



this was, or if it had any purpose other than padding out the episode's run time.

As an expeditionary team explores the anti-zone, Ryan, left behind to guard Hanne, discovers that the sound of the monster is being produced by a recording played over speakers hidden around the property.

The expeditionary team reaches another portal, and enters what appears to be a mirror image of the same farmhouse. Inside they find Hanne's father, with someone who appears to be Hanne's mother. Then, Graham's deceased wife Grace shows up.

I kept expecting this episode to settle down a bit and spin its story elements back inward for a while, rather than spinning them out further. The story's treatment of the "but you can't be here, you're dead" people is very, very reminiscent of Stanislaw Lem's novel *Solaris*. That book is largely about the inability of people to accept the things they feel are impossible, at the cost of much pain. The Solitract seems like an interesting idea as well — but did we need another conscious entity plucked from before the start of the Universe, rather than something that already exists in the immense history of *Doctor Who*? It feels like too much, to me. "Solitract" sounds like it means "solitary place," and that describes well the dimension or universe where the Solitract exists. And... did it have to manifest as a crudely animated talking frog?

I think the frog might be an oblique reference to *Life, the Universe, and Everything* by Douglas Adams. In that book, a man named Prak is given an overdose of truth serum, which causes him to tell *all* the truth. Anyone who hears it goes insane, so Prak is placed in solitary confinement until the drug wears off. When our heroes find him, as part of their quest to find the ultimate Question, he's done telling the truth:

"Oh, I can't remember any of it now," said Prak. "I thought of writing some of it down, but first I couldn't find a pencil, and then I thought, why bother?"

There was a long silence, during which they thought they could feel the Universe age a little. Prak stared into the torchlight.

"None of it?" said Arthur at last. "You can remember none of it?"

"No. Except most of the good bits were about frogs, I remember that."

Suddenly he was hooting with laughter again and stamping his feet on the ground.

"You would not believe some of the things about frogs," he gasped.

"Come on let's go and find ourselves a frog. Boy, will I ever see them in a new light!"

So, again — not a bad episode, and there are some nice science fiction tropes going on in this one. But again, it's entirely self-contained. At the end, The Doctor leaves the Solitract in its solitary place, Hanne and her father are going to head back to Oslo, and the gang is off on another adventure. I've actually been expecting Graham's deceased wife Grace to show up; they've telegraphed

that pretty hard, with Graham's ongoing grief. But I expected her presence to leave some lasting influence on the story. I guess they've been keeping that in reserve so that Graham can appear to enter a new phase of his grief by choosing to give up the faux-Grace. But I don't really feel like that payoff has been worth the wait.

### **Creeping Blood Pressure**

Things haven't gone brilliantly today. My living wife Grace's blood pressure has been creeping up, so I asked her to go back on nifedipine. This will knock her for a loop, leaving her dizzy and nursing a headache all day, but I was just not comfortable with the numbers she was getting, and I don't want to have to rush her back to the hospital. It's more of a burden on me, though, since she can't do much supervision of the kids, and we wanted to get out to buy a few things. I'm not sure she'll be able to walk around a store.

I haven't had anything to eat yet today. The kids were up and wanted to do some cooking, so we gave Sam instructions on how to roast some potatoes. He promptly ignored them, putting oil on some potatoes, then putting them on a flat cookie sheet rather than in a baking tray with sides, and putting it in the oven. The oil of course then dripped all over the inside of the oven and made a big smoking mess.

I got up and into the kitchen and spent some time picking more broken glass out of the garbage disposal. Yesterday at some point Grace heard a glass breaking, and kept asking the kids to find out where it went, but no one could find broken glass anywhere. One of them must have thrown a glass into the sink. If they had not removed the wire screen over the drain, which is supposed to remain there, it wouldn't have all gone into the disposal. But they did, so it did, and so there I was. I can't really wear gloves for that job, since I need to feel for the little bits of glass stuck in the holes in the bottom of the disposal. I always wind up with a number of shallow cuts on my fingers when I do this. But I got the disposal working again.

Then I had to take apart the bottom of the oven again and clean that. It turns out there weren't any gloves anyway. In case you've never experienced it, the feel of oven cleaner getting into shallow cuts all over your fingers is really quite something.

So I'm not in the best mood on Christmas Eve Eve Day. And now it's time to pay some bills that I haven't managed to get to yet. I'm sure that will help my mood. I did read a couple more stories in *The Bloody Chamber*. It continues to be really enjoyable. I've only got two stories left.

