

BAR

## CHAPTER 1: WHEN?

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"The beginning," L. said.

"You mean how long since the beginning?" M. asked.

"Yeah, how long have we been sitting here, from when we started sitting here?" L. asked.

"I'm not sure," O. said. "Does it matter?"

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"We were here before M.," L. reasoned.

"I was here at 10:30," M. offered.

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"So we've been here since 10:30, at least," L. concluded.

"At least," O. confirmed.

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"But how long since?" L. asked.

"It's 12:10, now," M. said.

"So for a bit," L. said.

"And some time before," O. concluded.

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“Felt shorter,” L. said, nodding.

“It did. Longer, too,” O. said, smiling.

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“How much longer will we be here?”

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## CHAPTER 2: VENDING MACHINE

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"It's weird that it's here though – isn't it, J.?" L. asked.

"Why's that?" J. asked, moving a rag through a few glasses.

"Well you serve drinks here. Why would you also have a vending machine people can buy drinks from?" L. asked.

"It's just soda; you can't get beer or anything from it," J. said.

"Sure, but you have soda at the bar. Doesn't that thing just cost you time to stock?" L. asked.

"I guess it would, but I don't stock it," J. said.

"You don't?" asked M., sufficiently interested to look up from the small-plates menu.

"Nope," J. said.

L. and M. looked at each other.

"Then who does?" each asked a second apart.

"Some guy," J. shrugged.

"Some guy?" L. and M. asked.

"Some guy," J. said.

"It can't make much money for him either," L. evaluated. "How long has that thing been here, anyway? I've never thought about it before. Is it new?"

"It's covered in dust," M. contributed.

"It's not new," J. confirmed.

"How have I never noticed it?" L. asked the room but not necessarily anyone inside of it.

"Why would you look for a soda machine in a bar?" M. asked. "Like you've been saying this whole time."

"Yeah it's weird that it's here though," L. returned.

"The soda company probably tries to put one wherever there is space and an outlet, betting that some will make money, some will lose money," M. said. "It will all even out and the product will pay for its own advertising."

"Pay for its own advertising?" L. asked

"Sure. It's a basic strategy but clever in its own way," M. said.

"I don't think a vending machine would make me think about a product," L. said. "Just about a vending machine."

"But you can't think of a vending machine without thinking about what it has inside," M. said.

"I could think of an empty vending machine," L. offered

"Why would you?" M. asked.

"I don't know," L. said.

"Would it still be a vending machine at that point?" M. wondered.

"I don't know," L. said.

"The soda company doesn't own the vending machine," J. offered, un-tessellating the conversation.

"It doesn't?" M. asked with interest.

"Nope," J. confirmed.

"Who does?" L. prompted.

"Some guy," J. shrugged.

"Some guy?" M. asked.

"Yep," J. said.

L. and M. looked at each other.

"The same guy that stocks it?" L. asked.

"The very same," J. replied.

"Who is he?" M. asked.

"I don't know much about him. He licenses vending machines in the area and asked if he could put one in my bar not long after I first opened this place up," J. explained.

"And you said yes?" L. asked.

"The vending machine is here, isn't it?" M. observed.

"It is," L. said, looking at it. "What does it cost, J.?"

"For what?" J. asked.

"For the machine. How much do you pay the guy?" L. asked.

"Nothing," J. answered.

"Nothing?" L. asked.

"Nothing," J. confirmed.

"Nothing," L. repeated to the room.

"It's big and it has a refrigerator." M. said. "Doesn't it cost you a lot in electricity?"

"It uses less than you'd think, but I don't pay for its energy costs," J. said.

"You don't?" M. asked.

"Nope," J. said, putting a fresh bowl of peanuts seeing that L. had slowly gone through the ones that were already out.

"Thanks," L. said. "Who pays for it, then?"

"The guy. We square up once a year," J. said.

"Who uses it?" L. asked.

"Mostly the in-between kinds of customers. People that are coming in to wait out some weather. People that need to charge their phone. People that come in to ask how to get somewhere or if something is nearby -- people that end up in a bar but don't need anything from a bar and want to buy something to justify their visit," J. explained.

"But you don't get that money," M. observed.

"No, but they don't need to buy something to come in or talk to me in the first place," J. said.

"And it's not much money," L. offered.

"Yeah you're not missing out on much," M. nodded. "How much money could that really make?"

"It's not much but it adds up higher than you'd think. Maybe a couple hundred bucks a year," J. said.

"That is high," L. said.

"But not much," M. said.

"High but not much," J. concluded.

"How much does it cost in electricity?" M. asked.

"About what it earns," J. said.

"So the guy doesn't make anything?" L. said. "That's a bummer."

"He doesn't lose anything, either," J. shrugged. "Just time."

"We all lose that," M. offered.

"So what's the point of it?" L. asked.

"I don't think it has one," J. shrugged. "Or maybe it is the point, itself."

"It's its own point?" L. repeated.

"It vends soda," M. concluded.

## **CHAPTER 3: SPONTANEOUS GENERATION**

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K. woke up with a sense that the air, or the space the air occupies, had been disturbed.

At the foot of the bed there was a strange object.

It had sensors and meters and gauges.

It wasn't small and it wasn't large.

It hadn't been there before.



## CHAPTER 4: IN THE WALLS

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"You've had this place a long time, huh?" L. asked, opening a bottle of water from the vending machine.

"I suppose I have," J. evaluated.

"What was here beforehand?" L. asked.

"Nothing," J. said.

"Nothing?" L. asked.

"Nothing," J. confirmed.

"So you built this place?" L. asked, looking around, looking impressed.

"No," J. said.

"No?" L. asked.

"The building was here. There just wasn't a business operating in it, which is why I could buy it," J. said.

"What was here before you and before it was nothing?" L. asked.

"I don't know; I didn't ask. There was some furniture that I kept and some that I got rid of. I ordered the bar you're sitting at and a company installed it," J. explained.

"What furniture did you keep?" L. asked, curious.

"Those tables and chairs by the door. Those magazine racks I keep the spare menus in," J. said.

L. looked at the described furniture for a few seconds.

"But those could have been for any business," L. complained.

"I guess so," J. shrugged.

