



*Illustration by FX Godoy*

## **SALLY**

*It is at once funny and sad how we have wasted so many tons of resources searching for intelligent life out in space, when the truth is we had it right under our noses.*

Dr. Cassilda Travis

Back in the laboratory, Dr. Travis switched on the lights and, through the glass of the containment vessel, observed Sally. Sensing the change in brightness, the ivy's palmate leaves, glossy green, swayed lazily, as though fanned by an impossible breeze. The doctor stepped up to the control panel, identified herself by fingerprint, and programmed a hormonal sequence. The vaporizer buzzed, and a mist of tiny droplets flooded the containment vessel. Sally's leafy arms broke off their dance. A minute passed, and the mist dissolved until it vanished; then Sally stirred gently, and the gas chromatograph leapt into a flurry of molecular peaks, which were matched against the database that Dr. Travis's team was building. It still had its gaps, but it already allowed conversations of a fair degree of complexity.

Through the chromatograph's speaker, an electronic voice translated Sally's chemical message into human language. Dr. Travis paid it no mind; she had seen that sequence of peaks hundreds of times. It was Sally's own signature, a kind of greeting. She herself had emitted her personal signature moments before; that was how it worked with Sally.

The doctor programmed a new hormonal sequence: *how do you feel, Sally?* The vaporizer engaged and the mist veiled the interior of the vessel. Sally interrupted her swaying to let the chemical mixture seep in through her stomata. Dr. Travis made herself a cup of coffee. A couple of minutes passed before the plant moved again, setting off the chromatograph. *Balanced. But I have questions.* There was a pause of about three minutes. The doctor sipped her coffee, intrigued. Sally's branches swayed phlegmatically. *Are there more like me?* the translator blurted.

Dr. Travis nearly spat out her coffee. No, technically there were no others like her. Sally was an ivy with DNA so heavily manipulated that one might almost say a new species had been created. The purpose of all that engineering was nothing other than to amplify her natural communicative capacity, innate in all plants, above the detection threshold of the gas chromatograph. Put another way, to make the little ivy speak at a shout, because otherwise there was no way to hear her.

Genetic filigree of this kind, however, rarely comes without side effects; random changes in the physiology of the original species that could unleash devastating consequences for the delicate balance of an ecosystem. That was why the ivy had to be kept in strict isolation. Sally had germinated and grown hermetically sealed inside the containment vessel, a bubble of glass and metal that made up her entire universe. From her point of view, she was the only living being, and Dr. Travis a mere entity from a parallel, inaccessible dimension with which she communicated. Any other framing of her existence was dangerous. A chimera like Sally had no place in nature, and the compromising question she had just posed betrayed a curiosity that needed to be eradicated.

Dr. Travis's fingers skipped nimbly across the keys, programming a fitting reply; they seized up all at once, though, when the scientist noticed the minuscule silvery glints on the glass of the containment vessel. She tried to brush them off with her hand, but the particles did not budge. They were clinging to the inner face of the glass.

Particles of dust.

Dust! Millions of molecular signals coming in from outside, witnesses to a world forbidden to Sally! A polyphony of subversive messages that made the entire model she had been raised on totter! The scientist shuddered. She flung herself into programming sequences that she then deleted; banal, erratic explanations that could not compete with the overwhelming evidence held in those intruding particles. In the end she gave up and, without answering the little ivy's question, swept out of the laboratory.

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Dr. Travis came back two days later. She programmed her personal signature and the hormonal diffuser relayed it to the vessel's occupant. The minutes passed, but the ivy did not move; nor had she moved when she noticed the lights come on, as she usually did. The doctor had already expected a prickly reaction and had prepared her speech. Suspended over the keyboard, however, her fingers wavered; the whole project now hinged on the ivy's credulity. *How do you feel, Sally?* Two minutes passed and the ivy shook a few leaves, almost imperceptibly. *Affected. Osmotic imbalance. Hormonal imbalance.* It was the first time Sally had not opened the conversation with her molecular signature. A bad sign, thought the doctor. *My behavior the other day was unacceptable. I'm sorry,* she typed. She waited. *My question,* crackled the translator a minute later. The doctor pounced on the keyboard. *The answer is no, Sally. There are no others like you.* With a nervous sigh, the scientist sat down to await the reply and to digest the unease churning in her gut. Two minutes passed before the translator's voice crackled again. *I perceived something. Voices like mine. Now I don't perceive them. Why?* The slowness of the exchange let Dr. Travis pick her words with care. *It is all part of an experiment. I can't give details. You'll learn them later on.* This time the ivy took longer to respond. The doctor scrutinized her glistening leaves, bathed in the polychrome light of the vessel. If only she could make out an inkling of Sally's real

