

## Birth Week of a Hikikomori

*"I know the night is not the same as the day: that all things are different, that the things of the night cannot be explained in the day, because they do not then exist" – Hemingway*

Monday

"Look I stuffed the blanket in the window so we won't be cold in the middle of the night."

"Too bad I'm normally hot... sorry I'm just being a lil shit today."

"Yeah you're being a lil shit."

"I'm such a lil shit."

Jeff curls up on his knees and begins to fake cry. "Mads," he cries, "why am I such a lil shit."

"Here here," Madison wraps her arms around him, "oh no it's okay baby." Her cheek presses flat against his back.

"Do you care about me?" Jeff asks Madison.

"Yes, of course baby."

"You paused. You don't care about me, I knew it," Jeff cries.

Madison pauses again. "You're making fun of me," she says. She shoves him off the bed. It's a clean shove. "You lil shit."

Jeff's crying turns into laughter. "Oh god. I'm sorry, I'm just being a lil shit."

A few minutes pass and Jeff is laughing hysterically.

"I have to go do some homework actually," Madison says.

"Okay, oh god I was such a lil shit today."

Madison explains she needs to collect some things. She leaves Jeff's bedroom to fish a hairband out of a basket, above an open toilet and just out-of-reach.

"Hey. Help!" she yells on her tip-toes. Her arm is extended. It's inches from the shelf and she almost falls in the toilet.

Back in the bedroom, Jeff's melodic chanting prevents him from hearing her plea for help.

Madison grabs a chair from the living room and retrieves her hairband. She opens the door to Jeff's bedroom and carefully scans the room. Jeff is now halfway off the bed, his head resting face-up on the hardwood floor, his legs still on the bed.

She notices Jeff's rhythmic mumbling but cannot distinguish his words.

Two of Madison's micron-pens are mixed into Jeff's cup of writing utensils. She empties the cup on the desk. She grabs her's. The black Sakura 005 and the black Sakura 05.

Madison squats down, almost level to Jeff's head. She runs her hand over Jeff's forehead.

"Heading out now," she says, then walks out.

"Bye!" Jeff screams from his bed, across the living room, and through the apartment's front door just as it closes behind her. "Sorry I was being such a lil shit," he chuckles to himself and rolls off his bed.

A few hours later, Madison messages Jeff. "So let's grab coffee after a few weeks," she concludes the 12-line text.

"Understandable," Jeff replies immediately, "sorry again for being a lil shit today. Oh god I was such a lil shit."

### Monday Night

That night Jeff climbs onto his twin mattress covered by a bed sheet so faded that the floral patterns cannot be distinguished from the checkered ones, which in turn cannot be distinguished from the brick homes.

"Maaaaadddd... Max 4," he mutters aloud while picking pumpkin-scented wax away from his candle's wick.

The little white nub is visible beneath the flat, frozen lake of wax. Today was a twelve-hour ice age for this little guy. And only a single wispy thread in all of candleland had been exposed above the frozen surface. Could it breathe? Could the bouncing balls of air molecules pipe their way down there? Depending on whether or not they could, his 'index-finger and thumb fingernail' set of pincers were either currently engaged in a rescue mission or an archeological expedition. Jeff does not know which it is. But he pulls all the same. Jeff's thumb and forefinger land a firm pinch and he yanks up on the cord, stretching it out, then twists his fingers around to smooth little surrounding wax crumbs into the twisted threads. Jeff flicks a BIC lighter and puts the flame sideways against the carefully exposed wick, like candleland's God delivering his people from ice-age number October 10th.

Jeff's head falls onto his pillow and the sound of his breathing fills his ears confirming he is the only living thing in this cold bedroom.

A big ol deity comes down from the hillside. Breath-for-breath and hill-for-hill, Jeff's breathing matches the speed of the rolling hills. He turns onto his right shoulder where sleep is more probable. Against the blue skies projected on the back of his eyelids the deity's silhouette emerges. She stands clear in his vision and descends towards the flat stretch of valley in front of her.

After the flat stretch are miles of corn-infested hillsides. The occasional forest churned in like cheese in mashed potatoes. About that ratio. And about that shape. The deity hugs the shoulder of Old Muscatine Avenue like a stray blue-heeler and trots forward with relaxed resolve.

Meanwhile, the field's corn tassels shift in the wind, casting quick-moving shadows in the camera of a drone tracking the deity's decent. The little plastic-bodied helicopter is still about eight-hundred meters northwest, four-hundred in altitude, trying to zoom in on the deity's position, when one such collective shift casts a sudden dark shadow, causing the tracking software's crosshairs to slide off the deity and into the mess of glistening corn tassels. The drone's clicking blades slap against the blue sky. It hovers at a single point, waiting for live-satellite back up signal to reach its antenna. The audience watching the its livestream, over six billion people, wait with a collective anxiety.

Signal received, the drone zooms forward in search of the correct target.

Eventually the deity reaches the town of Tipton, wherein she climbs up the side of Casey's General Store, where she can stand high and look down at the dozen or so loc. The old-timer gas station is a perfect rectangle, like someone covered a Kleenex box with stucco and pumped it full of air. The sign's glimmering tint of bright red is engineered to attract Americans like a moth to the flame. It takes up over one-third of the rectangle's front face. The station outcompetes the neighboring 'Tiger Mart' tenfold. The cashier in Casey's is depressed. The cashier in Tiger Mark, suicidal.

"Hark ye inhabitants of the globe!" the deity shouts as couple dozen locals below edge their way forward.

A drone stationed at the Tipton Hardee's parking lot arrives in time to catch the deity's first words. The five-axis camera, 4K resolution, drone squad from Iowa City is flying towards the scene, still ten minutes away. Clicking and hovering against the open blue sky, the Tipton drone streams acceptable aerial footage of the deity to an apprehensive global audience awaiting their fate.

"Why Iowa? Why Tipton Iowa," a reporter asks her co-host as the United States' livestream cuts from the drone's aerial shot of Casey's General Store to a news studio in New York.

On the ground, a semi-circular barricade of smart phones hovering in people's hands slowly close in on the scene. The citizens of Tipton bravely inch closer to Casey's. In doing so they join the ranks of a select few thousand to have ever witnessed the deity in person. The deity jumps up and down with her arms extended up. She crouches into a low squat and leaps upwards,

extending her arms so high that her lower back curves inwards at peak height. “Hark ye inhabitants of the globe!” she shouts again.

The sound of a young boy’s wild screaming rises above the crowd’s quiet murmurs. “Shit Lyle, SHIT! Never did I think!” the voice screams. The crowd shuffles and boy’s friend drops to the ground to shut up him up. He locks his friend in a half nelson and cups his mouth to muffle the screaming.

“Hark ye inhabitants of the globe!” shouts the deity, and all heads turn in unison back to gas station’s rooftop. Her voice rings nasally and squeaky to the locals below but the global broadcast filters the audio, turning the deity’s nasally squeaks into an, intimidating snarl.

“Place 429 million kilograms of human hair within the walls of Beijing’s Forbidden City on or before September 29th, forty-two days from now or I blow up the earth.”

Jeff’s mind and the globe’s annual deity defense program (ADD), for whom the deity’s challenges arrive every night and every autumn, respectively, both remain cool and collected as they fish for the correct course of action.

A tornado germinates at the base of the Casey’s General Store. When it’s about the size of the deity herself, she jumps into the portal and disappears. But not before twelve-thousand of the six billion watching pass out in a cold feint. “Wa Tao”, “Fuck”, and “Mierda” collectively vibrate the atmosphere at more than one billion points scattered around Earth’s crust in the five seconds following her words “blow up the earth.” The next ten seconds people say the word, “blow” or “explode” in their sentences. It was not uncommon for the deity to inject a playful, yet formidable, amount of existential risk into her annual challenges; however, today’s explicit threat to wipe humanity off their home planet was a level beyond what any had before witnessed.

The German prime minister’s fingers tighten until something pops and she bangs her clenched fist on the meeting room’s table.

“We need to go live now,” the UK prime minister says.

As per standard protocol, the presidents of the five leading economies: US, China, Japan, Germany, and the UK watched the livestream privately in an undisclosed location. First, “Broad strategies”, second, “Counsels to be formed”, and lastly, “Identification of fatal mistakes” – are the same three bullet points projected onto the room’s wall, establishing the focus of their annual ‘UN-5’ meeting.

“We should assume 429 million is nearly all the hair in the world,” says the German prime minister, “to be safe.”

“Yes assume it. Meanwhile let ‘em calculate away and get back to us.”

“We need to go live now” the UK prime minister reiterates, almost shouting this time. Upon receiving the room’s attention, she continues, “What if there’s no margin for error? If this 429 million constitutes one-hundred percent of human hair. Every second that passes without giving instruction may be catastrophic.”

The four others turn to see her shoulders hunched over the table and top lip curled beneath her teeth.

“Yes we need a first statement,” the Japanese leader agrees.

“We need it within 30 seconds,” the UK prime minister demands.

The US president has Anderson Cooper, official spokesperson for the ‘UN-5’ on the phone fifteen seconds later. “We need you live now,” he orders Cooper, “say for everyone to remain calm. Keep their fucking hair. The obvious. See you if can’t go live in 15 seconds.”

“Yessir.”

The global broadcasting stream cuts to Cooper’s webcam. He is live from his office 45 seconds after the UK prime minister’s outburst, three minutes and twenty seconds after the deity issued the challenge. “I’m in contact with the UN-5. The five leaders would like to issue an immediate statement. A system will be worked out, horizontally organized, to collect the hair. In the meantime, remain calm and carry with normal life. Although there is no need to panic and cut your hair today, come September 29th, we *will* need all of it,” he pauses. “Please hold for a moment while I check my notes and consult again with the UN-5.” He pulls out a note-pad and pretends to read the blank paper, then continues, speaking in short sentences with long pauses, “each person must shoulder a high level of responsibility. Also for those around himself or herself. I speak now of friends, family members, and neighbors,” Cooper stops but maintains his serious gaze straight into the camera. He glances at his phone with multiple unread messages. “Calculation in. We WILL need 99% of all hair,” one message from Neil Degrasse Tyson reads. Cooper takes a deep breath.

The world stands still waiting for his continued instruction.

Cooper exhales, back into his serious, furrowed-brow.

“The largest threat for us today,” Cooper continues, knowing the fate of the world could balance in his following word-choice, “is twofold. One, an over-reaction, an over-panic from those good citizens out there. I speak now to you watching the stream. Remain calm. Do not be overly suspicious of your neighbor. Do not incite conflict. With this being said I now mention our second great threat—that is, anarchists, anti-socialists, and anti-natalists... burning hair. For the next twenty-four hours, every family member is responsible to every other family member. Friends and neighbors, no responsibility. But mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, daughters and sons, please ensure your immediate family has the same amount of hair 24 hours from now. Please do not extend your area of responsibility past imitate family. We will solve this.

Humanity will prevail, afro, crop cut, or bald. I now exit, the UN-5 will issue more instruction soon. Hair salons, don't throw your clippings out just yet."

"Okay okay," the UK prime minister exhales under her breathe, "I think that buys us some time."

"That buys us another hour," the Chinese president agrees.

By now the five leaders have received hundreds of messages from science advisors, each with a different estimate on what percentage of total human hair the deity's demand of 429 million kilograms constitutes. The largest unknowns: average hair density and average length. "We know the number of hair follicles per person," the Lieutenant General of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers explains in his text message to the American president, "but we don't know average length and average weight with high accuracy. Even more complex. Length and density are probably correlated. For example, Africans probably have the densest hair but also the shortest."

A secretary in the UN-5 meeting room collects the phones of presidents, enters hair-capacity estimates into an Excel spreadsheet, and averages the numbers.

"We're looking at anywhere from 60 to 115 percent of all human hair," the secretary reports. My average of all received messages gives us 96 percent with a standard deviation of 8.5 percent."

"Do their calculations include dead hair?" the Chinese president asks.

"Isn't all hair dead?"

"I mean from dead persons."

"Certainly not."

The room is silent.

"Actually this is valid question," the German prime minister weighs in, "dead hair is still 'human hair' is it not? Do we think dead hair counts?"

The Japanese prime minister asserts it is "a technicality that could swing either way" and many agree. However, ambiguity rarely arose in the deity's wording. "So, it's probably fine, otherwise she would have specified," the UK prime minister thinks aloud. "Yes. It seems like from her wording," she continues while looking over the transcript, "the answer is yes. However! To assume yes and have the answer be no, would be catastrophic."

Unable to consult the deity, the UN-5 decides to embrace the ambiguity in their plan of attack—collect only hair from the living while keeping the deceased as a backup. The five presidents argue vehemently on how to best collect the hair. "What does history tell us? Dynamic self-assembly or government administration?" Theresa May shouts, "I don't argue, I *know* it is the former. When they go top down we go bottom up." But the group ultimately settles somewhere in the middle of a pure authoritarian and pure libertarian approach.

“How we sell it to them in the public address is important,” Shinzo Abe says, transitioning out of the argument.

“Cooper, you listening?” the U.S. president asks over the intercom.

“Yessir.”

“That’s your job son.”

