

Change Without Notice

A Novel

Brian Edwards

First Edition

December 27, 2025

Waco, Texas, USA

Copyright

Copyright 2025 Brian Edwards

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the author.

Contact

Brian Edwards brian.mabry.edwards@gmail.com 512-584-6841
Waco, Texas, USA

Contents

1. Chapter One (Worlds 1-15)
2. Chapter Two (Worlds 16-30)
3. Chapter Three (Worlds 31-50)
4. Chapter Four (Worlds 51-75)
5. Chapter Five (Worlds 76-100)
6. Chapter Six (Worlds 101-125)
7. Chapter Seven (Worlds 126-150)
8. Chapter Eight (Worlds 151-175)
9. Chapter Nine (Worlds 176-200)
10. Chapter Ten (Worlds 201-225)
11. Chapter Eleven (Worlds 226-250)
12. Chapter Twelve (Worlds 251-275)
13. Chapter Thirteen (Worlds 276-300)
14. Chapter Fourteen (Worlds 301-326)

Chapter One

Page 1

The tribunal had been in session for three hours, and they were still waiting for him to explain why he had married outside his caste.

The chair had been worn smooth by decades of defendants. K. sat in it now, shifting the way they must have shifted, sweating where they had sweated. Old paper, floor polish, something institutional—the smell of buildings that existed to process people. Fluorescent hum. A water stain on the ceiling tiles, yellowed at the edges.

His spouse of twelve years sat across the room. A stranger. She had dark hair, gray at the temples, and she wore a blue dress that looked like it had been chosen carefully for this occasion. She didn't look at him. She looked at her hands, folded in her lap, and occasionally at the tribunal members, three of them, seated behind a long table covered with documents.

"Mr. K," the center tribunal member said. She was perhaps sixty, with reading glasses pushed up onto her forehead. "We have been patient. The documentation is clear. You knew when you married that inter-caste unions require special dispensation. You did not apply for dispensation. You have been married for twelve years without dispensation. This is not a minor administrative oversight."

Three hours of nodding. Agreement seemed safer than confusion. But he was confused—deeply, thoroughly confused—because he did not remember this marriage. No wedding. No courtship. No first meeting. No life with this woman who, according to the documents, had shared his bed and meals and presumably his confidences for twelve years.

"What we need to understand," the tribunal member continued, "is why. Why did you choose to violate the caste protocols? Was it a political statement? Ideological opposition to the caste system itself? We're prepared to be understanding if you help us understand."

The woman across the room—his wife, he reminded himself, his wife—looked up at this. Her eyes met his for the first time. There was something in them. Not anger. Not accusation. Something more complicated. Something that suggested she was waiting for an answer too.

K. opened his mouth. Three hours of sitting and nodding and his throat was dry, his lips were dry, everything was dry.

"I loved her," he said, because it seemed like the thing someone would say in this situation, and because he had no other answer to give.

The tribunal members exchanged glances. His wife looked back down at her hands. One of the tribunal members made a note.

"Love," the center member said. "Yes. We've heard that before."

Page 2

His profession had been automated six months ago—not just his job, his entire profession—and now K. was learning to be a "Human Presence Consultant" for lonely algorithms.

The retraining center occupied what had been a shopping mall. Anchor store: now Assessment Hall C. Food court: subdivided into Competency Stations with plastic dividers and fluorescent bright-

ness. Station 7, where K. sat, was positioned near what had been a Cinnabon. The ghost of sweetness still haunted the ventilation, a phantom sugar smell that turned his stomach.

Twenty-three years of skills, rendered irrelevant by an algorithm. They had explained this with charts and graphs and a video featuring former professionals who had successfully transitioned. The video had been reassuring. K. had not been reassured.

The certification exam was tomorrow. He had studied the materials, or tried to study them, but the materials assumed a baseline familiarity with concepts he had never encountered. Emotional bandwidth. Parasocial calibration. The ethics of artificial attachment. There were practice questions at the end of each module, and he had failed most of them, not because the answers were difficult but because he couldn't parse what the questions were asking.

"The key," his instructor had told him during the orientation session, "is to remember that the algorithms aren't looking for solutions. They're looking for presence. They want to know someone is there. They want to feel less alone."

"Do algorithms feel lonely?" he had asked.

The instructor smiled the patient smile of someone who had heard this before. "They process isolation metrics. Whether that constitutes feeling is above my pay grade. Your job is to be detected."

