

*News from the Island of Excellence*

*By Stefani Nellen (originally published in Third Coast)*

Kelling had been afraid of seeing Monroe, but he found the sight a relief. Monroe now lived in his son Chip's former room, an attic space painted with sharks and jellyfish and a lone diver half-hidden behind a coral reef. He sat with his eyes half closed and murmured almost-words that still made the promise of intelligence.

Kelling visited every day. Without Monroe, he found it difficult to work at the department. The younger colleagues were gaunt and ageless and lived on rice crackers and ginger water. They were always chatting about quantum brains and organic computation, waiting for Kelling to slip up so they could claim his space, too. Kelling preferred to work in Monroe's presence. He talked about his ideas as if Monroe was listening, but deep down Kelling knew the truth. Without his partner-mind, he was lost.

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Monroe had told him during lunch. They had been sitting on their usual bench, picking at take-out noodles from the trucks, and Monroe had announced the diagnosis. Things had been strange for a while; there had been memory lapses and comments that didn't make sense, equations ending like abandoned bridges. But now it was definite. Students walked around them, younger than ever.

“Irreversible?” Kelling asked.

“Cognitive decline as a monotonous function of time.” Monroe tore open the utensil wrapper and let the knife and fork slide into his hand. “It's simple, really.”

“But you're fine now.”

“I write notes to myself. I need diagrams to understand my thoughts. That's not fine.”

“No.” Kelling's throat constricted, he couldn't imagine eating. “What about the work?”

*The work:* decades of collaboration, sore fingertips from writing on the blackboard, crazy conspiring smiles at three in the morning when they realized: *Yes, this checks out.* The silent agreement to spend the rest of the night at Kelling's place after a good night of *work*, as if they needed an excuse for sleeping together, the intellectual equivalent of too much to drink.

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Monroe and his family went to New England. *A specialist will see me*, Monroe had said, locking his office door, his expression ominous. *He writes. He wants to be the next Oliver Sacks. I'm doomed.* Kelling had forced a laugh, and he and Monroe had parted with a handshake. At first, Monroe sent Kelling brief notes - mostly attempts at mathematics, increasingly incomplete and generic, the isolated symbols made worse by unusual endearments popping up like misshapen fish through dull water: *How is my Other? For you, weird love.* Treatment turned into maintenance, and finally Monroe's son, Chip, wrote saying that Monroe no longer talked, and that his brain was about as useful as an old wasps' nest, but that he would make noises that sounded as if he were thinking deeply. *These murmurs*, Chip wrote, *make it a lot harder to take, especially for Mom.*

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Afternoon in the attic space was drawing to a close, and Kelling let his mind wander. Words formed in his mouth, words dictated by the dusty heat. Soon, he was talking about a new toothpaste sample. Salt toothpaste, tasting so strange he had almost spit it out. “The checkout girl gave it to me, you know? I didn't ask for it. Think it made me bleed...” Kelling tasted the salt again and felt the crunch between his molars, saw the red veins of spit floating in the water.

“Nonsense,” Monroe said. “Like yesterday.” He smiled. His eyes were open and alive.

“What about yesterday?” Kelling finally managed to whisper.

“Your idea...Almost complete sets.... It's nonsense. We need a continuity lemma.”

“Go on.”

“Induction,” Monroe said.

Kelling reached for his bag and dug out his notebook. “Go on.”

Monroe was murmuring. Kelling willed himself to make out the words. He willed his hand to write clearly. He kept his breath shallow in order not to disturb the attic dust and remind Monroe of the fact that he had paper for brain. But there came a point when Kelling couldn't suppress a yawn. The yawn, once it had started, became a groan that didn't end. When it was done, Monroe sat there with his eyes firmly closed.

The door creaked open again. Monroe's wife came in.

“Kelling,” she said. “I didn't know you were still here.”

“He talked, Charlotte,” Kelling said without looking up. “I wrote it all down.”