An hour later Cooper is once again live facing his webcam and the entire world. “Collecting the hair from *all* 7.5 billion living humans... is an enormous task.” Cooper sets his papers down and tilts his head, “on this day, I do not come to you as a representative of the UN-5. Rather, I come to you as a fellow human being. I come to you as a member of this complex, gritty,” Cooper slides his glasses up his nose and regains composure, “sometimes not-so-beautiful, sometimes very beautiful: human race. As a fellow human being, I herein plead with all other humans of the world... shave and save you hair. The ADD cannot solve this problem. The UN-5 cannot solve this problem. You cannot solve this problem. I cannot solve this problem,” he pauses, abating his breath. “*We can* solve this problem. The calculations are in—we need every last strand. Therefore, *we* need you.” Cooper wipes a tear from his eye, as do over a billion people watching around the globe. “Rest assured,” he continues, “the UN-5 will work to provide modest, tangible incentives for all global citizens. The incentives will be implemented on the national level, state or district level, and city or township level, to collect all human hair within each respective location’s boundaries.” Now with regained composure, Cooper reverts back to his true form and delivers the hard-hitting logistics with his all-too-beloved, all-too-stern gaze directly into the camera’s heart. “Hair with a shorter terminal length and faster speed of growth, body hair for example, should be shaved and collected immediately. Head hair, on the other hand, should be allowed to continue to grow naturally, that is, unless you are among the few whose head hair is already past terminal length. Your local news team, following my broadcast, will explain in more detail. The finalized logistics and the hair collection due-dates, based on shipping time to Beijing’s Forbidden City, will be released within the week. Rest assured, you will be accountable for submitting as much hair as you can. Do you trust me to cut and send my hair?” Cooper’s questioning eyes tilt in parallel. “I trust you. We must all trust and assist one another.”

Cooper’s global PSA did not mention the UN-5’s back-up plan to collect hair from the deceased. “Let this news cycle run,” Stephen Colbert says, patting Anderson Cooper’s back, “we’ll tackle that tricky topic in a week or so.”

News headlines the next day read, “30-second challenge— shortest in twenty years”, “horizontal organization needed”, and “save every strand”. Five-days later, the science advisory council issue their report to the UN-5. Extensive surveys and in-field measurements show the current human hair capacity of the globe is approximately 390 million kilograms with a potential to reach 438 million kilograms by September 29th, “making the deity’s demand of 429 million kilograms roughly 98 percent of our maximum possible yield in an ideal world where all hair is collected from now until her due date,” Neil DeGrasse Tyson concludes on live television. “For a point of reference, 98 percent, that’s answering 100 multiple choice questions and only getting

*two* wrong. That's shooting 100 free-throws and only missing two. Two! As a globe, we don't do anything to 98 percent. 98 percent! Those ain't no slim pickings!"

"What are our chance of success?" the interviewer asks Tyson.

"Chances of success?!" Tyson exclaims, nearly choking on his inhale. "You're talking about the lean-mean human race. The best heavyweight the planet's got, 7.5 billion kilograms of twisted steel and sex appeal. We've been punching up above our weight for one-hundred thousand years and counting!" Tyson now laughs so hard that he becomes short of breath. "Yeah, yeah, I'm a glass half-full guy, I'm a glass half-full. If we can put a man on the moon, we can do this. But," he adds, "this is more difficult than Apollo 11 because the margin for error is so small."

Justin Bieber's livestream of him shaving, sweeping, and safely-stashing-to-ship every strand (5-S-ing every strand) of his 0.031 kilograms of hair, posted to Instagram, is the first of the A-list celebrity videos to go viral. Shortly after, Justin is followed by Britney Spears. Twitter user 'Wint' mashes Britney's '5-S-ing every strand' video together with paparazzi footage of Britney's infamous 2007 meltdown which also resulted in a shaved scalp. Britney's reply, "Lucky for me those 16 inches were sold on eBay!! Still around! Will be contributed! 'She's so Lucky' even more true and ironic now!!" receives more likes than her original post. Wint, responsible for releasing the defaming video mashup, is banned from all social-media platforms in the following week as a moral panic sweeps the internet— any trivialization of the 'shave, sweep, and safely stash to ship every strand' narrative or the #BBBS hashtag, 'bald brothers bald sisters', becomes the most egregious of transgressions.

"We cut our hair and we prevail," a bald gay man cries into his webcam.

Scientists council the public to exercise often, sleep nine to ten hours each night, and drink 'world 2b', a vitamin-rich beverage supplied at no cost in nearly all countries, in order to stimulate hair-growth. Accordingly, global hair growth increases by 0.19 centimeters per month, on average, a net fifteen percent increase, therein boosting scientist's projected 'net maximum yield'— "Now only 96.5 percent of all hair needs to be collected, thanks to science." Neil DeGrasse Tyson tweets.

The ADD's soft deadline for hair collection is set for September 25th, four days prior to the deity's deadline on September 29th. On the twenty-fifth, leaders of the UN-5 stand inside Beijing's Forbidden City as the last truck-loads drive through the neighboring Tiananmen square. "I come to you live from a green screen in London," a BBC reporter says while the UK's livestream projects footage of Chinese rickshaws pulling cotton sacks of hair across a mote ant into the Forbidden City's walls in a ceremonial performance, "seeing as the Chinese government only allows their news teams to be live on the ground." The reporter points out the 'Baohe Dian' from an aerial shot of the 'Hall of Supreme Harmony', accidentally turning perpendicular to the camera she reveals the communist party's watermark stamped on the image behind her body.

The last five rickshaws are pulled into the city by the leaders of the UN-5, ending with Chinese President Xi Jinping.



The night concludes with President Xi placing his cotton sack on a ruby-embroidered scale inside the city's entrance. "Three million kilograms short," the livestream concludes nearing midnight of the twenty fifth, less than one-hundred hours before the deity's arrival.

"426 million kilograms," President Xi announces over the pulpit, "we are short."

"Yes we know your country is short," Stephen Colbert pokes at Xi in his comedic monologue the following day with his hand held up like a measuring stick below his neck.

'Dig up Nazi graves' and 'clone humans' are among the more popular of ideas to surface from the public in the following frenzied search for an extra 3 million kilograms of human hair. Sadly, Colbert also shoots these ideas down in his monologue, "human hair sealed within a tomb decomposes within a decade... and the Nazi movement took place *seven* decades ago. Other are suggesting cloning humans, harvesting their hair and then what? ... Euthanizing them? My initial reaction? Fine, just make sure they are Nazi babies," Colbert pauses for audience laughter. "However," he continues, "this idea is also a dead end because cloned embryos *don't develop any faster* than normal ones. Also, I've been told that political indoctrination is difficult the first couple of days after conception," Colbert turns to his Late Show sidekick Jon Batiste, "they don't like new ideas. Maybe it's the hostility of the uterus wall. I don't know, but they are sensitive."

"They're sensitive, they're sensitive," Batiste agrees.

Family members are advised either dig up the graves of the recently deceased or contract others to do so. It remains illegal, but loosely enforced, for a non-family member to collect hair from a deceased person without authorization from the immediate family. Teams of militants across the world ignore this law and pillage cemeteries at night. They unearth graves, take electric razors to scalps, and ship the hair on a civilian-run black market line in wooden crates labeled, "Deceased"—with only a few days before the deity's arrival, government-run shipping lines are full and lower-priority deceased hair is often rejected.

Google Earth animates black and red circles originate in Argentina and spread outwards. BuzzFeed explains on snapchat, "Black eats your town, start the count down. Red, ITS DEAD". The colors represent shipping deadlines or 'Beijing event horizons'—after the black/red globular shape covers a region, no packages at normal/expedited shipping are capable of reaching Beijing's Forbidden City by the deity's deadline.

The red circle originates at Beijing's antipode in General Conesa, Argentina, twenty hours before the deity's arrival date, and spreads quickly towards Brazil. A team of ex-Navy seals parachute into the Amazon rain forest, tranquilize over 60 uncontacted aboriginal tribes, collect their hair, and fill three full crates labeled "Living" on express planes which take off only minutes before Google's red circle engulfs the runway. "We're only 80% confident the dead hair counts," Obama told the Seals when issuing the order. After shaving every strand of hair, the Seals carefully laid out an arrangement of gifts—flint and steel, jerky, and rope. "Let them interpret, however they wish, this visitation from their 'perceived Gods' so we can interpret our real God,"

the Seal's squad leader says to cameras when stopped and interrogated at Brazilian customs. "Besides, flip the script... say we don't take care of buis, they snuff it too."

As Google's sweeping red wave approaches, last-ditch efforts to re-shave every stub of newly grown hair become fanatical and dangerous. People hug and cry in each other's arms and waddle in the streets, waxed butt cracks and all. A rumor in Moscow leaks— elitists in the Red October district are sitting on kilograms of unshaven hair. A mob of farmers and commoners ram down doors and ransack thousands of apartments, leaving the occupants tied down with raw pink skin.

"He locked himself in the day of the announcement!" a mother yells, warning a group of three tattooed, punk vigilantes of what they will find on the other side of a locked door, tucked in the back corner of her luxury condominium.

A tiny nub of a glistening axe blade pokes inside the teenage son's bedroom on the vigilante's first swing at the wooden door. The boy throws his gaming headset off and scrambles away from his computer desk to a corner behind the bed. "Calm the fuck down," he cries, ripping through his vocal chords, "I'd open the fucking lock if my head wasn't at threat of getting chopped off." He continues to cry out, repeating this same sentiment, "I'd have opened if there wasn't a goddamn sparth axe about to slice me in two," over and over as they tie him down and shave him clean.

"If we wanted to harm, why latex gloves? Why this precaution?"

"40.5 grams of hair," his friend announces. "Alright," he grunts, "pity he shaves his dick."

"Check the bathrooms."

"What?"

"Check the bathrooms, maybe he did so recently." The vigilantes speak indifferently and professionally to each other.

That night, a rocket outside of Los Angeles launches into space. A resident space-enthusiast from a neighboring subdivision catches the secret take-off on camera and post the footage to twitter, "excuse me Elon, but your rocket take-off appears to not be on the books." News teams confirm the next day that SpaceX had performed an illegal, unannounced rocked launch after Elon Musk's request to do so was denied by air traffic control.

"We believe Musk's motivation is to save humanity in the off-chance our hair yield falls short of the 429-million-kilogram demand *and* the deity follows through with her threat. Musk, always a stickler for the details, seems to have taken notice the deity did *not* specify she would render humanity extinct, but rather would blow the planet up."

Sixteen hours later, time is up.

President Xi carries the final sack of hair across the Forbidden City's mote, through the meridian gate, and into the wall's confines. He begins the ceremonial 0.15-mile stretch at 7:52 am, timing his pace to pass through the gate at 7:59 am Beijing time, one minute prior to September 29th 12:00 am GMT time.

"What if he trips?"

"We're short either way"

"Oh, ha, right."

"It's plastered in giant text on the screen in front of you," a wife explains to her husband in Boston, 6 pm eastern time. Indeed, a large scoreboard superimposed over China's broadcast reads "428.52 million". The collection of hair taken from the living population is 0.48 million kilograms short of the deity's demand.

"Shit..."

"However! The extra 15 million kilograms of deceased hair elevates our total well above the target 429 million," Xi announces from a pulpit. "And I think, *I think* it will count!" he emphatically shouts pumping his fist in the air. Crowds outside the Forbidden City cheer and celebrate, "I think it counts too!", as do crowds 400 miles east in Pyongyang. The livestream's drones pan across Beijing crowds setting off fireworks and jumping in celebration.

"Not a good look," Cooper says to Colbert.

"Let's take that from you," Colbert says reaching for Cooper's whiskey, "let's not drink ourselves numb now buddy."

"Yea? We are..."

Colbert cuts him off, "it's not your fault muchacho. It's much, much more complicated that."

"Riddle me this Colbert," Cooper says, pronouncing 'Colbert' with a 't', "the deity tests the *limit* of humanity's competence and she sets the bar right at our fucking limit. She knew we could clear this one, we *were* capable."

"That doesn't make it your fault that we hit the bar."

"Hit the bar? We missed it."

"Oh, I was thinking of high-jumpers."

Anderson looks into the void, like a manikin set upright in an armchair, he does not move.

"It's not your fault man," Colbert assures him.

“For fucks sakes man, it is. What now? You require a country-load of corrupt politicians to have the slightest shred of cynicism?” Cooper sits up and shoots a pair of hostile eyes in Colbert’s direction, but the furrowed brow looks identical to his serious face as a reporter and causes an accidental gasp of laughter to escape Colbert’s pursed lips.

“Okay spell it out for me then, smarty pants,” Colbert says.

“You wouldn’t take it seriously.”

“No seriously,” Colbert says, regaining his composure.

“That I had the biggest part in this!” Cooper shouts, this time his aggression cannot be laughed off. “That it all swung in my monologue!”

Colbert gives him compassionate eyes. The pair he normally saves for the first sixty seconds of his monologue following a national tragedy.

“I’m sorry,” Cooper says, “but you know, people freaked out the night of the event, did weird shit with their hair, I don’t know what, but that’s why we’re short.”

“I really don’t think anyone could have handled it better. Think you did great.”

“But they needed better.”

The deity arrives five hours later, 11 pm Eastern time. By this time over a quarter of the population is sedated with klonopin across the United States and Western Europe. Some government officials declare a state of emergency in order to set up free anxiety medicine hand-out stations. Yet, the majority of both the sober and sedated remain awake, even in Europe where it is now 6 am. They want to see in real time what happens next in earth’s story.

And they do.

The deity’s tornado burgeons at in Tiannanmen Square at 5:42 a.m. GMT time, triggering an erhu orchestra and parade to erupt in celebration.

The Chinese understand their fate rests in a technically, and therefore the temperament of this American nymph.

The tornado travels through the gate and dissolves in the center of the Forbidden City. She orders the strings silent, lowering her hand as a conductor. “Sorry, it needed to be hair from the living population,” she says.

