it if you can’t make it.”

“Is Howard going?”

“I haven’t told him yet.” He blushed. “I wanted you to know first.”

“Thanks, Raj,” she smiled. “I’ll make you a deal: if Bernadette is going I’ll do my darndest to go with them, okay?”

“Okay?” pumpkin grinned the astrophysicist. “That would be awesome! You all can stay at my parents’ estate so don’t worry about accommodations. If you have trouble with the airfare just let me know.”

“It’s six months away. I’m sure I can put something together,” Penny chided lightly.

“Maybe you can bring a date.” He wiggled his eyebrows.

“To India? That’d have to be one hell of a date,” she snorted.

Raj smiled but his tone was serious. “So how goes my Rani’s love-life anyhow?”

“A few dates here and there. Although there’s this guy, Mark, at the theater. He’s playing my nephew.” She shrugged. “We’ve gone out a few times for dinner after rehearsal. He’s nice but it’s nothing serious.”

“I see,” Raj said neutrally as he took in her Green Lantern t-shirt pajama top and silk sleep shorts. He measured his next words. “Penny, you should get out there.”

She gave a short laugh. “I am ‘getting out there’. It’s like what Esperit said about the men at our age: there are two types—the married and the unmarriageable.”

“Gee thanks.”

“Raj, as far as I’m concerned you were born to be married. Completely different.” He nodded, pleased at the compliment.
“I just want you to be happy like me,” he sighed.

“Raj, no one can be as happy as you are, even with the help of pharmaceuticals.”

They laughed and, realizing the time, said their goodbyes.

Before she closed off her computer Penny thought to check her email and was pleasantly surprised to see one from Sophie. She clicked on it and a picture of a kitten sitting on a laptop keyboard appeared with the caption: If not for sits, why is it made of warm?

Penny grinned as she saved the lolcat.
Chapter Twenty Two

Chapter Summary

Reference to: ‘The Staircase Implementation’; ‘The Proton Resurgence’; ‘The Luminous Fish Effect’

Mark ran a hand nervously through his short black hair as he stared incredulously at Penny.

“Wh-what’s he doing here?” he stammered. “What happened to him?”

“He died,” Penny replied sweetly.

“Aunt Martha, men just don’t get into window seats and die,” Mark said with a roll of his eyes.

The Nebraskan shook her head, amused. “No, Mortimer, he died first.”

“But how?”

Penny made to look as if she were tidying a small end table. “Don’t be so inquisitive. The gentleman died because he drank some wine with poison in it.” Mark’s jaw dropped.

“How did the poison get in it?”

“Oh we put it in the wine ‘cause it’s less noticeable.” Here Penny’s tone dropped to a conspiratorial level. “When it’s in tea it has a distinct color.”

The man nodded his head before what she was saying struck him.

“You put it in the wine?!”

“Yes, and we put Mr. Hoskins in the window seat because Elaine’s father was coming for tea.”

“Much better,” said a voice from the audience seating. “The pacing’s tighter and your actions are more natural, Mark. Penny, great stuff. Don’t forget to keep your movements normal. In your mind you’ve done nothing wrong so there’s no need for nerves.”

“Gotcha,” she replied.

“Aside of that, it’s nine o’clock,” continued the director. “Let’s give it a wrap and I’ll see you both on Tuesday.”

“Sure thing,” said Mark and he gave Penny a wink. “Want to go for a drink?”

A smirk came to her face. “At a bar drink or your place kinda drink?”

“My couch is comfier.”

“I agree.”

“See you soon,” he said and walked from the stage, Penny watching his hinnie all the way.
As she drove to his condo Penny reflected on their whirlwind…well whatever this was. Over the past five months they’d gone from quick bites after rehearsals to drinks on off nights. Then came opening night and things took a dramatic turn. Penny felt the rush as she performed in front of a modest crowd. Her portrayal of Aunt Martha, Mortimer’s unassuming yet murderous relative, garnered a strong response from the audience and she felt on top of the world. This was the feeling she had missed. To be honest she wondered if she truly felt this good acting before now. It was as if she now understood the craft of acting not just the technique.

After the cast party she realized that she didn’t want the night to end and neither did Mark. They excused themselves and met at his place and she spent the night. It became a rhythm: after Saturday night’s performance they’d have a rousing session at home followed by one of Mark’s famous omelets in the morning.

Penny was a natural at breaking the eggs.

xTBBTx

“Wow,” Mark gasped appreciatively as he soaked in the last of his post-orgasmic rush. Penny smiled as she stared at the ceiling, her breathing back to normal.

“Practice makes perfect,” she said drolly.

“Believe me, Pen, we’re both old pros at this thing.”

“Yup. Kind of sad the play wraps up in three weeks,” she sighed. “I really got used to this.” There was a pause before he agreed. “I’d like to keep seeing you.”

“Seeing me as in good times, great sex or seeing me as in a relationship?”

Penny turned her head to regard her lover. “Why can’t it be both?”

More silence. A silence she recognized all too well from her years of promiscuity.

“Penny, I like you but—”

“Not in that way,” she said flatly. Mark sighed.

“Why can’t we just keep things the way they are?”

Again Penny stared at the ceiling. “I used to have sex a lot and believe me a lot of it was meaningless. I—I dunno. Maybe it’s getting older?”

“You are getting to that ‘now or never’ time on the biological clock.”

Penny shrugged. “I’d want a stable relationship before I’d even begin to think about kids.”

Here he laughed. “Trust me, no relationship is ever stable. I was married for twelve years and things went from good to bad so many times I was almost sea sick. My eight years of freedom has been a Godsend.”

“Aren’t you lonely sometimes?” she asked quietly.

“Sometimes,” he said at last. “But not very often. You see, moments with people like you—vivacious, sassy and beautiful you—are like tasting the most exquisite wine.” He rolled over to face her. “It’s more than the sex. It’s you. I like hanging out with you.”
“And that’s all.”

“No, that’s everything,” Mark said. “Maybe it’s my midlife crisis but I don’t want to feel trapped. I want to enjoy my life on my terms. Maybe it’s selfish but I don’t want to settle. I want it all.” He smiled warmly. “After tasting wine I don’t want to go back to water.”

Penny closed her eyes and she felt a finger under her chin gently raise her head.

“Don’t ever let anyone tell you you’re meaningless, Penny,” he said seriously. A little smile came to her face.

“You sure you don’t want to give it a go?” she said in mock-seriousness.

Mark laughed. “We’d drive each other nuts: two wild horses tethered together, a disaster in the making.”

“But if they worked together they’d be unstoppable.”

“Probably. That requires strength and maturity and a fundamental commitment, things which I don’t want to share.” He eyed her. “I’m a selfish asshole but you’re not. Just remember not to settle. You want someone with you, perhaps to guide you, but never to tame you.”

Penny leaned over and kissed him.

“This is our last night,” she said softly. “And we are going to make it burn.”

xTBBTx

“I suppose you don’t have a jackknife handy?” Sheldon asked the Man.

“Sorry. What are you doing now?”

The physicist returned to the tiny piece of stick between his fingers.

“Doing my best to populate ‘Sheldonville’. Unfortunately my attempts are crude and out of proportion to the buildings unless I say the village had been overrun by hordes of Harlem Globetrotters.”

“Sheldon,” sighed Penny’s voice.

Both men turned to the mirror to see Penny and ‘Sheldon’ at the back of a large wooden building with .22 rifles. She looked at an older man as he came into view with an armful of pop cans.

“Who’s that?” asked Sheldon’s companion.

“Wyatt. Penny’s father.” The lanky man set the little ‘person’ in a pile of other ‘people’ and proceeded to break off another part of twig. “It’s odd we keep getting paired together in a recent string of dreams since we only met the once and it was in passing. Leonard’s far more familiar with the man.” He watched Penny bring the rifle to her cheek and pull the trigger.

“My father used to take me shooting,” Sheldon said matter-of-factly. “Usually during or after one of my experiments and for him after a few shots of cheap bourbon. I don’t think he liked me ‘playing’ with robotics or homemade medical equipment.”

“It’s far easier to understand a gun than a CAT scanner,” replied the Man with a shrug.
“I suppose.” Sheldon paused. “That’s why I wish Pop-Pop hadn’t died when he did. I missed talking to someone about science.” He regarded the Man. “I never had any friends growing up. The only person I had to look forward to seeing apart from Meemaw was Professor Proton whose science show started at four pm Monday to Friday.”

“So now we know what all the little Sheldonvilleites watch everyday.”

“Sheldonvillians’ and no, they don’t have to,” Sheldon said with a smile. “Professor Proton lives here.” He pointed to a house on the outskirts of town.

“What’s the little building out back?”

“Small nuclear reactor. He provides free electricity to the village.”

The Man grinned. “Thoughtful of him.”

“Yes, well, at least his mother got him yellow cake uranium for his birthday,” Sheldon said with pursed lips.

xTBBTx

Penny was in bed snuggled with Cheer Bear when the phone rang. She reached over and grabbed it from the side table.

“Hello?”

“Hello baby, how are yuh?”

“Better, Mrs. Cooper. Just really tired a lot.”

“That’s natural. Death takes a lot out of the livin’. Especially when it’s unexpected.”

“I just didn’t think Dad would just die like that. He was out everyday either in the fields or else with the animals. How can someone so fit have a heart attack?”

“The Lord is mysterious. It’s not my place tuh question.”

“Yeah. … Thank you for the flowers. The arrangement was lovely.”

“It was the least ah could do. How’s yuhr mother doin’?”

“She seemed more stable before I left. Greg and Lora came over and we had a family meeting with Mom. There’s no way she can run the farm without Dad unless we hire a full-time hand.”

“They say it isn’t too good tuh make big decisions after a big shock.”

“We agree. Greg’s going back to the farm to help Mom wrap up some things and keep other parts going until, you know, it’s sold.”

“Yuh sound so sad….”

“I know I haven’t lived there in years but the farm was always my home. Now I know it’ll be gone in the next couple of years I—I don’t know. Feel homeless?”

“Yuh’ll always have a place here, Penny.”
“Thank you.”

“It’s the least ah can do. Shelly didn’t belong here and it was muh duty tuh make sure he found his place. It was with yuh and his science buddies. He could finally do his sciencey stuff tuh his heart’s content.”

“You think he’s looking down at us?”

“Ah do. He’s in heaven with his father and muh father an’ mother and of course Jesus.”

“Huh.”

“Don’t worry, sugar. Yuhr father’s there too.”

“No, it’s not that. … I was just thinking. … Raj and I opened a box Sheldon gave Meemaw and it had a hard drive in it that had all his science notes and papers. … We noticed that some of his stuff has been used by…by someone else. … Anyways we told that person that we knew and he said that he’d wrap things up and take care of it but it’s been over a year and I don’t think he’s gonna do anything.”

“…Ah see.”

“I’m just trying to do what’s right. … My gut says to say ‘screw it’ and rat out the guy but he was really close to Sheldon and…. It’d ruin his career and I’m not sure Sheldon would want that. I mean he could have said something after the Arctic thing but he didn’t. He took it for the team.”

“Well, that’s a puzzler since Shelly’s had so few friends. … Jesus said tuh turn the other cheek when an offence was made and Shelly’s been dead for over eleven years so ah suppose it’d be Christian tuh forgive. Of course Shelly’s already done that when his ‘friends’ messed with his experiment. … When he came home he was a mess. Muh son was an odd duck but the one thing that kept him together was science. They almost took away his dreams but God wanted Shelly tuh be a physicist so ah darn well made sure he went back out there. … Reclaimin’ his work won’t bring Shelly back. But it would make his soul rest peaceful and that’s worth a lot.”

“I’ll talk to Raj and push things along.”

“Here yuh are, still lookin’ after muh Shelly after all these years. … Thank yuh.”

“It’s the least I can do. … He was my friend. And friends stick together.”

“True friends always do.”

xTBBTx

It’s not the same office but Penny knew where the physics wing was at Caltech. Her heeled shoes made an echo in the hall as she neared her objective. The secretary assured her that the office times posted on the website were correct so Penny took time from work to come here and hopefully set things right. Raj seemed particularly sad during their Skype conversation the night before as Penny said Leonard was out of time. Not that the astrophysicist was covering for Leonard, he just held out hope that his friend would do the right thing.

The door was open and she knocked on the frame.

Dr. Alex Jenson looked up from her desk.
“Yes?” she said, surprised at the Nebraskan’s appearance.

“I hope I’m not interrupting. I don’t know if you remember me but I’m Penelope. I was a friend of Sheldon Cooper and Leonard Hofstadter.”

The physicist set her pen down to regard the woman. “Please come in.” Penny closed the door behind her before taking a seat. “So what can I do for you?”

“I’m still in contact with Dr. Rajesh Koothrappali. He mentioned that you were working on a biography of Sheldon,” Penny said.

“I was chronicling his work not his personal life, per se. His mother gave me all of Sheldon’s early notes plus what Leonard and Rajesh gave me when I interviewed them.”

“I see.” Penny dug into her purse. “I was sorting out some stuff at home and came across something of Sheldon’s that I think you should see.” She handed Alex a flash drive. “It’s a backup of Sheldon’s computer.”

Now curious, the brunette plugged the drive into her laptop. The office was silent as she clicked a few file folders.

“I knew it!” she said triumphantly and with a giant grin. “I *knew* Dr. Cooper had other posits he was working on!” She glanced over the laptop to Penny. “He never discussed them with me. God, I was reduced to filing things or else reading potty journals. Anyways, I remember bits and pieces of formulas on his whiteboard from time to time and I was very disappointed that they didn’t come to me in the estate.” Here she smirked. “Guess Leonard was holding out on me. Maybe he’s working on a book of his own.”

Penny’s mouth twitched. “Oh, he’s sharing Sheldon’s work alright. Just not in the way you’d expect.” Alex raised an eyebrow. “Look in the file ‘drips and drabs’ for ‘spatial’.” The physicist complied and froze when she came to the heading. She glanced at Penny, wide eyed, before returning to the screen to pour over the document.

As Alex read Penny bit her lip. Maybe Raj was mistaken and the papers weren’t as similar as he thought. Maybe this was all one big horrible mistake and they’d all get a laugh over it and that’d be that. The only thing was Leonard had kind of confessed to Raj. Why would he have done that if he didn’t know—

Suddenly Alex popped out of her seat and went to her bookshelf. She pulled out a hardcover and flipped to the table of contents before turning to the desired page. Her jaw dropped as she scanned what she read.

“Son of a bitch,” she hissed. Alex returned to her desk and scrolled through Sheldon’s document trying to compose herself. “Does Leonard know you have this?”

“For a year and a half.”

“A year and a half!”

“He told me he would take care of it and that he needed time to wrap things up,” Penny said, poker-faced.

A knowing smile came to Alex’s face. “You’re telling me that you figured this out all by yourself?”
“Yes,” the assistant said firmly.

“I see. Does anyone else know about this?”

Penny gave what she hoped was the best performance of her life.

“Dr. Koothrappali. I told him about a couple of weeks ago and he suggested I contact you,” she said evenly.

Alex knew there was no way Penny figured this out on her own now or a year and a half ago but could tell from the Nebraskan’s formidable stare that she’d rather go down in a hail of bullets than involve Raj in this sordid affair.

“Fair enough,” the physicist said with a nod. “Give me time to go over this. I’ll approach Gablehauser when I’ve got a clearer picture as to what’s exactly been misappropriated.”

The two women exchanged phone numbers and shook hands before Penny returned home. She was glad she decided to take the entire afternoon off because she felt completely drained. At home she heated dinner—since Raj left she’d fallen into a habit of Lean Cuisine more times than she’d care to admit—and changed into her pajamas.

She sat down on the couch in her robot evolution t-shirt and set her food beside her laptop. After a moment’s pause she flipped to Outlook and sent off a three word email to Rajesh:

I’ve done it.

Now all she had to do was wait for the shit to fall.

xTBBTx

“Very impressive,” the Man grinned as he looked over the completed model town.

“Thank you,” Sheldon replied, pleased with himself. “I think I’ve managed to clean up at least a hectare of forest looking for sticks and twigs.” He cocked his head. “Funny that there were so many fallen branches given that I’ve never noted any type of wind. Have you?”

“Not really. Of course it’s not like I’ve spent great amounts of time out here.”

The physicist raised an eyebrow. “Have you been here before?” The Man shook his head. “So you had no idea these mirrors existed?”

“I learn something new all the time thanks to you, Dr. Cooper.”

“Yes, well, I aim to please.” The two men began to walk alongside the mirrors. “Your family must miss you.”

“Why do you say that?”

“You spend a lot of time with me.”

“I like spending time with you,” the Man said with a little smile. Sheldon shrugged.

“Even though it’s only to watch me build stick towns and bemoan my plight?”

“You’re not all sour grapes,” the Man countered. “You’re insightful, extremely knowledgeable and creative. Now’s not the time to sell yourself short.”
“I’m not,” Sheldon said haughtily. “I’ve argued successfully against the greatest minds in human history.” He looked ahead at the seemingly endless line of mirrors in the distance. “Not that this is particularly relevant at this point.”

“So what do you want to do now?”

“Go home,” the physicist said at once.

“And how will you do that?” the Man asked as he shoved a hand into his pocket.

“Leave here.” A self-deprecating smirk came to his face. “Although I seem to lack the courage.”

“You’ve shown plenty of courage, Dr. Cooper,” the Man chided lightly. “You would still be in the physics room if you didn’t.”

Sheldon chuckled. “If you were trying to make a bolstering point you just blew it. Somehow being lost in the middle of nowhere isn’t exactly an encouraging experience.”

“Ah, well, I tried,” the Man said, amused.

xTBBTx

It was well after midnight on the last Saturday night of the month which meant Penny and Raj were embroiled in the latest Halo skirmish. Howard was online earlier but of course couldn’t stay on as late given his domestic situation.

“Eat my crud,” Penny growled as she launched a grenade at the astrophysicist.

“Now be nice,” he said into his headset, his heart racing with excitement. “I’ve got a present for you if you’d just come out into the clearing.”

“I don’t have to,” she chuckled evilly as she traded up for a pulse rifle and moved in for the kill. Raj had himself well concealed.

Too bad it wasn’t perfect.

“Gotcha!” the assistant squealed.

“Just wait until I’ve recovered and you’re mine.”

“Oh yeah well—” The landline phone rang. “Phone’s ringing.” She got up from the floor in front of the television. “Probably a wrong number. I need some more water. Regroup in five?”

“Sounds good. AFK.”

Penny went to the refrigerator as the answering machine kicked in:

*“Hello Penny, or Penelope, or whatever you’re calling yourself now.”*

The Nebraskan nearly dropped the water at the familiar voice.

*“I just got an interesting email from Alex tonight. … You just couldn’t wait, could you? I said I was going to handle things and—”*

She crossed over to the phone and answered.
“Hello Leonard.”

“What the hell, Pen?”

“It’s been over a year. How long does it take to ‘wrap things up’?”

“I was in the middle of experiments. I couldn’t bring controversy to the projects. … It wasn’t a good time.”

“So when was ‘a good time’, on your deathbed?”

“…Do you have any idea what you’ve done?”

“I didn’t do anything, Leonard. … Why did you do it?”

“I didn’t just ‘do it’. You make it sound like I was chomping at the bit to steal from him.”

“So Alex isn’t going to find that you used anything else from Sheldon?”

“…”

“Leonard—”

“I didn’t mean to. … Pen, it was my idea.”

“You mean to tell me Sheldon stole off of you?”

“Nobody stole off of anybody. Before I looked at Sheldon’s computer I never saw his paper. To my knowledge he never saw any of my work. I always kept things to myself since he had a habit of fixing any errors on my board or saying snarky comments about what I was doing.”

“So this was a coincidence?”

“I suppose. The evidence’s there that he came up with this first but I swear to you, Pen, I thought this up on my own, too. I worked like hell on this thing. I knew it was groundbreaking. I was on top of the world and then I opened Sheldon’s computer and everything went to hell. … I was sick to my stomach when I read his paper. It wasn’t completely flushed out like mine but the general idea was there. … All my work was for nothing.”

“Sometimes shit happens, Leonard.”

“…You know what the kicker was? I didn’t find the paper in his ‘projects’ file or his ‘research’ file. It was in his junk file. ‘Drips and Drabs’. I remember Sheldon coming up with little things and then he would shrug and say ‘drips and drabs’. … So my idea was an anecdote. Nothing to him. … I lost it, Pen. He had an interpretation that I hadn’t thought of. It was brilliant and it made the rest of my research click into place and I might have borrowed it.”

“Stupid.”

“Very stupid.”

“Why didn’t you just say that the two of you came up with the idea?”

“Because I wanted it to be mine not Sheldon’s. I just wanted recognition for me for doing something significant on my own.”
“...What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’ll have to resign. ... It all depends on Alex, really.”

“Did you tell her all this?”

“No, I just got her email tonight.”

“Tell her.”

“I doubt it’ll make much difference.”

“You never know.”

“I forgot you’re always the optimist. ... I miss that. ... So aside from hearing unexpectedly from an ex-fiancé how are you doing?”

“Okay.”

“I was sorry to hear about Raj.”

“No you weren’t.”

“Okay, maybe I wasn’t completely onboard with the ‘Renny’ but still you’d been together for a long time.”

“Things happen. Things don’t. I’m in a good place now and I expect it to stay that way.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you so much as breathe in Raj or Howard’s direction about the Arctic and I’m speed dialing Homeland Security about your North Korean floozy and little rocket fuel mishap. It’s been a while but I’m sure if they swab the elevator shaft they could still find a bit of your fuel around the place.”

“Penny, I’ll go to federal prison!”

“No you won’t if you zip it. Now suck it up and do what you have to do to make this right.”

“Raj and Howard are to blame, too. They—”

“You’ve got one month.”

“Penny, I need more time.”

“You just don’t want to face the music but I’ve got news for you: if you’re even half the ‘nice guy’ you always said you were you’re going to own this. You owe Sheldon and you’re damn well going to pay up.”

“Here you are protecting him like the old days.”

“It’s what friends do, Leonard. You might want to remember that next time you get an itch to ‘borrow’ something from a dead guy. ... I’ve got to go.”

“Penny, I’m sorry.”

“Me too. One month, Leonard.”
Penny hung up the phone and went back to the game.

“I’m back,” she said flatly after donning her headset.

“What’s wrong?” Raj asked.

“The call was from Leonard. He was upset.”

“I can imagine. Are you okay?”

She shrugged. “I suppose.” Pause. “He said it was all a misunderstanding at first. That he thought he came up with the idea all on his own and was floored to see it on Sheldon’s computer. Then he did a stupid thing and borrowed some things from the paper.”

“What an idiot,” Raj sighed.

“He knows.” She began to sniffle. “God, what a stupid idiot.” Pause. “Why do I feel so bad?”

“Because you’re a kind person who doesn’t like to see anyone hurt, my Rani. You did what had to be done.”

“I know.”

“It’s best karma gets Leonard now as opposed to another life. Just think: you’ve saved him from coming back as a dung beetle.”

In spite of herself Penny laughed. “God, I love you.”

“And that is part of the reason why I’ll leave this earth a Prince,” Raj chuckled.

xTBBTx

Penny arrived home to find a package waiting for her. When she got to her apartment she opened it to find an advanced copy of Dr. Alex Jensen’s treatise of Sheldon’s work which over the course of eighteen months of writing had evolved from a single entity to two volumes. The Nebraskan flipped to the table of contents and was immediately lost in a plethora of scientific terms. She gently fanned the pages, marveling at the equations and diagrams as they flew past. All of this was Sheldon.

It was as she was closing the book that she caught a familiar name. She turned back to the dedication page:

To Dr. Sheldon Cooper, found at last.

xTBBTx

The treatise wasn’t a mainstream best seller but it did attract significant attention in the scientific community. Sheldon’s work was vast, varied and original.

Quite like the man, himself.

xTBBTx

Sheldon’s lips were twisted in thought as he stared at Penny’s mirror. He took a leap but his hand fell short of the top. Measuring out his steps to the tree line he turned and took a running leap at the mirror. His hand hooked the top but he was unable to gain a firm grasp and slipped to the ground.
“Come on, Sheldon,” he growled as he wiped his hands on his pants even though there was no perspiration present.

After a deep breath to calm himself he narrowed his eyes and made another attempt. This time he grasped the edge with both hands and with his shoes doing their best to grip the mirror’s surface he managed to haul himself to the top.

Once his leg swung over so he balanced on either side he looked around and what he found nearly caused him to fall off the mirror. On the opposite side he saw not only the same trees, rocks and dirt but also ‘Sheldonville’! He turned his head back and forth and there was no doubt that the scenes were identical as if the mirror’s reflection was made solid on the opposing side.

“Fascinating,” he murmured. Sheldon wondered if it was worth the effort to explore this other side if it was similar. “It’s different in that I’ve never been there,” he said with a shrug before dropping down.

He turned to the mirror and saw his reflection.

“No back to this, apparently.” He looked down either side of Penny’s mirror. “And each mirror’s the same color as they were on the other side.”

The physicist then focused his attention on ‘Sheldonville’ and after a close inspection came to the conclusion that this was in fact his creation. The houses were built in the same fashion and the little ties he made from birch bark to secure the railroad trestle were all there. Even his little stick figures of Professor Proton and him were present in the professor’s backyard.

“I wonder how far this mirror imagery goes?” he murmured to himself as he gazed into the forest. With another shrug he ventured in past the trees and immediately noted the absence of branches and twigs in the vicinity. He made his way further to the tree whose loose bark he’d used for his construction. At first he was hard pressed to locate it but when he finally satisfied himself that he had, indeed, found it he was surprised to find that it still had its bark.

“Aren’t you a treat,” he said with a pleased smile. “Now why are you different?” He turned the way he’d come and regarded the trees. He snapped his fingers. “I can’t see the mirror!” He rested a hand on the tree. “You’re different because you’re not reflected.”

Sheldon began his walk back to the mirror when he suddenly spun around in his tracks.

“Hello?” he called out, sure that someone or something was there. “I know it’s not your name but Virgil if it’s you please come out.”

Silence.

The lanky man took a few tentative steps forward. He wasn’t sure what was out there only that he felt that it was near.

“Hello?” He took another step. “I won’t hurt you.”

Sheldon’s heart rate quickened as his ears strained to hear something, anything, in the forest beyond. There was nothing to see or to hear and yet he somehow knew that the thing was moving, perhaps circling him. His shoe made smucking and smushing sounds as it rose out of the mud and sunk deeper as he took a step back. Slowly he turned and began to make his way to the mirror. With each step the mud seemed to get deeper until he was hard-pressed to lift his feet without effort.
“Come on, come on,” he hissed and began to pick up his pace.

Off to the side he thought he caught a glimpse of something moving at terrific speed towards him and he completely lost his nerve. Sheldon began to run, his progress hampered by the ever deepening mud. What was more frightening was that he should have reached the mirrors by now but all that lay ahead were more trees. His breathing was ragged and his arms began to flail as he did his best to maintain his balance. The creature was right behind him and it was all he could do to stay ahead of it until his foot sank beneath the mud, tripping him up.

“No!” he screamed as he fell face first into the wet soil and sank. Sheldon quickly rolled onto his back to find—nothing. He was alone.

His relief quickly turned to a new horror as he found himself unable to lift his arms out of the mud. He struggled with the mess and it seemed that the more he moved the quicker he sank.

From his left he saw his companion emerge from the trees.

“Help me!” the physicist shrieked.

The Man shook his head. “I can’t,” he said apologetically.

“What?”

“This is your struggle not mine.”

Sheldon laugh-sobbed as the horror of the situation overwhelmed him. He sank even deeper.

“Penny!” he cried out. “Lord, please, Penny help me!”

“She’s not here, Dr. Cooper,” the Man said pointedly.

“I know!” ‘Think Sheldon think!’

He stretched his legs downwards and felt something solid beneath him. After testing his footing he set his weight upon the ground and again attempted to get out of the mud. As he raised his arm the mud stretched with it like it was tar.

“Let go!” Sheldon began to shake his arm but the mud held fast. He did his best to pull but couldn’t free himself of the mess; instead the solid matter beneath him seemingly crumbled away and realized with a sob that he was sinking.

“You’re running out of time, Dr. Cooper,” the Man said urgently.

