

# Terra Incognita

by E. S. Strout

*If it wasn't for time, everything would happen at once.* Albert Einstein

## 1.

Monday, 18 August, 2036. 0600 hours:

A Mozart piano trio nudged Steven Pauley to grudging wakefulness. He levered an eyelid open. "Sara, it's only six A.M."

A blink of dark lashes over intense brown eyes. She brushed tangled auburn tresses back from her face and drew the bedclothes to her chin.  
"Busy day. Gotta get rolling."

Steve eyed an exposed slender hip. "A tattoo? I never noticed."

"Ancient history, Steve. I chose the Space Corps logo on a dare after a few too many brews at a Delta Tau Chi frat party back in my undergraduate days. It's the old NASA emblem."

She tucked the decorated extremity under the sheets. "Show's over. Gotta go fix a touch of gray."

Steve gaped a cavernous yawn, stretched his athletic frame and scratched his dark crew cut.  
"Prematurely gray is very sexy. Sara."

She stomped to the bathroom, trailing a bed sheet. "C'mon Steve, I'm only thirty-four. I don't need this."

He nodded. "I'll make coffee."

"Toast me a bagel too, love. Gotta be on the 0745 Delta Echo station shuttle. First sublight trials for Dr. Lynch's G-prototype today."

"You're a Section Chief, Sara. Aren't there other test pilots available?"

Dr. Iverson dunked the bagel in her coffee, took a bite, chewed and swallowed. "I've been Professor Paula Lynch's associate for four years. No other test pilots are more up on G-prototype technology than I am."

She continued, "I also have supersonic flight training and test pilot rating. I had to beg

and plead a little, but Paula finally tired of my whining and ok'd me for the first sublight test flight.”

“Sublight only, right?”

“Steve, the G-probe has the capability to exceed light speed with Dr. Lynch’s gravity drive engine. You know that.”

“I also know you have a test pilot’s proclivity for stretching the envelope . . .”

A blue and silver Air Force fourth generation Toyota Prius pulled up outside. The driver gave a single beep of the horn. “My ride’s here. See you later.”

“Be careful.” She smiled and waved as the Prius sped away.

“Fat chance,” Steve muttered.

## 2.

Space Corps Infirmary, 20 August. 1330 hours:

“Dr. Iverson asked for me. What’s happened? Why wasn’t I contacted right away?” Dr. Pauley demanded.

“Can’t say, sir,” the Space Corps security man said.

Steve blinked at the retinal laser ID flash. “I work here. Subatomic particle research. Dr. Iverson is a colleague.”

The man eyed the monitor and nodded. “Please come with me, Dr. Pauley.”

A second agent sat at a desk in an office, eyes riveted on a flat digitized plasma screen. “Dr. Steven Pauley, chief. He has Omega-7 clearance.”

“Good. He can see this.”

The man extended a hand. “Tony Wolcott, Head of Space Corps Security, Dr. Pauley.”

Steve shook his hand. “Security? Sounds ominous. What did she do this time?”

“Please sit, Doctor. This is a weird one.”

He turned the monitor screen toward Steve. “Security camera view. Real time.”

Dr. Iverson was propped up in a Space Corps Infirmary bed, finishing a tuna salad sandwich and green tea lunch.

“Those bruises. What happened? You guys had to subdue her?”

A wry grin from Wolcott. “She can explain better than I. You need to see this recording.” He tapped the remote.

“Dr. Iverson has been here almost forty-eight hours since her emergency MedEvac shuttle from Delta Echo. This is from 0938 hours day before yesterday.”

On the screen Sara dozed, an IV running in one bandaged arm. There was a sudden blink and she lay sleeping on her opposite side, the detached IV dripping clear liquid on the tile deck.

“Weird,” Steve said. “Must be time lapse mode.”

“That’s what I thought.” Wolcott said. He back-skipped the recording. “Note the time stamp, lower right-hand corner.” There was no gap.

“What happened?”

“Beats me. Astrophysics folks are all over this, want to know about any similar changes right away.”

Dr. Pauley gave a nod of irritation. “That’s why it was two days before I was notified.”

“I’m the lowest carving on the totem pole, Dr. Pauley. I had no choice,” Wolcott explained. “Astrophysics geeks. They’ve been a royal pain in the butt. Crowding around like paparazzi, demanding statements, results of physical exams, flight data chips. I had to have my guys run them off, even arrested a couple.”

Pauley looked doubtful. “And the press?”

