

Closet Space

by Barry R. Taylor

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The advert said the two-bedroom apartment had old-world charm and ample closet space. Big closets seemed to be its main selling feature. There was certainly nothing else about this dreary, neglected flat to recommend it. ‘Old-world charm’ meant that it was old. Beverly was not of a mind to complain. She could no longer afford the mortgage on her big house in the suburbs. She had been forced to down-size, with the emphasis on down. Beverly had become a poster-girl for downward mobility.

Beverly’s business card said, “Retail fashion merchandiser.” She wondered if she should change it to “Failed retail fashion merchandiser”. She ran a small shop called Bev’s Boutique, selling affordable fashions for working women. ‘Look your best in the Boardroom, the Ballroom or the Bedroom’ said the slogan. The store wasn’t doing well. Competition was fierce, and overhead was high. Creditors were circling like hungry wolves. In another month, maybe two, they would close in.

She wandered through the small space, following the rental agent: livingroom-dining room, galley kitchen, tiny bathroom, two bedrooms. Worn carpets and wall-paper peeling at the corners. Nooks and cupboards in odd places, typical of old buildings.

“The previous tenant was a scientist of some sort, but she worked at home,” said the agent, whose name was Laura. She was a petite, active woman wearing bright jewellery and extravagant high heels. She talked about the apartment as if she were sharing gossip in high school. “A physicist or something. Dr. Eisner, that was her name. Helga Eisner. Nobody understood what she was doing in here; weird experiments that kept blowing all the fuses. She seemed to be half mad: always looking over her shoulder, insisting someone was out to get her. And then, about six months ago she ups and disappears. Just like that. Gone in the middle of the night. Left everything behind, didn’t she.”

Beverly was intrigued. “Where did she go?” A physicist, even a half-mad physicist, didn’t sound like the kind of person who would skip out on the rent. She opened another unexpected closet, discovered pipes running through it.

“I’ll tell you, I have no idea. She certainly didn’t leave a forwarding address. Police couldn’t find her. Her bank kept making automatic rent payments, so maybe she was planning to come back? When her account ran dry we sold the furniture to cover the rent until the lease expired last month. I’ll tell you, I’m relieved to have the place back on the market. The whole episode was spooky. Who disappears like that, nowadays?”

“I hope nothing bad happened to her,” Beverly replied. The rental agent’s news was disquieting. It seemed cold to move into the apartment of someone whose whereabouts were unknown, as if she were being pushed aside and forgotten. Still, it had been six months.

They had arrived at the second bedroom again. Laura said it had been converted into a laboratory, or something. Dr. Eisner built racks of bizarre instruments and electronic doodads that no one understood. It had all disappeared along with her. There was nothing left now but a huge wooden table in the middle of the room, covered in scars and stains.

“Too big to move,” Laura said.

“What’s in this closet?” Beverly asked. She was standing in front of a wide door on the inside wall of the room. It was different from the other doors in the house: heavy, dark stained, perhaps oak. Both the door and the frame were inlaid with elaborate carvings. It was a door for a stately English manor house, not a tiny apartment in Halifax. A white doorknob in brass fittings overhung an old-fashioned keyhole, with the key still in it.

“I’ll tell you, I don’t know,” Laura said. “We can’t get it open.” She was wearing a snug red dress that certainly didn’t come from Beverly’s shop. “I think the lock is seized up. Bill, my maintenance man, couldn’t get it free. The hinges are hidden so we can’t get in that way either. This is why we don’t allow unauthorized renovations. The only way in now would be to break the door, and it’s so beautiful no one wants to do that.”

She ran her fingers down the carvings on the door. “If you can get it open, anything inside is yours,” she said, smiling. “That is, if you decide to rent the apartment.”

Beverly looked around the dingy rooms. The windows overlooked an abandoned courtyard of shaggy grass. She thought about her own bank accounts, and her debts. “I’ll take it,” she said.

About a week later, the few possessions she had decided to keep moved in, Beverly was sitting at the big table in the old laboratory, sorting through debts and accounts. Her laptop

computer squatted in the middle of a sea of paper. She had decided to use the room as her home office, if only because the table provided space to sort all her bills. Her treadmill waited in one corner.

Bev's Boutique was caught in a bind. Bev had a steady clientele, but if she marked up wholesale prices too far, customers complained. Yet she couldn't count on high sales volumes because the store was small and shoppers were fickle. She employed two floor assistants, both part time, to run the store when she wasn't there. She didn't tell them she had sold her furniture to pay their salaries.

Beverly heaved a great sigh. She sat back in her chair, contemplating the water-stained ceiling. She was talented in design and style, less so in business. Unless she could engineer a dramatic turn-around in sales, Bev's Boutique was doomed.

