

Chapter 3

From *The Atlantic Monthly*,

The trees in the Aokigahara forest can cast dismal shadows even in summer, but in the winter, the funereal gloom looks especially inviting to those who brave the maze-like trails of this haunted forest.

It's suicide season.

"It really increases as we get closer to the New Year," said Tetsuo Harada, an official with the Yamanashi Prefecture parks department. "Since the afterlife, it's only gotten worse."

The Aokigahara Jukai, literally "Aokigahara tree ocean," has a long history in Japanese folklore and urban legend. Magnetic compasses reportedly don't work in the forest and steep paths have sent many to injury or death, despite the stone statues of Jizo Bodhisattva that are supposed to guard the traveler.

The forest was infamous as a place to end one's life long before the discovery of the afterlife in 1997. Yoshitomo Takahashi, a professor of behavioral science at the National Defense Medical College Research Institute and author of "Aokigahara-jukai: Suicide and Amnesia in Mt. Fuji's Black Forest," has said, "The problem in Japan is that there are more sites where people are exchanging suicide methods, looking for partners, than there are sites devoted to prevention.

"Now the suicide parties are organized. They pack in computers, terminals, satellite uplinks and they go online and synchronize their deaths with others around the country. And the forest, unfortunately, lures them."

In Japan, the national government has declared the suicide problem an "epidemic that can't be cured by medicine or relieved by public awareness."

“Everyone knows that people are killing themselves left and right,” said Randall Levinson, a visiting scholar at Keio University’s International Center. “But they can’t do a thing about it. The problem’s gotten so bad there have been schools that have had to cancel classes — too many students killed themselves. It’s the siren call of the afterlife.”

It wasn’t a good night for Yamaguchi. Munroe counted five trips to the bathroom. She apparently never even remembered that he was there, or at least he so assumed from the fact that she never even glanced at the desk.

OK, well, I guess I never need to worry about that again, he thought to himself on maybe the second or third trip when he peeked into the bathroom and saw her perched over the toilet.

He went back to the computer and continued planning his trip for next month when she would be leaving town for a wedding and he thought he could take the trip to Egypt he’d always wanted. The website promised a living tour guide and a portable terminal with full Internet wireless access. Start in Cairo and the pyramids, then Karnak at Luxor, Valley of the Kings and finally Abu Simbel, all by riverboat and all for \$500 per person. *The living would die to get these kinds of prices,* he thought to himself. *Not that many of them are brave enough to go.* With the instability of the Middle East since the discovery of the afterlife, Western tourism, at least among the living, had all but dried up.

He looked at the pictures again and thought of wife number one, Marlene, who turned him onto all things Egyptian, and also turned him off college professors who cheated on their husbands.

Next he checked his email again and found a response from AfterNet security.

From: security@theAfterNet.net
To: jollycopper@denverpd.org
Subject: Re: Missing persons inquiry
Date: December 19, 2004 2:32 a.m. MST

This is an automated response to notify you that we have received your inquiry . Please do not reply to ...

So, nothing so far, but what else did he expect on a weekend.

He did, however, get an email from Bill Rybold.

From: (Bill Rybold) Bill.Rybold@theAfterNet.net
To: jollycopper@denverpd.org
Subject: Good to meet you
Date: December 19, 2004 1:10 a.m. MST

Dear Alex,

Enjoyed meeting you at the reception. Hope I didn't get you in hot water with your chief, but I think I probably raised your standing in the department.

By now, you suspect that I know your situation with the department. I know that your salary is actually coming out of an equipment budget because of the police union and I think that's emblematic of not only the department's view of you, but also the attitude of many government agencies and businesses. We disembodied — and yes, between you and me and others like us, I don't hide my status — have to stand up for our rights, otherwise we run the danger of being marginalized. (Did you see The New Yorker article: "Dispossessed and disembodied"?)

Sorry, didn't mean to get up on the soap box.

Now, I'm also sure that you know that I want to hire you, but you don't know for what. Why do I require the services of a homicide detective? Well, I don't require a detective, but I do need your brain (rubs hands and chortles maniacally). I need people who match a certain profile and have certain abilities to work for a start-up company, but I don't want to go into the details now.

Also, your next step is to do some research on me, and I'd like you to be informed before our next meeting.

If you're amenable, contact my secretary, Phyllis (v-card attached), and let's set up a meeting.

Again, nice to meet you.