### **Monday (Christmas Eve)**

Later yesterday afternoon Grace felt up to doing a little bit of shopping so I took her to Meijer. We bought ingredients for egg rolls, a can of Café du Monde

coffee, more celery for juicing, some flour and sugar for baking, and a number of small stocking-stuffer gifts: socks and underwear, and bags of pistachios. They were completely out of egg roll wrappers, but they did have the smaller square wonton wrappers and round potsticker wrappers. Meijer was very crowded and it took a very long time to check out. Grace didn't have much energy left left by the time we left Meijer. She had run out of Percocet and her pain level was creeping up.

### **Alice**

We got back home and unloaded things and again begged the kids to work on their kitchen cleanup chores. Then it was past time for me to put Benjamin in the car — Grace asked me to take him with me because he was the one she most wanted out of the house for a while — and head to Detroit Metro Airport to pick up Grace's old friend Alice. It's been a long while since I have gone to Detroit Metro and I was trying to follow signs to the airport entrances off of I-275, but wound up heading north on I-275 from I-94 instead of south, and so had to get off and loop around, and so was somewhat late to pick her up. The arrival lanes were packed with cars, but the freeways themselves were not, so we got Alice back to our home without difficulties.

### **In Search of Lost Time**

As I write this now it's about 8:00 p.m. on Christmas Eve and I'm trying to figure out what happened since yesterday. When I got home last night Veronica had, instead of doing the kitchen cleanup we requested, gone to bed early. In fact we were *two* dishwasher loads behind, because the dishwasher load that should have been completed and put away much earlier in the day had apparently gotten stalled when someone opened the dishwasher and didn't restart it. So we were pretty angry about that — Veronica going to bed with the dishwasher full of dirty dishes, the sink full of dirty dishes, and the counter covered with more dirty dishes. Last night she swore up and down that she would get up early and take care of dishes in time for me to make breakfast before our housemate needed to start her planned cooking for Christmas.

You can probably guess how that went.

### **Preparing for Christmas Cooking**

So we had a very late breakfast — I made a pot of coffee, and then a batch of blueberry pancakes, and then another batch of blueberry pancakes and a pan of cheesy scrambled eggs because everyone was very hungry. Then I spent a little time planning out our last-minute shopping with Grace. I planned to run to GFS, and then to Costco with our friend Alice so she could get some vegetarian food.

GFS did not have the main thing I was looking for: egg roll wrappers. They also didn't have pre-made eggnog, which Veronica requested. I picked up some

steel-cut oats, some Earl Grey tea from Harney and Sons for Grace, a container of wasabi peas (another festive Christmas food), and some vegetable broth. It was looking quite unlikely that the egg-rolls-from-scratch plan was going to come together, so I also bought three boxes of frozen egg rolls: chicken, shrimp, and vegetable.

While I was out, our housemate called my cell phone and asked me to bring her four foil pans for the food she was cooking, so she could transport it to her boyfriend's mother's apartment, and some brown sugar for the ham. I was actually in the parking lot at GFS, loading groceries into my car, when I got her call, so she got me in the nick of time — it took only a few more minutes to run in and grab those things.

When I got home Alice was asleep, and it didn't seem worthwhile to run back out to Costco on Christmas Eve for only eggs and eggnog. I consulted with Grace about whether we would need anything more for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, and concluded that we could get by and it would be fine if I went back with a bigger shopping list the day after Christmas.

### **The Christmas Masses**

A little while later Grace and the kids decided how we were going to get people to Mass with one car with four seats, and I put the fourth seat back in the Element. The plan was that I would take Grace for 4:30 Mass, and then I'd take the three oldest kids Christmas morning.

Grace is still moving pretty slowly, so we were quite late, but Grace received communion, Malachi was adorable and peaceful the whole time, and lots of people were excited to meet him. After Mass Grace inquired as to whether she had won a silent auction item she bid on, a few weeks ago. It turned out that she had. It's a vintage toy baby carriage with baby doll. So we brought that home and stuck it in the garage, and it will be a gift for both Elanor and Veronica.

### **Stony Creek Liquors and Marketplace**

On the way back we stopped at Stony Creek Liquors and Marketplace near the church. If you are thinking of looking up their web site, don't — it appears that their domain has been hijacked and redirects to some kind of Russian porn site, much to my surprise.

I hadn't been in that liquor store before and I was startled by how big it is inside — it looked like a small liquor store occupying part of a building. But it looks like the whole building is the store, and in fact they have a massive selection of beer and liquor and there is a small deli counter in there, too. They had one carton of eggnog left — possibly the last one in Washtenaw County. We also got a six pack of a nice Michigan stout. I picked up a peanut butter-flavored Pearson's Salted Nut Roll because I was excited to see it in the store, but Grace

tasted it as I drove us home and it turned out to be horribly stale, so it went right in the trash.