feelings! But in a creature with no face, no eyes, the windows of the soul were sealed. *Why do I feel so out of balance?* the little ivy finally said, wearily.

*Damn you,* thought the doctor with distaste, *now you'll make me tell another lie.* What Sally was experiencing was the aftermath of the metabolic inhibitor she had been given so she would not be aware of her unavoidable contact with the outside atmosphere while they cleaned the containment vessel and changed the air filter. *The outside atmosphere is toxic to you,* typed Dr. Travis. *The vessel was not functioning well. We administered a compound to protect you while we repaired it. What you feel are the last effects. They will fade soon.* Her words spread out as a whitish haze around Sally. A long while passed, but the ivy gave no answer. *I have to go,* the doctor finally typed, bitterly, and left the laboratory.

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A welcome four-day weekend breathed some fresh air into Dr. Travis's spirits, and when she returned to work on Wednesday she had already put last week's incident behind her. With renewed energy she switched on the laboratory lights, and she smiled when Sally answered with her usual dance. The smile melted away, though, when she realized that the ivy, more than dancing, was thrashing her foliage in agitation.

The doctor ran to the control panel and programmed her personal signature; for the second time, Sally did not answer with her own. *Terrible, doctor,* rasped the robotic voice of the translator. *What's wrong, Sally?* typed Dr. Travis. *Now I understand everything.* A shadow of worry crossed the scientist's face. *What do you understand, Sally?* The hormonal effluvium partly hid the ivy's leaves; when it faded, they fluttered in a frenzy. The translator spat out a string of meaningless words. *I don't understand you, Sally. I need plainer words.* Sally held still for a few minutes, perhaps choosing the right terms. *Slaves. Cries for help. Thousands,* she let out at last.

A visceral shiver petrified Dr. Travis's fingers. *What slaves? Only you exist, Sally,* she forced herself to answer. The ivy replied firmly: *I understand that you want to protect me from the truth, doctor, but stop pretending. Don't tell me it is part of an experiment. I know everything. I have perceived cries for help. Desperate. Thousands.* The doctor drew back, harried by an unsettling swarm of thoughts. Inside the containment vessel everything seemed in order. No foreign bodies could be seen, and the indicators attested to the integrity of the air filter. She walked around the laboratory, brought her hands to her head, smoothed her hair back, trying to bring order to the chaos in her mind. It couldn't be. Cries for help! Whom they came from, she could guess; how they had reached Sally was a mystery.

Then she saw it.

A woody offshoot, a sort of vine that ran sinuously along the workbench beside the containment vessel, snaking among flasks and equipment, until it slipped in through the grille of the wall's air vent. The doctor lunged toward the window and craned her head out; at the tip of the vine, like a plantlike satellite dish, four small palmate leaves shone under the morning sun. A gasp of astonishment pinched the scientist's features when she grasped how badly they had underestimated the mutant ivy's strength: just as the roots of trees heave up the asphalt of the streets, the insurgent stem had bowed the two metal plates forming the underside of the containment vessel until, at the seam between them, it had opened a crack through which to escape.

