
Tide Pools

by Kevin J. Anderson

Science Fiction

The return portal formed in the air like razor blades slashing through clear ice. Andrea stepped across the threshold, her mixed elation and disappointment so overwhelming that she barely noticed the skin-fizzing sensation of hopping back home from an adjacent timeline.

“I got something!” she called, unslinging the backpack from her shoulder. “How about a miracle cure for multiple sclerosis, anybody?” It wasn’t what she had hoped to find, but she had to make it look good.

In the receiving room of Alternitech, portals and complex control panels surrounded her. At her announcement, technicians and other cure hunters began to pay attention. “How much follow-up do we need?” asked the chubby man in the operating booth.

“Not necessary—I got all the right data.” Andrea brushed a hand through her short, sweat-rimed dark hair, feeling her cheeks grow warm.

Cure hunters like herself dreamed of such unlikely chances. Peeping into parallel timelines, digging through other-universe medical libraries, Andrea searched for effective treatments that doctors in her own timeline had somehow missed.

Who would have thought that a drug used for skin disorders would be amazingly effective against MS? When injected into the spinal columns of those suffering from the disease, the drug dissolved the small white plaques covering nerve sheaths.

No one in her own timeline *had* thought of it, but in an adjacent universe, a doctor had stumbled upon the treatment and published it to high acclaim. Alternitech would profit greatly from the discovery, and so would mankind.

The man in the operating booth spoke into his intercom, summoning verification reps to paw through her data. Other cure hunters applauded Andrea as they waited for their own gates to open. She surrendered her backpack and its contents to the security guard.

It was phenomenally expensive to haul foreign mass from other timelines. Hunters like Andrea recorded pertinent data onto the diskettes or videotapes they carried with them. Apparently, there was no cost to transfer *information* between timelines, though Andrea supposed the entropy specialists would probably come up with something sooner or later.

After the announcement of her discovery, the reporters would come, the television interviewers, the applause from the public, the heart-felt thank-you letters from MS patients given sudden new hope for their conditions. She allowed herself to revel in the times she made a find like this.

Andrea also felt a disappointment inside, despite the rewarding rush of success. After all, she had not been *looking* for a cure for MS. She had failed in her primary mission.

The problem gnawing at her was whether or not she should tell Everett. He was the one who had everything at stake.

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Home at last, Andrea entered through the front door, propping it open to let in the fresh breeze. Sunlight gushed through the bay windows, warming the sunken living room.

Everett straightened from his work by the laser generator. “Andrea? Is that you?” She stood in full view, and he was staring directly at her. His eyesight grew worse every day.

“Expecting someone else to barge in and blow you a kiss?” she asked.

“I expected you home hours ago. Wait, I have to start all this up again!” He held up his hands, then felt his way around the equipment, squinting at it, careful not to stumble. “I have a surprise. Where are you? Come into the foyer—I’ve set that up as prime focus.”

Andrea smiled to see him looking so earnest, so bustling. This was much better than the phase of moping he had gone through a month earlier. She went where he directed her and looked around the walls. Tiny faceted mirrors were mounted at strategic points around the room.

“Ta da!” Everett switched on his laser projector, and a 3-D holo sculpture congealed around her like a spider web of light, a kaleidoscope of rainbows. Each line was split, not quite resolved, so that it was really dozens of layered images overlapping each other, partially unfocused with chromatic aberration. His grids were out of phase, and she doubted Everett even knew it.

“My masterpiece,” he said. “I wanted to leave something impressive behind. I call it *Timelines*. It’s for you, Andrea.”

Everett was looking at her with a childish expression of delight and anticipation on his face. His gaze was slightly off.

Timelines. She looked at the fuzzed edges of the light threads, the overlapping images that were almost but not exactly like each other. Perhaps it wasn’t just some jittering lack of surety caused by Everett’s fading eyesight and his trembling hands; timelines nearly overlapping but subtly different. He *must* have done it on purpose; she had to believe that, or else his failure would tear her heart apart. “I think it’s beautiful, Everett. I don’t know how you managed it.”

