

Holly-Jane Rahlens



Extract:

Infinitissimo

The Man Who Fell Through Time

Note

***Infinitissimo** was written in 2265 in Late North American English (LNAE). The enclosed adaptation into turn-of-the-millennium American English, ca. 2000–2040, was executed as “Required Adaptation Exercise 6” for the seminar certificate “Understanding the Life Stages of Language—English, Part III.” Some foreign-language references have been left in their original when adequate equivalents could not be found. Knowledge of extinct German is helpful but not a requirement. I am much indebted to my mentor, Dr. Nelhar N. Suiled, for his assistance in elucidating the meaning of several obscure passages and words.*

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Chapter One
The Island

Finn slipped the Moon Zoomers on over his eyes. Above him, the deep night sky glittered faintly. He made out a space racer bringing workers to Mars and beyond. Or maybe it was back home for the holidays? It was hard to say from so far away. But he could see the racer's floodlights blinking, perhaps greeting that SunTeam cruiser, booked full, he presumed, with bungee jumpers out for a cosmic thrill. Finn shuddered at the thought. He'd never been fond of those weightless free-falls.

Far below, the 11 p.m. sky-glider from town came coasting along, closer and closer. It looped soundlessly landward and soared over Finn before alighting at the Outer New York Metroport to the north, behind him, all the way across the bay.

And the sea rumbled on. The waves rolled in. Then out. Back and forth. The water rose. And fell.

The air was still heavy with the past day's September heat, with salt, sea spray, and his neighbor's jasmine. Finn thought he might fall asleep, right there on the beach, under the stars—that's how tired he felt. But then a crab scuttled past his bare foot. And then another. Something had alarmed them. Alert, Finn heard soft steps in the sand. The rustling of fabric. Someone was approaching. He twisted around.

"Oh!" Rouge gasped, startled, but a moment later she let out a laugh. "Finn! What on earth are those things? They're frightening!"

Finn rose, pulling the Moon Zoomers over his head, careful not to stretch them out of shape. "Rouge," he said, taking a step toward her. "Sorry. Your visit is so unexpected."

Rouge dropped her sandals to the sand, and they air-kissed to the right, to the left, to the right of their cheeks. But there was awkwardness between them. Finn was not one for surprises, even one as stunning as Rouge Marie Moreau, so elegant, so lithe, a long-stemmed rose on this quiet strip of Fire Island beach.

“It’s not easy getting in touch with you,” she said, whisking a few strands of hair from her eyes. Ah, those eyes, steely-green and so keen. They never miss a thing. “Is something wrong with your Brain Button?” In the moonlight her curls glittered metallic red, like copper.

Finn shook his head. “No. It’s off. Everything’s off for a few days.”

“Everything?” she said.

Finn detected a subtle seductive lilt in her voice. They’d once been a couple. The affair had ended almost as soon as it began—Finn had felt that they were ill suited as partners, but they remained friends and even unit-mates. Recently, though, Finn had sensed a delicate shift in her affections again. Or was it just his imagination?

Rouge smiled up at him. And Finn returned it—albeit with a shadow of reluctance. She intuited his hesitancy. “What are those things?” she asked instead. The lilt in her voice was gone now.

“Moon Zoomers.” He was glad for the change of subject. He repeated the name, more slowly this time—“Moon Zoomers”—clearly enjoying the internal rhyme. Rouge, though, didn’t seem to notice. “They were Mannu’s,” he went on. “A gift from our father. He found them in an antique store. Years ago. They were in one of Mannu’s drawers.” Finn handed them to Rouge, indicating an inscription on the inside of the frame. “See? It says, ‘Made in USA.’ So they were certainly assembled before 2105. Our father thought 2040 or so.”

“Hmm,” said Rouge, contemplating the clumsy-looking goggles. “That makes them 225 years old. Manufactured right in the middle of Dark Winter.” She turned the goggles around in her hands. “More than

half the world's population was dying, and the Americans were still looking for new worlds.”

“It makes sense,” said Finn, with a slight edge to his voice. He often found himself, especially with Rouge, in the unpleasant position of defending his native continent. He liked to consider himself a European continental, but there he was championing the North Americans. “They thought it was the end of the world. Why not look for new ones?”