She sighed again. What she really needed, more than anything else at that moment, was a vacation. A break from bills and debts and management and worrying, even if only for a few days. A week hiking in the Rockies would be perfect; or maybe drifting down the coast on her friend's sailboat, stopping in all the little ports and old fishing villages along the way. Beverly was too active to much enjoy lying on a beach chair sipping an umbrella drink. But even that would be preferable to the miasma of work, worry and woe her life had become.

She was sitting with the window behind her. Pale sunlight reflected off the worn table top, highlighting the scars and scratches. She found herself contemplating the locked closet door on the inside wall. It was intriguing. Why would someone lock a closet? What could they have inside that had to be protected so carefully? Pajamas? Dr. Eisner had used this space as a laboratory. Were the contents of the closet connected to her work? Maybe she had packed all her arcane equipment in there when she disappeared. Doubly odd though, to take her research equipment but leave all her personal effects behind.

Beverly got up and approached the inscrutable door. The closet mystery was a welcome diversion from bookkeeping. She examined the lock. It was a classic keyhole like the ones maids peeped through in old movies. A bit of oil, probably applied by Bill the maintenance man, dribbled down the brass plate. She tried turning the key back and forth. Nothing moved. Twisting the key hard accomplished nothing. She tried pushing the key in farther, or pulling it part-way out, or jiggling it back and forth, all to no effect. Repeating all of the above with

pressure left or right on the doorknob made no difference. The lock appeared to be permanently seized up.

Beverly pulled the key out, discouraged. She was no mechanic. Better minds than hers had failed to free the frozen lock. But the locked closet tantalized her. That she couldn't see inside only heightened her curiosity.

"Bah. It's probably empty," she told herself. She studied the key for a moment. It was a heavy barrel key, probably brass, and definitely antique. A looped handle at one end supported a round shaft with an indented square tooth along the side. It was exactly the kind of key she would expect to fit into that kind of lock.

Looking closer, she noticed the word 'Invertito', presumably the lock manufacturer, embossed on the shaft in tiny letters. Beverly considered. Invertito was also the name of a trendy fashion house in Milan, whose gimmick was to make clothes that appeared to be worn backward: dresses with zippers up the front or a row of decorative buttons down the back; V-necked sweaters that revealed the wearer's bra strap.

Beverly ran her finger along the loop of the key. It seemed worn along the edges. She remembered reading about how, back when mechanical door-locks were ubiquitous, locksmiths sometimes used misdirection to make locks more difficult to pick. The obvious keyhole might be a decoy, while the real keyhole was hidden somewhere else. Might this lock be disguised the same way? 'Invertito' meant 'reversed' in Italian.

Beverly turned the key around and tried inserting the handle into the lock. With a little wiggling it slid in. Beverly raised an eyebrow. She twisted the key firmly to the left. Something inside the lock clicked.

"So that's it," she murmured. "Clever." She tried the doorknob. It turned easily. She opened the door.

On the other side of the door lay a walk-in closet utterly full of women's clothing. The closet itself was wider than the door, providing space for two rows of hangers with just enough space between them to walk through comfortably. Beverly found a light switch. Soft, recessed lights came to life along both walls. The light revealed a high ceiling, gently rounded like a cathedral, and painted sky blue. The walls, where she could see them, were red with polished wood trim; the floor was deep carpet. The luxury of the closet contrasted sharply with the

dilapidated apartment around it. The room was so full of clothing Bev couldn't even see the back wall.

Bev stepped into the room, wide-eyed. She had entered sartorial heaven. She flicked through dresses and gowns and skirts, examining each with an expert eye. She was impressed. Everything in the room was classic, stylish, and well made. None of the pieces had a label, but all were well designed. No fast fashion or designer knock-offs here.

"Why Dr. Eisner, you style maven," Beverly murmured, as she wandered down the aisle. "Pretty sharply dressed for a scientist."

Lost in abundance, she wandered deeper into the closet. After a while the racks of dresses gave way to lines of shelves bearing blouses and pullovers and sweaters, all neatly folded. A variety of hats hung above, while shoes and boots and sandals were lined up on low shelves along the floor. Here and there, padded white benches nestled along one wall, with full-length mirrors on the other. Beverly's own shop wasn't so well outfitted.

Beverly pulled a random dress off the rack. It was powder blue, long but figure-hugging, with subtle ribbing to highlight the wearer's figure. A double-stranded necklace of those-couldn't-be-real pearls hung around the collar. She held up the dress in front of a mirror. "I could wear this," she mused. Then she sighed. "Something nice to wear to bankruptcy court." She put the dress back.