L. was quiet for a long time, finishing the bottle of water in dutiful, unenjoyed sips and ordering a beer before asking, "Have you looked in the walls?"

"In the walls?" J. asked, confused.

“Yes,” L. nodded.

“Why would I look in the walls?” J. asked.

“I don’t know,” L. said with surprise. “Because you looked at everything outside of them, I guess.”

## CHAPTER 5: HOW DO YOU STEAL A WINDOW?

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"What are you looking at, J.?" M. asked, looking at the area of the wall J. had been glancing at all evening.

"Nothing," J. answered.

"Oh, ok," M. said.

"But, I feel like there isn't supposed to be nothing there," J. continued. "Wasn't there something there?"

"There was something there?" M. asked.

"There's a wall there," L. observed.

"A wall isn't something, it's a place for something to be," M. reasoned.

"It's a there but not a thing?" L. asked.

"Right, and it is an is," M. said.

"It is?" L. asked.

"I think there was a window there," J. said finally.

"A window?" M. asked.

"A window," J. confirmed.

"There can't have been a window there. There's a wall there," M. reasoned.

"Maybe someone took it," L. suggested.

"Took it?" J. asked.

"Yeah, stole it." L. replied.

"How do you steal a window?" M. asked.

"You cut it out of the wall." L. reasoned.

"Then there'd be a window sized window cut out of the wall," M. said.

"I don't think it was stolen," J. doubted.

"You should have put bars over it," L. concluded, returning to their beer.

"Do you remember what was outside?" M. asked.

"Outside the window?" J. asked, turning their attention away from the wall.

"Yes, when you looked through the window." M. added.

"Not really," J. said narrowing their eyes in thought, "No, I guess not."

"Then it was probably never there," M. said, turning their palms upward in a slight shrug and speculating, "Maybe you had a window there in another bar you tended."

"Yeah, maybe," J. said in tentative agreement.

## CHAPTER 6: A DUCK?

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"Excuse me?" a voice called into the bar, searchingly. The owner of the voice stepped in and removed their hat which they moved their thumbs over in patient impatience.

"Yes?" J. said in greeting, stepping into the bar from the kitchen. "Something to drink?" J. added cautiously, fairly certain the hat-fidgeter, who hadn't moved far beyond the door, wasn't stopping in for a drink.

"No, thank you. I was just wondering— you own this bar, yes?" the customer asked.

"Yes," J. said.

"And you're here most days?" the customer continued.

"Yes," J. said.

"And have you seen a duck?" the customer inquired, reaching their point at last.

"A duck?" J. asked.

"Yes," the customer nodded.

"Yes, I've seen a duck before," J. volunteered.

"No, not a duck," the customer dismissed.

"Not a duck?" J. clarified, eyebrows raised in confusion.

"I mean not any duck. A duck in your parking lot," the customer explained.

"Oh!" J. said.

"Oh? Then you've seen it?" The customer asked hopefully.

"No, not once," J. said

"Oh," the customer said. "I thought maybe you adopted the duck or maybe that you killed it. I used to see it everyday in your parking lot, but I haven't for a week or so."

"Nope," J. said in response to the suggestion of taking in or destroying the duck in question.

"Perhaps it migrated," the customer said aloud to no one.

"About the time for it, I suppose," J. corroborated.

"I don't like the duck very much," the customer confessed.

"No?" J. asked in surprise.

The customer rolled their hat over in their hands a few times before explaining, "No. I'm nervous it might fly at my head or peck at my feet each time I walk past it. But I also worry about the duck from time to time the rest of the day once I'm away from it."

"It must be a relief to you that it might be gone?" J. ventured, beginning to cut some lemons into quarters to restock the bar.

"No, no I don't think so," the customer said, looking affected but resigned. Observing J.'s gentle transition out of the conversation and back to work they continued, "Well, thank you."

Unsure what to do with themselves, the customer looked around, saw the vending machine and said "Ah!" and pointed at it with a performed but relieved smile. The duck-inquirer bought a soda, gave a slight nod of either acknowledgment, thanks, or departure, and left.

## CHAPTER 7: YOUR SIGN IS OUT

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Your sign is out," L. reported upon entering the bar.

"What sign?" M. asked, nose twitching in light confusion.

"The bar's sign," J. answered.

"The bar has a sign?" M. pursued.

Yep," J. said.

"And the sign is 'out'?" M. asked.

"It's not lit up," L. clarified.

"It lights up?" M. asked, nose wrinkling further.

"Yep," J. confirmed while reaching an arm under the bar near the dishwasher to flip a switch.  
"Thanks, L."

L. gave a small salute in acknowledgement.

"Is it big?" M. asked.

"Pretty big," L. said.

"About sign-sized," J. reasoned.

"Where is it?" M. asked.

L. rotated left and right on their barstool, spinning like a compass needle. "It'd be past right about there," L. concluded, pointing at a spot on the wall.

M. stared at the spot on the wall for a while before announcing, "I've never seen it."

"You mean you've never noticed it?" L. asked.

"No," M. replied.

## CHAPTER 8: DIALECTIC

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“What would you say to yourself,

if you could talk to yourself?”

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“I can talk to myself.”

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“But as a stranger, I mean.

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As an objective party”

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“I don’t talk to strangers.”

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## **CHAPTER 9: EARTH'S EXOSPHERE, 1960 A.D.**

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There is a box above the Earth.

There is a television camera sticking out of the box.

The box orbits the Earth 1,302 times.

The box takes 23,000 pictures.

The box has a geocentric reference system.

The box goes north until it is south, then south until it is north.

The box records images on tape recorders.

The box sends images back to Earth.

There is a cyclone over the gulf of Alaska.

There are cloud streets in the Caribbean sea.

There is a tornado-producing cloud mass.

There is the midwest storm of April 1, 1960.

There are some problems locating each picture's elements geographically.

There are forces at work.

There are positions in space.

There are points in time.

There are 23,000 pictures!

There are clouds in the way.

There is what looks like snow.

There is a planet looking at itself.

## CHAPTER 10: PERMITTED FRUIT

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L. sat at the bar searching through a bowl of broken peanut shells, making sure no nuts were missed in the course of snacking. J. was familiar with L.'s missions of peanut search and rescue and knew not to put a fresh bowl out until L.'s investigation was complete. J. was looking at L. looking at peanuts when two customers entered the bar and sat at two stools not too far to the right of L.