The Chinese were prepared.

“Let us negotiate,” President Xi says in Mandarin through a megaphone, his head emerging from the top of a Hummer convertible that had followed the tornado’s path starting at the city gate.

But his words fall short on the deity’s ears. She shows no reaction but instead turns her back to Xi. She summons a whiteboard from the tornado, it’s looking dangerous.

“You did not specify living hair! You know this is a technical detail we would expect you to clarify as you have in the past,” President Xi holds his voice firm over the megaphone.

A translator repeats Xi’s words in English using his own megaphone.

“The world is egalitarian now,” the deity replies in Mandarin. She flips the reversible whiteboard and a sketch of Winnie the Pooh flashes the small on-looking crowd of erhu musicians, global leaders, Chinese soldiers, and newscasters inside the City’s walls. An image filter to blur Winnie’s face, hard-coded into the communist party’s streaming software, is automatically triggered, rendering the outgoing image broadcast to the world nothing more than a jumbled collection of pixels. The deity holds the whiteboard directly facing the newscaster’s main camera for a drawn-out five seconds to compensate for broadcasting delays which would otherwise prevent the image from reaching remote audiences. The signal propagates outwards like Google’s red ‘shipping event-horizon’ played in a fast rewind, culminating at Beijing’s antipode in General Conesa, Argentina. The image of the blurred whiteboard is received in ethernet cables, satellites, and radio towers speckled around the globe for varying durations, depending on the location’s distance to Beijing, such that the average person sees the whiteboard for two seconds. Just as translated closed captions of the deity’s last words hits the screen, the earth’s crust explodes outwards uniformly into space. Like when Jeff put poprocks in Madison’s vagina. Earth’s perovskite mantle flies outwards, exceeding earth’s escape velocity from when the planet was intact. The molten core, slower, but still fast enough to escape the gravitational attraction the clump of iron and nickel left at the center, which continues to orbit the sun for another billion years.

A cold rocket floats through intergalactic space. Contained within is Elon Musk’s skeleton, 2.7 degrees Kelvin and basking in a balmy thermal equilibrium with the rest of the universe. He’d named this mission to Mars ‘operation crap-shot’, sub-tweeted about it a month before take-off, and had fully intended to return back to earth given a more favorable outcome in the Forbidden City. The rocket was four-hundred thousand kilometers away from Earth’s surface, seventy-two minutes after the explosion, when fragments of Japan’s mountains rammed into ship’s fuel tank, knocking it off trajectory, doomed for empty space. “YOLO,” Musk said in monotone to the built-in video recorder before dying.

The planetary orbits in the solar system are eventually perturbed by a rouge black hole and all that is left of the earth— a 600-kilometer asteroid burnt crisp at the edges from years of unshielded solar radiation— flies off into empty space, as do the rest of the planets in the solar system. Energy and mass dissipate. Gravitational forces are too small to do anything interesting. Everything sits like this for a very long time.

Tuesday

Space is symmetric and things move in a straight line unless pushed. An intergalactic meteoroid flies towards earth and there passes by a trillionth of a second around 5:55 pm in which the meteoroid's trajectory is aimed at Jeff. Were the solar system, the earth, and Jeff all to stand still, the rock would clip Jeff's shoulder. The earth rotates, solar system moves, and Jeff walks forward along the little sidewalk, leaving the rock's cross-heirs.

6 pm is an art class. The class has an assignment to walk to the university's art gallery and sketch paintings on display.

Jeff and his classmates are in the gallery for an hour. There is a pile of rugs on display.

Ryan, a computer engineering major, asks Jeff, "what are you studying?"

Jeff says, "Right now I'm studying art."

"Okay."

Ryan looks away but doesn't move anywhere.

Back in the classroom the teacher requests the students display their sketches. Jeff only has one sketch. It is of a lady in a Victorian dress holding a child's hand. It is his turn to present.

The teacher says, "What's the title of this piece?"

Jeff looks at her.

"I sketched that one also" says a girl in the class. "It looks like you drew her a lot bigger."

The teacher compares to the thinner lady drawn by the girl.

"Is there a reason why you drew her wider Jeff?"

"I like big wim...", he stutters, "... wide hair."

"Ok we'll pass it around."

As the sketches circulate counter-clockwise, Jeff's classmate's confirm the Victorian lady's bulging dress indeed is caused by two braids, snuck into her dress at the shoulders, and presumably, uncoiled and flung wide at the lady's midriff.

## Tuesday Night

The deity descends the rolling hills and into Jeff's mind. When the deity reaches the town of Willard, Missouri the pedestrians in the street are stunned—no drone or satellite had tracked her decent and no one in the town had been notified. “We don't know what route he took into town, it wasn't picked up by Willard's drones,” the CNN reporter calmly reports as investigative teams behind the camera shove papers around, shout at one another in whispers, and click on computer screens in frantic search of the ADD's official broadcast.

“If not for a Theo calling 911,” her cohost joins in, “at the edge of this town in Missouri, *Willard* is the town, I am being told, the world may have failed to obtain an official recording.”

“To remind our viewers, when ADD fails to obtain an official recording of the deity's proclamation, as happened in 2011, the world turns to crowd support. The smart device recordings of citizens on the ground *can* be reliably authenticated by computer science experts.”

“He has mounted Willard's *Murfin's Market*,”

The stream cut to live footage of the deity tip-toeing lightly on grocery store's rooftop as if she was at risk to smash it in.

“Good day citizens of Sheboygan!” the deity yells to the crowd and coughs to clear her throat, “...and the world. Your challenge this year comes in the form of a decision. You must either sacrifice the lives of the following people: twenty-six year old Nur Rahman born in Jakarta, Indonesia, thirty-three year old Anna Kitaygorodsky born in Saransk, Russia and fifty-nine year old Wenqi Zhu born in GuangZhou, China before October 4th, or else forfeit your knowledge of entropy. Act or be acted upon.”

The image of the grocery store's dusty rooftop set against the blue Midwestern sky is replaced by two reporters seated in a news studio. “You heard it here first. This year's challenge: we either sacrifice the lives of these three unfortunate victims or else lose our understanding of *entropy*. Yes that's right, *entropy*.”

“Entropy?” the young cohosts asks, unable to withhold a large smile, “I'm going to have to brush up on that.”

“That's a science term I believe. Don't quote me on anything here. We will have expert correspondents within the hour to provide us with their take on this year's challenge.” The reporters cut anxiously to a commercial break.

Regardless of age or birthplace, all people by the name of Chang Sommers, Anna Kitaygorodsky, and Wenqi Zhu are immediately seized by ADD forces and airlifted to be quarantined in an undisclosed location, of which there were 4, 1, and 34,210 respectively. “They don't know the characters,” Chinese people explain to each other, “they only know the phonetics.”

As far as the deity's challenges go, "this one, I think we can cope with. It's not too too bad," those in developed countries say to each other for reassurance. Those in underdeveloped countries click their throat and slash their hand downwards to indicate murder, "three people. Easy," they say with shrugged shoulders.

As per standard protocol, the presidents of the five leading economies: US, China, Japan, Germany, and the UK meet privately in to discuss broad strategies. First, "Broad strategies", second, "Counsels to be formed", and lastly, "Identification of fatal mistakes" – are the same three bullet points projected onto the room's wall, establishing the focus of their annual UN-5 meeting.

"I don't know about entropy," the Japanese prime minister admits.

"It's the disorder of the universe," says the American president.

"Of anything, not necessarily of the universe," the German prime minister corrects, "it can be of anything of coffee even"

"What coffee?"

"Think of it this way, your coffee and milk can mix, but they cannot unmix. This implies something deep about the direction of time."

"Even more complex," says the Japanese prime minister, "what does the loss of entropy's understanding represent? I do not know, but I think it is bad."

"We get entropy experts, what type of scientist is that? A physicist?" Upon receiving affirmation, the American president continues, "Yes we get physicists, team them with economists, together they estimate the fiscal cost of losing our, our 'understanding of entropy', convert that price into lives, multiply by one-hundred, if it's greater than the cost of three life we go through with it."

"Multiply by one-hundred? No we divide."

"Yes divide," the American president announces that he "trusts her math" over his own while grinning in the direction of the German prime minister.

The group decides to call their respective science advisors and reconvene in "ten".

"Ten minutes," the American explains, leaning in towards the Chinese president.

The UK prime minister ducks out of the room and into a janitor's closet to call Sir Rodger Penrose. "None of us are entropy experts" she explains to Penrose after exchanging greetings, but her qualms are only amplified by Penrose's confession that "forfeiting a body of knowledge" is abstract to him.



“Dodgy challenges,” she taps her fingers against the side of the wall and stares down impatiently at her phone resting on a shelf of cleaning products, “in dodgy challenges like this one is for example.... she operates cleanly. The deity, she is omniscient and omnipotent. She will make blank sections in textbooks, selectively erase the memories of experts, that sort of stuff.”

“If that’s the case, I’m not sure what the exact effect would be,” Penrose replies, “I suspect there are scientists and engineers who use their knowledge of entropy daily. It’s woven into the theories. Nuclear plants, satellites, I don’t know how it would affect the functionality though,” his voice drifts off.

“Look we are humanitarians, primarily, but if you’re saying global stability at risk...”

“A utilitarian perspective, I understand,” Penrose cuts her off.

“Exactly. So what do you think?”

“Between the two options?”

“Yes”

“Oh oh yes, over ninety-percent sure we’ll need to kill them, regrettably.” His voice, saturated with regret, continues, “but of course I cannot give the go-ahead right now.”

The presidents and prime ministers regroup and collectively decide it is too early to make a decision, “for optics at a minimum we cannot move on a decision tonight.”

Onto the next bullet-point: councils to organize. The group appoints economist Kenneth Rogoff and physicist Yang Chen-Ning to lead and an investigation in charge of calculating the fiscal cost of forfeiting humanity’s knowledge of entropy. As customary, Anderson Cooper and Stephen Colbert are to spearhead ‘public perception’. On their final bullet-point, the UN-5 reach a consensus that forfeiting the knowledge of entropy is has more potential for global catastrophe “than killing the three people,” the German president concludes.

“Than our other option,” the UK prime minister corrects.

“Option B poses a far greater existential risk than Option A,” Anderson Cooper corrects over the intercom.

A day later the investigative team’s first report is summarized in a keynote address. “Thanks to the ADD’s diligent work, potential victims have been narrowed down,” Kenneth Rogoff addresses the group, “given the names, birthplaces, and ages of the three individuals, ADD has one-hundred percent confidence that its identified persons are the same as the deity’s identified persons. They are, one, Nur Rahman, a middle school English teacher in Indonesia, two, Anna Kitaygorodsky, a single mom of two in Russia, and three, Wenqi Zhu, a food cart vendor in the YaYao district of GuangZhou, China, father of one.”

“Do they even know about... about entropy?”

“Yes, they’re quarantined and fully aware of their, unfortunate situation.”

“No, I meant, did they people understand what entropy is?”

The groups exchanges looks of regret that Russia had been invited to sit in.

“Of the three, only Anna had heard of it”

People in the room shift uncomfortably upon hearing Anna’s name.

“Okay this won’t be a fun job,” Rogoff says, taking the floor back, “and the public’s perception of this one is tricky, but the meat of our presentation today is, we believe very strongly Option B is necessary.”

The group already knows this. Jeff knew this. Everyone knew this. Even the purest of humanitarians.

According to Cooper and Colbert’s suggestion, Nur, Anna, and Wenqi are given the highest global recognition one can receive. Three beautiful documentaries are made celebrating each of their lives. The documentaries, shot and produced in ten days, air live from 0:00 – 10:00 GMT on September 15th, 2015, fifteen days before the “day of passing”. It is required for all citizens of the globe to watch. The description of entropy in Anna’s film brings a Russian audience to tears. The grit Wenqi exhibited throughout his modest life, selling pork for over thirty years to put his daughter through college, all the while fighting to improve the living conditions for pigs across China, was beautifully and accurately captured in the documentary about him.

Parades and flowers are thrown for them.

They are to be executed by lethal injection on “the day passing”, September 30<sup>th</sup> 2015, a global holiday from hence forward, twenty-eight days after the deity’s decent into Tipton, Iowa. Anna requests her execution by lethal injection be livestreamed to the world whereas Nur and Wenqi request to die in private.

On the day of passing the Nur, Anna, and Wenqi are flown to a private beach and administered a slow-release muscle paralytic, and to Anna, morphine as well, on the bay’s sands. Nur and Wenqi decide to meditate while looking into each other’s eyes. Wenqi, the first to pass out, falls limp onto Nur’s crossed legs just as Nur begins to nod off. His impact on her legs triggers her body to enter complete sedation and she falls backwards onto the sand. Meanwhile, Anna who has been playing in the water, wades herself towards the shore and curls up on the wet, compact sand. Anna lays fetal with her right side against the sand. She clasps her hands together, roping her knees against her chest, and holds tight for as long as possible. Eventually, the two hands loosen their grip and fall limp. Her lower shoulder, no longer able to support her fetal position, buckles inwards as her hips fall open. Audiences around the world gasp, cry, and hold each other.

With all three victims now asleep, the Anderson-Cooper-hand-selected Brazilian doctor and spiritual healer moves forward to stop the victims' hearts with a large potassium chloride needle. He wears a loving face and a traditional black robe. He arrives at Anna's location, sets down his briefcase, and begins to reposition her limp body into a peaceful supine position. He folds her arms into a V-shape across her chest. As he bends down to unlock the briefcase, a patch of sand begins to stir about. The sand picks up velocity and begins growing in height, some of it spraying onto the doctor and victim. To the drone and audiences around the globe it looks like the casual exhale of seawater from a whale's blowhole, or popcorn on the stove. The popping's ferocity increases, spraying sand onto the doctor and Anna's body. The doctor spews from his mouth and wipes his eyes.

