

FIND US ALIVE 38: IRENE GRAVETT

There used to be a little girl, living in a very small house in a very small town. There isn't a little girl there anymore. They do not last very long. Little girls are often burned up the fastest.

There used to be a little girl, squatting on a cracked sidewalk. There used to be a magnifying glass, and there used to be a tick. There was a burned black spot on the pavement, there was a brief sour whiff as something died.

*[Heat sizzles]*

Lesser minds would have found little Irene to be sick. Young girls shouldn't be so fascinated with the deaths of small creatures. Where was her gentleness, her compassion? She wasn't a monster. She didn't enjoy causing pain. She was only curious about how the world worked. About how death worked. About the mortality of the crawling beings around her, and about the mortality of little girls. Years and years later, she still had that pale circle on the palm of her hand, where she had turned the sun's white hot beam upon herself. The tick ran. She did not.

Blood. Metal. Light. Air. Blood.

One sees humans differently after cutting thousands of them open. The body is a machine of meat and bone. Exquisite and fragile. The human mind an incredible instrument of innovation and invention and malice, and so easily broken. Even the most brilliant human mind on earth was, when the sun went down, nothing more than electrified meat. Fragile. Embarrassingly so.

*[Sounds of a hospital, beeps, footsteps, quiet talking, doors opening and closing]*

Through the eyes of a mechanic, Dr. Irene Gravett viewed her fellow man. Dozens, hundreds of machines, reacting to stimuli the way their environmental factors dictated. Most of these reactions could be accurately predicted, if given the right amount of observation and analysis. They moved through the halls, going about the tedium of their time. Avoiding discomfort. Avoiding pain. Avoiding death. Each pursuit more futile than the last. The ultimate goal of humanity, to scabble at the dirt, to wear your fingernails to the quick trying to avoid the single universal truth of the earth.

You are going to die.

Similarly, the Foundation's mission was an exercise in futility. Another massive hierarchical pyramid supposedly dedicated to keeping as many humans as possible away from

their ultimate fate. Or maybe it was a pretense to give a certain council of individuals a disproportionate amount of power. A power that they could use to distract themselves from the rapid approach of the end. It would arrive someday. It didn't matter if it was one year from now or a thousand, even those kept alive by their abuses of the anomalous would still be found by that quiet oblivion. They would probably be the ones to scream the most on their way out.

Gravett often wondered if she was broken, by the standards of normal people. She didn't remember what it felt like to watch others pass her in the white halls and not see them for the flawed mechanism they were. Simple. Fragile. Inconsequential. A blip in time and space, over so quickly the universe barely noticed.

She did her job. She did her job very well. She kept them functioning. She fixed the parts that broke, or at least the parts she had enough knowledge to repair. Set bones, administered medications, knit flesh back together. It was what she was here to do, according to her own environmental factors, the chain of events in the chaos of the universe that dictated who she was and where she would end up. She saw no reason to defy this system. Impulsivity was a game for younger women. In years gone by she played that game, but creeping into her mid-70's Gravett had given up any attempt to break the bonds of fate. Even one's attempts to act unpredictably were still, by some measure, completely predictable anyway.

Dr. Gravett did not believe in an afterlife. And she didn't see a point to the extreme lengths humans would take to avoid going to one. It was another means of denial. The idea that, after death, one could continue living through a different avenue was, to her, just another attempt to escape the inevitable. Even if some immortal soul lived on after one's body had been destroyed beyond what science and magic could repair, it didn't matter in the present. Your current body, your current avatar of blood and bone and electrified gray matter, would die eventually, no matter how fast you ran.

*[Heart-rate monitor flatline beep gets slowly louder]*

So running was only useful to a point. Irene did not run.

*[Heart-rate monitor beeps, slowly fades out]*

The young field agent was fighting. Frankly, Gravett was surprised she lasted this long at all. The fact that she was still alive was a good indicator, but didn't change a reality that weighed on her for months now.