Charlotte knelt down next to Monroe's chair, and wrapped her arms around one of Monroe's legs. She was in her mid-forties now, small and slim, with dark hair and walnut-brown skin and the careless movements of a teenager. She shook her head, a caress against Monroe's knee. “Write what you want. You can have it. I have mine.”

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During the days that followed, Kelling waited for Monroe to speak again. And there were moments when it was hot, and the air was dead, and the headlamp of the painted diver shone through the paint, when Kelling thought he could hear a mumbled word, a laugh. He kept filling his notebook, hoping his notes made sense. But over the weeks, even these moments of *almost*

became rare. The sharks on the wall were grinning.

“Wake up,” Kelling said. “It’s getting late.” He thought he sounded like someone talking to a plant.

“Hello? Are you there?” Now he sounded like someone who has been blindfolded by his friends and is starting to realize they have abandoned him.

“Once more,” he whispered. “Please.” This was his real voice, finally, with a plea he had made before. But Monroe remained still, his eyeballs under his lids protruding like marbles.

Kelling walked down the stairs as fast as his knees let him. His heart was beating in his throat like small, angry fists. He half expected Monroe to call out after him, but there was no sound except his heartbeat, and, once it had died down, a soft chopping, like wood on felt. Kelling followed the sound to the kitchen, and found Chip Monroe cutting freshly peeled cucumbers.

“Mom wants to try a new recipe,” Chip said instead of a greeting. “I’m not sure about this one.”

Chip wasn't sure about many things. He had graduated from high school in spring and spent the summer working for *Meals on Wheels* and trying to figure out what was next. Whenever Kelling visited, Chip was busy cooking, painting the hallway or clearing out the basement. He didn't talk much. He ingested his father's decline in sad, measured bites.

Kelling had always felt that Chip liked him, and he had to admit the feeling was mutual. They had both been out of place in the busy Monroe household with its open dinner every Friday, the food caravans to and from the kitchen, the pagodas of snack plates growing everywhere. Kelling used to escape to the backyard with a beer and a bowl of peanuts, and think that among all of Monroe's satellites he was the one with the most lopsided orbit – until Chip

started to keep him company. As a boy, he had brought along books or model bridges; later he had brought his computer and a canister of water. Kelling would raise his bottle of beer and Chip his canister, and they'd share a look condemning the spectacle inside as unnecessary.

Chip said, "How's Dad?"

"He's o.k. The same as always."

"That's not o.k." Correcting Kelling's choice of words: A mannerism Chip had inherited from his father.

"No. I guess not."

Chip cleaned the knife on a towel and put it in a drawer. "I'm scared of growing old."

"It's all right. I don't mind it."

"I want to have that attitude when it's my turn." Chip swiped the peel strips into the trashcan. "Need a ride home?"

"I'll walk."

"You're sure?"

"I like to walk."

"You should learn how to drive. It's never too late."

"I'll walk. Take care."

Chip turned on the faucet. "You take care."

Once Kelling was outside, he found Charlotte was waiting, sitting on the porch swing, her feet bare and covered in soil. She wore jean shorts and one of Monroe's shirts rolled up and knotted around her waist. When she saw Kelling, she walked up to him until they faced each other. Her unlined face and the youthful pimple on her right cheek made him feel his heavy joints; he sweated in his tweed suit. Charlotte stiffened her jaws to hide the gum she was

chewing. When Monroe had first brought her to the department and introduced her like the one piece that had been missing in his life (“and, finally, this is Charlotte”), she had worn a sleeveless dress that showed off the snake tattoo on her right arm. The tattoo was still there, faded to blue.

“Did you have a nice visit?”

Since Kelling had told her that Monroe had been talking, Charlotte had inquired after their meetings with a sweet melody in her voice, as if indulging the fantasies of a confused senior citizen. Annoyed, Kelling had responded by mentioning that he and Monroe were developing *a proof*. He had suggested that he and Monroe were still communicating in spirit – that they were still connected, as they had always been. It wasn't exactly a lie. Kelling had been filling his notebook with *something*, even though he had a hard time remembering what it was. But it wasn't the truth, either, and every time he visited, Kelling resolved to keep quiet when Charlotte cornered him, until the melody in her voice annoyed him again and he added another gram of weight to his story.

