

DIANE DE PISA

REBIRTH

ON

XARBO



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SAMPLE CHAPTER

1

NIGHT JOURNEY

WHEN THEY TOLD Adam he was dying, he was not surprised. For over a year, he'd felt it coming — and it was his own doing. Even earlier, since Althea went, he began to let himself die. Nothing gave him pleasure, and work was a futile exercise. He withdrew from his limbs and organs and they became inert, alienated from each other. His heart grew weary of supplying lethargic limbs with blood. His stomach refused to process food he didn't relish. His arteries hardened with apathy. His lungs deflated with shallow breathing.

It began as avoidance of pain, of keening to his loss. He shut out music and sunlight and the odors of grass — became blunt to all experience. Vaguely, at first, he fought to ward off this deadening of faculties, but every sensation was wired to pain. Each time he saw Althea's straw gardening hat, moldering now on a bench, the floppy brim anchored with her shears, he felt a pang of deprivation. So many memories, and desires, had to be forever relinquished. Thus, imperceptibly, he gave himself over to the process of dying.

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Psychosomatic self-annihilation tendency was treatable, but he refused therapy. His son Alther tried to persuade him to seek it, but they had never been close and the tokens of persuasion seemed half-hearted. Adam could not expect more from the offspring whom he'd never cherished. Besides, any gesture toward life seemed obscene with Althea dead. He reached a state, he imagined, like that of someone injected with those banned weapons that numbed nerves, making adversaries impervious to pain and incapable of defending themselves. He injected himself with the notion of death and watched without sympathy as his stomach labored in the toils of indigestion, his heart palpitated like a mouse squeezed in a fist, his calves and forearms atrophied.

His whole system was grinding to a halt; morbidity compression, the clinicians called it. Only at the final hour did he rally instinctively. Panic struck as death throes rippled through his organism. He tried to muster his dying faculties as one might careen through a building to warn tenants of a fire. But his organs were too inert to respond — except his heart, which flailed awhile, like a fish cast up on shore, its spasms sending rays of pain through his body. At last, he abandoned that quivering entity to the abyss.

At the final moment, he leapt clear and saw his body sprawled alone, wondering for a moment what Alther would do when he found it, haggard but still handsome, aged by stagnation. He was freed of the constricted lungs, the heavy legs, and felt no impulse to flog them into function again.

He felt giddy with the release. The spasms now became waves that gently bore him away and off. Concentric eddies expanded softly from the hard impingement of his death on the universal pool, and he was borne ever farther from that stone-sure event. He dissolved and merged with the subsiding impulses, soon losing all definition as he flowed into a place without landmarks. Was he going forward or backward? Was he upside down or right side up? He had the same sensation once while walking with Althea in a blizzard. It was euphoric then, an adventure into a magical space without dimensions, and now he used that memory to keep loneliness and fear at bay. Remembering the blizzard, he let himself drift, heedless of direction or destination. He was helpless and knew it. Let the rescuers find him, if rescuers there were in this place.

After an indeterminate time, he seemed to pick up a signal in the featureless vastness. Something as yet indefinable was demanding his attention. He felt certain it was not self-induced, but coming from an outside source. Suddenly he knew it was Althea. She was near him, he was sure, although she did not emit any sound or light or scent. He recognized her presence — a heartiness without heat, proud and intact and pure, like a burgundy iris, sharing her queenly confidence to bolster him. Even devoid of shape, he sensed that he was cupped to her and together they were going somewhere.

Then he realized they were not alone. Other presences were all about them, but Althea stood out by contrast. She was delicate yet strong, while many of them were crude or heavy or decrepit. Some proceeded fiercely and seemed to clang through the space around them; others flagged, weak, and he could imagine they were about to disintegrate; several were lost or going in circles and recurred at odd intervals with an air of dismay and delusion; a few were so self-contained that he could scarcely detect their nearness except for a faint electric buzz that directed them to some destination.

The crowd around the couple was thick; travelers hustled and jockeyed for position. Many apparently were attuned to a purpose that Adam had not yet discerned. Perhaps Althea could recognize it and would pull him through. It seemed all were in a black night sky vibrant with speeding bombers en route to their targets, he and Althea like frail kites among ponderous, purposeful sky ships. The two seemed to float so lightly that they eluded all interference, floated as Althea's hair used to, buoyant and brown and sleekly clean, cutting a swath through the summer air.

Suddenly Adam felt a pang of nostalgia for every summer sun that had ever risen. He wanted desperately to see once more, to touch his fingers to the reddish freckles on Althea's upper arms. He remembered how the flesh felt, at once firm and soft; and the twin rounds of her breasts in sundresses; and her perfume as she moved, a bit tart, the fragrance of wild herbs. He felt something like a sob shake his being, with terror almost, so strong was his yearning for sight and smell and touch in this breathless place. Suffocating nostalgia disrupted his connection with Althea, and he lost her.