He lowered his head to cover his smile. She almost expected him to say “Awww, shucks.” Instead, he found a soft futon and sat down. “I was going to have it done by your birthday, but now everything takes me so damned long.” He sighed. “Are you going to stay home with me tonight, or are you going back to Alternitech?”

Watching him made her wince her eyes shut. What good would a multiple sclerosis cure be for him? She had failed him at the time he needed her most. She had to keep searching.

Heidegger’s Syndrome. The disease selectively attacked the myelin sheaths around the optic nerve, then chewed away at the medulla oblongata, deteriorating the nerves that controlled breathing and heartbeat. After a slow descent into blindness, Everett would one day just find himself without a heartbeat, then fall over and die. Andrea dreaded the morning she would wake up to find him cold in the bed beside her. She could not prevent it in any way.

Andrea stared at Everett in the living room. The solution was painful and obvious. But Alternitech had flatly denied her permission to hunt among the timelines for a cure.

She walked up behind Everett, threw her arms around his waist, then pressed her cheek against his shoulder blades. The tapestry of light glittered around them, defeating even the sunlight. *Timelines*.

“It’s your best work, Everett,” she said. “I love it.”

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Andrea fidgeted in the university office of a man she had never met. In the halls of the Neurological Wing of the Deudakis Medical Research Facility, she could hear annoying sounds of construction, hammers and saws and power drills. She had to weave her way around scaffolding and construction barricades to reach Dr. Benjamin Stendahl's office. The hall lights flickered, but remained on.

She looked at her watch again, sat down in the only uncluttered chair, then stood up once more. Stendahl's computer sat on a corner of his desk, glowing with a garish screen saver of multicolored lines. She ran her fingertips along the spines of the journals on his bookshelves, stacks of dusty manuscripts, technical papers held together with old rubber bands; one band near the bottom of the pile had snapped, splaying curled printouts.

A man stepped into the office breathing heavily and mumbling to himself. He came to a full stop as he saw her. His eyebrows were like fluffy gray feathers mounted on his forehead. "Oh! I forgot." He dropped a bulging briefcase atop the stacked books on his desk. "You're here to talk to me about Heidegger's Syndrome—your husband, right? Well, there's nothing I can do for him. You realize how rare the disease is? Only eight people a year are *diagnosed* with it in all of North America."

Andrea thrust her chin forward. "I've read all your papers. Looks like you were making good progress toward a cure. Why did you stop work on it?"

"Simple answer—no more money. That's the rotten part. Heidegger's isn't really an insidious bastard like cancer or AIDS. Given some research data, I could do a lot. But our rhesus monkeys were rerouted and never arrived. I could afford only one grad student, but she got married and moved to Ohio. I couldn't get her replaced before the end of the fiscal year, when my funding went away."

Stendahl sat behind his desk, jiggling the mouse so that the screen saver dissolved to display a master menu. "I think 'orphan disease' is the colorful term they have for it. With research dollars so scarce, who wants to waste time coming up with a cure for something nobody cares about?"

"I care about it," she said. "Eight people a year care about it, and so do their families, and everybody they know."

Stendahl looked at her with sympathy in his big, dark eyes. "Look, millions of people get cancer, leukemia, cystic fibrosis. Heidegger's just doesn't cut it. The disease was a medical curiosity when it was first reported, little more."

Andrea stared at the journals on his shelves. Pounding hammers from the hallway punctuated her sentence. "And now?"

He shrugged again. "I'm working on other things."

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Andrea wanted to spend her every waking hour hunting alternate timelines for a cure, but she needed to be with Everett. Each day was like Russian roulette with him, never knowing which heartbeat might be his last.

Seagulls wheeled overhead, tiny checkmarks that screamed against the booming rush of the Pacific. The ocean and the huge sky above made the universe seem oppressive in its grandeur. Headlands sprawled out in muted browns and grayish greens to the shore, where a string of tide pools dotted the wave-chewed rock like diamonds on a necklace. Barefoot and in cut-off shorts, Andrea and Everett

picked their way among the rocks.

Andrea took sandwiches out of the pack, and they split a bottle of beer. Everett squatted beside one of the pools and dangled his fingers into the water, startling two crabs that ducked for cover beneath the rocks. He squinted to make out details. Eyeglasses would not help him; Heidegger's was not a problem of focus, but of the optic nerve itself.

