

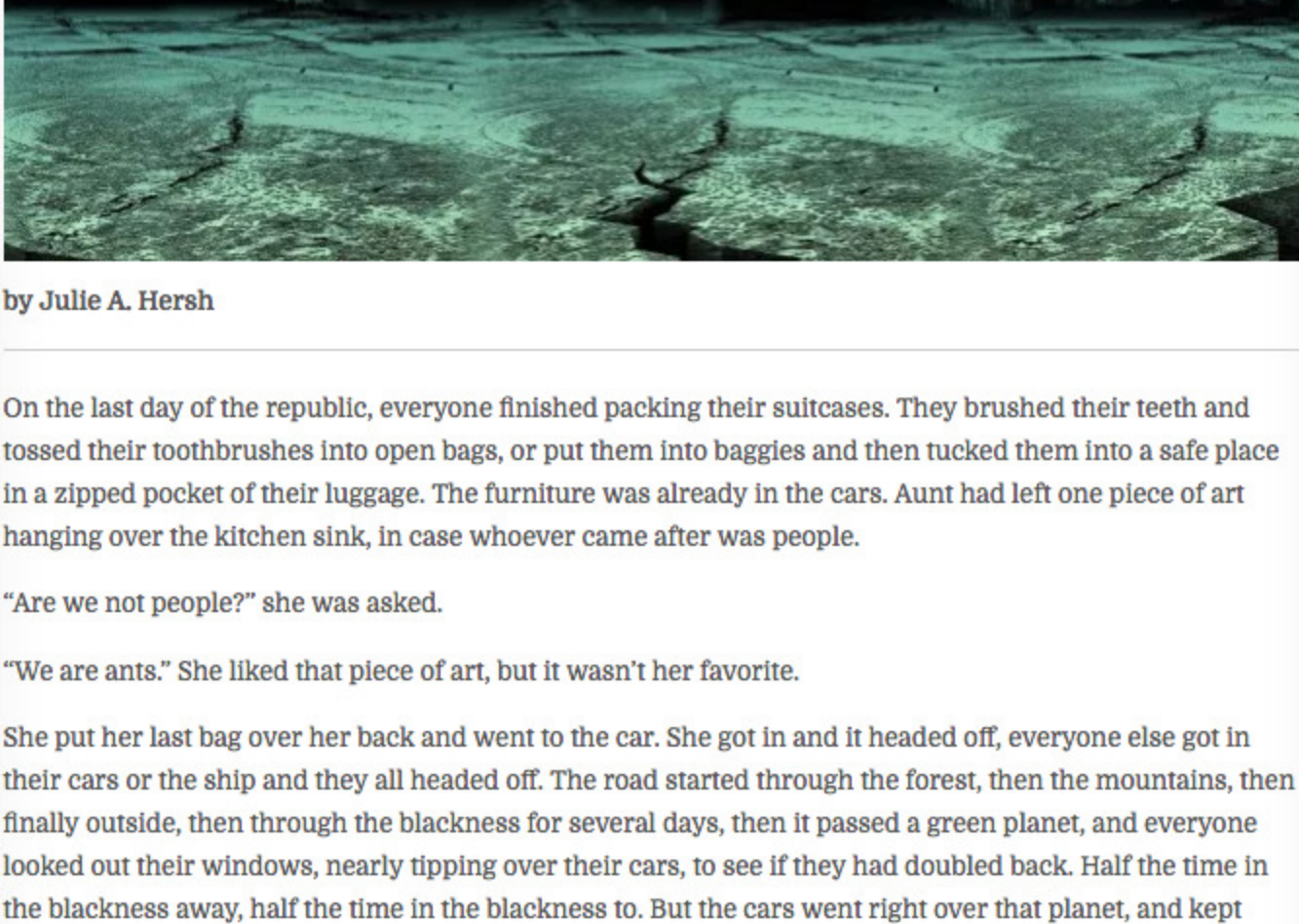
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STORIES

## The Republic

LEAVE A COMMENT



by Julie A. Hersh

On the last day of the republic, everyone finished packing their suitcases. They brushed their teeth and tossed their toothbrushes into open bags, or put them into baggies and then tucked them into a safe place in a zipped pocket of their luggage. The furniture was already in the cars. Aunt had left one piece of art hanging over the kitchen sink, in case whoever came after was people.