Site-107 did not have the resources for brain surgery. Not the standard ones, at least. Admittedly better-equipped than many Foundation single-anomaly research locations, a remnant of the hub it might have become, Site-107's infirmary still didn't have the same specialized equipment present at 19 or 17 or 01. Many of their tools were experimental, and designed for anomalous injuries rather than ordinary ones. Gravett and her Doctors and Nurses had managed their duties using scanners designed to detect anomalous activity within the body. Rarely did they find any, but with the help of a trained eye, one could distinguish flesh from bone from organ.

It's how she diagnosed herself, after all.

Irene Gravett had a backup of the Foundation database, current up to the point of their disappearance. Research into the MRI image of blood in the brain was not impossible, and matching that pattern to the bluish-purple blob on the scanner held against Agent Love's head was not impossible either. The real question was if she was right about what she was seeing.

*[Heart-rate monitor beeps steadily]*

The EKG beeped steadily, a song that told her not all was right, but things were not immediately, urgently wrong. Dr. Gravett heard that tone in her sleep. She heard its urgent, warning counterpart in her dreams. The finale, that long, piercing note, came deeper than that. The smell of antiseptic that lingered in her nose turned to the smell of metal and blood turned to the smell of shit and bile. A young woman laid on the bed, beneath their only cooling blanket, a measure to slow her blood flow and prevent her ruptured vessel from leaking even more. The vibrancy and noise of her life was an exception to the rule. Life was an exception to the rule. Here for a moment, then gone again, back into the cold of nonexistence. She was breathing, still. Her heart was beating. There was much Dr. Gravett couldn't know about what was happening beneath her skull. What kind of damage could be remedied there, if it could at all. Without the context of the Agent's collapse, and without her and her staff's collective knowledge of the functions of the human body, she looked like she was only sleeping. A pallid, sunken sleep.

There was a time in her life when Irene Gravett would have let Nari Love die. There was a time within that time that she may have even helped her along. Non-existence is not cruel, after all. At one point she believed that freeing up a space would be more efficient than pouring resources and time and money into a broken machine that likely could not perform as well as an un-damaged one. Past a certain point, a person was perhaps more effort than they were worth. She

had killed for the Foundation before. It was a kindness, sometimes.

She didn't believe that anymore. Maybe she was going soft in her old age.

She was changing, as people did. Dr. Gravett had not been a young woman for a very long time. Parts of her never stopped hurting, only went from a pressing, gnawing ache to a dull, thrumming soreness. Even her surgeon's hands, still steady enough to close a dozen compound fractures every month, trembled more than they used to. Imagine that, her own unholy flesh machine, wearing down after prolonged use. A thought frequently burrowed itself into her mind, late when sleep eluded her. That she could have done more, in years past, to avoid the pain of age. Or some of it, at least. She stifled the thought, stuffing it into the back of her mind behind white blast doors with "futile" printed on them. Animals wore down. Everything wore down. Avoidance is arrogance. The beam would catch up again soon.

And yet, after decades of corpses and cremations and Foundation-sanctioned "mercy" killings, Dr. Irene Gravett was afraid.

Dr. Irene Gravett did not want to die.

There was an ache beneath her skull. There was a long family history. There was an improvised screening.

And suddenly, Irene was running.

She knew what it was, from the moment it started and wouldn't stop. Her grandmother had it. Her mother had it. She avoided it passively for a long time, but now she had it, too. Gravett didn't need specialized diagnostic equipment to know for certain what was happening inside her own head. Brain cancer was the ghost that haunted her family for generations.

*[A computer fan hums, keyboard types, mouse clicks]*

From the moment she was sure, Irene Gravett ran. She ran to every source and text on the subject that she could access through the site's intranet. She sat in front of screens filled with text for hours every night, studying, learning her enemy. Even though the possibility of tumors in her gray matter loomed over her for her entire life, she grew complacent through the assumption that when the time came, she would not be on the forefront of dealing with it. There were other doctors. Neurosurgeons. She was not one of those. Nor did she have access to one.