Vigorous head shake and muffled expletive from Wolcott. “No way. There’s been a total media blackout on this operation since 0400 hours on the 18th.”

“Has anyone else besides the medical staff seen her?”

“Only two. Your subatomic particle physics honcho, Professor Lynch. Five minutes only. I tried to turn Dr. Dubrovny away, but Dr. Lynch said she was okay.”

Pauley scratched his scalp. “Dubrovny is who?”

“Professor Alexis Dubrovny. New Chairman of the Astrophysics Department.”

Steve gave another nod of annoyance. “Can I visit with Dr. Iverson now?”

Wolcott consulted a printed list, made a check mark. “Okay, Dr. Pauley. You’re authorized. Go on in. Five minutes only.”

3.

Steve’s eyes widened in dismay.

“Lovely shade of purple, Sara. You collide with an asteroid?”

She gave him a wistful smile. “Rapid deceleration. Every square millimeter of my body aches. Tylenol should make me a shareholder. I have two cracked ribs and a busted kneecap.”

“Damn. You broke the light speed barrier, right? That was specifically unauthorized in your flight plan, Sara. You knew that.”

A sly nod. “Uh-huh.” She grinned. “I not only bent the envelope, I split it wide open.”

“We’re at least a month away from getting the last few bugs out of your inertial dampers. You could have been squashed flat.”

“Saturn and back in forty seconds. Aren’t you impressed?”

Steve exhaled a sigh, then smiled and nodded. “I suppose so.”

She grabbed his hand. “Good thing I wore a flak jacket. Now what’s with the security spook and Astrophysics Department geeks asking about time skips?”

“I saw the playback. It’s real.”

Her expression was one of genuine puzzlement. “Weird. I do remember an odd chill and the nurse restarting the IV. I must see that flight record chip. Who has it?”

“Dr. Dubrovny, that security guy Tony said Forget all that, Sara. My only other concern right now is you.”

She squeezed his hand. “That’s sweet, Steve. I’ll be outta here in a couple of days.”

“Days? More like a week.”

“See this?” She tapped the IV line with a fingertip. “Ribosomal RNA augmented instant soft tissue regenerative proteins.”

“But the fracture?”

“They hammered in a couple of titanium-steel pins. So bring me some clothes, please? They had to cut me out of my flight gear. And sneak me in some wine. The hospital menu

sucks.”

“I saw no skips, Chief Wolcott,” Steve told him. She wants to see that flight data and bionics chip.”

“Astrophysics still has it.”

4.

Space Corps Infirmary, 23 August. 1130 hours:

Dr. Iverson stood and hoisted the hospital gown to mid thigh. Her skin gleamed a healthy pink with only an occasional faint yellowish reminder of the contusions. “Ta-Da. Just like new.

MRI and CT scans are normal, too. Got something good for me?”

Steve placed a Styrofoam cooler on the bedside stand. “Beringer chardonnay. Tony Wolcott agrees with you regarding hospital food.” He produced a brown paper sack. “Your wardrobe.”

She dumped it on the bed. “Good. Slacks, blouse, cardigan vest, running shoes and . . . “ A demure grin. “Black panties and bra? Enjoy yourself rummaging through my underwear, Steve?”

A faint blush. “Tony says Dr. Dubrovny still has the flight data chip.”

“Damn. This has gotta be space-time continuum related Those astrophysics geeks will need a lot more input from me. I’ve been out there in the G-prototype, they haven’t. Steve, see if you can steal me a copy of that chip.”

5.

Two days later. Sara Iverson’s apartment:

“Heard they grounded you.”

Sara took a swallow of wine, then another. “The inertial damper problem, Steve. Please tell me you’ve fixed it.”

“It took me a day to weasel a copy of the chip out of Dubrovny. You will like this.” He booted up his laptop on Sara’s coffee table, loaded the chip and tapped keys. Complex data scrolled down the screen.

Dr. Iverson drained her glass as she watched. “My flight recordings. Thank you.” Then

she gaped in surprise. “Stop. What’s this?”

Steve highlighted the page. “My exam revealed an instability problem in the shield matrix. I’ve modified the organized array of subatomic particles comprising the shield to better protect organic tissue.” He allowed himself a perceptive grin. “You can withstand the turbulent velocity changes encountered in FTL travel now without body armor.”

“I love it when you try to bullshit me with technology, Steven.” She gave him a seductive wink and undid her top blouse button. “Come here.”