"Are we not people?" she was asked.

"We are ants." She liked that piece of art, but it wasn't her favorite.

She put her last bag over her back and went to the car. She got in and it headed off, everyone else got in their cars or the ship and they all headed off. The road started through the forest, then the mountains, then finally outside, then through the blackness for several days, then it passed a green planet, and everyone looked out their windows, nearly tipping over their cars, to see if they had doubled back. Half the time in the blackness away, half the time in the blackness to. But the cars went right over that planet, and kept going.

Aunt spent most of the ride talking. She knew the route and did not need to look outside, since it had all been the same on the way there, years ago. She remembered everything: first blackness, then more blackness, then a star shaped like a candy, then more blackness. She talked to the radiator, about science, and to the couch, which was too big for its space, one arm pushing around her seat so that her neck couldn't rest. She talked to it about books, comfort, and green salad. Between those she covered most of the topics. Occasionally she spoke to the window, when she thought of something new, or the seat beneath her legs.

She didn't talk about the republic, since it was over. Sometimes she would say, I might miss-- and then she would stop, and talk about science again. They arrived.

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Last time she had been there, a long time ago, there had been white wires strung all across the city, and cable cars, for one person each. They were all broken now. Everyone had traveled through the city like that, everything white, around the walls of buildings.

There was a big marble plaza somewhere around the center. That was where they had met with the enemies to exchange gifts that time, at the end. The enemies had set the rules in advance: We'll poison you if we can, and you'll antidote yourselves if you can, and whatever happens after that we'll call it even. They liked people to blame themselves for their own deaths. The four of them arrived, they two and the two enemies, at the same time, and stood in the center, looking at each other. They were all dressed the same. They'd handed her an envelope full of bees. Her partner stood behind her, waiting. She took out from her pocket another, squashed, envelope that was supposed to be the antidote.

She had worked for a long time on this antidote, finally learning that it was bees, put them in the black envelope and velcro-ed it up. And then, when the poisoners revealed their poison, she thought, Oh, no. Mine is just the same. She and her partner looked at each other, said goodbye, and shared both packets of bees like they often ate dinner together. The bees, both types, were fuzzy and warm going down. They met in the middle of their stomachs, like she and her partner meeting in the stomach of some other, larger creature. The poisoners looked on and waited for them to finish. They did not die; she expected they were immortal now.

And then right afterward, after they and the poisoners had called it even, the partner jumped into the cable car of another woman and they left. "Sorry," he said, "it had nothing to do with the immortality, this was just my plan from before, so I'm continuing on with it." She lay down on the cold marble ground and the poisoners stayed in the square, again, watching.

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The grass on the non-republic planet was yellow. No one had mowed it in years and it hadn't rained while they were gone. A group of them went to check on the prison first, to get it ready. There was nothing much there, a few cans and only one molding body who used to be a person, who they had forgotten to take with them when they left. No one recognized him, so they removed him and aired the prison out. It was always there when they came back to get it. In the history book they'd written in the republic, they had said that this had happened several times already, but that they had come for good. They had written it on paper in green pen, as emphasis. The history book had been thrown into the ice on the way out.

The air smelled even worse now. The white city was purplish-black, from some pollution that had come along. It had a gloomy, romantic look. Aunt wondered where her partner had gone. During the republic she had forgotten that he even existed, because who cared? But now she was back and long alive and remembered him.

Aunt automatically began walking toward one of the big concrete buildings, the one where she had used to live. She found her key already in the lock, where she had left it, and went inside, arranged her things. She spent the night unwiring the cameras hidden in the apartment, but it turned out that they were too old to work anyway. In the morning she sat down on the floor, under the kitchen table she had just put in place. She leaned against one of the legs, so that it dug into her spine. She thought, I didn't really like it there anyway. She made a cup of tea, and an extra for anyone who might come to arrest her. At least in the republic they could drink the water. Here, it was yellowish and had a smoky flavor.