“Touché,” she said, and then returned to the object itself. “Do these things still work?” They were dangling from her fingers like a dead mouse by its tail. And that was exactly how she felt about them.

“Yes,” he said. “More or less. But only to a maximum distance of 400,000 kilometers. There was a space racer near Alpha Sextantis a few minutes ago. But it was hard to tell if the racer was coming or going.”

“But we see so much better with our BB telescope applications. With Skyze, C-Stars, AstroVu, and—”

“Rouge, it's just for fun!” he said, as always mystified by her lack of humor. “It was a toy.” He smiled at her. “Would you like a try?”

She shook her head. “No. Thank you. No.” She looked up at the night sky.

Finn wondered a moment if she felt insulted, but realized she was just trying to locate the space racer with her Brain Button. “Do you see it?”

“Yes,” she said after just a few moments. “There it is.”

Finn was impressed. Rouge was by far the fastest BB-impulse carrier he knew. Brilliant, really.

“It's coming home. It's moving toward us,” she reported, and then looked back up at Finn, waiting for his eyes to meet hers. “How are you?” she asked when they had.

He inhaled deeply then looked out at the sea. She waited quietly at his side while he searched for an answer.

“It’s been difficult,” he said, finally. “Especially losing Lulu and Mannu. We were so close. All three of us. Our parents were always working, so when Lulu was a young child, we weren’t just her big brothers. We were also her caretakers. She called us Manny and Fanny.”

“Fanny?” Rouge said, amused. “It doesn’t quite suit you.”

Finn shrugged, and then looked down at his foot where his toe had found a stone. He picked it up and a dragonfly materialized from under it. “Oops! What’s that doing there?” he said, startled, following the flight of the creature in the dim moonlight. The dragonfly circled around them, its phosphorescent wings fluttering wildly, then it flew away.

Finn turned to Rouge. “Lulu used to try to catch them when she was little. She squealed like a wild piglet when she ran after them. The house is too still without her now. She was quite the chatterer. Yakety-yak the whole day through. Like so many teenagers.”

“‘Yakety-yak’?” Rouge asked, unfamiliar with the word. She would have no trouble finding its meaning almost immediately with her BB, but she knew Finn enjoyed throwing tidbits of trivia her way, and then enlightening her about them.

Finn smiled. “North American, circa 1950, to talk persistently. From the verb ‘yack,’ origin unknown. Possibly imitative of the sound of chatter.”

Rouge’s English was impeccable, but her knowledge of historic North American slang was rudimentary, as was the case with most hard-core scientists from the European continent that Finn knew.

“Yakety-yak,” she said, amused. “It does sound like chatter.”

Finn’s eyes returned to the sea. “Lulu will be missed. Sorely. They will all be missed.” He looked at the stone still in his hand, and then tossed it. He watched the distorted reflection of the moon on the surface of the water ripple as the stone skimmed the surf and then disap-

peared. He turned to Rouge. “Mannu was quite the stone thrower. We used to stand here and see whose stone skipped the most in the water. He always won.”

Rouge waited for him to continue.

“He used to make a big show out of it,” he said, still looking at the moonlit sea. “All the girls would gather around from up and down the beach, and he would take off his shirt—all those muscles popping, all that curly hair climbing up his chest—and then he’d toss the stone, and it’d skip ten, maybe fifteen times if the surface of the water was smooth. And the girls would all swoon.” He looked up at Rouge. “He was a hard act to follow. But he was adored. Unconditionally.” Finn attempted a smile, but then abandoned it and bit down on his lip. “Twenty-one is too young to have lost one’s entire family. All four of them. Gone. Just like that.”

Finn heard Rouge inhale deeply through her nose.

“An orphan,” he said, indignantly. “Finn Nordstrom, an orphan.”

Rouge put a hand on his shoulder. Finn felt its warmth through his thin top.

“Should we go inside?” Rouge asked.

“Let’s sit out here a bit.”