"Two beers please, and is it okay if we eat this in here?" one of the customers asked, holding up a plastic shopping bag. "It's cut up fruit that we bought at the grocery store across the street."

"Of course. Enjoy," J. said, bringing two forks and small plates with their beers.

L. looked down at the bowl of crushed up peanut shells, then over to the pair eating fruit, and back to the peanuts. When the couple seemed immersed in their own conversation, L. asked J., "Hey, how come you don't sell fruit at the bar?"

"Here?" J. asked.

"Yeah. It looks like it goes really well with beer," L. appraised.

"Why should I sell fruit here if the grocery store sells fruit?" J. asked.

L. gave up on searching for stray peanuts in the bowl of shells and thought for a moment or two. "That's a good point. I guess there's no need to sell what the grocery store has."

J. nodded and put out a fresh bowl of peanuts for L. J. then moved over to the customers eating fruit and asked "Excuse me, the grocery store across the road— it doesn't happen to sell beer, does it?"

The couple looked at each other and then back at J. One chewed over a bit of fruit thoughtfully and replied "No, no it doesn't. No beer or wine at all."

"I see. Thank you," J. replied, relieved.

## CHAPTER 11: NEXT TO GODLINESS

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"Does it seem dirty in here?" L. asked, their eyes attaining the slow, callibrative acuity of someone coming out of a daydream.

"Dirtier than usual?" M. asked.

"How dirty is it in here, usually?" J. appended, self-consciously.

"No, not dirtier than usual, I don't think. Or, I suppose, maybe. I don't think it's usually dirty in here," L. explored, confused.

"I cleaned everything the same as I always do," J. reported, less defensively than before and seemingly more in the interest of observation and theory.

"Things could always be cleaner," M. suggested.

"That's true," L. concurred, satisfied.

"But they could always be dirtier," M. added.

"That's also true," L. concurred, no longer satisfied.

"Maybe it's the lighting?" J. wondered.

"The lighting?" L. asked.

"Maybe it's too dim in here," J. rationalized.

"That makes sense," L. concurred, satisfied.

"It's easy enough to prove," M. announced, getting up from the bar and moving over to the window and opening the blinds. Light streamed into the bar.

"Does it seem cleaner in here?" J. asked L.

"It seems different," L. responded.

"Different in a way that seems more clean or less clean?" M. asked from the window.

"I don't know," L. puzzled, "it's too different to tell."

## **CHAPTER 12: BREADCRUMBS**

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J. stood in the gravel parking lot and marked that there wasn't much to look at. No more than a few cars parked and not a single cloud in the sky, which seemed impossibly and indeterminately blue and far too close to the ground as a result.

J. squinted at the infinite nothing of sky for a while before looking back to the parking lot and setting about the task at hand: tossing bits of stale bread around the perimeter of the lot, by the dumpsters, around the cars, and particularly near the sidewalk where a certain duck might be found.

## **CHAPTER 13: NOTICE**

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The bar's door was locked shut and a sign was taped to the window:

The bar is closed as its bathroom has disappeared.  
We apologize for the inconvenience.

## CHAPTER 14: MULTIPLICATION

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"Hey, I got two waters," L. called out from by the vending machine.

"Extra thirsty, today?" J. asked.

"No," L. said.

"Then why the two waters?" J. asked.

"I didn't mean to get two," L. said.

"What does that mean?" M. asked.

"I paid for one water and two came out," L. said. "Can you put this water back in for me, J.?"

"I can't open the vending machine," J. said.

"But I didn't pay for this, or, maybe I didn't pay for *this*," L. said, looking in turn at the bottle in either hand.

"It's fine," J. said.

"Hm," L. said, unconvinced.

"If you're really upset about it, just put another water's worth of change in the machine," M. counseled.

"M.! You're a genius," L. said, relieved.

M. grumbled in a happy sort of way.

"Oh no," L. said after putting a few coins into the machine.

"What?" J. asked.

"It wants me to pick something," L. said.

## CHAPTER 15: DISTANCE FUNCTION

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"Yes, in the first aisle," the grocer replied.

"And bananas?" the customer asked.

"Yes, aisle one," the grocer assured.

"Toothpicks?" the customer asked.

"We've got them. Last aisle," the grocer said.

"What about—" the customer began.

"Aisle one," the grocer anticipated.

"—olives," the customer finished.

"Aisle one," the grocer repeated.

"How did you know what I was going to say?" the customer asked.

"I didn't," the grocer said.

"Then how did you know where to direct me?" the customer pursued.

"We just have the one aisle here," the grocer said.

## CHAPTER 16: URINALS

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"Has anything appeared?" L. asked.

"Appeared?" J. asked, in turn.

"Well you keep mentioning things that have disappeared," L. explained, "has anything appeared? New hallways or doors?"

"I don't think so," J. answered.

"Have you checked the bathroom?" L. asked.

"For what?" J. pursued.

"Anything that isn't supposed to be there," L. reasoned.

"No," J. said.

"No you haven't checked or no there wasn't anything extra in there?" L. asked.

"What would be in there?" J. asked.

"Anything that's not supposed to be," L. explained, "a vending machine, or a duck, or a bowl of fruit. Or something that is supposed to be in there but has duplicated like an extra soap dispenser, or urinal, or—"

"There aren't any urinals in the bathroom," J. interrupted.

"The urinals have gone missing?" L. asked

"We never had any," J. explained.

"There were never any urinals in the bar?" L. asked, surprised.

"No," J. confirmed.

"I mean there weren't any in the bathroom," L. clarified.

"Right," J. said.

"I mean in the men's bathroom," L. clarified, again.

"There is no men's bathroom," J. said.



"The men's bathroom has gone missing?" L. asked.

"We never had a men's bathroom," J. explained.

"Interesting," L. said and munched on some peanuts thoughtfully. The bar fell into thoughts about ducks and urinals before L. asked, "What about something small appearing elsewhere, maybe something harder to notice, like a bunch of toothpicks?"

"Toothpicks?" J. asked.

"Yeah, toothpicks that you don't remember buying but that suddenly showed up," L. qualified.

