

## HELLO WE WISH TO INFORM YOU THAT...

The image of Istar 370 – located at the edge of the observable universe – winked out of existence on the screen. Simultaneously there was a vague rumbling, felt in the gut rather than the ear, as the massive telescope slewed and found its new target. A fresh image – that of Istar 1402 – appeared on the screen. It was noticeably blue, which was strange, given that most of the objects in the survey were ruddy because they had been exported by the expansion of the universe to its far shores, dimming their adolescent bright faces. Also, the new image was pulsing. It was a blue beacon – the kind of thing that was supposed to send astronomers wild.

Sylvia Blanovsky scowled.

Keeping her eyes on the image of the Information star, she removed the sandwich from between her white teeth, and raised it to her well-shaped nose. It smelled as it had been presented: ham with lettuce and beluga caviar. The caviar, especially, was a sharp aroma in the dead, reprocessed air of the control room. Still feeling annoyed, she put the thing back in her mouth and resumed chewing.

She was not irritated with the food, but with the message which now repeated itself from Istar 1402. The signal was depressing enough to spoil even a gourmet lunch.

As the message from far away filled another redundant file in the Observatory's archive, Sylvia swung her feet off from the instrument panel. Her bare toes scrunched up on the grey floor as she bent forward to scrutinize the blue speck on the screen. The image of the source pulsed mesmerically, its brightening and dimming finding a response in the irises of her brown eyes.

She now knew what the message meant. But her joy at decoding the first definite message from another civilization had been short-lived. The message was not what she or the teeming billions on Earth had expected. And the fact that it kept repeating was something of an anticlimax. In addition, she was unsure if she should inform Glen Haggerty – her fellow observer – about the discovery.

With a frown on her usually clear forehead, she abruptly shook her curly hair and walked away from the screen, leaving the remains of her lunch on the console. A trail of sweaty footprints followed her to the viewport.

It was hot in the observation room. She would have preferred to go completely naked, but out of consideration for the maleness of her companion she wore shorts. The sex thing, she thought, would also have to be resolved. But right now, Sylvia was preoccupied with the problem of whether or not to tell Glen about the message.

The woman put an arm across the transparent material that broke the grey monotony of the walls. Resting her forehead on her arm, she stared through the viewport, letting her eyes seek the horizon.

Inspiration, however, was not easily found in the blasted terrain outside. It consisted of boulders: big ones whose valleys were filled by medium ones with gaps jammed by small ones. Their tops were rounded – the result of ages of alternating hot and cold which had chipped their surfaces, so that the landscape now resembled a dump of geological eggshells. The mounds of climate-baked rocks made for a near, hummocky horizon. This was broken by a larger structure than usual, which because of its resemblance to a bear had been dubbed Yogi. It was actually a large boulder which supported a smaller one, the whole topped by a mast. This relayed environmental data to the control room, and their results back to Base.

Sylvia suddenly pulled her arm away from the window, wincing. The viewport was hot, and the land outside even hotter. It was approaching midday. Somewhere on the other side of the Observatory, light was pouring down from a sky that no person could bear to look at.

This was a place where humans did not belong.

Sure, there was air out there. Mainly nitrogen, and even some oxygen. But there was no – *absolutely* no – water vapour.

The humidity was 0.0, always. No water during the searing days, and none during the freezing nights. A person might manage a few steps among the brooding boulders (indeed, Glen had tried it). But the parching atmosphere meant that human lungs shriveled like sponges in a blast furnace. It did not matter whether it was day or night: there was just not enough water to enable a person to survive.

Which was exactly *why* the Observatory was there.

No water vapour meant no absorption of the signals. And this was crucial for observing the Information stars. This class of astronomical sources was very weak, and so had only recently been discovered. A typical Istar was on the limit of what technology could detect, both distant in space and far back in time. The radiation, traveling vast length-eons through the

universe, arrived at the Telescope as feeble pulses. The wavelength was typically about the width of a man's finger – which meant in energy terms that the radiation from an Istar was billions of times less than in a ray of ordinary light. In fact, the radiation from an Istar registered on the gigantic collecting surface of the instrument with less than the vitality of a melting snowflake.

Not that a snowflake would be tolerated by the Telescope's massive banks of sensors: picking up the signal from an Istar at all meant that there could be no absorbing water at all.