Rouge was wearing a light summer dress, gauzy, with shimmery blue and green filigree. It was cut low, so her décolleté was on show in the moonlight, her breasts almost spilling out of the bodice. He noticed a perfect brown dot on the pale skin above her right breast. Had he just never noticed the birthmark before, or had she recently had it created especially for a night like this? He looked away.

Rouge lowered herself to the sand, tucking the fabric of her dress under her. She stretched out her endlessly long legs, and then neatly folded them back up under her. She did this with such grace and economy of movement, Finn was reminded of those antique folding knives from Solingen exhibited in the Museum of European Culture, not far

from where he lived in Berlin. Fascinating, the way her legs snapped open, and then snapped shut. Zzsscchht.

Rouge and Finn looked out at the sea.

Finn smiled inwardly. What a comparison—likening Rouge’s legs to a switchblade! But then again, Rouge had always had something dangerous, almost predatory, about her, as if she were on the verge of luring him into a trap, snatching him up with those long limbs of hers, and then eating him alive.

“You’re smiling,” she said.

“What actually brings you here?” he wanted to know.

“It’s a favor. For your university.”

Another surprise for Finn. “Greifswald? They asked you to come? Here?”

“They’re anxious you might give up your job now. And return to North America.”

“They should be anxious!” he said. “These past three months have been driving this translator bonkers!”

“‘Bonkers’?”

“It means crazy. Mad. North American, 1940s, origin unknown.”

“Spelling?”

“B-o-n-k-e-r-s.”

“Bonkers,” she said, pausing a moment as if looking in a mirror and trying the word on for size. “And?”

“They have us proofreading the punctuation on the computer-generated translations of those bank business reports they discovered a couple of years ago. Proofreading! You’d have thought those applications would know grammar by now. And they’re so boring!”

Finn was frustrated with his university job at the Library of Europe in Greifswald. He was a skilled translator of two languages into his English mother tongue—extinct German and New Standard Mandarin—a specialist in the decoding of German-language handwritten

documents, as well as a highly trained but under-challenged historian for popular culture in pre–Age of Dark Winter (1950–2029). “They should be giving us great works of literature to work on,” he said, “not Deutsche Bank’s ‘Consolidated Statement of Recognized Income and Expense for the First Quarter 2021.’ That stuff can be left to artificial intelligence. Who cares if there are punctuation errors?”

Rouge laughed—but kindly. “You’re a junior historian, Finn. A student! That’s your job.”

“And you are a junior physicist. But are you asked to sit under a tree and wait for an apple to fall on your head so you can theorize about gravity?”

Rouge laughed again. It was very easy to amuse her sometimes. If his BB weren’t turned off, he’d jot the joke down. Now he might forget it.

“But everyone said the business reports were a world cultural treasure,” Rouge said.

The reports had certainly caused a sensation when they were excavated four years ago, in 2260. They were discovered fifty meters under the earth at the site where the bank’s main headquarters in Frankfurt once stood. The archaeologists found fewer than thirty cubic meters worth of metal file cabinets stacked with German-language business reports, but that they had even survived the Great Scorching of 2050 was a miracle. It rid Europe of the German Plague, yes, but unhappily it destroyed most of its culture along with the virus.

“Those bank reports, a world cultural treasure? Please!” said Finn.

“Fine, fine,” she said, leaning back on her elbows and looking up at the stars.

Finn leaned back too. “But Greifswald surely didn’t send you from Berlin to a sleepy New York beach community just because they’re anxious about losing a junior historian with translation skills.”

“Correct,” she said, stretching out her legs.

“So why have you come?”

She turned to him. “Baltic archaeologists in Stralsund found something on the Fischland-Darss peninsula.”

“Found something?” he said, sitting back up.

“A case. Airtight and watertight. Corrosion-proof. Dust-proof. Everything-proof. The kind used on boats in the early twenty-first century. It was on the floor of the Saaler Bodden near Wustrow.”

“At the bottom of the Bodden?” Finn thought he might laugh. How absurd! The Bodden was so shallow. And unspectacular. It was not anywhere near a deep sea where one imagined ships and their treasures were buried.