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With her assuring nearness gone, this place without borders felt restricted and oppressive. The darkness became more opaque, murky as a smoke-filled street when a house is burning. He wanted to call her back but seemed to choke. And anyway, he had no voice, and she no ears. So he tried to lure her back with flattery: He thought of how beautiful she was and how much he needed and desired her. Although he did not know what for. What was there to be desired now — and what could she do for him in any way? Could she speak to comfort him? Shoot him her wise look to calm his doubts? No, none of this would she ever do again.

Adam was overwhelmed with a feeling of impotence such as he had never experienced. It was not like sexual impotence, when one has a desire but cannot fulfill it; nor like moral impotence, when one sees a wrong and lacks the courage to fight it; nor was it like intellectual impotence, when a problem looms too great to solve. Adam was familiar with all the earthly forms of impotence. But this was something different. He had lost not just one faculty, temporarily, but all faculties, perhaps forever.

His life had been a brew in a bowl and the bowl broke, letting the brew drain away, leaving no trace of him. The bowl had given him a shape that he called his own. But it was an illusion, an unreliable fiction. Now he was left without a form or vehicle for his energies and these were dissipating. Without a body, a voice, he could not even scream to Althea for help.

Still, he had something. He was thinking, wasn't he? He even had some compensatory faculties: He had felt Althea's presence without the aid of sight or touch. As he began to reason in this way and to spin a thread of optimism, he entertained a hunch that Althea pricked up her attention from an incalculable distance and was drawn to him.

As a fiber of strength built up in him, he sensed Althea more and more intimately, as a pulse that entered his own stream of thoughts and attuned them to hers. If he lost all and still had this, this sure and clear rhythm deep where his heart should be, then he need never fear, never regret the summer sun and shining hair. For didn't sun and hair and freckled arms, and the numerous warm, lovely things of the world — didn't they all conspire to give him just this: the assurance that all was well, that he was immersed in the flow of familiar elements? If the feeling was there without the

stimulants, why should he feel any loss? He began to settle down, lulled and complacent.

But now Althea was gone again, leaving no clues to her whereabouts. He had leaned on memories as a prop and this support gave way. He began to doubt that she had ever joined him. Perhaps he had fantasized the encounters and separations. Perhaps he was alone after all.

But if he was there — wherever, whatever this place might be — why couldn't she be there too? He decided to experiment. He had called her back once; let him try again. Instead of compliments, he tried conjuration as he understood it: through identification with the desired object. He imagined he was Althea — and was shocked at the immediacy of results. Without a body of his own to impede the process, he configured Althea's form. He could feel her long brown fingers at the ends of his arms: slim, strong woman's arms with fleshy freckled upper parts, brushed by a soft broom of hair. He could feel his neck like a stem, sleek, with scarcely a bump of a voice box. He was amazed at the refinement and delicacy of the female organism, the tiny ankles, the beardless face and molded lips. He could feel Althea's features and limbs emanating from the hub of his will. But he knew it was not Althea. And she was not attracted to this ethereal imagined form.

Thus Adam began to suspect that Althea did not much identify with her body, and probably never had. Twenty-two years of marriage, and all that time she had a detached, take-it-or-leave-it attitude toward her body, which he adored and worshipped and labored to please in so many ways! He wanted to laugh ironically, bitterly, but nothing came out. He just felt a dry little rasp, like the slip of a latch as it catches on a hasp, a small metallic gasp of cold knowledge without satisfaction.

Then he began to wonder what Althea did identify herself by, if not her body. It occurred to him that he was having an unexpected second chance now to learn what he should have long ago. What, in fact, he was being forced to discover by the most desperate need he had ever felt. She had waited for him in this dislocated location, yet he had lost her again. To lure her back, he must find her from the inside, learn what she identified herself with or as.

He tried to remember a characteristic expression or gesture of Althea's, but failed. Patches of memory, it seemed, had gone

blank. What if memory should fail him altogether? A patch at a time, snuffed out, leaving him in a void, perhaps unable to recollect even his name? And worst of all, unable to remember whom he loved, or why. Already, he fretted, love was wavering. Had he adored Althea's body only, and could recall nothing of her but the grossest details?

He was immersed in murk again, thicker now, like a fog that would blanket and enfold him until he dissolved, the last circuit of memory blinking out feebly. Panic clutched him where his throat should be. The fog seemed cold, as if it could condense and freeze and lock him in unyielding ice and no one would be able to hack him out. He felt a tightness where his jaw used to be, as if it were clenched. He had to save himself from locking into catatonic frozen hell. He made a deliberate effort to relax. He let himself be weak and drifted, formless as fog itself.