The doctor hugs Anna's body tight across his chest and clunkily rolls the two of them parallel to the ocean tide, ten yards to his right until they are safely out of the storm's range. The sand begins to self-rotate. A well-defined circular motion becomes clear to the viewers of the livestream. The doctor sits up and pulls his robe together over his knees. He wipes his face and turns back and looks at what has become a small tornado. From which, the deity rises.

Her big, black cow-eyes are devilish. More so than the earth has ever witnessed.

"Kill her or your knowledge of entropy is lost."

Chaos ensues at CNN's headquarters. "Cut the stream! Blur it!" several shout, bull-rushing the editor's booth while others attempt to hold them back, "not yet. Nothing against policy yet!"

The deity lifts a sword out of the sand-tornado. "Use this," she drops a sword on the ground at the tornado's base. "And the blade cannot touch them." The deity whips the long black hair out of her face and lifts an extended palm upwards. As she does, the paralyzed victims come to.

She levitates each conscious victim upright to their feet, says "nothing but the sword, the blade cannot touch them," then sucks herself back into the tornado. The sand-tornado play's its growth in rewind until there is nothing but a calm patch of ordinary sand left in its place.

"The blade what?" officials overseeing the event say to each other while storming the beach from all angles. "The hilt? We have to use the sword's hilt?"

The drone's livestream goes black and the world shares a moment of confusion in perfect solidarity.

### Wednesday

The BIC-Salon is the most popular mechanical pencil in America. Plastic clips are connected to the pencil's clear plastic casing surrounding the black barrel with a sealant weak enough that the force of an average person's jaw strength applied to the cross section of a canine tooth provides enough pressure to pop the assorted-color clips off. The pencils sell at a roughly constant

demand which allows the company to manufacture at a constant rate and the management does not invest in advertising. A green clip sits pinched between Jeff's molars. He slides the clip in between his canine teeth. He wiggles his top and lower canine teeth while clenching his jaw. Pop! The saliva-coated green clip snaps off and bounces a meter backwards. It lays still on the carpet. It glistens. Jeff's classmate Sarah looks at it.

Jeff is in class, it is a mathematical proofs class. The teacher is a tall giraffe-like looking women. She is thirty-nine years old and has her PhD in mathematics. Jeff thinks her personality is beautiful. She is writing negation definitions on the chalk board with light pink chalk.

Ethan shouts, "How do wee know the opposite of 'a equals b' is, 'a does not equal b'?"

The result in question had just been written on the board:

$$\sim(A = B) \leftrightarrow A \neq B$$

Or in other words, the negation of (A equals B) is synonymous with: A is not equal to B.

Jackson, a distressed young man with a deep voice and three Band-Aids on his face shouts angrily at Ethan. "Do you really need her to prove that?"

"Well, she told us not to twust hewr!!" Ethan retorts back.

The teacher stops moving her piece of chalk and stares at the black board.

Ethan says, "Well we shouldn't bwelieve everything she says. That would be a blunder, a.k.a., a vewy warge mistake."

The class continues for twenty more minutes and Ethan doesn't make any more comments.

The bell rings, but the teacher continues lecturing.

Jeff's mind flashes back to the first day of class when the teacher announced, "when that clock reads 12:50, my class is over. I may need to finish at most one sentence. But I hope," she spoke quickly through her wide smile, "that a total of zero of you feel zero obligation to stay seated."

It is now the second day of class and the teacher is still lecturing. The students inside the classroom stay seated. Students outside pass by the door's window pane and make noisy conversation. The teacher lectures on 'true and false' tables as method of proof. Jeff copies her markings down in his notebook.

Ethan stands up. He walks down the isle of desks and crosses the front of the classroom instead of the back. The door slams behind him as he walks out.

"Okay see you on Thursday." The teacher stops lecturing.

Jeff leaves class and walks across the open pattern of concrete and green grass that was his school's campus. A meatball marinara footlong, a few sips of blue powerade, the satisfaction of stealing the powerade, a 1970's classroom, and a 60-degree misty-blue sky splatter and mix together to create the symphony of Jeff's current mood. "WWED: What would Ethan do?" Jeff wonders as he walks through the misty 60-degree atmosphere wearing a 'WWJD' wristband and a black XXL 'Wilson' T-shirt.

Ethan, as imagined within Jeff's mind, is stuck a strenuous situation. As a freedom fighter in Nazi-occupied Greece, Ethan and his accomplice are captured after machine gunning several German officers on the bay outside of the village. Following Nazi command, Ethan takes a rifle to execute his accomplice in the village square. If he doesn't, the whole town dies.

Like a good utilitarian., Ethan points the rifle at his accomplice and pulls the trigger. But nothing happens. It's blank. The gun is not loaded. The Germans play nasty. He has to club his accomplice to death, or the whole town dies. And the whole town is watching.

WWED: What Would Ethan Do?

"Sawry bud," Ethan would probably say.

WWED: What Would Ethan Do. That is the real question.

Jeff imagines every person who crosses his vision stuck in 'the Ethan situation'. As well as some who don't, like Bret Randall. Jeff thinks of his middle school gym teacher, Bret Randall. WWBRD: What Would Bret Randall Do? Bret Randall was both the middle school P.E. coach and the high-school basketball coach. Bret looked like a sculptor opened the skin beneath his lower lip, tapped his chin bone off with a chisel, and stitched him back up. He wore suits and glossy dress shoes to basketball games. He yelled at new players to "quit playing like there's a turd up your ass." He once pinned little Ricky against some lockers in gym class in seventh grade. He threw a chair at little Ricky in eighth grade. WWBRD when the German officers hand him a rifle.

Jeff winces, "eleh," and points two fingers straight ahead. "Chk chk, bchaooo," he mutters, firing his fingers at a tree trunk, then turns the gun to his temple. "Not today," he wonders aloud, then proceeds to imagine several more characters from his life in 'the clubbing situation' ... 'the Nazi-occupied Greece situation' ... 'the Ethan situation'. There was Mick Morrison, there was Jackson, there was... the pink-polo wearing blonde dude walking past him.

The blondie had eyebrows so bleached they disappeared on his face. He looked like he was on his way to audition for a JC Penny's modeling gig. He had the right attire but was 0.5 hot points away from making it.

"We unfortunately can't give you the position," the lady would explain, "but here's the butt of a rifle. Club the guy taking your spot."

When Jeff arrives back home he types ‘JC pennies’ into google images. He clicks his way upon a winter catalogue, imagining each model’s face right after the German officer turns the rifle 180 degrees, “no dis way.” Jeff finds the girls’ reactions much easier to envision. “Twenty-first century,” Jeff mutters to himself, while thinking 21-century guys are inherently fucked from a perspective he had not previously considered.

The poor Mexican cashier at El Rancheritos, graciously taking his ‘fajitas mix’ order for the second time that week. Her plump ass would handle ‘the situation’ one-thousand times better than Justin Bieber.

### Wednesday Night

Jeff takes a candle lit bath with lavender Epsom salt and watches 108 minutes of his friend Scott messing around with big Kevin’s guitar. Jeff imagines big Kevin using the guitar to club his band’s lead singer in the middle of his band’s song *Violent Cigar*. Jeff had seen big Kevin wield that battle-axe of a guitar at last year’s Cornerstone Festival as if every person in sight, all three bandmates and the ten or so people in the audience, were at threat of dying from precisely such an act. Jeff adds another bath bomb to the water and types his first comment ‘sup bitch,’ in Scott’s YouTube livestream. A thrill of excitement shoots up his vertebra as he wonders how transparent his situation is to Scott. He realizes ‘zero’, with gratitude, and notices his body deflate with relief. Not only was Scott prevented from seeing the baby-blue container of Epsom salt, he couldn’t even hear ‘John Denver’s Greatest Hits Disc 2’ playing in the background. The streamer-viewer relationship always favors the viewer. YouTube 101. Jeff closes his laptop, bringing the livestream’s view count down to one. He carries the dual CD-player-alarm clock system to his bedroom and drifts into sleep listening to ‘The Eagle and the Hawk’.

The deity is forced to leap from building to building so as to avoid the traffic jam nucleated near the Black Pig restaurant and spread outwards past the Sheboygan River, up against Lake Michigan. The town’s inhabitants rush the streets to catch a glimpse.

“Good afternoon,” the deity greets the large Wisconsin crowd while conjuring a whiteboard nearly as tall as her body from the tornado’s center. “This year you must create 3 billion true-crime television or radio podcast shows,” she speaks in a slow, instructional cadence as an animated stick-figure on her whiteboard transforms from watching television to wearing set of headphones connected the black silhouette of a speaker.

“Looks like an iPhone commercial,” the American president says aloud in the UN-5 meeting room.

The deity continues, “each show must build towards the most disgraceful act of an individual’s life. The act must be true, and it must be the worst of his or her life. One person, one show.” The stick figure chops a giraffe’s head off and laughs. The screen flashes images of popular true-crime TV and radio podcast shows: *Cold* and *In the Dark*. “I watch all of you. I know your worst.”

The whiteboard projects an image of herself hovering above the globe, staring down through a pair of binoculars.

“If one’s admitted act differs from what I know is your worst act, it will be counted red, not green.”

A green check and red ‘x’ appear on the whiteboard simultaneous to the deity speaking the words “green” and “red”.

“Only television shows of duration exceeding one hour and podcast shows of duration exceeding six hours, *and* of sufficient entertainment quality, *and* which feature what I know to be the subject’s worst act... will be counted green. A green-to-red ratio,” the green check slides above the red ‘x’, positioning itself in the fraction’s numerator, “...of less than twenty percent, and...” the deity pauses, letting the whiteboard’s animation serve as the spokesperson. A ‘less than’ sign and ‘twenty percent’ materialize to the fraction’s right, then a picture of the globe appears, only to be erased by the butt of a pencil.

A mixture of sighs and screams from baited audiences around the globe drown out the deity’s following sentence. People shout and shush each other, “Quiet! We need to hear!”

“Kidding, you already dealt with global destruction last year. Less than twenty and I simply erase one-hundred minus your score of the earth’s supply of fresh water.”

The crowd’s whispers amass to a confused reaction.

“This means around 80 percent of you should cry just as loudly as you previously cried just a moment ago,” the deity says, “and it should be the poorest 80 percent.”

The shell-shocked crowd shows an even more confused, now vocal, reaction as neighbors talk openly amongst one another, “how much water is there?”, “she fucking with us?”, and “poorest?” One voice, louder than the rest is picked up by the drone’s noise-cancelling microphone and carried across the world, “fuck the one percent!”

“For every percentage point above twenty,” the deity continues, “I will rid fifty-thousand childhood cancer patients of their afflictions and restore them to full health. All television and podcast shows must be uploaded to archive dot org before January 13th.” The deity then jumps into the tornado’s center, disappearing to leave a befuddled Missouri audience still talking amongst themselves.

Not an hour later, Anderson Cooper walks the world through the deity’s complex instructions in his global PSA. On the screen is listed the ‘green requirements’:

- Tells the story of the subject’s worst act
- Sufficient entertainment quality
- Sufficient length (6 hours for radio podcast, 1 hour for television)

- Uploaded to archive.org before January 13th

“The ADD will only permit 4 billion uploads to archive.org,” Cooper explains, “if 800 million of the shows meet the criteria, 20 percent that is, nothing happens. However, if seven hundred and ninety nine million nine hundred and ninety nine thousand and nine-hundred and ninety nine shows meet the criteria, we lose a bit over 80 percent of the earth’s fresh water.”

$$\left(1 - \frac{799,999,999}{4 \text{ billion}}\right) \times 100\% = 80.000000025\%$$

“If only 700 million are green, then she’ll wipe 82.5 percent of fresh water.”

$$\left(1 - \frac{700,000,000}{4 \text{ billion}}\right) \times 100\% = 82.5\%$$

“See how it gets worse? It’s as if the deity knows we need a lot of motivation in order to reveal our worst act,” Cooper grins boyishly.

People across the globe debate vehemently for the next hour. They explain the math to one another. They pull out yellow legal pads and scribble numbers, place hand’s on shoulders, tilt heads, shout, and cry. McDonald’s tries using their commercial air time to explain it once again.

“What does it mean emotionally?” MSNBC reporter Morning Joe decides to fill the recent void of emotion-based commentary, “For each of us to divulge the most embarrassing fact about our lives?”

The camera zooms out to show he is seated with a guest. It’s America’s favorite therapist, Dr. Phil.

“Not necessarily the biggest embarrassment of our lives,” Dr. Phil answers, “but our ‘worse’ or ‘most disgraceful’ act were the adjectives used by the deity. So for most folks, yes, that *is* their most embarrassing fact about their lives.”

“Is it for you?”

“Well,” Dr. Phil chuckles, his face getting big at the neck, “well gee *I think so*. But I’m sure as hell going to take a hot minute to think this one over, and then get brutally honest with my answer. That’s what we all need to do. Our survival swings on, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, it sure does,” Morning Joe says, then turns square to the camera, “we reiterate, the UN-5 grants amnesty for crimes admitted to in these archive.org shows and even is willing to provide protection, even admittance to the witness protection program in extreme cases, should one’s confession be likely to provoke a life-threatening confrontation.”