### **Special Deliveries**

When I got back home it was time to load up the car with our housemate, one of her daughters, and her baby son in his car seat. The rest of my car was entirely filled with the gifts she was taking to her boyfriend's mother's apartment for their Christmas celebration and the trays of food she worked on this afternoon — ham, yams, green beans, and mashed potatoes. On the way I commiserated with her about how bad the kids had been about finishing their chores, and how we were going to have a Christmas Eve dinner of reheated frozen egg rolls because they weren't willing to do the kitchen work required to cook egg rolls from scratch. I got her and her kids and her things delivered to the apartment, and then of course I got lost on the way back, so I blundered around a bit until I could find a freeway entrance, which let me take a route I knew how to navigate, instead of the maze of surface streets with their roundabouts and curves and numerous renamings.

### **The Kids Prepare**

When I got back, the kids had apparently had a come-to-Jesus moment, and with Alice's help had done a bunch of kitchen cleanup and were actually in the process of prepping all the fillings for won tons. So as I write this, I'm enjoying some slices of black pepper-coated salami and some wasabi peas while the kids finish up that job and heat up a pot of lard on the stove. I will do the actual deep-frying for safety reasons.

Elanor had been taking a nap, and when she woke up and came into the kitchen, we were horrified to discover that she had apparently taken a spill on the front porch and scraped her forehead and skinned the tip of her nose on the concrete. So she looks like hell, but she's in her usual good spirits. I'm happy that we won't be taking her to Mass tomorrow morning, looking like that.

### **Celery Juice**

Grace did not take her nifedipine this morning but instead had Joshua make her a big glass of celery juice. We have reproduced the startling result that Grace had in the hospital — the celery, apple, and lemon juice cocktail in fact caused a dramatic drop in her blood pressure. She monitored it for the rest of the afternoon and into this evening, taking it every two hours, and it had improved a lot and remained fairly level. So we're going to try to get her back into a regimen involving daily celery juice, but perhaps a smaller amount twice a day. We'll watch her and if her blood pressure starts to get dangerously high, she'll have to go on the nifedipine, at least her evening dose, until we find a better solution.

It's time for me to go deep-fry the wontons in lard left over from our friends' pig. Merry Christmas, and Excelsior!

## **Tuesday (Christmas)**

I'm catching up on Wednesday, the day after Christmas, since I didn't actually write anything on Christmas. I described most of Christmas Eve already, and there isn't much more to tell. The egg rolls in the form of wontons were quite tasty, and the kids had a good time making them. Grace and I weren't up to distributing the pistachios, socks, and underwear into the kids' bags, so we left that for Christmas Day. I called my father and brought him up to date on the situation with Chi, Grace, and the rest of us.

On Christmas Day I got up early with my alarm and got myself bathed, and then woke up the three oldest kids to go to Mass. I wanted us to get there early, which we did, because I thought the Mass might be very crowded, and it wasn't. Veronica, Sam, and Joshua were reasonably well-behaved. I found out that what I suspected was true — they wanted to go to the 10:00 Mass because they thought there would be coffee and donuts afterwards, as there are on most weekend morning Masses. But they didn't do that on Christmas, and I wasn't surprised — I think most people wanted to go home to their own Christmas celebrations rather than socialize at church.

When we got home, our friend Alice took the kids outside to play while Grace and I opened up packages of socks and underwear and distributed them, with the bags of pistachios, into the kids' gift bags, and brought in the old baby carriage and doll for Veronica and Elanor. Our friend Alice had brought them a small assortment of vintage treasures to pick from including a vintage hippie purse, which Grace claimed. While we were sorting things, our housemate called to request a ride. We told her we would be there soon but we were going to open gifts first. After that was done, since I don't really know the way there and back very well, and Grace was feeling well enough to take a short drive, Grace took the car to go pick up our housemate and her children.

After the kids all opened up their bags, we spent the afternoon lollygagging around. We ate the reheated frozen egg rolls and Grace and I finally got to see *Iron Man*, the 2009 movie, on DVD, and we cleaned up the kitchen, and there isn't much else to tell about our Christmas except that towards evening, Grace's blood pressure was creeping up a bit. So I asked her to take her nighttime dose of nifedipine, which she did, with a plan to have her use her celery juice in the morning and monitor it and see if she could skip her noon dose.

## ***Iron Man* (2009 Film)**

*Iron Man* is generally ranked as one of the best movies to come out of the Marvel Cinematic Universe to date, and after finally watching it, Grace and I agree with this assessment. I was impressed that in the midst of all the explosions and iron suit special effects (some of which actually look slightly dated and unconvincing

on the small screen after only a decade), the storyline of the movie is actually quite character-driven, and the actors in the lead roles, Robert Downey Jr., Jeff Bridges, and Gwyneth Paltrow, are all very good. Many scenes are also very well-written, to the point where in parts we feel more like we're watching a serious dramatic film, where events are layered with symbolic meaning. This is nowhere so evident as in the hilarious, gross, and touching scene (yes, all three at once) where Paltrow has to help Downey replace the tiny reactor that powers the electromagnet that keeps his heart working.