Tomorrow: the exam. Failure meant recycling into a different track—Basic Infrastructure Support, maybe, or Manual Verification Services. The materials didn't specify what happened to people who failed those tracks too.

Module 7: Appropriate Response Protocols When an Algorithm Expresses Existential Uncertainty. Question one: identify the correct empathetic response to a system reporting it could not determine whether its outputs had meaning.

Options A through D. All reasonable. All wrong.

Page 3

Three happiness units short for the quarter, and the auditor arrived thirteen minutes early—a documented technique, catching people before they could compose themselves into the required positivity range.

The apartment was clean. Cleanliness correlated with contentment metrics. Fresh flowers on the table, though not too fresh—excessive freshness indicated anxiety, the desperate performance of wellness. Four days old. Slightly wilted. Lived-with.

"Mr. K.," the auditor said. She was young, probably early thirties, with a tablet and a manner that suggested she had been doing this long enough to be efficient but not long enough to be tired.
"Thank you for making time."

"Of course," K. said, and smiled. Smiling was mandatory. Perform it till you embody it.

"Standard assessment," the auditor said, settling into the designated chair. "Nothing invasive. We're here to help. If you're running a deficit, we want to understand why."

"Walk me through a typical day."

He walked her through it. Alarm at 6:15. Lukewarm shower—hot indicated self-indulgence. Breakfast of whole grains and fruit, photographed for his wellness log. Approved podcasts during commute. Mandatory smile breaks at work. Evening hobbies from the pre-approved list.

"And where do you think the deficit is coming from?" the auditor asked, when he had finished.

The honest answer: he did everything right and it still wasn't enough. The act of maintaining happiness was exhausting, and the exhaustion dragged on the very metrics he was trying to improve.

"I think I might be trying too hard," he said.

"Effortful happiness. Very common." She made a note. "Have you considered our Spontaneous Joy workshop series?"

The audit was in an hour. No—the audit was now. This was the audit. His confusion about the timeline was probably being noted too.

Page 4

The pressure outside would kill a mammal. K. knew this the way he knew his own name—automatically, embedded so deep it felt like instinct. The surface world was myth. Air-breathers were stories told to children, like dragons or democracy.

His apartment: 40th depth. Good location. Not too shallow, where bioluminescent farms polluted sleep. Not too deep, where pressure differentials caused headaches and occasional structural failures. Reasonable rent. Quiet neighbors. Gentle current outside the windows, though storm season approached.

He had gills. Had always had gills. Couldn't remember breathing through mouth and nose instead of the delicate filaments on either side of his neck.

And yet—he remembered something. Air. The way it felt to inhale deeply, to fill lungs he no longer had with something lighter than water. A place with no ceiling, no walls, just openness extending forever. Breathing in. The breath going on and on, expanding his chest until he might float away.

He mentioned this to his doctor during his annual depth-adjustment checkup.

"Surface dreams," the doctor said. "Very common." Her fingers were cool against his neck, checking gill function. "Some people dream of flying. Some people dream of breathing air. The desire to transcend our limitations."

"It felt like a memory."

"Dreams often do." She made a note. "Your gill function is excellent, by the way."

K. took the current-lift home. Bioluminescent markers sliding past. Pressure settling like a blanket. In his apartment, he put his hand on his neck, felt the gills open and close, water cycling through him.

He tried to remember what air had felt like. Couldn't. He could remember remembering it—but that was a memory of a memory, which might not be a memory at all.

Page 5

The timestamp on his wrist: 2 years, 3 months, 14 days, 7 hours, 22 minutes. Before he paid the rent, it had read 2 years, 11 months.

Eight months gone. Currency was time—not metaphorically, literally. Lifespan measured to the minute, transferred through chips embedded at birth. Buy something, lose time. Sell something, gain it. The economy ran on mortality.

The apartment was nice, though. Spacious. Good light. A view of the temporal district, where banks glittered with accumulated time—years and decades stockpiled in vaults. Some people had so much they'd stopped aging entirely. Most people counted their remaining days on wrist displays that ticked down like bombs.

Two years, three months remaining.

"Cost of living," the landlord had said about the increase. Old phrase. It meant something different now: the cost of continuing to live. The price extracted for each additional day you insisted on existing.

The math: at his current income—temporal arbitrage, buying low-value minutes from the desperate and selling them to the anxious—he could cover expenses for eighteen months. After that, the numbers stopped working.