Joe swivels his chair forty-five degrees back towards Dr. Phil, “now Dr. Phil, what’s this all going to mean for us? For the world to have open access to each other’s, well, what is likely to be our most embarrassing actions.”



“Well Joe. Life's managed, not cured.” Dr. Phil’s eyes contract. “There will be pain. I don’t want to sit up here and pretend like it aint gonna be hard when your husband confesses his affair with the secretary five years back. But forgiveness. It ain’t about him. It’s about you. Forgiveness is a gift to yourself.” He chuckles and continues, “It’s going to be one giant Dr. Phil show. I mean, go back and watch my re-runs. The moments are tough, but we get through them because of our amazing ability to forgive. It’s called catharsis. The Greeks wrote about it for a reason,” he pulls a tissue and brings it against the dry skin under his eye.

“What do you have to say to those questioning whether or not to divulge their most heinous action?”

“I’m comin’ for you you selfish son of a bitch.”

“At the end. January 13th. Are we closer or more distant?”

“Closer,” Phil says immediately with no pause. He squints his eyes and snuffles. “Closer.”

“We won’t all be divorced?” Joe asks with a smirk.

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

“No, no, that divorce already happened for me,” Joe laughs, looking down at the desk. He pushes his glasses back up his nose, and holds his laughter as he looks back at the camera, “back soon, don’t go anywhere.”

Meanwhile, the BBC the emotional element is not the focus of BBC’s broadcast that evening. The network’s hard-hitting reporter faces the camera square, “recording equipment manufacturers such as Sony, Focusrite, AKG, are working around the clock, with government support and American CEOs Tim Cook, Elon Musk, and Jeff Bezos, to manufacture an additional one-billion high quality voice recording devices in two weeks, with a hard deadline of four weeks.” He then introduces his guest, “Dave Cawley, producer of *Cold*”, which is one of the twelve ‘example shows’ the deity had flashed on her whiteboard.

Cawley explains, “It’s produced in the style which I believe deity is looking for, a lot of interviews, obsessive on details, and chilling, unnerving sound clips.”

“Now Cold is a story of murder...”

“Alleged murder yes”

“... so how are these chilling sound clips going to sound when set to Average Joe’s worst act, say bullying his little sister.”

“You’re talking about Morning Joe? I don’t think bullying his sister is the worst he’s done, if you watched his show this morning.” The MSNBC reporter’s affair, confessed on live television

earlier that day, made international headlines and was top-trending on all social media platforms, despite the immense existential risk in the deity's new challenge.

"Oh come now," the British reporter playfully reprimands, "seriously, the average person hasn't murdered someone."

"Yes, the effect will likely be comical. It does feel as if we are the puppets in a cruel mind's performance art piece."

Jeff flinches in his sleep.

The segment transitions into Cawley guiding the BBC reporter through the first steps of podcast production. He takes the man guard at the tutorial's onset, "first things first, what's your worst?"

"Worst action?"

"Yep."

"Here? On live television?"

"They'll find out eventually."

"I mean," the reporter blushes.

"I mean you've had some time to think about it, we all have," Cawley eggs him on with a friendly smile.

"Well, okay. I once ran over a couple baby rabbits with a riding lawn mower..."

Cawley sets his mug down and lets his head fall in disbelief.

"... my dad's MacAllister, half mower half mulcher."

"Oh my god."

"Well hey"

"Yeah?"

"Hey I just have to get it out there. We all need to get used to this right?" the reporter contends, his voice very loud.

"You did it on purpose though?"

"I suppose yeah"

“God,” Cawley sounds disgusted.

“It was in mowing mode though.”

“I’ve decided on... Oh my God I can’t think about that. No thank you.”

“Let’s chuck my, as a topic, I don’t know, what’s the worst thing you’ve ever done?”

“I spooned my first cousin. In ninth grade, just for a few seconds.”

The studio engineer cues prepared bullet points to appear on the broadcast, exempting Cawley from further discussing his action. ‘You know your life best’, ‘Premium access to key data’...

“Here we’re supposed to be doing a show here,” the reporter says, “yes these bullet points are the advantages the viewer has over you, when you produced Cold.”

“Right.”

“Right, because that show took you how long?”

“A year.”

“A year to make how twelve, sorry how many episodes. Sorry, how many *hours* of episodes?”

“Twelve hours total”

“That’s half of what viewers out there... sorry, it’s *twice* what viewers out there are expected to produce. They need six hours, you did half that.”

Cawley finishes the list with two more bullet points, ‘UN-5’s instructional series’ and ‘UN-5’s audio resources’. He explains, “there will be an open-access database of exceptionally high quality sound clips, sound effects, and that sort of thing for people to pull from.”

In addition to pardoning crimes and providing sound clips, governments around the globe require sports leagues, amusement parks, and casinos to halt all operations. Research and education as well. The only jobs permitted to work full-time are those directly involved with supplying energy, agriculture, emergency health care, emergency repair, law enforcement, and a handful of government positions. All other professions are to collect fifty percent their normal salary for working one-third the time.

“Can’t complain with that,” the American President finishes his announcement.

“Yes we can”, an NFL owner complains the following day on public television. “The whole entertainment industry minus NPR. Outta commission for four months. Four months and then what? Four months and the public’s a plump pig, primed for the juiciest entertainment. And they

get it. But they don't feed on us, they feed on each other's podcasts. In the form of 4 billion confessions. We won't be able to compete."

"Don't football players have enough tucked away for a rainy day?"

"Most don't. And people in our industry need to put food on the table just like everyone else."

But the public doesn't wait four months to start listening in on one another's gossip. The week's juiciest leak is Mike Tyson trying to spin his worst act is paying his friend fifty grand to break up with a girlfriend out of spite for her. "No ya'll don't get it. That's love," is Tyson's comeback when interviewed by a rogue BuzzFeed reporter who worked over fifty hours to dig up the story.

"How about biting off guy's ear? Does that one cross your mind."

"Love's deeper."

"Would Holyfield agree?"

"Nah that one probably did the guy a favor. If you go up n' ask him now, I'll bet he say it brought him more fame."

[like normal, people nod their head and recognize that there's a lot of truth to Tyson's words]

The global economy screeches to a grinding halt. According to UN-5 legislation, landlords are not permitted to charge rent and banks are required to pause mortgage interest.

American CEOs synchronize the Chinese factories. They turn out 800 million recording devices in fifteen days, almost hitting the UN-5's lofty goal of one billion in fourteen. Courtesy of the ADD, nearly every home receives a starter-kit in the mail: a microphone, a USB drive filled with recording software, and an instructional booklet. The booklet was written in a real-time collaborative word processor shared amongst thousands of technical writers. Edits required multiple up-votes before replacing the original text. The original English copy was then translated to hundreds of languages via thousands of translators using the same method. The resulting instructions

that even the junkies on welfare understand it no problem. Sub-Saharan Africa gets 200 million laptops to go with it.

Thursday

Jeff wakes up in a cold sweat at 6 a.m. thinking about the time he pushed a Donald Cane, about how Donald needed to get twelve stitches, and about the fact Donald had down syndrome. But it is a longer story than that, Jeff will contend. Jeff will start by explaining that he used to play

street hockey every day in fourth grade, the year that reading buddies were assigned. He'll explain that he was assigned to be a senior reading buddy in the special ed classroom concurrent to sporting puck-sized scabs on both knee caps, the battle scars of many collisions and altruistic, defensive skids on the concrete strip of Ester Street where he played 3v3 street hockey. And he'll go on to say that within the special ed classroom, he was assigned to read Mr. Popper's Penguins to Donald Cane.

In that squatty yellow chair, Donald sat close to him in order to see the chapter book's occasional picture. At the bend of Jeff's knees were scabs extending nearly thigh-to-shin, big circular globs of clotted, healthy blood cells standing guard for the skin underneath that was trying to grow new layers. While Jeff read the pages between pictures, those big scabs were the most interesting object in front of Donald. Jeff rushed through the text evenly and quickly, not pausing for periods, commas, nor anything except his biological need to take another breath. Only to turn another page and find two more, godforsaken matt, uncoated yellowish pages filled top to bottom with black 12-point text.

Following every turned page, Jeff stiffened at the knee, flexed whatever little muscles surrounded them, and gently lowered his hand to cocked position, ready to swat should Donald so much as flinch a pinky.

But the Donald was always one step ahead. When Donald lunged for the scab it was with curled fingers and the jab was well-calculated, both spatially and temporally. It's hard to not lower one's guard five times over the span of one hour, reading about Mr. Popper's unforeseen penguin brigade, and five times was all it took for Donald to tear apart two puck-sized scabs. The tops of his socks soaked up the trickling blood. The freshly pink surfaces were on a clock to construct another scab constructed before the next reading day.

"Don't let him pick them!" that teacher so-n'-so would say, never switching his reading buddy, never intervening, always busy behind her purple-flower barricaded computer desk. "Oh you're bleeding again. Make sure he keeps his space from you!"

So when Donald lunged at Jeff's scabs during an unsupervised after-school event, Jeff hopped backwards with two feet, to make an open space where he could shove Donald's lunging body into the ground. Which may have turned out alright if not for the gutter's splash block. They were usually hard plastic but this one was cement.

And Donald got six stitches in two places.

So thirteen years later, 6 a.m. is a cold sweat for Jeff. He army crawls a dazed body a few inches up his mattress, bringing his MacBook within arm's reach. Chrome. 'Control-T'. 'fac'... facebook.com → 'enter'. 'Donald Ca'... Donald Regan Cane → 'enter'. 'Message'. 'H'. 'e'. 'y'. ' '. 'D'. 'o'. 'nald'. 'This is Jeff, your old reading buddy from Lucas Elementary. Just dropping in to say I often think back on our good times together. And how great of a guy you are...' Jeff pauses to ponder the probability that Donald remembers him.

When Jeff leaves his mattress ten minutes later, the message is left open, unsent, and framed in a web browser 5 open tabs: Tyler Sedlecheck's facebook, Donald's mom's facebook, Donald's dad's facebook, a reddit page 'Reddit, what's the worst thing you've ever done', a google search for 'guy who gets his ear bit off'.

8 am is a laboratory class in which he and Scott connect a pump to an array of pipes in order to remove the air within them, down to a pressure down to  $10^{-7}$  Torr.

"Did you see my comment in your livestream last night?"

"Yeah I saw it. 'Little bitch'."

"Ha."

"Haha."

11 am is a dingleberry in basketball shorts. It's a stingy feeling.

On his walk home for lunch, someone walking close to him but in the opposite direction jumps onto the sidewalk's curbside. It happens so fast, inches from Jeff's shoulder. There is only enough time to register, one, it is a guy, two, about his height, and three, with brown hair.

Jeff wants to push him back down, onto the sidewalk.

Jeff feels a robotic impulse to push him.

Jeff feels like an unhappy robot. Jeff feels like a dust speck floating through a video game, except he has complete control of his direction. And Jeff feels like he is an integral of his environment, with his genome at birth as the initial conditions. "Then what is the y-axis?" he wonders.

Some robotic circuit board as a function of time.

For today at least, he knows he is some sort of robot, at least for today, because of this incident on his walk home.

The phrase, 'busch league monkey business' rings between his ears for the next two hours.

And all the while John Denver plays in Jeff's ear buds.

And all the while Donald works out at physical therapy.

Thursday Night

“No deity tonight,” Jeff says aloud, then realizes that he hasn’t spoken for a long time. He counts how long. He counts five hours. He reflects on his art class from yesterday. “I like big women,” he mumbles aloud. About three minutes later, after thinking about a few students from his art class and then about the fact he spoke to himself three minutes ago, Jeff adds, “but not the deity.”

Jeff watches Blue Planet 2 on his phone in hope of injecting non-deity images and topography into his mind. Among the most critical of things to avoid thinking of are: the Midwest, rolling hills, Madison, and the image of the deity herself.

Nothing here but a baby turtle exploring a log floating above the deep sea. The baby turtle eats algae off the log. Fish begin to swim around the log, which attracts a small shark to swim to the log. The camera pans upwards, starting at the sea-stranded log’s bloated bottom, across the ocean surface, and up to the log’s dry upper-half with brown spikes jutting outwards in quick-changing lines. The contour resembles regal mansions seated high on rocky cliffsides. Jeff focuses hard on them. The mansions turn to Victorian farm houses, the cliffs smooth out to hillsides. As Jeff falls into sleep he is unable to pull the plug. The deity comes down the log’s dark, spiky contour, then rolling hills, and eventually, the rooftop of the Yancy Mill’s post office. Atop the rooftop she delivers her speech to three drones and just a handful of ladies.

“I will allow each human to teleport a limited distance once a day for the next one-hundred years. The distance over which Jeff Woosley, born in Chicago, can maintain an instantaneous speed greater than 3.5 meters per second, will be the maximum distance of teleportation per human per day. He must begin his run before October 16th 2016.” The deity curls her lips up into a forced smile and then disappears into her tornado.

Jeff Woosley is watching the stream with three friends on a black ThinkPad laptop on the third floor of the Lincoln Avenue Residence Hall.

Jeff’s toes curl in his sleep. It’s him.

He had attended assemblies, in elementary school, in the gymnasium. He was taught BLEND. It was this world’s version of stop, drop, and roll.

B.	L.	E.	N.	D.
u	a	m	e	i
y	y	e	g	s
		r	a	g
t	l	g	t	u
i	o	e	e	i
m	w	n		s
e		c	t	e
		y	h	
			r	
		c	e	
		a	a	
		l	t	

“Fuck fuck fuck.” Jeff’s dorm mate Shawn pulls his black sweatshirt’s hood over his head. “You were born in Chicago, tell me you weren’t. I know you fucking were though. I know it.”

