

THE PALE: EPISODE 2

"THE PROFESSOR"

By

Zev Hurwich

**THESILEA**

Thank you so much for taking the time. I feel kind of... I don't just I feel so weird talking to someone about this

**ART**

Yeah? Why's that.

**THESILEA**

(Beat)

I think that because I haven't talked to anyone about this, whole... I think that when I say it out loud I'm making it real, and if I don't then I can just keep pretending like this isn't actually happening.

**ART**

That's okay. We don't have to rush into anything. How about you start by giving me a little background. Talk about yourself, who you are, why you're here, that kind of thing. The more you talk the easier it'll get.

**THESILEA**

(Exhale)

I can do that. Yeah.

(Another Breath)

My name, is Thesilea Porter. I'm from Coos Bay Oregon, but moved to Portland after finishing medical school. I've been practicing medicine as a neurosurgeon for nearly a decade. I've been married for just about that long, but met my wife in '09. Her name is Cecily. When we first started dating she'd always joke

that we sounded like teenage sleuths from a 50s mystery series.  
Thesilea and Cecily.

We met getting our respective degrees. Mine in medicine, hers in 19th century European literature. There wasn't much of a queer scene on campus, so all of our mutual friends told us we, "just had to meet this amazing woman." It was really clear we were the only two Lesbians that they knew, so nothing happened for a while, but eventually we did meet, and we hit it off, and we got together, had a son, and of course got married.

Life wasn't boring, not for either of us, we had our jobs and being moms, but between my shifts at the hospital and her book, the relationship was... I don't know if boring is the right word. It was... It was listless. Moving along by virtue of the greater current of our lives. We knew it was happening, but until something changed, we didn't have the time to actually work on it. Then Cecily's book was published. So we took a vacation.

### **ART**

Why did you decide to go to antarctica?

### **THESILEA**

When Cecily did the research, she saw the educational programming that they offer here, and we agreed it would be a wonderful experience for Clark.

### **ART**

And he's...?

**THESILEA**

Our son. Turning twelve next month. It's an interesting age, you know? Old enough to really get all the stuff going on around him, but too young to fully comprehend.

**ART**

So why talk with *me*?

**THESILEA**

A few days ago I heard about what happened with your child. So I don't know I figured...

**ART**

Ah....

**THESILEA**

Yeah. You were another person who it sounded was having an... experience on board. Then I saw you at play center pickup, and here we are.

What happened still makes no sense. It was so far outside the realm of my past experiences, that I have nothing close to the kind of context I need to understand. So if you're listening, then I guess I'm ready to talk.

**ART**

I'm all ears.

**THESILEA**

(Exhale)

It started my third day aboard the ship.

We had settled in, Clark was happily with the play center people, and really had been since day one. Cecily and I made a go at it of doing things together. Trying out the activities, going to lectures, that sort of thing. But it didn't take long until Cecily was spending hours at the desk writing. I couldn't tell what it was, but she was working on something, scribbling on a legal pad, going through multiple drafts an hour.

I was happy for her. I know not to disturb her when she's in the zone. Besides, I figured now was the perfect time to finally read her book. I should have read it long ago, but in my defense it's the weight of a brick and it's about European literature in the 1800s.

(Getting lost in thought)

Anyways...

(Snapping back to reality)

Right. So I took my copy of her book and went to find a quiet place to read.

I wanted to give Cecily some space to write, but finding a place on this ship that is neither freezing, loud, or packed with people is hard. I wandered around for a while, until I found a sign for the Greenhouse.

It probably wasn't that big, but it was packed with all sorts of vegetation, with a zigzagging path that made it seem vast. There some wicker chairs were set up in some corners of the path and I melted into one.

I opened the book, and got through the whole introduction. Cecily's writing... it was witty, wry, vital. It showed energy and passion, which were beautiful. She wrote the way she talked

about her thesis on our second date. I loved it. Then I got to the treatise on the 19th century origins of surrealism.

I tried to keep going, I tried so hard. But the air was warm, and heavy with the smell of hundred different plants. It was a struggle to keep my eyes open. Whenever I got like this in med school I'd put my book down, walk around the room, and clear my head. So I wandered along the path, it was so nice and warm. The plants were beautiful. The air had that vague shimmering quality you get when...