Bill

So Munroe researched Bill Rybold. He found several pictures from before Rybold's death and saw that his avatar did not at all resemble him. In life, Rybold was short, dumpy and plain. *Well, who wouldn't want to look better after their death?* He was 54 when he died.

Although not much to look at, he was apparently a very good businessman, rising up the corporate ladder in the very competitive Denver telecommunications world, and then surprising everyone by taking the top job in a relatively minor player in the field. But Rybold took ClearView Cable (now ClearView Broadband) into the Fortune 500 quickly.

His business expertise wasn't his only achievement, however. He was a bona fide geek, with several patents to his name in the telecom field. And Munroe found news profiles of Rybold that applauded his business *and* his management skills. When he took over ClearView, he didn't fire everyone and install his own team, but worked with what he had. There were several quotes from employees, from upper management to cable installers, which praised Rybold.

Unfortunately, he was saddled with a board of directors who wanted to take a buyout offer from a competitor, which Rybold successfully fought until his death from some kind of freak pancreatic cancer, after which Rybold was removed as CEO and chairman.

After his death, Rybold didn't fight the removal and seemed to vanish until a few months ago when a columnist in the *Rocky Mountain News* spotted his avatar at a fund-raising dinner. Since then, Rybold came back with his new persona in a big way by sponsoring the reception. Munroe couldn't find any information on the man Rybold had hired to be his avatar.

All in all, Rybold seemed like a decent, if possibly vain man. *Of course, if I looked like that, I think I'd want to find someone better looking.*

He thought about Rybold's assessment of his situation within the department.

God knows he's right. What am I to the department besides their latest crime-fighting tool? What do I owe them? But the chief did give me a break when he hired me. And maybe I made some progress tonight and they'll think of me as a person.

Munroe opened the v-card and saw the secretary's email address and phone number. Then he saw Yamaguchi turn over and get out of bed for the sixth trip to the bathroom. He added the information to his address list.

About 7 a.m., Yamaguchi woke briefly.

"Alex, you there?"

"How you doing, partner?"

"I feel like dog poo."

"Yeah, I gathered that."

"What time is it?" she asked.

"It's about seven. Go back to sleep."

"Need to take you back to the station," she said as she slowly tugged the covers away from her.

"Forget it. Look, I'll call a cab later — Metro's pretty good at picking up the disembodied. Is the front door locked?"

"Uh huh."

"OK, when you feel better, unlock the door and I'll tell them to knock and open it for me. For now, go back to sleep." He got no reply and realized she'd already gone back to sleep with her ear bud clutched in her hand.

He realized that he'd been online seven hours straight, but the time had gone pleasantly after

he'd found Melissa in one of the chat rooms. She was in New York City and she'd been dead 20 years, dying when she was 21. She died a long time before the discovery of the afterlife in 1997 and the start of the AfterNet in 2001, but remarkably she was a warm, funny, sane person, which Munroe doubted he'd be were he in the same situation.

She had found his unabbreviated sentence structure in the chat room "quaint," while she used every contraction in the book, which he found maddening. He found it funny that at 41 years old, she was still a 21-year-old who seemed clued in to every fad of the last 20 years and apparently knew the plot of every episode of *Friends* and *Seinfeld*.

jollycopper: When did you start watching them?

messym: when they startd

jollycopper: They started before the AfterNet, didn't they?

messym: ? Duh.

jollycopper: You watched them without sound?

messym: :) watchd em at def cupls house whre i lived most of the 90s. they wre gr8, cute baby 2, and they wer young, in there 20s & they watchd alotta tv. a real barbie and ken but nice. i still keep in touch, but they wre freakd when they found out id been livng with em. funny there almost 40 now

Munroe had a hard time deciphering what she wrote at times. He bet it took more effort for her to come up with her abbreviations than to type out a complete sentence. He was wrong, of course, she was forever 21 and knew when something was hip or *passé*, further surprising him by using *passé*. She eventually gave in to his requests and began using fewer abbreviations and he had a long conversation with her. He was fascinated by how she'd spent all those years alone without going mad, and he realized that her frozen state of maturity was her defense.

He had added Melissa's name to his buddy list and she said she'd do the same, but he had few hopes. *I feel even more like a dirty old man than I do with Linda*, he thought.

Linda finally woke up again about eight and unlocked the door. She stumbled through the

house like a zombie and other than a few incoherent ramblings didn't speak except to say, "Good night, Alex," after which she went back to bed.