Sheldon took several deep breaths and reached out with a pointed foot and found solid ground. After assuring as best he could that it was safe he again tried to free his arms but to no avail. As he stretched and swished through the mud he examined its composition and concluded that it had a consistency more like white glue as opposed to earthly mud.

It’s as he thought over the mud that it struck him that he was no longer sinking.

“I must have hit bottom,” Sheldon murmured and again stretched his arm for all he was worth. “Jesus Christ!” Again the ground beneath him crumbled away and he sank deeper.

“Language,” the Man tsked.

“Either help me or shut up,” the physicist growled as his feet again found a solid base. He stopped
moving as his thoughts went into overdrive. “The ground seems solid and then lets go only to again solidify after I’ve sunk.” He dug his toe into the ground and found it to be a hard base. “Besides the ground I’m the only anomaly present. Therefore it’s something I’m doing that’s causing the ground to give way.” Sheldon stretched his arm as high as he could before letting it rest back in the mud. He made a calculation and then proceeded to brace himself and lift with his legs as he tried to raise his arms and shoulders. It didn’t work but he didn’t expect it to.

“That’s changed,” Sheldon said to the Man, who was as still as stone as he observed.

“My mass is the same,” the lanky man continued. “And if anything the force I exuded to extricate myself has increased yet unlike the previous attempts the ground did not give way. What’s changed?” He racked his brains as he sought to recall everything that had happened.

“The only thing that’s changed is that I’m not panicking.” He squared his jaw and pressed down on the ground to gain a solid footing before again attempting to pull his arms from the mud. Sheldon could feel his muscles strain. ’Maybe I’m wrong and—’

The ground gave way.

“No!” he growled and immediately there was ground beneath him. “No, no, no.” He pulled again. “I’m Sheldon Lee Cooper. I have two doctorates and an IQ of one hundred and eighty seven. I won’t die like this!” His hand broke free. “I refuse!” His arm stretched the mud but it clung to his shirt. He pulled his other hand and forearm free but try as he might he couldn’t free his shirts. An idea struck him and he rolled up his long shirt sleeve and again reached for the surface.

The mud didn’t stick to his skin.

With a struggle he grabbed the cuff of his right sleeve and slipped out his arm before wiggling out of the rest of his shirt. His upper body free, he quickly undid his belt and pants even as he kicked off his shoes and socks. Sheldon braced himself and then leapt to the side, finding solid ground and he scrambled up.

“Dr. Sheldon Cooper—for the win!” he shouted triumphantly. He looked around but the Man was nowhere to be seen.

Sheldon began to walk, his naked flesh not feeling wet or cold.

As he expected he soon caught the flash of mirror in the distance. When Sheldon stepped beyond the trees he was surprised to see himself fully clothed in the mirror’s reflection. He looked down to see his clothes fully restored to his person.

Mentally exhausted, he walked to Penny’s mirror, plopped down and leaned against it.

**End of Part Four**

Play: Arsenic and Old Lace: Screen guild players script genericradiocom
Chapter Twenty Three

Chapter Summary

Time takes it all, whether you want it to or not.

-Stephen King, The Green Mile

xTBBTx

Reference to: ‘The Gozhowitz Deviation’; ‘The Flaming Spittoon Acquisition’

xTBBTx

2032:

“…Happy Birthday to You!” sang the group.

Raj smiled at his best friend. “Ready?”

“For fifty? Not on your life;” joked the engineer.

“Just blow out the candles you two,” Bernadette chided lightly. Both men smiled at each other and jointly blew out the candles on the cake.

“So how are the ‘Golden Years’?” Penny said with a wink.

“I’m not fifty until October;” sniffed the astrophysicist. “This is just symbolic;”

“For how much it cost us to fly here it better be more than ‘symbolic’;” Eila chuckled before kissing her husband.

“Enough talk. Cake;” pouted Mary Jane as the teenager crossed her arms in front of her chest.

“Mary Jane;” her mother tsked.

“It’s okay Bernadette. It isn’t just cake—it’s birthday cake!” cheered Raj as he scooped up the diminutive girl causing her to squeal. “Cut the cake! Cut the cake!”

“Cake! Cake!” giggled Meena as the toddler clapped her hands and waddled over to her father.

“Help!” Raj squeaked and his ten year old son, Birin, grabbed his sister so Raj could bring his God-child back to earth.

XxX

“Here you go,” Penny said as she handed her present to Raj. He opened it without fanfare and gawked as he saw ‘The Flash of Two Worlds’ statue in the box. His eyes met hers.

“You’re sure?” he whispered.
“Happy Birthday, Raj.” She smiled and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

Xxx

“I can’t believe you brought them,” Penny whispered as Raj and she stood in her bedroom watching his twin three year old girls sleeping in their car seats on the bed.

“I had to. It’s not like Pasadena is a stone’s throw away,” he replied equally as soft. “I wanted you all to meet my family.”

“They’re beautiful.”

“Thank you.” He reached out and took her hand. “You look good.”

“So do you.”

“I’ve got love handles,” he sighed. “It’s hard to motivate myself to do pilates without a class.” They both chuckled as Penny patted his little belly.

“It looks cute.”

Raj rolled his eyes. “What am I going to do with you?” The ex-mates stared at the babies. “I was hoping you were going to bring someone,” he said after a moment.

“Sorry bub, no kiddies here.”

“I meant a man.”

“I know.” Here she shrugged. “I’ve dated on and off for a while but nothing serious.” She noted the look on Raj’s face. “Hey, if someone came along I’m more than ready for a relationship but I’m not going to throw myself after someone because I’m alone.”

“I don’t want to see you alone,” Raj said seriously.

“I have my friends; I have my hobbies and acting. Believe me I’m busy.”

“You’re happy?” he asked softly.

“I’m happy,” she assured him with a smile.

xTBBTx

2036:

“Happy birthday, bestie,” Amy said happily.

The two women clinked glasses. Now that the get-together with the Wolowitz’s and Rajesh via Skype was over with apartment 4A was a wash of soft jazz playing as two friends rejoiced in the calm.

“It’s so funny. When Howard turned fifty MJ was all bouncy for cake. Now you can’t tear her off her phone for anything,” chuckled Penny as she opened a birthday card from her sister. Since their mother had passed the siblings really didn’t stay in touch with each other beyond the yearly birthday and Christmas cards.

“Four years changes them a lot when they’re young.” Here Amy smiled. “Two years from now
when she graduates college and begins her adult life I’m sure Bernadette will look at this time with fondness."

“You must be counting the moments until Abby’s all grown up.” Penny put the card on Missy’s card and tackled another envelope, this one from Mrs. Cooper.

“Not completely.” Amy took a sip of wine. “While adolescence has at times been trying overall the experience has been both rewarding and delightful. Unlike me Abby’s popular. Not that I’m saying I lived through my daughter,” blushed the neurobiologist. “It’s just nice that when we had bedtime reading sessions we didn’t have to go over ‘How to Win Friends and Influence People’.” She noted the address on the envelope. “How’s Mrs. Cooper?”

“Still a force.” the Nebraskan smirked. “Looks like the fifty celebration doesn’t end quite so soon. She says there’ll be ‘a small gathering’ at the house when I visit this summer.”

“Of course. Where else would you be?” said Amy. It was practically a ritual for Penny as she spent her summer vacation in Galveston and a four day weekend in Boston in the Fall at Amy’s condo.

“You’re making me sound like Sheldon.”

Amy stuck up her hand in a Vulcan salute. “It’s only logical.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Penny said as she opened the last card before setting it on the pile.

“Who’s that from?”

“Alex Jensen.”

Amy raised an eyebrow. “Sheldon’s biographer.” Penny nodded as she sipped. “I hadn’t realized you’d kept in touch.”

“Yup. She keeps me up to date on things about Sheldon, not that I understand a lot of it. I guess since I—since things got sorted out with his work she thinks I’d want to know that things are okay with him,” Penny said with a shrug. A thought came to her. “Oh! Before I forget, Alex actually broke down and is writing a book of anecdotes about Sheldon.”

“A la ‘Surely You’re Joking Mr. Feynman’?”

“The physicist guy?”

“Yes.” Amy was quite pleased Penny knew the name. Perhaps working with Sheldon really did rub off on the Nebraskan after all. “His friend put together a book comprising tidbits of their conversations.”

“Something like that, I guess.” Penny took a sip of wine. “Anyways she asked me if you’d be willing to add anything and I said I’d have to ask first.”

Amy similarly took a sip of wine as she thought over her years with Sheldon: playing Counterfactuals, messing with their friends with a little meme theory, having words of the day. Suddenly it struck her that her fondest memories occurred before their paradigm shifted. A time when his humor titillated her to no end and his intellect left her wanting more.

“I’d be comfortable with that,” the neurobiologist said at last. “Sheldon had a whimsical side that needs to be shared.” She paused. “Besides, it’s not like Dr. Jensen could ask Leonard.”
“I guess not,” Penny murmured. “Have you heard from him at all?”

“Not since before he tendered his resignation at MIT. Alex’s book really ground his career to a halt.”

“Yeah. Alex said they took back his Young Scientist award for that Proton paper. Since she’s an authority on Sheldon’s work she’s been asked by Caltech to go over Leonard’s publications to see if anything else popped up that wasn’t his.”

“And?”

‘You’ll have to read my new book to find out’,” Penny mimicked the female physicist.

“Hopefully a joke.”

Penny smirked. “Eh, she’ll send me a free advanced copy so all’s good. All I need is someone to interpret it for me”—here she raised a fist to her mouth—“cough-Amy-cough.”

“I’ll be sure to let you know,” promised her friend. The two women clinked glasses. “To the years ahead.”

“Happy and healthy,” added the Nebraskan and together they drank.

xTBBTx

2042:

It was past five thirty and Penny was still in her office working diligently on the transfer papers. There was another merger at Fenris only this time it was being swallowed up by a bigger corporate entity. After twenty nine years at the company she was sad to see it go. Sadder still that her job was going to be forfeited along with most of her staff. Fortunately she’d listened to someone long ago and had put away a lot into savings. At her age it might be difficult finding another job.

The sounds of footfalls and then a knock at her door.

“Come in,” she said and was surprised to find it was Derek Starke. “What can I do for you, Mr. Starke?”

“Funny you should ask,” he smirked. He might be in his sixties but he still had a charm to him that was attractive. “I’ve been headhunted by another firm. They want me for my body—and my close connections with my clients.” He paused. “The only thing is that there’ll be a lot of things to be sorted as I adjust into their system.” A little chuckle escaped his lips. “It’s been said that I don’t play well under other people’s rules.”

“I have heard that, yes,” Penny smiled. “Kind of brings back a sense of déjà vu if you know what I mean?”

“Touché, my dear.” He cocked his head as he regarded the manager. “I could really use someone to keep me in line.”

“I agree.”

“So what do you say, Penelope? Unless you’ve landed a position elsewhere?” She raised an eyebrow. “As soon as Marilyn said she was retiring I immediately looked for you. I know they’re axing your job. Even with your talents I’m willing to bet it’ll be tough finding a job at your age.”
“I’ve been too busy to look,” Penny sniffed.

“Well look no further. I’ve arrived with the coach, Cinderella, and I want to take you to the ball.”

Penny thought it over. “So I’d be an EA again.”

“No, you’d be my assistant. Completely different. I mean you’d still be doing all the jobs of an EA but hey, it’s a prestige thing,” he said with a little smile.

“I suppose it’ll mean a reduction in salary. I’ll have to see how much.”

“Actually, it probably won’t. They shoveled out some hefty coin to get me, Penelope. Let me know what you want and I’ll make sure you get it.”

She shook her head in amusement. “You always get your way, don’t you?”

“Except with fire-tempered Nebraskans who don’t take crap,” he replied with a wink.

“I tentatively accept your offer,” Penny said after a moment. “Only I have to complete this merger first.”

“I understand completely.” He pulled out his card and set it on her desk. “Text me and we’ll get the ball rolling.”

Penny paused a moment to gather herself. “Mr. Starke. Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. It’s your fault you made yourself indispensible,” he mock tsked.

xTBBTx

Over the next while Sheldon spent his time watching Penny’s dreams not for the content but for something to do as the other part of his brain reflected on his plight. Somehow the forest around him was sensitive to his emotions so he’d have to be careful of his state of mind before entering. In this instance he was still a little freaked about his last trip there so he decided that the only traveling he wanted to do at present was vicariously through Penny.

There were times when people appeared he didn’t recognize but obviously they were important to her; however, more times than not someone from the gang was there or like in this instance the entire group was assembled. Sheldon regarded his ex-girlfriend now looking older as were the rest of his friends. From the surroundings they were obviously at his mother’s home in Galveston; the details of the living and dining areas were so precise he knew that Penny must have spent a great deal of time there.

The only curiosities to the room were the balloons, streamers and pile of presents all in shades of pink and purple.

“Obviously this isn’t my party. In fact, where am I?”

As Amy and Bernadette chatted away as they laid out plates around the table Sheldon spotted Howard and Dream Sheldon in the background setting up a magician’s table.

The back door to the house opened and in ran six children: three were obviously Raj’s by their caramel skin tone; a brunette brother and sister; and a blond, about six years old, with long hair. All but the last ran to the table as the blond instead dashed to ‘Sheldon’ who scooped her into his arms.

“Alright, now I have to know what’s going on.” Sheldon opened the mirror and stepped through in
Can’t believe how much Shelly’s grown,” Bernadette squeaked as Dream Sheldon approached the table with the girl. The girl smiled as the diminutive woman. “And so pretty!”

“With her mother’s genetics how could she not be?” Amy said matter-of-factly. “She’ll be a man-killer when she grows up.”

“I’m rather uncomfortable talking about my daughter’s comeliness,” huffed Dream Sheldon causing his real self to gasp.

“My daughter?” He stepped closer to the pair. ‘Shelly’ had his blue eyes and wore an orange Penny Blossom in her hair.

“Where’s your mother?” Dream Sheldon asked Shelly.

“At the car,” the girl said in an East Texan accent.

‘Real’ Sheldon walked to the door and saw Penny talking to a man he didn’t know. He ventured over to the pair.

“So anyways, what do you say?” the man said amiably.

“I can’t, Mark,” was Penny’s polite response. “It’s not right for us.”

“A man can’t change his mind?”

“Sure he can. That doesn’t mean he can change a woman’s though.”

Mark was confused. “I thought you liked me?”

Penny smiled warmly. “I do but not the way you want me to.”

He stepped closer. “I like you, Penny.”

“I’m with someone.”

Sheldon frowned. “She’s married and has a child,” he said, unconscious to the fact that his hands had curled into fists. “Semiotics man. Observe the ring on her finger.”

“How come I’ve never seen this guy?” Mark growled. “No one’s ever seen him?”

“Mommy!” came a cry from the house as Shelly waved to Penny.

“I’ve got to go,” the Nebraskan said softly and went to her daughter; Sheldon scowled at the man before following.

He stood in the doorway as Penny was led by the hand to a lit birthday cake sitting on the table. They all sang ‘Happy Birthday’ while Howard took pictures. Shelly blew out the candles and Penny and Dream Sheldon kissed.

“Who wants some cake?” said a familiar voice from the kitchen before the swing door opened and Meemaw came out followed by Mary.

While people seated themselves Sheldon’s mirror self cut the cake and Bernadette served.
As for Sheldon he stayed by his grandmother’s side until the scene melted away.

“Thank yuh again for comin’,” Missy said as Penny and she walked through the graveyard. “Ah know Momma and yuh were close.”

“Not that we aren’t,” the Nebraskan chuckled as she lightly bumped shoulders.

Two boys around eight years old rushed the pair.

“Meemaw, cain Roger an’ me go tuh the swings now?” the taller of the two said. “We were good ‘n’ quiet in the church.”

“Ah suppose,” Missy replied. “After we have lunch.” The two little faces fell. “But then y’all can swing tuh yuhr heart’s desire until dinner.”

“Yay!” squealed the younger one and they both took off playing tag down the rows of gravestones.

“Walk, don’t run!” Missy called after them before chuckling. “They listen about as well as Shelly and ah did. So are yuh goin’ back to the house or comin’ with us tuh the community center for the reception?”

“I’ll come with you, only can I make a little pit stop before we go?”

Missy nodded. “Ah have tuh drop by anyhow.” They headed south. “Ah don’t get out here like ah should.”

“Well you’ve got the brood to look after. What is it, two grandkids?”

“Two point five. Cass is pregnant again.”

Penny laughed. “Soon there’ll be enough Sanders to populate a small town.” Missy rolled her eyes.

“It’d be nice tuh be known for more than ruttin’.” She smiled wistfully. “Ah suppose Shelly took all than pent up ambition with him.”

“Oh get off it,” chided Penny lightly. “All of you turned out fine.”

They both stopped talking as they came upon a familiar stone.

“Hey Sheldon,” the Nebraskan said warmly as she knelt down and began clearing the grass from the patch of Forget-Me-Not. Since Mary got too ill to come out in the final months her son’s grave took on a wild look. “I just wanted to let you know that your mother passed on Saturday.” Pause. “We had the funeral today and she’s buried in the same cemetery as you.” Another pause. “Amy, Raj, Howard and Bernie are all okay. So am I, surprise, surprise.”

She leaned into his headstone and said softly, “Your work is safe, Moonpie.”

“Say howdy tuh Momma for us,” Missy said.

Before the two women left Penny picked some of the little flowers from Sheldon’s grave which she later pressed at home in his biography.
“I thought you said you weren’t going in there anymore,” the Man said as Sheldon stepped out from the mirror. Immediately the physicist looked sheepish.

“I do well for long periods of time,” he said after a moment. “Then I….” He trailed off and looked away.

“You’re lonely.”

“I’m weak.”

“You’re human, Dr. Cooper.”

“Whatever that means,” Sheldon snorted. “Humans live on Earth and read comic books and have pizza and watch Firefly. I don’t do any of that now.”

“You do what’s important,” the Man countered evenly.

“And what’s that? Waste what time I have on model towns and fantastic mirrors?”

“It this is such a waste why are you doing it?” the Man said with a frown. “Why not just go?”

“Go where? I’m trapped.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way.”

Sheldon shrugged. “It doesn’t matter where I go.” He turned to the mirror. “I’m a masochist for watching this.” Pause. “I wish I had even a minute with Penny. That I could warn her about Leonard and tell her she should believe in herself.” He caught the Man’s eyes. “Could you do that?”

“Let me clarify: I’m as omnipotent as I am omniscient and as you know I’m far from that,” the Man said apologetically. “We all have our limitations, Dr. Cooper.” A little smile came to his lips. “You have to trust Penny to live her own life because in the end that’s what she’s doing.”

After a moment Sheldon nodded and the Man strolled off.

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2052:

“So what are you going to do?” asked Penny as she took a sip of tea.

“I dunno,” Missy replied. “After Mamma died we took over the house and sold the trailer. Maybe that wasn’t such a good idea after all.” She shook her head. “Ah don’t know how she did it, bein’ a widow and all and takin’ care of the place. With Pete gone now ah’ll have to sell the house ‘cause it’ll eat muh savin’s in no time flat.”

“Yeah, I had to really plan ahead with my budget before I retired last year,” agreed Penny. “I still have things I want to do like visit you and Amy and go to plays so it means giving up things like shoe shopping.” Here she chuckled. “Sheldon would think I was mentally ill to say something like that.”

“‘Cause yuh’d have to be tuh say it,” laughed Missy.
Penny thought over her expenses and what she liked to do.

“You know,” she said slowly. “I can always move here.”

Missy nearly spilled her tea. “Yuh? Penny, there’s no play houses here or great shoe stores ‘cause yuh might think yuh can skip out on them but believe me yuh’ll crack. Asides, there’s Bernadette an’ your play watchin’ group. Here’s just me and muh family.”

“Missy, are you telling me you want to move in with your kids?”

“Hell no!”

“Well then?” The East Texan was dubious. “It’ll save me a lot of money if I came here,” Penny said. “If I itch for plays Houston’s only an hour and a half away. I’ve been there several times and there’s more than enough venues to keep me busy. Besides,” she continued as she set her tea cup on the table. “Bernie and Howard have their grandkids so I don’t see them as often as I used to.”

Sheldon’s sister mulled over the proposition throughout the rest of Penny’s stay.

“Yuh’re sure?” she asked as Penny packed her things into the suitcase.

“Missy, I’m sure. It’ll be nice having company that’s family.” The Nebraskan stopped and turned to her friend. “Since Sheldon died your mother’s been my lifeline with her encouragement and love.” Here she smiled. “You’re awesome to hang out with and hey, someone’s gotta raise hell in this city now that your mom’s gone.”

“Fair enough,” Missy grinned. “Galveston, get ready!”

Penny looked around the bare apartment with a mix of sadness and fondness. She’d sent off her bed, dresser and computer desk along with the rest of her belongings. All that was left were boxes and furniture for the Goodwill.

The only thing she felt sorry she couldn’t bring with her was the couch. It was too big for the house and, truth be told, terribly out of date. Moreover the springs were going from years of her flopping on the couch and having her friends’ kids hopping on it.

“Hello,” said a burly man at the door with brown hair who reminded Penny of her ex-boyfriend Kurt. “We’re here from the Goodwill for pickup?”

“Terrific. Here’s the key to lock the elevator so it’ll take less trips,” she replied.

“Sounds good.”

“Oh,” she said as a thought flashed. “If you could do something for me it’d be appreciated.”

“Name it,” said the other man as he entered the room.

“This couch is junk. Could you put it by the garbage for me?”

“Sure thing,” said the first man. He looked at his coworker. “Might as well get it out of the way first to make room.”

They each picked up an end and made for the exit.
“Wait!” Penny blurted before she knew what she was saying. She went to the couch and picked up the rightmost cushion. “Okay, it can go.”

After they’d finished the move Penny locked the door, slipped the keys into the superintendant’s mailbox and left 2311 N. Los Robles Avenue for good.

xTBBTx

2057:

Penny smiled as she got to the door and saw a bunch of planets and nebula pictures taped to it. She knocked and waited for an “Enter” before slipping inside.

“Hey Shelly,” she said.

The little girl put a bookmark in her Harry Potter book and delicately set it aside. She had long fingers like her grandfather, George Jr.

“Hullo Penny,” she replied evenly.

“What are you doing in here? It’s a beautiful day outside.”

The girl shrugged, causing the tips of her brown hair to shiver around her shoulders.

“Bryan an’ Ron are out there. Ah’d rather stay in.”

“Are they picking on you again?” Penny pursed her lips as she saw Shelly decide whether to tattle on her playmates. “You want me to talk to them?”

“No. That’ll only make thin’s worse. They’ll know they’re gettin’ tuh me,” she said grimly.

“Point,” Penny replied. She was amazed at her God-child’s assessment of the situation; for a five year old she was far sharper than the neighborhood kids.

Then again she was a Cooper.

“Are yuh here tuh read tuh me?” the girl said hopefully.

“Shelly, I think you can read for yourself,” Penny said, indicating the Harry Potter book.

“Please?”

Blue eyes met green.

“Okay.” Penny went to the child’s book shelf with its Dr. Seuss, Harry Potter and a line of ‘Introducing’ Science reference books. “What do you feel like today?”

“‘Introducin’ Richard Feynman,’” Shelly replied as she settled on the bed and reached for her pink bear.

Penny grabbed the book and sat down on the bed, leaning against the headboard.

“Start at the beginning or—”

“Page sixty three,” the little girl said and her God-mother complied.

“Path Integral Formulation: Particle in Curved Space.” The Nebraskan cleared her throat. “For a
particle in curved space the kinetic term depends on the position and the above time slicing cannot be applied, this being a manifestation of the notorious operator ordering problem in Schrödinger quantum mechanics.”

She glanced at Shelly who was sucking her thumb with her eyes closed.

“‘You okay there, Moonpie?’”

Shelly opened an eyelid. “Continue please.”

“Yes Ma’am,” Penny said with a twinkle in her eyes. “One may, however, solve this problem by transforming the time-sliced flat-space path integral to curved space using a multivalued coordinate transformation….”

Penny sat on the couch stifling a yawn as the two Sheldons worked at the whiteboard.

“We should do something,” she said for the third time.

“I am doing something,” Dream Sheldon said absently before adding to his equation.

“I mean besides the mumbo-jumbo.”

“Mumbo-jumbo!” ‘Sheldon’ gasped as he turned to glare at his neighbor.

As for ‘real’ Sheldon, he chuckled out a “Penny, Penny, Penny” and continued writing.

There’s a knock at the door and Raj entered.

“Are we going dancing or not?” he asked.

“Sure,” Penny replied and turned to the lanky man. “Coming?”

“I don’t dance,” Dream Sheldon said stiffly.

“You danced with Amy,” she reminded him as she got off the couch.

“That was non optional.”

“You never danced when I asked you to dance,” she said quietly.

‘Sheldon’ paused at the board before he continued writing. Penny turned and walked out the door with Raj.

“Who dances in the kitchen?” Sheldon said as the scene went to black. “That’s a whole plethora of safety violations.” He shook his head as he exited the mirror. “Besides, you’d just engaged in coitus with Leonard.” Pause. “You were wearing his shirt.”

He turned to gaze at his reflection in the mirror although his mind was focused on the night he did go dancing with Penny, Bernadette and Amy.

“You suggested we go dancing.” Another pause. “You told me to go after Amy.” He looked at himself. “You said I wasn’t ‘the guy’ and only the guy should dance with you and Leonard is the guy.” He began to pace. “I was ‘the guy’ for Amy and therefore I danced with her. Of course I was preparing to return our paradigm to friendship when I was killed so obviously I wasn’t ‘the guy’
rather than ‘a guy’.

He stopped walking and again stared at the mirror. “Still, I would never have experienced having a girlfriend. I never had a woman in my life who wasn’t family.”

A little smile curled his lips as he thought of blunt cut blond bangs and a baby blue t-shirt.

“And then you came….”

xTBBTx

2065:

“Who in tarnation’s callin’ at this time of night?” cursed Missy as she got up stiffly from her bed and made her way down the hall and into the living room. She picked up the phone and gave a gruff, “Hello? ... Oh, Biren. ... No, no worries about the time difference. ... Of course she’s here. We still paint the town red but that’s before ten o’clock bedtime. Now just a moment.”

Missy put down the phone and proceeded to her friend’s room and knocked.

“Penny?” she said. Silence. “Penny?” she said again, a little louder as she opened the door. Penny was now paying for all the nights at loud dance bars as her hearing was definitely not what it should be considering she was four years younger than Missy and the East Texan had just turned eighty one.

“What is it?” mumbled Penny.

“Biren’s on the phone.”

“Now?”

“Well it’s nearly one in the afternoon there in India so give the boy a break,” Missy chided as the Nebraskan got out of bed and the pair made their way to the living room.

Penny took up the phone. “Hello? ... How are you, sweetie? ...Oh? What’s wrong? ... Oh my God. How? ... I see. ... How’s your mother? ... Text me the details when you can. ... Of course you do. Thanks for calling.”

Missy was sitting on the couch watching her friend slowly replace the receiver on the cradle.

“Penny?”

“My Prince is gone,” she whispered with tears running down her face.

Missy held her as she cried.

xTBBTx

“Sheldon.”

The physicist looked up from his wooden ‘train’ and immediately he sprung from the ground. Panic raced through his heart as he approached the mirror. There was an image but it was terribly distorted.

He opened the mirror and carefully stepped into his apartment at 4A. There was no one in the room; even the whiteboard was blank.
“Penny?” he called out. “Penny?”

Suddenly the room rippled and Sheldon saw what looked like a hospital room.

“Penny?” said a woman’s voice with an East Texas twang.

The apartment returned.

Sheldon’s mind went into overdrive. Either this was one trippy dream or else something serious was happening.

“Penny? Talk to me,” he cried as he stared at the ceiling which was now a wash of whiteness.

Again a shudder and the hospital room appeared. This time Sheldon caught a glimpse of the old woman and realized with a shock that it was Missy.

“Can she hear me?” asked his twin.

The scene vanished to the apartment. Sheldon looked to the hallway but could no longer see the washroom as the whiteness came down the hall.

“Lord, you’re dying,” Sheldon whispered.

“Sheldon?” came Penny’s terrified voice from the hall.

He raced to the door but couldn’t turn the handle.

“Penny!” He could hear her sobbing and laid his cheek against the door.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said calmly. “I’m right here.”