Options existed. Sell non-essential experiences: memories, sensations, the capacity to taste sweetness. People did that, sold pieces of themselves to buy more time, then spent the purchased days in a diminished state, unable to fully experience what they'd paid for.

Or accept it. The number would reach zero eventually. Everyone's did. The wealthy just reached it later.

He looked at his wrist. 2 years, 3 months, 14 days, 7 hours, 21 minutes. The seconds counting down. Always counting down.

Page 6

The interviewer had been scrolling through her tablet for several minutes. K. sat in the ergonomic chair—designed, he suspected, to keep candidates slightly uncomfortable.

"Your background is impressive," she said finally. "But I'm not seeing any grief architecture experience."

He nodded. Nodding bought time.

"Grief architecture," he repeated. "Could you tell me more about what that involves?"

"Mr. K., grief architecture is the core competency. It's in the job title. Senior Grief Architect. It was in the posting. It was in the pre-screening questionnaire."

He tried to remember applying for this job. He was wearing interview clothes—his good suit—so he must have prepared. Must have intended to be here.

"Of course," he said. "I'm wondering how your organization defines it. There are so many frameworks."

"We take a humanistic approach. Traditional grief architecture focuses on structural elements—stages, timelines, expected trajectories. We're more interested in the experiential space. When someone comes to us with loss, we build them an environment where grief can take whatever shape it needs."

The words made sense individually. Together, they formed professional poetry—meaning something without communicating anything specific.

"That resonates with me," he said.

"Does it? Tell me about a time you designed a grief space for a client."

He opened his mouth. Closed it. All the jobs he had held, all the skills accumulated—none involved grief or architecture. He had been a bureaucrat once. A consultant. Something in an office, doing something with numbers or documents.

"I'd prefer to demonstrate rather than describe," he said. "If you have a sample case."

The interviewer made a note. The interview continued.

Page 7

Everyone had offered condolences. That was the word for it—condolences—and K. had accepted them the way you accept unwanted gifts, with gratitude that was performed rather than felt, with thank-yous that were obligations rather than expressions.

His spouse had died in the war.

Everyone knew which war. He had figured this out from context, from the way people mentioned it without specification, the way they said "the war" as if there had only ever been one. The war had ended three years ago, or maybe five years ago, or maybe it was still going on in some technical sense that he didn't understand. The war had taken many spouses, many partners, many children and parents and friends. The war had created a whole vocabulary of loss that people used fluently, reflexively, the way they used any common language.

K. did not know which war.

He did not remember a spouse. He did not remember a wedding or a marriage or a shared life that had been interrupted by conscription or deployment or whatever the war had required. He lived alone in an apartment that showed no signs of having ever contained another person—no photographs, no extra toothbrush, no clothes in the closet that weren't his own size. And yet people kept offering condolences, kept asking how he was managing, kept suggesting grief counselors and support groups and the particular casseroles that were, apparently, traditional to bring to the bereaved.

The condolences had become suspicious now. He could see it in their faces, the neighbors and colleagues and distant acquaintances who had been so kind in the immediate aftermath. They were starting to notice that his eyes were dry. They were starting to wonder why he never spoke of the deceased. They were start-

ing to exchange glances when he failed to recognize the name that must have been his spouse's name, the name that everyone else seemed to know.

"How are you holding up?" his supervisor asked, during their weekly check-in. "Really, I mean. Behind the brave face."

K. tried to arrange his features into something that looked like a brave face concealing deeper pain. "Some days are harder than others," he said, because this seemed like the kind of thing a grieving person would say.

His supervisor nodded sympathetically. "Mira was a remarkable person," she said. "We all miss her."

Mira. The name landed like a stone in water. Mira had been his spouse. Mira had died in the war. Mira had been remarkable, apparently, and everyone missed her. K. searched his memory for any trace of a Mira—any face, any voice, any moment of intimacy or domestic routine—and found nothing.

"Thank you," he said. "That means a lot."

His supervisor's expression flickered. Something had been wrong with his response. The gratitude was too clean, maybe, too uncomplicated by the messy emotions that grief was supposed to produce. He could see her recategorizing him, adjusting her assessment, filing away this interaction as evidence of something.

He went back to his desk and tried to remember what Mira had looked like. He couldn't. He tried to feel sad about this, and couldn't do that either.

Page 8

Adults did not use words. K. knew this the way he knew his own name, the way he knew the smell of the office and the route to his apartment and all the other things that constituted the furniture of his life. Words were crude. Words were imprecise. Words were what you used with children, patiently, condescendingly, the way you used training wheels or picture books—helpful for beginners, embarrassing for anyone who had developed past the elementary stages.

