



# Loxahatchee

by Etienne Doyle

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**I**t traveled faster now, a bureaucrat's trick, milky panes and faces, the smell of plastics. Isabel sat by her father's leg. She was not trembling. Her eyes were soft. There was not a thought about her father's life and his soul unnourished. He was looking out the window and there weren't the wood storks he was thinking of. Tropical dusk pierced the falsely preserved.

Things were not simple in the world beyond the window. Out over the rim of the top pane of glass, satellites complicated the sexuality of stars. Isabel sat drawing heads of cows, coyotes, marsh rabbits. She drew a cloud that looked like a barred owl. She passed jokes at her small plasticine robot, the toy worm companion Mr. Condorcet, who in turn made passes at her skin with a water color brush.

Playful black compost in the hot shade outside wanted to look in. Her father mumbled, "there are many that have nothing to say until it disappears. That is the thing." He lifted his hand. Isabel sang a small soft song, made up, about the edges of her drawing paper. "My drawing paper has no voice it only speaks through me," she sang. She was sure that moths would be coming later. She was sure Mr. Condorcet would be afraid of them again.

She looked at her father's boots beside him. They looked like an old deep layer of an old man, lying like they were not breathing but were supposed to. In the house it was quiet.

The clouds outside the window were enormous. Isabel sat, like under trees, by his leg peering up to his face with all the odd grown hairs. It was June. The sound of the Loxahatchee river failed to exist. His eyes were hard in his face like dry lines from a dead river running into the brow. His ears listened for the Loxahatchee.

Her father's leg was not going anywhere. Violent

weight pushed down on his shoulders. The unbreathable life of civilization choked him. Still, his leg. His eyes above his leg. The prison of the leg, quiet and flesh and gator-like. He killed for the river. He hated passionately for the river. After a long silence she sat in the carpet as he rose and went to the door to listen hard at it. And she was always watching him listen hard at it. The house was surrounded by agents. The spirits in the house sat silent with their waning magic. Small whispers. Mr. Condorcet listened to the spirits.

Her father's eyes grew. She watched them grow. He was afraid. Human noises scuffled in the front yard. Cops in armor took positions behind thousand year old cypress trees, the last of their kind.

The bullhorn called her father. He had murdered two power company PR executives from off planet for the death of the Loxahatchee. He was smiling and looking terrified. His strong knobby fingers shook under their own weight. He armed himself with his shotgun and walked to the door. He felt the door and then walked back to his chair. He looked at the carpet and looked at Isabel. His eyes were red and cloudy. A small dark orb in the back of his eye squirmed around like a moon drowning in a flooded universe. He walked to the door again and sat before it, counting something in a way that seemed like prayer. He stood up, felt the door, opened the door and walked outside.

Isabel thought, from the depth of the carpet, that she could hear the limpkins rushing off from the loud cracks of gun fire that followed. The sounds pushed through and beyond her father into her ears—metal, bone, wind. There were tiny tiny ghosts in each noise, fragmenting into tinier pieces. She heard her father's gurgle, his throat reaching out for himself which was winding up from his body. She knew he would have wanted alligators to eat his body. She knew he was already working his way under the house. She knew





he wouldn't make it. She knew they'd take his body away and that the worms in the yard would be sad.

"How sad are the worms?" Mr. Condorcet asked Isabel, his paneled mouth display in a frenzy. "Sadder than you or me," she replied. Isabel pocketed Mr. Condorcet and ran up the stairs of the house to the brown hallway of the second floor. Agents were swarming in through the front door. She entered her parent's old room, the one they used before her mother died. Isabel remembered her mother, Rosa, and father fighting the night Rosa blew herself up while bomb building. Her parents old room was a cold room, simple, critical of weakness, but with a strange radiance like staring into a cup of tea. They had been in love in the room. It smelled like that. Spirits lived in the room.

Isabel feared she would be taken to prison if the agents found her. She feared the authorities would find video in Mr. Condorcet's files of her masturbating late at night and she felt too old and too young to be masturbating. She feared her body and she feared confinement and the cold cities of the people who funded the authorities. Besides, there wasn't a way to say it. Not a way. Things accumulate that are unspeakable. There are many worlds. And sometimes there are none. Isabel knew of no other world but the Loxahatchee and if that world were to die to her she would want all the worlds to die. She knew her mother had learned to hate her father, that her father never learned to hate her mother, that they both loved the river, that her body was tired, that she and Mr. Condorcet and the spirits must flee. She knew her father was dead and she wasn't sad. She knew she would go. She knew she would detonate her parent's old room, taking the agents that had covered the yard of cypress knees, everything in the area in fact, the hydro station and café, to a charred and restful beginning. Her father's body would burn up here.