Sylvia turned her well-muscled back on the viewport and walked with determination back to the control panel. She stuffed the last piece of the sandwich into her mouth, leaving her hands free to adjust a number of instruments.

The blue image of Istar 1402 disappeared from the screen. There was a faint jarring motion as the telescope turned, and then the red image of Istar 1907 came up. It was not winking, but stared at her with the dead eye of a defunct intelligence.

For of the approximately 2000 such sources known, only the blue Istar 1402 was still sending a message. The other stars had complex spectra, which appeared to contain remnants of structure, but they were no longer broadcasting. They were like a string of lighthouses around the periphery of some cosmic ocean – their lights left on, shining steadily but uselessly into the sea of spacetime. What had happened to their population of keepers? Why had they died out and stopped signaling?

More importantly, would Istar 1402 meet the same fate? As it was, the message it was sending was simply repeating, as if its keeper had only had the strength to switch on some automatic device.

And Sylvia – who had responsibility for the sources numbered 1000 and up – new from her observations that the strength of the modulation in Istar 1402 was gradually decreasing. The ups and downs around the average value of the signal were slowly fading. It was as if she was watching the credits roll at the end of some cosmological movie which mankind had missed. And even for that summary, the lights in the cosmic theatre were going out ...

The woman spun suddenly on her heel as a noise interrupted her reverie.

A man entered the control room, yawning. He was older than the girl, but his torso rippled with the muscular evidence of systematic exercise. Paradoxically, he limped – the consequence of three missing toes on his right foot, which had been amputated following

frostbite. This was itself the result of a foolhardy (if successful) attempt to fix the antenna on top of the formation of boulders known as Yogi. The expedition had been carried out at night; but it was not so much the bone-numbing cold which had caused the damage, but the ravenous sucking of moisture out of the skin by the bone-dry atmosphere. The mission had been both heroic and stupid: the one because they relied on the antenna for contact with Base, and the other because the telescope's water-contaminated sensors had taken some time to recover.

Favouring his right leg, the man walked over to the vacant seat in front of the console and flopped into it. "Good morning, Sylvia."

"Good afternoon, Glen."

This was their standard opening conversation, done in a neutral tone of voice. Whoever had fixed the protocol for the mission must have liked symmetry: the working day was split into two parts, and each of the two observers had care of half of the Istars.

The only break in the routine of the Observatory came at the times of crew replacement. But even the manning schedule was like a closely-interlocking chain, with virtually no gaps. At long but fixed intervals, one new person arrived and one old one departed. In this way, each observer experienced two companions during a run.

Glen Haggerty had been there longest, and Sylvia Blanovsky knew that she only had to put up with him for a certain time. Nevertheless, she found the man incredibly irritating.

Even now, at the start of his shift when he could hardly be fatigued, he sprawled rather than sat in the chair. His casual attitude to the job bordered on indifference. Also, while he had agreed to wear shorts, his wide-legged position revealed a hairy testicle which did nothing to excite her.

Aware of the woman's disapproving look but not meeting it, the man leaned forward and swung his hand over the surface of the console. A cascade of bread crumbs fell to the grey floor, landing near the knobs of the man's amputated toes.

Disdaining any comment on the remains of her lunch, the woman stalked from the room, leaving the man in charge.

Sylvia turned left out of the control room, to take the long way back to her apartment. The Telescope was of a new design, and looked like a gigantic clam shell buried in the boulders, its concave surface pointing to the stars. Around the edge of the installation were the rooms with windows where the crew lived, each with ample space. There were also places to carry out

activities, including a well-equipped gymnasium and a small swimming pool (the water had cost a fortune to get here). The central regions of the installation, by contrast, were dimly lit and given over to machines and computers. These were the guts of the Telescope. For its enormous bowl was formed from over a million units, each of which could be independently adjusted to make the most perfect possible surface on which to receive signals from the Istars. The whole thing was mounted on a super-conducting foundation, so it could swing around to view in various directions, like a mammoth merry-go-round.

The girl began walking fast, and then broke into a jog. The exercise felt good, and after a while she started sprinting. She only started to slow down when the bouncing of her bare breasts caused them to ache. By the time she arrived at her apartment she was gasping for breath and covered in sweat.

Ordering the door open, she entered a living room that was decorated in unmistakably feminine tints. Peeling off her sweat-drenched shorts, she threw them into a corner and entered the shower.