All at once streaks of whiteness took out the walls and Sheldon could see his Meemaw (!) staring at him. His mouth dropped in shock but before he could say anything he heard what sounded like ice flash-freezing and the scene became a wall of tarnished silver. Madly he dashed to the mirror’s entrance as the silver followed on his heels. He just managed to make it out before the mirror slammed shut and its sheen dulled.

It took him several minutes to calm himself before he ventured to the mirror and touched it. Where he had opened it there was no longer a mechanism to click. He noted the color and realized it was the same silver that was on some of the other mirrors.

“She’s dead,” he said to himself. There’d be no more traveling through the mirror. No more Penny and apartment 4A. He was sad yet at the same time there was a burst of excitement as he recalled the last few seconds.

Meemaw was there. A little smile came to his face. He had no idea why she was there but she was. She existed. “And I’ll find you,” he vowed. “Even if it takes me a millennium.”

He brushed his hand gently over the mirror.

“Thank you, Penny,” he said and with determination marched beyond ‘Sheldonville’ into the forest.

xTBBTx

Over the years they’d gotten some weird requests at New City Cemetery so this wasn’t the
The coffin was set on top of what looked like a couch cushion.

**End of Part Five**

xTBBTx

Wikipedia: Path Integral Formulation
Chapter Twenty Four

Chapter Summary

“Alice: Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?
The Cheshire Cat: That depends a good deal on where you want to get to.
Alice: I don't much care where.
The Cheshire Cat: Then it doesn't much matter which way you go.
Alice: ...So long as I get somewhere.
The Cheshire Cat: Oh, you're sure to do that, if only you walk long enough.”

-Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland

xtBBTx

Reference to and dialogue from: ‘Pilot’

“Hello Slugger,” came a familiar voice.

Penny looked around her white surroundings and saw a man in his twenties she immediately
recognized as her father standing with open arms. Instantly she rushed to him.

“Daddy!” she cried.

“Hello Pen.” He kissed the top of her head.

After a minute or so she stepped back to take him in although they held hands.

“It’s really you?” she sniffled, her eyes reddened although no tears fell.

“It’s really me,” he laughed.

“Come on, your mother’s waiting for you.”

As they walked it dawned on Penny that her forearms were devoid of age spots and were youthful
looking. She stopped to feel herself: her hands ran across her smooth brow, tight neck and thighs.

“Crap on a cracker,” she giggled. “It’s been a while since I’ve been like this.” She noted she was
wearing an old baby blue top, jean shorts and flip-flops.

“Yup. I couldn’t get over how I looked when I first got here and best of all: no arthritis!”

“I hear ya,” Penny chortled as they approached an open door seemingly standing unsupported.

“What’s this?”

“Home,” Wyatt said and with that Penny and he stepped through into a yellow cornfield grown
head high.

“Penny!” called her mother from somewhere ahead.

The Nebraskan took her father’s hand and, laughing, practically dragged him along. Soon they
were out of the field and she saw her grandparents’ old farmhouse ahead and her mother standing
on the porch.
“Momma!” Penny called and urged Wyatt onwards, only letting go of her father’s hand so she could rush up the three steps and swallow her mother in a hug.

“Hello pumpkin,” Anne said warmly. “Nanny and Papa want to see you.”

Together they went inside.

xTBBTx

“By the by, Pen, someone came by saying he wants to see you,” Wyatt said, interrupting his daughter as she talked about anything and everything about family since her parents died. She looked at him.

“He can wait, can’t he?”

“I don’t know. He said he was royalty.”

All at once Penny’s mouth dropped and she stood from her place at the kitchen table. Oddly enough that was the only thing in the house: a dining room table which seemed to accommodate her family no matter how many came through the door.

“Where is he?” she said softly.

“In the kitchen, dear,” Nanny said.

Penny rushed through the door to find herself in apartment 4A and a young Rajesh Koothrappali sitting on the couch.

“Raj!” she squealed and in a flash he was up and immediately inundated with kisses and hugs.

“Hello my Rani,” he laughed as he sat the pair of them on the couch.

“How?” Penny stammered. “This is all— Is this heaven?”

Raj shrugged. “I don’t know. To me this is bhuva, the world of ancestors, as all I’ve encountered is family. Not that I’m complaining,” he amended quickly. “It’s been wonderful seeing my sisters and parents.”

“I know the feeling. I’m surprised my voice isn’t hoarse from all the talking I’ve been doing.”

He smiled. “You’ll find that your physical limitations are gone, Penny. No getting tired or hungry or thirsty or sore so gab all you want.”

“Gee thanks,” she smirked before sticking out her tongue causing him to chuckle. “It’s kinda funny that Mom and Dad had no idea what had happened to me, actually to anyone since they died.”

“As far as I can tell all contact with the mortal world has been severed. There’s no place for me to ‘look in’ on my children or Eila.”

Penny raised an eyebrow. “So how did you know I was here?”

“I think about you, Penny,” the man said seriously. “All the wonderful times we’ve had; oftentimes I find myself in this apartment.”

“So you’re saying the doors connect to different places if you want them to,” she said slowly.
“From what I can figure out. All I do is think of someone and step through a door and I’m in the place I associate with him or her most.”

“So how did Dad know you were waiting for me?”

“I’ve been to your grandparents’ house. That’s where I found Wyatt and asked him if you’d come. He said no but that he’d send you over as soon as he was able.”

Penny cocked her head as she thought. “But what if you think of me here and I’m with my parents at Nanny’s house? Wouldn’t you be here by yourself?”

“Oddly, no,” the astrophysicist replied. “It’s like we have all the time in the world and that each moment is slotted in so that we arrive some place at just the right moment to meet.” He paused. “At least, that’s what I’ve experienced for the most part but who knows if that’s the norm here.”

“Huh.” She looked around the apartment. “It’s a wonder Sheldon isn’t here.”

“Actually, he’s what throws a monkey wrench into my idea,” said Raj. “Once I’d settled in with my family I thought of Sheldon but he’s never appeared here.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Maybe he doesn’t want to see me.”

“That’s bunk.”

“So then where is he?”

“Probably with his Meemaw. I doubt he’d leave her side,” offered Penny.


“Since when has Sheldon ever ‘fit in’? God, he’s probably reorganizing this place as we speak.” She noted Raj sobered. “What?”

“I was wondering how long it’s been since I’d died?”

“Just over six years.”

“I see. How is Eila?” he said softly.

“Better. Of course she misses you like crazy. All of us did.”

“And my children?”

Penny smiled. “All fine. Biren has gout now which his wife blames on the paunch he’s got.”

“Excuse me, ‘love handles’ if you please,” amended Raj.

“Whatever,” she giggled. “Anyways you’re about to be a grandfather again and….”

Sheldon’s desire to find his family was as strong as ever despite the near-impossibility of the task. As he walked he busied himself with mind puzzles in an attempt to stave off boredom. The bright side to having an eidetic memory meant that he remembered literally thousands of puzzles; of course he also knew all the answers so the challenge wasn’t quite there to keep him interested for too long.
He estimated he’d covered the distance between Los Angeles and New York at least twice over.

“This is impossible,” he sighed and immediately cursed himself as his next step made an obvious slap as if it had stepped in muddy ground. “I *will* find Meemaw and Pop-Pop,” he growled.

A couple more steps passed and the ground was again solid.

“Well this certainly promotes positive thinking,” he said with a smirk. “Too bad it—”

“Shh!”

The physicist stopped.

“Hello?” he asked.

“Shh!”

“Who’s there?” Sheldon began walking in the direction of the sound.

“Shh!”

“I shall do no such thing until you answer me.”

“Shh! Shh! Shh!”

In the distance Sheldon spotted movement and as he approached he saw that it was a man wearing a Flash outfit hanging upside down seemingly nailed to the tree through his feet. His hand brimmed his brow as he peered skyward.

“You seem to be in distress,” the physicist said.

The man pursed his lips. “You break even as you name it,” he scolded.

“Pardon me?”

“Shh!”

Sheldon looked up at the sky but saw nothing more than the usual whiteness.

“What are you looking at?” he asked.

“What goes round the house and in the house but never touches the house.”

Sheldon lowered his eyes to regard the man.

“The sun.” He thought of what the man first said to him. “’I break it even as I name it.’” The lanky man brightened. “The answer is ‘silence’. You speak in riddles.”

The man looked at the physicist with a big smile even as he shook his head, no.

“When one does not know what it is, then it is something; but when one knows what it is, then it is nothing.”

“Even if I answer them they’re still riddles,” Sheldon countered. The man shrugged. “Why are you hanging there?”

“The two brothers who live on opposite sides of the road yet never see each other yet sees what’s
been around for millions of years yet is no more than a month old.”

A frown crossed Sheldon’s brow as he thought. “Two brothers. Two brothers.” He grunted. “Eyes.”
Again he looked up at the whiteness. “You’re staring at the moon.”

“It turns and is never wrong,” the man agreed.

“But it’s just whiteness. There aren’t any celestial bodies to look at.”

The man cocked his head. “What belongs to you but others use it more than you do?”

Pause. “My name? Dr. Sheldon….” Another pause. “Sheldon. Sheldon Cooper. And you?”

“I am the part of the bird that is not in the sky; who can drown in the ocean and yet remain dry. A last vestige of you that refuses to die.”

Sheldon took a step back, his face sober, and looked at the ground around him before returning to the man.

“What do you mean you’re my shadow? There’s no sun or other direct light source so I can’t have a shadow.” The man pumpkin grinned. “You really are a fool,” Sheldon scowled.

“I will look you in the eye and I will never lie,” said the man before sticking out his tongue.

A tic washed across Sheldon’s face. “I’m only a fool because I’m wasting my time talking to you,” he huffed and turned to go.

“I have rivers without water, forests without trees, mountains without rocks, towns without houses,” the man called after him.

The physicist froze in his tracks.

“You have a map?” He returned to the man who pointed to the right.

“It has roots as nobody sees, is taller than trees; up, up it goes and yet never grows.”

“How far to the mountain?” The man shrugged. Sheldon looked but all he could see was forest beyond. “You’re sure?”

“I keep it after giving it to you,” the man said earnestly.

“Fair enough,” the physicist said. He paused. “Do you want me to get you down?” The man glared and Sheldon took the hint. “Thank you,” he said and headed off.

xTBBTx

“I have to admit I was pretty pissed when you OD’ed,” Penny said as she walked with her brother through the yard towards the farmhouse.

“Yeah, well, it wasn’t intentional,” Greg said before a smile came to his face. “You know cooks like to taste the broth. Besides, you should be happy I didn’t blow the place up with the lab.”

Penny rolled her eyes. “How thoughtful. I’m surprised Mom and Dad didn’t kill you when you got here.”

“Oh believe me I know. The lecture didn’t last that long since, really, what’s there to say once we
all get here.” Greg’s voice lowered with emotion. “What got me was the disappointment they had. I really screwed up and yet they still admitted to me and took me in.”

“We love you, chowder head,” his sister grinned as she squeezed his hand.

“Thanks Pen.”

The house door opened and Wyatt stepped out.

“What are you kids up to?” he asked.

“Plotting to take over the world,” Greg replied.

“No, that’d be Sheldon. A friend of mine,” she said to clarify as she mounted the few steps to the porch. “Anyhoo, I’ll give you guys some space.”

“Why’s that?” her father asked.

“Because I recognize the ‘Greg, you’re in so deep you can blow bubbles’ look on your face,” Penny replied sweetly as she kissed him on the cheek.

“Smart girl.”

“You betcha,” the Nebraskan said as she opened the door…. 

…And stepped into the Cooper family home in Galveston.

“Hello Penny,” said Mary as Meemaw and she sat at the dining room table. The two women got up and hugs were exchanged.

“It’s so great to see you both again,” Penny gushed.

“Yuh too, darlin’,” Jane replied with a wink as they all sat. “Ah hope life brought yuh everythin’ roses.”

“It was a good one. Different but good. I ended up moving in with Missy in this house. We raised some serious…heck at the seniors’ center.”

Mary snorted. “Now yuh sound like Mother,” she said even as she eyed Jane.

Penny laughed. “Listen, I’m glad you’re all here. Raj said he’s been looking around but couldn’t find Sheldon. Is he hanging with Pop-Pop or something?”

Again Mary looked at her mother only this time the looks were serious.

“What?” The smile faded from Penny’s lips.

“He’s not here,” Jane said at last.

“What do you mean he’s ‘not here’? He has to be here! Everyone’s here.”

“Not Shelly.”

A thought came to the Nebraskan. “Is it because he was an atheist?” she said quietly. “Is he *dead* dead?”

“No,” Jane said firmly. “Ah saw him.”
“Where?”

“In yuh.”

Penny was surprised. “In me? How did you—”

“Ah was thinkin’ about yuh when the Lord was bringin’ yuh home. In an instant so quick it’d pass a second by ah saw him in yuh lookin’ at me an’ then he was gone.”

“So he’s alive then,” Penny confirmed.

“Somewhere,” Jane agreed. “We just don’t know where.”

“Figures Shelly would have tuh make this complicated,” tsked Mary.

“Have you tried the places in Pasadena?” Penny asked. “Maybe if you talked to Raj—”

“Ah already did.” Mary pursed her lips. “He’s been tuh the comic book store an’ the university an’ nothin’.”

Penny felt an incredible sadness. “I don’t know what to say,” she said at last. “I have no idea why he was ‘with me’ but if he was I sure didn’t know it.”

“Lord knows what that boy was thinkin’,” agreed Mary. “Anyways, we were hopin’ yuh’d have some more suggestions as to where tuh look.”

“Not a clue. I think Raj covered all the bases. At the end Sheldon and I mostly hung out at his office or the apartment. I’m sorry, Mrs. Cooper.”

“Mary,” the woman replied. “Ah think we can skip the formalities now.” She offered her hand and Penny took it. “Ah think we need a little guidance about now.” She closed her eyes. “Lord, thank yuh for bringin’ Penny home tuh us. What we really need now is Shelly. Please light the way so he can join his family in this world as we miss him an’ love him something fierce.”

As Mary concluded Penny had a flash of inspiration and got up from the table.

“Sorry,” she said. “I have to see a man about a statue.” And with that she vanished through the door.

xTBBTx

“This is promising,” Sheldon murmured to himself as he noted the barely perceptible alteration to the incline of the terrain. As he walked he began to spot black rocks here and there. From their angle in the soil it looked as though they’d fallen to the ground as there were definite signs of impact. He could see nothing skyward save the treetops and the whiteness and—wait! Just barely through the trees he saw something both massive and black. Hoping it was the tip of a mountain he pressed onwards.

Soon the incline sharpened dramatically and the black stones became larger rocks until he encountered a boulder or two. The trees became sparse and ahead of him the blackness of rock took in his entire field of view. Sheldon had no idea how high this mountain was but was hell bent on climbing it.

As he ascended he remembered his sister scrambling up the stone steps towards the rock wall overlooking the ocean:
*“Shelly, hurry up!”*

“Ah’m goin’ as fast as ah can within the bounds of safety,” he replied.

Missy turned and continued to run.

“Don’t get too close tuh the wall!” he called after her. His heart was practically fluttering from a combination of exertion, fear and anticipation. Why his twin would pick a windy day like today to visit the wall was beyond him. Sheldon didn’t even like the ocean. It was too full of things.

“Come on, Shelly!” He glanced at his sister who had reached the top and then passed from his view.

“Missy! Come back!” He wasn’t sure if she could hear him or was being stupid and not responding. Nevertheless he picked up his pace. Splash from a particularly impressive wave sprayed over the wall. “Missy! It’s not safe!”

Ten steps became five and then he was at the top and before him was the roiling sky and sea before him.

Reaching the top of the mountain wasn’t as dramatic or terrifying but it was nonetheless impressive to see the land before him: trees as far as the eye could see in all directions. To his right there was a reddish glow that seemed to stretch the length of the horizon.

Sheldon took a moment to gather his bearings before setting off towards the light.

xTBBTx

She found Rajesh in the university arboretum—a favorite place for them to have picnics and see the stars.

“Hello Penny,” he smiled. “What can I do for you?”

“I’m as obvious as that, huh?” she chuckled.

“Far be it from me to refuse a lovely face with ‘don’t mess with me’ stamped over it.”

“You always were a smart man.” She stepped closer to her friend. “Sheldon’s not here but his mother saw him when I was dying so he’s alive.”

“Where?” Raj asked.

“I don’t know. Remember that statue I gave you?”

“The Flash of Two Worlds’. Yes.”

“You think it’s possible Sheldon’s trapped somewhere?”

Raj took a moment to think. “I’m not sure how that’s possible. From what I gather the move from earth to here is pretty much instantaneous the moment we die.” He regarded her. “I don’t remember a delay or being somewhere else.”

Penny’s shoulders slumped. “Well he’s got to be somewhere.” She raised an eyebrow. “You said something to me about the afterlife. We were here and then we reincarnate, something like that.”

“Our jiva reenergizes itself, reflects on its previous life and prepares for its next journey.”
“Okay, where does it do that?” Raj was confused. “I mean I’m not doing any reflecting here. Nanny and Papa are here. They haven’t gone back to Earth and it’s been what, over sixty years since they died?”

“I don’t know what to say, Penny,” the astrophysicist said softly. “Things are the same and yet different than the scripture. I’ve been reunited with my ancestors. None seem to have returned to Earth so that rules out the reincarnation part.” He shrugged. “Maybe we sort things out together.”

She pursed her lips. “Then why isn’t Sheldon here?”

“I don’t know. He’s always been a loner.”

“No, he’s been alone a lot but that doesn’t mean it was because he wanted it that way,” the Nebraskan countered. “There’s no way he’d put up with me if he was a loner.” Her eyes softened. “He was my friend.”

“It is said there are two paths: that of the sun or bright path and one of the moon, the path of ancestors.”

“Maybe he took the wrong one,” she replied. “What’s on the sun path?”

“It’s the path of gods,” said Raj. “When a soul travels along the path it never returns.”

“Don’t like the sound of that.” Penny bit her lip as she mulled. “Okay, if Sheldon’s on that path it’s whatever but he wasn’t. Meemaw said she saw Sheldon in me and I’m definitely not a route to the gods.”

“I don’t know what to say.” Here a grim smile came to Raj’s face. “The path of the sun is what we aspire to. No one’s ever come back from there. Why would they? It’s paradise. Perfection.”

“I got nothing,” admitted his ex-girlfriend. “All I know is that Sheldon was with me for some reason and it’ll eat me alive if I don’t find out why.”

“You’re going after him,” Raj said, awed.

“Someone’s gotta find that whackadoodle,” Penny replied with a smile that was far less confident than what she wanted. “So how’s a girl find a path to the sun?”

“It might not be that simple. In Hinduism each god has his or her own world and there are many heavens and hells. Sheldon could be anywhere.”

Green eyes met brown.

“I have to try,” she said quietly. Raj nodded and embraced her in a hug.

“May Ganesha bless your journey, my Rani.”

They kissed and Penny made for the garden door. She had no idea how to get out of here so she did the only thing she could: think of Sheldon not as he was but as he was now.

The door opened and before her was a grassy patch. Penny stepped beyond and noted ahead of her was a dirt path that cut its way through a forest of white birches.

“Me without my breadcrumbs,” Penny murmured before disappearing into the trees.

She walked for what seemed like miles without a hint of Sheldon, of anyone or anything for that
matter. No birds sang. No buzzing of bees or humming of crickets. Just silence. Combined with the
grey it was a surreal feeling. She found it kind of odd that the path was so well defined since there
seemed to be an absolute absence of life. Still, she wouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth.

Penny blew out a breath. “I’m going to kill him when I find him.”

Ahead and to the left she spotted a clump of blue.

“Forget-Me-Not’s.” She plucked a few flowers and put them into her pocket for luck. “Okay
Meemaw, if I were a genius where would I be?”

Another batch of Forget-Me-Not’s appeared ahead, this time to the right of the path.

A smirk came to Penny’s face. “This isn’t so hard after all.”

xTBBTx

A big ol’ tic washed over Sheldon’s face as he did his best to keep his mouth closed. What had
started as intermittent noise had now become a steady sound of whistling in an off key. It wouldn’t
have been so bad if he could just pass by but it seemed as though the whistler was keeping stride
with the physicist.

At last Sheldon could stand no more. “Stop it!”

Silence.

“I don’t care who’s there but quit your infernal whistling.” Sheldon glanced around as he walked
but saw no one there.

“Spoilsport,” pouted a familiar voice. “It’s me again, Dr. Sheldon Cooper.”

“Who’s ‘me’?”

“Not you.”

“Terrific,” Sheldon muttered. Obviously he was going to get nothing but roundabout answers like
he did the last time he encountered the disembodied voice in the forest.

“Where are you going?”

“To the ‘east’ although my bearings are completely off so I could be heading in any direction,
really.”

“True,” the voice agreed.

“What are you doing here?”

“Walking.”

“You’re in a better mood than last time.”

“I think I’ve eluded them,” the voice said proudly.

“Who are they?”

“Not us.”
Sheldon rolled his eyes. “You couldn’t be any more cryptic than my so-called guide,” he sighed.

“I don’t mean to be,” the voice pouted. “I’m only telling you what I know.”

“Why is it that no one around here seems to know?” sighed the physicist.

“Do you know, Dr. Cooper?”

“Know what?”

“Exactly,” the voice said smugly to mark Sheldon’s confusion. “Maybe that’s how it starts.”

“What starts?”

“The not knowing.”

“How am I supposed to know something without having prior knowledge?” snorted Sheldon. The voice giggled.

“You’re doing it now, aren’t you?”

Sheldon thought for a moment. “I’m asking questions.” He looked about. “Is that what you mean?”

There was no reply and so he continued on his way.

xTBBTx

*God this goes on forever.* Penny had no idea how long she’d been walking but it seemed long enough. She’d stuck to the path in the hopes that it’d lead to Sheldon but in reality she had no such proof that she was any closer to her friend.

“If I ever find him,” she whispered.

Beyond the next few trees the path came to an abrupt end; in fact the last couple of steps seemed kind of muddy and so she moved onto dryer ground. Penny looked ahead into the forest beyond.

“Well, I came this far.”

She set her jaw and continued. Some of the areas ahead were brambly but she circumvented them like her father showed her to when they went into the bush during partridge hunting season. In this instance she was looking for a giant whackadoodle but the process was similar. She never spotted any tracks but as she traveled she found sprouts of Forget-Me-Not here and there which helped lift her spirits even as they broke up the monotonous scenery of trees and white sky. The woods seemed almost supernatural with the whiteness around it.

*Very ‘Twilight’*, Penny mused to herself. Sheldon was pasty enough to be Edward but that’s about where the similarities ended. The physicist was tall and blue eyed and had this scowl that made Penny grin as it—

“Hi!” said a female voice to her right.

“Hi,” Penny responded as she tried to find the source of the sound.

“Hi.”

“Hi.” Now Penny was more tentative.
“We don’t mean to interrupt. We live around here.”

“That’s nice. Can you come out where I can see you?”

A pause. “We’re not much to look at,” the voice warned.

“That’s okay,” the Nebraskan said warmly.

A moment went by and then from behind a tree a figure emerged. As she approached Penny could see that she wore brown leggings and boots and some kind of leather armor but what was most obvious about the woman was her emaciated condition. Her blond hair was tied back in a ponytail and she looked positively starved. Penny took in the hollow cheeks and large eyes and smiled.

“I’m Penny.”

“Hello Penny.”

“What’s your name?”

“I don’t have one.”

“Seriously?”

The woman shrugged. “I haven’t needed one before now.”

“Not a lot of people around here, huh?” Penny said as she glanced around.

“Not really.” They began to walk.

“So what is this place?”

“My home.”

“I mean where is this place? Why is this place?”

The woman smirked. “You ask a lot of questions.”

“Yeah, I guess I’m kind of nosy.” The woman laughed, sounding like chimes tinkling.

“It’s alright. I don’t mind,” she said.

“Have you been here long?”

“As long as I can remember.”

Penny brightened. “Maybe you can help me. I’m looking for someone: a man, tall, lean, probably wearing some sort of superhero t-shirt.”

“Superhero?”

“Yeah, you know, Superman, Batman, Flash—” She took in woman’s blank stare. “Never mind.”

The woman seemed to shrink. “I’m sorry I don’t know.”

“Hey, it’s no biggie,” Penny soothed. “Before I met Sheldon I had no idea who the Flash was or Aquaman. I mean, I heard of Superman and Batman but that’s because of the movies.” Here she chuckled. “Never been to a comic book store before.”
“Comic book store?”

“Comic books are picture books for children.” She thought about Sheldon. “And men who dream.”

“Ah,” the woman said, comprehending. “I like dreams.” She looked shyly at Penny. “Do you have dreams?”

“Not since I died.” The woman seemed sad. “But I used to have lots of them when I was alive.”

“Like what?”

“I wanted to be a movie star. An actress,” Penny said to clarify.

“A make-believer,” the woman nodded.

“Yup.” Penny smirked. “That’s a perfect way to call it because it was all make-believe. I didn’t want to act I wanted to be a star. I dreamed about limousines and award shows and rubbing noses with famous people at parties at my own mansion.” She paused to think. “I kept saying I was an aspiring actress for quite a while. Still took the classes. Still had an agent. But between you and me I quit looking for auditions. I relied on my agent to find things and didn’t press her for acting gigs like I should have.”

The woman regarded her companion. “You didn’t care?”

“I didn’t care about a lot of things,” Penny admitted.

“So what did you do?”

“I drank. A lot. I threw myself into a relationship with a man I couldn’t quite seem to love the way I was supposed to no matter how hard I tried.”

“Ah, love,” the woman smiled.

“You’ve been in love?” The woman shrugged, embarrassed. “Hey, it happens to the best of us,” Penny said gently. “Does he have a name?”

“Yes.”

“Well don’t leave me in suspense.”

The woman blanched. “I can’t say it.”

“Why not?”

“I’m afraid.”

“Of what?” Penny smiled sympathetically. “He doesn’t know you like him does he?” The woman sadly shook her head. “Aw, sweetie. Listen, people like to know they’re loved. There’s no way that you loving him can be a bad thing.”

“Really?”

“Trust me—” Penny pursed her lips. “Is there something I can call you? A nickname or something?”

“How about Penny?” the woman said brightly.
“That’s me.”

“It’s the only name I know.”

“How about Courtney?”

The woman wrinkled her nose. “I don’t like that.”

“Stephanie?”

“I don’t like that one either.”

“How about Jane? I know a really nice lady named Jane.”

“Jane’s nice, but I don’t want Jane. I like Penny.”

“Well we both can’t be Penny,” laughed the Nebraskan. “How about if I call you ‘Penelope’?”

The woman smiled. “That works.”

“Good. So, Penelope, what’s Prince Charming like?”

“He’s wonderful,” Penelope gushed. “He’s tall and lean with eyes of blue and a heart so true and he knows so much.”

“Tall ones are good,” Penny agreed. “Is he cute?”

“Yes,” Penelope said shyly.

“How do you know him anyhow? I thought you said you haven’t seen anyone?”

“Anyone recently. Sometimes a person comes near only to pass by not knowing, not caring.”

Penelope smiled wistfully. “He heard me and saw me and then we—”

“We?” Penny prompted.

“Talked. We talked and he listened and it was so very wonderful to have someone listen. At first I didn’t know what to say but he coaxed things from me that I’d never said aloud or at least hadn’t in a very long time. He knew me and whispered my name and in that moment I was his and he was mine.”

Penny smiled at the tale. “Sounds magical. So what did he call you?”

“Penelope.”

“No, I call you Penelope.”

“It’s the only name I know.”

Penny paused. “You’re kind of weird you know that?” she teased.

“I’m only what I know,” Penelope shrugged.

“That’s okay. I don’t mean it like you’re freaky weird. Just different.” The Nebraskan regarded her companion and noted more fleshiness to her. “Actually you are different.”

“Oh?” The woman was startled.
“You look better. I mean you’re still skinny but you’re no longer flesh and bone.”

Penelope looked at her arms and chuckled. “I’m not different.”

“Yes you are.” Penny countered adamantly. “You look a zillion percent healthier.”

“I feel much better.” The woman flashed a genuine smile. “Thank you for taking the time to talk with me.” She paused. “I hope you find your Prince Charming.”

Penny chuckled. “Sheldon isn’t my ‘Prince Charming’ he’s my friend.”

“Oh.”