He cast about for some flotsam to cling to — something familiar and comforting and exalting. "Glory be to God for dappled things," he quoted an ancient poet, and repeated it as a rune against disaster while he kept the image of Althea's freckles before him. He floated on a tide of speckles, of lovely, sharp, contrasting disks and full moons and trout sequins: images that broke up the hideous homogeneous fog. And he felt a surge of gratitude to Althea for having had freckled arms.

It seemed now that Althea took pity on him, or his gratitude touched her. He could picture her eyes now, with flecks swimming in them, laughing at him. And again she was nested next to him and a feeling of lightness returned, and they were going somewhere.

Xzz ... he seemed to hear, and Althea gave her approval to the sound. It was like a buzz somewhere inside him, in his middle ear, vibrating its tiny bones. The voyagers around them echoed the syllable soundlessly, like bats agreeing on a destination by radar. Yes, that was it: Xzz was the destination. Althea prodded him to hurry, join them all in their rush to Xzz. Now it expanded, opened to Xzzaa. He scanned his memory for what it might mean but failed to recognize it. Was it a sound that belonged to any earthly language? An African Bush dialect, perhaps?

Althea almost slipped from him as he speculated. *She is impatient*, he thought. *She has no tolerance for academic questions.* He remembered with chagrin how he plied her with his intellectual

gymnastics, thinking to impress her, never noticing that he bored her. She tolerated him merely, from a deeper love that was not based on his cleverness but actually persisted despite it.

Even back then she had waited for him. And now, with these flashes of insight, he drew an answering warmth. It was unmistakable. Althea was there. Without look or touch, she yet responded, her deep-rooted goodwill flooding him with courage and hope.

Xarr ... the echo seemed to resonate through his whole being, as if he were sheet metal shaking in a thunderclap. Xarrrr-bo. Then quickly in succession, like pellets from a repeat launcher: Xarbo, Xarbo, Xarbo. Althea rejoiced, excited as never in life. Her joy induced a thrill or shudder as exquisite music used to produce in him. His hair should stand on end, he felt.

But what was this Xarbo that Althea and all the others streamed toward without wind or wake? As if he had accessed a universal data base, answers flooded him: Xarbo: prime goal of former Earth beings; super-conducting atmosphere. Completion guaranteed; everything happens fast there.

Completion, he thought. And the flow of information stopped. He had tried for Completion as all Ahims must. Tried too hard, all the guides told him — fixated on the idea that he had to please them, prove his ability, compete with the others. No amount of coaching could induce him to relinquish that extra bit of strain that kept him from entering the last lap. Althea had begun the last lap but hadn't finished it. She was like a jogger caught up in the joy and pride of her strength, glorying in her abilities, but not excelling them. Not trying hard enough, it seemed. No, maybe not following instructions precisely. Perhaps he respected the guides too much, she too little. Perhaps.

He lost Althea again as he petered out into speculations. *Keep your word close to your heart*, he thought, quoting some time-lost ancient philosopher. What did the heart want? Oh yes, Completion. And Xarbo guaranteed it.

But if Completion had been close enough to his desire, he would not have meandered into memories at this all-important juncture, where Completion was promised in a strange destination. In fact, on Earth he had been a dilettante, not seriously expecting to reach that high state that the ancients called illumination, enlightenment. Why

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had he tried so hard? All for show. To show Althea he was one of her type, a dedicated Ahim, to save face with the guides, to prove he was not a Technist despite his background. So he had been a hypocrite. And now he was not eager to reach Xarbo — if it was where everything happens fast. No; he had put on an appearance of haste, but it was all a shuffle to hide his inertia. He had really wanted only to stay at Althea's side, whatever the pretext, and have her approval, however unworthily.

He felt ashamed, and again marveled that she had stayed by him and waited for him. Here, the slightest feeling could not be masked. Nothing escaped unregistered or without a reaction. And he realized now that it had been so even in life, but there, one could be distracted, gaze at the freckles and the sun-combed hair and take a holiday from consequences. But every gesture and look, every word and — yes — every thought registered somewhere. Of this he felt sure, now that all the distractions of flesh and posture were gone. And yet the void proved so full of detail. He must be headed for a comeuppance. Why else did he have to remember his foibles and faking?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diane De Pisa's early publications include three articles on Black Elk Speaks, the topic of her doctoral dissertation directed by Scott Momaday at UC Berkeley, and twenty poems in several journals. In 2014-2021 the *Berkeley Times* carried two serialized and condensed works sequentially: a satirical novel titled *As Sour Grapes Ripen* and her text for photos of Berkeley in the sixties by her late husband titled "Telegraph and Beyond."

De Pisa's account of grief and recovery, *Love of Finished Years*, was published by Wipf and Stock in 2021. Her "Bird Tracks: A Pantoum" won a Poetry Society of America award for a surreal poem, and a short story, "Visions Etched in Ice," earned the grand prize at a Canadian festival.