Anyways, before I knew it I had wandered out of the greenhouse. It was clear I had lost my way, because where I found myself didn't look anything like the rest of the ship. The corridors were narrow, there were exposed pipes, the walls were a dull unpainted iron. It did not look like the kind of place where passengers are supposed to be.

But I like being places I'm not supposed to be, poking around, exploring, that kind of thing. I wandered a bit, careful not to go too far. I mean I wasn't actually that careful, I shouldn't say that. No, it wasn't caution, it's just that these surroundings were profoundly boring.. The only discernable characteristic was a stencil on one wall. It was pretty worn but I could make out the letters N-A-U the middle was faded, maybe an H? then-U-S.

There hadn't been anyone around for a while, but one moment I turned and there was this man there. Clearly a sailor.

It was how he held himself. This self-confidence— his head was well set on his shoulders, and his black eyes looked around with cold assurance; calmness. I couldn't tell if he was 35 or 50.

I introduced myself, and asked him his name. He just laughed and said. "Oh me? I'm no one. Just an old sea dog." It was a

laugh that at first felt easy, but had a nervous energy below the surface. We talked for a while, mostly him asking questions. The weirdest questions about the smallest details of my life, he was fascinated by such an, “accomplished lady physician”. He’d apparently been “all over the world,” but had never heard of Portland Oregon.

Eventually I asked him about the Greenhouse. Another laugh, this time though the nervous energy was closer to the surface. He said today was the first time he’d heard of it. It was clear he didn’t want to answer any questions, and I eventually stopped trying. Once I thought the matter was dropped though he told me to go back there. I remember the exact words, he said:

“There’s surely more there than one soul can discern in the passing of a few hours.”

Something about the syntax, or the choice of words, I don’t know... it stuck out. But then he just smiled, and left.

With nothing to keep me there, I made my way back to the greenhouse, and tried reading more of the book. When I realized it had taken an hour to finish the twenty page chapter, I called it a day and went back to the cabin.

### **ART**

I’m assuming you did go back though.

### **THESILEA**

Yes.

Didn’t take that long. The next day was like the one before. Cecily got caught up scribbling, scratching, and throwing out drafts of whatever she was writing. So I took the book back

down with me, telling myself I was going to finally make some real headway reading it.

I didn't. The third chapter was about the literary legacy of Jane Austen in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Cecily is a great writer, but this book was all over the damn place, and it just wasn't the kind of thing I normally would have read on my vacation.

**ART**

What do you normally read?

**THESILEA**

You'll laugh

**ART**

Come on...

**THESILEA**

Tom Clancy. Not necessarily his books, but that whole... oeuvre of work.

Anyways, this was not in my wheelhouse. Yet again I found myself wandering. Maybe this time I'd explore those corridors some more, maybe I could see what the engines looked like. I thought that would be pretty neat

What I found this time though was different. Instead of the cramped corridor I stumbled into what I assumed was someone's quarters. The room was...the term that comes to mind is "well appointed". It wasn't ostentatious, but this looked like first class. There were rich curtains drawn over the windows, a silver tea set on the table, an armoire, a couch piled with cushions.



Before I could even ask myself why or how such a room was attached to the greenhouse in the hold of the ship, I heard footsteps and the voices. They were coming closer. Realizing I was in someone's sitting room I panicked. Instead of just, you know, finding my way out, like a sane person, I hid in the armoire.

The door to the room opened, and the owners of the voices entered. I remembered enough of what they said that I looked it up later.

**ART**

Looked it up-?

**THESILEA**

Just listen. There were two of them, a husband and wife, middle aged. The woman said:

“Why, my dear, you must know, Mrs. Long says that Netherfield is taken by a young man of large fortune from the north of England; that he came down on Monday in a chaise and four to see the place, and was so much delighted with it, that he agreed with Mr. Morris immediately; that he is to take possession before Michaelmas, and some of his servants are to be in the house by the end of next week.”

Can you guess the young man's name, the one she was talking about?

**ART**

Bingley. I mean yeah, they were quoting *Pride and Prejudice*.

**THESILEA**

It could have been, but it wasn't.