“But what about your Prince? Will he be back?”

“I don’t know. He was supposed to but never did. It’s been so long since he called my name, Penelope, and I answered, oh Sheldor.”

The Nebraskan stopped in her tracks. “‘Sheldor’?”

“What?”

“You called him ‘Sheldor’.” Penny frowned. “Is this some kind of joke?”

The woman’s smile faded from her lips. “Why would you say I’m a joke?” she said, hurt.

“I’m not saying that, I just—” Penny sighed. “Sweetie, you can love whoever you want. It’s just weird because I used to play a game with Sheldon and in it I was Queen Penelope and he was Sheldor the Conqueror.”

“I’m not a game,” the woman countered hotly.

“Wait, you mean you’re not Queen Penelope or that you are Queen Penelope so you’re not a game?”

“No one takes me seriously. No one but him.”

“Penelope, I’m sorry I—”

“*Queen* Penelope!” the woman snapped. She drew out a green-edged sword and Penny cringed. “I am fierce and strong! He knows it! He sees it! Do you see it?” Her eyes narrowed. “Do you Penny?”

“Yes,” the Nebraskan stammered.

“Yes?”

“Yes!”

“Then it’s Queen Penelope for the win!” And with that the woman swooshed her blade and rushed deep into the trees.

It took Penny but a moment before she fled.

xTBBTx

Riddles: Thinkscom ; Mozaicom riddles
“I will look you in the eye and I will never lie,” –a mirror

“I keep it after giving it to you,” –my word

Hindu afterlife: hinduwebsite.com
Chapter Twenty Five

Chapter Summary

Reference to: ‘The Big Bran Hypothesis’; ‘The Luminous Fish Effect’; ‘The Hamburger Postulate’

The reddish glow got brighter and brighter until Sheldon found himself at the edge of the forest. Before him was a rocky clearing that led to a crag. He walked to the edge and peered at the redness which roiled below but not like a true fire.

“Not that I want to find out,” he said. The physicist picked up a rock and let it drop but there was no discernable splash below. There was no telling how deep the crag was; all he knew was that given what he estimated to be twenty three feet there was no way he was jumping across. He began to walk, hoping to find a narrowing for him to clear.

It was odd that he could see the red glow from a distance but here at the edge it seemed to stay contained in the crevasse: the sky was its usual whiteness and the forest dull and still. His steps grew from tens to hundreds to thousands and beyond but the separation between both sides of the crag stayed steady.

“Looks like this is a dead end,” he muttered.

“Seems that way,” said a familiar voice causing Sheldon to scowl.

“I don’t want to talk to you,” he snapped without turning around.

The Man sighed. “That’s fair I suppose.”

The physicist spun around. “You ‘suppose’? You left me to die!”

“To be fair I didn’t leave you,” the Man said softly.

“But you didn’t do anything either.”

“I stayed. I didn’t have to, you know.”

“How noble of you.”

“Do you think it was easy watching you struggle?” the Man said hotly. “Having you beg me and I not able to help you?”

Silence.

“You owe me,” Sheldon said at last in a conciliatory tone. He indicated the crag. “So tell me about this.”

The Man went to the edge and looked.

“Well, I wouldn’t recommend jumping in,” he said drolly.
Sheldon shot him a glare. “Does this stretch to infinity like the mirrors?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s bull. *Everyone* knows—the whistler, the fool on the tree, you. Everyone knows but me and I’m sick and tired of not knowing.”

The Man turned to his companion. “What makes you think you don’t know, Dr. Cooper?”

“You’re saying I do?” the physicist said incredulously.

“No. I’m just asking if you’re sure you don’t.”

“I need to think about this,” Sheldon said after a moment.

“I’ll leave you to it.” The Man strolled away.

Penny had no idea how far or long she’d run through the muddy ground. She just hoped she was far enough away from ‘Penelope’ or whoever she was. Even as she thought this the Nebraskan lost her flip-flop in the mud, causing her to trip. Fortunately she was dexterous enough not to fall and although it wasn’t graceful she did recover her footing.

“Enough already!” she scolded herself. She took a few deep breaths to calm her nerves before returning to her foot apparel and freeing it from the mud. Fortunately the goo seemed to just slide off the flip-flop so she slipped it back on her foot and continued on her way albeit at a walking pace.

She looked around her in the dullness wondering how Sheldon was coping if he was here in the gray and mud.

“Poor guy must be freaked,” she muttered. Her jaw set squarely and she was pleased to note that the mud seemed to be drying up.

A while later she spotted what looked like a clearing; sure enough she’d come across another path complete with Forget-Me-Nots scattered along its sides.

“And here we go again.” Penny followed the trail with its twists and turns until she came to a fork in the road. The leftmost path was overgrown and brambled while the right was clear and—

“Footprints!” She took a closer look and sure enough they weren’t just footprints they were shoeprints. “Sheldon!” she called out as she tore up the right pathway, running at full tilt trying to catch her lanky neighbor.

Penny came to a halt as she rounded a bend to find not only another fork in the road but also a man. He was of average height with sandy brown hair and wore leggings, breeches and a green tunic.

“Wow,” he gawked as he looked her up and down.

“Uh, hi,” she replied.

“If I may say you most definitely provide a perceptual experience of pleasure and satisfaction,” he said after taking a moment to recover.

“Sure. Listen, have you seen a guy about six two, probably we—”
“You have a mate?” the man said with a pout.

“No,” she amended. “He’s a friend.” Immediately the man perked up.

“That’s terrific! I mean, oh.”

“As I was saying he’s probably wearing a superhero t-shirt and—”

“The combination of amber or light brown pigmentation of the stroma, given by a low or moderate concentration of melanin, with the blue tone imparted by the Rayleigh scattering of the reflected light really makes your eyes ‘pop’.”

“So I take it that’s a ‘no’?” Penny said exasperatedly.

“I could never say ‘no’ to you,” he said wistfully before snapping out of it. “Um, ‘no’ to what?”

Penny rolled her eyes. “Seeing my friend,” she snapped. The man cocked his head.

“You seem distressed.”

“Leaning more towards pissed at the moment,” she warned.

He flashed a smile. “Well, I know what we can do to relieve the tension.” He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

“In your dreams,” growled Penny.

“Someone as perfectly ideal as you shouldn’t worry her pretty head,” he continued. “Especially when it’s about another man.”

Penny narrowed her eyes menacingly. “Unless you want to carry your nuts in your hand you stay away from me.”

The man winced and took a step back. “I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to upset you. It’s just that you’re particularly comely and I can’t help but think that—”

“As long as you think and not do we’ll get along fine,” Penny said distractedly as she looked over the paths behind him. The shoeprints—she quickly glanced at the man’s feet and was relieved to see that they were too small to have made the print—continued up the right pathway. If she had any inclination about going to the left it was quickly dashed by the sheer mess of brambles and overgrowth on the path.

The man noted her stare and blanched. “Please don’t go. No one as pretty as you comes by here.”

“Sorry bub,” she replied as she advanced. “Move it or lose it,” she warned again and he complied.

“But I love you,” he whined.

Again Penny rolled her eyes as she set off following the prints in the dirt. They were evenly paced so it looked as though whoever made them wasn’t in a hurry. She hoped Sheldon would take a break at some point so she could catch up but since her body hadn’t shown any sign of fatigue after all this time she doubted he’d be tired enough to rest.

Another sharp turn in the trail brought her to another fork and, to her surprise, the same man.

“Did I just make a loop?” she sputtered.
“You’d be loop-de-loop to think something like that,” he replied with a smirk. “Keep sticking to beautiful and leave the brains to me.”

“I’ll take that as a no,” she said with a frown. “Okay I’ll bite: how did you get here ahead of me? Did you take the other path?” She looked at the leftmost path and it looked even more tangled than the last. He snorted.

“No one’s stupid enough to take the other path. It’s treacherous with its twists and turns and branches that pinch and scrape. Definitely not for me.”

“So how did you get here?”

“You already asked that. Short-term memory problems?”

“Screw you,” she snapped.

“If you insist,” he said happily only to stop dead at her glare. “Oh, you mean figuratively.” He pursed his lips. “You’re a tease you know that?”

“How about I make this clear? Nothing’s going to happen between the two of us, okay?”

“Are you asking me for permission or—”

“You’re impossible.” She made to move past him but he stood in her way.

“This from a girl who can’t even figure out where her friend is?” he hissed. “Dumb blond. Good thing you’re pretty.”

She shoved him aside and continued to follow the tracks.

“I’m sorry!” he whined after her. “I don’t know what got into me. Please come back!”

It took a while for Penny’s scowl to leave her face.

“Asshole,” she muttered as she came to yet another bend in the path. “Oh balls.”

Sure enough the path forked in two and in the middle was a familiar face.

“I’m sorry,” the man sighed. “It’s just that I don’t get to see many people around here, especially people with lavish hips and firm thighs and perk—”

“I get it, I get it.” She put her hands on her hips. “How come I keep meeting you at forks in the road?”

“Because we’re destiny,” he grinned. “You and I are meant to be.”

“You’re messed.”

“You’re hot when you’re flustered.”

“This is stupid!” Penny could see the shoeprints ahead of her and to the left a mess of foliage that was more bramble than path.

“Actually the situation isn’t stupid because it’s not like it’s stuck here unlike someone else I know.”
“Fuck you!” Penny turned around and stormed back the way she came. This was getting her nowhere fast so maybe it was time to go back to the beginning and choose the other path.

She walked for quite a while longer than before, a deepening frown crossing her brow.

“I should have come to a fork by now,” she muttered but all she could see ahead of her was a straight path. “Son-of-a-bitch….”

“Where is it?” she spat as she returned to the man. “Where is the other fork?”

“What other fork?” he asked innocently.

“This is the third fork in the road we’ve met at.” She pursed her lips. “We’re going to keep meeting aren’t we?”

“We’re destiny,” he said with a light shrug. “Why fight it? My brains, your looks, we’re meant to be.”

“Just because we keep meeting doesn’t mean we’re ‘destiny’,” she said, using air quotes with her fingers. “I could see you every day for the rest of my life and that still won’t make you any less insulting and pathetic.”

Penny took a step forward before turning to the left. The overgrowth was so dense she doubted she could get an arm in there.

“You’re going to get all cut up and scarred,” the man warned.

She pursed her lips and made her way in with her hands.

“You’re going to be hideous if you go through there. You really want to go through eternity like that?”

Brambles and sticks caught into her hair as she made a slow step, then another, into the growth.

“You’re wasting your time!” he shouted out to her. “No one goes down that road!”

“Better than your road,” Penny growled back.

“You’ll never find your way back! You’ll be stuck there forever!”

“If it gets me away from you it’s worth it!”

“My way is easier!” he whined. “Please stay! I love you!”

Penny didn’t bother to answer, instead she continued onward. She felt the sting of scratches and pokes all over her bare legs and arms and her feet were often jabbed by sharp protruding roots and branches.

“Stupid shorts and flip-flops,” she snorted. Of course who’d of thought she’d be spending her afterlife cutting through dense bush? She took a moment to rest, looking at the crisscross of reddening scrapes on her arms although no blood dripped.

For a moment she thought about going back but realized that was no longer an option. She doubted she could turn around and, more importantly, she’d end up killing that guy at the fork and somehow she didn’t think that’d improve her karma although she figured she’d be hard-pressed to find someone who’d blame her. The man was backhandedly and sometimes outright
condescending and didn’t see her as anything more than a sexpot.

‘Who could put up with crap like that?’ She took a breath and pushed forward.

She didn’t know if it was her imagination getting the better of her after hours of frustration but she swore the bush around her was less dense.

“Finally!” she laughed as, indeed, the path ahead seemed clearer. A hundred or so more steps confirmed this and she emerged from the tangle onto a clear path that cut through a birch tree landscape like the one she’d become used to seeing.

Penny looked behind her at the mess of trees.

“Just because no one goes here doesn’t mean it’s not worth going,” she smirked. As she turned a little flash of blue caught her eye and she walked over to spot a solitary Forget-Me-Not at the edge of the bramble. Penny picked it and brought it to her face to take in its delicate petals.

“I’m coming, Moonpie,” she said softly.

Sheldon stood at the edge of the crag wondering how far it was to the bottom. He knew his body could withstand fatigue and basic wear and tear but wasn’t sure if it could a several hundred or thousand foot drop.

“That is, if it even has a bottom,” he said.

“What has a bottom?” asked the Man as he made to stand beside his companion.

“The crag. The roiling redness below reminds me of a star. Perhaps this is the center of this place.”

“You’re not suggesting you’re going to find out,” the Man said, horrified. The physicist shrugged.

“It’s not like I can stay here forever.”

“There’s always the forest.” Here Sheldon snorted. “You found this place. Maybe there are other places you—”

“I won’t make it,” the lanky man said evenly as he looked to the Man. “I feel so utterly hopeless I’ll sink the moment I step foot in there.” He returned his gaze to the ‘fire’ and the two men were silent.

“I won’t find them will I?” he continued quietly. “My family. My friends. They aren’t here.”

“I haven’t come across them,” agreed the Man. “But that doesn’t mean they aren’t out there somewhere.”

“Oh, I have no doubt they are,” Sheldon grunted. “I saw my Meemaw just before Penny ‘died’. The problem is that I’m *here* and there’s no way to get *there*.”

The Man was shocked. “Wait, you saw your Meemaw? Where?”

“In Penny’s dream. It was a fractured mess of imagination and reality as she saw it. I think I also saw my sister. She was elderly so by that token Penny must have been as well. At any rate just before the dream world collapsed I saw my Meemaw staring at me. I wanted to say something but there wasn’t time.”
“You’re sure she wasn’t a part of Penny’s dream?”

“I’m sure,” Sheldon said firmly. “She saw me.”

“So what does that mean?” the Man said after a moment. “Is she in a dream world or Penny’s world?”

“I don’t know.”

“Or are you suggesting there’s more than one world and that maybe she’s—”

“I don’t know!” Sheldon snapped before pursing his lips. “The many-worlds theory would suggest so but it’s invalidated by the presence of the mirror which allowed me access to Penny’s world, albeit limited to her dreams.” He sighed. “The only hope I have is that I’m on a separate integral path that will ultimately lead to where she is. Where they all are.”

“It’s still hope, Dr. Cooper,” the Man soothed. A deep sigh came from the physicist and the Man was unnerved by his friend’s despondency.

“I’m tired,” Sheldon said.

“Then rest,” the Man pleaded. “Don’t do something you’ll regret.”

“I’ve already done something I’ve regretted,” Sheldon laughed bitterly. “I didn’t open that damned door! I made one choice and I’m paying for it. It just doesn’t stop.” His eyes began to burn. “Please make it stop,” he whispered brokenly.

“I wish I could,” the Man said gently.

xTBBTx

She caught a flash of green in the distance and as she neared Penny’s heart caught in her throat.

“Sheldon!”

He was standing on the path, which had a whole whack of Forget-Me-Nots growing about him, looking towards her but not reacting to her call. As she got closer she realized that what she saw was in fact a glass of some sort and before it on either side were four more panels. She paused for a moment before stepping forward; she saw herself peripherally in the four panels all scratched up from the brambles but when she turned to see the extent of the damage she was surprised to see herself as a twelve year old wearing a baseball uniform and carrying a glove.

“What the frak?” Penny tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and the mirror mimicked the movement. “Huh.” She turned to the right and there her reflection was looking to be in her early twenties standing dejectedly in front of her. The next one to it had her all dolled up like a sex kitten complete with lace corset and stockings and the last showed a very drunk Penny complete with her favorite bottle of wine in her hand.

She went in front of Sheldon’s mirror and regarded the physicist standing before her with his arms behind his back wearing his Green Lantern t-shirt and khaki pants.

“You’re different.” Mirror Sheldon said nothing. He just stared at her intensely with his blue eyes. “Why you? Why me?” Penny turned to the side mirrors. “Why can’t I see my reflection properly?” She moved her arm and the movement was mimicked by all of her mirrored selves. “You’re all me. Yeah, I get that.” She returned to Sheldon. “But you’re not me you’re you so why are you here?”
She touched his mirror. “Are you trapped?” Suddenly her stomach dropped. “Are you still trapped in me?” No reaction from the physicist. “Come on Sheldon help me out. You’re the brains here.”

After a moment she left the mirrored area and walked around the panels. There was no path ahead and definitely no more flowers.

“Oh balls.”

Penny sat out in front of the mirrors in a patch of Forget-Me-Nots staring at Sheldon who stared right back. He was in that lecturing pose which normally caused her to roll her eyes but in this instance she’d do anything to listen to one of his boring explanations because hoo boy he always had an explanation for everything even when he was wrong. Especially when he was wrong.

“I’ve been wrong my whole life. Guess I’m used to it.” She thought over her dreams of coming to California and being in love first with Kurt and then Leonard. She thought of her lack of commitment to Raj although after seeing Eila and his kids she had to admit that it did turn out for the best.

“Everything resolved itself but you,” she said to Sheldon. “I never got to thank you for helping me. You didn’t have to do that and yet you did and I’m grateful.” No response. “Come on Sheldon, let me help you.” She got up and marched to his mirror. “You’re just as stubborn now as you were then.” She glared at him, his eyes of blue stared back just as intensely although there was no expression on his face. She always called this his clinical look as he observed the world through his Sherlock Holmes magnifying glass. It was the Sheldon she knew least and yet there was no doubt that it was Sheldon. “Whackadoodle.” He cocked his head slightly to the right and blinked.

“That’s what you are for being here instead of with your family. You always think you know best well you don’t, Sheldon Cooper. God, there have been so many times you clued out like when you broke into my apartment and cleaned it and wanted me to buy thirty years worth of tampons and had no idea what a tie on the doorknob meant.” Sheldon returned to his impassive state.

She pursed her lips. Penny thought she had something there once she called him a whackadoodle but apparently bringing out instances when he screwed up wasn’t it. No one liked to hear it but it was especially hard to hear when you know you screwed up.

When you acted contrary to who you really are.

Penny stepped over to the baseball mirror and looked at herself in her hat and uniform. “I couldn’t be the boy you wanted me to be, Dad. I was good at sports but I was in them not because I wanted to be but because I wanted to please you.” The mirror shimmered and her reflection became Sheldon.

She turned to the other side. She recognized her lucky audition shoes she wore ever since she got the commercial. “I wasn’t Hollywood enough. I was too Nebraskan. Too fat, too skinny, too short, too blond, too anything but what they wanted. But you know what? I still acted at the end. Because I wanted to. I really am their loss.” Again Sheldon appeared.

Next was the vixen Penny. “This is all I thought I was. This is all I brought to the table—a hot body and a great lay. I could never understand why I went through so many one night stands. Why guys were with me and then cheated on me or dumped me. I gave them my heart or at least I thought I did. I gave them my body. That’s all they wanted and when they got it and had enough of it they moved on.” She smirked at her image. “But I’m more than a pretty face. I’m an actress and office manager and God-mother to a genius kid. Too bad most people didn’t see that in me.” Vixen Penny became impassive Sheldon.
“You’re worst of all,” she said to her drunken self. “I gave up plain and simple. I wrapped myself up in the bottle and sex because I didn’t have the courage to make a change. Me, who placed third at the junior rodeo the first time out and who tossed her stuff in a car and drove half way across the country to follow a dream.” She stared at herself. “I can’t believe I let myself down like this. I have no idea what people saw in me.” A slight smile came to her face as she finally understood. She turned to her friend. “What you saw in me. I thought I was your blond monkey; that I was too stupid to be your friend and yet when the chips were down you came to my rescue. You paid my rent and made Penny Blossoms and taught me how to be an executive assistant.” Here she chuckled. “You even drove a fricken car for me.”

She looked to the other mirrors, all now reflecting Sheldon who stared at her. “You know what the weird part was? I never took any crap from you. I took it from every side and yet whenever you got all haughty taughty on me I stood my ground. I wouldn’t hear it from you.” She placed a hand on the mirror where Sheldon’s cheek was. “You were always different. Yeah you were a genius and bat-crap crazy sometimes but that’s not all you were. You were honest, sometimes brutally so, but I always knew where I stood with you. You praised me for being an awesome Halo and paintball partner and you came to me to take care of you when you were sick. You thought I was ‘comely’ but you didn’t treat me any different than the rest of your friends. Because I was your friend.” She chuckled as she took in the scrapes on her arms from the brush. “Scars and all.

“And no matter how weird you got I still put up with you because you were my friend. You are my whackadoodle but I wouldn’t change you for the world.” Pause. “Well, unless you’re being an ass. Then it’s junior rodeo time, pal.”

The corners of Sheldon’s lips curved upwards in a little smile before all of his images disappeared. Ahead of her was the path and she walked through the mirror and went on her way, only turning to look behind her at the sound of glass cracking as the mirrors were reduced to powder and fell to the ground.

xTBBTxF

Sheldon walked along the edge, every once in a while knocking a rock over the side with his foot. From what he remembered of his scanning of the land’s layout from the top of the mountain this crag with its reddish glow was the only thing that stood out. Still, it didn’t mean that there weren’t other things to find in the forest. Indo-European myths said that spirits traveled between worlds along an axis such as a giant tree, river, tent pole or rope. Maybe one of the forest inhabitants functioned like a guardian and all he had to do was overcome it to gain his freedom.

He took a breath and turned towards the forest.

“—don!”

Instantly he was still. He thought he heard something on the other side but he wasn’t sure as it was about a hundred meters from the crag to the forest beyond. Maybe he was mistaken and—

“Sheldon!”

His mouth dropped. “Penny?” He looked to the opposite side but couldn’t see anyone. “Penny!”

“Sheldon!”

He scoured the forest edge until he—there!

“Penny!” he shouted over and over as he waved his arms frantically. “Penny I’m here! I’m here!”
“Stay there!” came her reply and he waited as she neared. He took in her blunt cut hair and baby blue t-shirt and jean shorts and every other part of her he could see.

She was all smiles as she got to the crag.

“You are one tough guy to find, you know that Moonpie?” She waited for the chastisement but none came. If anything Sheldon seemed absolutely stunned. “Cat got your tongue?”

“Is it you?” he asked hoarsely.

“The one and only,” she grinned only to instantly sober as he dropped to his knees, covered his face and proceeded to sob.

“Sheldon, hey, it’s okay,” Penny soothed as she looked around but couldn’t find a way to cross over. “Come on, sweetie.”

He removed his hands and sniffled a couple of times as he tried his best to contain himself.

“That’s better,” she cooed as she sat down across from him.

“How—how did you get here?” he asked.

“Long story short you weren’t where we were so I went looking for you.”

“We’?”

“My family, your family, Raj. Anyone and everyone I care about who’d died. Except for you.”

Here she smirked. “Your mother was right: you always do make things difficult.”

Sheldon grunted. “At least I’m consistent.”

“And a pain in the ass.” Penny slapped her thighs with her hands. “Come on, let’s find a place for you to cross.”

He shook his head. “There isn’t any.”

“How do you know that?” she said with a frown.

“Penny, I’ve walked hundreds, perhaps thousands, of miles and the width of the crag has remained parallel for the most part. I somehow doubt it’ll suddenly narrow for my benefit.”

“But if we walk far enough we’ll get around it,” she countered as she took in his sad expression. “Come on, don’t be like this. There’s a way across somewhere.”

“There is, but I never opened the door,” he said softly.

“What door?”

“Penny, when you died did you meet a man with blond hair and white clothes?”

“Nope. I just remember a white light that swallowed me up and then I saw my dad who looked like he was in his twenties. Actually everyone I meet there looks young and yet the moment I see them I know who they are. Huh.”

“Did you see Meemaw?” he asked hopefully.
“Yup. Saw her and Mary. I mean your mother. They’re okay,” she said before he could ask. “Only they miss you terribly. We all do.” Penny chewed on her lip. “Meemaw said that she saw you in me.”

Sheldon nodded. “It must have been a transitional moment as your body was dying.”

“Ah.” Now she was curious. “So how did you get there?”

“My ‘long story short’: I found a mirror where I could enter your dreams whenever you thought of me.”

“You were in my head?” she gasped.

“I’m sorry,” he said with a shrug. “I was lonely.”

“It’s okay.”

“No it’s not. My presence might have influenced you in some way. It was a selfish risk.”

Penny took a moment to absorb the apology.

“I don’t think I turned out too badly,” she said at last with a slight smile. “I got things figured out by the end.”

“You were happy?”

“I was happy. Why does everyone seem to doubt that?” she said with a shake of the head. “I even started acting again at a couple of community theaters only this time I did it for me. It was fun and you know what? I was good at it.” She regarded her friend. “So what about you? Why are you by yourself since you don’t seem happy about it?”

“I chose certainty over the unknown,” Sheldon sighed.

“O-kay. And that means…”?

He smiled grimly. “I had a choice to learn the mysteries of the universe or else open a door. I chose the former. From what I’ve experienced here I surmise that the door was the entrance to where my family and friends are.” He pursed his lips. “All my life I’ve lived in the pursuit of knowledge. To explore strange new worlds.” Sheldon looked at her with reddened eyes. “Why is it wrong?”

“It’s not wrong, sweetie,” Penny said softly.

“So then why am I here? Why am I not with Meemaw and Pop-Pop?”

“You will be—once we get you across this stupid thing.”

“It’s no use. I chose my path and I have to live with it.”

“That’s crap.”

“It’s fact.”

Penny rolled her eyes. “Sheldon, there’s a way across. There has to be because you’re more than just science. You love comic books and koalas and your Meemaw. There’s so much that’s a part of you that’s over here.” A little smile crossed her lips. “You’re a particle and a wave.”
Sheldon’s eyes rose to meet his friend’s green gaze. A moment and then an amused expression came to his face.

“Bazinga,” he chuckled.

They both got up and started walking—apart but together.

xTBBTx

Wikipedia: Beauty; Eye Color; Otherworld
“...So anyways I didn’t see much of your mother or Meemaw but when we get back I’ll have to make up for that.” Penny glanced at her walking companion but Sheldon was silent. She pursed her lips; it was so unlike him to be quiet for so long it worried her. She looked ahead at the seemingly endless path of the crag. After walking and talking about anything and everything under the sun—'If there was one', she thought as she took in the white sky—for what she figured had to be a whack-load of miles she began to have the sinking feeling that the physicist was right in his assumption that the divide went on forever. Still, she’d never voice her doubt; the last thing she’d ever want to do was add to Sheldon’s despair. Talking was the only thing she could do and so she continued.

“It was actually pretty trippy meeting Jane in real life. Completely different than what I expected. She was pretty hip and wasn’t so bible-thumping like your mother. Not that I’m saying she wasn’t religious just that she—”

“—Didn’t wash my mouth out with soap for spouting evolutionary theory when I was six,” he finished.

“Yeah. That.” She hooked her thumbs in her belt loops. “So what is this place anyways? Raj said that where we were was more like the place of ancestors or something like that but this crack and the forest really doesn’t fit into my idea of heaven.”

Sheldon shook his head. “I don’t know. I’ve experienced some truly wonderful things here but also things that were—not so good.”

“Want to talk about it?”

“Not really.” He looked at his former neighbor. “I saw Missy in your hospital room before you died.”

“Yup. We were roommates at your mother’s house in Galveston.”

Sheldon raised an eyebrow in surprise. “Why on Earth would you willingly go there?”

“It’s not that bad, Sheldon. The beaches and the ocean were nice and the pace of life was slower than Pasadena which was good for these old bones. Well, when they were old,” she chuckled. “I gotta say it’s kind of a relief that I’m not spending eternity as an eighty four year old granny.”

“You had offspring?”

“No. Just saying, you know, old women are granny types. Although I was a God-mother to Sandra’s daughter, Shelly. Sandra’s—”
“—George’s youngest daughter.”

“Second youngest. He had William Robert after that,” Penny amended. Sheldon thought about it for a moment before he rolled his eyes.

“‘Billy Bob’. Good heavens.”

“I’m glad you said it.” Penny smiled wistfully. “Actually, I can’t wait for you to meet Shelly. She’s so much like you it’s scary.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was reading her science stuff since she was four and did my best to make play-doh molecules and atoms just like Pop-Pop did with you.”

“She sounds quite intelligent.”

“Yup. She wasn’t as young as you when she went to university but fifteen isn’t something to sneeze at either.”

“What did she ultimately do?”