“Yikes!”

The water was unreasonably cold. But it took away the heat generated by her run; and the following air blast left her skin pink and fresh.

Passing by the full-length mirror, she was young enough and vain enough to stop and admire her figure. It was trim. The skin was well-toned, with a few chocolate-chip freckles above her breasts. By some matching of genes, the same dark-brown colour appeared in her curly hair, deep-set eyes and the triangle between her legs.

It was a pity that Haggerty was such a retard. Because she suddenly felt like having sex.

She went to the door of the apartment and locked it. (Though she realized that this was something of an empty gesture, insofar as there was an over-ride in the control room for use in medical emergencies.) She was not really worried about Haggerty, who despite his jockish character did not drink or do drugs excessively, and was very unlikely to force his way into her room. And anyway, she could probably outrun him, given his gimp leg.

Picking up a bottle of oil from the bathroom, she lay down on her bed. Languorously, she began moving her fingers between her thighs, watched only by Yogi through the window ...

In the control room, Glen Haggerty finished his run on Istar 0083, and sent the data to the antenna atop the bear-shaped pile of rocks, for rebroadcasting to Base. The complicated antenna

was the information life-line for the Observatory; and while its well-being had cost him three toes, the man was not resentful. (He would replace the digits anyway after his tour of duty was over.) However, he did resent Sylvia Blankovsky's casual attitude towards that and other pieces of their equipment. The situation had been better with the woman's predecessor, whom Haggerty had called the Old Man. That white-haired, brooding-eyed individual had loved his instruments almost as much as his daily bottle of whisky. Where the oldster had obtained the alcohol, Haggerty never did find out. Maybe he made it in the Observatory's laboratory. The Old Man dosed himself with booze from when he got up to when he went to bed. Remarkably, the delicate astronomical sensors and the quality of what they recorded had always been perfect. Also, it was the Old Man who had risked his own ageing lungs to go outside and rescue the frost-bitten, unconscious Haggerty. No simple drunkard could have manipulated the controls on the airlock – which guarded against a loss of water as jealously as that on a spaceship guarded against loss of oxygen. And no stereotypical alcoholic could have handled the autodoc – which had clipped off the three pieces of desiccated tissue that had been toes. Yes, the Old Man had been O.K. Briefly, Haggerty speculated on whether Sylvia would have taken the chance to rescue his carcass under similar circumstances. Glumly, he muttered “No. She doesn't like me enough.”

Why had Administration sent her here anyhow? Surely anybody with half a brain and a handful of hormones could see that a male/female crew was bound to have problems – sexual and otherwise. Haggerty set up the next target, Istar 0101, and started the observational run. This object was one of the less interesting: its image stared stolidly at him from the screen, while its spectrum on the monitor showed a maze of information-carrying lines but with large chunks missing, presumably due to some cosmic catastrophe. Absently, the man started to scratch his crotch.

Sylvia was pretty – he had to admit that; and given the chance, he would have been on top of her several times a day. But the woman had taken a dislike to him, and she was loaded with petty problems. A gritty feeling beneath the sole of his right foot, caused by stale bread crumbs and dried fish eggs, reminded him of one problem: she was a sloppy eater. Well, so what? It was not a big thing in itself. But it was one of a lot of small things that amounted to a big thing. When there is nobody else around, and there is little else in the way of entertainment, even the small things take on meaning.

Glen Haggerty's thoughts drifted through the repertoire of Sylvia Blanovsky's shortcomings. Apart from being a messy eater, she was also a *noisy* eater: her thick lips were frequently apart, emitting the sounds of mastication. These were accompanied by an equally irritating noise from her molars which clicked together with each chew, like repeating mouse-traps. The woman had a nice, sensuous mouth (for which the man sometimes fantasized a different use). But occasionally, what was in her mouth in the way of food would escape. As Glen had phrased it early in their relationship and therefore gently: "Sylvia, it's called eating when the food stays *inside* your mouth." She had not replied to this, preferring instead to wipe up an errant blob of custard on the end of her forefinger, which she sucked avidly as if afraid of starvation. There was no risk of a food shortage, however, and the woman had gained some weight since arrival. Some of this was distributed in two bands of fat – which the man called "handles" – above her hips. Glen regarded Sylvia's infrequent runs as a non-serious attempt at fitness. She also seemed unconcerned about other aspects of her body, such as the hair in her armpits and the over-long toenails.