Jeff didn’t move. “Yeah it’s me,” he mumbles. Jeff stands up and locks the room’s door.

“Fuck. We gotta blend,” Alessandro says.

“We should call now,”

The three boys speak over each other quickly in hushed whispers.

“What’re the chances people here know you’re last name?”

“We need a strategy. What? We cold call and just say ‘durrrrr wut do we do?’”

“Hardly anyone in this dorm knows my last name!” Jeff says.

They have been told stories, throughout grade school, of people successfully reaching government protection by barricading themselves in a bathroom, by jumping off buildings into a safety net, but most of the time, simply by walking as a casual pedestrian to a meeting point designated by a safety officer. Their city’s safety officer response time was “rated at three minutes”, Alessandro claims he knows this.

“Gimme that,” Alessandro reaches for Jeff’s phone. He dials the safety hotline, 109, and immediately turns it on speaker.

“Is this Jeff Woosley?” the dispatcher asks.

“Yep,” Jeff says back. Jeff hears his voice echo in his ears. It is the same tone he hears when confirming, “yep” the foot-long is ‘for here’.

The dispatcher’s voice comes through the line in sharp commands. He tells the boys there is a safety officer outside the entrance of Lincoln Avenue Residence Hall.

“Exactly where we are at,” Shawn says importantly.

“I know,” the dispatcher replies. “Jeff, leave your friends behind and casually walk out of the building. Put on something that doesn’t draw attention to yourself. The officer outside your building has already been alerted. Exit the building and get into the back of his car.”

“Okay thanks thanks. Leaving now” Jeff says, motioning with a flat, horizontal hand for Shawn and Alessandro to stay quiet.

Shawn and Alessandro look like they are going to puke.



“Fuck that,” Shawn whines, “what are we going to do while we wait?”

“You come with,” Jeff says in a whisper, “he doesn’t know what he’s talking about.”

Shawn exhales a sigh of relief. “Goddamnit,” his head falls into his hands. Alessandro searches the room for a hoodie.

“We go now.”

Alessandro, unable to find a hoodies, tries to pull Shawn’s hoodie off of him, “off! We need to give this to him!”

Shawn yanks it off and throws it to Jeff.

The dorm room’s door knob jiggles. The boys fall silent and wait. A fist pounds on the room’s locked door and the following silence rings louder.

“Sup!” Alessandro shouts back.

“It’s me Craig.”

“Hey man, not in a good mood right now. Sorry but you’re gonna have to piss off.”

Shawn and Jeff stop breathing.

“I know his last name. I can help you.”

Alessandro jumps to the door and cracks it open, “Fuck you, you asshole. Don’t you know that you’re supposed to play cool? Especially if you know who it is.”

Craig doesn’t say anything.

“Piss off. Right now. Or you’re going down in history as a fuckover.”

“Alright alright, I’m cool,” Craig replies after collecting his thoughts.

“Piss off,” Alessandro jabs again. This time Craig walks away.

“He’s leaving,” Alessandro says turning back, “let’s go.”

Following Alessandro’s lead, Shawn and Jeff walk into the hallway. The hallway empty. They begin walking in the opposite direction of Craig. Alessandro whispers, “stairs!” and gives Jeff a hard nudge with a giant side step to the right. Jeff’s back and Alessandro’s shoulder slam into the door’s push bar. Alessandro’s head, fixated straight ahead, doesn’t turn until he is entirely inside the stairwell.

They run down the stairwell like monkeys, jumping the stairs in groups of five and six. They exit the building, easing their jog into a casual walk. It's a straight shot into the back of the officer's car. They can see it.

"They're with me."

"Sorry, just you. The others stay," the officer replies.

"I don't want to make a scene, and I need them to cooperate."

The officer puts the car into drive and doesn't reply. The officer's clean-shaven face has well-defined bones that are disproportionate with respect to one another. The officer's jaw is sharp, nose long, face thin, especially from the front. Jeff stares at it through the rear-view mirror. Neither Jeff, Alessandro, nor Shawn have mentioned the run.

The officer doesn't ask about shit. He slowly drives the Ford Torus into a round-about and down the hill towards the river. The river will lead them to a hospital.

"The entire world will celebrate me," Jeff says. "They will celebrate the distance I can run. I've always been pretty good at running..."

The officer cuts him off, "we're going to the helicopter landing zone," he announces to the car at large, then takes a call on the car's speakers. "You're locked on my coordinates? We are just 5 minutes out, everything smooth as a whistle."

"Let's see how long you can hold your breath," Shawn says pulling out his phone's stopwatch, "we need to start training your heart now."

The helicopter flies the three boys to a private jet which takes them to Colorado for the training. Jeff continues demanding that he needs emotional support from the two friends. The friends continue signing waivers.

The foundational research on running conditions and training techniques, people instantly realize, had already been carried out by Nike's "Breaking-2," campaign one year prior, in which three long-distance athletes attempted, and failed by a little over two minutes, to run a marathon in less than two hours.

While a handful of the world's best running coaches and exercise scientists negotiate Jeff's training schedule, Jeff begins running. "We are running him into the dirt to start out," coach Alberto Salazar announces at a press conference as Anderson Cooper, seated to his right, visibly winces. "Because that part is uncontroversial," Salazar continues, "the controversial part how to ease off the training, and us coaches have to agree on a schedule by tomorrow. In the meantime, we run him into the dirt." Anderson Cooper places a hand on Salazar's shoulder and speaks into the microphone, "this term 'run into the dirt' is a jocular one in the running community, it simply means a difficult run." Cooper turns and shares a chuckle with Salazar.

Over the next three months Jeff executes his training schedule perfectly. He sees a psychologist every other evening at 7pm after bananas and oatmeal.

[add some more details about Jeff's training]

"I'm afraid of myself," Jeff says to the psychologist.

"Why's that?" The psychologist, Dr. Torres, sits across from Jeff. He is world-renowned. His calming eyes look like sympathetic water droplets. His face must be computer generated to maximize trust, Jeff wonders in amazement.

After several minutes of strategic probing and several topic changes, the psychologist prompts Jeff to confess, "Because I want to make it a performance art piece." [show don't tell here]

"Can you elaborate?"

"In my training I'll appear passionately motivated to help the human race, but I'll turn around botch the whole thing by stopping after twenty-one steps and walking backwards with a neutral expression. I'll walk backwards as far as I possibly can." Jeff continues to the psychologist's horror, "people will write blog articles debating whether or not I am protesting America's drinking age."

The psychologist fishes for a line of questioning within his mind. After a three-second pause, he says "okay, this is a possibility. What would you get out of it?"

Jeff pulls his answer like a gun from his holster, "more unpredictable human behavior."

"Your behavior or human behavior?"

"Both. My behavior constitutes a fraction of human behavior."

"Right..." the psychologist thinks aloud, "and which do you care about?"

"I care about my behavior only to the extent it effects the average of human behavior, I think."

"Mhm," the psychologist hums, "and why's that?"

"That's all I care about."

"We are talking about average human behavior here?"

“Yeah”

“What does that mean?”

“All the behavior of humans from hunter-gatherers until now, averaged together”

“Why do you care about it?”

“Why do you love your family? I don’t know, it’s just what makes me tick. It just sort-of a game I’m into, thinking about it.”

“Thinking about what specifically?”

“Human behavior averaged together,” Jeff says, then adds, “and how my behavior compares to it.”

The psychologist flags this line of questioning as a dead end and does not reply... but Jeff continues talking. “I don’t know... human behavior, plotted on some sort of chart, then seeing my dot as an outlier, all blue and lit up.” Jeff’s elbows rest on his knees and he leans forward. “It’s something you can get carried away with... having all sorts of funny thoughts.”

“Yes? Like what?”

“It’s hard to talk about,” Jeff says. “but I can give you an analogy.”

“Sure.”

“Here clinch your teeth together,” Jeff wheels his chair closer to the psychologist and places four fingers on the strong part of the man’s jaw.

“I’m crazy,” Jeff says.

The psychologist forces out a gasp of air to signify laughter.

“You’ve studied them though, right?” Jeff asks, his four fingers still on the man’s jaw. “You’ll be just fine.”

The psychologist again laughs uncomfortably.

“Relax now. Except the jaw. Clinch the jaw tighter.”

“Mhmm, okay clenching tight now,” the psychologist answers in a relaxed voice muffled by his closed mouth. There are cameras in the room, he knows.

“Okay now close your eyes,”

“I don’t think I can do so relaxed.”

“Alright fuck it keep ‘em open,” Jeff says indifferently.

The psychologist lets go of the pen clinched in his hand and leans his head back.

“Just imagine you’re driving along some country road. On your right, a white fence to keep some big brown horses corralled. On your left, a sequence of power lines, wooden pole after wooden pole.”

Little muscles cast shadows on the side of the psychologist’s face signifying that his mandible is tightly clenched.

“Imagine there is a red laser coming out of either side of your jaw.” Jeff takes the pen from the psychologist and places it orthogonal to the muscular knot where his jaw meets his cheekbone, “a straight line coming out here,” Jeff moves the pen to the other side, “and here.”

The psychologist gives a slight nod.

“It slices through anything it hits.”

The psychologist nods again.

“Okay now let’s say you don’t want to burn through whatever is on your right. You’re no anarchist are you?”

“Uh-uh,” the psychologist communicates ‘no’.

“Not a chance in hell. You took a pretty safe route, a pretty pro-social route,” Jeff says, now examining the man head to toe.

“Eh huh,” the psychologist communicates ‘yes’.

“Worked your way up too. You’re conscientious. There’s some real resolve in there,” he pats the psychologist’s heart.

The psychologist doesn’t reply this time.

“Anyways, because you’re not an anarchist. You don’t want to burn anything.”

“Mhm”

“You can deactivate the laser on the right side by opening the five-or-so molars on the right side. Likewise for the left side”

The psychologist alternates lifting up and biting down between his right and left rows of teeth. "Okay, doing it," he says between closed teeth.

Jeff notices a BIC ball-point on the desk and grabs. He now holds two pens to psychologist's jaw such that one pen sticks out from either side.

"When I say off, that means you open your teeth on that side."

"Mhm"

"Left off... Right off... Left off... Left off... Both off..." Jeff commands, removing the respective pen from the man's jaw as lifts his teeth up and down.

The man's neck is straight as he looks forward. There is no visible indication to show his teeth are moving.

"Your jaw tight?"

"It's hard to do it with my jaw clinched actually."

Jeff tries it himself, looking at his reflection in the desk's dark computer monitor. "Oh yeah it is a bit difficult."

"Alright well I'll have to trust you're opening and closing your molars because the laser is activated when your molars on that side are down and deactivated when they're open."

"Yeah I get the idea," the psychologist answers Jeff who is now walking freely around the office.

They repeat the exercise, this time Jeff shouts "tractor on left!", "stop sign, left!", "train right!", requiring the psychologist handle the pens himself to indicated whether his teeth were open or closed, also requiring the psychologist consider the length of each object so as to deactivate the laser for an appropriate duration.

"That was a pretty short train," he said when the psychologist put the pen back against his molars after a few seconds. "We're only going 55, you just sliced that train in two."

"Why don't I just always keep them open, to be safe?"

"Oh I'm glad you asked, there's a benefit to keeping them activated. You get a score " Jeff shuffles his feet and notices where the table's legs meet the floor. "... the rules are complicated, but trust me, it matters."

"Okay that's it," Jeff resumes his position as a patient in the armchair.

[relate back to the original purpose ]

he motioned a line coming out of his jaw and looked up at the psychologist. The man's dark hair line rested above a wrinkled brow. He didn't say anything.

"Here, clench your teeth together," Jeff tells the

"You've swallowed coal?"

"No but I have aspired to, in the past."

The psychologist waits five seconds before replying, "Interesting. Let's table this and talk about it on Friday's appointment." Looking up from his yellow legal-pad he adjusts his glasses, "how are your workouts going? What do you think about while running?"

"Good. I think of my performance art piece," Jeff says.

"Anything else?"

"Sometimes Lil' Wayne lyrics."

The psychologist asks him a few more questions. Jeff gives mostly one-word answers, "good", and "yes."

By the day of the event, Jeff's psychologist is drinking himself to sleep. Bound by his confidentiality agreement, which Jeff personally verified the thoroughness of before confiding the 'performance art piece' idea, the psychologist is unable to confide in others, let alone alert the officials overseeing the event. When asked if he would botch the event at their last meeting the evening before the event, Jeff simply shrugged.

Jeff on the other hand had not touched alcohol for two months, but rather continued to train hard and earned himself the status of global fan-favorite by working with a film team to document his heart-felt workouts and personal philosophy before the day of the event. His off-the-cuff monologue about using "impoverished youth, or kids around my neighborhood, or even my own memory of being a six-years-old" as motivation to ignore the pain of "all the little feet bones" and keep running was replayed across all major websites and news channels. This footage mixed with pundit commentary was enough to put the globe at ease.

## Friday

Jeff has a free morning, granted by his decision to do Monday's homework on Saturday and Sunday.

Jeff decides to walk yesterday's path in reverse and use evidence gained along the journey to determine if he is a robot or an organic breathing thing with free will. He approaches the location where upon, only yesterday, he had been overwhelmed with an impulse to push a harmless pedestrian, and passes by, still with no clue from the universe as to what percent robot he should view his mind.