“Your ribs? Your kneecap?”

“Check them out yourself.”

6.

The next morning, 0730 hours:

“Sara?”

She raised her head, wedged an eyelid open and gave him a sleepy “G’ morning.”

“Your tattoo. It’s different.”

“Say what?”

“How weird. Your, ah, left buttock. The Space Corps logo. It’s different.”

A flush of annoyance. “What’s different?”

“Take a look.”

She padded to the bathroom, wearing only a robe. “Mess with my head, Pauley, you’re a dead man.”

Minutes passed. Steve gave a soft tap on the closed door. “Sara?”

It cracked open a centimeter. Her face was ashen, eyes wide with foreboding.

“This is weird. You’re right. Logo is the same, but the legend reads NASA, not Space Corps. I’ll show you something else, too.” She pulled hair back from her forehead till the skin stretched. “See anything odd?”

“What?”

“Jesus Christ, Steve.” She yanked a handful of tresses straight up. “Ow, dammit. Look now. Closer.”

“You switched from Lady Clairol?”

She grabbed him by the shoulders and gave a vigorous shake. “I haven’t used hair dye in a week, Steve.”

“No gray. How come?”

“I’m damn well going to try to find out.”

7.

Space Corps Security Office August 26. 0920 hours.

“Good to see you again, Dr. Iverson,” Tony Wolcott said.

She returned his handshake with a determined grip. “I know you keep a nanochip copy of my infirmary stay. Show me.”

Wolcott rubbed his receding hairline, blinked at her glare. “Can’t. Not authorized.”

Sara keyed her cell phone. “I can have Dr. Lynch here in thirty seconds.”

Tony smiled and loaded the chip. “I’ll assume you’re authorized.”

“I really appreciate this, Tony. Can you enlarge specific locations?”

“I can do a molecular scan on every pore, Professor. Where do you want me to start?”

“My face. Right before the first skip on the 18th.”

Wolcott tapped at the keyboard. A color image appeared on the monitor. “Got it. Oblique angle, partly hidden by the pillow.”

“Move up to the hairline. Closer. Good. Right there. Maximum enlargement. What do you see?”

Wolcott fidgeted.

“Tony?”

“You have a bit of premature gray, Professor. It happens.”

Sara punched a closed fist into an open palm with a resounding smack. “Yes. Now, same spot right after that skip.”

Wolcott punched more keys. “You’ve turned over.”

“Damn. Get the temple. There.”

A perplexed head shake from Tony.  
“The gray is gone.”

8.

The next morning. Sara’s apartment:

Steve gulped black coffee and took a bite of toast. “Didn’t hear you come in last night.”

Dr. Iverson poured more coffee, booted up her laptop, studied graphics, took a bite of scrambled eggs. “Head knocking with Dubrovny and the astrophysics geeks till after one.”

“Do they know anything?”

“Dubrovny has an idea. She was excited as hell.”

“Does she have an answer to the skip weirdness?”

Sara said, “Not yet, but she gave me a theory of astrophysicist Stephen Hawking’s from the early days of this century. She told me that Professor Hawking proposed a theory that there may be infinite numbers of identical space-time lines and probabilities. Parallel histories within our universe, but with subtle variations.”

“So?”

“She thinks I may have transposed small components of myself with a counterpart from one of those alternate time lines. The tattoo and hair color.”

Sara continued, “Delayed side effects of FTL travel, occurring with each skip you saw on my infirmary chip.”

Steve gave her a dubious stare.

“You’re telling me there could be another you out there in some interchanged cosmic reality wondering what happened to that tattoo on her ass?”

A giggle. “Pretty freaky, huh?”

Steve uttered an agonized groan. “Did Dubrovny have any real conclusions?”

“She’s concerned that I may have established a link with a particular space-time line, and that more delayed changes could be transposed if I make another FTL flight. Now she wants time to run more tests,” Sara muttered sourly. “Like weeks or months.”

“I agree, Sara. This is a new, unexpected phenomenon in FTL travel. Its evaluation could take that long or longer, to make sure there are no dangerous side effects.”

“Come on, Steve,” Sara insisted. “The unmanned FTL probe was unaffected. The rats and the chimp all came back okay.”

“Maybe it only affects more advanced primates. Like *homo sapiens*. Us. Relax. You’ve earned some time off.”

She gave him a lazy smile. “I got a new mission approved.”

Steve made a gagging sound. “Good God, Sara. How did you get it past the flight safety people?”