"All silly things!" Haggerty exclaimed at the image of Istar 0101. Trivial, human things. Infinitesimal things – compared to the star at the furthest distances of the universe, which had once been the home of an intelligent race that had apparently died out.

What had happened to the inhabitants of the star system I-0101? Maybe the wives and husbands (if they had such) got pissed off with each other, because the toothpaste tube was squeezed in the middle rather than the end? Perhaps in the psychological pressure-cooker of an over-crowded and starving world, the petty problems had led to some kind of fluoride fury? Possibly, there had been a war of triviality, with hordes of strange creatures lambasting one another with loofahs?

Haggerty suddenly laughed. What a load of self-indulgent rubbish! But that was how the human brain reacted in isolation – it tried to fill the psychological vacuum with speculation. At least, he thought, I have a sense of humour. Something which Blanovsky lacked.

Daydreaming no more, the man progressed to the next source on his list, Istar 0239. The chair on which he was sitting moved slightly, in reaction to the telescope rotating on its super-conducting foundation to find the new target. This was one of Haggerty's favourites. The star was not pulsing, but its spectrum was enormously complex. It was, in fact, a superposition of *two* spectra. It was Haggerty who had discovered this, as the result of long periods of careful

analysis. He was proud of this achievement, but was unsure how to interpret it. Did it mean that one civilization had invaded another? If so, it was an argument against the widely-held hypothesis that intelligence implied peacefulness. Or did it mean that one civilization had come to the aid of another, in the hope of avoiding the demise of one or both? If so, it was an argument in favour of the belief that intelligence implied altruism.

Haggerty did not know what the double spectrum of I-0239 meant about the civilization whose data was frozen in the spectra. All he knew for sure was that the double star was dead, like all of the single ones, with the exception of the blue source I-1402. But that system was Sylvia's responsibility; and even though it was unique in that it was still broadcasting, Glen strongly doubted that the girl would be able to decipher its message. After all, it had taken him ages to figure out the static spectrum of I-0239, so it was reasonable that it would be even harder to translate the dynamic signal from I-1402. And then again, that only one of nearly 2000 sources was still alive sent its own sombre message: the fate of alien civilizations was (apparently) to die.

The man had his own, human-affected idea of how a dead, alien world might appear. He envisioned a globe covered in beautiful buildings of fantastic architecture. Subterranean and out of sight were colossal machines, producing enormous power from strange technology. The world's surface was always bright – the inhabitants had banished night; and while they existed had lived carefree, leisure-filled lives. But now the people were gone. Their buildings were empty. Only the machines toiled underground, sending power to the surface, where it blazed from a billion left-on lights. In other words, Glen Haggerty's picture of an Istar was something like a gigantic casino after a fire alarm.

The man's mood became maudlin. Would humanity *ever* make Contact? Find friends among the stars?

It was not for want of trying. The first systematic Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence focussed on stars near the Sun. Those of F and G type, with similar properties, which might have attendant planets suitable for life. Paradoxically – in view of later developments – that first search was refused funding by the administration of the day. (This was a politically awkward amalgam of science and finances known as N.A.S.A.) It went ahead due to the philanthropy of a couple of individuals who had made fortunes designing the first computers. Later, the search received a boost by the discovery – using conventional optical telescopes – of a large number of



planets in orbits around distant stars. A few of these even had reasonable surface conditions – but no detectable life. Then came new types of telescope, sensitive to wavebands outside that of the human eye, and capable of peering through the gas and dust which obscured the Milky Way. A few sources were found which indicated life, but *not* intelligent life. After all, you cannot have a conversation with a blade of grass. By now, S.E.T.I. had achieved respectable status. Money flowed, more sensitive instruments were built. But it gradually became clear that mankind's own galaxy – the Milky Way – was devoid of creatures who wished to communicate. It was at about this stage in history that the Loneliness Factor came in. Simply put, the human race became increasingly aware that it might be ALONE. Driven psychologically by this, and technologically by even more radical designs for telescopes, the search went outside the Milky Way. First to other nearby galaxies such as the Magellanic Clouds and the Andromeda Nebula, and then to ever more remote sources. To probe the vast distances of intergalactic space, the best waveband was the one preferred by the universe itself, that is the one of the cosmic microwave background or C.M.B. Unfortunately, this type of radiation is blocked by water vapour, which is common in the atmospheres of planets and in certain regions of space itself. However, a notable attempt to avoid this problem had already been made in connection with other astrophysical studies. It was called the Atacama Cosmology Telescope, and was situated in a desert. This instrument was the prototype for ever-larger probes dedicated to studies of the C.M.B. It was these new telescopes which were gradually commandeered by the search for other civilizations. Driven by the irrational but understandable Loneliness Factor, the population swayed the funding priorities of the astronomical authorities. Eventually, as much money was going into S.E.T.I. as into all other branches of astrophysical research combined. And still no luck.

