



Source: Obituary 'Assassinated scion of Lebanese political dynasty', *The Times* in *The Australian* online, 24/11/06.

Tags: [fortune](#), [workplace](#), [world events](#), [surveillance](#)
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If only jobs could be inherited, Rachel might be posted near the edge of the universe, alongside the ancestor she loves most and calls Grandmother. Unfortunately the Echelons assign duties through some arcane mechanism that defies comprehension even by omnipresent beings. During the interviews leading to Rachel's assignment, she has frequently encountered the dilapidated, crotchety underling named Mahler, who runs errands and takes copious notes. But this time the Upper Echelons are absent—they have judged her capacities and made their decisions. She finds herself alone in the presence of Mahler, who holds the weight of her destiny in his squinty, condescending stare. Rachel barely manages to conceal a full-flooding panic attack.

'What a lot of paper!' she exclaims, regarding his cluttered workspace. 'You must be absorbed in the greatest of mysteries.'

This is meant as a compliment, but Mahler's glance flutters dubiously.

'Formulae,' he replies. 'Algorithms. Everything is tedious.'

Living forever, few Recorders can bear to remain so miserable.

Mahler declares dully, 'The Powers have chosen your assignment. Something about you must have impressed them. But whatever talents you possess, do not suppose they will help you where we send you. No mental, emotional or physical training can prepare you for what you are assigned to record. Fortunately you will have the benefit of time in which to contemplate it, all the time you need, and even that will not be enough. You are expected to collect exhaustive data. The assignment is endless. And pointless really, but don't worry, no one pays attention except me. I am responsible to follow your endeavour and provide any resources you might require. It is most tedious.'

Mahler pauses and turns in his throne, which creaks and lurches beneath him. He gestures into the shadows behind. A large multidimensional form flickers and begins emitting opalescent light. Rachel marvels at how archaic his tools are: everything from the paper and ink to his broken chair, and now this holo-projector.

Omnipresent beings need no screens or images. They can transport themselves anywhere and anytime they choose, with minimal effort. Rachel, in fact, knows every detail of her existence from beginning to end, but these must be presented in sequential form for purposes of a comprehensible narrative. She could experience every distinct cosmic event everywhere if she chose, but even the most obsessive minds are not that demented.

Mahler's holo-projector seems the quaint tool of someone who wishes to avoid certain realities. Within it, a spherical image forms, apparently some kind of planet. Its surface is mostly oceanic blue, partly obscured by banks of white vapour. The projector begins emitting a stream of information about this world, and Rachel finally apprehends the nature of her assignment.

Sentient biological species are a rare phenomenon in the cosmos. Despite endless possibilities of time and space, an entire galaxy might give rise to two or three such races, occasionally more. On this blue-green globe, one species is failing to turn its intelligence and resources toward discovery and psychic advancement. Instead it is

caught in the process of destroying itself, along with other planetary inhabitants. To a studious race such as Rachel's, this is incomprehensible tragedy. From her dimension of space she cannot interfere, only observe. Her panic turns to nausea. Every Recorder hopes to spend eternity documenting less depressing matters. Mahler hands her a sheaf of papers.

'You will find the co-ordinates in there,' he says. 'Go as soon as you wish. The place might engage your senses, but I have no time today.'

Then he returns to his algorithms. She opens the folder and flips briefly through. The directions are unnecessary, but Rachel begins to understand Mahler's apathy. She wishes she could take the same attitude, but the assignment is neither optional nor flexible. Her destiny has been settled.

Rachel leaves his office, but does not approach her destination. She drifts. There is no timeline or deadline, no pressure, little incentive to begin what she must do. She can't get fired. She is stuck in a job no one else wants, for eternity.

Instead she visits Grandmother.

Rachel's race traces lineage by a complex method. Her people exist like electrons. They are everywhere because, in the vast stretches of time-space they are probably anywhere. Their minds overlap like mathematical sets, and intersections give rise to new sets, new minds. This could be confusing, given all possible interactions, but with infinite time in which to sort out their relationships, they experience no more confusion than simpler life forms do in six or seven decades. Grandmother is a term of endearment, not a precise description of Rachel's relationship to her. Grandmother's duty is to record some ineffable quality about the edge of the universe. Few minds understand her work. She leads a solitary existence.

One problem with omnipresence is that your family can know everything about you. As soon as Rachel appears, Grandmother asks, 'What are you waiting for? Get busy.'

One can't lie to an ancestor who perceives everything—one can only posture. Rachel complains she feels too much tension between who she is and what she must become. Grandmother smiles knowingly, and lightning traces her expanse of hair.

'My girl is growing up,' she declares. 'You express the essential problem of life: how to become what we are, and at the same time let go of it. Do not let this Mahler cloud your perception of the task at hand. Work like this has often been given to our family, because our minds are capable. You have been honoured. Both you and I contemplate the boundary between existence and non-existence. I study a clouded veil our minds cannot pass. You must study a fishbowl. You will inevitably swim in it for a while. But perhaps you will bring us closer to understanding.'

After this conversation, Rachel accepts her charge with patience and sadness. Her primary annoyance is still in answering to Mahler, who doesn't grasp the gravity of it, but the planet in question begins to interest her.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Van Waffle.