"No, no toothpicks," J. said.

"That's too bad," L. said.

"How come?" J. asked.

"Because I need one," L. answered. L. looked around and, with a bit of surprise, said, "Hey, M., have you always been here?"

M. looked up from meditatively scrutinizing the small-plates menu and blinked in confusion. "Yes, I've always been here."

"Since when?" L. pursued.

"Since I got here," M. answered, looking from L. to J., slightly bothered.

## CHAPTER 17: OLD FRIENDS

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"Hello everyone," came a cheerful call from the door of the bar.

"O.!" L. called across the room. "It's been a while. How are you?"

"I'm great, L., how are you?" O. returned.

"That's great!" L. rejoined.

"You're good then?" O. inquired.

"I'm glad that you're here," L. said.

"I mean how are you, independent of that?" O. asked cheerfully.

"How am I independent of that?" L. asked. L. looked at M. and J. and O. in turn. "I don't know," L. concluded, confused.

"Same old L.," O. smiled and J. gave a small chuckle of acknowledgement while M. shook their head in mock hopelessness.

"Same me," L. said and smiled, feeling sad.

## CHAPTER 18: STOCK

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"What's strange?" J. asked.

"Hm?" asked the guy with his arm deep inside the vending machine.

"Did you just say something was strange?" J. clarified.

"Hm? Oh. Yes, I guess I did. You're out of bottled water," the vending machine guy explained.

"Is that strange?" J. wondered.

"It's strange for you," the vending machine guy answered.

"For me?" J. asked.

"You run out of soda pretty regularly; in fact, the only reason I really come around here is to refill B4— B4 is soda," the man with his arm in the vending machine explained before continuing, "—but recently you've been running out of water. C1."

"Ah, I see. One of our regulars has started buying a water bottle from the machine most nights," J. explained.

The guy restocking the vending machine was now behind the machine's front panel with just an arm and a bit of a foot visible, making the two of them, the vending machine and the man, look like one amalgamated entity.

"Well I guess that would do it," the vending machine man concluded. "I only brought soda for restocking; mind if I leave this open while I grab some water bottles across the street?"

"Across the street?" J. asked. "At the grocery store?"

"Yep," the vendor replied, stepping out from behind the vending machine's face.

"Isn't that weird, though?" J. asked.

"What do you mean?" the vending machine guy asked.

"Buying water bottles from the grocery store to stock the machine?" J. clarified.

"That's where I always buy my stock from," the vendor shrugged.

"You do?" J. asked with surprise.

“Sure,” he explained. “Where did you think I got it from?”

J.’s eyebrows furrowed in reply, “I don’t know— a warehouse.”

“What warehouse?” the vendor asked, confused.

“I don’t know,” J. responded. “Just one that I picture when I think about warehouses.”

“No,” the vendor dismissed, “It’s the grocery store for me. Couldn’t think of a better place to buy stock for your and the grocery store’s vending machines.”

“The grocery store has a vending machine, too?” J. asked.

“Yep,” the vendor confirmed.

“And you stock the grocery store’s vending machine from the grocery store?” J. pursued.

“Yep,” the vendor repeated.

“Don’t you think that’s remarkable?” J. asked.

“Not really,” the vendor began, heading for the bar’s door. “Or, I suppose it might be. I’m not sure,” they concluded as they stepped backwards into the sun.

## CHAPTER 19: PURIFIED WATER

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"You know I can give you water at the bar. It's free," J. said.

"I like getting it from the machine. I don't know if I'd drink any otherwise," L. said.

"Why do you like getting it from the machine?" M. asked.

"I don't know. It's a whole thing when you get it from the machine," L. explained.

"A ritual of sorts?" M. asked.

"I guess," L. said.

"Does it taste different?" J. asked.

"I don't know," L. said looking at the bottle. "It says here that it's purified. Is the bar's water purified?"

"It's filtered," J. shrugged.

"That's not the same," M. said.

"How is it different?" L. asked.

"I don't know. But it's not the same," M. said.

"Should we do a taste test?" J. asked.

"Sure," L. agreed.

J. filled a glass of water from the tap and another from the water bottle. L. turned away so as to not see which was which. The bar settled into the sound of a vending machine humming and water falling over and into itself.

"Ok," J. said.

L. turned back to the bar and took a sip from one of the two glasses.

"What does it taste like?" M. asked.

"Water," L. answered.

"Try the other one," J. prompted.

L. drank from the other glass.

“What does that one taste like?” M. asked.

“Water,” L. answered.

“They taste the same?” M. asked.

“No,” L. answered.

## CHAPTER 20: UNICURSAL

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"Potatoes and olives are both in this aisle?" the customer continued.

"That's right," the grocer said.

"As well as everything else?" the customer asked.

"Yes," the grocer affirmed.

"How can you have just the one aisle?" the customer asked.

"It's all I've needed so far," the grocer said.

"But you can't have just one aisle, you can have zero, or three, at the least," the customer reasoned.

"But if I had three aisles I'd have six, and I don't have the space for six aisles, nevermind twelve," the grocer calculated.

"So everything is just here then, zero functioning as one?" the customer asked.

"I guess so," the grocer replied.

"What if you need to stock more things?" the customer asked.

"It's quite long," the grocer assured.

"Is it full?" the customer asked.

"Not yet," the grocer said.

"What if it was?" the customer asked.

"I'd worry about sales," the grocer joked.

"What if you needed to stock more kinds of things? That needed more shelf space?" the customer asked.

"The aisle could twist or turn some I suppose, to avoid the back wall," the grocer evaluated.

"I can't see the end of it. How long is this aisle, already?" the customer asked.

"It's quite long," the grocer repeated.

“What if I get lost?” the customer asked.

“How could you get lost? It’s one aisle,” the grocer assured.

“I don’t know. What if I do?” the customer asked, unnerved.

“Turn around and return,” the grocer directed.

“Ok. I’ll be back to checkout soon,” the customer said, turning into the aisle to begin shopping.

“Wait!” the grocer cried out.

“Yes?” the customer asked.

“What are you making with potatoes and olives?” the grocer asked.

“They’re for different things,” the customer said.



## CHAPTER 21: WIND

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"Ask me a question," O. said.