“It's going pretty well,” Kelling said now, unable to resist. “I think we're close.”

“Oh, good.” This was Charlotte's role in these conversations: Deadpan and refusing to be impressed. But now she hesitated, and when she talked again, her voice sounded soft and even a little slurred. “So like when you're close...that means you're done soon...and then you'll stop coming?”

“Why?”

She moved the gum around in her mouth. “You're the only one who comes to see him, you know that? His colleagues come to see *me* all the time. They're having a conference in a few weeks about Joe's work.”

“I heard.” Kelling was not on the program committee, and couldn't remember whether he had been asked.

“They act as if he's already dead,” Charlotte said. “They keep asking me for photos, but all they want to do is milk his work. I could tell them a lot of things. About being a family. About the way he is now, and how it happened. It didn't happen overnight, you know? He cried. Did you ever see him cry?”

Kelling felt dizzy. A headache crept up his neck from where the bag dragged at his shoulder. Charlotte looked him up and down. “You probably think I should be happy. You probably think I won.”

“I don't know what you mean.”

“I think you do.”

Kelling stared at the ivy clinging to the wall, at the plant's little white claws.

“I don't care,” Charlotte said. “You're still visiting. You're the only one who can stand it.”

A pause. She twisted her ankle, a shy girl now. When Kelling felt almost free to walk away, she continued. “Could you talk to his colleagues about your proof?”

“You told them about it?”

Her eyes were open, honest – sharper than usual, daring him to play along. “I had to give them something.”

Kelling wanted to say that he didn't care about the conference, and that the *thing* he had constructed with Monroe in the attic was as intimate as Charlotte's memories of “Joe,” and that he didn't want to share it..

“No problem,” he said. “I'll walk them through it.”

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Kelling opened all the windows and put the upright fan on the highest setting. He lived on the top floor of a brightly painted but unstable Victorian. An expanding family of currently four inhabited the two lower floors. Their constant stomping and wailing until late in the evening didn't bother Kelling as much as the penetrating hum of what sounded like a blender at three every morning. He slept, worked, ate, and watched TV in one room; the intended bedroom was filled with old stuff he couldn't bother to throw away, some of it from his sister's place after her death, some of it from his parents, both also dead. Kelling wasn't dead. He had always been the misfit.

He stood in front of the fan, unbuttoned his jacket, and let the weight slide off his shoulders. *How did I get here?* Into this cave with books for company, surrounded by the noises of a family he didn't know? He had grown up in a big house with an echoing stairway. He had spent long summer vacations at the house of his friends, two brothers – what had been their names? Claude, Wally? Some strange combination like that. They had lived at a lake surrounded by pine trees, and the water had tasted of glacier. They had swum until they were blue from the cold and sick from the water in their bellies. Claude and Wally had families now, and every once in a while they sent a message asking how he was doing. *Any news from the island of excellence, old pal?*

What could he have told them? He and Monroe and the love that did not dare to speak its name, except as part of a linked search term in the *Annals of Mathematics*?

This moment, when Monroe had sat down on Kelling's bed with a groan, as if he had been overburdened, and had looked up with shining eyes, his hands cupping an invisible sphere. "This is real," he had said, his hands raised and protecting *this*, which was real and invisible, his

eyes pleading for Kelling to understand. “This is real. I want to marry her.” And Kelling had wanted to say *No! You can't do this* –as if there had ever been a promise between them, as if there had ever been a guarantee. The words had not come out, they had stayed in his belly, and he had felt sick with pride. Monroe had left, happy and awkward, and not without asking, “are we still...?” and receiving a “yes” in return. There had been greater distance between them afterwards, but Kelling had managed to live with it. He wouldn't beg. He told himself that he had the part of Monroe that really counted.

For many years, Kelling had been sitting in the back yard, trying to see this as a mark of distinction. And Chip had been there, too, a visitor from the legitimate side of Monroe's life, but also doubting, and turning to Kelling for help. Should he have told all this to Claude and Wally in his replies to their wedding and birth announcements?