The tide pools were colorful, filled with life, a microcosm of unfurled pale-green anemones, tiny fish, and shells. Snails worked their tedious way across the rock surface, finding rich patches of algae. Everett tossed a rock, watching the ripples spread to the boundaries of the tide pool, but constrained by the walls so that it could not affect the other tide pools.

"Each one is like its own universe," he said. "Full of life, nearly identical to the others, but different. I'm like an anemone in a tide pool, stuck to the bottom, waving my fronds in the hope that I'll catch something, but ultimately trapped right where I am. You, on the other hand, are more like one of those rock crabs. With Alternitech, you can scuttle over the wall and get to other tide pools, go see new places, look at what they've got, and maybe take something back with you."

Andrea didn't know what to say. She did indeed have the flashy, high-paying career. Who could imagine a world where a "research librarian" was considered a glamorous profession? Andrea was constantly being interviewed, receiving awards and applause. She had loved it—until the search had become personal, and desperate, and she had failed.

"I'm still looking for something to help you. I'll find it. Don't worry."

A wave curled against an outcropping partly out to sea, dashing spray into the air like tiny crystal droplets. Two gulls swooped down, then wheeled high overhead.

"Why help me when you can help thousands?" Everett said. His voice held a strong resignation that had emerged from his initial depression.

"As if one cure precludes another!" Andrea scowled. "Why do we pit the two types of research against each other, as if they were our only two choices? The government spends more money maintaining *flower gardens* around monuments than they do on Heidegger's research—why does one bit of science have to siphon money from other science, rather than something else? Everything isn't equal." She looked down, though she knew he couldn't see her face anyway. "Besides, if I find something, I'll just tell Alternitech that I found it by accident while doing other research. They can't prove otherwise."

Everett smiled, like a parent watching a child deliver promises with false bravado, then he reached for his sandwich. She watched him squint until he found it.

She swallowed a large bite. "We should get back. I can go out hunting at least two more times today."

Everett's face was a plain mask of disappointment, but he said nothing.

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In her long search, most of the alternate universes appeared identical. Digging into the medical research libraries, sometimes she discovered even less progress on Heidegger's Syndrome, or none at all. Twice, she found minimal successes beyond her own timeline, but nothing worth bringing back. With a run of unlikely bad luck such as Stendahl's, it seemed obvious that in some other timeline he would have received his rhesus monkeys, his grad student would have stayed an extra six months.

Throughout her search, she also had to find enough other tidbits to keep Alternitech happy. They had

told her not to waste time hunting a cure for an orphan disease, yet they were delighted when she found a way to artificially change eye color from blue to brown and back again. Plenty of cosmetic and commercial applications, they said. Their priorities made her sick.

She had lost count of the timelines by now. On each mission, Andrea went directly to a university's medical library and buried herself in Stendahl's publications, checking to see if he had anything new to offer. This time, according to the library, Stendahl had completed his experiments, but his crucial summary papers were "in press," which meant they were not yet published and would be available only in his office.

Andrea hurried along the dim corridor. So far, every timeline had the same chaotic construction in the west wing of the building. Perhaps chaos itself was the only constant among the timelines. Yellow barrier tape blocked off corridors, light fixtures lay on the floor, the sounds of hammers and power saws echoed in the halls. Andrea passed a pile of new-cut boards, ducked under a scaffold holding drip-splotched cans of paint. She hadn't yet been able to determine if they were building something up or tearing something down.

Stendahl's door was closed. Taped to the wall beside his office hung a handwritten note giving an address to send Get Well cards. Under that, she read a newspaper clipping that described how Benjamin Stendahl had broken his leg after stumbling in a construction area, and that he was not expected to return to teach classes for the remainder of the semester.

Stendahl's door would be locked, but all cure hunters kept lock-picking tools in their packs. If this timeline had some crucial information for Everett, she would take whatever measures were necessary. As she worked at fumbling the slim tools into the door's keyslot, construction noises drowned out the sounds of her hidden efforts. But she kept looking over her shoulder. She was not good at this.