\*\*\*

When they started the republic, many of them had thought, Even being here is too much; we have to go somewhere else, where it will smell different, so we won't go back into our old ways. We need a whole different everything. So they'd gone out on a mission on a ship to find a planet. There was a story that their parents had also gone somewhere else to found a republic, and perhaps the people before those, too; no one remembered or felt it clearly. A different planet every time, they assumed, because their own new planet had, mostly, been so fresh and empty. They were going to run out of planets if they kept this up.

They had named it the planet of desperate laughter. Because they had not laughed for their entire lives. When they landed on the new planet, they all burst out laughing immediately. In a panicked, crazed way. There were trees, there was green in the sky, there was softness on the ground, and many of them sat down outside the ship and laughed forever. Some of them cried, as well, but it was still part of laughter. They had never done anything like this before, so loudly and concentratedly. If they laughed before, it had been in a very small way, and then usually they remembered something terrible and stopped. Here, someone next to Aunt sat on the ground with her legs tucked in, fell right over onto the ground, chest against that warmish earth, and kept laughing, tearing at the grass with her fists stretched out. When she stood up, finally, after a long time, her face was damp and her shirt covered in mud. She said, "I have now been born, people." They all understood.

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They were not involved in the movement for the new republic until late, until some of their life was over. By that time Aunt had become important on the old planet, where she had been born, and knew how to build things like space ships that fit in a gold tooth, or buttons that you could attach to your middle finger. Cameras that were just your eyes. The president wanted her to build him the end of the world, and she wasn't sure about that. They said they wouldn't use it, but she didn't know if she wanted to make it, anyway.

She did end up making it, though. It seemed to her that it was by accident, but they might have found a way to make her do it. It was another of the finger-buttons. When she finished it she closed it in a desk drawer and locked the drawer, but she worried about the key all the way home. Her partner wanted to know what was wrong. She didn't tell him. She couldn't figure out how to destroy the button without accidentally pressing it. It was just one piece; she couldn't open up the back and disable it. So she bought a fireproof lock box and put the button inside, and locked it. And then she bought another, larger, one, and put the smaller box inside that one, and the key, for some reason.

The larger one didn't have a key but a passcode, and she found someone to set the code and not tell her what it was. And then she and her partner--she had told him by then what was going on, and he had agreed with her about everything--they killed him. Quickly, and without scaring him any more than absolutely necessary, but she still dreamed about it most nights. Afterward, they scrubbed all the blood away, and threw out the sponges, and put the body somewhere, and took turns showering. And the box, in the end, was very secure. She gave the whole thing to the president's people, and they were very angry. That was when the bees had started. They'd been told that they had a few weeks left until their poisoning would take place. It seemed very fair to her, and even to her partner, actually.

The president's people did get the outer box open, after a while. But it turned out she had accidentally locked the wrong key into the box, and she didn't know where the right one was. She honestly didn't. Somewhere in the back of a closet or fallen into a drain hole, probably. After that, they had no choice about getting involved with the revolution. No one had found the key by the time they moved to the new planet. The box was probably still somewhere in a conference room, and the key in an ocean. Perhaps the button had even already been pressed. That made sense as well. Somewhere on the old planet they had woken up, and shaken the box so hard that the button was pressed; now the world was over.

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At the beginning of the republic, they all lived together on what they called the construction site. It was actually a big building that used to be an arcade--that was all they had found on the planet, after searching all over. They moved into it, like people who sit next to other people though the whole waiting room is empty. In the basement was a whole maze of restaurants and stalls and games. They cleared out all the food that had gone bad, drank some of the alcohol, and set up their sleeping bags--on soft old booths, under tables, in corners behind bars. Somehow they felt the most comfortable in the basement, like it was the least likely to be invaded. They were planning to slowly transform the arcade into something, but for the moment they just lived there. The electricity even still worked. They explored behind all the building's exits, looking at the wire fences and the glass and stones behind them, the big metal ladders laid horizontal across enormous holes to be climbed over.

When they reached the end of the arcade property and crossed the street, they found a small kiosk, and after that nothing but plants and mud for the entire rest of the planet. The woman behind the kiosk sold them iced coffee and spent a long time explaining the pastries to them in a range of languages--"this one is sweeter, this one better for breakfast; but you'll probably want the sweet one for breakfast anyway. No? All right. This one has peanuts, but made into a light cream; this one..."--but she wouldn't tell them anything else, such as who she was, how she had gotten there, why she was there. They took her along into the republic with them, and she and they all pretended she had come with them. She smelled like powdered sugar.