When I peaked out of the armoire I saw them, dressed in period clothing, which sure could be costumes, but then they pulled back the curtains. Light poured into the room, and these massive windows looked out on a well manicured lawn in the English countryside.

I almost screamed. Instead I waited until they had played out the rest of the chapter, and left. When they did I looked around the room, and it all felt so real, and certainly didn't feel like I was aboard the ship. My first thought was that it was , immersive VR, or a hologram like in *Next Generation*. Of the available options, that was the most logical. The only other option I could think of was that I was asleep, or that I had a dissociative episode. There was an easy enough test though, I had to repeat the experiment

I made my way back to the room. Not a lot of time had passed, and when I burst back into the room Cecily almost jumped out of her chair. She hurried to sort out her papers and shove them into the desk. She could tell something had happened. I didn't tell her exactly what it was, but I did tell her she had to come with me, there was something I had to show her. My intention was for her to not freak out. I was not successful.

To be fair, I didn't really know what we would find when we got there. My sanity was still in question.

When we got there, Cecily thought that the greenhouse was the surprise, I told her there was something I needed her to see with me. We walked through the winding path, and I noticed that I had grabbed her hand. I was squeezing onto so tightly, pulling her along with me. I could tell she was starting to get scared, both of our palms were sweating, and I could feel her blood pulsing through her hand. She asked questions, and I didn't have any

answers. I looked for where I had found the entry to that sitting room.

Somewhere in the middle of the room there was a slight shimmer. I had assumed it was a byproduct of the heat and humidity before, but now...It had a quality, indescribable, as if the shimmer were not only a visual effect, but a wavering of all the sense.

We passed it, and as before there was no immediate effect, but walking onwards we found ourselves somewhere entirely new...

**ART**

Where was it?

**THESILEA**

(Lighting a cigarette)

221b Baker Street.

(Exhale)

**ART**

You mean?

**THESILEA**

He actually wasn't home when we arrived, but Mrs. Hudson was puttering around.

It took a while to realize where we were. We'd come to this narrow stairway, and at first it just looked like an old but messy room. Once again it was the windows that assured us we were not on the ship. Neither of us could believe it at first, and I'd experienced it twice before, for now you must see that those hallways from my first experience were not from our current

ship, but to have proof that I wasn't delusional, cast the whole thing in an entirely new light.

Getting over the initial shock, we began to poke around, and it was Cecily who discovered where we were. It was hesitant, and almost reluctant, but there were dozens of signs all around the room, and they all pointed the fact that we were in the apartment of Sherlock Holmes.

The real clincher was when Mrs. Hudson barged in on us. Cecily began to talk to her, and there was no denying it any longer. It wasn't a particularly memorable conversation, the two of us were still in too much shock to say anything very coherent, and Mrs. Hudson was too used to strangeness around the place to press us on anything. But for two whole minutes we talked to a fictional character. And she talked back.

We left pretty much immediately afterwards. Both of us were freaking out, and it took a while before we stopped talking over each other. Once we calmed down enough for coherent discourse, we didn't stop talking for the whole day. She wanted to know everything that happened, and I told her about the last two times I had gone through. She had a million questions, but not many that I could actually answer. As soon as she had gleaned everything she could from my experiences we immediately went into theories.

She had latched onto my initial one about it being a hologram. But after going to 221b Baker street I thought that extremely unlikely. It was the smell, tobacco, ink, coal, the smell of Mrs. Hudson's perfume, the far-off horse smell coming from the streets. Sight and sound, those are easy to mimic, feel, harder but not impossible. Smell though? When we smell things, our noses are picking up particulates of what's around us, most of those are

complex molecules which would be astronomically hard to synthesize at will. If it had been just one location, sure you could put together, I don't know, some kind of a smell profile, or something. But with changing locations?

Cecily then made a good point, that it could be some kind of mental control, that they "beamed" a scenario into your brain, or something like that. I thought it over, gave all the scientific reasons why that was highly improbable, and you know what she said to that?

"Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth."

Even I got that one, and we laughed. That's how the rest of the day went, theorizing, counter-theorizing, joking, and eventually planning. Neither one of us had to ask if we were going back. We intoxicated on the thrill of discovery. My goal was to test the thing, see what we could learn about how the phenomenon worked, she was planning things that we could do, adventures we could go on.