"What question?" L. asked.

"I don't know, something better than that," O. said.

"Hm," L. thought.

"Hm," O. said.

"Where do birds go when it's windy?" L. asked.

"I don't know, where do they go?" O. asked.

"I don't know," L. said.

"Oh, I thought you were setting up a joke," O. explained.

"No," L. said.

"Then it's a serious question?" O. asked

"It's serious enough," L. evaluated.

"It's a good one," O. said.

## CHAPTER 22: READINGS

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"I thought I heard you up here," J. hailed while climbing out of the bar's roof access hatch.

"Yes," N. affirmed in a short, bright tone.

"How are today's readings?" J. asked

"Unremarkable," N. called out. "Humidity is at 43%."

"Ah," J. said with genial disinterest.

"Thanks for letting me put this up here, by the way," N. said, looking at an unmoving anemometer.

"Sure, it's just roof space," J. said. "It's nice to have an excuse to come up here, anyway."

"Mm," N. said.

"Do you have any other stations set up?" J. asked, looking at no particular point in the sky.

"Two others," N. answered. "One on top of the grocery store and one on my own roof."

"And you check on each regularly?" J. asked.

"Consistently," N. answered.

"Find anything?" J. asked nonchalantly.

"Not yet," N. answered, taking the chance also to look at no particular point in the sky.

"Well, If you ever need a break, there's a bar nearby," J. offered. "First drink is on the house."

N. gave a small smile and nod while the thought turned over. Looking back at their instruments they replied, "Not yet."

## CHAPTER 23: DREAMS

--

"I don't remember," L. answered. It was a confusing answer but L. didn't feel confused by the explanation.

"How do you know you were dreaming, then?" J. asked, double-checking an order form.

"I felt different when I woke up," L. said.

"Different from what?"

"Different how?"

J. and M. had asked their questions at the same time and looked at each other as L. looked from one to the other. J.waved a hand in a deferent prompt to M.

"Different how?" M. asked again.

"I don't know," L. said, taking a sip of beer before continuing, "When I woke up, I felt like I had gone somewhere."

"Maybe you sleepwalked," J. said.

"What?" L. asked, concerned.

"It means you walked in your sleep," M. clarified.

"I know what it means," L. said. "I don't think I walked in my sleep."

"How would you know?" J. asked.

"You might do it every night," M. offered.

The bar grew still for a moment as each sat thinking of a body moving through sleep.

"But," L. began, movement and sound coming back to the bar, "can you sleepwalk without dreaming?"

## CHAPTER 24: RAT

--

Eyes trained upwards, the rat emerged from behind the dumpster. It moved in tense bursts.

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Noise!

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Shadow!

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.

.

Bread!

## CHAPTER 25: MORE OR LESS

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"It's a vending machine," the grocer said.

"What?" J. asked.

"The thing you're staring at," the grocer explained, ringing up a bag of lemons and putting them next to a comparable bag of limes. "It's a vending machine."

"I know," J. said. "Do you know the person that fills it up buys the soda and water from your store?"

"Sure," the grocer said, ringing up a few jars of olives.

"You do?" J. asked. "Is that strange?"

"Is what strange? Olives?" the grocer asked.

"That he sells your product in your store?" J. clarified.

"He paid for it," the grocer shrugged. "And it's a pretty big purchase to fill that vending machine up, and he owns another machine or two beyond that. I'm happy for the sale."

"Hm," J. evaluated.

"Is it any more odd than you buying your bar ingredients from me?" the grocer asked, gesturing at the lemons, limes, and olives they were placing into bags.

"What do you mean?" J. asked.

"Well, I'm sure you could have these shipped directly to the bar from the same place you order your alcohol and napkins and everything else, couldn't you?" the grocer suggested.

"I guess so," J. considered. "But, it's mostly beer and wine drinkers at the bar; I don't think I'd go through ingredients and garnishes like these fast enough for the amount I'd have to order directly."

"I see. Well, why don't you just buy these with your regular groceries for the week?" the grocer pursued.

"My regular groceries?" J. asked.

"Yeah, your own food," the grocer said.

"I don't know," J. said. "I think I try to keep those things separate."

"Why?" the grocer asked.

"I don't know. To avoid having to unmix them, maybe," J. reasoned.

"I see. Do you live nearby?" the grocer asked.

"I live in the bar," J. answered.

"I see," the grocer said.

"In the same building, anyway," J. added.

"Of course," the grocer said.

"Do you live in this store?" J. asked.

"No, but near enough," the grocer responded.

J. looked out the grocery store's windows in the direction that seemed like where near enough might be. On one window a faded decal of the grocery store's logo converted sunlight into green and yellow patches on the floor.

"Has that logo always been there?" J. asked.

"More or less," the grocer answered.

"Meaning it comes and goes?" J. asked.

"No, I mean it went up after the window did," the grocer said.

"Do things here ever just go?" J. asked, pushing the receipt the grocer handed over into a grocery bag full of lemons, olives, and limes.

"Do things disappear?" the grocer asked. "Sure, an apple here or there. I don't mind much. If I lose something because of a mistake ringing things up or if someone walks out with something I usually make it up in getting an accidental extra item or two in a shipment."

"Does anything else ever go missing? A window?" J. asked, picking up the bag of groceries.

"Oh sure, windows, toilets. It's no big deal. Things seem to work out," the grocer dismissed.

"Hm," J. said "One last thing,"

"Yes?" the grocer asked.

"Your logo - has it always been a duck?" J. asked.

“More or less,” the grocer said, looking at the logo, eyebrows raised in tepid evaluation.

“I see,” J. said, offering thanks and walking out wondering about whether certain things were more more-or-less or less more-or-less and what any of either might mean.

## CHAPTER 26:

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"You know, I don't really think about K. anymore," J. said, after a while.

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## CHAPTER 27:

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“Me neither,” M. agreed.

## **CHAPTER 28: NOTICE**

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The bar's door was missing and a sign was taped to the window:

The bar is closed as its door has disappeared.  
We apologize for the inconvenience.

## CHAPTER 29: BLUE FIELD

--

"It's hard to look at the sky for too long, even with the sun at your back," J. said, gaze returning to N. and the treeline beyond the bar.