\*\*\*

The old president was dead, in a pile of ashes under his own desk, and none of the other people they had left behind were there. They supposed they had gone to a different planet as well, probably to start a republic as well, or a not republic. So they started rebuilding. They instituted the most recent rules, and they would take it from there.

They voted on who would take all the power and make all the decisions. Most people abstained. The winner was just some man. He couldn't get in the spirit at first, so he sent them all home so he could think. In the morning he had put on a red velvet robe and was wearing thick high heels, and he had changed everything about himself. He said he saw why this was necessary now. He made them clean out the kitchen in the president's house, the miscellaneous animal leftovers, dust, finger bones, cleaning supplies, and then he fed them all a healthy dinner that he'd cooked himself.

Later that day Aunt tore the carpet out of her small apartment, stole iron locks out of the home supply store, and went to the building's basement to figure out how to turn on the heat. Her former partner got her phone number and called her: he was living just a few miles away, where there was a colony of them. They completely hadn't noticed. She agreed to meet him for coffee.

\*\*\*

They had first met at the airport. One of them had gotten off a plane and the other had been waiting there, having just gotten off a different plane. When they had first seen each other in the airport, one of them had immediately grabbed the other's hand. It was the same thing as if they had been waiting on purpose.

The airport was an hour outside the city and there would be buses going there, following the wall that separated the city from the rest of the world. Along the wall were big stones, plants with shiny leaves. You could see the city off and below in the distance, as the bus went along its elevated paved road. Their conversation was long and nonsense. One of them said, "I've never been here before," and the other said, "Neither have I," although one of them had, for a few days, and had seen all the main sights, so they wouldn't want to this time around, and they would go to curio museums alone while the other went up the five hills, seeing the decayed churches and the gold-and-iron statues. They would meet back at the hotel, where they had one twin bed with the middle sunken in, so when they wanted to talk they would lie one on each side of the sunken-in section, their hands resting together in the middle. She liked to think that she had found him wandering around the world one day. In a protected place, though the rest of the planet was trash.

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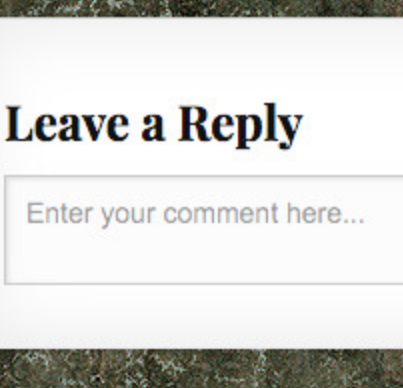
It took them almost a full year to even be able to leave the arcade, scared of the green and whatever else. They did eventually, slowly, one toe at a time. They named the surrounding land Virginia and began to build, allowing themselves to stay near the arcade, like it was a giant concrete blanket. And things went pretty well for years after that. This republic was very small, so it was easy. Within five or ten years it even seemed like a normal society. They had institutions and everything.

They began to disagree, but not too badly. And then more. And then more. And then more. And then more. They all agreed equally on giving up, though. Not one single person stayed behind. Not even the woman they had found there in the kiosk. The teenagers on the ship back started plotting immediately--they'd taken the games from the arcade with them, and also all its principles--but they seemed to agree, like it was their birthright, that they would be quiet about it for a while. They wanted to let the fight grow to its full height.

\*\*\*

The president began cutting his hair close and grew a silver beard, which he trimmed constantly. He wrote new laws. At night when he was alone he took off all the fancy clothing, covered the beard with a scarf, and hoped someone would overthrow him. The republic had been messy. In the way of spaghetti all over the floor--how there is so much of it, all pointing in different directions, or not pointing but aiming, first one way and then in a final, toward direction. In a jumble and overlapping, sitting one below each other. If you try to follow one, you end up suddenly on someone else's path. And if you try to follow along one with your finger or pick it up, it breaks, so you will never know where it was heading. And if you eat it all up, slurpily, sitting on the floor with forks and a friend, there will still be traces of it forever, butter or tomato-sauce trails, like of snails, that if you try to wash them out will just sink deeper in, to escape the washing. In that way, you always know what happened on that patch of carpet, the republic. You can adjust your eye to the spaghetti stain below the spaghetti stain, and on and on. If you lived in the republic and you didn't like spaghetti, you were fucked. And in the morning he transformed again, and forgot that he had thought that.