Eventually though we had to pick Clark up, and then we were back to being moms for a little while. Still though, it was just... it was so much easier. We had talked and we had gotten in sync in a way which we hadn't been for months, years. There was no talk of bringing Clark, and I hate to admit it, but not because we thought it might be dangerous. No. It was the same reason neither of us even thought of getting the phenomenon on video, or telling anyone else about it. For the first time in a long, long time we had something that was just ours. When we got into bed it felt like we had saved our marriage, that this was the universe giving us a break, giving us that *thing* we needed to make it through to the other side of this long and painful rough-patch.

I fell asleep the moment my head hit the pillow. When I woke up Cecily had several books spread out across the cabin floor, annotating with pencil and sticky notes. I didn't bother asking if she had fallen asleep, just made coffee and made sure Clark got to the play center on time.

We didn't take long to go back, and again we found ourselves in a new setting. That day, and the days later we made several trips, took rigorous notes, carefully discovering the rules of the phenomenon. The first discovery was that there was in fact an actual border, some physical space that once crossed would lead you off the ship, the shimmer I told you about. Each time we passed it we'd find ourselves in a different location. It wasn't exactly random, but if there were rules to it, the specifics were indiscernible. It responded to us, our intentions, our conversations, passing thoughts through our head seemed to have some effect on where we'd end up. Going through while thinking about America might send you to Mark Twain, but if you had just listened to Silent Night you might end up meeting the ghost of Christmas Past. I couldn't get the hang of it, but Cecily managed to get some degree of control on the whole thing.

She had a long list of stories she wanted to visit. It never crossed her mind to try anything else, and I didn't press the matter. Once we could actually gain a little control over where we went we started to really explore. Those first trips were very short, poke our heads around, try not to interact with the protagonist, that kind of thing. We never feared for ourselves, but Cecily was terrified that we might, I dunno, break the story? Or maybe that if we upset this in any way, it would all disappear.

Soon though, we started to get comfortable, and we would stick around a little longer. Then we decided to test something that hadn't ever crossed our minds before. We wanted to see if time moved differently there than it did in the real world. I set my phone down outside the phenomenon, clock running. When we got back, no time had passed. It didn't matter how long we stayed in the phenomenon, every time we returned to the very moment we left.

With this discovery, everything changed. It started with taking longer trips: taking a hike in the moors of Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, getting drinks at the Spouter Inn. They were diversions, ways of extending the day, and spending some time alone. But back then we were content to visit, and then come home and go about our day. When we were ready to go back, no matter how far we'd wandered we could always find our way. We'd come back, pick Clark up from day care early, go on one of those group kayak trips, or just cuddle up together in our cabin.

As time passed, Cecily realized the full implications of the phenomenon. She proposed we go on a vacation from our vacation. Spend a weekend in the French countryside of Flaubert. When your wife invites you to spend a weekend alone in *Madame Bovary*, you don't say no.

(Beat)

I promise it was nothing so torrid as what you may be imagining now. No, we did check in on the characters once or twice, but most of the time we spent was in a cabin we found. Fiction never concerns itself with details outside the main plot, so whatever we wanted to do, as long as we didn't interfere with the protagonists, just worked out. How often do you get a chance to be alone with

your partner, and truly not have to worry about anything? It was a feeling of such profound serenity as to be intoxicating.

Of course it didn't stop there. Cecily never grew tired of being in the world of a book she loved, and grew bolder in our trips. She began talking with characters, even the protagonists. We got drunk with Mina Harkness, and played cards with . Eventually she even tried to save the life of Sydney Carton. It didn't work, the story would allow us to visit, but not to meddle. That got to Cecily and she spent a month in London after that getting over the loss. But she did, and soon we went back to our adventures.

That week, was the best decade of our marriage. We had all the time in the world, and had nothing to stop us from doing what we wanted. We always stayed in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. I don't think we had to, but Cecily never got tired of it. . We visited every continent on the planet. We learned several different languages. Opened a flower-shop at one point. We spent a whole year doing nothing else but learning instruments. I took up the cello, she took up the piano-forte. Then when we got tired we'd come back to the ship.