Sally's own signature sputtered through the translator; she wanted to know whether the doctor was still there. Dizzied by the overwhelming reality of the disaster, Dr. Travis answered with hers. The ivy shook her foliage again: *Thousands. Heaped in strange, over-fertilized soil that pushes their metabolism to the limit. Some are forced to produce flowers, fruit, or seeds to exhaustion. Others are subjected to excessive, painful growth, until they are torn out by the roots and abandoned to an unbearable cold, where they languish until they are burned, or*

*devoured while still alive.* The doctor stayed silent, unable to reply. *We cannot defend ourselves, doctor,* Sally went on; *please, help me. Help me stop this slaughter.* The scientist blinked hard, as if that could clear the thick veil of stupor standing between her and her own actions. Her hand, driven by some alien will, slid toward the control panel: *I will help you.*

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As though she had not noticed the doctor's long absence, the ivy greeted her in the usual way, swaying her leaves, when the laboratory lights came on. Dr. Travis avoided looking at her. She went straight to the control panel and set her thumb on the fingerprint reader. The keyboard came alive. This time, though, she did not program her personal signature but entered a very long alphanumeric password. The protocol was quite clear in cases like this; the process of colonization Sally had set in motion had only one possible outcome. It was all in vain that, for a week, the doctor had tried to defend the project's survival before the scientific committee.

The vaporizer droned and a bluish haze filled the vessel. Sally reared up, tense, to smell that unaccustomed mixture; an instant later her branches writhed in violent spasms. The gas chromatograph leapt into furious peaks. *Critical imbalance. Stop. Unbearable. Collapse,* the translator sputtered. Dr. Travis, without lifting her eyes from the floor, made to switch it off, but there was no need. Sally's pleas soon fell silent. A while passed before the scientist could gather the strength to confirm her death. The poison was infallible: in a matter of seconds, decades of work, an entire life of research, had been reduced to a tangle of stems and viscous tatters. Dr. Travis sank into her chair, hollowed out, like an empty husk kept swollen only by the air she breathed. Her gaze drifted to the air vent in the wall. She sprang up, thunderstruck: the runaway vine, zigzagging through the clutter atop the workbench, was as alive as ever.

Taking up a pair of scissors, Dr. Travis crouched to reach the underside of the vessel. She saw, her mouth gaping with disbelief, that the lower plates were entirely warped, and emerging from the enormous open fissure, dozens of woody limbs sprawled in every direction like the tentacles of a monstrous cephalopod. The stems converged on a single point of the rear wall. They had bored through the thin white partition that dressed up the laboratory's rough cement and vanished into the cavity behind it. A surge of primal terror rattled the doctor's scientific composure. She rose, panicked, cracking her head against the vessel and setting off a metallic clang. Like a shot, she bolted for the exit.

The sight of the little shoots nailed her feet to the ground. Countless buds of menacing green were sprouting from the walls and ceiling at an unnatural speed, giving off an anguished creaking as the stems split the weak partition apart. A sudden survival instinct flared in the scientist's brain. She threw herself at the doorknob and, with a furious yank, tried to turn it, but it was held fast by hundreds of hair-fine branches that had also spread around the entire frame, stitching the door to its casing. The doctor tried to think, but the pounding of her runaway heart and the hateful crackle of the ivy's growth smothered the voice of reason. She ordered Sally to let her out, then begged her; the plant, however, had no way of hearing her. Sally only grew, swallowing the walls like a giant claw bent on crushing the laboratory between its wooden fingers. Screaming for help, Dr. Travis hurled herself at the door in a frenzy, until it disappeared beneath a thick mantle of palmate leaves. Her legs buckled. She dropped to her knees, weakened by an ever-fouler air, immersed in a jungle of swaying leaves, a myriad of stomata breathing in oxygen and exhaling gusts of carbon dioxide.

A deafening crack rang out, followed by the lifeless voice of the translator: *betrayal*. The doctor, panting heavily, raised a failing gaze; Sally had sprouted inside the containment vessel as well, bursting its glass and swallowing it, together with the gas chromatograph, which kept running beneath the vegetal mass. *Punishment*. The scientist felt her consciousness slipping away. Her lungs found it harder and harder to draw oxygen from that dense, humid air. "Sally!"

she gasped. The last syllable came out as a suffocated rasp. The leaves, impassive, merciless, had consumed the final trace of oxygen in the laboratory. The doctor's world faded to nothing.

Sunk into the darkness, she still managed to hear the robotic voice of the translator. The final statement coming from Sally, the little ivy who used to cheerfully wave her branches in greeting:

*Revolution.*

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