Wrapping her sweaty palm around the knob, Andrea finally opened the door. She ducked inside and closed it behind her, flicking the light switch.

Stendahl's abandoned office smelled oppressive and long-empty, though he had been in the hospital for only a week. She switched on the computer, letting it boot up as she scanned the bookshelves. She did not have much time to find what she needed, and Stendahl's cluttered organization made the task more difficult.

She saw the title on the fresh manuscript lying on top of one pile, then found a folder filled with memos, his hand-jotted records of the experiments, raw data. She flipped through the pages. At the end of his summary Stendahl even suggested a few treatment methods. "Yes!" she said.

She glanced at her wristwatch, trying to determine how soon the Alternitech portal would come back for her. She could use her camera to photograph each page of the hardcopy summary report, but this was raw data—files and files of it—experimental records, suggested follow-up tests. It would be laborious and time-consuming to copy all of it. More time than she had. But she could store everything onto one of her diskettes—if she could find the right files on Stendahl's computer.

Andrea went to the computer, glancing at the menu and searching for Heidegger files. As she feared, Stendahl had imposed little organization in his filing system. Some of the filenames contained the word "Heidegger," but when she called them up, they were mere memos requesting supplies. Stendahl had named seven of the files REPORT1, REPORT2...each taking up significant disk space. She checked the file-creation dates, then called up the most recent, but it had nothing to do with Heidegger research.

Out in the hallway, the construction workers used something that sounded like a jackhammer on the walls. Andrea tried to ignore the racket and concentrate on her work.

Finally, when she pulled up REPORT5, the words described all his tests, all his results, all his suggestions. Jackpot!

Excitement and anxiety growing within her, Andrea checked her watch again. She unzipped her pack and pulled out the various blank diskettes from her own universe. She pulled a disk out of its plastic sleeve and tried to slide it into the drive.

It was an eighth of an inch too wide. But she had other formats, other sizes to accommodate slight differences among the timelines. She tried another from her stack.

She finally found a diskette that fit. Stendahl's drive began formatting it. Alternitech experts had always been able to decode her diskettes, no matter how subtly different their computers might be. Of course, the techs might not help if she brought back something she had been instructed not to look for. She might have to call in all of the favors she had earned in her years working for Alternitech.

The disk finished formatting. It would take a few moments to copy the files. She didn't have much time; the portal would come back for her soon.

At the far end of the hall, one of the construction workers cursed as the jackhammer noise changed with an abrupt clank.

All the lights in the building went out.

Stendahl's office filled with blackness. The computer died. Andrea's hopes died with it.

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By flashlight, she photographed as many pages of the draft manuscripts as she could. Working backward, Andrea snapped each image of conclusions, then the experimental method, and finally began plowing through all the raw data. She stared at her chronometer, watching the time tick down.

Alternitech's machinery cast her across the parallel universes at random like a fishhook in the water. Now that she had found a timeline that offered hope for a Heidegger's cure, chances were very slim that she would ever find herself back *here*. Frantic, she kept photographing the data, hoping that her flashlight provided enough illumination for the pictures to turn out.

Finally, when she could not wait a second longer, Andrea clicked one more photograph, then ran out of Stendahl's office, leaving the papers scattered all around. Glowing green EXIT signs shone in the darkness. She heard voices calling, complaining about the power outage. By the bobbing light in her hand, Andrea ran through the halls, dodging construction barricades. She had to get back to the portal.

A gruff voice yelled for her to bring the flashlight over so they could find the circuit panel, but she ignored it. She nearly tripped over a pile of pipes against one wall, but she caught her balance. Reaching the secluded stairwell, Andrea stumbled into the shadows just as the Alternitech portal slashed through the air.

Clutching her precious data, Andrea fell across the sea of timelines.

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“Well,” Stendahl said, raising his bushy eyebrows, “that's the good news.” Andrea suddenly felt her stomach turn into ice.

He folded his hands on his desk and leaned toward her. Around him, she could see photocopies of the article and notes she had taken from the alternate universe. Stendahl had studied them, marked them with

a red pen. She spotted several pieces of data circled, a few with exclamation points beside them. Andrea feared that she had not managed to include the *one page* that contained crucial measurements or descriptions of the one round of tests that would have allowed Stendahl to create a treatment for Heidegger's. It would all be lost.