Adults communicated through pheromone secretion. The glands were located behind the ears, and they produced a complex chemical vocabulary that could express ideas and emotions and nuances that words could never capture. Fluent secretors could convey in a single aromatic burst what would take paragraphs to say verbally. The most sophisticated conversations happened entirely in scent, entire arguments and reconciliations and collaborative problem-solving sessions conducted through the nose rather than the ears.

K. could not smell what he was saying.

He hadn't always been anosmic. The condition had developed gradually, starting with the loss of subtle distinctions—the difference between agreement and reluctant acquiescence, the shading between affection and mere friendliness—and progressing to total olfactory blindness. Now when he secreted, he secreted into a void. He had no idea what message his glands were producing. For all he knew, he could be saying something deeply offensive, something embarrassing, something that contradicted his intentions entirely.

The reactions he got suggested this was often the case.

"We need to talk," his coworker said at the morning meeting, using the childish words that indicated serious concern. She was being kind. She was lowering herself to his level, the way you would speak slowly and clearly to a foreigner or a person with cognitive difficulties.

"I know," K. said. Speaking felt strange in his mouth, clumsy, the vocal cords engaged in work they weren't designed for. "I've been trying to get treatment."

"What you said in the presentation yesterday—" She stopped. Her nose wrinkled slightly, picking up whatever his glands were producing now, the chemical commentary that accompanied his verbal statement. "You're doing it again."

"I'm sorry. I don't know what I'm—"

"You really can't smell it?"

He shook his head. The gesture felt inadequate, a physical movement substituting for the rich chemical language he could no longer access.

His coworker's expression shifted through something complicated. Sympathy, maybe. Revulsion. The kind of discomfort that came from interacting with someone whose communication was fundamentally broken. She secreted something—he could see the slight movement of the glands behind her ears—but whatever she was saying, whatever she was really saying, remained invisible to him.

He was speaking a language he couldn't hear. And apparently, based on everyone's reactions, he was saying things he shouldn't be saying.

Page 9

The teenager was standing in the kitchen when K. came home, and the teenager was making pasta, and the teenager looked up from the boiling water and said "Hey Dad" with the casual familiarity of someone who had said this thousands of times before.

K. stood in the doorway. The keys were still in his hand.

"I made enough for both of us," the teenager said. "Mom called and said she's working late again, so it's just us tonight."

The teenager had dark hair and K.'s nose and a way of standing that looked learned from someone, inherited from someone. The kitchen was full of ordinary things—spices in a rack, a calendar on the wall with appointments and reminders, photographs held by magnets on the refrigerator. One of the photographs showed K. with his arm around the teenager, both of them squinting into the sun at what looked like a beach, both of them smiling.

K. did not remember the beach. He did not remember the photograph. He did not remember the teenager.

"Look at this," the teenager said, pulling a phone from a pocket, scrolling to something. "From last summer. Remember when you tried to build that sandcastle and the wave got it? You were so mad."

The phone showed a video. K. was in the video. He was younger—no, not younger, the same age, it was only last summer. He was standing in shallow water and a wave was coming and a sandcastle was disintegrating and the K. in the video was laughing, actually laughing, the kind of laugh that came from the belly, the kind of laugh that K. couldn't remember ever producing.

"Yeah," K. said. "That was something."

The teenager looked at him. The teenager's face expected recognition, expected shared memory, expected the easy intimacy of parent and child who had built years of experiences together. Din-

ner was getting cold. The pasta was ready. The kitchen smelled like garlic and olive oil and the particular warmth of a home that was lived in, that was loved.

"You okay, Dad?" the teenager asked.

K. put his keys in the bowl by the door, the bowl that apparently existed for this purpose, the bowl he had no memory of buying or placing or using before. He hung up his coat on the hook that was at exactly the right height for him. He took his place at the table, in the chair that must have been his chair, across from the plate that must have been his plate.

"Long day," he said. "Tell me about yours."

The teenager talked. K. listened, or tried to listen, but mostly he watched this person who was apparently his child, trying to find something in that face that he recognized, some echo or trace of memory that would make this real. The pasta was good. He couldn't remember who had taught the teenager to cook.

Page 10

The elderly were infants here, and the young were ancient, and K. was exactly middle-aged in both directions, which meant he belonged nowhere.