### Adrift on an Insurgent Starcraft October 3039

**T**he stars. Country tried to find Isabel's hand, a thin hand, found her hand on her waist, found it amazingly strange, the movement of skin, the bulbous round movement from the ribs inward to the hip, to the bone, to the pant line. Isabel's underwear line was something unexplainable to the body, to both bodies. Just around the edge of the shadow folding over was heartache, history, heartbeat, the counting of time. Isabel pulled her hand into Country's shirt, feeling the spine, the hair in the curvature of the lower back, the smell of old sweat, old tear drops, and the old false wood of the chamber loft seeped into her back muscles.

Three days of cuddling as the worlds collapsed beyond the craft. Cities run on empty, time opening up. The thin separating shades that one learns staring through a window, feeling love and sadness remade in quiet and panic.

Country had a hurting hip bone, lying on her side on the flat plastic bed, arm across the belly of Isabel, fingers touching each other, not wanting to move even for comfort. The toes moving the way they do. Two planets circulated in and out of the window. Both were shimmering and dying. Neither was Earth. Country, with her thin hair, rolled away from Isabel toward the ships interior to witness the sterility and the rose color of the furniture. She wept. It was quiet. Mr. Condorcet was busy doing an internal systems check on his data file, leaning against a small stack of old plastic books.

"When we found you we tried to feed you bottles of fruit but you wouldn't eat. You were just looking at me without expression. There wasn't a way for us to communicate," Country told Isabel, scratching her leg like a cat, running her fingers into the hairs. "We couldn't get you to stop masturbating. You seemed otherworldly in your fits."

"I didn't want anyone to see me. I don't want you to see me do that," Isabel whispered. It had been eight years since Isabel's father was killed, since she had detonated her parent's home, since she had eluded her identity to become part of the underground. Clear plastic moths fluttered around the ceiling space of the chamber loft.

The light of the loft burned amber in the wings of the moths as they turned and dipped in play. Isabel's eyes were peeling backwards into themselves, calling on some spirit she had forgotten. She flittered into daydream and back, towards the vision of the white and rose ceiling. She imagined the cities of the worlds. Each city must draw power from the ghosts of birds. She thought she knew it. She thought each city was circumambulated by a web of thinnest design to catch the fresh and frightened spirits of birds who died en masse. She saw the small bird ghosts flailing in the webbing and looked deeper, seeing even tinier spirits, the spirits of the bird's hearts fluttering out to escape their panicking host. She watched into near infinitude as ghost died into smaller compartmentalized nano-ghosts, until each was trapped into smaller and smaller webbing and converted into energy for the cities. Country swallowed all her saliva with despair in the middle of a forgotten breath and choked up for a moment. Isabel didn't notice.

Isabel left the room as a sun loomed in through the window. She didn't motion at all to Country. She walked down a long corridor of white to a mess hall. She opened a box of sweetened corn stars and poured a cup of synthetic coffee. A tall man sitting at an adjacent table stared into his coffee with a smile on his face. He was one of the insurgent bomb technicians on the inconspicuous tourist class ship hovering over planet Liberty.

## Liberty

It seemed late. Isabel was afraid of the way the broken glass rested under the neon light advertising a diet energy drink. Steam wasn't evacuating from the glass but Isabel felt a fever looking at it. It was perfect. The glass must have had a ghost now. She hadn't been in a city in sometime. Cars rolled by with the smell of chaffed bulletproof plastic. There were lights everywhere. The smell of people was visual. She had memorized the address of an office downtown, section 7. She hailed a taxi.

"The sun catches the advertisement just right, eh?" the driver, a short male with a friendly set of eyes said, pointing up at a teleboard. A woman with long legs was hunched over on her knees. Her head was out of view and hidden by the angle of the image that focused on her ass. Three men stood before her, their faces below the nose covered in foam. They were shaving. It was unclear what she was doing but her genitals were shaved. The sun made a beam that lighted on her ass. Isabel pretended not to notice. The air was pushing all around the cab. "Where you going?" the driver asked.

"10003 Nextera Towers," she replied.

"You from this part of the city?"

"No," she responded. It would be an obvious lie to say she was. She had studied the style and culture of Liberty and especially the five-hundred mile sector of city she would be working in but she could not chance pretending to be a local. "I'm from Earth."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"No, don't be. I have done well for myself there. I have no regrets."

"I would say so. You seem healthy. You work for Nextera?" he asked, looking into the rearview. "They say we are next. I hear our crops are failing now," he went on.