"People forget how bright the sun is. You can stand in the shadow of a building and still see just fine," N. reasoned.

"I saw bits of white floating like little satellites or snow," J. said.

"Entoptic phenomenon," N. identified.

"What?" J. asked.

"Your eye is rendering visible some objects within the eye itself," N. defined.

"My eye is seeing itself?" J. asked.

"In a sense," N. offered.

"Hm," J. concluded with a few deliberate blinks before pointing at a few squares on the horizon and asking, "Have those buildings always been there?"

"No, not always," N. said.

J. looked back at N. and the weather station and asked, "How's the air pressure today?"

"Normal," N. replied.

"Has it always been? Today?" J. asked.

"Yes," N. said.

"Hm," J. concluded.

## CHAPTER 30: BREADCRUMBS, TRAIL OF

--

Stale bread in the one hand, crumbs falling in lazy arcs thrown from the other, J. heard movement and approached the dumpster

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breath

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held.

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## CHAPTER 31: POSITIONS

--

"Beer, please," N. said, taking a seat at the bar.

"So, you've figured something out," J. said, pulling on a tap.

"Mm," N. committed.

"Hello N.," M. said.

"Hi," N. replied.

"Hi N." L. said.

"Hello," N. replied.

"What did you figure out?" L. asked as J. handed N. a beer.

"I'm not sure," N. answered.

"You've been up there a while," M. commented.

"Two months," N. confirmed. "Thirty days each up on the roof of the bar or the grocery store, alternating between the two every other day."

"What do you think is coming?" L. asked.

"Hm?" N. asked.

"What are you forecasting?" M. clarified.

"Oh. nothing," N. said.

"Nothing?" M. asked.

"I'm studying readings from each day and comparing them to reports from days before," N. said. "I'm not guessing at what might happen tomorrow."

"You're looking back in time?" L. asked.

"Only as a reference," N. said.

"But yesterday already happened," M. contended.

"I suppose so," N. said, taking a sip of beer.

“So did most of today,” L. offered.

“What difference does that make?” M. asked.

“I don’t know,” L. said. “About a day’s worth, I guess.”

“What are you trying to figure out, N.?” J. broke in.

“Oh, I don’t know anymore. I thought maybe this bar and the grocery store were the same place,” N. replied.

J.’s eyebrows raised in surprise. L. nodded slowly. M.’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

“What do you mean? Geographically?” M. asked.

“Geometrically?” L. asked.

“Neither, and, both,” N. answered.

“I see,” L. lied.

“I don’t,” M. said.

“Yes,” N. agreed.

“You thought my bar was the grocery store, and that it was my bar?” J. asked.

“More or less,” N. said.

“But you’ve been to both,” M. observed.

“Consistently, for two months,” N. agreed.

“What were you measuring?” L. asked.

“Everything,” N. answered, raising a finger to request another beer.

“And?” J. asked, setting down a fresh beer and removing the old glass.

“It was all different,” N. said.

“The bar and the grocery store aren’t that far apart,” L. contemplated. “I would have thought some measurements would be the same.”

“Some were, sometimes” N. acknowledged.

“Then maybe the two places are the same place sometimes,” L. suggested.

"They're two different places," M. said, flatly.

"They do seem different," J. said.

"Very different?" L. asked.

"Not very different, I guess," J. reasoned. "Different enough, though."

"How different is that?" L. asked J.

"What measurements were you expecting?" J. asked N.

"Correlated ones," N. answered. "But there was no pattern at all."

"Maybe it's because you only checked one building or the other each day," M. volunteered.

"Each station was still taking measurements when I wasn't there though," N. answered.

"Maybe you take down measurements differently when you're looking at them," M. continued.

"Maybe," N. sighed.

"Maybe what you needed to measure was something happening at too small a scale to measure," L. consoled.

"Maybe," N. allowed. "But my instruments are pretty precise."

"Or maybe it's too big to measure," J. said. "Maybe the bar and the store are part of a much larger collection of the same building," J. added, imagining a continual warehouse full of bars, grocery stores, and vending machines.

"Many more points in arrangement," N. said with some optimism. "It's possible."

"That's surely it," L. said contently.

M. began to disagree, frowned, nodded, and turned a small-plates menu over to scrutinize the listings on the other side.

J. asked "What about the third station?"

L. and M. refocused their attention. N. surfaced from thought and asked "The one on my roof?"

"Yeah," J. confirmed. "What were its readings like?"

"I only got a few day's worth and those few days of readings were pretty erratic," N. said. "I removed its measurements from the set as outliers."

“What happened after a few days?” M. asked.

“It disappeared.” N. said.

“Disappeared. It was stolen?” J. asked.

“No,” N. said. “I don’t think so, anyway.”

“You should have put bars around it,” L. concluded.



## CHAPTER 32: FORECASTING

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"Will I need an umbrella, tomorrow?"

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"Did it rain yesterday?"

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"The day after?"

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"Did we go outside?"

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## CHAPTER 33: TO CHANGE POSITION OR LOCATION

--

"Do ducks migrate?" J. asked.

"Sure," O. said.

The vending machine hummed, peanut bowls were refilled, drinks were sipped.

"Where do they go?" J. asked.

"South," L. said.

"South where?" J. asked.

"South of here," M. said.

"Why?" J. asked.

"Cold," M. said.

"Food," L. said.

"Warmth," O. said.

"They would freeze," L. said, changing answers.

"They would freeze?" J. asked.

"Their eggs might," M. reasoned.

"That's sad to think about," L. said.

Peanuts shells cracked between fingers, drinks settled in glasses.

"Which one is sad to think about?" O. asked.

"Either," M. said.

"Both," L. said.

"Either or both," O. said and the bar fell back into the vending machine's hum.

## **CHAPTER 34: THE FRONT OPENS UP, YOU FILL THE INSIDE**

--

"What do you mean inside?" the vending machine guy asked.

"I don't know. Inside the machine," the grocer repeated.

"There's no room for a person in there," the vending machine guy said. "It's full of bottles and cans and machine parts."

"It just seems like there's more to it than that," the grocer said.

"Maybe," the vending machine guy admitted. "The vending machine game doesn't really attract people with much in the way of imagination."