Downey's role in the story was a tricky one — he has to convince you that he's the billionaire head of a weapons company, and that he doesn't feel any moral qualms about this. But then he has to convince you that he's had enough of a change of heart to risk destroying his father's company and alienating everyone else in the firm. Downey navigates this beautifully by underplaying scenes that might easily have become preachy and unconvincing. According to Wikipedia:

There was much improvisation in dialogue scenes, because the script was not completed when filming began... Favreau felt that improvisation would make the film feel more natural... It was Downey's idea to have Stark hold a news conference on the floor, and he created the speech Stark makes when demonstrating the Jericho weapon... Bridges described this approach as "a \$200 million student film," and noted that it caused stress for Marvel executives when the stars were trying to come up with dialogue on the day of filming scenes.

I had the feeling, watching some of these scenes, that ad-libbing or at least writing on the fly might have been involved, and in my view these scenes really sell the story. Grace and I were both impressed with the way the screenplay ties up loose ends and captures details from the perspectives of multiple characters. For example, there's a scene earlier in the film where Downey dances with Paltrow at a party and they nearly kiss. Downey has to race off for more drama. But near the end of the movie, we hear Paltrow recount the evening from her perspective, and it is a nice touch that does something that a lot of superhero films don't bother to do, which is to remind us that assistants and sidekicks and friends and lovers of superheroes are people that *have* perspectives.

Downey is very appealing as the protagonist of this movie, and his role does something else I find interesting. Downey is not actually a large man, or immensely muscle-bound, although of course he's fit. And so, much of the *physical* presence he displays in the film is actually created by his acting. He convinces the viewers that he's burlier and more imposing than Downey really is by his confident movement. And I also like the way in which, even in his iron suit, Downey discovers many moments in which he can't win by force, and has to outsmart his enemies instead.

Grace had some qualms about the portrayal of Arabs in this film, and I had a few too, although as she put it "I wasn't immediately revolted, the way I often am." I think the role of Pepper Potts is worthy of some discussion about female

characters in superhero films. I'm not really familiar with the old comic book Iron Man, but I'm sure the original role was pretty appalling, and I'm happy they gave her character more agency in the film.

The film runs 124 minutes, and there's just about nothing I would actually edit out to make it tighter. It could lose a minute or two here and there, but for the most part, it doesn't drag. And I was pleased that by the time we got to the big showdown, I actually was interested enough in the characters to care what happened. That's not true of a lot of superhero films.

### **Wednesday (The Day After Christmas)**

The day after Christmas has been a bit of a snooze, which is far from a bad thing as far as I'm concerned. This morning I gave Chi his first bath. He's still only twelve days old, so it was more like a thorough soak of his bottom half and a light rinse of his top half. He seemed completely unperturbed by the process, and didn't fuss at all.

I ran out to get a couple of boxes of donuts from Tim Horton's. Our housemate brought down her laptop and set it up for the kids to watch the movie *Pixels*, which I've never seen. I watched the first half-hour or so and decided I didn't need to see the rest. Grace had her celery juice this morning and her blood pressure is comfortably in the safe zone, so she will again skip her afternoon dose of nifedipine, and we'll watch it and see if she needs an evening dose.

This afternoon I'll run out to get laundry detergent and pick up a few things at Costco. The tentative plan is for me to go back to work tomorrow, and for Alice to stay until Saturday.

### **Thursday**

Yesterday afternoon I went to The Little Seedling store for more laundry detergent, but they didn't have any more jugs of the Allen's Naturally that we've been using. So I had to go next door to Arbor Farms and pick up a smaller jug of Seventh Generation detergent instead, along with a couple of bottles of Dr. Bronner's Sal Suds, and a few packages of cheese for Alice. In the checkout line, the young woman bagging my things said that I looked like I belonged in the Bee Gees. That kind of made my day!

Then I went on to Costco. Grace and I had received our annual 2% reward in the form of a paper certificate. I was able to cash this in at the counter and use it to pay for another year's membership, and take the rest in cash. I put the cash towards a load of groceries. We needed to stock up on celery, apples, bananas, oranges, size 4 diapers (Elanor is outgrowing size 3), eggs, frozen crab cakes for Friday's dinner, bags of salad, corn chips and salsa, and boxes and cans of coconut milk.