She wandered on. The range of clothes on the racks was astonishing. There were items in the closet for every season, every mood and every occasion, from dinner with a duke to a work-out in the gym. Styles ranged from sombre and serious to light and flirty; hemlines from floor length modest to scandalously brief. In addition to dresses and suits and skirts and gowns, Beverly discovered slacks and jeans and shorts and leggings, all hanging in orderly rows or neatly folded on shelves. An impressive variety of winter coats covered pretty much every fabric, including leather and mink. Right behind them was a collection of swim-wear that would outfit a beach movie.

Beverly found herself wondering again about the previous owner of all this clothing. The closet, and the vast wardrobe in it, only deepened the mystery of Eisner's disappearance. Was there a scientist in the world who was this well dressed? In addition to all the furniture and personal things in her apartment, she had left behind a small fortune in clothes. Why spend the money and time to acquire such a fantastic wardrobe, then leave it all behind?

Beverly found this revelation unsettling. It all suggested the vanished physicist had fallen on misfortune. Maybe she had been abducted, or, more likely, had suffered an accident. What other explanation could there be for disappearing without taking any of her belongings? Yet she had removed all of her research equipment, which implied her disappearance was deliberate. Laura said Eisner had poured acid or something into two computers she left behind, rendering the hard drives unreadable.

Beverly contemplated this mystery as she examined a pair of knee-high suede boots. It was one of several pair lined up neatly below rows of colourful spring blazers. She glanced back toward the way she had come in. Her eyes went wide. The open doorway was a diminished rectangle of light far away down the corridor. She must have walked three times the length of her whole apartment! She should be in Narnia by now. She looked back to the door, then down farther into the depths of the closet, bewildered. She still couldn't see the back wall.

Exactly how deep was this closet? How deep could it be? The closet was mounted along an inside wall separating the small bedroom from the cramped living room. From the outside, the protrusion for the walk-in closet was a few feet deep, barely enough for an ordinary closet. How could a closet the length of the Channel Tunnel possibly fit in there?

Beverly dropped the boot. A feeling like vertigo washed over her. The room began to spin. She sank onto a padded dressing-bench and closed her eyes. Something was openly wrong here, quite impossible. Objective reality was being violated.

With an effort she calmed herself down. When the room had settled a little and her breathing was under control, she made her way through the rows of high-quality clothing back to the door. It was a long trip. From the doorway in the bedroom-cum-laboratory, she looked back into the closet. The racks of clothing ran in trim lines into the far distance. There was no step or slope downward to suggest the closet ran underneath the apartment, rather than through it. There was no curvature that could lead it to run beneath the corridor outside the apartment.

Let's be absolutely sure of this, Beverly decided. The flagrant unreality of the closet justified skepticism. She examined the office doorway, and confirmed that the wall had an intrusion into the livingroom to accommodate the closet. It was no deeper than the length of her arm. She stepped into the livingroom, now occupied by some of her own furniture. The back side of the amazing closet should be right behind the sofa. Kneeling on the cushions, she knocked on the wall here and there. It didn't sound hollow.

How to be sure? She had sold her top-end sound system, but she kept an old portable music player. She threw on a CD of the Brandenburg Concerti. She returned to the cavernous closet, set the player by the wall behind a bench, and cranked the volume up high. Organ music thundered. Then she retreated to the office, closing the carved door behind her. The music faded as the door closed. Beverly went to the kitchen for a glass, held it up against the wall of the livingroom and put her ear to the bottom.

Nothing. Absolute silence. She could hear the sound of her own pulse.

She collapsed onto the sofa, stunned. This was no ordinary walk-in closet. This closet defied the rules of three-dimensional space. No wonder Dr. Eisner had locked it so securely. The vanished, half-mad physicist had left behind a deeper mystery than a fabulous wardrobe and a door with a deceptive lock.

Beverly decided it was time to learn a little more about the Dr. Helga Eisner. She retrieved her laptop and opened a search engine. Dr. Eisner was not hard to find. Almost immediately she found three useful results. The first was an article in *New Scientist*, more than five years old, entitled, "Space-Time Ripples Could Solve Several Problems in Cosmology." It reported the work of Dr. Helga Eisner, then a professor at Delft University of Technology in The Netherlands. Dr. Eisner was an expert on black holes, wormholes and something called inter-dimensional portals.

The material was not easy to understand. Beverly was well read, but degrees in English and design did not prepare her for leading-edge physics. She learned that some of Eisner's earlier work had implications for the neutrino problem. This information raised more questions. First, how could research on inter-dimensional portals bear on the neutrino problem? Second, what was the neutrino problem? Third, what was a neutrino?

Apparently Eisner's work was controversial. Not everyone was sold on space-time ripples. There was a photograph of Eisner in the article. She was a trim, blonde woman with intense eyes. She was very well dressed. Beverly was not surprised.