The Bodden landscape—a string of saline lakes with a sea connection along the southern Baltic coast, once a sanctuary for migratory birds and a nature preserve—suffered greatly during the Age of Dark Winter. But now that most of Europe had been resettled, some of the Baltic coastal areas were being reorganized into sea-mining communities.

“But those waters are so shallow,” Finn said. “You’d think that everything down there would have been fished out by now.”

Rouge shrugged. “It’s at least six meters deep where they found the case. Apparently it was down there for well over two hundred years. They came upon it by chance while prepping the area for construction.”

Finn’s heart began to race. “Is it an important find?” he asked, trying to control his breathing.

“A world cultural treasure.” The statement had a slight, very slight, mocking edge to it, so Finn wasn’t sure if this was what the experts were saying, or if it was just Rouge teasing him.

“Why? Is there something important inside it?” he asked.

“Possibly, they say.”

“And what does all this have to do with this historian?”

“There’s something in the case, Finn. It’s handwritten in German. It needs to be decoded and translated.”

“But why this translator? And why send you here? What’s the rush?” None of this made sense to Finn.

Rouge shrugged. “Perhaps they’re worried that one of the larger universities will snatch it away if they don’t act quickly. Obviously, they think you can do the job.” She looked up at him. “It may be what you’ve been waiting for.”

He tended to agree. Bank reports wouldn’t likely be at the bottom of a shallow saltwater lake. Especially not handwritten ones. But what would be there?

“Will you speak to Greifswald about it?” Rouge asked.

“Yes. Certainly. Of course.”

“Good,” she said, standing up. She wiped the sand off her hands. “The director of the Library of Europe expects your call. First thing in the morning.”

Finn rose too. “So soon?” He was clearly astonished.

“Even sooner than you think. His morning. That’s in—” She tilted her head slightly, accessing her BB clock. “Two hours.”

“In two hours?”

She nodded, and then yawned.

“You’re tired,” said Finn.

“Yes. Shall we go inside?”

They were standing close. So very close. He noticed the birthmark on her right breast again, how it rose and fell with her breathing. He could pull her toward him and kiss her.

But he didn’t.

“This way,” Finn said, turning away and pointing to the large wooden house to the west. “The Nordstrom residence.”

Rouge grabbed her sandals and followed him in.

Chapter Two

Doc-Doc

Finn tidied up the family den for the holocasting. The Library of Europe’s director might decide to pay him a visit. With Doc-Doc, as Dr. Dr. Rirkrit Sriwanichpoom was referred to by his employees—and not without some sarcasm—you had to be prepared for anything.

Finn parted the curtains. The moon, a fat white balloon, was floating in full view above a smooth Atlantic. A brilliant backdrop for a holocasting. Finn was aware of his growing excitement. What was in the Bodden case? Dare he hope for a “millennium miracle”?

The last great discovery in German was almost 130 years ago, in 2136, on the North American continent, in the province of California, in Laguna Beach. In a house of rotting stone and stucco, workers prepping the ruin for demolition found a worm-infested oaken chest containing a steel box. Inside the box was a stack of handwritten pages. Experts in the lost languages identified the language as German, written in the old German script used at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Further study established that it was Nobel Prize winner Thomas Mann’s original *Buddenbrooks* manuscript.

The California Cultural Treasure Office put up a strong case to keep the manuscript in North America—Thomas Mann was a naturalized American citizen, they argued—but in the end it was bequeathed to the Library of Europe’s Archive for the Lost Languages, where, Finn agreed, it rightly belonged. These days it was kept under lock and key, but a tru-replica of it was on display, and Finn had studied and read the tru-rep—not an easy task, as even paleographers specializing in

German find old German Kurrent script extremely hard to decipher if one's training has focused primarily on the later scripts.

Buddenbrooks, in any case, was truly a millennium miracle and quite a distinction for the translator entrusted with it. Maybe Finn would be lucky too.

On the way to the kitchen, Finn passed the steps to the lower level and saw that the light in Rouge's room was off. For a moment he remembered how tired he was, too, but fatigue was not a trait that Sriwanichpoom appreciated. As Finn had never spoken more than a word or two with the director in his life, it would not be good to make a bad impression now. He made himself a zing to get his brain cells bouncing, and then returned to the den. He connected to the holo-camera, then sat down and waited for Doc-Doc's call.