The rest of the evening consisted of a lot of cooking and cleanup work. Alice

made nachos and roasted Brussels sprouts. I cooked a package of steaks from Costco. These were larger than the lamb steaks, so I pan-fried them a couple at a time in our biggest cast-iron pan, then finished them in the oven at 425 degrees — two minutes on a side in the pan, then seven minutes in the oven. For seasoning, I gave them a light coating of salt, pepper, and garlic salt. Some of them also got smoked paprika. I used the pan drippings to make a quick gravy using corn starch, white wine vinegar, and mustard powder. The steaks were delicious, and so was the sauce. I sliced up one of the leftover steaks to take to work, along with some of the multi-grain bread.

Grace's blood pressure continues to be too high for my comfort. She measured it last night before bed, when she was due for another dose of labetalol, and after having morning and evening glasses of celery juice. It seems pretty clear that the labetalol is not keeping it level — the doses don't last long enough. We've established that the celery juice has a strong antihypertensive effect, but it also doesn't seem to keep it level over time. Grace will see her obstetrician tomorrow for a follow-up appointment. We're also working on a plan for who she should see next.

### ***The Bloody Chamber* by Angela Carter, Concluded**

While the kids were finishing up some hand-washing and Grace was working through her e-mail backlog, I read the last two stories in *The Bloody Chamber*. One of them is “The Company of Wolves,” in which Carter clearly honed the language to a fine point — it's loaded with alliteration and really beautiful turns of phrase.

### **Back to Work**

Our friend Alice is still here so it seemed reasonable to go into work, to avoid taking any unpaid days. Grace needed the car today, because the kids are back into scheduled activities. So she and Chi rode in with me this morning, so that she could take the car back home. A number of my co-workers were out, so it was pretty quiet upstairs. I went through the backlog of e-mail and started getting my head back into some of my LabVIEW code. Grace came out to get me this evening as well. I've got more leftover steak and bread, as well as some frozen burritos and yogurt, left to eat tomorrow. I should be paid tonight, although most of it is going to go right to the Team One account.

The weather has been strange. We had a little sun yesterday, but for the most part it has been gray and overcast for almost two weeks. Today it is about forty degrees, and tomorrow it is supposed to be over fifty. We got only a very light sprinkling of snow on Christmas Day. I'm grateful that we've passed the shortest day of the year, but we could really use a little more sun.

## Friday

Grace came to get me from the office last night about 7:15 p.m., bringing Chi with her, and drove me home. She reported that the kids had been grazing on and off during the day, and that she didn't have any real plan for dinner. So I suggested we stop at Blaze Pizza on Washtenaw. I think the last time we got their pizzas was last January, as reported in this blog. I had them make a meat lover's, a veggie, a white, and a barbecue chicken. When we got home I was quite happy to discover that the house and the kitchen were both in great shape — our housemate, Alice, and Grace had managed to keep the kids on track with cleaning chores.

Grace had me examine her incision. Worryingly, there is some slight bleeding happening, on one side. The other side seems to be healing fine. There was no sign of infection that I could detect, but it seems like she might have torn some stitches, maybe in a fall she took earlier in the week. So I'm glad that she is seeing her doctor today.

I was so distracted last night that I think I may have taken my evening medications twice. I use an alarm on my phone to remind me, but if I'm driving or very busy, I silence the alarm and just remind myself to take the pills later. I can't really be sure, but the side effects of Celexa seemed more severe than usual last night and this morning. Oops.

This morning I drove in with Alice so that she could take the car back home, and asked her to go with Grace to her appointment this afternoon in case she needs assistance. So I will be carless today. I stopped at Joe and Rosie Creamery and got a coffee and a couple of day-old pastries for me, and a tea for Alice.

I'm planning to go to Costco after work, although that might be complicated by the car situation. We'll have the crab cakes for our Friday dinner. Alice will leave by a noon flight on Saturday. *[Update: well, when I wrote that, I thought it was a flight, but it turns out she bought a ticket for a Greyhound bus out of Detroit.]*

The kids have been watching an awful lot of movies and TV shows. After New Year's Day, we'll call their holiday TV-watching binge over, and put the TV back in the basement.

## Saturday

Once again I'm playing catch-up. I was hoping to have more time, on these last few days of the year, to reflect on things, maybe finish a few books in progress, and come up with some insightful digressions, instead of just reporting what happened. But it seems that at present I am barely able to even keep up. So I'm writing this on Sunday night at about 7:30 p.m. after a dizzying weekend, and I still have more chores to do before bedtime.

### **Grace's Follow-up Appointment**

Grace gave me an update about her obstetrics appointment. She did not get to see her obstetrician, and was seen instead by a nurse practitioner at the practice who consulted with a physician on call. The physician did not examine her. She got some specific recommendations on the blood pressure ranges they consider to be hazardous. The nurse practitioner examined her incision, but did not palpate her abdomen. She told Grace that everything looked like it was within the range of normal healing. But I'm not really satisfied — no one felt the difference between the two sides of her belly. I hope that she will soon be able to see her obstetrician who made the incision, and get a more thorough examination.