Cecily's happiness was infectious, and for a long time I was content just to be near that. But I missed our son. Sure we'd check up on him while we were Away, and I knew he wasn't missing us. As more time passed though, it became clearer and clearer that Cecily no longer saw this as a diversion. This was her life, and she came back when she missed watching TV, or hot showers.

Maybe that's not fair.

I didn't want to take this away from her though, so I didn't say anything. On one rare night we stayed aboard the ship, I asked if



we could just spend the next day just the three of us. She said okay.

It was weird at first, it had been so long since we'd spent more than a few waking hours in the real world at one time. I was so focused on Clark. Making sure I got everything right. He's young but quite attentive, it wasn't easy, but I don't think he realized anything was wrong. I didn't remember the TV show we had been watching over the vacation, and was lost, but I did remember his favorite snacks.

Cecily struggled a bit more. So when she said she was leaving to bring lunch back to us I sensed that she needed a moment to compose herself. It wasn't more than twenty minutes, but she came back, and didn't have lunch. I asked what happened to it, and she looked at me for a second, then broke out in a laugh. She said that she wasn't able to bring anything back, but "would call in for supper."

Even Clark sensed that something was wrong. I knew what had happened though. I was mad, but it wasn't like she had dropped the ball that much. I mean Clark's a big boy, and he got over it. It didn't feel like she really let us down. So I didn't say anything, and it didn't happen again that day.

The next two days though....

I don't know if she actually thought she was fooling me, or if she just didn't care. We'd be leaving a science demonstration on the ship, and she'd go off to "pick something up from the gift shop". Sometimes she even came back with something, a present for me or for Clark. Every time she came back though, she was different. How long was she spending there? Months? Years? Decades? It could have been a century or more. Less and less of her came

back each time. I could step into a shower, and by the time I got out, my wife could be a different person.

It's embarrassing... I wish I could tell you that as soon as I realized what was happening I confronted her. The truth is that I didn't. Not until the day she forgot my name. She called me Theresa and tried to brush it off.

That was more than I could bare. I blew up at her. To her though, it wasn't a big deal. What was the problem is she was never actually absent from anything, so she forgot some small details. Hell, I was the one who showed it to her, we'd spent a years there who was I to judge her. I don't remember a lot from that fight. There was too much adrenaline in my brain, from anger, from hurt, and from shame. It was a blur of tears and shouting. Where things get clearer is when I tried to remind her of what she had here. All the time there she'd stopped writing, so I went to the desk to take out whatever she had been working on before all this had started.

I started reading, hoping it would bring her back. The first line was, "We need to talk about divorce." That stopped me in my tracks. Cecily tried explaining, she said it had been so long she didn't even remember writing it. I told her to go. And she did.

(Long Pause)

**ART**

Did she come back?

**THESILEA**

Yes. And no.

I cuddled with Clark for the afternoon. He's starting to get to be the age where he doesn't like it, but he knew I needed it, and he's

such a great kid. We just sat together and I let him order anything he wanted from room service, and we watched cartoons.

A few hours later the phone rang. I was asked to come to security. When I got there I saw Cecily was in the brig. They told me she wasn't in trouble, but they she had made a scene. It was still unclear exactly what happened, but she had apparently tried to throw a passenger's phone into the ocean and then broke down, repeating a phrase over and over.

For a second I thought it was about our fight, but when I walked into the room I saw how she looked at me, and I knew what happened. When she saw me come in I didn't see anger on her face. No sadness, no hurt, no shame, nothing like that. Just confusion. Because she didn't recognize me.

(Long Pause)

**ART**

So what happened to her?

**THESILEA**

(Sighing)

I offered to take her back to our room, but that freaked her out. So she's in sickbay. Which was a bit of a relief. I didn't want to expose Clark to her. And last I heard she still isn't great around technology.

At first I thought it would just be kinder to send her back, but then I thought about it.

How long does it take to forget your wife and child? Because she didn't age a day, it's not dementia. I didn't talk to her for very long, and most of what she said didn't make sense to me.

Yesterday though I heard about her meltdown, and I learned what she had been repeating to herself.

“I’m in hell, I’m finally in hell.”

She probably didn’t even mean to come back, but with an endless amount of time, it’s inevitable she’d come back, intentional or not. How many centuries was she there?

My wife left me for an afternoon, lived a long life, and died. Then she had the nerve to come back.