The taxi arrived fifteen minutes later and took Munroe to the Cherry Creek Mall. A lot of disembodied gathered at the mall Sunday mornings, using the public terminals throughout as ad hoc chat rooms. The elderly mall walkers, who enjoyed the peace and quiet of the mall before it opened for regular business, often joined them. The living were understandably curious about what awaited them and the disembodied, many of whom had no living relatives and were unable to contact their relatives on the AfterNet, viewed the elderly as an extended family waiting to happen. Most of the disembodied who attended the coffee klatch were themselves older when they died. Munroe perversely enjoyed being one of the younger ones.

The rest of the day he spent at the Denver Public Library, then the Tattered Cover bookstore and finally back to the station. He did get an email from Yamaguchi earlier in the day saying that she was alive. Back at the station, he also got an email from Yamaguchi's mother (addressed to him through his AfterNet address), asking him whether he knew why she hadn't returned her messages.

How the hell did she get my email address? he wondered, then realized she probably just looked it up from his postings. *I really shouldn't post my address everywhere. I hope I don't have to change it.* He sent her back a message saying that Linda was sick and that he was sure she'd return her email messages once she felt better.

And he got back a real response from AfterNet security.

From: (Steve Howland) Steve.Howland2@theAfterNet.net
To: jollycopper@denverpd.org
Subject: Re: Missing persons inquiry 20041219-0324
Date: December 19, 2004 5:34 p.m. MST

Dear Officer Munroe,

I'm sorry about the delay in getting back to you regarding your inquiry about Brian Thompson (minerofLove). We always want to work with the police, but your situation made it difficult because we can't normally initiate a trace based on an email request, but my supervisor said to go ahead because it's you.

Mr. Thompson last logged in to denver.theAfterNet.net at 3:35 p.m. MST December 11 from the downtown branch of the Denver Public Library. He used a public terminal, stayed on 23 minutes and went to the entertainment forum. He didn't leave any messages. He doesn't use the AfterNet as his email server, so we don't know when he last checked his mail, but his address is brianthompson4@hotmail.com, so I'm afraid you'll need to get any other email information from Microsoft.

If you have any other questions, feel free to contact me again, or if I'm off duty, just tell anyone at security@theAfterNet.net that your case number is 20041219-0324 and they can look up this incident.

Thanks,

Steve Howland

AfterNet security

Munroe sent a quick email to Brian's mother, quoting the message from AfterNet security and also asking whether she'd heard from Brian. Then he opened a browser and went to Denver.theAfterNet.net and the entertainment forum. He did a search and looked for all the messages that were posted in the forum from Dec. 5 through Dec. 11. Most of the messages were mundane: some Christmas party invitations (including a Christmas Eve get together at the downtown Tattered Cover sponsored by the AfterNet — *I should remember that*), a poetry reading by a disembodied author (*I won't remember that*) and a plug for the Christmas lights at the Denver Botanic Garden.

So far, Munroe didn't see anything that would be of interest to a disembodied 23-year-old out-of-towner. Of course, it was possible that a message that referred to an event during that timeframe had already been removed. So Munroe left a message in the forum asking any visitors whether they knew of such an event. He wasn't optimistic — many of the visitors to the forum were one-time or infrequent visitors, but he couldn't think what else to do. He also sent another

message to AfterNet security to see if they could retrieve deleted messages, but he wasn't hopeful about that, either.

Munroe spent the rest of the night and the early morning reading. He had discovered Project Gutenberg and right now was devouring Edgar Rice Burroughs. He'd remembered reading *A Princess of Mars* as a kid and now the idea of the ageless John Carter, fighting man of Virginia, delighted him.

About 9 a.m. Monday morning one of the detectives in missing persons came by and taped something on the side of Munroe's terminal, with the note "Thought you'd find this funny." It was a cartoon and was adapted from the old *New Yorker* cartoon showing two dogs at a computer and the caption, "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog." This one showed the Grim Reaper, with the trademark sickle, sitting at a terminal and the caption, "On the Internet, nobody knows you're not dead."

Munroe stared at it awhile and just couldn't find the humor. He knew what they were going for, but it just didn't have the right — something. He also couldn't figure out the detective's motive for leaving the cartoon. Was it really just "thought you'd find this funny" or "we know you don't really exist" or "we don't think you should be taking a job from someone living"?