Kelling's parents and sister had sometimes wondered why he was still alone, and why he didn't move to a new place. It had been easy to dismiss them when he had been young and able to climb stairs without any difficulty. Now he was old. In front of the relentlessly turning fan, he thought of Monroe – not the young man, but Monroe like he was now. The terrible thing, which Kelling had refused to imagine so far, was the losing battle Monroe must have fought when his mind had been snatched away piece by piece. Had he been trapped, paralyzed by horror and robbed of the words to cry for help? Had his body taken over, sweating and peeing it out? And Charlotte? Had she been cold and serene? In shock? Crying with him? And Chip?

*I should have been there*, Kelling thought. He clicked off the fan. He was now completely cold. *I should have made a scene. I never made a scene in my life.*

He took the notebook out of his bag. At first, it wasn't too bad. Kelling's ideas connected, and there were even traces of Monroe in the reasoning. But gradually, dead ends appeared, ideas

were cast off, and question marks invaded the pages. Kelling wasn't unfamiliar with this pattern. He had always been thinking in starts and stops, unable to avoid mistakes. When he had been young, he had grasped his hair and moved his fists around in circles so his thoughts could stir and settle again in a better pattern. His first publications had come from that time, and also his thesis, which he had defended in his early twenties, completely green and unable to cook anything except spaghetti. He had stood in front of his committee and a couple of friends, not part of a famous collaboration yet, just one man, Kelling, in a second-hand velveteen suit he had bought with his sister.

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Kelling walked almost blindly, trying not to pay attention to his surroundings until he sensed that he had arrived at an unfamiliar place. He opened his eyes and tried to get his bearings. He saw a filling station and a garage, and a few small houses shut down against the noise. Further up, the road burst into a complex intersection.

He crossed the street and continued. After a while, a *Meals on Wheels* car pulled up next to him. The passenger door opened.

“Hello,” said Chip Monroe.

“Hello, Chip.”

“Get in.”

Kelling's knees had stiffened, and his feet were burning. He got in the car. As soon as he sat, he never wanted to get up again. The car was air-conditioned and smelled of warm chicken, asparagus, and salmon. The interior was light gray and looked brand new. Chip wore his usual generic outfit: jeans, t-shirt, sneakers. His wild hair was Monroe's, the eyebrows were Charlotte's, but the rest of him was new and alien and unreadable.

“How did you get here?” Chip asked after they had emerged from a tunnel.

“No idea.”

Chip frowned.

“I mean,” Kelling said, realizing too late that certain remarks are no longer harmless to children of a demented parent, “my mind was wandering. I didn't pay attention, and, well, here I am.”

“Welcome to my life,” Chip murmured. He put out the turn signal. The clacks echoed through the cabin. They took a wide turn up a driveway at the end of the road and parked in front of a large apartment building guarded by two white lions.

“I'll be right back.” Chip got out of the car, took a stack of plastic boxes from the trunk, and carried them to the entrance on one hand. Black sliding doors opened and closed behind him.

Kelling looked around in the car. Two items lay on the dashboard: a road map of Pennsylvania, and a bottle of water. He opened the glove compartment and found a net with apples and a book. Familiar, this jacket. Could it be...? He picked it up. Yes, it was *Natural Induction*, the book that had made his and Monroe's career. He leafed through it like others would leaf through a family album.

Earmarks and underlines, cracks in the spine: the book had been read thoroughly. It wasn't a library book; it belonged to *C. Monroe*, the name printed in agonizingly warped letters on the first page. The handwriting was completely different than Monroe's, but certain details were similar: The forceful dot, which looked more like a dash, and the perfectly round o's.

¶Tucked against the last page were folded sheets of paper. Kelling unfolded them with a pang of need, expecting a letter from Monroe – one word would have been enough – but no luck: the language of mathematics was familiar; the handwriting on the paper was not. It was Chip's.

The door of the apartment building slid open and Kelling put the book back where he'd found it.