“Dr. Lynch pulled a few strings.”

Steve’s shoulders slumped in resignation. “Sara, I want to see new FTL data too, but suppose Dubrovny is right?”

“I’m a scientist, Steve. I must know.”

9.

Three days later. 2030 hours:

“What do you have, Tony?”

“Dr. Iverson looks okay. Her flight suit is intact and she has no bruises. Forty-four hours of surveillance recordings and only two skips, less than a nanosecond each. The tattoo still says NASA and her hair is natural dark.”

“You saw . . . all of her?”

Tony smiled. “Part of the job, Steve. You’re a lucky man.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “What about Dubrovny and the rest of the geeks?”

“Didn’t let them in. Made up a tale about a medical quarantine. Sara’s lab stuff is

finished. She's tired. Why don't you take her home now? Dubrovny's people will be back soon enough."

"Thanks, Tony. I owe you one."

10.

Sara's apartment, later the same day:

"Everything's all right, Sara?"

"Lab tests, x-rays, augmented MRI, molecular bioscans, DNA check, you name it."

There was a moment of hesitation

"You seem unsure," Steve said.

She paused. "Well, not exactly everything." She held out her glass. "Little more wine, please?"

Steve filled both glasses.

"Watch this." She set her glass down, extended her legs and gave two vigorous kicks. Her black flats impacted the window ledge and flopped to the carpet.

"So?"

An exasperated sigh. "I wear size seven footwear, Steven. Snug fit. No way I could kick them loose. My feet are a size smaller. That's not all. I've lost five pounds, even with the pre-flight hi-carb push."

"The skips. More alternate universe changes." Steve said. "Dubrovny was right. I was afraid of this."

A nod, then a covert grin. "The alternate Sara will be shopping for a new wardrobe."

"Have Dr. Dubrovny and our boss seen the new flight and bionics chip?"

"I back-skipped it and deleted my new changes."

"How could you? Security would know."

She smiled. "They won't. I'm a computer geek, too. I fixed the time stamp."

"Jesus, Sara. Security will figure it out very soon."

A grin. "Tony knows. He likes me."

"Please wait, Sara."

"G-probe got me to the Sagittarius-A anomaly and back in less than two hours. Think I'm gonna quit now? Rim of the galaxy is out there waiting for me."

"When Dr. Lynch finds out you'll be grounded, maybe kicked out of Space Corps. You could end up as a flight attendant for Frontier Airlines somewhere in Wyoming."

Sara smiled. "The volume of recorded data I collected on our galactic black hole will keep Dubrovny's ratpack salivating for months. They won't know I'm gone. Dr. Lynch wants me to go," she whispered.

A shocked gasp. "Does she know about the new changes?"

"I told her. She and I are searching for answers."

"There could be more delayed changes. Suppose you come face to face with your alternate time line doppelganger?"

"I'll kick her right in my Space Corps tattoo."

## 11.

Wednesday, October 1. Security Office:

"Why all the secrecy, Tony?" Steve asked. "Dr. Iverson has been missing for six weeks, Dubrovny is accusing her of hijacking the G-probe. All that alternate time and history stuff is making me a little crazy."

"She's back."

Steve collapsed in a chair next to Wolcott's desk, his face drained of color. "Since when?"

"0655 hours today."

"Is she okay?"

Tony gave an indecisive shrug. "You decide. They are on their way here from Delta Echo now."

A blink of confusion from Steve. "They?"

12.

Five hours later:

“They could be identical twins,” Security Chief Wolcott said as they viewed the conference room through a one-way glass window.

Steve expressed a tremulous gasp.  
“They are both Sara.”

Tony nodded. “My first reaction, too.”

“Why wasn’t I called right away?”

“Dr. Lynch said you were too close to the problem because of your relationship with Dr. Iverson. She has arranged a suite for them in the VIP quarters.”

Steve’s response was one of reluctant acceptance. “Yeah, I suppose I can see that. Can you tell me anything, Tony?”

“They were confused and disoriented, angry, then amazed and curious. Dr.’s Lynch and Dubrovny have been shut up with them for four hours filling recording chips. They’re debriefing each other now with G-7 PowerBookl laptops having identical serial numbers.”

“What have you heard?”

“Not a peep. None of my people were allowed in there, and the intercoms were turned off.”

“How did they get here?”