"Listen to that thing hum," the grocer said, not listening. "What else do you think that thing could be?"

"It's a vending machine," the vending machine guy said.

"It's a sound repeating itself," the grocer said.

"It vends soda," the vending machine guy concluded.

## CHAPTER 35: IN THE WALLS

--

"Do you think there could be rats in the walls of the bar?" J. asked.

L. choked on a sip of beer and O. replied, "Rats? In the walls?"

"Mm," J. said.

"You shouldn't ask your customers if there are rats in the walls," O. said.

"I don't like rats. Why would there be rats in the walls?" L. asked.

"I don't know. I saw one by the dumpster," J. said.

"Well there you go," O. said, centering a wine glass on a napkin turned coaster.

"There I go what?" J. asked.

"*Where*," L. corrected.

"Where what?" J. asked.

"There I go *where*," L. said.

"If the rat was by the dumpster, then it's not in the wall." O. concluded.

"Hm," J. said, unconvinced.

"Well, there you are," L. said, relieved.

## CHAPTER 36: STATES

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“Do you think this place really could be another place?”

.

“Or, any of a thousand others?”

.

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“All of a thousand others?”

.

.

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“Yes.”

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.

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“Well ... ”

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“You don’t know?”

.

“No.”

## **CHAPTER 37: ROMAN EGYPT, 1 A.D.**

--

There is a box outside of a temple.

There is a slot cut into the box.

When a coin is deposited into the slot the coin falls onto a lever.

The coin acts as a weight, pushing the other side of the lever up, like a seesaw.

The lever is connected to a plug.

The plug is stopping the flow of liquid in a container.

As the lever lifts upward, the plug comes away from the container's opening, allowing its contents to flow.

The coin slips downwards until it falls off one end of the lever.

This change in weight returns the lever to its original position.

This puts the plug back in place.

There is a box outside of a temple.

There are hands with open palms in front of a box outside of a temple.

There is holy water spilling into the hands with open palms in front of a box outside of a temple.

There are relative positions of fulcrum, effort, and resistance.

There are hands and a coin.

There are forces at work.

There is a vending machine.

**CHAPTER 38:**  
**LOSS OF COHERENCE**

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What would it mean to be in  
another place?

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## **CHAPTER 39: NAVEL-GAZING**

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"Did you know the circumference of an orange is infinite?" the grocer asked the couple buying fruit, holding up one of the oranges for a moment before placing it in their shopping bag. The couple smiled politely at the grocer, at each other.

"And think about how many oranges I have!" the grocer said, full of joy.



## **CHAPTER 40: TRAVEL**

--

A car drove along a winding shore road, the sea air whipping in through open windows. The sun was bright and the sky was empty and the world felt like one big lightbulb.

In the passenger seat, the seatbelt fastened, was a hobbyist's weather station.

## CHAPTER 41: REUNION

--

"It just appeared?" J. asked.

"I guess so," K. said, looking at the weather station set on the floor in line with the bar stools. "It wasn't there before, anyway, and then, it was."

"N. will be glad to know it's back," J. said before letting a few more thoughts turn over. "Or, maybe not. This is a pretty big outlier. How did you know to bring it here, anyway?"

"An address of somewhere in this town is written on its underside," K said.

"You really looked this thing over," J. said.

"Sure," K. replied, "It's not everyday a weather station appears in your bedroom."

"I guess not," J. said. "Will you stay for another drink?"

"Sure," K. replied. "It's not everyday I appear with a weather station."

CHAPTER 42:  
DILEMMA

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Which

.

froze

.

first

.

.

the duck

or

the egg?

## CHAPTER 43: A DRINK

--

"K! You're back," L. said.

"Just visiting," K. said.

"For how long?" L. asked.

"For just this visit," K. said.

"Where are you living, these days?" M. asked.

"I didn't move all that far. The town I live in is about the size of this one, more or less," K. evaluated.

"What is the town like?" M. pursued.

"It's quiet enough, busy enough. It's right on the coast. It's got a bar and a grocery store," K. said.

"Maybe I'll head down there some time," J. said.

"Living near the coast sounds nice," M. offered.

"Sometimes," L. began, "especially if it's raining, I pretend the rushing pass of cars is the sound of waves breaking. Are you near enough the coast to hear the surf?"

"I am," K. said.

"What does it sound like?" L. asked.

"Like the rushing pass of cars," K. replied.

## **CHAPTER 44:**

### **SIGN**

--

"You put a sign above the aisle," the customer noticed.

"Yes," the grocer said.

"Why?" the customer asked.

"For the convenience of my customers," the grocer answered.

## CHAPTER 45: DIRECTION

--

"Can I ask you a question?" J. asked.

"Sure," N. said, interested.

"Which way is south?" J. asked.

"That's not an interesting question," N. said, disappointed.

"I guess not," J. admitted.

"South of where?" N. asked.

"Of here," J. said.

N. took a sip of beer, stood up, and looked around the bar at something that wasn't there or couldn't be seen, rotating slowly and stopping, facing a wall where J. thought a window had gone missing.

"There," N. said. "Well, from there to there, I suppose" N. added, bisecting the bar into two hemispheres and expanding how much of the bar could be considered southerly. "Well, and also that way, eventually," N. concluded, waving a hand at the rest of the bar.

"I see," J. said.

## CHAPTER 46: HERE

--

"I'm thinking of going to out where K. is," J. said.

"A visit?" L. asked.

"What for?" M. asked.

"To see K.," L. suggested.

"K. just visited," M. countered.

"The sea sounds nice," J. answered.

"It does sound nice," L. said.

"It's all the same," M. dismissed.

"How so?" L. asked.

"There's a bar, a grocery store, people— you heard what K. said," M. explained.

"There's no sea here," L. proposed.

"We're in a bar," M. said. "What is a slider?" M. asked, putting down the small-plates menu.

"Hamburger," J. answered.

"Then why not call it a hamburger?" M. asked.

"It's different," L. said.

"How?" M. asked.

"Smaller," J. answered.

"Smaller isn't different," M. said.

"Isn't it? Is it?" L. asked each of them.

"Not really; sort of. I think the sea is nice. I'm going to go," J. said.

"I don't think you will," M. said.

"You're very, what is the word, contrarian today," L. said to M.