The second hit was a three-year-old news article discussing Dr. Eisner's abrupt dismissal from the university. Her department refused to give reasons or publically discuss the matter, beyond insinuating that Eisner had become unstable. The article suggested she had gone overseas.

The third hit was only a few months old. The headline said, “Still No Leads in Disappearance of Local Scientist.” Before she disappeared, Eisner had been supporting herself as a sessional lecturer at the local university. A more recent picture accompanied the article. Dr. Eisner was still impeccably well dressed. There was wildness in her eyes.

Beverly closed her laptop. She returned once more to the bedroom and the enigmatic closet, deep in thought. The answers to this mystery were as wildly impossible as the closet itself. Dr. Helga Eisner, brilliant, semi-mad scientist with fabulous fashion sense, had somehow created a space-time ripple, or something, in an ordinary clothes closet. How she had done that, or why, were questions beyond Beverly’s ken. She was more concerned with a bigger question: what happened to Helga Eisner?

“Where are you getting this new line?” asked Denise, one of her store helpers, a couple of weeks later. “They don’t have labels on them.” She and Beverly were in the back room of Bev’s Boutique, busy sorting through a new batch of dresses from Helga Eisner’s endless closet.

“They’re from a new distributor I discovered at the spring show in Montreal,” Beverly replied. “Apparently they gather material from a network of independent stylists and help them sell. They haven’t settled on a logo yet, so no labels.” It was a rehearsed line. Beverly wasn’t sure she could explain that she was supplying her shop from an inexhaustible supply in the vast closet of a vanished half-mad physicist. Montreal was safer.

“They’re selling really well,” said Denise. “And I think we’re getting new customers too. Good product is the best advertising!”

Beverly said, “Indeed it is. And if these brisk sales continue I may be able to pay you and Anna this week.”

Beverly felt guilty about supplying her store from her predecessor’s wardrobe. Desperate debts demanded desperate measures. She reasoned that the closet was part of the apartment, this end anyway, and she was the one paying the rent. Laura the rental agent said that anything in the closet was free for Beverly to take. She couldn’t have known it went on forever. Anyway, Beverly could see no evidence that the clothing she had removed made any difference to the abundance in the closet.

Oddly, the clothing there came in a range of sizes; Helga Eisner couldn’t have worn all of it. But other women could. And the profit margin on stock that cost essentially nothing was

fabulous. In mere days Bev's Boutique had become profitable again. Helga Eisner's trans-dimensional closet changed everything.

Where had Eisner gone? The question nagged at Beverly's mind. She wasted several hours on the internet trying to find out more about her work. The quest required that she find articles about black holes and the like that weren't overwhelmingly technical but still might make references to Eisner's work. It was a frustrating search. At times Beverly felt like she had fallen into a black hole herself. Worse, she was uncertain of her own motivation. Was she genuinely concerned about the fate of a mentally unstable physicist she had never met or was she assuaging her guilt about plundering the woman's bottomless wardrobe?

Her search did throw up one intriguing item. An article in an obscure (to Beverly) industry newsletter covering technology reported that engineers at WFI had become interested in the potential applications of tiny, human-created wormholes and space-time ripples for future space travel. They evidently thought commercial applications were feasible within a human lifetime. There was no mention of Dr. Eisner's research.

Beverly knew about WFI, of course. It was impossible not to, they were in the news all the time. WFI was the initialism of some long German name that more or less translated to 'space exploration incorporated'. The company was owned by a resourceful Austrian entrepreneur who from an early age showed a talent for innovation and for maintaining murky connections to unseen investors. His company was making enormous strides in rocketry and space technology. Beverly had no idea why WFI were interested in wormholes. The company was coy about their research. These were not scientists who presented at conferences.

Something about WFI stuck in her memory. She was at home, sitting at the big table in her new office. Bins of clothing from the endless closet were stacked nearby, ready to be ferried to her shop. She had seen the letters WFI somewhere recently, she was sure of that. She set her laptop computer on a chair, then carefully stacked up the price tags she had been preparing for the new clothes. She scanned the scars and stains on the old table. Here and there, someone had inscribed letters and symbols into the wood, like a student carving his initials in his desk. Most were meaningless, doodles with a jackknife. In the middle, right where her laptop had been sitting, the letters FUWFI were inscribed in three-inch capitals.

Beverly ran her hand across the graffiti. The markings seemed less worn than the others. Was this a parting message from half-mad Dr. Eisner? If the first two letters were interpreted as

an expletive, which seemed likely, then why did Eisner have a gripe against WFI? They were involved in similar lines of research.

Her rumination was interrupted by the warble of her cell phone. The text message was from Denise: “Bev, pls come to the shop”.

“There were two of them,” a shaken Denise explained, a half hour later. “A tall, bald guy and a younger man wearing glasses. They were really aggressive.” She and Bev were sitting in the back room at Bev’s Boutique, among racks and boxes of clothing. Beverly had hung up a “Closed for Lunch” sign on the front door.