### **A Rushed Evening**

Grace picked me up at my office Friday evening. I was expecting her about 7:15, which would have left us plenty of time for a Costco trip since they close at 8:30, but she got there about twenty to eight, so it was almost eight when we got to Costco. She had baby Chi with her in the car, and was not feeling up to racing around the store with me, so I did the racing around myself while she nursed baby Chi in the car and sent me text messages. This time I bought mostly fruit, vegetables, and salad. Benjamin wanted more pot pies. Joshua wanted french fries and sausages. They didn't have frozen french fries — their frozen sweet potato fries seem to be only a seasonal item. Grace wanted honey. Pippin wanted a surprise, so I got him a box of Taiwanese pineapple cakes. I also got some chicken legs. Our friend Alice wanted vegetables so she could pack some for her return trip, and hummus, so I bought a big vegetable tray and a box of little packs of hummus. I got the Kirkland brand (Costco's house brand) of hummus, because I am boycotting Sabra. I also got another bag of tortilla chips, and a seven-layer dip, for no good reason other than the fact that I was craving it.

### **A Touch of Gout?**

I considered getting more red meat, but just felt a little burned out on red meat. It also seems like I am starting to get a little bit of gout. After eating steak for dinner and steak sandwiches for lunch both Thursday and Friday at work, I was complaining to Grace about a stabbing pain in the ball of my big toe. I thought it might be a plantar wart, but couldn't find one. Grace suggested gout, so I looked it up on some web sites such as the Mayo Clinic's web site. The diagrams showing the common location of the pain describe my symptoms exactly. So I will talk about it with my doctor — I see him again in a few days. There's a possibility it might be related to the blood pressure medication I'm taking, although certainly I could stand to get back onto a healthier diet and exercise regimen.

Speaking of exercise regimen, Grace and I are giving serious thought to spending the rest of my end-of-year bonus on a treadmill. I know that I'd use it, and I

think if we put it in the bedroom, she would use it, too, and we could also allow some of the kids to use it, with supervision.

On the way out of the Costco parking lot, I realized that one of my headlights is out. Again. It seems like I just had them both replaced! *[Update: according to my own journal, I had them both replaced on May 21st — there ought to be some kind of a warranty on the bulb, shouldn't there? I will have to dig out the paperwork.]*

When we got home, we put the crab cakes in the oven, then served them with the vegetable tray and the seven-layer dip. Our friend Alice ate a good portion of the dip and chips for dinner. I had hoped that the kids would like the crab cakes, but they didn't really seem to enjoy them very much.

After dinner, we spent the rest of the evening arguing with the kids about their chores until it was quite late, and eventually went to bed. Grace's blood pressure was worryingly high again at bedtime, even an hour after her dose of labetalol. So she took another dose of nifedipine, the one with the nasty side effects. This pretty much guaranteed that she was going to feel like crap the next day, exhausted and headachey.

### **The Next Day**

It wasn't a great night's sleep — our little Chi is not a bad sleeper as newborns go, but he wakes us up a couple of times. I got up and threw on some extremely casual clothes to go to the Greyhound station in Detroit — jeans with a ripped-out leg, and a button-down shirt that is too ratty to wear to work. I was anxious and hated to just wait around the house while Grace and Alice finished getting ready, so I ran out to get myself a coffee and a sausage, egg, and cheese biscuit at Tim Horton's, and to gas up the car. I had been planning to gas it up on the way home from Costco Friday night but I forgot. That's one of the hazards of getting into a conversation with my wife — I forget my regular routine.

### **New Year's Presents**

We pulled out of the driveway about ten minutes to eleven and made it to the Greyhound station by 11:45, dropped off Alice, and then got back onto route 10. I asked Grace if she wanted to go ahead and go to the Lego store in Troy at the Somerset Collection mall, as this was something I had hoped to do, in order to get the kids a big Lego set as a post-Christmas gift. She thought that was a good idea so we went there. Grace was not too keen on walking, but fortunately there is a walkway from the parking structure into the mall. Grace needed to eat, so we stopped at a place in the food court called Honey Tree and picked on a strange assortment of food — a chicken shawarma sandwich, a cucumber dill salad, a piece of spanakopita, a bowl of clam chowder, and a bottle of cranberry juice. Everything was pretty good except for the clam chowder, which we both agreed was not worth eating.