“You didn’t really say so,” Chip said when they were back on the road. “But I assume you want a ride home.”

“That doesn't sound bad.”

They were silent for a while, the sounds of the world filtered by the windows and the grey, plush seats. The smell of food was fading.

“I've been meaning to ask you something.”

“Okay,” Kelling said.

“You know Dad pretty well, don't you?”

“I would say so, yes.”

“You worked together. For a long time. You're best friends.”

“Yes.” And more.

“Would you say he liked being a father?”

Kelling paused. He didn’t dare to look at Chip, who did such a good job of keeping his voice steady and calm, as if they were talking about a shared acquaintance or a character from a book. He remembered the photos in Monroe's office. Chip as a baby, a toddler on a swing, a teenager in a kayak, always with that serious expression saying, *yes, I'm real*.

“I think he was very proud of you,” Kelling said.

Chip didn’t respond.

“So, yes, I'd say he liked being a father,” Kelling said.

“Makes sense,” Chip finally said.

Kelling knew he had failed, but he didn’t know how. He had no idea about Monroe's

feelings about fatherhood, because it had been one of the things they hadn't discussed, one of the many things. He could offer Chip an honest guess, that was all, and it wasn't enough.

"There is something else," Chip said after a while.

Kelling waited.

"I've often been wondering..."

"Wondering what?"

"Wondering whether there's something I don't know. About Dad."

They turned into a smaller side street, rounding the corner at the Center of the Arts, a villa painted blue and purple and golden. They were entering Kelling's neighborhood.

"I don't know," Kelling said. "What do you mean?"

They came to a halt at a stop sign and slowly sped up again.

"Never mind. I shouldn't have asked."

"It's all right."

"No, forget it. It's o.k."

The turn signal clacked again, like a giant metronome. They turned left, into Kelling's street. Chip stopped in front of Kelling's house – or rather, the house where Kelling lived.

"There you go."

"Thanks for the ride."

"You're welcome."

Neither of them moved.

"It's just," Chip said. "I saw you and Dad once. At the lab. I don't know what was going on, but you two were..." He shook his head, barely perceptible, and looked up at Kelling.

The truth was close, right there in the car, not safe at all.

A long time ago, before Charlotte, before glasses, and shortly after the thesis defense in the velveteen suit, he and Monroe took a walk on a beach. Monroe had driven them up the Atlantic Coast after a conference in Boston, *the conference*, where they had met for the first time.

The sky had been a blue dome torn by white stripes of clouds. The waves had spat their salty foam into the wind and the sand had calmed it into a hissing caress that cooled their bare toes and ate their footprints. When their faces stung with salt and the beginnings of sunburn, they had sat down in the shadow of a dune, using their jackets as blankets.

Monroe had leaned back and closed his eyes, his face like a child's, as if he had never strained to understand anything. Kelling had reached out for Monroe's neck and stroked his warm, stubbly skin. Monroe's heartbeat had lived in his palm and rushed through him, rousing in its steadiness. It could have been a forgotten moment if Monroe hadn't opened his eyes and looked at him, not startled or shocked, but with the lazy happiness of a cat.

"Just say it," Chip whispered. "I won't tell."

Kelling wanted to touch him. He knew he should talk now. But he couldn't give this to Chip. He couldn't give it to anyone. He had so few things left.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Okay." Chip's voice was flat, as flat as Kelling's had been when Monroe had asked him whether they were *still*, and Kelling had said *yes*. Kelling pushed down the door handle. The door opened and let in a gust of warmth.

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Bob and Maire Feldman, the hotshot faculty new-hires who had made national news with a simulation of "operator worms" they claimed would grow into a system able to decide P vs. NP,

sat on a red sofa in Monroe's living room. Charlotte sat between them. Chip sat on a yellow beanbag further away, reading a book. Kelling sat opposite the Feldmans and Charlotte on a white design thing possibly intended to be a chair. His suit was dry-cleaned and stiff, and his flesh felt the same. In front of him lay the notebook.

For now, the Feldmans were busy showing Charlotte the preliminary outline of the conference proceedings.