“What did they want?” Bev asked. She sipped her tea, hoping Denise would do the same.

“They wanted you, at first. They kept asking where you were, when you would be here, where you had been. When I asked who they were the tall man said they were detectives from the RCMP.”

“Were they in uniform?”

“No, they were in suits. But they were obviously lying.”

“How do you know?”

“Remember my brother is a cop? The RCMP doesn’t have detectives. The rank would be Inspector. Anyway they didn’t show any identification or explain what they were about. The tall man said you were a suspect in some crime or other. The young fellow started rifling through the clothes on the racks. He found the new line and claimed they were stolen. They started giving me a hard time about selling stolen goods. I told them to leave.” She paused, sipping tea. “Bev, that new clothing line, without tags. It’s not – I mean, you wouldn’t – ”

“No!” exclaimed Beverly, a little too loudly. In truth she wasn’t sure. Was she stealing from the vanished Dr. Eisner, or merely retrieving abandoned goods? The laws of property did not cover transdimensional closets.

Denise drank tea. “Anyway, they left, but they were still threatening me even out the door. They said they would be back to arrest you. They were really rude!”

“I’m sorry,” Beverly consoled her. “I didn’t mean to put you in the middle of my problems.” She considered a moment. “I have a hunch who these people are,” she said. “And they are definitely not police. If they come back, call the real cops.”

The following morning, Beverly was back in her home office, in a video chat with Laura the rental agent. Today Laura's dress was blue. "I got it at your shop," she said, smiling. "You do have an excellent selection."

"Thank you," Bev replied. "Laura, I'm curious about something. About Helga Eisner."

"Oh, a strange girl that one," Laura said.

"How so?"

"Well, the few times I met her in person, she was as sweet and pleasant a person as you would ever want to meet. She apologized for blowing the fuses and promised it wouldn't happen again. Of course she would do it again a week later. I'll tell you, it was all that electronic stuff in her apartment – in your apartment. Broke all sorts of regulations, didn't it. It made weird noises at all hours of the day and night. But she was so genuinely nice and the work seemed terribly important to her, so I let her get away with it."

"So why do you say she was strange? Besides running a physics laboratory out of her second bedroom, that is."

Laura leaned in as if sharing a secret. "I'll tell you, the woman was paranoid. Would that be the word? Always looking over her shoulder, so to speak. She was convinced someone was watching her. Wouldn't say who. She double-locked the apartment. Hardly let anyone in, even me sometimes. She put security bars on the windows, we didn't even know about them until she disappeared. We don't permit unauthorized renovations."

Beverly considered this history. "You said something about how she wrecked the computers she left behind. Did you test them?"

"Oh no, the police looked at them after Ms Eisner disappeared. They were hoping to find some clue to where she went, but they didn't even boot up. Later a couple of experts came by to look at the hard drives. They got right upset when they saw what she had done to them, I'll tell you."

Something about that last revelation made Beverly wonder. She said, "Wait a minute. Can you describe the two computer experts?"

"Well, I suppose so. One was an older man, right tall and losing his hair. The other fellow was younger, heavy set –"

"Wearing glasses?"

"Yes! How did you know that?"

“Laura, thank you for all this. Now I’ll tell you something in return: Helga Eisner wasn’t paranoid. She was afraid.”

“Oh dear! Do you know what happened to her?”

“Not exactly. But I have an idea where she might be.”

“What am I doing?” Beverly asked herself, early the next morning. “I’m not a detective. I’m not an explorer. I have a store to run.” Nevertheless, there she was, in her bedroom, packing essentials into a backpack, about to set off on a journey to . . . she didn’t even know where. She was dressed in blue jeans and a sweatshirt, with a solid pair of walking shoes on her feet. The shoes were courtesy of Helga Eisner. She brought along food and water, just in case.

She was settling a ball cap over her hair when someone knocked on the door. She frowned. Who would that be, this early? The old building did not have security at the front door. The knock sounded again as she approached the front door. “Who is it?” she called.

“Halifax Police,” a voice replied. “We need to speak with you. The matter is urgent. Please open the door.”

Beverly opened the door on its security chain. “I’ll have to see some – ” She stopped. There were two men standing in the dingy corridor. One was tall and balding, the other shorter, thick-bodied, wearing glasses. The tall man had his suit jacket open, hands on his hips. Beverly caught a glimpse of the shoulder holster beneath his jacket.

“Oh, it’s time to go,” she said.

The younger man rushed the door just as Beverly slammed it closed. She leaned her shoulder against it while she threw the deadbolt. There was noise and commotion outside, what sounded like cursing in German. Dr. Eisner’s second deadbolt was still there, so Beverly closed that too, and just in time. She heard the sound of something striking the door from the other side, probably the boot of a man who knew how to kick in doors.