“It was a tossup between genome research and astrophysics for the longest time but she settled for biology in the end. Shelly did keep up with the astrophysics though and got her Masters in it. Raj and her were Skype buddies so she never felt like she was missing out.”

“That was nice to make himself available,” Sheldon said.

“Yeah, well, we were close,” Penny replied neutrally. “So it was no big deal.”

“Believe me, Penny, if she was as intelligent as you say and she grew up under George’s roof in ‘good ol’ Galveston’ Rajesh was a ‘big deal’ to her. My childhood would have been far less enjoyable were it not for Pop-Pop and Professor Proton.”

“Professor who?”

“Professor Proton. He had a children’s science show every weekday at four pm. I watched him ‘religiously’”—here he used air quotes with his fingers.

“The only guy I remember doing science was Bill Nye.” The physicist snorted.

“He was too commercial. Pop science, indeed. No, Professor Proton had experiments to learn and informative songs sung by his puppet sidekick Gino the Neutrino.”

“Sounds like quite the pal,” Penny smirked.

“Professor Proton was my only friend,” Sheldon said matter-of-factly. “So, yes, he was indeed a treasured companion so I’d prefer if you didn’t make fun of him.”

“Sorry,” the Nebraskan mumbled.

“Apology accepted,” he replied.

They continued their journey in silence.

XxX
Sheldon frowned at the sound of a rock skipping along the ground.

“How long are you going to continue that infernal racket?” he asked. Penny shrugged.

“It’s not like there’s a lot to do to kill the time.” She kicked the rock forward. “I mean it’s not like we’re talking or anything.”

“Point.”

“What the hell, let’s ask. ‘So how long were you at my ‘mirror’ anyways?’”

“A while,” he said neutrally. “‘It’s not like there’s a lot to do’.”

She smirked. “Point. See anything interesting?” She tried to keep her voice light even though she felt a tad nervous.

“For the most part the scenes took place at my apartment and consisted of the usual group social gatherings and individual conversations.”

“That’s a relief,” sighed Penny. “Usually dreams are supposed to be whacked.”

Sheldon cocked his head. “Well there were some confusing elements”—shapely legs wrapped around his hips as her breasts jiggled with every thrust—“like seeing my blue jay.”

“Kinda funny since I only saw its picture.”

“Speaking of ‘kinda funny’ I also noted that Leonard had quite a bit of success since my demise.”

Penny bit her lip. “You mean the proton thing, huh?”

Sheldon mulled for a moment before he took a breath.

“Penny I realize it isn’t polite to speak ill of the dead but as I’m the one who’s deceased, not Leonard, I feel I should tell you that—”

“I know it’s your paper, Sheldon.” She regarded her friend. “Everyone knows.”

A twitch passed over the physicist’s face as he absorbed the news.

“I see,” he said slowly. “And by ‘everybody’ you mean…?”

“Meemaw gave me the puzzle box you sent her and Raj and I opened it. He’s the one who found your paper. I gave the whole kit and caboodle to Alex Jensen and she published it.”

Sheldon stopped and closed his eyes. He turned to Penny and gave her a heartfelt “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me quite yet,” she said. “Raj and I didn’t open it for nearly a decade and before we turned it over we sat on it for two years.” Sheldon looked at her inquisitively. “We wanted to give time for Leonard to come clean and then we got busy with our lives and so we kind of—”

“Forgot.”

“Yeah,” Penny said sheepishly as they continued to walk. “Although once I got my priorities straight I went to Alex right away. Leonard lost his award and his job. Alex went over his work and found other ‘borrowings’ in his later papers.” Penny sighed. “What a mess.”
“Indeed. Still, you rectified the situation. I’m in your debt.”

“IT’ll keep that in mind the next time you’re a pain in the butt,” she said with a little smile.

“Shouldn’t it be used to make up for what you do to me?”

“If there’s anything I learned being an old woman it’s that guilt works much better than apologizing. I’ll just make you feel like crap when you mess with me so you won’t do it again,” she winked.

“As opposed to amending your behavior. Ingenious.”

“Thank ya.”

Sheldon was silent before he let out a snort.

“You know how difficult it is envisioning you as an elderly person?” he said, amused.

“Happens to the best of us, um, you know what I mean.” If she could blush she would.

“Not that I recommend dying prematurely but at least I never experienced cognitive decline,” he shrugged.

“Not to mention getting up two to four times a night to take a pee.”

“Penny!” he tsked. She laughed.

“God, I missed you. I almost forgot what a prude you are.” He pursed his lips. “And that glare!”

“You’re still impossible,” he scowled at her pumpkin grin.

“At least I’m consistent.” For emphasis she again kicked a rock.

Sheldon sighed.

XxX

“Wow, the landscape sure doesn’t change much,” said Penny as Sheldon and she strolled along the edges of the crag.

“It’s relatively uniform, yes. From my perspective on the mountain top I saw nothing but trees and the light from the crag,” replied Sheldon. A thought came to him. “Odd that the redness from the crag doesn’t color us even though we’re walking right next to it.”

“There’s a lot of funny things about this place,” she grinned. “Actually, you know what a cool one is? I now have a memory like yours.” Sheldon raised an eyebrow.

“So you recall everything?”

“Well most things,” she amended. The Nebraskan cleared her throat. “‘Let’s go out tonight,’” she sang. “‘I have to go out tonight; You wanna play? Let’s run away; We won’t be back; before it’s Christmas da—’”

“You’ve made your point,” Sheldon interjected loudly.

“It’s awesome. I remember every word to ‘Rent’—even parts that weren’t my own.” She
brightened. “You never got to see my production. If we get bored I can always do the Mimi parts for ya.”

“I’m sure it won’t come to that,” the physicist said hurriedly, causing his companion to pout. “After all, we have a lot of things to catch up on,” he amended.

“I suppose.” Pause. “Actually, I do have a question for you. When Raj and I went through your flash drive we noticed along with your physics stuff you had a lot of files about, uh, bodily stuff.” Penny felt the warmth even if she couldn’t blush. “You know, like poop measurements and how much food weighs and how many steps it was to the bus stop. Why did you do that?”

Sheldon shrugged. “I don’t know. It just seemed to make sense to me. To control my baser bodily functions so that I could maintain intellectual purity.”

“Yeah, but it had to take up a lot of time graphing and measuring and whatnot.”

“I wanted to be precise.” He looked ahead at the landscape. “It gave me a sense of control,” he said at last.

“Huh,” said Penny. “Why did you need it?”


“Not a chance, sweetie. You came into your own hanging out with us.”

“My encountering you was accidental.”

“I say lucky.” Now it was Sheldon’s turn to snort.

“Gaining friends almost cost me my career and my legacy. Leonard not only misappropriated my work but also masterminded the plan to tamper with my findings in the Arctic to which Wolowitz and Koothrappali were complicit.” He shook his head. “I should have learned from Carl Franks in grade two that people will ultimately betray me.”

“I didn’t,” Penny snapped.

“Who told me that I was overreacting to the betrayal, saying that it was like the Star Trek movie?”

“Sorry,” she said quietly, feeling chastised. “I didn’t really understand what happened.”

“Your hormones spoke for you. It was natural you took Leonard’s side.” Pause. “You almost always did,” he said in a disappointed tone.

“It’s not like you weren’t difficult, Sheldon. It was like moving a mountain to get you to do something.”

“You went behind my back to my mother,” he scowled.

Penny grinned. “That wasn’t betrayal that was preventing a homicide, sweetie. You were being unreasonable.”

“Me?” squawked the physicist. “Who sabotaged laundry night and touched my food?”

“Oh yeah,” giggled Penny. “I forgot about that.” She looked at her friend. “Those were good times.”
“Exasperating times you mean.”

“Eh, potato, potAHto.”

Silence came between them as they walked. Penny remembered Amy saying that a ‘magical’ date according to Sheldon was the night they spent five hours together without speaking. 'Like I even have anything half as interesting to say as Amy.' All at once she felt self-conscious; she'd attained her goal of finding the physicist but now she was unsure what to do except keep walking. There wasn’t anything around with which she could build a walkway across the crag much less find a fallen tree. 'Absolutely useless, Penelope.' Here was her friend, stuck here for who knows how long and all she could think of doing was sing songs and—

“I missed you, too,” Sheldon said softly.

Penny beamed. “I’m buried in your spot, y’know.”

“My spot is at 2311 N. Los Robles Ave apartment 4A. I somehow doubt you’re beneath the floorboards,” the physicist replied.

“I mean your cushion. It’s under my coffin.”

“It’s only a cushion. Before I had the couch I was perfectly content with a lawn chair,” he sniffed.

Penny rolled her eyes. “It’s symbolic, Sheldon.”

“I see.” He licked his lips as he paused. “So you’re saying I have to put up with you sitting in my spot for eternity?”

“Queen Penelope—for the win!” the Nebraskan shouted with her arms raised.

In spite of himself Sheldon laughed.

XxX

“—And so anyways the Federation agent turns out to be Khan!” squealed Penny.

“Hardly a secret,” Sheldon sniffed. “The internet was swirling in rumors about Khan playing the adversary.”

“Only he wasn’t the only adversary since—”

“Penny, I don’t like spoilers.” She rolled her eyes before gesturing to their surroundings.

“And just where are you going to fine a Sheldon-approved movie theater here?”

Sheldon pursed his lips. “Point.” He kicked a rock which curved over the edge and into the crag. “Dying sucks.”

“Yeah, well, could be worse,” Penny said cheerily causing her friend to look up. “Imagine if it was pre-Star Trek Penny: you wouldn’t know what happened at all until you met up with Raj.”

“If I meet up with Raj.”

“*When* you meet up with Raj,” Penny said with a meaningful stare.

The physicist acquiesced with a nod. “So you said there was another villain?”
“The ultimate guy, yup,” agreed the Nebraskan. “Anyways it turns out that he’s….”

XxX

“I need a break,” sighed Penny.

“Penny, it’s not like our bodies suffer from fatigue,” Sheldon chided lightly.

“Maybe it’s not as exciting walking for a zillion miles without an occasional bear claw,” she shrugged and proceeded to sit down. “Come have a seat.”

Much to her surprise he did although he first swept away any loose debris where he ultimately plunked his keister. Sheldon caught her look.

“Given the lack of proper seating I’ve sat on the ground several times.”

“I guess.” Here she smiled. “It’s just different having you less ‘stiff’.” Penny piled her hair on top of her head before lying down. “Leonard always called you ‘Pinocchio’.”

“Yes, well, I have yet to smoke a cigar or be swallowed by a whale,” Sheldon scowled.

“Don’t take it personally.”

“How am I not supposed to? Pinocchio, while going on to be a beloved Disney character, is ultimately the story of a wooden puppet who became a ‘real’ boy because he proved himself ‘worthy’. I reject the notion of having someone judge me or my actions.”

Penny rolled her head to regard her companion. “That’s not it. You don’t like being called Pinocchio because you always were a real boy. It’s just that most people didn’t see that—or treat you like that.”

“I’ve always been different,” he said slowly. “People have been jealous or fearful of me for as long as I can remember. I was peculiar, not like other children, and so was picked on and ostracized.”

“Is that why you came up with the ‘homo novus’ thing?”

“I *am* homo no—” He paused. “My advanced IQ and eidetic memory made me a formidable scientist and Star Trek aficionado.”

“I wish I could have been good at something like you when I was a kid. I—Ooo! There’s a dog!” She pointed to the sky.

“There’s only whiteness,” Sheldon replied as he looked up.

“Over there. It looks a whiter shade of white.”

“Good Lord,” he sniffed.

“Get down here and see for yourself,” she chided.

“Penny, I hardly think it makes a difference whether I’m sitting or prone.”

“What happened to that scientific curiosity thingie?”

With a roll of the eyes Sheldon lay on the ground.
“As I foretold, there’s no difference in my perception or a canine in the sky.”

“That’s because you’ve got no imagination,” Penny mock-huffed.

“You think physics comes from raw intellect alone?” the lanky man said incredulously.

“Okay, I’ll bite. So how come you’re all imaginative with physics but you can’t get sarcasm?”

He shrugged. “A quirk of personality, I suppose. Numbers are what they say they are. If something’s wrong it’s my fault either in gathering data or calculating my formulas. Perhaps I assume that everything else is straightforward as well.”

“But we’re not.”

“Especially you.”

“Yeah, I am pretty special,” she said with a pumpkin grin. “You know, I remember this time back in Nebraska when this girl, Sally—she was on the cheerleading team but, really, who was she kidding? It was her mother on the PTA that got her the position.—Anyways, she was all into my brother and….”

Sheldon closed his eyes as he did his best to separate her cadence and tone from her speech. He found that the majority of what Penny said didn’t interest him however her enthusiasm was infectious and he found himself quite pleased when he added to her joy.

“…It was so frustrating. I was pretty enough for the Corn Queen’s court but not to be the queen. I worked my ass off for the junior rodeo and finished third. It’s like I’m made to be not bad but….”

As she continued to talk Sheldon looked at her, the paleness of her skin in this world gave her a delicate quality that was so contrary to her fiery disposition. Her shoulders were strong and she had adequate muscular development in her arms and legs without appearing disproportionate. In fact if memory served him correctly—and it always did—Penny had enough flesh to her to suggest a roundness to her buttocks and then there was the delightfully intriguing mix of firmness and softness as he grasped her right breast—

Penny turned to her friend. “Are you even listening to what I’m saying?” she said with an amused smirk.

“You didn’t know why your father gave the car to your brother even though you did more work around the farm.”

“Exactly.” She snuggled herself firmly on her back and tucked her arms behind her head. “And even worse he didn’t even….”

A frown came to Sheldon’s brow as he realized that the scrapes on Penny’s body even extended to the underside of her arms. In all her wounds were less violent in coloration than before with some having faded altogether. It still didn’t remove his feeling of guilt that she had been injured in the first place.

And yet there was a rush of excitement every time Penny went into action on his behalf whether it was to extricate him from a near-death situation in Halo or else pop off a pair of geologists in paintball.

The moment she kicked Zarnecki in the balls she was larger than life. For all of Sheldon’s talk about superheroes or delving into ‘Age of Conan’ when it came to human interaction—particularly
in the form of confronting bullies—he found himself ill-equipped to handle the situation. Not Penny. She turned that car around and retrieved Sheldon’s things lickety-split and returned home like she’d done nothing out of the ordinary. All in a day’s work. She was a doer, always pushing Sheldon to react whether it was in the form of a glare or else hanging her clothes on a telephone wire.

He remembered the smile on her face as she looked at his whiteboard for the first time and realized that it was one he’d experienced countless times since and had taken for granted. Most people laughed and smiled at him; she smiled for him. He was her ‘whackadoodle’. She was his—what? Not a blond monkey.

She was his hero.

And the hero always peeks.

That’s why she put up with him no matter how idiosyncratic he got.

She’d seen the real boy.

“…God, I’ve talked your ear off,” Penny said, embarrassed.

“A physical impossibility but your sentiment is noted.”

She laughed. “Gee thanks.”

“You’re welcome, Penny.”

“Sarcasm, Shel— Oh! There’s a truck!” she said as she pointed to the sky. “Over near the trees to the left. See the wheels?”

“I’ll take your word for it,” he replied evenly.

“You’re not even trying,” she mock pouted. “Just put your brain in neutral and go with it.”

He regarded the whiteness. “I see an electron configuration for tin.”

“Oh yeah, right next to the bunny.”

Sheldon opened his mouth to question her knowledge of the atomic structure but stopped himself.

“Yes it is,” he said with a slight smile.

Time was meaningless as they lay under the sky talking and laughing and dreaming.

XxX

“You really met Einstein?” Penny gasped.

“And Heisenberg and Oppenheimer and Feynman and—”

“Heisenberg! As if!”

“You have no idea who Heisenberg is, do you?” smirked Sheldon.

“Not a clue,” she replied cheerily, kicking a rock as they walked.

“Well, let’s just say that I met Schrodinger and Newton.”
“Did you tell him about the cookies?”

“Penny, this is one of the preeminent fathers of physics,” he tutted.

“That sucks. I would have been pleased as punch to have a cookie named after me.”

“I told you before the cookies are named after Newton, Massachusetts.”

“Wow you guys must have been a bundle of chuckles in that room,” she snickered.

“We were, actually. I’d never had more thrilling and completely satisfying conversations in my life. To delve into the heart of matters without having to explain myself first was exhilarating.” Sheldon smiled at the memory. “Feynman and I ‘clicked’. Actually we made great strides in refining his path integral formula to calculate pseudoscientific discourse—an insult to pure mathematics but instrumental in providing a means of leaving the room.”

“No kidding,” Penny said.

“It was all quite fascinating,” Sheldon continued in a chipper tone. “First of all Dr. Feynman had mapped out his own interpretation of Schrödinger’s Equation and….”

The Nebraskan had no idea what Sheldon was talking about but wouldn’t dream of interrupting him. This was the Sheldon Cooper she knew: arrogant in his certainty. While it was annoying when he did this about everyday things she had to admit that it sounded so right when it came to science. Leonard always had to raise his voice to defend his work. Sheldon was a matter of tone and inflection, an insistence he was right like it was the inevitable conclusion. Penny glanced at her friend. ‘He looks so relaxed. Happy.’

All at once Sheldon stopped talking.

“What?” asked Penny.

“It occurs to me that this is above your level of comprehension. We should discuss something else.”

“Sorry,” she said softly.

“It’s not your fault. Given your educational background I shouldn’t expect you to grasp my work.” He raised an eyebrow. “Heisenberg and Schrödinger had difficulties and they’re both Nobel Prize laureates.”

Penny was silent and Sheldon felt at a loss. He thought changing the subject would rectify the situation as he noted her involvement in the conversation had dwindled to nothing.

“Please talk to me,” he said at last.

“I thought you liked silence?” she replied evenly.

“Only when it’s companionable. Even I know this is awkward and that’s the last thing I want us to be.” He turned his head to his friend. “Our relationship has never been about science so I hardly expect us to start now.”

Penny shrugged. “But it’s such a big part of you. Normally when you’re all enthused about something like Star Trek or trains you’re like a kid.” Here her voice dropped, suddenly shy. “When you babble on about science there’s this energy to you, this passion, and in that moment you really
are a beautiful mind.” She shrugged again. “I just wish I could share it with you.”

“Do what I do when you gush with emotion over things I find baffling.”

“What’s that?”

“Share a mutual satisfaction in your joy. You’re happy. I can’t tell you why you should be but I recognize that you are and in that I find myself content.”

Penny laughed. “I thought I was annoying?”

Sheldon sighed. “Penny, I find everyone ‘annoying’ to one degree or another. You, at times, happen to be refreshing.”

Now the Nebraskan was really amused. “I’ll have to remember that the next time you say I’m ‘exasperating’,” she said using her fingers as air quotes.

“It’s alright,” he said with a twinkle to his eyes. “I’ve learned to put up with most of your idiosyncrasies.”

“Mine? Hello, Mr. I-Label-Days-Of-The-Week-In-My-Underwear!”

His mouth dropped. “You shouldn’t have been in my dresser!”

“Someone had to clean it out.” Suddenly she understood. “I threw your magazine in the trash long before anyone got home. No one saw it,” she assured him.

“I’ve always tried to be discreet.” Sheldon chuckled after a moment. “Thank goodness my mother didn’t see it. I already ‘creeped the bejeezus’ out of her as it was so I doubt she needed to see She-Hulk in a thong bikini.”

“Yeah she really had a killer body.”

“You make it sound as if yours is not attractive.”

“Eh, I tried but I could never get the rock-hard abs I wanted no matter how many crunches I did or miles I ran.” She snorted. “You’d think since I’m now young and in heaven that I would have lost that final three pounds I’d been trying to get rid of forever. Ah well, what’s Penny without a few flaws?” She noted Sheldon’s frown. “What?”

“Why did you put yourself down?” Sheldon asked seriously. “I made an observation, perhaps a tad biased, but sincere nonetheless.”

Penny took a moment to think. “I don’t as much as I used to,” she began slowly. “God, I was a neurotic mess when I was with you guys. Not that I’m saying you brought me down. It’s just that everything wasn’t working out the way I wanted it to so I began to avoid life. I quit doing what I liked and hung out with you guys.” She immediately clamped her mouth shut as Sheldon turned his gaze to the sky. “I’m not saying I didn’t like hanging out with you it’s just that I used to have my other friends over for football games and I’d—”

“—Go to the beach and rollerblade and karaoke, yes I’m aware.”

“All I ever seemed to do was drink, watch movies or screw.” She smiled grimly. “Not exactly a ‘relationship of the mind’.”

“I’ll admit to watching movies—although there are several I’d give my eye teeth to forget—and
I’ve imbibed alcohol—taking note of the fact that it’s only been in your presence—but we’ve never engaged in coitus.”

“Talk about a miracle. On my part, sweetie. I mean that I practically screwed everyone but Howard and—”

“Me. I see,” he said stiffly.

“Ugh. Sheldon, I’m not saying you aren’t attractive. I just mean that I made all my relationships about sex—except for you and Howard—and Howard is out completely for the creepy factor.”

He turned to her, genuinely surprised. “You think I’m attractive?”

“Well, yeah,” she said, now embarrassed. “I mean you are less, uh, filled out than I usually go for—”

“I.E. I lack defined muscles.” Pause. “Leonard, from a body mass index perspective, is physically worse off than I am and yet you involved yourself with him.”

“Hel-lo, you’re the smart one in this relationship,” Penny chuckled. “You always said that Leonard and I’s relationship was doomed.”

“It was obvious you were both in denial,” the physicist sniffed. “I have no idea why you married him.”

“I didn’t.”

Sheldon’s heart seemingly skipped a beat.

“I see,” he said as evenly as possible.

“It was a big ol’ mess. Leonard proposed and I stupidly accepted and we were supposed to go to Boston and then I—” Penny shook her head.

“Then you?”

“I couldn’t do it. I had a career in California.” Here she straightened up. “Hem, hem, an executive assistant who later became office manager.”

“Excellent,” Sheldon said approvingly.

“But it was more than the career. I realized that I’d changed over the years and not for the better. I lost who I was.” Penny smirked at her friend. “Leonard was the wrong kind of inertia.” Sheldon nodded, obviously pleased. “You did so much for me and I never had the chance to say thank you.”

“Believe me you more than made up for it by keeping me company albeit unbeknownst to you. You were my link to the physical world and whenever I sat in my spot in your imaginary apartment 4A it allowed me some measure of comfort.”

“Me casa es su casa.” Sheldon raised an eyebrow in surprise.

“You know Latin?”

“I’m a bundle of surprises, bub,” she said with a wink. Her bit part in ‘A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum’ came with complimentary Latin phrases to learn.
“I must say I’m impressed.”

“That’s ‘cause you impress easily.”

Sheldon snorted. “Oh yes, muh down home folksy nature makes me susceptible tuh yuhr big city sophistication.” Penny laughed.

“God, I don’t know if anyone’s ever told you but when you go all Texan you’re majorly sexy.”

“I always thought I sounded unsophisticated.” He turned to his companion. “You never mentioned I was, at any point, ‘sexy’.”

‘Inquisitive blue eyes staring at her from the hall before shyly looking away.’ “Maybe it was a bad case of denial,” she said thoughtfully.

“About what?”

Penny tried to read her friend’s face: he was curious but that was all. “Nothing I guess.”

Silence.

As they walked Sheldon kept stealing little side glances at Penny. She wore the same attire as she had the first time he ever saw her. Who knew how transformative a simple ‘Hi’ would be to his life? ’Blunt cut hair and green eyes.’ How a farm girl from Nebraska overwhelmed a man with multiple doctorates. ’Singing ‘Soft Kitty’.’ Snuck by his defenses until she’d become—what? His jaw tightened. Perhaps it wasn’t a question of ‘what’ but ‘how’ to say what he felt because at this moment he—

“What were you going to say to Amy?” Penny asked.

Sheldon blinked. “About what?”

“She said you emailed her the night before your accident. That you were bringing the relationship to the next level since you kissed and stuff.”

“That kiss was a catalyst but not for progression,” he assured her. “I was going to terminate the Relationship Agreement and hope that Amy would reinstate our friendship.”

Penny was stunned. “Wow. Ames sure got that wrong.” She eyed her friend. “So why did you kiss her?”

“Social protocol. Amy said it was required and so I complied.” He pursed his lips. “It was unsatisfactory.”

“But she’s kissed you before, why the turnoff now?”

“Our previous encounters were by happenstance. This was planned and I didn’t like that I wasn’t consulted. I was fine with the way things were.”

The Nebraskan rolled her eyes. “You were too fine, Sheldon. If you had it your way you’d never move and that’s not healthy.”

“No, what’s ‘not healthy’ is being forced to move in a direction I don’t wish to go,” Sheldon scowled. “I’ve always had difficulties with contact and I didn’t appreciate the pressure placed upon me to ‘perform’. I’m not a trained seal.”
“You hugged me,” she said simply. Sheldon looked away. “You helped me get dressed and we were all sweat bunnies when we hunkered in that hole at the paintball field and—”

“That was different. You didn’t have expectations for me.”

“Are you kidding?” she laughed. “I had *tons* of expectations: I *expected* you to get your ass in gear and get me to the hospital; I *expected* you to suck it up and take my damn Christmas present; I *expected* you to keep hidden so you didn’t give away our position.” A little smile crossed her face. “The only one that slipped by me was when you hugged me in the laundry room. Didn’t expect that one.”

“And I paid for it,” he grunted.

“Hey, as a bright side we got to spend Valentines Day together.”

“Point.”

“Like you said to Meemaw: good couples bring out the best in each other.”

Sheldon snorted. “We were hardly a ‘couple’. You were dating Leonard at the time.”

They walked in silence.

“As I recall you’re the one who ‘liked me’ first as I hadn’t even realized we’d shifted paradigms from ‘neighbors’ to ‘friends’,” Sheldon said nonchalantly.

“Yeah but Meemaw said you moved mountains to accommodate me into your life,” Penny teased. Sheldon stopped in his tracks.

“She told you that?” he sputtered.

“Not *told me* told me,” she said in a placating tone. “She sent me some of your letters and—”

“You read my letters?!”

“Just a few. Nothing about the Caramilk secret I swear.” She took in his unimpressed stare. “Sheldon, it wasn’t that bad.”

“They weren’t for you.” He squared his jaw. “Obviously I’ll have to have a word with Meemaw.”

“If it helps she was already dead. She put the letters aside for me in the estate.” Penny smiled warmly. “It was so cool reading things we did from your perspective: me driving you crazy; you trying to figure out if you liked me or not.” The physicist stared straight ahead. “Sheldon, it’s okay that you like me. I like you, too.”

He turned his gaze to his companion; there was no other way to describe Penny. Granted when he first encountered his Nebraskan neighbor she was a conundrum. Then she became tolerable and ultimately integral to his routine and overall sense of wellbeing. Now after spending a lifetime with Penny aiding her as best he could given the limited nature of the mirror Sheldon knew that their moments were intimate even if unbeknownst to her. He’d come to appreciate Penny in new ways; surprising ways, really, as quirks he would traditionally see as annoying like her penchant for sarcasm and endless prattle were a source of both amusement and comfort. She was zest and life and he knew that somewhere between the dreamscape and the endless miles they’d traversed along this infernal crevice a paradigm had been altered.
“You do?” he said happily.

“Sure sweetie. Actually It was nice to read the letters because over the last couple of years we kind of lost touch and I thought maybe you didn’t want to be friends anymore and—”

Sheldon’s face fell and he needed a moment to compose himself and so started walking at a fast clip.

“What? Sheldon, what’s wrong?” Penny tried to bolster her voice even as she sped to catch up.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Sheldon seethed and increased his pace.

“Sheldon, I—”

“Leave me alone!” He jogged ahead about twenty feet and kept walking.

Penny didn’t catch up. She was too busy trying to get the foot out of her mouth although she had no idea why it was there. Why was Sheldon surprised that she liked him? They’d been great friends for three years before Amy came into the picture. She frowned. He was treating his friendship with Penny like it was something taboo. ‘Why’s it so bad being friends now?’ She stared at Sheldon’s form as he walked. By her own clock Sheldon had been dead fifty eight years. He could have stayed with the other scientists or else went looking for his Meemaw but instead he spent his days with her. Watching. Did he know that she wore his t-shirts to bed? That she visited Mary and family every summer? She kept his couch and even plopped her coffin in his spot. The question was why.