We made our way to the Lego store. Grace came in with me for a few minutes, but Chi wanted to nurse again, so we found her a bench and then I went back in. I was considering some of the big, big Lego Ninjago sets like the Ninjago City set or the Ninjago City Docks set. After looking at them in person, though, I decided they were just too big and had too many pieces; they were marked for ages 16 and up, and tagged for expert builders. I think Veronica (14) and Sam (12) could manage sets like that over a few days, but not while surrounded by siblings demanding to participate. I think Grace and I would enjoy it, though, if we had some down time to work on it! I also wasn't thrilled about spending \$230 or \$300 on a single set, especially since Grace wanted a Duplo set for Elanor and the younger kids, and I wanted to pick out an "in-between" set for kids who felt too old for the Duplo set and too young for the Ninjago sets.

I wound up solving this by buying a somewhat smaller set, the Destiny's Bounty, and another one, the Temple of Resurrection. So I bought those two, the Duplo Playground set, and for the middle ages, I chose a Jurassic World Velociraptor Chase set. So I got four sets for a bit more than the price of the giant Ninjago City set. I looked wistfully — again — at the eight hundred dollar Millennium Falcon set on the way out.

### **The Hunt for Coffee**

We were ready to go, but Grace was feeling flattened, and told me that she needed something to get her up off the bench. So I went on a hunt for a coffee drink. That took some time. None of the storefronts in the food court sold coffee at all. There was a Starbucks, two floors below. There was a very long line at the Starbucks. But I finally was able to bring her back a peppermint mocha, which gave her enough energy to walk to the car. I had to pick up some candy at a little bulk candy place, including some candies in the shape of Lego bricks that actually snap together (well, sort of).

The drive back home was very long, especially since we had to stop so that Grace could nurse baby Chi again. The kids were very excited to see the huge Lego bags holding Lego sets. Veronica in particular was really excited about the Temple of Resurrection — apparently it contains some little masks that she is thrilled to have, although I could not explain why even if I tried. They did not seem excited about the Velociraptor Chase set, though. So we decided they would put together the Destiny's Bounty ship on the table, and the smaller kids could work on the Duplo set on the floor, and the other two sets would go in our room until later.

Grace had promised our housemate that she would take her to Once Upon a Child, the used clothing store in Ypsilanti, so they left me with baby Chi and headed out again. The kids came to me to complain that some pieces were missing from the Destiny's Bounty set. Then they found one or two of them, so I'm not sure if any were actually missing, although it wouldn't be out of the question. If so, it was only a couple of small bricks, and I had to explain to them

that I wasn't going to be able to drive all the way back to Troy anytime soon — they would just have to muddle along as best they could.

### **Improvising a Soup**

When Grace and our housemate got back, our housemate was craving soup. So we improvised a chicken soup in the Instant Pot — we sauteed chopped celery, onion, and carrots, she browned one of the packs of chicken legs in a cast-iron pan, then we put them together in the pot with the two quarts of vegetable broth that Alice didn't use, along with a bag of the leftover pork and cabbage filling we had made for egg rolls on Christmas Eve. The result was quite tasty.

### **Grace's C-Section and Its Aftermath**

After getting a dishwasher load going, I helped Grace get herself washed. She is not allowed to bathe her incision fully, and she has been feeling too unstable to take a regular shower. So we put a little water in the tub, so that it stayed below her incision, and she soaped herself and I hosed her off with a spray bottle. She took off the rest of her tape strips, which were loose by now. We didn't see any more bleeding, so that was encouraging. She does not like to wear the compression belt, but we wrapped her belly up with an ace bandage.

Her blood pressure was high again — so, more nifedipine. We sat up a while. The kids were still making noise. I wanted to watch some videos of C-section surgeries. I've had questions in my head about the procedure. When I've been in the operating room, I've always been seated up by Grace's head, with most of her body cordoned off by cloth partitions. They invite me to stand up and watch the baby's delivery. I've seen it several times. Last time, I was very distracted, because I was extremely worried, not so much about the baby and the delivery, but about Grace's blood pressure. So unfortunately I was not able to pay as much attention to the birth as I wanted to.

From my perspective, it has appeared to me that they have had Grace's uterus partially pulled out of her abdomen and up on her chest. After the baby is delivered and suctioned, I've gone over to attend to the baby and take pictures. Then, as I look back at Grace from the other side, the team has been in the process of stitching her up, and it's also confusing to figure out just what I'm looking at, as much of her body is covered and there are a lot of sponges involved, although not as much blood as one might imagine.

After watching some videos, it seems like that is not quite what I've been seeing, but exactly what I've been seeing is still a little unclear to me. I *think* they have been doing the incisions, through several layers including the uterus, and then actually removing the baby through the incision. Then they place the baby on her chest while they do the cord-cutting and suctioning of the baby's mouth and nose. They hand the baby off to a nurse, who does a quick evaluation of the baby's condition on the warming table, and then bring the baby back to lie on Grace's chest.