She dashed into the bedroom to retrieve her backpack, then hurried into the second bedroom. The men outside were still trying to get through the reinforced front door. The deadbolts were strong. Beverly used the key to open the closet, stepped inside, and closed the door behind her. She slipped the key into her pocket. With the door closed she could hear nothing from outside. She heaved a sigh of relief. Then she shouldered the backpack and headed out into the endless closet.

It was, she had to admit, a peculiar place to go hiking. She had been concerned that closing the door would make her feel claustrophobic, but the closet was so wide and long that it felt quite comfortable. It was difficult to make any time, at first, because her attention was repeatedly arrested by some new item of attractive clothing – or a rack of attractive clothing – that demanded a closer look. The arrangement of materials in the closet was constantly shifting, and seemed to have no order. Changing stations and mirrors appeared here and there and wherever. Sometimes shelves replaced hangers for a few metres, sometimes for the length of a football field.

The closet was deep indeed. An hour of brisk walking had not brought her any nearer the end. She sat down on a comfortable bench to rest. A mirror across the room led her to fuss with her hair for a moment. She had a drink of water and snacked on some trail mix. She brought out a compass from her backpack to see if she was still going west. The needle swung about at random. So much for that. Her cell phone found no signal.

A blue dress hanging on a rack nearby caught her eye. She got up to look at it more closely. It was the same design as the dress she had discovered her first time in the closet: light blue, long and close, with a bit of ribbing. Up to that point, Beverly had never seen an item repeated. This dress was slightly different though. The pearls in the necklace had been replaced by topaz beads. The dress had a belt. She hung it back up. She shouldered her backpack and carried on.

She encountered the blue dress several more times as she walked along. Now that she was looking, it stood out. Every dress was the same as the first, but each one differed in the details. Some had collars, others had buttons or bows; the length and the cut varied from dress to dress. Yet it was always the same design.

Beverly pressed on. The closet was gradually changing. Rest stations and dressing rooms were becoming more frequent, and more elaborate. Mirrors had lights around them. Tables and extra chairs appeared. One break had a wood-finished, overstuffed chair with a matching ottoman in front and a floor lamp hanging over it. It looked like an inviting place to settle in with a good book. There was a side table for cookies and tea. Farther on she encountered day-beds and lounging chairs, sofas and recliners and finally, what looked like a fully functional bathroom. The shower, tub and toilet were hidden behind privacy screens. Beverly used the toilet. The plumbing worked.

The clothing on the racks and shelves was changing too. The transition was gradual, but Beverly had a trained eye. Styles were becoming simpler. Colours were becoming less bright, and less varied. Beige and brown were displacing blue and red and tangerine.

Beverly stopped at what looked like a functional kitchen. A stove, refrigerator and marble counter stood behind a matching bar with six tall chairs. The refrigerator was empty, but the tap over the sink worked. Beverly refilled her water bottle.

She was now several hours deep into the closet. The deterioration of the clothing continued. Cuts degraded to loose, shapeless robes in beige and grey until, eventually, everything was black. By this point the clothing was barely clothing at all, but lengths of fabric carelessly stitched together.

Yet the luxury of the closet itself was undiminished. The quantity of furniture in it continued to increase. Beverly crossed a long passage which resembled the smoking lounge in an exclusive gentleman's club. There were five grandfather clocks along the passage. All of them were working. None of them told the same time. She stopped in another lounge and ate the rest of her snacks at a beautiful oak dining table.

Beverly pressed on. Her feet were getting tired. The racks of ragged black robes on either side were becoming depressing. Footwear had simplified to rope sandals. She was starting to wonder how much farther she could go when the clothing stopped.

The end was abrupt. The regular rows of shelves or hangers on either side of the closet ended in an empty corridor, which soon gave way to a large open space, like the antechamber of a cathedral. Hard, metallic flooring replaced carpet. The ceiling here soared far above, much higher than in the rest of the closet. The walls were polished, glasslike, and appeared to be almost spinning.

Beverly turned about, feeling vertiginous. Her reflection bounced back at her from a dozen directions. What was this place? The vast room spun around her like a carousel, flashing and blinking as it moved, yet somehow remaining fixed. There was no furniture in the room, no bars or handrails, nothing to hold onto. Beverly stumbled across the polished floor. She could see the passage by which she had arrived on one side and another, identical passage on the other.

Something in the apartment side of the closet caught her eye. Hanging on a rack near the end of the line hung a pair of slim blue jeans. The jeans stood out among the dreary army of

poorly cut, dull black robes behind them. They looked a lot like the fashionable jeans that Beverly was wearing.