Just when it had become unbearable again, after twenty or thirty years, they rose up again. They asked Aunt if she wanted to come along with them, out of respect, but she couldn't decide, and by the time she did, they had already left.



Julie A. Hersh is a writer living in New York. She has lived in four countries (most of them post-Soviet) in the past three years. Her writing has appeared or is forthcoming in journals including *Menacing Hedge*, *Syntax and Salt*, and *Kaaterskill Basin*.

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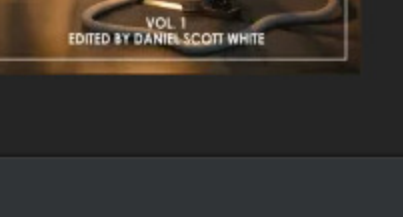
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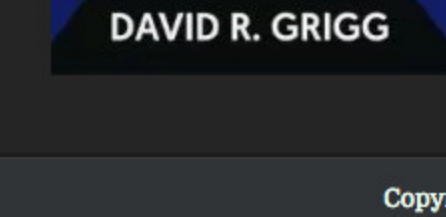
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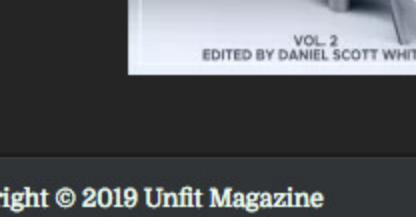
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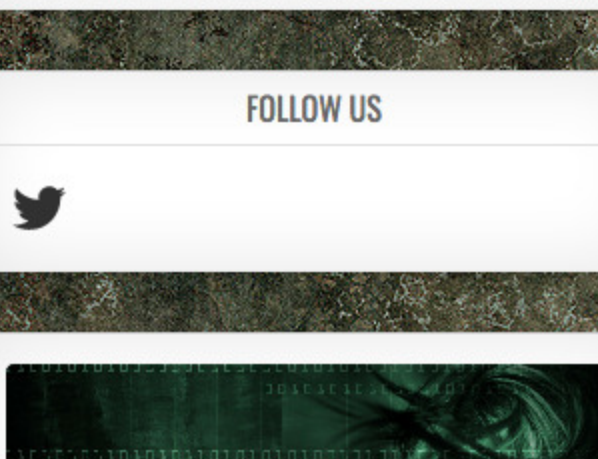
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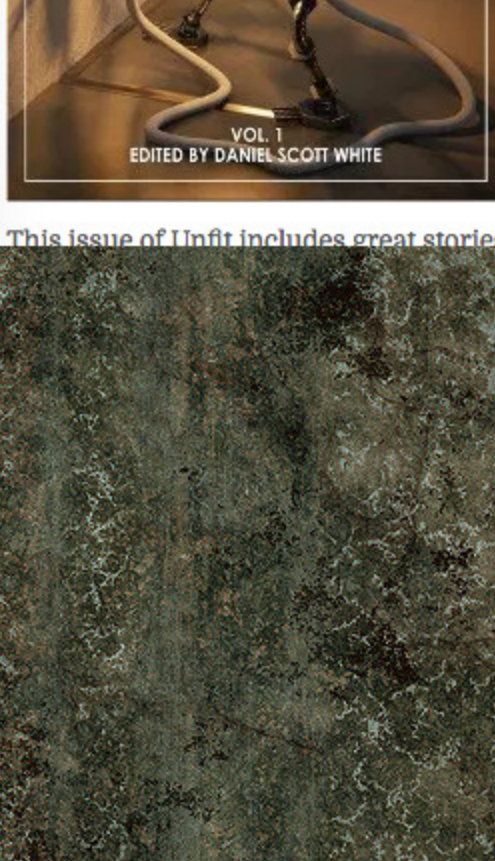


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