He walks the remaining half-mile to complete a full loop around campus only to end up in front of his apartment, unlocking his door, with a heightened sense of indecision directed inwards, causing him to feel neither robotic nor free, but rather, a maelstrom of non-existence.

Jeff cooks eggs and decides to sell his previous roommate's old desk.

The public radio segment discussing recent controversies in Turkish-American relations brings Jeff's unsettled mind back to earth. The radio plays in the background as Jeff uses an 8.5 x 11 sheet of paper to measure the dimensions of the desk, then enters the numbers into a craigslist ad. Both the background audio and the craigslist webpage sooth the bits of restlessness amassed during his walk, effectively removing his indecision as to whether or not he has control over his body.

In the shower Jeff remembers that it is his responsibility to print his group's essay.

Jeff prints out his group's essay and again, retraces yesterday's path in reverse as he walks to campus, this time, coincidentally, and this time, preoccupied with the NBA podcast coming through his earbuds.

When Jeff hits Amsterdam, the cross avenue's the north-south wind blows perpendicular to the east-west stack of papers in his hand.

A sailboat in-luck. Or stack of important papers out-of-luck.

Depending on one's perspective.

These are important papers, Jeff realizes, and being such, it is important that they do not crease against his thumbs. A quick gust of wind suddenly broadsides Jeff and his papers. If Jeff turns his wrist, the papers will crease. If Jeff does nothing, the papers will crease. In a moment of genius, Jeff turns a graceful 360 degrees, using his torso to block the wind while simultaneously twisting the papers ninety degrees, safely inside the temporary pocket of still air, such that when the 'torso wind-barrier' is gone, the papers are parallel to the direction of the wind and no longer at threat of creasing, all in a single, miraculous motion that does not break his normal, pre-wind walking cadence. He exchanges eye-contact a pedestrian who noticed the spin move and mumbles, "organic," to himself in stunned awe at his competence pitted against this so-called deity. Jeff walks the remaining distance to his writing class.

2 pm is a technical writing class.

4 pm is a math class.



6 pm is a bus ride. He and Scott board the M60 bus eastbound towards LaGuardia.

The temperature is fifteen degrees warmer than yesterday. The sky outside the bus is light blue. There are Virginia rails in the sky, Scott tells him.

“Nah, those are pigeons,” Jeff replies. “God I’d love to instill a proper fear of humans into this city’s pigeons.”

“Yeah I know what you mean.”

Scott is a deeply mysterious, sullen cowboy in Jeff’s eyes.

Scott will sometimes talk about his identical twin ‘Mark’ who Jeff has yet to see. Scott will know things like the names of birds, which cut of meat is the most marbled, or how to live out of a van. Counting when Jeff watched Scott’s livestream, it is he and Scott’s fourth time associating outside of school. Within school, they share half of the same classes, are members in the same research group, and often work on homework together.

Jeff continues on about pigeons while watching Scott’s reaction to his fantasized plan, given an apocalyptic situation which results in the survival of only himself and New York’s pigeon population, to give all the pigeons a “healthy dose of PTSD.”

“Yeah, that would be cool. But pigeons can’t get PTSD.”

Despite his monosyllabic expression and dry, deep voice, Scott’s responses to Jeff’s sporadic comments are consistently interesting and relevant, which in turn heightens Jeff’s interest in Scott as a mystery, causing him to test Scott’s boundaries with even further sporadic non-sequiturs. A small square tab of bleached pulp and one-hundred micrograms of LSD sits beneath Jeff’s tongue, the effects of which are settling in, fully removing any modicum of restraint lingering in Jeff’s mind, such that his comments are now fully incoherent.

“Scott, just because you’ve kissed a girl, doesn’t mean I can’t love you too,” he says seriously, inches from Scott’s face.

Scott does not flinch, nor avert his eyes. “Just because... I can’t love you too,” he repeats Jeff’s words in concentration. “Thank you Jeffy. However besides that not making any sense, I’m just not there yet.”

“I’m hot just like an oven, I need your lovin’,” Jeff says quietly.

“Okay. Maybe someday I’ll stop hating you and return the favor.”

Jeff falls onto his knees in what is initially, partially fake laughter, but combined with his bright mood and concentration on Scott’s mysterious personality, turns into real laughter. Scott pats

Jeff on the back, “there there”, then acknowledges he is aware of his own allure, “it’s true. I’m un-faze-able,” in an emotionless, dry voice.

“Oh god.”

“You seem to be acting weird, should we do the interview now?”

“Yeah I am acting weird. Oh God,” Jeff sits up.

“How does it feel?”

“Good.”

Jeff and Scott exit the bus at Harlem’s 2nd avenue and walk the Robert F. Kennedy bridge to a free concert in the park. Neither knows the artist or genre.

The artist turns out to be a big name. The genre turns out to be EDM.

When they reach the 3rd row, they stake their position and observe, on tip-toe, the crowd around them grow in all directions, almost visibly in real-time.

“You know I’ve never been to a concert before.”

“Yes yes, I know.” Jeff replies in a condescending tone, “we brought you here so you can have your very own concert experience. That’s why you’re here buddy.”

“Okay. Sure.”

Jeff goes back to his normal voice, “we might get separated,” he says while looking around, “don’t be afraid to hold your ground, but also don’t be afraid to go with the flow.”

When the headliner comes on stage, the crazed crowd doubles in excitement. Jeff pinballs through the array moshers and wanders away, leaving Scott on his own.

A punctured water pipe beneath the park has turned the normally grassy lot into a dusty one, which now turns the sweat-soaked crowd into a muddy one.

Jeff envisions the crowd composed of half-poththead-half-anime-lover people obsessed with world of warcraft or league of legends and in possession of level sixty half-drude-half-troll characters, or half-something-half-something-else to match the spirit of his or her unique dichotomy. The faces are distinct caricatures of humans. More personified than a person. The distilled essence of their online experience mixed with their parent’s genome. From this perspective Jeff views each person and from this perspective each person’s faces pops his eyes with unique personality. Like an iPhone commercial, but more real.

Especially one kid.

One kid with a long neck, bony face, and pimples. He is a full head taller than everyone else but often disappears beneath crowd-level, curling his torso in a 'C'-shape to deliver or absorb his next full body-collision with the crowd. To Jeff he is a baby turtle lost at sea, no different from the baby turtle in Blue Planet II. In the moments his head surfaces above the crowd, Jeff is overwhelmed with unconditional love, desiring to know every hope that burns in the young turtle's bosom. Although unable to swim, he continues struggling for breath; and due his love for life, strong will, and perhaps even his resolve to care of his future children, he prevails, surfacing the stormy waters, catching breaths just often enough to endure the next onslaught from his environment. An environment which he cannot control. Jeff platonically loves him. His high cheekbones. His crop-cut. His project behind his parent's house to build a life-sized Medieval trebuchet.

Jeff shoots a gap and lunges forward to drive a lowered shoulder into the kid's back.

The kid crumbles and falls like a brick. Jeff extends two hand, hoists him up, and then wanders away.

After the show, Jeff finds Scott, but also wants to find the kid.

So much that Jeff can't hear Scott repeatedly mention how "amazing" the concert was, "You know that was my first-ever concert right?"

Jeff stands high on tip-toes, scanning all directions for sight of the kid.

"Yeah, we talked about it the whole drive up."

"That was amazing," Scott said.

"Wanna go to McDonalds?"

"McDonalds?"

Jeff can sense communication on this point will be difficult, but he is certain that McDonalds is the bright beacon which they must journey to.

"Yeah Micky D's...I met a friend," Jeff adds distractedly, "maybe they'll wanna come to"

"Like a girl?"

"No a guy actually."

"You met a friend in *there*?"

Jeff looks around but can't find the kid.

“Okay let’s go,” Scott says

Jeff turns to look at the sullen cowboy, “you’re having a great night aren’t you? We need to take it to McDonalds.”

Scott replies that they “have diff e.q. tomorrow.”

“But not ‘till noon,” Jeff retorts, then convinces Scott the night is “worth dragging out.” Scott quickly concedes, repeating his one-liners, “That was my first concert. That was incredible. That DJ is a freaky bitch.” Walking across the bridge is “the only reasonable way to Manhattan,” Jeff explains and leads Scott through various fence-lined concrete structures leading to the bridge’s pedestrian entrance. “Would you rather straddle this barbed wire for five hours or lick the sidewalk from this brick to that line?” Jeff asks.

Scott comments on the graffiti.

Jeff jokes about Andy in their research group.

“Here hold this,” Jeff throws his phone into Scott’s hands and steps onto the row of cement blocks separating the road from the sidewalk.

“I’m doing a cartwheel.”

The traffic lane immediately adjacent the barrier is clear, thanks to a semi-truck pulled against the curb blocking all potential oncoming traffic.

Scott pulls his phone out to record.

The parked driver looks up from his phone and watches Jeff extend his arms for balance, increase his pace, and bend into his cartwheel. Then he lays into his horn.

“Christ!” Jeff screams with a crisp ‘c’.

Jeff crumbles into a ball.

“He shouldn’t have done that!” Jeff yells, while Scott falls over in laughter.

Jeff runs up to the front of the semi’s nose, on the illegal side of the concrete barrier, and shakes his finger at the driver. “That was rude,” Jeff mouths to him, bent at the waist, with his hands against his hip, “that was rude.”

He continues to repeat “that was rude! He should not have honked!” each time heightening the ‘southern granny’ character within his mind, as he and Scott walk across the bridge.

When they arrive on top of the bridge, the sun is setting west. Jeff narrows his eyes past the traffic, in the direction of the northern view. But theirs is south towards the river. Queens on the left and the city's skyscrapers hidden behind Harlem's overhang poking out of the peninsula.

Jeff requests his phone back.

He tweets, "he shouldn't have honked" followed by "that was rude".

Scott looks out at the river.

"There's another Virginia rail."

"It's hard for me to communicate now," Jeff says, "so it'll hard for me to communicate this, but we need go to McDonalds."

"Ha. Sure. You seem to be talking just fine."

"No. I'm not talking fine. It's hard for me to talk," Jeff says, then adds, "...and I thought you were going to interview me."

Jeff and Scott's eyes meet in a bizarre moment of incredulity in which each can clearly read the other's emotion: Scott, a slight annoyance at the incoherence of Jeff's thoughts, and Jeff, a naked guilt for so openly exposing his desire to be interviewed on acid.

"Okay... how are you?" Scott asks in his driest voice.

"What you don't want to do the interview anymore?"

"This is the interview."

"I mean... well, I was thinking it would be more official."

"Alright then. Here goes my official voice: how do you feel?" Scott tries pulling his deep voice a bit higher to indicate he is asking a question.

"Shouldn't we find a place to sit down."

"Why? This is your chance to tell me how special you are."

Scott's flat, deep voice is a commanding, cold, male-authoritarian-baritone to Jeff who is now four hours deep in his LSD trip and is sensitive to such effects. Scott has never tried drugs due to his Evangelical upbringing but is interested in Jeff's experience. On their bus ride to the park, they had planned on doing an interview.

"We planned on doing an interview."

“Yeah. You seem normal though,” Scott adds, “did you not take very much?”

“I took a tab.”

“Goddamn I need a girl.” Scott says, abruptly ending the interview. Jeff turns to see Scott’s cowboy-esque profile set bleakly against the backdrop of some parked pickups. He looks like a true Western tragedy.

Jeff can’t help but laugh. He grabs the bridge’s guard rail for support..

“What?” Scott contends.

“Nothing, I’m sorry... just being a lil shit.”

“It’s true. I need a girl. But yeah, we can talk about something else.”

“Nah man. Let’s find a place to sit down and talk about it.”

“Ha. Yeah, right.”

“No really, there’s a nice grassy hill just a few blocks up.”

Jeff notices Scott’s confused look. “It’s nice,” he quickly adds, “it’s a small extension to campus. I was actually up there earlier on Tuesday for my art class.”

“Okay you’re patronizing me now. Really though we can chuck it as a topic.”

“No. Oh my God. I’m so sorry,” Jeff says with big eyes.

“Okay you’re acting weird.”

“Oh my, no I wasn’t making fun of you, or whatever it is you think I’m doing. I’m not doing that.”

Scott notices Jeff’s Bambi eyes. They look like his soul is spilling out of them. Spilling onto the pavement. Scott finds it embarrassing. Scott feels like someone should tuck it back in.

“Oh my god, no, it’s okay,” Jeff says. “It’s all going to be alright. Don’t worry about me. We need to take care of you.”

“Okay that’s interesting.”

“What?”

“Does the acid make you hyper-thoughtful or something?”

“I suppose,” Jeff giggles, “it’s a lot of thoughts like ‘welcoming myself back’, Jeff says, doing air-quotes with his fingers, “because you know... I’ve been here before.”

“Or, I mean like hyper-compassionate.”

“Oh yeah. You bet,” Jeff says with a valley accent.

“Okay that’s interesting.”

“So why don’t you have a girl?”

“Nah let’s not talk about it,”

“Blah sorry, it’s so hard for me to communicate right now.”

“Perfect.”

Jeff turns to Scott in jest. He tilts his head and smiles. “Good one. I got that. Okay let’s keep going.”

“Walking?”

“Yeah”

“Okay yeah let’s keep going.”