Understanding was upon her. “This is where it all begins,” she whispered. “This is the factory.” She looked down the corridor across from the jeans. The closet must have another end. She had to keep going.

Clothing began again perhaps fifty metres farther down the far corridor. At first it was the same black rags as before. As Beverly expected, the quality soon began to improve, just as the colour spectrum broadened, first to include grey and beige and white, and then more and more colour.

Yet this end of the closet was not the same as the other. This closet, once quality and style began to re-appear, presented an array of strange and wild garments. Some were merely imaginative, others utterly impractical. All were different from what Beverly was used to, and Beverly worked in the fashion industry. There were racks of glittering catsuits with built-in boots, long, flowing gowns with impossibly big shoulders and something made of strips of fabric that wound around the figure like a satin candy cane. Some of the clothing was sexy, some was sedate, much was suitable only for a Hallowe’ en party. Beverly strode along. The designer of this clothing, she mused, must have been unrestrained by market forces and over-exposed to science fiction. Indeed, one entire rack of clothing appeared to be experimental variants on classic Star Trek uniforms.

The furniture was different here too. Rather than reflecting the other end of the closet, the furnished interruptions continued to become larger, and more frequent, the farther Beverly walked. She discovered billiard tables and dart boards, comfortable lounges and luxurious changing rooms with giant dressing tables and lighted make-up mirrors. The closet grew steadily wider as she continued. At last she found herself walking through what resembled the front room of a luxury hotel. Tall white pillars ended in fanned vaults on the gold-plated ceiling. A grand piano occupied a large space on one side, waiting patiently for someone to tinkle the ivories.

At the far end of the room was a door.

Beverly approached the door with great relief. She had walked too far and confronted too much unreality for one day. She shrugged off her backpack and set it on the floor. The door was much as the one at the other end of the closet. It wasn’t locked. Beverly took three deep breaths, steeling herself for yet more impossibility. She opened the door and stepped through.

She was standing in an enormous room made almost entirely of glass. Sunlight poured in, making her blink. Through the glass ceiling, high above, Beverly could see blue sky enlivened with random white clouds and a brilliant yellow sun. The low walls below the windows were made of great chunks of carved stone as in an ancient castle. The floor was polished stone. The ceiling was supported by two ranks of stone columns along either side. Much of the centre was occupied by a large pool, filled almost to the brim, and fed by a splashing waterfall along the far end. The rest of the room was furnished in the same rich style as the closet. Arched corridors extending off the far side of the room, across from the windows, suggested this room was only part of something much larger. The windows looked out over a bucolic landscape of rolling hills covered with forest and farmland, bisected by a winding river. Was she finally in Narnia, Beverly wondered. Or Tuscany?

“Hello?” Beverly said, as she stepped into the room. “Is anybody here?”

She received no answer. She could hear music playing, far away, something soft and orchestral, barely discernable over the gurgle of the waterfall. She crossed the room, past the pool, following the music. Gaily coloured birds flitted among the trees outside. “Hello?” she said again.

She passed under a stone archway into another room, smaller than the first, but still capacious. It too had a glass ceiling, but the walls were mostly stone. The music was coming from a set of four giant speaker-boxes spaced around the room. Along the inside wall rose a rank of keyboards and monitors and gauges worthy of a nuclear power station. The control station fronted a grand and messy assemblage of wires and boxes and coils and pipes rising all the way to the glass ceiling high above. A catwalk wound around the machinery, a garland with guardrails.

A petite, slender woman was sitting in one of several chairs in front of the control station, studying the monitors. She fiddled with controls on a touch screen from time to time. Beverly cleared her throat. “Hello!” she said, over the music. “I’m sorry to interrupt.”

The woman started. She lept out of her chair, grabbing a long knife on the way. She pushed a button and the music stopped. “Who are you?” she demanded. Beverly noticed she was wearing a kind of white toga dress with flat sandals. The white straps wound around her calves almost to her knees. Beverly wasn’t surprised.

“I’m sorry to intrude,” she said. “My name is Beverly. Dr. Eisner, I presume?”

The other regarded her with cold suspicion. She menaced with the knife. “How did you get in here?” was her reply. “Are you from” – here she inserted a few colourful expletives – “WFI?”

Beverly raised both hands. “No. Please, don’t be alarmed. I have nothing to do with WFI or anybody else. I run a clothing shop. I’m living in your old apartment.”

Her opposite digested this news. After a moment she visibly relaxed. She tossed the knife on a table. She smiled. “Ah. I see. In that case, I am delighted to meet you. Sorry about the dagger; I have to be very careful.” She extended a hand. “Helga Eisner. And your name is . . . ?”

Beverly shook hands. “Beverly. Call me Bev. I love your dress.” Months in isolation had not suppressed Eisner’s fashion sense.