Dr. Dr. Rirkrit Sriwanichpoom was a dazzling personality. Everything about him blinded the beholder: his handsomeness, his silver-white hair pulled back in a ponytail, his bright ivory smile, his eyes, large and lustrous like Tahitian gray pearls, his brilliant intelligence—even his shoes were dazzling. His feet sported those new transparent glass-like half boots. He wore them snugly over sparkling silver socks.

Finn was immediately aware of Dr. Dr. Sriwanichpoom's boots because when Finn was holocasted into the director's office, nicknamed the Throne Hall because of its spaciousness, the director's legs were crossed lazily on top of his desk. "Mr. Nordstrom!" he said, rising. He came forward, and Finn gave his superior his hand in greeting. There was nothing for Finn and Doc-Doc to shake hands with save air—a hologram is, of course, just a hologram, and not made of flesh—but they went through the motions anyway.

"Sir," said Finn. "Good morning."

"What time is it over there?" Sriwanichpoom spoke English impeccably, with that brittle nasal accent that the people of the British prov-

ince were known to have, but which foreigners, like himself, had perfected.

“It’s . . . uh . . . two a.m.,” said Finn, knowing full well that Doc-Doc knew exactly how late it was. So why did he ask?

“You’re staying up a bit late, aren’t you?” the director said with a chuckle. He didn’t wait for an answer. “Please, sit down.” He pointed to one of those transparent suspension tables with four hassocks assembled around it. Finn, who’d never before been invited into the Throne Hall, whether live or as a hologram, needed a moment to acquaint himself with the room before taking a seat. He actually sat down on a stool in his family’s den, but such details were unimportant when being immersed in 3-D images.

The director tugged his white trousers up a centimeter, sat down, and crossed his legs. His glass boot was almost in Finn’s face now. “So. This won’t take long. You know where the case was found, of course?”

“Yes,” said Finn. “At the bottom of the Bodden.”

“Correct. Near Wustrow.”

Ping! A ping-blink went off on Finn’s BB grid.

“You just received two documents,” the director said. “Take a look.”

The first was an image likely taken from a boat. Finn saw water and a rather desolate strip of land, probably the Bodden shoreline. There was a group of poplars on the left, and in the background the ruins of a town, with a steeple.

“That’s where the box was found,” said Doc-Doc.

The second document was the image of a black box with a handle, similar to turn-of-the-millennium hard-shell suitcases.

“The diary was found in that case,” said the library’s head.

The ping-blinks disappeared suddenly from Finn’s BB.

“So sorry,” said Doc-Doc, frowning. “They self-destruct. A bug. If you need them again, just ask. So, where were we? Ah, yes. You know the diary was handwritten in German?”

Finn nodded.

“Unfortunately,” the director went on, “German is not one of this director’s specialties, those being Italian, French, Russian, extinct Dutch and Danish, of course English, and naturally his native tongue, Thai. This reader was therefore unable to do more than give the contents a cursory inspection. Very interesting, though. One of the archaeologists over here in Stralsund, a Dr. . . . hmm . . .” The director raised his eyes toward the window and clicked into his BB. “Yes, there he is. A . . . Dr. Beyer . . . an Age of Dark Winter specialist . . . well, he took a somewhat more in-depth look at the diary’s contents, but felt under-qualified to judge the significance.”

“Why was that?” Finn asked. “When this translator was fifteen, he worked with Dr. Beyer at summer camp. Dr. Beyer’s an outstanding Dark Winter specialist.”

“But sadly not a specialist for turn-of-the-millennium popular culture. This document we have for you today is from 2003, written by a teenager.”

“Oh.” Finn registered immediately that he was disappointed. A document from a teenager? It was certainly no millennium miracle.

“You seem disappointed?” said the director. “Were you hoping for a millennium miracle?”

Finn was so surprised, he laughed. The director was notorious for his genius-like intuition.