In all she’d known Sheldon Cooper nearly six years—a drop in the bucket given her eighty four year lifespan—and yet in that time she’d had so many new experiences from Star Trek Shakespeare to Halo night. Singing ‘Soft Kitty’ to nearly wringing his neck when he strung her clothes on the telephone wire.

The arguments. The constant password changes to the wifi. His gibber jabbering. Sheldon was the most frustrating man she’d ever met and yet when it came down to it he was always there for her.

‘Lost in blue eyes. ‘I want you to stay.’’

And she did. Without hesitation. No thoughts of Leonard or Amy.

Only the man who demanded she be Penelope.

Penny’s eyes burned as she stopped in her tracks.

Sheldon wasn’t disputing their relationship.

‘Being friends’ just didn’t cover it.

xTBBTx

Rent musical song: ‘Out Tonight’
Chapter Twenty Seven

Chapter Summary

Reference to: ‘The Barbarian Sublimation’; ‘The Habitation Configuration’

Penny looked for the umpteenth time to her left but couldn’t see anything in the trees.

“‘This is ridiculous,’” she hissed and came to a halt. “Sheldon, we’re being followed.” At first she wasn’t sure if he was going to stop as it had been a dog’s age since either had spoken to the other but after a couple more steps he turned around.

“Where is it?” he asked neutrally.

“In the woods. It’s been following us for a while.”

“I see. Do you know what it is?”

“Not yet. I’m gonna take a look,” she said and with that veered away from the crag.

“Penny, it’s not safe,” Sheldon warned as he walked back to even himself with his companion.

“I know, I know: think happy thoughts and no mud pies for Penny,” She found a baseball-sized rock and picked it up. “If I don’t check it out it’ll keep following and that’d creep me out.”

“You could also get lost.”

“We can always do what we played with my cousins. ‘Marco’?“

Sheldon pursed his lips. “Technically I’d be ‘Marco’ since I’d be trying to locate you.”

“Whatever works for ya,” she replied and turned to go.

“Penny.” She regarded him. “Please be careful.” Penny winked and continued on her way.

As he watched her near the forest he suddenly found it harder to breathe as a low grade sense of panic set in. ’What if she got lost or injured or trapped or—‘

“Marco!” he called out.

“Polo!” Penny replied. Normally she would have giggled at his premature shout out since he could obviously see her but at the moment her nerves welcomed his little bit of comfort. She took a last look at Sheldon before stepping into the woods. Immediately she shivered as the eyes she felt on her seemed to come from every direction.

“Marco!” she yelled.

No answer.

“So much for that,” she sighed. Penny tossed the rock in her hand and looked around.
“Okay,” she called loudly. “I know you’re watching me so get out here and we can get this over with.”

“Are you going to hurt me?” said a male voice from the trees to her left.

“Only if you attack me first.”

“That seems fair.”

“I aim to please. Who are you?”

“Dr. Sheldon Cooper.”

She pursed her lips. “No you’re not.”

“How do you know?” the voice said haughtily.

“Because he’s my friend and more importantly I just left him less standing at the cliffs not even a minute ago.”

“Why would he be silly enough to go there?”

“Why, what’s wrong with it?” Penny said with a frown.

“Nothing I suppose. I just think it’s a boring place to spend eternity.”

“We won’t be there forever,” she countered. “Once we get to the end he’ll cross over and—”

The voice chuckled. “What ‘end’?” All at once Penny’s stomach dropped.

“There’s an end,” she cried desperately.

“You’re not so naïve to believe that,” the voice hissed. “He’s a lost cause. Come with me and we can go wherever you want.”

“Like hell.” Penny started back down the path she took.

“I can be Dr. Sheldon Cooper and you can be you and we can—”

“You’re not Sheldon so fuck off and leave us alone!”

Silence. Penny felt alone and with a grim smile she made her way back—only there seemed to be no clearing ahead.


At the crag Sheldon had begun pacing to keep himself calm. Five minutes had turned into fifteen then fifty five and Penny still hadn’t returned. Hadn’t answered his calls.

“Marco!” he shouted.

Nothing.

“She shouldn’t have gone,” he growled. He was angry and he did his best to fuel that fire since the only other emotion he seemed to possess at the moment was fear and he knew that once he started down that path it would consume him. He counted every second since she’d disappeared beyond
the trees; perhaps he’d be left counting forever.

“Marco!” came a tiny voice from way to the left. Sheldon raced back several hundred meters.

“Polo!” He spotted her at the edge of the forest making her way back to the crag.

“Well that idea sucked,” Penny chuckled when she arrived. She took in his grave stare. “Sheldon, I’m fine.”

“You always have to be the hero, don’t you,” he snapped.

“Guess I got a little too much Kirk in me,” she grinned.

They began to walk.

“Did you find anyone?” Sheldon asked.

“Not someone per se. It was a voice. He said he was you and I told him he wasn’t and’—he said you’re stuck for eternity’—“other stupid stuff. Anyways, long story short I scared him off and that’s that.”

“Please don’t do this again,” he said softly. “You could have been harmed and I wouldn’t be able to help.”

“Sheldon, I fell out of a tree before and nothing happened.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You climbed a tree?”

“Yeah, when I was first starting out. I landed kinda rough but nothing broke.” She snorted. “That’s why I was kinda surprised when I got all—” She looked at her arm and it dawned on her that it looked pristine. “My scrapes are gone! Man, I was sure some of them were gonna scar.” She checked herself over.

“They’ve been slowly fading. You have two remaining on your calf but I expect them to eventually disappear as well.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” she admonished.

“What was there to say?” he shrugged. “I’d rather see you uninjured but even if your wounds didn’t heal you’re still Penny. My regard for you wouldn’t change.”

“Thanks Sheldon.”

“I’m merely stating a fact.”

“Well it’s a nice fact,” she grinned.

“Penny, facts are neither ‘nice’ nor ‘nasty’. They are what they are.”

“I y’ams what I y’am,” she said in a Popeye voice. “Toot! Toot!”

“I still haven’t forgiven you for selecting that movie,” he tsked.

“It’s okay,” she laughed. “I don’t think Robin Williams forgave himself for doing it.”

XxX
“I can’t believe you’re telling me that you’ve been surrounded by a zillion trees and haven’t climbed even one,” said Penny as she tossed a small rock onto Sheldon’s side of the crag.

“I’ve had other things on my mind.” Sheldon picked up the rock, feeling its smoothness between his fingers. “Such as how to get out of here.”

“Yeah, I guess,” the Nebraskan said, feeling sheepish. They continued to walk. “How long have we been here?”

“Since I encountered you at the crag we’ve walked roughly one hundred and twenty miles in an estimated twenty four hour period. At forty three thousand eight hundred miles per year plus the time spent sitting, standing and—”

“Sheldon….”

“Three and a half years more or less. Granted I haven’t been as diligent counting steps as I should but I feel the estimate is a good one.”

“Wow,” Penny said softly and stared ahead.

The physicist waited for her to say more but all he was faced with was silence. As they walked he felt the weight of each step, how each stride marked both time and distance in a place where neither had meaning. He took in his companion’s downcast demeanor, noting how her pace had taken on a listless quality. It was as if she walked in a world with a heavy gravity. As it was seemingly impossible to physically tire out their new bodies he knew that this weariness came from within and, more importantly, where the blame ultimately lay for causing it.

“Penny, you should go home,” Sheldon said seriously. “I’m sure your family misses you.”

She turned so their eyes met. “But you’d be alone.”

“This was my choice that led me here. My folly shouldn’t be the source of your unhappiness.”

“Who says I’m unhappy?” Penny snapped, startling her companion. “Sheldon, the situation sucks shit, not you. There’s no way in hell I’m leaving you here so take that idea and shove it up your ass. And yeah, I know, ‘language Penny’ but just zip it.”

Silence.

“‘Gravity, gravity, if you go up then you’ll go down,’ ;” sang Sheldon. “‘Gravity, gravity, it’s the force that pulls you to the ground.’” Penny looked at her companion. “‘Get a ball. Throw it high, and see where it will go. Watch it move through the air and come down so low’. ”

“What’s that?” Penny asked with slight smile on her face.

“‘The Gravity Song’ from Professor Proton,” he explained and continued to sing; “‘Jump up high. Try to stay suspended in mid-air. Watch out ‘cause you’ll touch the ground; gravity takes you there. Gravity, gravity, if you’ll go up then you’ll go down.’”

“‘Gravity, gravity, if you’ll go up then you’ll go down’, ” Penny repeated.

“‘Gravity, gravity, it’s the force that’”—here Penny joined in—“‘pulls you to the ground’.”

Sheldon tossed the rock and she caught it.

“‘Take that ball and some paper crumpled up so tight. The ball is really heavy, but the paper is so
light. Drop them both from way up high and see which one lands first. Gravity takes everything at one speed to the earth. Gravity, gravity—’”

“’—If you go up then you’ll go down,” Penny sang aloud.

“‘Gravity, gravity, it’s the force that pulls you to the ground’.”

Sheldon smiled. Penny responded in kind. Together they walked.

XxX

“…So basically you made Michael Jackson’s glowy sidewalk from Billie Jean,” said Penny.

“That’s what I told Missy. In reality I was electrifying the walkway so as to protect the porch from another bag of lit dog feces,” replied Sheldon.

“What did your mother say?”

“She was off at a bible study weekend so she wasn’t around.”

“So how did it turn out?”

He grunted at the memory. “For my initial tests I had hooked the wires to the portable generator before finally attaching it to the house circuit.” He pursed his lips. “That’s when George thought it ‘funny’ to throw the breaker. I went to check the wiring when he flicked it back on and—”

“Sizzlin’ bacon!” laughed Penny.

“Actually, George said I was doing the ‘funky chicken’, whatever that means.” He scowled at his companion. “It’s not funny.”

“I know,” she said as she giggled.

“I was injured.”

“I’m sorry. I just can’t help seeing you there flopping like a funky chicken!” She flapped her arms haphazardly then was too overcome with laughter to continue.

Sheldon shook his head in disgust as Penny shot out a “bok, bok, bok-ouch!” and continued to laugh. Unable to contain himself he chuckled—something which she noticed.

“See? Told ya it was awesome!” she gasped.

Sheldon folded his arms and turned away to hide his grin.

“You’re not nice,” he said in a pouty voice.

“Aww, I’m sorry Moonpie,” Penny chuckled. He turned to her, his face stern, but it was his eyes that bathed her in their mirth and something else that made her heart skip a beat.

“Penny, only Meemaw calls me that,” he chided her lightly.

Penny pumpkin grinned. “I’m old enough to be your Meemaw.”

“Just because you died later than I did doesn’t remove the fact that I am four years older than you,” he sniffed.
“Not a chance. You’re forever thirty one to me, Sheldon.”

He cocked his head at the thought. “Age is irrelevant, especially here.”

“Especially since I’m now twenty four again,” she grinned.

“Twenty two,” he amended.

“But who’s counting, right Sheldon?” she winked.

“What matters to me is that you’re forever Penny.”

The Nebraskan clamped her mouth shut as her eyes reddened. She took a moment to swallow before she smiled at her friend, her Sheldon.

“You better believe it,” she said. He nodded and they continued on their way.

XxX

Sheldon’s brows met as he contemplated where to go next. If his mass was the same as his Earthly physical body he’d snap the upper branch but it was the only way he could grab the specific leaf he had in mind. Still, it wasn’t like he was going to break anything if he did fall—proof he came by the hard way as he’d already crashed out of the tree twice.

“What the heck,” he muttered. He leaned forward away from the trunk and grasped the branch. It began to bend wickedly and he knew he barely had seconds so he kicked himself up and with his fingers grasped the leaf. The branch snapped but he let himself go limp and did his best to anticipate the landing. It wasn’t a thing of beauty but he did land butter-side up.

“Yes!” Smiling, he dusted himself off and tucked the leaf in his pocket before heading back to his companion who sat on the other side of the crag rolling a rock between her outstretched legs as she watched him climb.

Penny couldn’t help but grin as she saw his proud gait coming her way. He was a happy young boy and a successful hunter all rolled into one. As he neared she took in his long limbs: Sheldon was lanky but not the string bean she had decided he was. He had muscle but it was sleek, deceptive. She remembered his forearms flex as he folded his laundry or wrote at his whiteboard—his tapered fingers practically dancing as they moved with precision—and wondered what it would have been like to feel them wrap around her body. Immediately she smiled to herself. She did know what it was like: Sheldon had hugged her twice for the napkin and the Hadron collider. They had to be two of the most awkward and hesitant embraces she had ever endured.

She knew as soon as he pulled out the leaf from his pocket and held it up triumphantly that she’d give anything to feel a third.

She also knew she’d never let go.

“I present to you a leaf from the upper third of the tree—as you requested,” he said with a twitchy smile.

“Proud of yourself, aren’t ya?” Penny winked as she stood.

“You betcha,” Sheldon twanged. She chuckled and the two of them began to walk.

XxX
“You were right about Babylon 5,” said Penny. “Raj and I watched some of it but I couldn’t get through it. Way too soap opera-y and Sinclair was a jerk. Hardly leading man material.”

“He also caused a major re-write as he left the show at the end of season one although he does take on a recurring role in seasons two and three,” added Sheldon.

“Never made it to season two. Raj said it got better but I just couldn’t risk it.”

“Very wise.”

“Sooper Genius,” she agreed.

“Indeed.”

They continued to walk in companionable silence save the rhythmic flip-flopping of Penny’s foot apparel.

“How long were you with Raj?” Sheldon asked out of nowhere in what he hoped was a nonchalant tone.

“Fiveish years. Sixish if we count the year and a bit we were just roommates,” she said carefully, not sure where this was going.

“That’s a long time to be with someone.”

“I guess. Then again, how long have we been here?”

“Four years eight months.” He paused. “—ish.”

“Is that the new math?” she teased. Sheldon pursed his lips and glared. “Sorry, sorry. Anyways, we’re just about at five years. That’s pretty impressive too.”

Sheldon shrugged. “I suppose. Of course it makes a difference that you were romantically engaged with Rajesh. Was he—good to you?” he asked carefully.

“He was the best,” Penny said with a broad smile. “He liked Sex and the City and spa days and, man, could he ever cook! We went all over the place and he was just….”

Sheldon noted the wistful look on her face.

“I’m glad,” he said neutrally.

“Still, things didn’t work out so we went back to being friends,” she said hurriedly.

“I don’t understand. If you were so compatible why didn’t it work?”

“You and Amy were compatible. You tell me.”

Sheldon nodded. “Point.”

Silence.

“I’m surprised Raj never proposed.”

“He wanted to but we both knew it wouldn’t be right.”

More silence.
“Did you ever regret not marrying him?”

“Sheldon, we were the best of friends. I wanted what was best for him and I wasn’t it and he wasn’t the one for me.”

“I see.” Pause. “Did you have someone specific in mind?”

“Not then.”

They looked at each other.

“And now?” Sheldon asked softly.

Her response was a smile so beautiful, so mischievous and full of whatever it was that constituted Penny it took his breath. Before he could say anything she began to run ahead before turning around and jogging in reverse.

“I thought we ascertained I don’t run,” Sheldon said with a smirk.

“Because you hate to lose.”

“We don’t physically tire. My long legs grant me a longer stride so it’s inevitable I’d win.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

A Cheshire grin came to her face. “Then it’s a good thing I’ve got a head start!”

Penny turned and bolted while Sheldon immediately went after her like a shot. It took him a while to fashion a proper gait but once he had he slowly but surely made up ground. Of course what helped was Penny turning backwards every once in a while to taunt him. The last time she did that she screeched as Sheldon was about three arm’s lengths away.

“Told you,” Sheldon said as he pulled up beside her.

“Yeah, yeah,” she hissed.

“Anytime you want to stop.”

She glanced at him. “Are you quitting on me, Cooper?”

He set his jaw and accelerated further until he pulled ahead.

“Perfect!” Penny yelled.

“What is?”

“I’m behind you.”

“Penny, we’re too far apart for me to ease your wind resistance.”

“Naa, I just like ogling your butt.”

He pulled up and she passed by.

“Too easy!” she gleefully shouted over her shoulder.
With a growl Sheldon set off in hot pursuit.

XxX

“You slept in your socks, too?” Penny giggled. “Man, I’m surprised you didn’t have a scarf and mittens for winter.”

“Penny, why on earth would I sleep with something wrapped around my neck?” said Sheldon incredulously. “And FYI I did have sleep mittens and a nightcap in case the temperature dipped.”

“So that’s pajamas, t-shirt and socks. Didn’t you cook in summer?”

“Well unlike someone I know I managed to keep up on my electric bill hence I could use my air conditioner.” Penny stuck out her tongue. “Bazinga.”

“Yeah, but there were nights when I was practically naked. Don’t tell me you didn’t strip?”

“What else am I supposed to have slept in if I didn’t wear my pajamas?”

“Ever hear of the buff?”

“Unhygienic,” he sniffed.

“Wait a minute didn’t I catch you with no pants?”

Sheldon grunted. “You were in my room. No one’s supposed to be in there.”

“Skipping the point.”

“I had spilled grape juice on my pants,” he explained. “As they were my Wednesday pants and it was, indeed, Wednesday I had no alternative but to sleep without them.”

“Protocol dictated, huh?”

“You know I adhered to strict routine.”

“Yeah.” Penny tucked her thumbs through her belt loops. “Sheldon, can I ask you a question?”

“You just did,” he said with a little smile.

“Can I ask another, Mr. Smartiboots—after this one?”

“By all means.”

She took a moment to compose her thoughts.

“Leonard said that you took me on as your assistant because I was an experiment,” she began. Sheldon’s smile faded from his lips. “That I was a part of your social routine and you didn’t want to see it disrupted.”

“What do you think?” he asked. Penny shrugged.

“Leonard told me about the chocolate experiment. I thought you were just being nice.” Here Sheldon winced. “The same thing for the EAing but then I read over the notes you took on me and I wasn’t ‘Penny’ or even ‘Penelope’. I was ‘subject’.”

“I wanted to remain objective. I was your employer not your friend.”
“Why did you stop being friends with me?” she asked softly.

He halted abruptly in mid-stride.

“Penny, since we altered our paradigm I’ve always been your friend,” he said earnestly.

“Until Amy came along. Then we quit doing things together.” A wry smirk came to her face. “I mean I realize I’m not in her league but it kind of hurt being kicked to the curb.”

“It wasn’t a competition,” Sheldon said with a scowl.

“I know that. Besides, it’s not like I could win.” They continued to walk. “We just hung out. With Amy you could talk science and play that whacky question game you guys made up and be all brainy.”

“While Amy Farrah Fowler and I conversed on a myriad of topics—and she at times did question my intellectual authority—nevertheless we communicated on a plane of relative equality.” He glanced at his companion. “You made me feel stupid.”

Penny’s mouth dropped. “Me?! You?! Get off it.”

“I couldn’t figure you out. Every time I thought I had you’d say or do something to stump me.”

“You said things all the time that went over my head so don’t worry about it,” she chuckled.

“I’m the one with the high IQ, Penny,” Sheldon sniffed. “Being stymied for prolonged periods isn’t a state in which I’m comfortable.”

“Yeah but I only knew stuff that wasn’t ‘important’”—she made quotes with her fingers. When he didn’t correct her Penny laughed. “Exactly. I’m your blond monkey.”

“No you’re not!” he snapped causing her to jump.

“Sheldon I was just teasing,” she soothed.

“It’s not funny. Don’t *ever* call yourself that.”

They continued to walk.

“I like you, Penny,” he said quietly.

“I like you too, sweetie.”

“Leonard didn’t make me like you. I don’t know why I said that.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

Blue eyes met green. “It matters to me that you know.”

“I know, Moonpie,” she said softly. “I know.”

XxX

Sheldon eyed his companion nervously as she continued to cartwheel her way along the crag’s edge. Penny had this foolish notion to count how many times she could wheel herself over. He’d wanted to admonish her but was too afraid he’d distract her with disastrous results.
Suddenly she veered and collapsed in a heap.

“Penny!” gasped Sheldon.

She turned over to sit on her butt.

“Forty eight!” she said happily. “I’m getting better at this.”

“I’m not. Please move yourself twenty feet away from the precipice.”

“Sheldon, I’m not going to fall in.”

“Humor me,” he said seriously.

“Fine, fine,” she smirked as she got up and dusted herself off.

“Perhaps we could do something else?” He brightened. “How about the ‘Elements’ game?”

Penny winced. “Gee, didn’t we play that not too long ago?”

“About fourteen months.”

“Yeah, I though it was recently.” She grinned at his glare. “Still if you want to play a game we can always do ‘Apples, Peaches, Pears and Plums’.”

“And what are we supposed to do with this fruit salad?”

“Pick a spot far off. Each of asks a question and we take a step for each time it’s true for us. Like, ‘how many times did you go to a formal school dance?’ I’d take thirteen steps and you’d take…?”

“One.”

She smiled. “Really? You went to one?”

“ Forced to go. Mother wouldn’t buy me the power supply transformers I needed unless I went.” He cocked his head. “Still it wasn’t a complete waste. I managed to work out what I needed for the centrifuge as I spent the night in the boy’s washroom.”

“Oh honey,” she said sadly.

“Like I said, I don’t dance.” He cleared his throat as he scouted ahead. “I have a tree in mind. Let’s begin.”

“Okay. Take a step with each fruit. ‘Apples, peaches, pears and plums, tell me when your birthday comes?’ Step for each month.” Sheldon took an additional five steps after the first four and Penny, eleven. “And we’re off!”

“In any given year how many times did you thoroughly clean your apartment?” He took fifty two steps. Penny took eleven. “As many as that?” he said with a twitchy smile. She stuck out her tongue.

“How many music concerts have you been to?” She took thirty seven steps to Sheldon’s five.

“Fred Penner and the symphony,” he explained. “Time to make some space. How high is your IQ?” Penny wrinkled her nose and gave a smarmy smile as Sheldon happily moved one hundred and eighty seven steps ahead. “I’m only three steps away from the finish.”
He turned at the sound of flip-flops and saw that Penny was still right behind him.

“What are you doing up here?” he asked, puzzled. “We don’t share the same IQ.”

“You’re right. You said I made you feel stupid so I must be one eighty eight,” she said with a wink.

“I’d like to issue a formal protest,” Sheldon scowled.

“I’ll get back to you on that.” He rolled his eyes. “So.” She clapped her hands. “Three steps wins it, huh?” A devious smile came to her lips. “How many people have you had sex with?” With a sweetie-pie smile she skipped past Sheldon and across the imaginary line. “Taa daa! The winnah! The crowd goes wild!”

“You cheated,” pouted Sheldon as he folded his arms across his chest.

“I did say I was Kirk, didn’t I Mr. Spock?” she winked.

“This is hardly the kobayashi maru,” he tsked. “And flattery will get you nowhere.”

“Hey, it’s not like you lost by much. Three is a respectable number.”

“You mean two.”

Penny blinked. “You had sex with someone?”

“I am someone.”

“I meant with other people.”

“You weren’t specific.”

“My bad,” she chuckled. “You’re naughty but I’m definitely bad.”

“By that notion you’re additionally ‘bad’ for calling me naughty.”

Penny pumpkin grinned. “And what would I be for thinking of you doing the naughty?”

“In trouble,” the physicist said.

“I like trouble.” She pulled out the rock from her pocket, kissed it and flipped it to her companion. “The best I can do to make it better, sweetie.”

“Noted.” He slipped the rock into his pocket and they continued their walk.

XxX

“Those woods are really ‘Twilight’-y,” Penny said before a smirk came to her face. “I guess that makes you Edward.” Sheldon snorted.

“As I recall from that horrible movie you made me watch he exhibited all the alarming traits of a serial stalker. I never understood how he was a ‘romantic lead’.”

“It’s all how you look at it I guess,” Penny shrugged.

“True. For instance, your continual barging into my apartment unannounced equaled trespassing not to mention the theft under five thousand dollars for eating my food and stealing my bandwidth.”
“And sneaking into a stranger’s apartment to clean it isn’t creepy?” she retorted with a raised eyebrow.

“Technically I did know you as we were introduced and you did give us your apartment key so the entry wasn’t forced. Consider it an opportunity for organization.”

“While I was sleeping?”

“It’s not like I watched you sleep.”

Penny batted her eyes. “You watched me dream. That’s romantic.” Sheldon rolled his eyes.

“Hardly romantic. You were my connection to the living world.”

“Romantic.”

“You were a source of companionship even though our interactions were limited.”

“Romantic.”

“I think Amy Farrah Fowler would disagree. I am anything but ‘romantic’”

“Sarcasm, Sheldon.”

“Ah.”

“Not that it doesn’t mean you don’t feel. I mean Edward felt. The only problem was that as a vampire he felt too deeply so was completely overwhelmed when Bella came into his life. She was, like, totally his soul mate and he fought it tooth and nail because he didn’t want to hurt her.”

“That is the prudent choice,” the physicist nodded. “He is a vampire, after all.”

“It’s a stupid choice. They were meant to be together.”

Sheldon raised an eyebrow. “Even though it put his family, Bella and himself at risk?”

“Life is all about risk, Sheldon. Some are big and really suck when they don’t work out. Leonard was supposed to be my true love and I spent years trying to convince myself only it wasn’t true.”

“Being with Leonard isn’t a story of risk but resignation,” he countered. “Risk only came into the equation when you decided to leave him.”

“I guess. But it was also a risk because I was leaving behind the one guy I thought was supposed to make me happy.” A self deprecating smile came to her face. “Cinderella just wanted her time at the ball.”

“I should have danced with you,” Sheldon blurted.

Penny cocked her head. “What?”

“In the kitchen. In the laundry room. I should have danced with you.”

“You don’t like dancing.”

“I danced with Amy. Of course she was safe. She was my friend.”

“And I’m not?” Penny said, hurt.
“You’re overwhelming at times, Penelope,” Sheldon replied. “I didn’t know how to process your requests. Not because your commands are so complicated but that my reactions are unlike anything I’d experienced before. One dance meant opening the door to a whole slew of things I was unprepared to deal with. It meant change and I was unwilling to compromise myself.”

“You did though.” He looked at her quizzically. “You put up with my stealing your wifi and watching sappy movies and mooching your food. You set up my business and got me prepared for school. You did the best you could, Sheldon. I was just too blind to see it.”

Before he could speak a voice echoed in the distance, calling Penny’s name. The Nebraskan’s mouth dropped.

“It’s mom!” She turned to the forest. “Mom! I’m here!”

“Pen-ny!” The call was long and mournful. Heartbreaking.

“You should go and let her know you’re alright,” Sheldon said.

“Maybe it’s a trick,” Penny said softly.

“Does it feel like one?”

“No.” She pursed her lips. “I won’t leave you.”

“It’s not like I’m going anywhere,” he said with a little smile. “This is supposed to be a time of togetherness and your mother is missing her daughter.”

“It took so long to find you.”

“You’ll never lose me, Penny.”


Sheldon nodded. “I love you, too.”

“I’ll be back,” Penny burbled happily. “I’ll just let them know that I’m okay and not to worry.” Even though there were no tears she unconsciously wiped her eyes.

“Safe journey,” he said.

“Yes boss,” she saluted before running off to the trees.

“She won’t find her way back here, you know,” said the Man’s voice from behind the physicist. “So was this worth it? You’re alone. Lost. Nowhere.”

Sheldon watched Penny disappear into the trees beyond.

He simply said “Yes”. The Man was silent.

**End of Part Six**

xTBBTtx

Gravity song: Jennifer Fixman’s Science Songs with Miss Jenny
Chapter Twenty Eight

Chapter Summary

Trip no further, pretty sweeting,
Journeys end in lovers’ meeting—
Every wise man’s son doth know.

-William Shakespeare, Twelfth Night Act II Scene III

Sheldon drew a line in the dirt with his shoe and stuck a stick into the ground beside it. He then paced out twenty five feet and repeated his actions. For his part the Man watched in silence as the physicist counted out fifteen more feet and again drew a line and planted a stick.

“What are you doing?” the Man asked.

“An experiment.” Sheldon made sure his foot was behind the line and then looked ahead to the stick beyond. He took a breath and then began to run. When he hit the next line he jumped. The landing wasn’t a good one as he staggered forward before falling to the ground. Immediately he popped up and went to check where his first foot had landed.