“We collected some blurbs from his students,” Bob said. “Joe was a great teacher. Here, this one is pretty funny.”

Charlotte took her time to read it. “I don't get it.”

The Feldmans exchanged a look. “He's making a joke about Chomsky,” Bob said. “He starts by saying—”

“Whatever. I believe you.”

“And that's a really great photo. Thanks again.” Maire pointed at the portrait on the front. Monroe's face had been tinted with sepia. His eyes were angry and intense.

“You're welcome.”

The Feldmans and Charlotte were moving pages around on the table, and all the time, Kelling knew it was coming. He waited, not touching the notebook or the glass of water next to it, and finally, here it was.

“Obviously, there'll be another important item,” Maire said, initiating air-quotes. “Monroe's Last Proof.” Her hair was pulled back in a bun, her face rosy and sweet and completely innocent except for a single incisor standing crooked in her mouth. Bob (tall, wiry, shoulder-length hair) reclined on the couch, consumed by the inability to take anything seriously. Charlotte regarded Kelling with studied indifference, but there was a spark of curiosity in her

eyes: *What exactly have you guys been doing up in the attic?* Maire clicked her biro. “So. You want to walk us through it?”

“Sure,” Kelling said. He paused and turned to Charlotte. “Actually...Do you own a blackboard?”

“I don't know,” Charlotte said. “I don't think I have one. I mean...”

“That's just the way mathematicians are,” Bob said. “Blackboards are our fetish, ha ha. Sure you can't do it without one, Kelling?”

“He can use the whiteboard in the kitchen,” Chip said, putting down his book. “Would that work?”

“I think so.”

They gathered around the breakfast counter. Kelling picked up a sponge and wiped off a shopping list. *Soil. Rose Fertilizer. Mulch.* He raised the green magic marker and wrote, *Let  $L = FOTL + \mu$ .* In careful steps, he proceeded to outline a proof he had developed since his last visit with Monroe. It was new and had nothing to do with the notebook. It was a solid but unremarkable proof that a first-order logic remains complete after extension with a  $\mu$  operator, nothing more. And nothing less. Kelling listened to the predictable cadence of his voice, and knew he was safe. There was no hesitation or exuberance. He had managed to build a wall and hide behind it, and with him his precious and incomprehensible love. He had to think of Charlotte's comment. *Write what you want. You can have it. I have mine.*

Charlotte didn't react to the presentation at all. Maire and Bob Feldman, however, slowly retracted their antennae. Kelling felt their attention drain away. The proof on Monroe's whiteboard wouldn't garner them any headlines or juicy research grants. Even worse, it was too good to attack. Kelling knew that a brilliant insight was only the second best thing they had been

hoping for. The best thing would have been a spectacular intellectual belly flop. If he had introduced a notation based on the patterns found in anthill tunnels or gone off on a lecture about the song of the cosmos, they would have beamed, both of them, and scheduled him for the conference's prime slot. Greatness and insanity, so similar to each other, and so, let's face it, hilarious.

The proof Kelling wrote on the whiteboard was the worst possible thing: Dull and harmless. A good but replaceable brick in the building of knowledge. Underneath the layers of tweed and old flesh, young Kelling in his velveteen suit smiled to himself.

¶*You can dismiss me and gossip about me, but if you wait for me to humiliate myself in public, you can wait forever. I'm a monument. I crumble slowly. I'll be gone long after you are.*

“Wait,” Chip said. He stood up and walked around the table, a sheet of paper in one hand. Kelling realized that he had taken notes all the time. His secret glee subsided.

“It doesn't work, does it?” Chip tried to sound confident, like a colleague entering a conversation, but he wasn't experienced at this, and it showed. He fidgeted with his notes and gestured at the whiteboard. “Let's see...” He hesitated. “Let's see...” His fingers searched, slowed down, hovered. And found the spot. “Here. Kelling assumes that this,” he gestured at an expression (*too imprecise*, Kelling thought even though he knew what Chip meant) “is analogous to Akkunji et al., but it's not. Could I have the marker, please, Kelling?”