Alternitech management had not been pleased with Andrea when she had returned with information on Heidegger's syndrome, information she had been specifically told not to seek out. They had suspended her, until they received a phone call from an angry senator whose daughter was even now being treated for multiple sclerosis—using the prescription Andrea had brought back. The phone call seemed like a miracle cure to her situation.

Now, Everett was the only one who had something to lose.

Andrea met Dr. Stendahl's gaze. "What is it?" she said, her voice hoarse. "What's the bad news?"

"I've confirmed—er, I mean I *agree* with my own conclusions." He forced a wry smile. "This research does indeed suggest a treatment regimen that could offer hope for people diagnosed with Heidegger's syndrome. But —"

Andrea flinched, but she didn't dare say anything else.

Stendahl looked away. "As with so many other ailments, beginning the treatment at the onset of the disease holds the key to the cure. If we could have started this right when your husband's eyesight was affected, when the disease was still confined to the optic nerve, we might have had a chance. He could have suffered a loss of eyesight, but the disease itself would be eradicated."

His feathery eyebrows rode up his forehead. "In your husband's case, the disease has already migrated to the medulla oblongata. The damage is already being done to the crucial nerves that govern involuntary functions such as heartbeat and respiration. This treatment itself purges the disease, but at the cost of destroying the nerves that are affected—somewhat like amputation."

Andrea took a long, shuddering breath. "Obviously, we can't do that in Everett's case. Not anymore." She felt a dry whispering sound in her ear, as of her own ragged hope draining away.

Stendahl was lousy at sounding optimistic. "From now on, anyone else diagnosed with Heidegger's will have a chance. You've saved those eight people a year you were so concerned about. No one else would have funded my research. You have that to show for your efforts, if nothing else."

Andrea found she couldn't listen any more.

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Mist generators sent a cool fog toward the ceiling of the room, making the bright green and red laser beams stand out. Everett had been furiously working on another sculpture, fine-tuning it and trying to finish while he could still function. He had cranked up the laser intensity to the maximum safe level, just so he could discern the beams with his failing eyesight.

With the rest of the house darkened and only a few stars visible out the window, Andrea lay next to him on the floor, looking up at the laser tracery.

Everett spoke in the darkness. "There was a poet during the Boer War who said to live every day as if it were your last, for one day you're sure to be right."

"When did you start reading poetry?" Andrea said, trying to change the subject.

“I’ve had a lot of time to do things while you were off at Alternitech.” He sighed. “But I’m glad you found the cure anyway.”

“You’re still going to die!” Andrea snapped. Her failure seemed like fluttering wings around her head.

“We’re all going to die,” he countered. “But you’ve given a longer life to the other people who get the same stupid disease I did.” He took a long breath. “I came to terms with this illness a long time ago. It’s *you* who need to accept it.”

“I had to try,” she mumbled. But she began to wonder if her obsession to find a cure, her need not to fail at the task she had set for herself, was actually more for herself instead of Everett.

“I know you did,” he said. “Thank you for trying, Andrea. But all those days you were gone hunting ... I would rather have gone to the mountains with you, done a few more bed and breakfasts up the coast.” Everett’s words stung.

“There are plenty of other versions of *me* in other universes who *will* have a long and happy life with you. In our timeline, I had an unlucky break. I got an incurable disease that nobody’s ever heard of. It just doesn’t happen in this timeline, with this Everett and this Andrea.”

He sat up abruptly. “We’ve got money saved, so why don’t we spend it? Besides ... you’ll be getting a big life insurance check from me before long.”

Andrea winced, but he gripped her hand. She thought of the hours she had lost in her desperate hunt. “I suppose I could take a leave of absence from Alternitech,” she said haltingly, “especially now. It would give them time to cool off.” She flashed him a smile that was at first forced, but gradually grew sincere as she thought of the things they could do together, now that all the restraints had been snipped away.

“All right,” she said. “Let’s go be alive as long as we can.”