"I wouldn't worry," she said. "The authorities have set up an effective quarantine." She watched the city. Suddenly Isabel imagined her mother near the window of a building hovering above the taxi. She saw her mother some fourteen stories up downing a bottle of cough syrup, smiling. Her mother was beautiful and young. Stars filled her eyes. This had happened before. The advertisement inducers had reached her, often with less clarity and more static, as a child growing up on Earth. They were very strong and effective on Liberty.

"Infinity Sigh Cough Syrup," the driver said, "I love that advertisement. It allows me to see my mother again." Isabel closed her eyes. The advertisement was drawing from Isabel's brain receptors the appropriate childhood jingle to blend more nostalgia into the product placement. It was a tune her father played on the banjo, the *Battle of Loxahatchee*. Isabel wondered what the driver's mother looked like.

"Your mother still alive?" he asked.

"No, Yours?"

"Yes, but I have no time to visit. That's why I take this toll-way. I can see her two, sometimes three times a day. I don't know how she can drink so much of that cough syrup without getting drunk though. Ha!" He amused himself. Isabel saw the Nextera building in the distance. It was twice as tall as any of the others.

## Nextera

The smell of diesel and males getting off, candy, the sound of motionless tires. Lights inside the ears of passersby. Isabel looked up at the building. She pulled out her notebook, flipped to an empty page and drew a portrait of a dream reduced to pure density. It looked like a bullet hole. *Let's be done with thinking of new ways forward. Let's come back. Let's come back to your hand. Sometimes it touches mine. We can build from this a way out of the clock. There is a brilliance in our loving decay, the red lifting of our bodies when the dying gets goosed and the controls are found weakened. Lets move in this direction, clenching and biting each other out of the clock.* Isabel felt the metal walkway beneath her. She felt her feet. There was a bright green light behind each of the windows. All of the curtains looked like meat. The building seemed to escape beyond the planet. In her side bag Mr. Condorcet wiggled for comfort.



## Dawson Herero

"I'm here to see Mr. Herero," Isabel said with a soft voice to the woman behind the visitors' booth in the lobby of the Nextera building. "I have an appointment."

"Your name please."

"Insi. I am from Earth." Isabel replied.

"One moment please." The receptionist turned to her computer. Well dressed executives filled the lobby, some chatting, most moving through with great speed. Isabel felt the architecture press against her. There were lights in everyone's eyes. There were small affirmations of beauty, a wisp of perfume, part sanitation part field of stars, a woman in a milk-yellow dress, a quirky shadow that wouldn't go away with its creator. Under a pink and vermilion gate in the center of the lobby there was an art installation. It was sensuous almost wet but meaningless.

The receptionist gazed at Isabel. "Mrs. Lee, correct, Mrs. Insi Lee?" *I take as my dawn the white moon. I take as my car the green star. "Mrs. Lee?" I take as my exercised demon the fresh black plum. I take as my state the chewed rind.* Her outside body was turning pale and she was motionless. *I take as my control the half-sleeping cat. "Excuse me, ma'am?" I take as my dream the ejection seat. I take as my take the impatient abyss. I take as my enemy the specter of operations.* "You can proceed this way Mrs. Lee. Mr. Herero will see you." *I take as my fear the will of ten-thousand doors. I take as my love the field of beings.* The receptionist tapped Isabel on the shoulder, her painted face nearly touching Isabel's face. Isabel almost vomited. The burning liquid fell back down her throat.

"Hello Mrs. Insi. Welcome to Liberty. I hope your trip was pleasant." Dawson Herero, CEO of Nextera Energy, grabbed Isabel by the arm as though an old time companion. It wasn't aggressive. It was familiar. They had never met. His face was wide, partially invisible. It couldn't completely be looked at.

"It was. It's great to be off Earth."

"Please, let's speak on my balcony. I'll have a meal prepared." He glanced at Isabel and motioned her forward through his living room. There were red flowers, real ones, on an end table. There was a tiny garden of amaranth and lavender in the center of the room. Over a fire place hung an enormous painting. It was a famous piece by Bovatol, the neo-futurist. In the center of several thousand concentric rings the word "collaborator" sat in simple font. It was the core of the universe and the soul and an example of high art on Liberty.

"Insi, look there." Herero gestured to the balcony. "Look at the way the light pulls in. You can see the edges of it." It looked to Isabel like a vortex of spirits pulled from all angles toward the edge of the balcony. "This is some view Mr. Herero," Isabel said moving through the door onto the balcony.

"The brilliant light of empire. It all gathers here. I've had a special attractor placed along the edges of my office." He ordered food and wine from a thin woman

that had been standing statuesque near the balcony entrance. Isabel and Herero stared at the vortex. The layers of the city hit up into the sky like a barelegged boy bearing an urn in one hand and his penis, newly discovered, in the other. One building deep below looked like a milk bottle.