Without knowing how long she had, or if anything could even work, Gravett set her doctors on a secondary task. Keeping

her alive. They used their experimental equipment to locate the small tumor, but without the rigorous training required of neurosurgeons, open surgery would be a long shot at best. The variety of catheters and other minimally-invasive tools *could* remove some of the cancerous tissue, but was better suited for the removal of fluids and closing of blood vessels. The Medical Department searched, but only found a pile of tools that might work, solutions that could help, and methods that could be useful. The consequence for failing any of these would undoubtedly be death of the immediate variety.

So she could make a break for it. Run for a spot of light that might be safety, and might be the concentrated sun. Or she could stay still and wait for the end.

She was dying, and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

It wasn't supposed to happen this way. Death wasn't supposed to come for her the same way it did everybody else. The human body was a machine, but hers was supposed to be different. It was supposed to be different. She was a surgeon, a mechanic, a prophet of the needs of blood and bone and she was destined to go out on her own terms, her OWN terms and years from now, by bullets or pills or poison but not by a clump of rogue cells in the one most valuable part of her machine, and she was fearless and she was afraid, she was afraid, she was afraid.

And suddenly every moment, every stupid, cosmically insignificant moment of her tiny, meaningless existence, was beyond value.

Dr. Featherman's potted plant had a second sprout growing from it. A little green shoot, clearly from a different type of plant entirely. She wondered why she never noticed before. In Wing AD, there was a rubber scuff on the floor, left by somebody's shoe, likely during one of Security's bouts of roughhousing. It didn't go away between the Resets, which meant it was there before the Shift. Had her coworkers always been that way, then? Had there always been such life here, buried under a thousand layers of metal and earth? All around her, people talked, worried, grieved. They loved and hoped and tried. There was no meaning, and there was only meaning.

For the first time in seven decades, Irene Gravett was alive.

She was standing at the end of a hospital bed, staring at the inert body of one inconsequential person who wouldn't even leave dust to remember in a thousand years, and life had meaning, even though it didn't, and choices had meaning, even though they didn't, and love had meaning, and

it always did, and there were handprints on the walls, and there were people waiting beyond the door, and death hung in the air and everyone was running, not away from it, but toward each other, because when nobody is holding the magnifying glass there is no beam, only the sun, and none of it matters, and all of it matters.

There used to be a little girl. There used to be curiosity, and innocence, and there wasn't anymore. In its place was a cold, hardened tool of the Foundation, who could not see the sun but only feel the searing heat, not the glowing warmth abundant around her. It had been too long. It was too late for her.

But it wasn't too late for *her*.

What Dr. Gravett saw lying in that bed was the promise of the death of the Foundation.

Maybe, with more like her, with more like *them*, with less of herself, they could unmake the Foundation brick by brick, and people could be more than machines. Site-107 was evolving before her eyes. It was deviating beyond its species, so much that even the most rigid, the most loyal, were commanding mercy. Irene Gravett knew she could not change with it. She was not one of them. Both emotionally and physically, she was too far gone. But there were still options. Still avenues of going out on her own terms. Choices she could make against the grain of her fate, useless, futile wrenches she could throw into the workings of the universe.

The Foundation had to erode eventually. She was wearing down with it. They both spent too long scrabbling in the dirt, avoiding death, avoiding change. But there was hope in Site-107, pointless and stupid and growing, faster than the Foundation would be able to withstand. She would funnel the last months, or weeks, or days of her life into that meaningless hope. That blip in the cosmos. After all, perhaps all her own environmental factors had led to this. It would be pointless to fight it, right? If your predictive series of events led to a tiny, short rebellion against the universe, the most logical choice was to continue that rebellion.

There was a young woman in a hospital bed. There was a surgeon, and there was a Foundation. Perhaps some of those things wouldn't last very long. But there was also hope, and that would last very long indeed.