Kelling handed the open marker to Chip. Chip started writing, and after a couple of false starts, the tip of the pen squeaked on the white surface. Maire and Bob were beaming now. This was becoming interesting after all. Monroe's son taking down his collaborator. A human story. Possibly with a publishable idea at its core. Yum!

Kelling watched his attempted deconstruction from the side. Sunlight fell on the tips of

Chip's hair. He had long dropped his notes and started to improvise, addressing an imaginary audience sitting in the upper cabinets and turning back to the board before finishing his sentences, making the crucial points hard to understand. All beginners' mistakes. Kelling remembered them well. Interleaving writing and thinking and talking had taken him a long time to learn.

“You see?” Chip said when he was done. He scrutinized his own handwriting. “It doesn't work.”

“Neat!” Bob Feldman slapped his thighs. “No offense, Kelling.”

The marker had started to leak onto Chip's fingers. He looked at Kelling. And Kelling wanted to let him get away with it, because he was young and confused and about to lose his father. But Chip was also Monroe's son, and too good for the applause of people like Bob Feldman. So Kelling put out his hand, received the marker back, wiped the whiteboard clean and copied down the last lines Chip had written. In his clear handwriting, the symbols lost their ambiguity. Chip's claim was on the wall for all to see. Without haste or triumph, Kelling dismantled the claim, uncovering a series of small mistakes anyone could be forgiven to make but that, taken together, made his line of reasoning untenable. He closed abruptly and without flourish. His audience remained silent.

“Okay,” Maire said. “Well...”

“Too neat to be true,” Bob said. “Pity.”

Chip ignored them. His eyes were still on Kelling. “Come on. You and Dad didn't work on a proof.”

Kelling's heart was beating fast. The marker felt hot between his fingertips, and he put it on the table. “Why do you think so?”

Chip held his gaze. His expression was angry, not unlike Monroe's angry sepia portrait, but alive and real, the frown of a young man who is about to break something. He waited, and Kelling waited, and their friendship died, beat by beat.

“Dad's out of it,” Chip finally said. “He doesn't think anymore.”

The tension dissolved; Charlotte hissed, “enough, Chip” as the Feldman's cringed and put on *that wasn't so nice* faces. Kelling lowered his head.

Charlotte escorted the Feldmans out of the kitchen, and the three of them started chatting. Their voices echoed in the hallway, and Kelling could make out Bob's braying laugh and his insincere apologies right after.

Kelling and Chip stood in the kitchen. A few floors up, Monroe was sitting in his attic ocean, silent. Chip put one hand in his pocket and scratched his upper arm with the other.

Slowly, Kelling reached for the hard sponge under the whiteboard and wiped out the lines. “All right,” he said. His own voice sounded strange to him. There was nothing predictable or reassuring in it anymore. In small twitches, he tried to develop another proof of sorts, an analysis to answer Chip's challenge. *Admit it.*

How could he explain what had happened during these past weeks? These past years?

*Fact: Monroe can't talk.*

*Fact: Monroe talked to me.*

*Conclusion: I made him talk.*

*How?*

*Possibility A: By hallucinating. The talking took place in a different reality.*

*Possibility B: Through a Frankensteinian shock infusion of need.*

*A: Sad.*

*B: Wasted effort.*

*Conclusion: Irrelevant. I can't do it anymore. And when he did talk, he used these words:*

*Yesterday. Continuity Lemma. He was honest. He said: Nonsense.*

Would this be enough, this admission of *need*? Chip regarded him calmly, his thoughts unfathomable.

“Your father and I worked together our whole lives,” Kelling said. “You're right. Our last work wasn't our best.”

Chip wiped his green fingers on his pants. “You can say that again.”

A song of laughter filtered in from the hallway, a song written for three voices. Charlotte, cut with sarcasm. Maire, false and sweet. Bob, rhythmic and mean. Kelling and Chip locked eyes, and Kelling longed for that backyard party look of conspiracy. He waited. And slowly, a gift, it came to him.