Sriwanichpoom laughed too. “You’re ambitious, Finn Nordstrom. That’s good. Downstairs in the Archive for the Lost Languages they say that you’re an early twenty-first-century specialist and that you have an excellent feel for colloquial turn-of-the-millennium German and English, both of which will be needed for this project.”

“This translator is grateful for the chance to show his ability.”

The director stood up. “Here is what we have prepared for you. We made a tru-replica of the document. We know that you historians pre-

fer to work with hard copies rather than digitized BB documents. Very sensible, too, when it comes to handwriting.”

“There was only one document in the case?”

“Have you forgotten our government’s axiom: ‘One step at a time’?” said the director, wagging his finger jauntily at Finn.

That was standard procedure. The Deutsche Bank business reports were given to him one by one too. Chronologically. Always chronologically. “But were several documents in the case?” Finn persisted.

“That is not for this director to disclose,” replied Sriwanichpoom coolly, almost haughtily.

Now, that was not standard procedure. Translators were usually briefed on the length and extent of their projects.

The library’s director held Finn’s gaze a full few moments. Finn thought his eyes cold, even threatening. And Finn had the vague feeling that the director reminded him of someone. But who?

Dr. Rirkrit Sriwanichpoom rose and nodded at a wall. It slid open to reveal a bookcase. He went over to it and returned with a book. Its cover was pink. Very pink. A lurid pink. They used to call it hot pink. Or neon pink. An ugly, shiny, loud pink plastic. Or perhaps it was vinyl. Tiny red hearts were printed on it. Hearts and flowers and butterflies. There was a flimsy-looking lock on the book, too, with a small gold key in the keyhole, a thin satiny pink ribbon looped through it. Finn didn’t know what to make of it. He looked up at Dr. Dr. Rirkrit Sriwanichpoom. “What is it?” he asked.

“It’s a diary,” said the director. “Handwritten, of course.”

“A diary?” Finn said, surprised.

Finn had seen several old diaries. But none of them looked like this. Most were elegant, leather- or linen-bound. Some had the words “Moleskine” or “Filofax” printed on their covers or spines. But then he remembered that he had once seen a diary of Anne Frank’s that had a lock and key like this. The Holocaust victim’s original diaries were

sadly all lost during Dark Winter, but two reproductions of her white, red, and green plaid diary, reconstructed by craftsmen in 2002, were salvaged from the ruins of Amsterdam and now preserved in the Library of Europe.

“Who’s the author?” Finn asked.

“We don’t know. Some entries are signed with the letter ‘E.’ We think it is a girl.”

“A girl?”

“A very young girl. Thirteen, said Dr. . . . uh . . .”

“Beyer?”

“Yes. Apparently it starts on the child’s thirteenth birthday.”

The diary of a thirteen-year-old girl from the early twenty-first century? This could hardly be great literature or a world cultural treasure. Unless, of course, these were the early ponderings of someone who later became famous? But what was the chance of that? It crossed Finn’s mind that it might be a mistake to give up the Deutsche Bank business reports.

“We hope the author’s name is in the text somewhere,” said the director, again intuiting Finn’s thoughts. “Perhaps we know of her later work. That will be your job, obviously. To read every word. Research every reference. Where does she live? Who is her family? Who are her friends? You will surely find clues within. And, we hope, very soon. We think this may be an important project. You might even be able to get a doctoral thesis out of it. You do intend to get a graduate degree?”

“Yes, certainly. This student was considering working first another year or two, tweaking his research skills.”

“Very well then.” The director stood up. “This is settled?”

Finn was taken aback. “Do you need an answer immediately?”

Doc-Doc frowned. “Yes, of course. Why else a holocasting?”

Finn felt overwhelmed. “In that case, yes. Yes, fine.”

“We booked you a seat for today, Tuesday, two p.m. New York to

Berlin. The information is in your in-box. We expect you in Greifswald early Wednesday.” And then suddenly he was standing right in front of Finn, in the Nordstrom den. “Ah!” said the director, looking around at the furniture in the room. “How charming. Twenty-first-century American.” He walked to the window. “Brilliant view. Moon on earth.” He turned to Finn and gave him his hand. “Well then, Wednesday.”

Before Finn could even shake hands with the air, the director of the Library of Europe had disappeared.