“Seven and a half feet. Not good,” he said with pursed lips. He took another stick and laid it on its side at the edge of the line to mark his place before wiping clean any trace of his landing and fall.

“I never knew you were athletically inclined,” said the Man as the physicist returned to his starting position.

“I’m not.”

“Then why are you doing this?”

Sheldon again ran and jumped. He dusted himself off and marked his landing.

“Because I want to go home,” he said matter-of-factly. The Man’s eyes widened in shock.

“You’re not seriously thinking of jumping are you?” he gasped.

“Everything I want is across this chasm: Meemaw, Pop-Pop.”

“Penny?” Sheldon’s eyes flashed to the other man’s face before returning to the ground to count out his steps. “Ah,” the Man nodded grimly. “Men have done foolish things for women, Dr. Cooper.” The physicist straightened.

“What would you have me do, walk this divide forever? There’s been no narrowing in distance, it continues beyond the horizon and all I have behind me is endless forest. Penny is twenty three feet away from me. That’s unacceptable.”

The Man shrugged his shoulders. “Yes, but she’ll be inconsolable if you perish.”

“Since she won’t be coming back here she’ll never know.” He glanced at the crag. “So I can die?”
“Well it doesn’t exactly look healthy down there. I don’t know if anything could survive.”

Sheldon’s eyes were steadfast. “Well, then, I guess I’ll just have to make it.”

He ran again but stopped short of the jump.

“My technique is off. I need to adjust my stride and body position for maximum lift.” A smirk came to his face. “I suppose you don’t happen to be a varsity running long jump coach?”

“Not a chance,” the Man chuckled. “Besides, you actually expect me to help you with this suicide mission?”

“You could always try being optimistic,” tsked Sheldon.

“Sorry. You expect me to help you in this pulse-pounding endeavor?” the Man said over enthusiastically.

“Your Bazinga is noted,” mumbled Sheldon as he carefully marked out his steps.

The Man was grim faced as he watched his companion work.

XxX

“Mom!” Penny shouted as she looked for signs of the path she used to get here.

Nothing.

“Great,” she muttered.

Since she’d entered the forest she hadn’t heard anything, not even the flip-flopping of her shoes, so there was little chance her mother heard her calls. Still, Penny was hell-bent and determined to get back ‘home’ as soon as possible so she could return to Sheldon.

“Maybe there’ll be something there I can use to get across that frakken gap.” At this point she was ready to strip everyone naked and make a rope from their clothes if that’s what it took.

Over to her left the trees seemed clearer so she made for it and discovered a path.

“Now we’re cookin’ with gas,” she grinned. Penny looked around but there were no flowers present so she doubted this was the same path. “Maybe because this isn’t Sheldon’s path it’s Mom’s.” She looked out for daisies—her mother’s favorite flower—but couldn’t spot any and after a while abandoned the search.

“Gravity, gravity, if you go up then you’ll go down’,,” she sang. “‘Gravity, gravity, it’s the force that pulls you to the ground’. Get a ball. Throw it high, and see….’.”

Ahead on the path was a familiar face wearing a striped cardigan and glasses.

“Amy!” Penny cried joyfully although she was a bit confused. Amy quit dressing all frumpy nearly a half-century ago. Heck, she didn’t even wear striped cardigans when she was in her seventies!

“What are you doing here? I saw Sheldon and he’s okay only he’s stuck and—”

“Who are you?” said the neurobiologist with a frown. The Nebraskan was taken aback.

“Penny. Your bestie. Don’t you rem—”
“You’re not Penny. Don’t even kid yourself.”

“What are you talking about? Amy, it’s me!”

“Oh really?” Amy folded her arms across her chest. “Tell me then, ‘bestie’, are you in love with Sheldon?”

“Yes,” Penny said, unsure where this was going.

“Who’s your best friend?”

Penny shrugged her shoulders sheepishly. “Raj. But you’re my best female friend,” she added quickly. “It’s just that we kind of got separated when you moved and—”

“We did no such thing!” Amy shrieked. “You think I don’t know my own best friend? She loves Leonard. She wants to be an actress.”

“I still got to act,” Penny frowned. “I used to do community plays on weekends.”

“Oh yeah, after your ‘career’ as an executive assistant. Please. Penny is a treasure but she couldn’t organize the alphabet without help and you’re now expecting me to believe that you’re her?”

“I went to school and Sheldon helped me,” snapped Penny.

Amy laughed bitterly. “Oh yes, ‘Sheldon’. Sheldon who compared you to a monkey and said that you had no overlapping areas of interest to talk about.” Penny opened her mouth to speak. “I’m supposed to believe that you’re interested in ‘Star Trek’—this from a woman who couldn’t tell the difference between it and Star Wars, who insisted there *wasn’t* a difference.”

“Yeah? And what about you?” Penny growled. “How did you go from all clinical to counting the moments until you fucked Sheldon?”

“It’s called ‘growth’.”

“Okay, let me get this straight: after seven years working as a waitress I finally get a career and drop a relationship that was all about sex while you have an amazing career and are super brainy and then become a hormonal basket case as soon as you get a boyfriend and I’m the one who’s unbelievable? And, hey, even if what you did was growth, you’re telling me I can’t do the same? That, what, my destiny was laid out before me the moment I met Leonard?”

“Leonard is your soul mate. Your babies would have been smart and beautiful.” Amy gave a smarmy smile. “You really think you’d be with Sheldon if he didn’t die? You didn’t have anything in common and he said more than once that you brought down the level of conversation in the room. *We* are compatible. The matchmaking site proved it.”

Penny’s hands curled into fists as she advanced towards her ‘bestie’. “Yeah, you were a match—before you turned into a horny bitch. You used to be all intellectual with Sheldon and, yeah, he hung out more with you because you were so alike. That’s the Amy he liked. That’s the Amy I liked and the Amy who moved on to Andrew and had a baby and got lasik surgery, that’s the Amy I love. She doesn’t take crap and she’s treated with respect and she’s loved the way she should be.”

“Make-believe!” scoffed Amy. “I was made for Sheldon. You were made for Leonard. We were all happy.”

“Holy shit, Amy, I was a God damn alcoholic! I worked a dead-end job, was flat broke, pretended
to be an ‘actress’ when I never went to any auditions. All I had was my relationship with Leonard and even then all we did was fuck. We had about as much to say to each other—no, wait, I had more to say to Sheldon than I did Leonard because at least with Sheldon we fought and teased each other.” Penny grimaced. “Yeah, I was ecstatic. That’s why I acted like a complete bitch making fun of you all and you all made fun of me. Wow, we were great friends back then.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. We were great friends: you were Rachel and Leonard was Ross and I was Monica and Sheldon was Chandler and—”

“Are you out of your mind? Leonard and Sheldon and Howard and Raj are scientists who like to dress up in costumes and go to sci-fi conventions.”

“They grew out of that.”

“Grew out of science fiction?” Penny said incredulously. “Hel-lo, science and geek stuff is what got them through bullies at school and problems at home. They’ve spent thousands on comic books and own model rockets and kite fight. It’s part of who they are just like your neuro-thingy is a part of you—or are you telling me that you’ve outgrown science too?”

Amy glared. “You’re not my Penny.”

“You never knew me when I first hung out with Sheldon and Leonard: I was optimistic and spunky and had fun with life. I had lots of friends and loved watching the Cornhuskers play and went dancing.”

“You were twenty two! What else were you supposed to do?”

“And, what, twenty six is ancient? I’m to throw away everything that made me ‘me’? What do you want from me, Amy? You say it’s okay for me to change from, what, happy-go-lucky to a bitter drunk but I can’t go on to something better?”

“Sheldon and a career? Why not throw in a couple of babies and a picket fence?” Amy narrowed her eyes. “You’re delusional.”

Penny shook her head. “Listen lady—because there’s no way you’re Amy—I’ve had enough of your crap. Now get out of my way or else I’ll move you.”

“You’re not Penny.”

In response Penny marched through the other woman, who became black smoke as soon as the Nebraskan touched her.

Penny straightened her shoulders. “I’m Queen Penelope, bitch.”

XxX

“Going for a record?” asked the Man as he watched his companion in the midst of doing pushups.

“Hardly. I’m going over my approach to the jump. My technique has to be perfect,” Sheldon replied.

“Well, if we add eight more activities we can have a straight decathlon. Although I suppose your heart’s set on only one event.”

“Indeed.” Sheldon stopped and stood, grabbing a small rock he’d been staring at and put it back
into his pocket from whence it came. He went to his measured position and took twenty one steps back and drew a line.

“Perhaps if you retraced your steps you could find the physics room again,” the Man blurted.

“I don’t want to.” The physicist ran and jumped. He turned to see his mark: fifteen feet. It was an improvement on eleven but still eight feet short of the goal. Taking a stick he noted his position.

“There might be another way around.”

“Highly unlikely.” Sheldon wiped out his jump marks with his foot.

“But a possibility,” the Man argued. “What does your path integral formula say?”

“I’ve got two options: I descend, hoping there’s a bottom and climb up the other side or else jump across. As I’d rather not experience what lies below I’m left with no other choice but to jump.”

“You could always build a bridge or something.”

Sheldon snorted. “Now you’re being ridiculous. There’s nothing to aid me. I’m the only resource I have; I don’t know if it’ll be enough but”—here he shrugged—“I’ll let the chips fall where they may.”

The Man frowned. “That doesn’t sound too scientific. Who said that the numbers don’t lie? If you can’t make the leap then you’re just being a fool.”

Sheldon said nothing and continued back to his starting position. Somewhere along the run he had to change his body position to make himself more aerodynamic.

“Dr. Cooper you are a man of amazing intellect. Just think of what you can accomplish. You argued with Einstein and stumped Schrodinger. You advanced string theory and—”

“I made a friend who’s, hopefully, come to a better end than me.” He glanced at his companion. “I take it you still have no idea what happened to Dr. Feynman?”

“Nope.”

Sheldon pursed his lips. “Somehow I doubt he’d let something like a little ol’ gap stop him from his goal.”

“Or maybe he’s smart enough to take another route.”

“There is no other route!” the physicist shouted. “Good Lord I’ve an IQ of one hundred and eighty seven. Do you really think I’d risk myself if there was some other way?”

“I don’t understand why you’re risking yourself, period,” scowled the Man.

“Like I said before: I want to go home.”

The Man scoffed. “Since when did you have a ‘home’? You never fit in: Galveston was hell, Pasadena was ripe with betrayals. Just what’s so great over there that you’d risk everything?”

“I’m* over there,” Sheldon said quietly. He looked wistfully at the trees on the other side. “The boy who played with Pop-Pop and baked cookies with Meemaw. The dear friend of Rajesh and Amy and, yes, even Howard—and Penny, my adversary and healer and comrade and hero and source of both frustration and awe. Before I met her I was a physicist. She pushed me to be so
much more and yet at the same time she accepted me for who I am. She rolled her eyes at my hobbies and yet she got me Leonard Nimoy’s autograph and introduced me to Stan Lee. She gave up her trip to Europe so that, if things had worked out, I would have seen the Large Hadron Collider.”

“So how did you end up over here?”

“I didn’t appreciate these things like I should. I didn’t think they did anything to aid me in my quest for answers and accolades. I’d assumed that everything I wanted and needed to know was in that physics room.” The physicist gave a little chuckle. “Sheldon Lee Cooper was wrong.”

“So you’re willing to give up physics?”

“I’ll always be a scientist. Besides Raj is over there and I bet Feynman will be too. We can gather and mull over things and at the same time be near our loved ones.”

The Man smirked. “Sounds like you want it all.”

Sheldon turned to his companion. “You’d really expect me to settle for anything less?”

The two men stared at each other until the Man gave a little nod and departed.

XxX

As she walked Penny heard the sounds of a woman crying but could see no one.

“Hello?” she called. No answer.

The Nebraskan continued.

XxX

Sheldon grunted. “Eighteen feet.” He wiped away his jump mark in the dirt. He had five feet to go —six if he wanted to play it safe. Still, he had all the time in the world to get it right.

He came to his start line and prepared for another run.

XxX

Penny swore she could hear water running in the distance. Sure enough the path led to a bridge that arced over a stream. She walked to the midpoint on the bridge and leaned over to look into the water. The current was fast yet at the same time the surface was still enough for her to see her reflection; it scared the bejeezus out of her because it showed Penny with eyes and mouth wide open, seemingly drowned.

“Note to self: stay away from the water,” she smirked grimly and kept going.

As soon as she stepped onto dry land the sounds of crying returned.

“Hello?”

The crying stopped and immediately Penny felt on edge as she made her way along the path. Ahead she saw a familiar woman with long blond hair in a pony tail wearing leather armor with her arms wrapped around her waist.

“Penelope?” Penny said as she neared. The woman looked up, her eyes red from crying. “What’s
wrong, sweetie?"

“He didn’t wait,” the woman said sadly. “He said he would but he didn’t.”

“Sheldor?”

“The one who knows me. The one who loves me.”

“Oh honey I’m so sorry. Were you supposed to meet somewhere?”

“At the bridge,” the woman sniffled.

“I didn’t see anyone or any tracks,” the Nebraskan said sympathetically.

“What do I do without him? It took me so long to find him.”

“I don’t know. Maybe go home? He might come looking for you there.”

The woman shook her head. “My home’s with him and now he’s so far away.”

“Where is he?”

“He leapt beyond.”

At once Penny’s breathing stopped.

“Why would he do something like that?” she said hoarsely.

“It was the only way to be together,” Penelope said. “Forever together and now he’s forever alone. I failed him.” Green eyes met their counterpart. “We failed him, Penny.”

“No,” Penny gasped, shaking her head as she backed away. “I don’t believe you.”

“‘Gravity, gravity, if you go up then you’ll go down’,,” the woman sang in a heartbreaking tone. “‘Gravity, gravity, it’s the force that pulls you to the ground’.”

“No!” Penny’s heart sank and so did her feet. She turned and raced to the bridge only to find a red-haired young woman standing with her arms folded and a scowl on her face standing in front of it. 

“You said you weren’t interested in Dr. Cooper,” the woman snapped.

“Not now,” the blond growled, wracking her brain as this woman seemed familiar. Suddenly she clued in that it was Sheldon’s graduate student. She narrowed her eyes and made to push through the woman as she had ‘Amy’.

The woman was solid and strong and shoved a surprised Penny to the ground.

“Not so fast.”

“Look Romana—”

“Ramona.”

“Whatever. Get out of my way.”

“No, you’ve been in the way,” Ramona spat. “You and your distractions kept Dr. Cooper from achieving true greatness. Now he’s wasting his time pining away for things that were not meant to
Penny darted to the side trying to get around the woman but Ramona countered creating a stalemate.

“He can still do his work over here,” Penny growled. She lunged and was pushed back.

“You think you can help him? You’re a waitress. I’m a physicist. I understand him,” sniffed Ramona.

“No, I know him and Amy understands him. You’re just a nut job.”

“Well at least I’m not responsible for his death. That’s on your head, sister.”

Again Penny charged and again she was repelled.

“Let me by!” she screamed.

“What’s the point? It’s not like you’re going to be in time,” Ramona said with pursed lips.

“I won’t if you don’t let me through.” Penny’s eyes reddened and she let out a growl in frustration. “I swear, Ramona, if anything happens to him—”

“You mean *when* something happens to him.”

“Ramona please!”

The physicist raised an eyebrow as a thought struck her. “What will you give me if I let you pass?”

“ Anything!”

“You. I want you, whether you find him in time or not. Do you agree?”

“I agree!” Ramona moved and the Nebraskan raced by and into the forest.

The path was gone.

Penny looked desperately for anything familiar and, finding nothing, proceeded blindly through the trees.

XxX

Sheldon marked his position with his last stick. After eight thousand and sixty four jumps he’d managed to extend his reach by another foot and a half but that was still three and a half feet short of his minimal goal. He wasn’t sure what more he could do to improve his distance: all twenty of his sticks were stuck virtually together.

“Practice makes perfect,” he said with a grim smile and proceeded into the forest to gather more sticks.

“Hello Dr. Cooper,” said a familiar voice.

“Hello disembodied articulation,” Sheldon said absently as he gathered sticks.

“Take a number.”

“Seven.”
“Double it and add nine. Then subtract three, divide by two and subtract your original number. I bet your answer is—”

“Three. X plus three minus X equals three. In this case X equals seven,” Sheldon replied.

“Exactly!” the voice said happily. “Take a number.”

“One hundred and sixty three.”

“Double it and add twelve. Then—”

“Subtract four, divide by two, subtract the original number and the answer is four.”

The voice laughed. “You’re good at this.”

“It’s elementary algebra,” sniffed Sheldon. “Hardly a challenge.”

“Hmm. Okay. How about this: Suppose we wish to prove P implies Q. We assume P.”

“Not-Q implies Q hence Q must be true. It’s a tautology: (Q -> not-Q) -> not-Q,” Sheldon explained.

“So from a premise we can prove the premise is false, then the premise is false?”

Sheldon sighed. “If from P and not-Q we can prove Q, then from P we can prove not-Q implies Q. In classical logic, the Law of the Excluded Middle tells us that not-not-Q akin to Q is a tautology. By substituting and using Modus Ponens, we then have that from P we can deduce Q. Since from P we can deduce Q, we conclude that P implies Q holds true.”

“Wow. That’s impressive,” said the voice.

“It’s logical,” shrugged the physicist.

“Not everyone thinks logically. Some of us move by blind luck.”

“You mean random selection.”

“Eh, Potato, potAHto.”

“What did you say?” Sheldon whispered.

“I’m minding my P’s and Q’s, Dr. Cooper. Are you?”

Quickly the lanky man returned to the crag, dumped the sticks by the others and made his way to his starting point.

Now, more than ever, he needed to get across.

XxX

It didn’t seem to matter in which direction she started out as inevitably Penny returned to the bridge.

“I’m so sorry, Sheldon,” she said softly.

She turned and went back into the forest leaving a trail of muddy footprints in her wake.
“Pen-ny!”

Sheldon veered his head towards the sound of Penny’s mother’s voice. He thought it odd to be still hearing the woman when Penny had left the crag quite some time ago. Surely the Nebraskan would be home by—

“Pen-ny!”

An iciness came to his soul as he thought about how long it had taken him to wander to the crag. If it took Penny only half as long she could still be out there for years. ‘If she ever emerges…’

“Pen-ny!”

With pursed lips and resolve in his step Sheldon marched to the lip of the crevasse and stepped back twenty one paces before marking a line.

“What are you doing?” the Man said in a panic.

“It should be obvious.” Sheldon did a few squats to limber up even though his body didn’t require stretching.

“But you’re still three feet short. You won’t make it.”

“I have no choice. Penny’s lost.”

The Man narrowed his eyes. “How do you know that?”

“Her mother’s calling.”

“Penny’s on her way. Who knows how long it takes to get home?”

“Not this long.”

The Man began to pace. “You’ll fall for eternity, you know.”

“She came here because of me. I won’t leave her alone.” Sheldon raised an eyebrow. “How do you know the crag’s bottomless?”

“I didn’t—until now.”

“You really ought to get that memory of yours checked,” the physicist snorted as he placed his foot at the starting line. He regarded the stricken man with affection. “I want to thank you for your companionship. I would have gone mad without you.” He chuckled slightly. “Although you’re still a sucky guide.”

The Man smiled sadly. “It was my pleasure.”

Sheldon closed his eyes and took a series of deep breaths, his mind imagining his approach repeatedly.

He opened his eyes, narrowed them to his path and started off. Stride after stride marked the dirt as he shifted position in anticipation of his liftoff. The edge neared and he gave it every thing he had.

Sheldon yelled as he knew almost from takeoff that he was going to fall short. Yes, there was fear
but mostly it was anger: he failed Penny and that was unacceptable. 'I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sor—'

He face-planted on something solid, stunning him. It took a moment for Sheldon to orient himself until he realized with a start that he was lying on some sort of invisible platform over the roiling redness below. Quickly he got to his feet and scrambled up the five feet he had fallen until he was on the other side of the crag. Wide-eyed and heart pounding he regarded the Man with shock.

“I didn’t make it,” Sheldon gasped. The Man smiled.

“The point is you tried, Dr. Cooper.”

Eyes met and then Sheldon turned and sprinted off towards the forest.

The Man watched him go with a look of satisfaction on his face.

“Penny!” Sheldon called as he entered the woods. He scanned the area for any sign of her but found nothing. As her mother’s voice seemed to come from the right he began swiftly in that direction, continuing to shout Penny’s name. There was no sound, no echo. The only hope he had was that they’d hear each other if they passed in close proximity. He couldn’t even imagine being so close to her and yet not hearing her—His feet made a sucking sound in the mud.

Sheldon stopped and took a breath.

“I *will* find her and then we’ll go home,” he said evenly. He took another step and the ground was solid.

Again he quickened his pace although this time there was less of a sense of desperation as there was determination to find his friend. His mind immediately rejected the word. He was friends with Rajesh and Howard. Girlfriend? Normally such a designation came as a result of some kind of courtship. Sheldon thought about the relationships he knew and compared them to his situation: they hadn’t held hands in movie theaters nor had coitus after a night of drinking and movies. All Penny and he had done was walk and talk about anyone and everything. Memories. Dreams. Reflections and laughter.

His hand slipped into his pocket to ensure that his—that their—rock was still there and took comfort in its cool surface between his fingers. He had no idea what to call what he had with Penny and realized with a start that, really, he never did. Beyond the scowls and pranks and sarcasm and laughter there was something between them that defied description. He didn’t see it but, like dark matter, that didn’t mean it wasn’t there secretly shaping him into what he ultimately became.

To his left he caught sight of something before it darted.

“Penny!” Sheldon cried and took off in hot pursuit. After two hundred yards he pulled up.

“Obviously if this was Penny she would have stopped,” he said aloud.

“Nothing gets by you, huh?” said an annoyingly familiar voice. Sheldon turned to glare at the bespectacled homunculus.

“Well, well. Hello Leonard or something resembling him.”

“I find your lack of faith disturbing,” Leonard smirked. Sheldon rolled his eyes and began walking in his original direction.

“Are you here to hinder me, help me or recite Star Wars dialogue?” he tutted.
“Why would I hinder you? You’re my best friend.”

“Correction: you were my best friend.”

“You know that I—borrowed some of your work,” Leonard said sheepishly.

“’Borrowed’. Good Lord.” Sheldon stopped in his tracks and turned to the physicist. “Leonard you stole my work and proclaimed it as your own. If Penny and Raj hadn’t found my flash drive you’d have gotten away with it. As it was you had a decade’s worth of undeserved accolades.” He cocked his head. “The only thing I don’t understand is why you did it.”

Leonard shrugged. “I didn’t mean to. It just sort of—happened. I was working with protons and came up with an idea that I later found on your laptop so really we both came up with it, just at different times.”

Sheldon folded his arms across his chest. “I came up with the original idea and you came up with it later. This isn’t some namby-pamby game where we all get ribbons for participating. Besides, even if I accept your premise we should have been coauthors on the paper.”

“You’re right.”

“Of course I’m right.” Sheldon thought for a moment. “As a question how much of my work did you appropriate?”

“A few things here and there.”

“Leonard….”

“Look, I never out and out took something of yours. I just borrowed bits and pieces.” Sheldon frowned. “Most of the time.”

The East Texan shook his head derisively. “You were an adequate experimental physicist.” Pause. “You were better than this. Goodbye Leonard.” Sheldon turned and walked away.

“You’re not going to forgive me?” Leonard gasped.

Silence.

“Fine, fine,” Leonard said. “Keep looking for Penny forever. I mean it’s only obvious to anyone with a working knowledge of the universe where she is.” Immediately Sheldon spun around.

“Where is she?” he growled.

“Afeter she sabotaged my career you’d expect help?” Leonard snorted as he strolled up to the physicist. “Thanks to her I lost my position at MIT.”

“It’s not my fault you were led astray by your own emotions.”

“And what do you call this?” Sheldon glanced at his ex-roommate but said nothing. “You complain that I ‘took’ your ideas and yet when you get the opportunity to do some kickass work with Einstein and company you ditch it all for, what, a waitress?” Silence. Leonard chuckled. “Maybe it’s for the best. It’s not like you have what it takes to be the best.” A twitch passed over Sheldon’s lips. “After all if Leslie corrected your equation and you couldn’t even see that a Lorentz invariant field theory approach solved your quantum loop corrections—”

“Irrelevant. Tell me where Penny is.”
“Admit that I’m the better physicist and I’ll tell you.” The lanky man glared. “Look I’ll make you a deal: I’ll tell you where Penny is and in exchange we’ll go back to the physics room where you can be my subordinate. You know, erase whiteboards or fetch markers.”

“Hardly. It took long enough getting over here, I’m sure as hell not going back; especially since you said that you’d tell me where Penny is but you said nothing about my being able to assist her in getting home.”

“Well then it looks as though we have a stalemate.”

“Unless we duel.”

“You’re not fast enough to keep up with me.”

“Chicken.”

Leonard laughed. “Your arrogance will keep her from you.” He took in Sheldon’s determined stare. “Very well. Subject: many world’s theory. Defend yourself. The splitting of worlds forward in time, but not backwards in time is time asymmetric and incompatible with the time symmetric nature of Schrodinger’s equation or CPT invariance in general.”

“That’s because the splitting is time asymmetric,” shrugged the lanky man. “This observed temporal asymmetry is due to the boundary conditions imposed by the Big Bang. As I’m sure you’re aware such a constraint doesn’t apply here as we exist in a state of uncertainty.”

Leonard raised an eyebrow. “So you’re saying we’re in another universe? Occam’s razor rules against a plethora of unobservable universes.”

“Occam’s razor actually is a constraint on the complexity of physical theory not the number of universes. Many worlds interpretation is a simpler theory since it has fewer postulates,” countered Sheldon. “For instance, the quantum suicide machine under the Copenhagen interpretation would have me dead because the wavefunction would have collapsed the moment my physical body expired thereby providing a zero percent chance of survival. But, if the many worlds interpretation is true, a superposition of the live me necessarily exists no matter how many times I use the machine no matter how improbable the outcome. As I exist this is obviously the case.”

“But you *are* dead.”

“Occam’s razor. Cogito ergo sum.”

“Nonsense,” scoffed Leonard. “The quantum suicide machine experiment attempts to isolate all possible outcomes for the duration of the experiment. Therefore it’s only within the confines of such an abstract quantum scenario that an observer finds they defy all odds.”

Sheldon snorted. “Time and space have no meaning here. I’ve ascribed meaning calling out months and years through steps or estimated seconds by counting aloud. This is an abstract quantum scenario. Everything here comes from me.”

“Even Penny?”

Sheldon shrugged. “Irrelevant.”

“You think risking death chasing after someone who might not even exist is irrelevant?” snorted Leonard.
“I wouldn’t be who I am now without her,” Sheldon explained. “Ego sum illa est. Quae ergo ego sum: I am therefore she is. She is therefore I am.”

The short man scowled. “That’s nonsense.”

“No, a paradox.”

“A logical fallacy. You have no proof.”

“I have faith. That’s all I need to know.”

The two men stared at each other.

“It was always you wasn’t it?” Leonard said bitterly. “Penny wasn’t interested in me. She wanted you only you didn’t even dream of having her because she’s too stupid to—”

One second Leonard was standing and the next he was flat on his ass thanks to a well-placed fist.

“You stole my work because I wasn’t there to defend myself. I’m making it abundantly clear that I’m here now and won’t tolerate further interference with what’s mine,” Sheldon said darkly.

Leonard rubbed his jaw as he scrambled to his feet.

“What’s ‘yours’? Penny isn’t property, Sheldon.”

“No she isn’t. She’s my mate.” The East Texan’s blue eyes were steadfast.

“Look for her near the bridge,” Leonard said with a pout before stomping off.

“What’s the bridge?” Sheldon called.

“Where you’d expect one, dumbass,” was the short man’s answer even as he dissipated into black smoke.

Sheldon shot out a glare before he continued on his way.

“There better not be another divide or I’m going to complain,” he muttered. He raised and flexed his right hand. It felt tingly. “It’s a good thing my body’s sufficiently tough here because if this occurred when I was alive I most definitely would have broken my hand.” Sheldon smirked. “I should have Penny show me how to throw a proper punch.”

XxX

Penny stopped in her tracks and flopped to her knees. In front of her was a small patch of dead Forget-Me-Nots.