“Thank you! Designed it myself. But . . . you didn’t leave the closet open, did you?”

Beverly smiled in return. “No. And I brought this with me.” She dug into her pocket and pulled out the key.

Eisner’s face lit up as if the key were a long lost child. “Oh thank goodness,” she exclaimed. “I left in such a hurry I completely forgot about the key.” She paused. “Would you care for a spot of tea?”

“That sounds splendid,” Beverly replied. “My feet are killing me.”

Ten minutes later Beverly and Helga were sitting in deep stuffed chairs in the pool room, looking out over the landscape while they sipped hot tea. Helga said, “I must say, it is a pleasure to have someone to talk to. It’s very nice here, but I’m all alone. I’m impressed that you got the door open.”

Beverly said, “The word Invertito on the key gave me a clue. If you don’t mind, what’s the deal with you and WFI?”

The other woman said something rude in German. “WFI is a gang of thieves. They figured out, or that clever jackass that owns it figured out, that my research had practical applications, at least in the long term. But of course it wouldn’t do to have such valuable knowledge in the public realm. They must keep it for themselves. When I refused to leave the university to work for them, they set about to sabotage my career. WFI has influence. I found it far more difficult to publish, while opposing views flourished. Opinion pieces refuting my theories began appearing in journals and on-line forums.

“WFI began to shadow me. They followed me around. They broke into my laboratory, twice, and stole important data. Well, the first time they did. The second time they stole a bunch of fake data I left for them. Idiots. When I complained to the administration that I was being harassed they dismissed the allegations as unproved. That was either WFI again or normal bureaucratic intransigence. The stress began to get to me, I admit. Why wouldn’t it? I was worried that WFI might take extreme measures. My department claimed I was acting erratically. They used that as an excuse to put me on leave. I think they couldn’t stand all the negative publicity WFI was generating about my work.

“I didn’t think it was safe to stay in The Netherlands so I left for Canada. Bit of a negative career move, but I was scared. WFI wants my research hushed up, and I don’t know if they are above violence. I hoped that if I kept a low profile and pursued my research privately, WFI would leave me alone. False hope. WFI followed me here and started watching me, again. They must have known, or suspected, that I was carrying on with my research. They tried to break in. About that time I made a major breakthrough in my work on space-time ripples. But the field behaved well, unexpectedly, and I ended up making that closet, sort of by accident. Just in time too. I barely had time to move my stuff in and lock the door before those goons broke into my apartment again. But I left the key in the door! I am so glad it was you who found the way in.”

Beverly nibbled on a chocolate chip cookie. “Dr. Eisner – Helga – there’s something you should know. I’ve been pilfering clothing from your closet to stock my store. It sells really well. I would be out of business without it.”

The stylish physicist waved a hand. “Don’t worry about it. The closet will regenerate everything that’s taken. And you must have noticed that the inventory is . . . substantial.” She grinned.

Beverly laughed. “I did notice. It’s hours long. I noticed too that the closet eventually repeats certain styles, but each one is a little different from the others. Like . . . snowflakes.”

“Snowflakes. That’s a good analogy.”

Beverly became serious. “WFI hasn’t given up. They’ve started to threaten me, my staff. I think they figured out where my new line of clothes was coming from. They got into my apartment – your apartment – once, pretending to be policemen.”

“I guessed that they would. I left them a message.”

“Yes, I saw that. I understand they were suitably annoyed. But they came back. Two dangerous-looking men were at my door when I left.”

“Oh. Dear me, I put you in harm’s way.”

“Not at all. They didn’t get in. My staff has been warned. But WFI aren’t fools. Sooner or later they will get into the apartment and try to open the closet.”

“Let them try. They won’t get in.”

“They could pick the lock.”

“Not a chance. Nobody gets in without the key. The one that you brought with you.”

“What if they break down the door?”

“Then they will find an empty closet, of course. And another message.”

Beverly considered all this. Then she laughed. “You’re brilliant! But . . . Helga, what *is* the closet? And . . . what is this place?” She gestured to take in the splendour all around them.

Helga frowned in thought. “How much do you know about cosmological theory?” she asked.

“Almost nothing. But rather more than I knew two weeks ago.”

“Ah. Well, the closet, of course, is a transdimensional portal superimposed on a wardrobe. Why it keeps making more clothing . . . you know, I’m not entirely sure. And this place . . . oh dear. This is going to take rather a while to explain. Do you have any pressing commitments?”

“None at all. The girls can run the shop for a few days.”

“Wonderful. Why don’t you stay here for a while? It will throw WFI off the scent and give me time to brief you on the nature of space-time. I have lots of room.”

Beverly smiled. She leaned back in her chair and looked out over the peaceful countryside. She really needed a vacation. She said, “Helga, that sounds like a wonderful idea.”