Until the discovery of the Information stars or Istars. These objects were found to lie at almost unimaginable distances; and due to the time lag associated with the propagation of light, they were seen as they were long ago. As one popularizer of astronomy wrote, it was as if an old man looked backwards through time to see himself as a child. So, the Istars were remote and young; *and* their light contained information that could only have been produced by intelligent beings. It was therefore a bitter blow to find that most of these clever races had apparently suffered an early death.

The only one of approximately 2000 Istars that still showed signs of life was I-1402. Glen Haggerty did not expect that Sylvia Blanosky would succeed in deciphering its message,

given the trouble he had experienced decoding the information in the dead source I-0101. But then, she was a strange girl. Maybe her mental closedness concealed academic brilliance. And maybe her physical repression hid a seething pot of sexual desire...

The man came out of his reverie to discover that he had a tremendous erection. His penis was rigid, its head projecting from the blanket of foreskin, like that of a hungry bear emerging from its lair. Surprised and frustrated, he regarded the incucubus, wondering whether to encourage or quell it...

The woman, meanwhile was waking. Her pubic hair was still sticky, and she could tell from the feel that her labia were still slightly swollen. Oh for the Dial-A-Stud service back home! But here there was only Glen.

Glen the sports-fan, who thought that men colliding with each other to gain possession of a ball ranked with ballet. Glen, who spent ages working out with weights, to hone a body hardly anybody would see, and then mar it by losing his toes in a stupid attempt at heroism. Glen, the man who passing a mirror would cast an appreciative sidelong glance at himself and run an approving finger down his obsessively-shaven jaw. The man who, paradoxically, oiled the hair on his chest to make it look thicker and darker. And, again, used the laser in the laboratory to artificially whiten his teeth. The same teeth which bit precisely into his food, though that was invariably the ready-made dinners the kitchen dispensed on demand, and never a proper meal prepared from the stores of frozen meat and vegetables. Glen, the *apparent* man who had never had a long-term relationship with a woman or sired a child, because he was afraid of the responsibility. But who, nevertheless, had made a reasonable income by donating sperm to a fertility clinic, before starting his present job. In short: Glen the grown-up kid.

Sylvia, pacing about her apartment, realized she was in a bitchy mood. And she knew why. While asleep, her subconscious mind had been chewing away at a problem she had found difficult to resolve while awake. Now, however, it was more-or-less clear: she would have to tell Glen that she had decoded the message from Istar 1402. The thing that was troubling her presently was the follow-on to that decision. Namely, *how* to tell him.

Preoccupied, the woman entered the washroom and splashed some water in her face. She would have liked another shower, to dispel the stickiness between her legs; but water was rationed, and in any case she rather liked the residue left by her own love-making. What she did

not like was the frown between her chestnut eyebrows and the serious expression thrown back at her by the mirror.

“Just go and tell him,” she said to herself.

Still pondering how to inform Glen that she had cracked the code but kept it secret, Sylvia unlocked the door of her apartment. Her shorts lay forgotten in the corner by the bed.

In the control room, Glen saw an apparition reflected in the shiny surfaces of the instruments. The vision was sudden enough and attractive enough to instantly replace all thoughts of masturbation. Turning guiltily in his seat, he kicked his shorts under the console and tried to appear nonchalant.

“Glen,” said the woman uncertainly. “There’s something I have to tell you.”

“Oh, yes?” Haggerty’s eyes had been on the woman’s sweaty, naked crotch. But now he moved them up to her concerned-looking eyes. Having jumped to the obvious conclusion about imminent Sex, he was having second thoughts. However, masculinity ran in his veins like electricity ran in a wire. He patted his thighs solicitously, ignoring the aggressive spike of his penis. “Come and sit down,” he invited with insincere concern.