Whatever the motive, Munroe was now stuck with it until Yamaguchi was back. And should he even ask her to remove it? Would it brand him as someone without a sense of humor? — a death sentence, so to speak, among cops. At least they'd finally stopped stealing his chair. Maybe this was a form of acceptance from them. He'd never had any problems with Rollins, the detective who'd left the cartoon. Rollins *was* black after all; he should be sympathetic with the plight of another minority. *Hmm, was that a bigoted assumption of mine?*

Of course, the disembodied weren't a minority. With hundreds of billions more dead than

alive, some living viewed them as a real threat.

And Rollins might know that Munroe was there from the activity on the terminal's screen, so should he respond now? Send an email to him? What should he say?

While living, this was a situation that Munroe had rarely encountered. He prided himself on being able to handle almost any situation — apart from ex-wives. He had been, after all, a white, male cop — lord of all he surveyed — although he liked to think he never let *that* sort of thinking affect his attitude or behavior. But now he found himself questioning his ability to act like a cop.

Well screw that, he thought. He opened up a new email window and sent a one-line message to Rollins: “Very droll.”

Let him figure that one out. Sometimes the ambiguity of email had its uses.

Munroe got out of the station before he had to deal with the consequences of his reply. He spent the morning at the same Starbucks and even got a few hellos from the crowd. This morning the table the terminal sat on also housed a few empty coffee cups — he didn't know if this was an attempt by the baristas to make the table seem more homey or more likely just the attractive force between an open surface and an empty cup.

Munroe got into a chat with the others and found that two of them had been customers of this particular Starbucks while alive. And another person was still working as a consultant for the company she worked at while alive, just a block away.

Munroe had wondered at Starbucks' financial incentive for installing the terminal, but they pointed out that aside from the initial investment for the terminal, it cost them almost nothing. And the consultant also mentioned that she had a meeting in an hour and said that she often used the Starbucks as her office.

The word “office” prompted Munroe to check his email and he saw that he had a reply from Rollins.

From: (Joshua Rollins) Joshua.Rollins@denverpd.org
To: jollycopper@denverpd.org
Subject: Missing disembodied report
Date: December 20 2004 9:15 a.m. MST

Munroe,

Glad you liked it. Hey, I was hoping you could do me a favor. I have a missing persons report filed by a Cheryl Miller on a disembodied woman, a dead Fort Carson woman, Staff Sgt. Tralawna Johnson. She was supposed to meet with Johnson in Denver last week and they never hooked up. She hasn't heard from Johnson since then

You know we don't really have a policy on this. I don't even know where I'd begin. Would you mind taking a look?

Thanks

Josh

The email had an attachment containing the missing persons' report.

Munroe replied to Rollins, saying he'd contact Cheryl Miller, and then he emailed the woman, who was living, and asked if they could meet to chat.

While writing up the emails, he also saw that he'd got an email from Brian's mother saying that she still hadn't heard from him. She also said that she'd learned that Brian had a blog and gave him the address.

OK, two missing dead people reports a few days apart. He looked more closely at the report Rollins had sent and saw the date that Sgt. Johnson was supposed to meet Miller. *Correction, possibly the same day if I take Brian's disappearance from the AfterNet as the date he went missing. Two disappearances don't make a pattern,* Munroe thought to himself. *Still, it gives me something to do.*

Well, let's see when Sgt. Johnson dropped off the AfterNet, he thought to himself. He sent

another message to Steve Howland asking for that information.

Munroe decided he needed to go back to the department and made his farewells to the group. Someone asked, “Same time tomorrow?”

Yamaguchi woke up to a ringing cell phone about 10 a.m.

“Hello,” she said, after smacking her lips a few times to break the gunk in her mouth. She was a little confused and was unsure what day it was. *Is today Monday?*

“Why didn’t you reply to my email?”

“Mom?”

“I talked to your partner. He said you’re sick.”

Yamaguchi hated it when her mother used the phone. Her mother had paid someone to digitize her voice from recordings she had saved on her computer so she could use her own voice when calling people. Yamaguchi hated it. Although she’d gotten used to the idea of having a disembodied mother, the sound of her mother’s voice on the phone was too eerie — especially with the slight Scandinavian-like accent that the speech synthesizer introduced.

“Yes, mom, I’m sick. I think I have the flu.”

“Go to the doctor. You’re sick.”

“The doctor can’t do anything. Mom, just send me an email. Or I can chat later. I just don’t feel up to talking.”

“Did your partner stay last night?”

“What?” *How the hell would she know that?* “Sorry, Mom, I ... think I’m getting another call. It may be important, bye.”

She hung up and didn’t answer the phone when it rang a few minutes later. *Mom, don’t do*

this, not today.