Tony activated a flat plasma screen on the wall next to the window and pressed a remote. “This is Docking Bay 4 at Delta Echo.” Two identical slender one-person G-prototypes rested nose to tail in Bay 4. “They caused a bit of confusion with the docking crews as you can well imagine, almost collided. The G-probes are identical, down to the last molecular transistor according to our electronics guys.”

The door clicked open and Dr. Dubrovny stepped out.

“What can you tell us, Professor?” Steve said.

A head nod and quizzical half smile from Dubrovny. “They are both Sara Joanne Iverson. Their identities incorporate the same postgraduate degrees, same research experience,

social and family backgrounds and associates.”

“And their physicals and lab?” Dr. Pauley asked.

“Astrophysics and medical have completed their presumptive evaluations,” she said. “Here’s what they have learned so far. Speech patterns, inflections, vocal accent identical. Same orthopedic pins in the kneecap with the correct orthopedic appliance ID numbers.”

She continued. “Identical lab results, MRI too. Same DNA. Molecular and subatomic structure analysis identical.”

They are convinced of their identity and deny being clones or copies.”

“Can I go in?”

“They are asking for you.”

### 13.

Both Saras gave Steve a long embrace.

“Looks like you’re outnumbered, Steve,” Sara said with a smile and a raised eyebrow.

The other Sara said, “We suspect you are as confused as we.”

Steve nodded, mouth agape.

“In the last several hours,” Sara continued, “we have gained mutual respect for ourselves as identical contemporaries from alternate time lines in this universe.”

“A tough concept for us to grasp,” Sara said.

The other Sara added, “It’s like meeting an identical twin you have been separated from since birth.”

Steve said, “But one of you must be a copy.”

“No copy, no clone, Steve. We are both Sara Joanne Iverson. Your scientists have run every relevant test possible, but the answer remains the same.”

“We are each other.”

“Our only question, Steve, is what do we do about you?”

“Explanation, Dr. Dubrovny?” Steve asked.

She took a deep breath, let it out through pursed lips and answered in a low, tremulous voice. "I don't have a good one."

"This situation," she continued, "the permanent transfer of individual characteristics and entire individuals from an alternate time line is unique. These unanticipated side effects of faster than light travel could not have been predicted. Hopefully some adequate answers will come later as a new field of study and research evolves."

"And we're the guinea pigs," Sara whispered to Sara.

Steve scratched his head. "Twins by some whim of the cosmos. God has a bizarre sense of humor."

Dubrovny tugged at a stray lock, tucked it behind an ear and whispered in her soft Slavic accent. "I believe that the alternate universe scientists are dealing with an identical problem. Two identical Saras."

The Saras nodded to each other.

"Two there, two here. Now we're quadruplets."

"No other clues, Professor?" Steve asked.

"Steven, this is *terra incognita*. A new and unexplored field of knowledge, as I've stated."

"Dr. Dubrovny, suppose one of these Saras tried another FTL trip?" Steve asked.

"The compilation of flight and bionics data from her last trip suggests that we could get a third Sara, or perhaps more."

Wolcott scratched his head. "Greek to me, Dr. Pauley."

"Me too. It's all theoretical as hell. But imagine a third Sara. Or a fourth, a fifth."

"Or an infinite number," Dr. Dubrovny added, eyes wide with amazement.

Steve nodded.

Tony clapped both hands over his ears.

"Stop it, you guys. You're making me crazy."

"Are you all right with this, Steve?" Dr. Dubrovny asked.

Steve's face reflected determination. "I do have one suggestion, Professor. Please step outside with me."

The Saras arose. "We'll come, too."

Steve held up a restraining hand. "I will explain later, Sara . . . and Sara."

14.

The next day, 1430 hours:

The Saras sat together in the conference room, both displaying a relaxed demeanor as they sipped iced tea.

"What happened to Dr. Pauley?" Security Chief Wolcott asked.

Dr. Dubrovny breathed a deep sigh, dried her hands on her lab coat.  
"Steven has a plan. Too dangerous, I tried to tell him."

Tony's expression was one of total puzzlement. "Where is he, Professor?"

She tapped keys on her laptop, eyed the screen and nodded. "He's just now exiting our solar system in one of the G-prototypes."

Wolcott leaned back in his chair with a smirk of amusement, turned to the Saras. "You ladies must be more than a little anxious."

They smiled. "We're just beside ourselves, Tony. We can't lose."

Tony muffled a chuckle with a hand.  
"Suppose we get more than two Steve's back?"

*Terra incognita*, Tony," Sara said.

The End