"No I'm not," M. countered.

"Why won't I go?" J. asked.

"Because you're here," M. said.

"Where?" J. asked, confused.

"This bar, this town, this, well, this," M. listed.

"I don't know; I choose to be here," J. said.

"That's what I said," M. concluded.

"How many sliders do you get in an order?" L. asked.

"A hamburger's worth," J. said.



## **CHAPTER 47: LOCAL PHENOMENA**

--

"Nice weather, huh?" L. called over to N.

"What?" N. asked, surfacing from thought or daydream.

"I said 'nice weather'," L. explained.

N. looked around the bar, at things that weren't there. N. looked at L. and with narrowed eyes asked, "In the bar?"

"What?" L. asked.

"Nice weather in the bar?" N. asked.

L. blinked in surprise and replied, "Outside of it."

## CHAPTER 48: ZERO FACTORIAL

--

"A beer please, bartender," the grocer said approaching the bar.

"Sure thing," J. said. "We were just talking about you."

"We?" the grocer asked, looking down the bar to the seat occupied by another customer.  
"Oh— you! I'll never escape you."

"I've been thinking about the grocery store aisle some more," the customer said.

"I'm sure you have," the grocer replied.

"The problem is one of arrangement," the customer said.

"I just sell groceries," the grocer said.

"Do you want to get rid of the aisles in your store or not?" the customer asked.

"I thought you wanted me to add more aisles?" the grocer said.

"You said that you wouldn't so I thought in the other direction," the customer said.

"You thought in the other direction?" the grocer repeated.

"Instead of adding more aisles you could remove them," the customer explained.

"I did do that," the grocer said.

"But you left one," the customer said.

"But you said I have to have one aisle, as no aisle is still an aisle," the grocer said, flustered.

"Right, zero as one," the customer said.

"One as zero," the grocer affirmed.

"But that's not really zero. That's the problem," the customer said.

"What's the problem?" the grocer asked, concerned.

"The problem is you've arranged a set with nothing in it," the customer explained.

"I have?" the grocer asked.

“You have,” the customer said.

“What do I do?” the grocer asked.

“You have to get rid of the set,” the customer said.

“Get rid of the set?” the grocer asked.

“True zero,” the customer said with satisfaction.

“What does that mean?” the grocer asked.

“What does it mean?” the customer asked.

“Yes, practically,” the grocer said.

“Oh what does it practically mean,” the customer mused.

“Mm,” the grocer affirmed.

“Well, you’ll have to get rid of the grocery store,” the customer concluded.

“I will?” the grocer asked.

“Yep,” the customer said.

“What will I do?” the grocer asked.

“Whatever you want. The store will be completely efficient,” the customer said.

“I could go to the sea, I guess,” the grocer said, a little bemused.

The bar fell into the steady hum of the vending machine exhaust fan for a few moments as everyone focused on their thoughts and drinks.

“Where will I buy food?” J. asked.

## CHAPTER 49: PROJECTIONS

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"You can't know the future, not really, anyway."

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"You can tell the way things are heading."

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"How?"

"By looking at where they've been,

.

and where they've been before that."

.

"Looking back, ahead?"

.

"Looking at trajectories of objects in space."

"Weather patterns."

"Conversations?"

"Sure."

"Thoughts?"

"Hm."

"Hm."

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“How can you determine an object’s heading?”

.

“How fast is it moving?”

.

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“When?”

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“Thoughts?”

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“Hm.”

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“Hm.”

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## CHAPTER 50: WHAT DO YOU MEAN

--

"Everything is gone alright," M. said, peering into the window of the one wall that remained of the bar. "I think that's the most that has gone missing, yet."

"Do you think it will come back?" L. asked.

"Hm," M. evaluated.

"What do you make of it?" L. asked, looking at the wall of the bar, at the sky.

"What?" M. asked.

"All of it, I guess. Where things are connected. Where they're not," L. said.

"I don't think it means anything," M. said.

"It has to mean something," L. said.

"If you say so," M. said.

"Hm," L. evaluated.

"Where will we drink?" M. asked.

"I hear the grocery store started selling beer," L. said.

"That's convenient," M. said.

"Yeah, I suppose it is," L. said. "Well, I'll see you around, then."

"Where?" M. asked.

## CHAPTER 51: SPATIAL ORIENTATION WITH RESPECT TO VISUAL INPUT

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"What happens if you fall in space?"

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"In what direction?"

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"Any."

"All."

"None?"

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"Like along a circle?"

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"Sort of."

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"Are my eyes open?"

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"Sure."

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"Am I alive?"

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"Sure."

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.

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"In what direction?"

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## CHAPTER 52: OBSERVABLE

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J. listened carefully, hearing what sounded like waves.

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On one side of the road there was a grocery store, on the other, a bar.

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J. looked hard, trying to place the sea.

## **CHAPTER 53: NOTICE**

--

There was a window. In the window there was a sign:

The bar is not open because it is closed.

## CHAPTER 54: PERSPECTIVE

--

"At a certain distance

.

the thing being looked at can be seen."

.

"What's looking?

At what?"

.

"Well, to look at what is doing the looking, the distance required can be

considerable."

.

"I see."

.

"There are constants and variables."

.

"Like what?"

.

"How bright is sunlight?"

"How fast

can it travel?"

"How long is a lifetime?

How fast does it go?"

## CHAPTER 55: WHEN?

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"How long have we been sitting here?" L. asked.

"I'm not sure," O. said.

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"It's 12:10, now," M. said.

"So for a bit," L. said.

"And some time before," O. concluded.

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"But for how much longer before?" L. asked.

"Tonight?" O. asked.

"Tonight, and before that," L. said.

"Quite some time before that," M. said.

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"But how much time before that," L. asked.

"I'm not sure," O. said.

"It's hard to know exactly," M. agreed.

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"Let's work from the time we do know to find the beginning," L. said.

"Work from when?" O. asked.

"From 12:10," L. said.

"It's some time past that already, though," M. said.

"I guess so," L. said.

"Let's just count back from now then," O. said.

"Now isn't current enough," M. said.

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"Let's work back from the end, then," L. said.

"From what's to come?" M. asked.

"From where?" O. asked.

"The end," L. said.

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