She put her hands to her face and wept.

XxX

“This is taking too long,” Sheldon growled. Of course he knew that this was all relative as in reality there was no time. Nevertheless the amount of distance he had covered was immense and he had found no sign of a bridge much less Penny. He recalled his view from the mountaintop but it didn’t help beyond the crag. If things worked like they did at the mirrors then the landscape on Penny’s side could be identical. Perhaps this bridge was to the left of the mountain which would mean the right here and so—
He stopped moving in order to orient himself as he thought he could hear the sounds of running water.

“Now to find me a bridge.” Sheldon hurried through the trees until he came to the banks of a river. Grimly he noted that the divide was similar to the crag in distance. “Well at least things are consistent.” Out of curiosity he dipped his fingers in the water; the liquid felt cool to the touch but when he brought his fingers to his face they were dry.

All things being equal he decided to travel to the left. He noted the stillness of the river’s surface but could see the plants whipped about under the surface by a powerful undercurrent. Occasionally he caught sight of large shadowy somethings moving in amongst the water plants. Whatever they were Sheldon had decided that he didn’t want to meet them.

He walked until the last time he stopped seemed a distant memory. It was as he was deciding whether to double back to the right that he spotted what looked like a curved bridge in the distance arced across the river. As he approached he scanned both sides for any sign of Penny but it appeared as though no one was there.

“Penny?” he called.

Silence.

To his left was a path that led back into the forest. A flash of yellow and white on the ground caught his eye and he walked over to find several wilted coreopsis and daisies. A little smile came to his face as he remembered the all-nighter he pulled making a thousand Penny Blossoms. He turned and stepped onto the bridge.

At the halfway point he stopped.

Sheldon returned to the flowers before peering deeper into the forest.

“Penny?” He walked tentatively along the path as he didn’t want to lose the direction to the bridge should the path suddenly end.

Ahead of him the path looked like dried mud. Sheldon’s heart lifted as trapped in its hardness were flip-flop imprints but his joy quickly turned to confusion as he noted that Penny had passed over this point several times heading towards and away from the bridge. As he continued following her tracks a horror came to him as the tracks sunk deeper and deeper into the mud.

“Penny!” he shouted and ran as fast as he could without losing sight of her prints. Abruptly the path ended and he was faced with literally hundred of choices as Penny’s tracks went in a multitude of directions. He focused only on the deeply set prints and quickly narrowed down his choices to two. Snapping off a twig he measured the depth of first one print then the other before concluding that the right one was deeper. Even if it didn’t lead to Penny he had to rule it out first as it demonstrated a more intense despair than the others.

Through the trees he dashed calling her name. After a couple of thousand steps he noted that her route had begun to cross itself and this pattern continued the further he went.

“Penny!” he shouted. He heard a sob ahead and ran for all he was worth.

“Oh Lord, Penny,” he hissed as he came to a muddy bog with Penny in its midst. “Penny!”

“Sheldon!” she sobbed. She tried to reach out but she was immersed in the mud up to her shoulders.
“I’ll be right there!” Carefully Sheldon made his way towards her; the ground was gushy but held firm.

“I’m stuck!” She began to struggle until she gave up and sank deeper into the mud.

“You have to calm down,” he said as evenly as he could. “You’ll be out of there in a moment.”
He came as close as he could and knelt to one knee.

“Grab my hand,” he said as he reached out.

“I can’t,” Penny gasped.

Sheldon made to stick his hand into the mud but instead of sinking in he felt only a hard surface.

“No,” he whispered and began to claw desperately at the ground. Penny could hear his panic and she began to struggle. The physicist slid towards her and they both realized that he was sinking.

“Oh no,” he spat and sat back on his butt. “Penny, give me your hand.”

“I can’t. Sheldon I’m sorry—”

“Don’t be sorry, just do it,” he growled. “You’re the Penny who rebuilt the tractor and impressed at the junior rodeo and kicked Zarnecki in the testicles. You stood up for me and to me and took charge of your life so like hell you’re going to let a little mud get in the way.”

Penny gritted her teeth as she strained to move her arm.

“Come on, Penelope.” He held out his hand and slowly but surely mud-covered fingers emerged from the ground. “I can’t help you. You have to want this.”

Suddenly the mud stretched and her hand broke free; immediately Sheldon popped up to one knee and grabbed a hold. With a growl that was part sob and part strain Penny freed her other hand. Sheldon braced himself as she pulled against him even as she kicked herself upwards and slowly but surely she rose from the filth. He leaned forward and her arms wrapped around his neck and as he pulled she emerged and they fell back in a heap.

They were both out of breath and then Penny began to sob even harder than before as she crushed Sheldon in a hug. He wrapped his arms around her and gently whispered his “there there” over and over.

After her crying subsided they sat up.

“You’re here,” she said softly as she placed a hand on Sheldon’s cheek.

“I’m here,” he agreed and with that Penny leaned in and pressed a lingering kiss.

“Why did you do that?” a stunned Sheldon said.

“Just shut it and kiss me,” she grinned.

He gave a twitchy smile and did just that.

xTBBTx

Wikipedia: Many Worlds Interpretation; Quantum Decoherence; Quantum Suicide and
Immortality; Multiverse

Stackexchange: Logic-Proof by Contradiction, Circular Reasoning?
Penny squeezed Sheldon’s hand as they walked.

“I can’t believe you jumped,” she said tersely.

“Given my choices it was the only available option.”

“Bull. You could have gone back.”

“I’ll amend my statement: it was the only suitable option.” Penny growled and now it was Sheldon’s turn to squeeze her hand. “What’s done is done. There’s no point in fretting over something that’s in the past.”

“You’re right. We make choices and have to live with them,” she said cryptically and with a tinge of sadness.

“What’s wrong?” he asked softly.

She looked to him and smiled lovingly. “Just feeling sorry for myself.” She shook their joined hands lightly. “Let’s get you home.”

They came up to the edge of a familiar path and slowly they walked as the sounds of rushing water increased. As they emerged from amongst the trees to the bridge Penny felt her breath quicken. Now that she had him she didn’t want to let Sheldon go.

And yet that was exactly what she had to do.

Penny stopped and took his other hand in hers.

“I love you, you know,” she said. They kissed.

“I hope we don’t have to reaffirm our commitment every mile and a half or else it’ll be several lifetimes before we get home,” he smirked.

For her part Penny said nothing and they commenced to crossing the bridge.

“Odd,” said Sheldon as they came to a pile of leather clothing on the bridge. “It looks like light armor.” He gazed upon the water. “These aren’t exactly the waters I’d choose to swim.”

They leaned over the railing and Penny braced herself for the sight of Penelope in the water. She cringed at the woman’s staring eyes beneath the waters.

“What?” asked Sheldon. Penny pointed to the body and he stared. “It’s just your reflection,” he said after a moment.
“You really don’t see her?”

“See who?” Now he was confused. “Who do you see in—”

“Never mind.”

They continued walking to the midpoint of the bridge when Penny stopped. A tremor came to her lip as she realized that she could go no further but she clamped down and did her best to keep her voice steady.

“Hey, could you go on for a sec? I need a moment,” she said.

“Alright.” Sheldon turned and strolled to the end of the bridge. “Actually the architecture of this bridge reminds me of those found in Japanese gardens during the Heian period. In fact at Byodo-in garden in Kyoto, a wooden bridge connects the Phoenix pavilion with a small island of stones representing the Mount Penglai or Mount Howai, the island home of the Eight Immortals of Daoist teachings.” On the ground he noticed Penny’s shoeprints leading from and returning to the bridge. “They say that the bridge symbolizes the path to paradise and immortality.” He looked ahead down the path. “Where does this lead?”

Silence.

“Penny?” he turned and saw her still standing at the midpoint of the bridge.

“Go home, Sheldon,” she said sadly.

Immediately his stomach dropped. Something was dreadfully wrong.

“Penny, what’s going on?”

She sighed deeply. “I fucked up. I thought you were going to kill yourself back there so I made a deal.”

“What deal?” Sheldon frowned. “With whom?”

“With me, Dr. Cooper,” said Ramona as she came out from the trees to stand in front of the bridge.

Sheldon made to step around her but she blocked his way.

“Penny, come on,” he pleaded.

“She can’t go past midpoint,” Ramona explained.

“What was the deal?” the lanky man growled as he glared at her.

“I’d let her pass and in exchange she gave me the only thing she had to give—herself.”

Sheldon made to get past the grad student but she was immovable save when she wanted to block his progress.

“What can I do to free her?” he asked at last.

“I’m not sure.” Here Ramona smiled sweetly. “Do you have something to give me?”

“No!” Penny cried. She tried desperately to move forward but found she couldn’t. That just left her with one other option…. 
Penny scrambled to the side and popped over the railing into the water.

“Penny!” Sheldon shouted, horrified. Again he made to get by Ramona but she kept him at bay. “Out of the way!”

“Why should I move? You never gave me credit for assisting you with your resolution of the black hole information paradox.”

“Fine! I apologize!”

“How sorry are you?” she teased.

Sheldon didn’t have time for this. He stepped forward and planted a kiss on Ramona’s lips before shoving aside the dazed student even as she dissipated into a black mist and rushed to where Penny had jumped. Without a second thought he vaulted over the side into the chilly water and immediately felt himself being dragged by a powerful undercurrent.

This was not the time to realize he couldn’t swim.

Several hundred meters down the river Penny struggled to the surface. Gasping she did her best to swim to shore but the current was strong and swirling. Just as she thought all was lost a hand grabbed her by the wrist and dragged her out of the water. As she recovered she focused on the familiar blue eyes of her leather-armor clad savior.

“Sheldor?” she croaked.

“You’re not Penelope,” he said with an air of confusion.

Penny gasped as she sat up, suddenly recalling a splashing sound not long after she jumped into the water. “Oh my God Sheldon’s in there! Sheldor, they’re both in there!”

The warrior set his jaw and waded into the water before diving under the surface.

All was still.

Just as Penny decided to go back into the water Sheldor and Sheldon came to the surface. She jumped in and grabbed the physicist by the shirt and hauled him to the bank while the warrior took a breath and went back under.

Sheldon coughed up some water and groaned.

“You whackadoodle,” Penny laugh-sobbed. “You can’t swim.” He rolled over onto his back.

“I did remarkably well on my living room floor,” he gasped. Penny placed a hand on his brow and swept back his hair even though it was already dry. “You make any more deals while you were away?”

“Nope.”

“Good.” Pause. “You make this hero stuff seem so easy.”

“It’s a Nebraska thing.”

“Noted.”

Sheldon closed his eyes and breathed as Penny looked out over the still water.
“Thank you Sheldor,” she whispered.

XxX

“Helium,” said Sheldon as Penny and he walked along the path.

“Mercury,” she replied.

“Ytterbium.”

“Molly—thingie.”

“Molybdenum.”

“Yeah, that.”

“Alright. Magnesium.”

“Manganese.”

“Europium.”

Penny bit her lip.

“There’s one more ‘M’ word and you win the game,” he prompted.

“Can I call a friend?” she said hopefully. Sheldon rolled his eyes.

“If you’re stumped we can go over the elements again.”

“Or we can replay using the name of rock bands,” she replied sweetly.

“You’re exploiting a weakness,” he chided.

“No, I’m expanding your knowledge base.”

“Potato, PotAHto,” Sheldon mumbled causing Penny to elbow him lightly in the side.

“Let’s play hide-and-seek,” she said brightly.

“I’ve had enough ‘hide-and-seek’ to last me several lifetimes.”

“How about we keep it simple?”

“No leaving the path.”

Penny smirked. “Even Waldo would have a hard time trying to hide.”

“No leaving the path or else I’m not playing,” Sheldon sniffed.

“Okay, fine. You’re ‘it’ and I’ll hide. Give me a minute—and don’t peek!” She kissed him on the cheek and sprinted off.

Sheldon tapped off sixty seconds with his foot before proceeding after her. The path twisted and turned as if trying its best to conceal Penny.

“You better stop running at some point!” he shouted. The only way she could keep herself hidden
was by staying well ahead of him, well, that’s if she stuck to the path. Which she promised to do.

Too bad the path made no such commitment as it ended abruptly around a corner.

“Game’s over, Penny,” he called.

Nothing.

He began cursing himself for even thinking of playing such a stupid game when he spotted part of a flip-flop behind a tree.

“You could have answered, y’know,” he twanged in relief as he headed over. There was no Nebraskan—only a lone flip-flop nestled against the trunk. “Ha, ha,” he grumbled as he picked it up. He scoured ahead until he caught what he was looking for and padded over to pick up the second flip-flop.

“Necessity is the mother of invention.” Sheldon spotted a baby blue cloth hanging ahead in the branches. With a smirk he followed and took up the t-shirt. “There’s only so long you can do this,” he said as he folded the apparel.

He found his breathing had quickened by the time he found her shorts in another tree. Remembering when he brought her to the hospital he realized that Penny was more likely than not pantyless.

As there was only one thing to look for he kept his eyes peeled for a bra and sure enough found it dangling like a white flag.

“Unless you’ve more apparel that I’m unaware of”—he unhooked the bra from the branch—“this should be the end of this escapade of yours.”

He noted a little clearing ahead and proceeded to it, only stopping when his eyes took in a familiar form standing before him in all her naked glory.

“You found me,” Penny purred as she waited with arms open wide for Sheldon to step within.

“You forgot a few things on the way,” he replied with a twitchy smile.

“Well, let’s just put them aside for a few minutes.” She took her clothes and flip-flops and set them on the ground before taking Sheldon’s hands. “I’ve got another game I want to show you.”

“I already know how to play Klingon Boggle,” he teased before their mouths joined. Lips smacked and Penny leaned into him, their hips rubbing.

“Too many clothes,” she giggled and reached for his belt.

“Penny, we can’t engage in coitus,” he countered. “Our bodies don’t produce any fluid capable of lubrication.”

“And?”

“From my understanding intercourse would be extremely painful.”

Penny chuckled. “That’s if we stick to your ‘coitus’. Fortunately I know a thing or two about sex.”

“The words are synonymous,” he drawled.
“Ah, Little Grasshopper,” she chuckled as she went to one knee and quickly unlaced Sheldon’s shoes. “Lift your foot. Now the other one.” In a daze he complied until both shoes and socks were removed. As she stood up she couldn’t help but notice the tenting in his pants. “Ok Sheldon now we’re going to get rid of the rest.” Her hands went to his belt and were immediately covered by his own.

He felt flushed and admitted to himself that he didn’t know what the hell he was doing; all he knew was that he was aroused thanks to his next door neighbor—a friend, his best and so much more—and wanted desperately to know what other tricks she knew so he could adequately prepare for what was ahead.

He undid his belt and let his pants drop to the ground. Penny stuck her fingers in his Spider-Man underwear and did the same.

“Damn, Sheldon,” she said wide-eyed as she took in his engorged penis. Quickly she moved his hands. “Don’t you dare hide.” She stepped back to take in the whole deal: Sheldon with his fisted hands at his sides and head lowered and found she had to take a moment to catch her breath. Never in a million years did she think she’d ever see Sheldon naked much less look like this.

Positively scrumptious.

Penny moved to her lover and gently lifted his chin until their eyes met. “Don’t hide, Moonpie. You’re beautiful.” Sheldon flashed a twitchy smile.

“I told you my genitals were functional and aesthetically pleasing.”

“That you did,” she smirked. “So, have you ever been kissed before?”

“Besides my family members I’ve been kissed by Dr. Hofstadter and Amy Farrah Fowler twice—and you, of course.”

Penny nodded. “That’s ‘kiss’ or ‘kiss kiss’?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Sheldon said softly as Penny raised her lips to his.

“I mean,” she whispered. “Did you kiss?” She planted a slow kiss on his lips. “Or did you kiss kiss?” Sheldon felt the warmth of her breath as it teased his lips before her mouth covered his and began to move in such a way that curled his toes. Her lips tugged on his lower one and his mouth responded. There was no hesitation as his tongue licked her lips before sliding in between. Penny more than willingly made room and joined in the caress as she tasted everything Sheldon had to offer.

At last they parted to breathe. Sheldon opened his eyes to the most wondrous shade of green.

“Well?” Penny asked.

A twitchy smile came to his face. “If this is your two point oh on kissing I imagine your improvements to conventional coitus must be staggering.”

“It’s all a matter of physics,” she said with an impish smile as she placed a hand on his penis. “Which comes from the Greek word physika meaning the science of natural things....”

“Does it?” Sheldon breathed. Penny’s hand began to move. “Sweet Jesus....”

XxX
“God, when we get back I so want a bath,” moaned Penny.

Sheldon chuckled. “Now you sound like me.”

“Guess you rubbed off on me after a while.” She lifted their joined hands and kissed his as they walked.

“You didn’t have to stay with me.”

“I wasn’t going to leave you there by yourself, Sheldon.”

He squeezed her hand. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Penny swung their arms. “So when you said you loved me, did you mean love me, love me or just love me?”

“Penny, I’ve been intimate with you,” Sheldon tutted. “I’ve never been this intimate with anyone before.”

“I wish you could have tried it when we were alive. It’s a whole lot messier but—wow!”

Sheldon snorted. “I hardly think ‘sex’ in any capacity could interest me for long.”

“But I thought you liked being intimate?”

“While this exercise was—intriguing—it doesn’t compare to our conversations at the crag.”

Penny nodded as she thought back to all the years they’d been together. How many things they’d talked about from dreams to science to what actors would make good Klingons or Vulcans. There were silences, of course, partly from running out of things to say here and there and partly because they’d managed to come to that point where silence was comfortable.

“Sheldon, when we’re back,” Penny began. “You know, with everyone. You don’t have to stay with me.” He stared incredulously at her. “I mean I realize I’m not the most stimulating person to talk with and Amy and Raj will be there and—”

“Amy,” he said thoughtfully.

“Yeah.”

Sheldon squeezed Penny’s hand. “I missed Amy even when I was alive. There was so much pressure to change and I was changing but it wasn’t fast enough for her. More importantly who I was changing into wasn’t me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’ve been misunderstood my whole life.” He regarded her. “I expected to be alone.”


To Penny’s surprise Sheldon raised her hand and gave it a kiss. “Obviously I require a near infinite amount of patience. You’ve provided that.”

The Nebraskan laughed. “Oh believe me, I’m not that patient. There were times I was about ready to jump over and strangle you.”
“Baser emotions,” he tsked. “You need to take the high road.”

“Oh?”

“For instance, when you went into your litany as to how reality tv in the subsequent years since my demise had vastly improved I spent my time working out spin gravity.”

“You tuned me out?” she gasped.

“Penny, I’ve an IQ of one hundred and eighty seven. My ability to—”

“Get your ass in trouble is absolutely astounding,” she growled teasingly.

He cocked his head. “Well, that’s not what I was going to say but I suppose it’s now moot.”

“You better believe it’s—”

The distinct sound of metal repeatedly hitting metal came from the left side of the path. Immediately Sheldon pulled Penny towards him even as she stepped in front of the physicist.

Laughter and the sounds of bodies crashing through the trees came nearer until Penny and Sheldon saw Penelope spring across the path and turn with sword raised to face an approaching Sheldor.

“Nice try,” the Queen chuckled as swords came together. “Now if I were lame and one-eyed then maybe you’d stand a chance.”

“If you were lame chances are you wouldn’t be standing at all,” the warrior countered as he swung low.

In response Penelope jumped onto his blade, forcing it to the ground.

“Literalist!” she shouted gleefully and darted into the forest.

Sheldor picked up his sword and went after her with a grin.

Sheldon was stunned.

“He looks like me,” he said.

“Well, if you’d actually gotten some sun and worked out a bit,” Penny teased, garnering a glare. “You know Queen P’s gonna kick Sheldor’s butt, huh?” Sheldon snorted.

“Hardly. Sheldor the Conqueror is a legend in Cimmeria.”

“Oh really?” Penny went to a tree and broke off a branch. “En garde!”

“‘En garde’? From a barbarian queen? Really, Penny.”

“Just speaking your language. You know, the dainty part of the barbarian kingdom.”

“Your ken can kiss my Barbie,” Sheldon growled as he grabbed the stick out of Penny’s hand.

The Nebraskan squealed with laughter as she turned and sprinted several feet down the path before breaking off another branch.

“Today is a good day to kick your butt!” she said loudly. “If you can catch me first!”
She raced off, laughing, and Sheldon took in every ounce of her being before launching himself in pursuit.

XxX

“Are you planning to do this for the foreseeable future?” Sheldon tsked as his companion walked by his side albeit on her hands.

“Just until I get tired of it.”

“Wonderful,” replied the physicist with a roll of the eyes.

“You know what’s kinda funny? My legs don’t move while I’m doing this.”

“You’re maintaining your center of balance.”

“But how come my arms move when I walk?”

“The swinging of arms when we walk is instinctive and co-ordinates our arms to move out of the way of our hips which sway slightly as we walk. The hips sway to shift our weight against the back and forth movement of our legs. This in turn keeps our centre of gravity low and puts less pressure on our spine.”

“Ah.” Penny let herself fall forward and Sheldon placed a hand under her upper back to right her.

“Welcome back,” he said and lightly kissed her lips.

“Look at you,” Penny grinned. “Since when did you get all kissy kissy?”

“I’ve had a long time to reorganize my priorities.” A smirk came to his face. “Besides, as far as I can tell there are no germs here.”

“Just girl cooties.”

“Psh.”

“Say,” Penny wrapped her arms around his waist. “Since you’re over the germs you still owe me.”

“Owe you what?”

“A dance.” Penny stepped back and gave a slight curtsy. “Dr. Sheldon Cooper will you do me the honor of dancing with me?”

“I’m accustomed to the man asking the lady unless you’re invoking the Sadie Hawkins protocol,” chuckled Sheldon as the pair came together.

Penny winked. “I’m used to grinding my pelvis against my partner’s so we’re both stepping outside the box.”

Sheldon closed his eyes and drew in the apple scent of Penny’s hair as she snuggled against his chest and slowly they danced to a song that never had the chance to play and yet their hearts intrinsically knew.

“You were right,” Penny murmured.

“Of course,” replied Sheldon. His mate leaned back and stuck out her tongue.
“Smartiboots.”

“You were saying?”

“When you came over to ask me out on a date and I talked about missing an opportunity with a guy and you said you were that guy.” She chuckled. “All I was thinking of was Leonard.”

“Fair’s fair,” the physicist shrugged. “I had Amy Farrah Fowler in mind.”

“Man we were dumb.”

“We weren’t ready,” Sheldon said seriously.

“I’m ready now.”

Blue eyes met green before lips kissed and the dance went on.

XxX

Sheldon sped along the path and Penny did her best to keep up.

“Come on Moonpie, spill it.”

“No.”

“Please?”

“No.”

“It’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“I don’t see why you need to know.”

“I don’t need to. I’m just curious.”

“Yes, well, that state didn’t fare too well for the cat.”

“You did do the nasty didn’t you?” Sheldon scowled but said nothing causing Penny to grin. “Oh my God you did!”

“It was a perfectly natural response,” he huffed.

“Of course it is: you see me doing it with Leonard or Raj and I’m sure the ol’ shaft got a workout.”

“What makes you think it was one of them?”

Penny shrugged. “Well I was with them for quite a while so I just assumed.” She regarded him. “So who was it?”

Now it was Sheldon’s turn to shrug. “Not important.”

“Like heck it isn’t. Tell me.” She wracked her brain thinking about all the boyfriends she’d had over the years. “Kurt?”

“Hardly.”

“Wait a minute,” she said slowly. “You said that the mirror only showed dreams with you in…”
“It seems as though someone had the 'hots' for me,” he said with an amused smile as Penny covered her face with her hands.

“I can't believe you watched,” she moaned.

“And all the while I was thinking you respected me for my intellect,” he teased. “Bazinga.”

Penny shook her head as she grabbed his hands, turned around and began pulling him.

“I had sex with a dead guy.”

“Technically you've had sex with a dead guy several times.”

“Yeah but these don't count 'cause I'm dead, too.”

“Semantics.”

A little smile crossed her face. “Actually you’re right because I was having sex with the man I love every time we did it.” Penny noted his strange look as he stared at something over her shoulder so she turned her head. “What?”

Ahead through the trees was a brown brick wall. Penny and Sheldon looked at each other before they ran towards it.

“It’s just like 2311 N. Los Robles Avenue,” Sheldon gasped as he ran his fingers across the bricks. “The coloration is identical.”

“Great,” Penny replied as she surveyed the blank wall. “Man, it’s got to be fifty feet tall.”

“It’s magnificent.”

“Sheldon, it’s just a wall.”

He shook his head. “It’s home.”

“But I came out a garden gate.” Penny regarded the structure. “How are we supposed to get in?”

“It’s home, Penny. There are no riddles or games.” Here he grinned. “All we do is knock.” Sheldon cleared his throat and raised his hand to the wall before he paused. “The only thing is there’s no one to answer the door.”

“Yeah, but it’s your apartment,” Penny said.

“Point.” Sheldon stared at the wall, his mind a whirr as he calculated where the door to the building was in relation to the stairs and then his own door at apartment 4A. Time was and yet wasn’t. Space was how he interpreted it.

He pressed a particular brick and a part of the wall opened.

Absolutely beaming, Sheldon turned and extended his hand to his lover, his companion and together they entered into an empty apartment 4A. Immediately Sheldon bee-lined to the couch and sat in his spot. A boyish grin came to his face as he snuggled further in the seat.

“Daddy’s home,” he cooed. Penny laughed.
“Man, you didn’t look this happy when you saw me at the crag.”

Sheldon raised an eyebrow as he lifted his right arm to accommodate Penny’s snuggle against him.

“I was beyond happy. As my mother would say, you were a ‘miracle’. Besides, my true spot is at Los Robles Avenue and while this is a satisfactory facsimile I realize it isn’t the same.”

“It’s the thought that counts,” Penny said with a smirk.

“Exactly. When I was alive my spot was the singular location in space around which revolved my entire universe. That’s no longer the case.”

“Oh? So where is it now?”

“At your side,” he said simply. “You are my point of consistency. From what you said about these doors I can see whomever I want whenever I want and I fully intend to utilize that ability.” Here he rubbed his thumb along her forearm. “But I’ll always return to you.”

Penny leaned over and they kissed.

“That’s good ‘cause believe me if I have to stalk your sexy ass again you’ll be sorry,” she mock-growled with a smile. A thought came to her and her lips turned wicked. “Actually, since we’re home I’ve got an idea how we can celebrate.” She slid her hand across his chest, making sure to rub over his nipple causing Sheldon to squirm.

“But you can’t be in my spot,” the physicist said with a twitchy smile. “You’ll be violating protocol.”

“I’ll show you protocol,” Penny cooed as lips met. Smacking sounds echoed in the apartment as they kissed and kissed heavily.

Penny leaned back and smiled even as Sheldon grinned.

“I want to take you home,” he said brightly.

“I thought we were home?”

“This is our home. I mean my home.”

Penny kissed him lightly and then released him.

“Lead away kimosabe.”

Sheldon and Penny got off the couch and made their way to the door. The physicist cleared his throat and raised his hand.

Knock Knock Knock “Meemaw and Pop-Pop.”

Knock Knock Knock “Meemaw and Pop-Pop.”

Knock Knock Knock “Meemaw and Pop-Pop.”

He turned the handle and opened the door to the smell of freshly baked snickerdoodles and Pop-Pop’s shout of joy.

xTBBTx
A/N: I realize that compared to the rest of the story their time spent together is relatively short but I hope you understand that I had to focus on Penny and Sheldon's rehabilitation from their canon portrayals as written in seasons 5-6 if the relationship had any realistic chance. In particular, Penny has taken an absolute beating as the divide between the group and her in terms of professional and personal advancement has grown to epic proportions. It bothers me that no one seems to acknowledge her slide much less attempts to assist her.

As for Sheldon, he needs growth but it should be an awareness of his treatment of others not the abandonment of 'geek stuff' and science. It's his passion for these subjects (along with his love of Meemaw and koalas) that allows Sheldon's redeeming qualities to shine through hence the need in my story for him to communicate with Penny through science.

When I started writing this I had no idea how it would turn out, if I was capable of capturing everything that occurred in my dream. I've done my best and so must be content. Thank you so much for giving the story a chance. *Lynn

Wikipedia: Japanese Garden

Funtrivia: Why do people’s arms swing when they move?

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