Sylvia shook her curly hair, ignoring this adolescent overture. Then, deciding to get to the point, she blurted: “I know what the message says.”

There was a period of silence, while the man’s hormone-drugged brain strove to understand this statement. Then he said, in a voice tinged with puzzlement and disappointment, “You do?”

“Yes,” confirmed the woman.

Abruptly tiring of the pantomime-like conversation, she strode over to the control board and brought up the image of Information star 1402. Its blueness reinforced those of Haggerty’s eyes, which however were gloating over the girl’s naked and very near body. It was as if an art connoisseur had suddenly had the Mona Lisa shoved into his face.

“And here’s the message,” added Blanovsky. She pointed to it on the screen, hoping that its angular script would penetrate the fog of sexual appetite which swirled around her companion.

There were only three lines of text on the monitor. Three short phrases from the most remote parts of the universe. Three bits of information that were all mankind had to show for its long search for intelligence in the cosmos.

The woman, suddenly angry that the man was more interested in one female crotch than humankind's destiny, grabbed the back of his chair and swung it around so that he was obliged to look at the message.

The first line was simple and devastating:

*Hello. We wish to inform you that you are alone in the universe.*

Sylvia, looking sideways at Glen, saw his eyes widen as the impact of the message sank in. Then they crimped, as if in pain.

The second line of the communication was more technical, but informative:

*This is an automatic broadcast, and there is not much energy.*

The woman noted that the man's shoulders had begun to slump in the face of the awful news from Out There. However, his penis was tougher, and maintained a self-assured stance.

The third line of the message was the longest, and had caused Blankovsky some trouble in decoding. But the nearest to the meaning she could achieve was this:

*We who are gone do not have much advice, except to be nice to each other, always.*

Now the woman noted a significant change in the man by her side. However, it was a curiously mixed change. His pained eyes clenched, and a tear squeezed out. At the same time, he emitted the deepest, most forlorn sigh she had ever heard come from a human being. But even as this was happening, the man's shoulders were coming back up, and his chest started to inflate. Slowly, he stood up. With an obstinate shake of his head, the man flung off the concerns of outer space.

The woman took a step back, puzzled. She was even more baffled when a broken kind of smile appeared on his face.

"Well!"

"Well what?" Sylvia responded, not knowing where things were headed.

Glen took a step forward, dragging his lopped-off right foot as if it were a mark of honour. Indeed, his whole demeanor seemed to have changed from one of defeat to one of expectant triumph.

"Well, *they* didn't make it." Haggerty's voice was calm and careful. "But they were nice enough to tell us how *we* might get further." He was confident, a few words of wisdom from across the void supplying a new, ready-made philosophy for his soul. Like one of the prepackaged dinners he used to fuel his body.

Blanovsky blinked. There was some kind of strength here which she had not anticipated. True, it was an immature kind of strength. Uncertain, she realized for the first time that she was completely naked. The control room of the Telescope was hot; and while its gigantic disk gazed out into the cold depths of empty space, *here* it was warm and cozy. She licked her lips, wondering what was to come. The man's penis, immune to everything, stuck out from his loins like a sword with a challenge.

"They said to be *nice* to each other," Haggerty reminded. Experienced in philandering, he did not make the mistake of moving forward, something which would have set the girl into flight.

As it was, she stood there, rocking slightly on her feet.

There's a big universe out there, Sylvia thought. And it's empty.

EMPTY.

Nobody to talk to. No friendly aliens. No fifth cavalry to come and help if we get into trouble.

Maybe that was the problem with mankind – always assuming somebody else would come along to fix the mess. Passing the buck between themselves for local conflicts; and hoping there would be something bigger to help (God? Aliens?) if there were a global problem. But as of now, the game was different: there was no help.

Humankind was on its own.

"Hell," muttered Sylvia. "We're *alone*."

The world telescoped down to the control room with its close air and its soft floor, and one woman and one man.

Sylvia took a step forward.

Glen's smile broadened. He looked like a teenager, with his silly big chest and strutting cock. But cleverly, he kept quiet.

The woman stood in front of the man, her legs slightly open. The man extended his arms, and gently drew her in.

"But afterwards," she said, "don't make me eat one of those horrible premade pizzas."

He laughed. Then she smiled. They were reading from a new menu.