

Distraction

A fine romance.

Julian Tang

He was there again.

Jenny Landers walked down the steps of the physics lab to where her bicycle was chained, shaking her head and smiling to herself.

It wasn't that he was unattractive, but she wished that he would just come and talk to her.

"Men!" she sighed to herself in exasperation as she bent to unlock her chain, then stood up to put it in her backpack.

"Er, hello," said a quiet, rather nervous male voice from just beside her.

Jenny almost dropped her backpack. Looking up, she was startled to see the subject of her musings.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to give you a fright," he said, self-consciously.

Jenny felt her face getting hot. "Don't worry, it's OK," she began quickly, looking down and fiddling with her pack to allow her to recover some dignity.

He stuck his hand out. "We haven't met. My name's Jeremy — Jeremy Maitland," he started. Then as an afterthought, "I'm an English major here."

Jenny, not knowing what else to do, allowed social etiquette to kick in and shook his hand, firmly. "Jenny Landers, physics PhD, at your service," she laughed, finally breaking the ice.

"Want to go for a drink?" he asked hesitantly. "I've wanted to talk to you for some time, but didn't know how to, um, approach you."

Jenny grinned in relief. "Sure!"

They ended up in one of the local student hang-outs, finding a seat in a quiet corner.

"So, er, what shall I get you?"

Jenny didn't normally drink much, but tonight, she would make an exception. "What about half a cider?"

Jeremy nodded, smiling nervously, and moved off to join the queue at the bar.

Jenny watched him go, curiously. Although he seemed nervous with her, he moved in a sure and assertive manner. He quickly got the attention of the bartender and came back with a pint of draught for himself, her cider and a bag of corn chips.

"So, what area of research are you in?" asked Jeremy, finally, when the silence became awkward.

"Well," she paused, looking into her glass. "My research is in astrophysics, specifically to look for unusual radio-frequency sources from deep space ..."

"You mean like SETI?" he interrupted, excitedly.

"Yes!" she exclaimed, looking at him, incredulously.

Jeremy continued, speculating. "It seems an impossible task. I mean, from what little I've read, you need to search in multiple directions at multiple wavelengths. From a point source, like Earth on the galactic scale, you cannot cover every angle and the possible number of wavelengths is equally vast." As he finished, Jeremy was staring into the distance, as though his mind were elsewhere.

Jenny couldn't take her eyes off him.

And that was that.



They became a couple soon after, were married a few years later and had triplets — at which point Jenny gave up her lifelong dream of joining the SETI Institute to become a full-time mother. Jeremy showed an amazing talent for predicting stock-market trends and became a very successful investment manager. They lived a long and happy life, with many grandchildren.

Later, as Jeremy lay on his death-bed at the ripe old age of 77, Jenny, still spry at 80, sat quietly beside him, holding his hand.

"We had a good life together, didn't we, Jen?" Jeremy whispered.

The cancer had spread throughout his body. They knew he didn't have long now.

With tears in her eyes, Jenny squeezed his hand. "We did OK."

After a short pause, he asked: "You don't regret giving up your dreams of SETI — even just a little bit?"

Jenny waited a little, before replying. She knew she couldn't lie to him to make him feel better, even now. He would know. "Yes,

a little, I guess — but having children is a worthy substitute, my love."

He held her gaze for a while then nodded. He wanted her to know that he understood what she had sacrificed.

The funeral was a simple affair, just family and close friends. Jenny lingered a little longer at the grave as her children waited respectfully a short distance away, then eventually, she left too.

That night, Jenny would have been intrigued and amazed to see Jeremy's body start to glow brightly in the elegant coffin as the clothes in which he was buried began to vaporize. Then the substance of Jeremy's body shimmered briefly before vanishing.

Moments later, Jeremy Maitland was hovering in deep space, with others of his kind.

Your mission was much ... longer than expected.

Yes, but this way ... this distraction ... was kinder — the same ends were achieved.

Are you sure?

There was a pause, as if his peers were conferring, or perhaps ... *sensing*.

About the same time, on Earth, Elena, one of Jenny Lander's youngest granddaughters was sitting at her grandmother's desk PC, looking through university websites, trying to decide which course she wanted to do and where. Looking up from the screen for a moment, she spotted one of her grandmother's old box-files, marked 'SETI' on one of the upper shelves. Curious, she took it down and started looking inside.

After a few minutes, Jenny walked into the study. "You know, something, Elena," she began, after watching her thoughtfully for a few minutes. "I have some ideas about that project that I haven't told to a soul in over 60 years! Want to hear them?"

Elena looked up, her eyes bright with interest and nodded.

Back in deep space, the *sensing* came to an end. Without any need for further communication, he started on his return journey to Earth.

Julian Tang is a clinical/academic virologist. Like SETI members, he also believes that ET is out there somewhere, but may not want to be found — at least, not yet ...

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