

**D.K. McCutchen**  
from *Jellyfish Dreaming*

*“This is the way the world ends ...”*  
— T.S. Eliot, “*The Hollow Men*”

***IN THE JELLYFISH TANK***  
*(First There Was Blue)*

The beginning is blue. Waves surge and pitch, sloshing, neither cold nor warm. There is no before, no anticipation of after. Now is blue. Blue is soft water, hard ice. The briefest surges of potential buzz past in a yellow blur and die away in the rhythmic rocking. A second of questioning, then loss of awareness, rise and submerge, cycle around. Be. Dream ... a lash of raw red pain brings consciousness, alongside the black possibility of Not. Soothing blue erases all; rise and fall, slosh and rock, be. Buzz. Pain. Awareness.... *Snap.*

...

*“What happened,  
what we think happened in distant memory,  
is built around a small collection of dominating images.”*  
— E.O. Wilson, Naturalist

***JACK***

They buy me things. Recycled plasti-weave T-shirts and jeans — *remember when jeans didn't crackle and pinch* — a softer pair of hand-woven flax pantaloons and a sarong. Someone salvaged a sealed container full of antique coats made of real milled cotton and is flogging them in the Marketplace. I wear my new/old coat with tails as sharp as a tern's wing — *extinct seabirds skimming long-ago waves.* The coat overhangs the crackly-new jeans and remaindered

## **D.K. McCutchen**

combat boots; in the gritty wind they make me sweat. But I don't care. I'm making memories. I imagine swooping out over the surf. In my fancy clothes, I feel like the Luck-in-the-Leftovers. The two well-dressed men who are paying for it all stop to help admire me in every surface that reflects.

There is just the one café left on the protected side of the boardwalk where folks with credits can sit out of the wind and watch rubbish swirling in the surf, The Trash Café. The adults order a lunch far richer than I am used to — algae patties with real goat cheese. After a diet of low-protein, dried jellyfish it is too rich. I feel sleepy and uncomfortably full — two big meals in two days.

I look up in time to see Joon making his way towards us up the littered boardwalk and my face flushes hot. Joon is wearing his usual shabby black-on-black and looks thin and dangerous. Hazel eyes are narrowed under the thick coils of his dreads and his hands are hidden in deep pockets. I scan for a knife, but Joon isn't stupid. He won't show arms in front of the Market Guard. Joon stops at the table and nods to me.

“Jae. Forget to check in?”

“Couldn't,” I say miserably, shifting to hide my new boots under the wobbly, recycled table. “Got nabbed, Joon. These'ns bailed me. We was just....” How can I explain my new finery and all this food?

“You a friend of Jack's?” the biggest man asks, his voice a deep rumble. “Won't you join us?”

Joon ignores him. “Time to go, J-boy.” I look away. I don't want to go anywhere with Joon in this mood.

## D.K. McCutchen

“Leo...” The thin man, Charlie, has the collar insignia identifying him as a University Doc. His long hair is pulled back in a severe ponytail that seems to twitch on its own. I can see Joon calculating whether he’s the one in charge, just as Charlie gives his companion a push and the bigger man stands, looming over Joon, dark eyes deep and impossible to read. I imagine Leo as a bear — but I have animal metaphors in my head that no one else gets. I also know Joon will just get meaner if challenged.

“*Jun*, is it?” Leo’s deep voice is soothing, “We’d like to talk to you too. We need to discuss a business transaction.”

“If it’s business, I might have a minute.” Joon seems uncomfortable. He *seems* to be backing down. *Wow. One up for the big guy.* But I notice Joon watching Leo closely and feel the first cramp of what might be jealousy, might be the goat cheese. Joon slides gracefully into one of the rickety chairs.

“And it’s *Joo-oon*,” he adds, nodding for Leo to punch up a meal. Like me, he doesn’t hold back when someone else pays. “Jae and Joon. We come as a set,” he smirks, but I know the anger is still there under the tight smile. It always is.

Leo picks up a sweating clay pitcher and fills our mugs with real filtered water, the clearest I’ve seen. It tastes delicious. It tastes like clean dirt.

Once Joon has food, Charlie starts. “We are paying Jack — Jae? — to help with our research. Perhaps you could help as well?” Big Leo clears his throat, but Charlie ignores him. He’s in lecture mode; I recognize it from up at the lab. I watch Joon’s face, waiting for the storm.

“Can I assume that you are also...” Charlie stops suddenly, wincing. “Ow. *Ah*. Perhaps I should tell you about our project.” Charlie glares at Leo, who grins, showing big white bear teeth.

## D.K. McCutchen

Charlie starts to talk about the rubbish in the water and the food, and how everyone's bodies are messed up, so there aren't many kids. He talks a lot. I've heard it before, so I watch Joon. Charlie finally gets to the point, about how he believes some of the most messed up *can* still have kids. Joon eats and maybe listens. When the food is gone, he pushes the tray away, leans back, and says, "*Ge*. So what you *hetchi* pervs want is to — what? Knock up my freaky boy Jae and create a race of *superherms*?"

I can't help giggling. I figure Joon is going to blow now. *Why doesn't he?*

"What I'm offering you," Charlie says sharply, "is hard credits for a six-month commitment with possibilities for longer — you *and* Jack — for our research on intersexuality and fertility."

Joon's mouth turns down. "What am I then?" he asks. "Some kinda control? Like, to compare him to, *neh*?"

"No," Charlie says. No one speaks. Joon stands, shoving back his chair so that it tips over and clatters to the floor. He glares at me and stalks away.

"But I never said anything!" I wail. *Jack is abandoned again*. "I never said!"

Charlie's eyes are hound-dog sad (*no more dogs, dogs-gone*). "You didn't. There are visual indicators ... sometimes."

I want to go — but where? Joon is beyond angry. I can't go there.

"Jack," Leo says, "are there others like you two?"

The words tip me into panic. With no destination in mind, I run. Again. It's what Jack does.

*Jack be nimble, Jack be quick, Jack had better run like ....*

...

Snap.

*Leap back Jack,*

*I haven't met them yet; the ones I will love.*

*The world is blue water,*

*Then safe green,*

*Later clotted by heavy snow; gold and desert-dry at the edges.*

*I'm drawn to this dry ending place.*

*To these memories.*

*To an earlier Marketplace,*

*Where a lesser me stands,*

*Barefoot on a polluted shore.*

*Hungry for more than food.*

Snap.

*(pain)*

*It's time ...*

...