The phone didn't ring again and Yamaguchi relaxed, hoping that her mother had given up. *This isn't fair*, she thought. *I shouldn't have to put up with her after she's dead. I hope to God she doesn't call the watch commander.* She still shuddered at the thought of the time an officer had come to her door on a "check the welfare." She was a rookie cop then. There were still cops four years later who could bring that up.

The fear her mother's call had induced made it impossible for her to go back to sleep. She got out of bed and went into the kitchen. She cleaned rice and put it in the rice maker and then made green tea the way her mother had taught her. She couldn't help but think of the last year of her mother's life. She had stopped taking her medication and had slid further into depression.

Her mother had loomed so large in her life then. Her father had left her mother a few years earlier. She couldn't really blame him, but after he moved to Japan, she was the one responsible for her mother. Her father paid generous alimony, but it still left her with the day-to-day care of her mother, making sure she took her pills, paid her bills and remembered to eat.

She hated to admit it, but her mother's death came as a relief, a relief that lasted only a few months when her mother contacted her through the AfterNet.

She sat down at the kitchen table and poured her strong green tea from the small ceramic pot her mother insisted made the best tea. She could almost feel her mother's presence.

Oh, my God, she isn't here, is she? She ran back into the bedroom and saw that Munroe had shut down her notebook. OK, she couldn't have been calling from here. And the last time I checked, she was still in Japan, making life miserable for Dad.

She went back to the kitchen after taking the computer with her. While the rice cooker rattled, she checked her email. She saw a message from Munroe, telling her that her mother had

emailed him.

Oh great, now I've dragged him into my circle of hell. She also looked at the last email her mother sent her and saw that it originated from the same Japanese mail server as before.

Suddenly she felt weak and she realized she was sweating, probably from her illness but she knew part of it was her fear.

I do love her, but she's quite insane.

The rice maker pinged and she got up and transferred the cooked rice to a pot and added water. She set that to boil. The rice quickly became a thick glop while she absentmindedly stirred it.

I suppose I could bounce back her emails. Oh right, remember the time you changed your phone number, she asked herself.

After a few more minutes, she got shoyu from the cupboard. Then she took an egg and the Ziplock of sour plums from the refrigerator. She added the egg to the pot, stirring it in. After the egg had cooked in the hot rice, she removed the pot from the heat and transferred the rice to a small Japanese bowl, her mother's favorite. She poured the shoyu, sprinkled dried fish shavings from a small plastic package and added the plums. It was the same food her mother always made for her when she was a little girl and was sick, and it was also the last meal she had made for her mother before she died. It would make most Westerners gag but was good for little Japanese girls and sick dogs, too, her mother would always tell her.

As usual, the food did the trick. The rice settled her stomach and the green tea quieted the caffeine withdrawal she was suffering after a day drinking only orange juice. She put the dishes in the sink and went back to the bedroom and watched TV. That evening, she chatted with her mother.

He didn't know how long he had been waiting for something to happen. Unable to feel a pulse or hear his own breathing, he didn't have the cues to tell him how long he existed in the empty, dark void. He couldn't even tell if he was restrained. He'd have to be able to detect his motion relative to something in order to tell, so he couldn't tell if he was in a vast empty space or still in the box they used to trap him.

He had tried to see something in the darkness, but his environment was as empty of visual light as it was of the larger spectrum of which he was capable of detecting.

Maybe I finally am really, truly dead, he thought to himself. Maybe I transitioned from being disembodied to this. Oh, that's stupid. Somebody forced me into this, and I don't mean God.

He thought again about the other people in the room when the walls started closing. *Are they in here with me?* If they were, he had no way of knowing.

Suddenly light — visible bright daylight — hit him from every direction. He was suddenly outside in a park on a gorgeous summer day, which made no sense. It was December. And he was moving. Or more correctly, he was somehow being moved, against his will. He couldn't fight against it. He couldn't even feel that he could fight against it. He seemed to simply be flowing, like a leaf drifting in a stream.

He watched as children played in the park and he moved toward them. A young woman, his age, with long brown hair, threw a Frisbee back to one of the children and then walked toward him. She had a smile on her face and she reached out a hand toward him, and he saw a hand clasp her hand. And he followed her and he realized she was holding his hand. He couldn't feel her flesh, or his either, but he longed to feel it, to feel her warmth in his hand.

And then the scene faded and he was back in the dark again. The sunlight, the woman, his hand, were gone, and he wanted them back.