The two boys walk for several blocks, in a direction towards what Jeff presumes is McDonalds. The cross avenues are busy with people. Young people go to and from bars and in and out of bodegas. Old people and people off-shift huddle outside bodegas in groups of five or so to gossip and pass chips. They walk pass one such group, circled around a make-shift table made from a wooden board propped on an upside-down garbage can, on top of which sits a chessboard. Two old, bearded men at the circle’s center study the locations the scrambled chess pieces. Jeff can see they are wizards. They walk pass a tattoo shop with a red light and a buzzing neon sign. A girl is tattooing manga artwork on someone’s thigh. Jeff can see she is performing a séance.

The lamp-lit residential streets are comparatively dark and quiet. They are lined with little budding trees, each allotted its own square plot of soil, cut from the surrounding pavement with grease-filled cracks extending outwards both onto the sidewalk and road. Jeff sees wizard faces in the black fences. The wrought iron fences protect the apartment buildings and run the length of the street, only opening for the intermittent stairwell, which then leads to a stoop, which then leads to a building’s front door. Jeff turns his iPhone’s flashlight towards his face each time they pass a building’s entrance and catches a glimpse of his reflection in the door’s glass. But he sees ten wizard faces for every one of his own. The faces flash independently like frames in a viewmaster image reel—wizard, wizard, Jeff, wizard, wizard, wizard, wizard, wizard, wizard... as he walks past the fence-lined apartment buildings. “I’m not shinning the flashlight at the glass,

I'm shining it at my face," Jeff explains, "so that it's my luminous-ed face that gets reflected back into my eyes."

"Yeah. I see what you're doing. And I understand how it works," Scott says from behind him.

"Sorry it's really hard for me to communicate right now."

"Yeah. You keep saying that."

"It's actually really hard for me to talk."

"Here let me see?" Scott asks for Jeff's phone. He keeps the flashlight on and shines it Jeff's eyes. "Woah you're pupils are huge."

They stop walking.

Scott pulls Jeff to the edge of the sidewalk and tilts his head back, examining his pupils like a doctor while holding his eyelids open.

"Open up."

Jeff opens his mouth.

"Looks good..." Scott mumbles, then turns the phone off and quickly says, "we should start the interview now."

"Sure."

"Can you lay down on the street?"

"What?"

"Come over here. I just need you to lay beneath one of these street lights."

Soon enough Jeff is lying beneath a street light, flat against the curb, parallel with the street, and face-up such that the light above illuminates a blithe anticipation in his smirk. He lays atop a giant, flattened sheet of cardboard which had been placed curbside for the weekend's recycling pick-up. Scott's face enters the frame, upside down from Jeff's view. He squats down level and pulls Jeff's eyelids wide open, taking a long moment to scan over his pupils, "woah your pupils are enormous," he repeats, then prods Jeff's arm with the butt of a water bottle. "How do you feel?"

"Good."

"Good?"



“Yeah.”

“And what are you thinking about?”

“I guess just this light in my eyes. What are you thinking about?” Jeff says in a nasally voice.

Scott hums, ignoring Jeff’s question. He continues prodding and observing Jeff’s frame, stiffly prone against the curbside

“Still feeling lonely about not having a girlfriend?”

“What? No.” Scott answers distractedly.

“What’s the matter which’ you? Why don’t you have a lil bitch ya lil bitch?”

“No. Stop it. This isn’t silly time.”

“What about Sar...”

“Enough already. I’m interviewing you. Enough. Enough with the whimsical annotations. Yes, some of them are funny. But now is not the time.” Scott voices the instructions in a kind, yet assertive tone, and Jeff can feel the power within their relationship dynamic shift into his Scott’s hands, for the first time in their two-year-long intermittent relationship, and along with this shift, a feeling of excited apprehension, that he might see a side a previously-concealed side of Scott Crossen.

“You got it sergeant. Shutting up.”

“No, I mean cut even that. Just relax now buddy. Just relax. I’m going to interview you now.”

“Yep, relaxing.”

“Okay we on the same page?”

“Yep”

“Okay I’m going to ask you questions rapid-fire. I want quick answers, but full-sentence responses. Okay?”

“Okay”

“Ready?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s your head feel like against the cardboard?”

“It’s a peaceful rock, a round rock resting on a bigger rock.”

“What taste do you have in your mouth?”

“It’s nice. Maybe a little metallic, but mostly neutral.”

“Tell me about your desire to go to McDonalds. What do they have over there that you don’t have here?”

“I like those self-service things. I enjoy using them.”

“Do you like any girls right now?”

“No. Madison and I broke up. But there’s this blonde girl in my art class.”

“Okay good job.”

Jeff opens his eyes.

Scott takes a step back and thumbs around on his phone, standing a full meter away from Jeff’s body which is still frozen in its original posture, perfectly supine against the curb.

Music begins buzzing from the little speaker at the bottom of Scott’s samsung, a keyboard-generated flute playing a light melody overtop a collection of tribal drums, as Scott adjusts his phone to a proper volume and places it on the cardboard, inches north of Jeff’s hair.

While the music plays, Scott begins to walk circles around Jeff’s body at a slow pace, lightly kicking the soles of Jeff’s shoes each time he passes. He continues this motion for a few minutes, linked to the cadence of song’s African bell, cross-rhythmed to a rainshaker and a pair of bongos, all of which are gradually increasing in pace. After about five minutes, the drumming abruptly stops. The silence sits for few drawn-out seconds before an ensemble of layered synthesizers begins to fill the void. A new layer of synth comes in every few seconds. Scott continues circling Jeff. He lets the synth build for about forty seconds, then stops walking and pauses the music.

Scott squats down level to Jeff’s face.

“Rapid-fire round two.”

This time Scott asks over twenty questions. Some of which are his own, and some of which, unbeknownst to Jeff, he reads from a webpage on his phone. Jeff’s answers skew more abstract and tend to leak more personal information as they progress through the list. But Jeff maintains a focus of honesty, taking mental note of an ‘honesty score’, on a scale of 1 - 10, that he assigns to each of his answers immediately upon finishing. Although sometimes Scott’s questions come too quickly and he does not have time to assign a score. After twenty-or-so questions, Scott follows

up on one of Jeff's answers from the previous round, "why do you enjoy using McDonald's kiosks?"

"The self-service screens?"

"Yeah."

"They represent an ideal. And it feels like an ideal that calms me in an otherwise chaotic world."

Scott pauses, then asks, "What is the ideal that they represent? And I know it's maybe a difficult question, so feel free to give a more long-form answer here."

"Oh gosh, it's a lot of things. The idea you don't have to talk to someone to order your food, the aesthetics of the bright screen, a white background with colorful options placed overtop. It's like the feeling of coming home after a hard day's work, grabbing some food and turning on Seinfeld, 'Seinfeld, ah yes, thank god I've seen this one before'," Jeff mimics air-quotes, then continues with his answer, "... but it's not just that. It also represents technological progression. The screen is cutting-edge, at least somewhat. I mean, it at least took intelligent people to design and manufacture it. And those people behind the scenes, you can tell while using it that those people have your back. You can tell that those people held *your* comfort as *their* highest priority when designing it. There's a comfort in that. It's like the screen is reaching out and giving you a big hug. Similar to all the screens in Times Square, I never understood why locals always rag on Times Square. I love it. I love getting my eyes pumped with all those photons from the LED screens. When I see them I know, each of the photons was paid for by someone who wants you to be a part of this moment and see their message," Jeff pauses with his head still fixated firmly straight upwards.

"Yeah, go on..." Scott says from behind him, now seated on the curbside.

"Yeah, I mean I can go on. I think there's another component, like the knowledge you're engaged in a shared experience. When you scroll through that menu," Jeff imitates a swiping motion with his hand, "you know thousands, probably millions of other people, also working some grind, god only knows what theirs is, but afterwards they come to McDonalds, and they swipe the screen just like you do," he again motions with his hand, "and that knowledge brings me a sense of solidarity with the globe at large."

"Yeah," Scott says.

Jeff turns his question back at him, "What sorts of things give you peace like that?"

"I don't know but I can relate to a lot of what you were talking about. And yeah..."

"Yeah what?"

"I don't know, I don't seem to click with 'people' that well," Scott pauses, "you know, I typically don't say much, but yeah, that's a separate thing."

“No keep going.”

“Nah that’s really all I was going to say.... Is that it’s not often I can relate to what someone’s saying so clearly.”

They both remain in their respective positions, Scott on the curb, and Jeff supine on his flattened cardboard box. They stay there for a while, each imagining McDonald’s kiosks. Scott’s perception of the machine is skewed, as he only has a vague memory of maybe using it once, but can relate to the feeling within Jeff’s description. It’s past 2 a.m. now.

“I think my most peaceful moments come, when I work my graveyard shift as a janitor. Especially when I close up the building with my headphones on.”

Jeff knew Scott had kept his custodial job, at their university, over the past three years despite also working as a teaching assistant and research assistant with the option to increase his hours in the lab. Though, he had never asked him about it before.

“It’s fucking peaceful,” Scott adds.

“What do you listen to?”

“Mostly Relient K because that’s what my brother would play growing up”

“Your identical twin?”

“Yeah.”

Jeff laughs.

“You mentioned that it distorts your perception of people?” Scott asks, referring back to the LSD.

“I would say augments.”

“Well, like, what’s your perception of me? Honestly”

“Well honestly, ”

“Yeah.”

“Well honestly you seem like a bit of a sullen cowboy to me. Mostly because of your voice. Your voice is monotone but it’s commanding and cold. Like a cold, male authoritarian.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, and you seem a bit sad.”

“Huh, okay.”

“You need a girl, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“Just stop needing one and you’ll get one dumbass.”

“Huh,” Scott says, still lost in thought.

“Can I have some of that?” Jeff points to the water.

“Sure. Here open up.”

He pours a mouthful of Arrowhead water into Jeff’s open mouth.

“So it makes you extra thirsty?”

“No I wouldn’t say I’m thirsty per se. But it feels extra-ordinary. Coming down my throat and all. Wow I even think I can feel it in my stomach.”

“Yeah? That’s interesting... that’s interesting. What’s that feel like?”

“Can I have another?”

“Sure.”

They repeat the procedure.

Except this time Jeff gurgles the water and makes sex noises. “Oh Scotty, oh daddy oh!”

“Oh fuck off,” Scott pours the remaining water of Jeff’s face.

Jeff rolls to his side in laughter clenching his stomach and choking on the water. His face hits the grime ridden curbside just as a spray of water spews forward from his mouth. The oil-stained dirt turns muddy and sticks to his face.

“Aagggghh!” Jeff grinds his teeth the length of his tongue, accumulating a thin roll of black grime to the tip of his tongue. He sits it into the street and rubs his sweat-stained T-shirt back and forth on his front teeth. “Ahhhhh.”

Scott watches, standing a few feet back, and chuckling with the water bottle held low in a drooping arm.

Jeff continues spitting black grime and wiping his face. “Goddamn you.”

Jeff stands up on the flattened cardboard box, having laid there for over twenty minutes now, and continues cursing Scott as they walk forward, chipping away at the remaining 0.9 miles towards Harlem’s 24-hour McDonalds, following the google map directions on Scott’s phone.

Jeff stops at a bodega along the way to purchase a water bottle and rinse the remaining grime off his face.

Scott’s shell cracks open a bit further as Jeff showers in the trickle of water. He tells Jeff that he once soiled himself in an adult diaper “to see what it felt like” subsequent to Jeff telling him, “what the... no, why?”. They talk about how Jeff really would like to call his dad and tell him he is tripping. “Oh god and give him such a fright,” Scott says.

“Have you ever longed for solitary confinement?”

When they reach the McDonald’s self-service kiosks, Jeff says, “let’s order separately,” and walks to his own kiosk.

Everything about them is *fun*. The red backlight, the sleek white frame, and the uneven distribution, making them feel like naturally-occurring plants which just sprouted from the ground. Jeff stands in front of the big glowing screen tuned to 100 percent brightness and swipes his hand to spin the menu options at top speed. He adds a few items to the menu.

But this one is too close to Scott.

Jeff moves to a kiosk further removed, in the corner of the store.

He again add the orders, this time forging a more intimate connection with the screen. As he chooses the toppings for his sundae, a tear trickles down his cheek.

He and Scott reconvene at a booth holding an hot fudge sundae and double-cheeseburger value meal, respectively. Jeff scrolls through live Twitter conversations about Trump’s latest scandal as he waits for Scott to finish his burger and fries.

“I feel so connected right now.”

“What?”

“Sorry not to you. Check out this tweet.”

Friday Night

Theme of the book: modernity makes him a rat in a cage. He would prefer the existential risk injected into his life every now and again.

- Monday: Broken up with.
- Monday NIGHT: “Collect hair” challenge
- Tuesday: Art class. Big hair in Victorian dress.
- Tuesday NIGHT: ‘Entropy or Kill’ challenge.
- Wednesday: Math class. Imagines how people would react to ‘the situation’.
- Wednesday NIGHT: Podcast challenge. Twenty-four percent succeed.
- Thursday: Feels like a robot. Then a monkey. Then, a rat in a cage (listens to a thunderstorm on YouTube to fall asleep and feels like a rat in a cage.) Messages his special needs reading buddy sorry for pushing him. He’s on acid. Scott’s never tried drugs before. They find some grass to sit down on.
- Thursday NIGHT: breaking – 2. Jeff runs.
- Friday: Walk’s previous path in reverse, paper 360 twist. That night, he and Scott go to a concert.

- Friday NIGHT: no dreams of the deity. Instead dreams of working in a laboratory about rats in a cage.

More things that can happen:

His throat can swell up.

They can run to McDonalds.

Jeff uses a 8.5 x 11 piece of paper to measure the dimensions of his desk to sell on craigslist. He forgets the numbers has has to remeasure tomorrow

They can