I think they do pull the uterus partially out of her body cavity in order to completely clean it out and stitch it back up, but I think they do that *after* the uterus is empty. It makes more sense — they don't have to make the incision as large, and the uterus is immediately smaller after removing the amniotic sac and placenta. But none of the C-section surgery videos we watched were shot from “dad's perspective.” Grace has never wanted me to shoot video of the actual births, either vaginal or surgical, and I think that's fair — who would watch them, and in what context? Would we pull them out at birthday parties?

It's pretty remarkable, come to think of it, that there's an organ, about 3 inches long when not occupied, that can repeatedly stretch to hold a baby to full term, and squeeze out a baby, and shrink back down, and do this again and again. It can also get sliced open, and heal up well enough to work again, over and over (although this can get a bit tricky).

### ***Mistress of Mistresses* by E. R. Eddison**

I have one more book that I've been meaning to mention. I've been reading a little bit of E. R. Eddison's *Mistress of Mistresses*. This is the first book of his Zimiamvia Trilogy. It follows *The Worm Ouroboros* and seems to take place in another part of the same world, and features a character, Lessingham, who is present in the introductory chapter of *The Worm Ouroboros* as an observer.

*Mistress* is a less straightforward and more challenging book. It was the first of the trilogy to be published, but it is chronologically the last of the three. In the first chapter, “The Overture,” we learn that Lessingham, apparently a man of our world, has died. Most of the chapter consists of his best friend recounting a brief history of their friendship to a mysterious woman. Then, the two seal up Lessingham's corpse in a room, open a secret panel above his bed, which hides a portrait of his dead wife, and burn down the castle.

It's a deeply romantic conceit, and a bit gothic as well. In the next chapter we meet Lessingham again, but it's a different Lessingham — Lessingham in the afterlife, or a sort of ur-Lessingham, of which the earthly one was a sort of copy. I don't really claim to know what is going on yet, as I have really only finished the first chapter. But if you're reading Eddison, you're probably not *really* reading him for the story; you're probably, like me, reading him for the amazing beauty of his language, and descriptive world-building:

I can see you now, if I shut my eyes; in memory I see you, staring at the Lynxfoot Wall: your kingdom to be, as I very well know you then resolved (and soon performed your resolve): that hundred miles of ridge and peak and precipice, of mountains of Alpine stature and seeming, but sunk to the neck in the Atlantic stream and so turned to islands of an unwonted fierceness, close set, so that seen from afar no breach appears nor sea-way betwixt them. So sharp cut was their outline that night, and so unimaginably nicked and jagged, against the rosy radiance to the north which was sunset and sunrise in one, that for the moment they seemed feigned mountains cut out of smoky crystal and set

up against a painted sky. For a moment only; for there was the talking of the waves under our bows, and the wind in our faces, and, as time went by with still that unaltering scene before us, every now and again the flight and wild cry of a black-backed gull, to remind us that this was salt sea and open air and land ahead. And yet it was hard then to conceive that here was real land, with the common things of life and houses of men, under that bower of light where the mutations of night and day seemed to have been miraculously slowed down; as if nature had fallen entranced with her own beauty mirrored in that sheen of primrose light. Vividly, as it had been but a minute since instead of a quarter of a century, I see you standing beside me at the taffrail, with that light upon your lean and weather-beaten face, staring north with a proud, alert, and piercing look, the whole frame and posture of you alive with action and resolution and command. And I can hear the very accent of your voice in the only two things you said in all that four hours' crossing: first, 'The sea-board of Demonland.' Then, an hour later, I should think, very low and dream-like, 'This is the first sip of Eternity.'

Demonland is the location where the events of *The Worm Ouroboros* start; it is on the planet Mercury, or at least some *version* of the planet Mercury.

*Mistress of Mistresses* clearly won't be of interest to everyone. I'm still not sure if I'm going to finish reading it. I first picked up the trilogy and *Worm* in a used bookstore in Erie back when I was in high school, perhaps in 1982 or 1983. I read *The Worm Ouroboros* back then, with some difficulty. I have since read it and enjoyed it more, and will very likely read it again. But the books of the Zimiamvia trilogy, although fascinating, I couldn't really penetrate back then. As well as being fantasy novels, they contain deep and antiquated digressions into religion and philosophy. I'm not going to force myself through chapters if my eyes continue to glaze over. But now, thirty-five or more years later, maybe they will open up to me and pull me in.

## Media Discussed This Week

*This list does not include books, chapters of books, or other works that I only mentioned briefly in the text above.*

- *Doctor Who* Series 11, Episode 9: "It Takes You Away"
- *Iron Man* (2008 film)
- *The Bloody Chamber* by Angela Carter
- *Mistress of Mistresses* by E. R. Eddison

*Pittsfield Township, Michigan*

*The Week Ending Saturday, December 29th, 2018*

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