"Have you ever been to Olitic, Indiana Mrs. Lee?" Herero's face changed expression. "And have you seen the Empire quarry, the one the stones the Empire State Building were quarried from?"

"Yes," she responded wondering the point. Her father had taken her across the wastelands of the east coast to Olitic when she was young.

"Did you throw anything into the quarry Mrs. Lee," he asked?

"Yes, I suppose I did."

"What did you throw in the Empire quarry Mrs. Lee?" His face was stoic and dispassionate.

"Well, let me think. A rock I suppose, or, yeah. I threw a rock in."

"Did you know that the rock that was excavated from that pit as well as the rock you threw in are remnants of black stars, older than God?"

"Yes." Isabel felt nervous.

"Why did you throw the rock into the pit Mrs. Lee?"

"No reason. I guess I just wanted to hear the sound of it hitting water."

"Did you want to jump in yourself?"

"Yes. What is this about? These are odd questions. I'm hear to discuss Nextera's project in the Everglades."

"Look over the balcony Mrs. Lee."

"No."

"Why not?"

"This is ridiculous." Isabel turned away from the balcony. Her head was dizzy. Herero's apartment was more than three-hundred stories up.

"I'm sorry. Please, I'll change the subject. I haven't been to Earth since I was a young man. I miss it. I was very fond of Olitic. The Empire quarry is perhaps the first chasm I ever stared into. I find that the view from my balcony gives me a similar sensation. I'm very neurotic about it. I apologize."

Just then the servant woman brought out a tray of food. Another servant, a short man with wire glasses, brought out a bottle of wine.

"And so, you are here about the PR position for the aquifer mining proposal?" Herero had changed character from morose to hungry at talk of mining operations.

"Yes, I am from Earth. I am from Florida, in fact, and I know what the people need to hear. I am familiar with water and energy issues. Many have turned to the insurgents and such invasive operations in their water supply will only make that worse. I am well trained in public relations as my resume explains."

"I see. And how much would you request in salary?"

"30 million a year."

"That seems reasonable. I have looked over your files.

You seem to me to be a perfect fit for the job. Of course, I had your background checked with the local authorities in Florida. They say you are who you say you are. Your references check out. But there is one thing," Herero broke off and walked to the food tray and opened the bottle of wine. "Tell me about your parents."

Though Isabel had an air tight guise, complete with narrative, and false family history, she sensed that Herero knew something. "My parents were part of the insurgency. They were terrorists. They died when I was very young."

"Intriguing," he poured two glasses of wine. "That isn't mentioned in your files."

"I didn't think it would help me with the position. My father killed Nextera representatives with the help of my mother," Isabel returned.

"I did know this of course. You have your toy with you, do you not?"

"My toy?"

"Mr. Condorcet, am I correct? It was with you when your father was killed. It was with you when you trained for this operation."

"But..."

"We have watched your files for a long time Isabel. I know what you plan to do. We can intercept your toy's visual data."

"I only came to gather information. I..." Isabel reached into her belt and pulled a large blade hidden along her thigh. A guard grabbed her arms from behind and another smashed her hand with a baton. She dropped the knife.

"You fucker!" Isabel shouted. He had been so close. Two guards shackled her arms and legs and started to carry her off.

"You intended to kill me, Isabel. You and the

insurgency want me dead. I don't blame you." Isabel kicked and screamed as she was dragged through the room towards the door. "Oh, Isabel, wait a moment," Herero called playfully. "I almost forgot. I am going to keep Mr. Condorcet. I am aware of some very personal image data recorded there," he grinned. "Well, I'm happy to inform you that the data has already been accepted for a new advertisement. You'll be a star."

The guards dragged Isabel out of the apartment and into an elevator. "I can't wait to see that ad," a guard said to Isabel.

### Mr. Condorcet

"Take it to the lab and get all the files," Herero said, handing the plastic robot, its segmented worm body writhing, to one of his assistants.

Three miles away the security van transporting Isabel to the police station came under heavy small arms fire. "Goddamit. They want the girl. Let's just give her to them," one of the guards shouted. But it was too late. The front of the van peeled inwards with an explosion and then folded out with an enormous blast. Moments later the back of the transporter flung open. It was Country. Isabel leapt up and kissed her. "What did they find on you."

Isabel stared into the distance at the Nextera building. "They were onto us from the beginning. Someone with us had been keeping them apace."

"But now they have images of you."

"It doesn't matter," Isabel responded.

"But Mr. Condorcet?"

"Mr. Condorcet was a good companion. especially when outfitted with C4" Isabel said smiling. In the horizon Country saw the Nextera building collapsing in a cluster of explosions.

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