Diane lives in Albany, California. You can find out more about Diane's works and world at her website, dianedepisa.com.

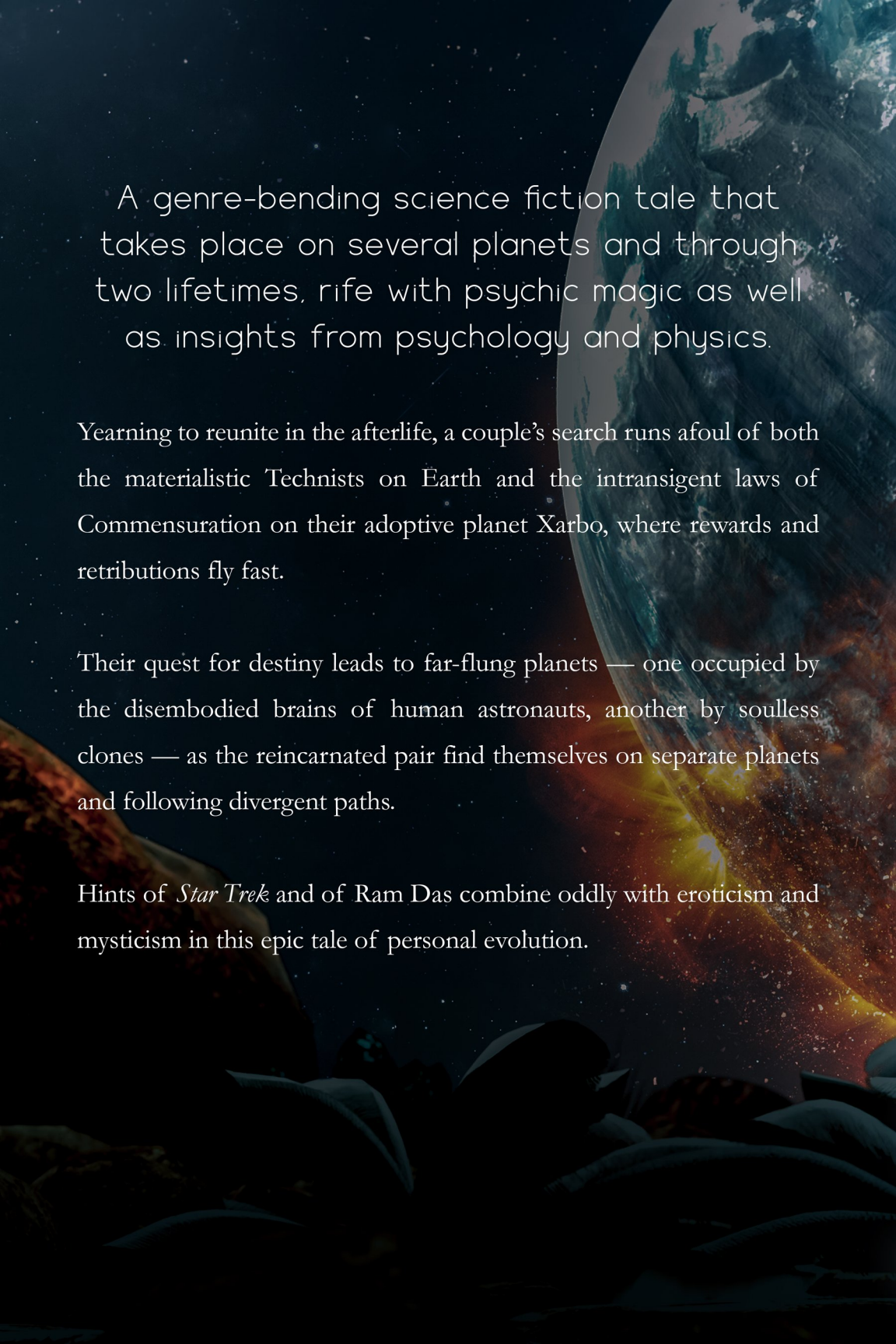
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A genre-bending science fiction tale that takes place on several planets and through two lifetimes, rife with psychic magic as well as insights from psychology and physics.



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A genre-bending science fiction tale that takes place on several planets and through two lifetimes, rife with psychic magic as well as insights from psychology and physics.

Yearning to reunite in the afterlife, a couple's search runs afoul of both the materialistic Technists on Earth and the intransigent laws of Commensuration on their adoptive planet Xarbo, where rewards and retributions fly fast.

Their quest for destiny leads to far-flung planets — one occupied by the disembodied brains of human astronauts, another by soulless clones — as the reincarnated pair find themselves on separate planets and following divergent paths.

Hints of *Star Trek* and of Ram Das combine oddly with eroticism and mysticism in this epic tale of personal evolution.