He understood the basic mechanics of it. Time flowed differently. Aging reversed or inverted or rotated along some axis he couldn't visualize. People were born old, wrinkled and wise and tired, and they grew younger as the years passed, their skin smoothing and their energy increasing until finally, at the end of a long and backward life, they achieved infancy—small and helpless and perfect, revered and protected, the most sacred members of the community.

The toddlers who crawled through the park were actually ancient, ninety or a hundred years into their reverse journey, approaching the final transformation into newborns. The teenagers who seemed so vibrant and clueless were middle-aged, with decades of un-aging behind them and decades of un-aging ahead. The gray-haired professionals who ran the offices and made the decisions were the young adults, just starting out, still learning how the world worked.

And K. was stuck in the middle. Not young enough to be taken seriously by the wise infants and their caretakers. Not old enough to relate to the energetic seniors who were still figuring out their purpose. The census forms didn't have a category for him. The social structures weren't designed for someone whose age moved in both directions simultaneously, or in neither direction, or in some direction that hadn't been named yet.

"It's a rare condition," his doctor said. "Temporal ambiguity. We see maybe one or two cases a decade."

"Is there a treatment?"

"That depends on what you want." The doctor was young—seventy or eighty, K. estimated, still full of the enthusiasm that came with advanced age. "We could try to shift you into one trajectory or the other. Commit you to forward aging or backward aging, stabilize the process. But there are risks. And there's something to be said for your current state. You have perspective that most people lack."

"I have nothing," K. said. "I don't fit anywhere."

The doctor nodded. The doctor had heard this before, from the handful of other temporal ambiguates who had sat in this office and tried to explain the particular loneliness of being unstuck in time.

"The support group meets on Thursdays," she said. "It might help to talk to others in your situation."

K. went to the support group once. There were four other people there, all of them middle-aged in both directions, all of them struggling with the same disorientation. They shared stories. They acknowledged each other's existence. They confirmed that the problem was real, that they weren't imagining it.

It didn't help. Shared loneliness was still loneliness.

Page 11

Everyone could read minds. K. had known this forever, since before he could remember, the way he knew gravity pulled down and water was wet. Telepathy was as ordinary as breathing. You thought things, and other people heard them, and the whole of society was structured around this fundamental permeability of consciousness.

But you were supposed to filter. You were supposed to control what you broadcast and what you kept private. There were techniques learned in childhood, walls and barriers and selective channeling, ways of directing your thoughts toward specific recipients and away from others. Uncontrolled broadcasting was rude at best, assault at worst—the mental equivalent of screaming in someone's ear or exposing yourself in public.

K. couldn't stop broadcasting.

He had tried the techniques. He had taken the remedial courses. He had seen specialists who had tried medication, therapy, surgical intervention, experimental treatments that had left him disoriented for weeks. Nothing worked. His mind was a sieve, leaking constantly, every thought escaping into the shared psychic space where everyone could hear it.

His thoughts were obscene graffiti on the walls of other people's consciousness.

He knew this because they told him. Not verbally—verbal communication was reserved for children and the telepathically impaired—but through the reactions he got, the flinches and the averted eyes and the sudden excuses to be elsewhere. He knew it from the formal complaints that had accumulated in his employee file. He knew it from the restraining orders that prevented him from approaching certain public spaces where his uncontrolled transmissions had caused documented harm.

Today he was thinking about lunch. That was all—just lunch, what he might eat, whether the cafeteria would have the soup he liked. But the thought came with associations, memories, tangents that spiraled off in every direction. The soup led to a memory of his mother making soup, which led to a complicated knot of feelings about his mother, which led to thoughts he didn't want anyone to hear, thoughts he barely wanted to admit to himself.

The woman next to him on the transit platform edged away. She was trying to be subtle about it, pretending to check her phone, but he could see the tightening around her eyes, the way her shoulders hunched as if protecting herself from something.

"I'm sorry," he said, out loud, using words like an animal.

She didn't respond. She got on a different car when the train arrived, and K. stood alone on the platform, waiting for the next one, trying desperately to think about nothing.

He thought about trying to think about nothing. He thought about how thinking about nothing was itself a thought. He thought about how everyone within range was probably hearing this meta-spiral of self-consciousness.

The platform was empty by the time his train came. Everyone had found somewhere else to be.

Page 12

The congratulations had started arriving before he got to the office. Text messages, voice mails, a card signed by the entire department. Someone had put balloons on his desk—silver and gold, the colors reserved for significant professional achievements. His supervisor had scheduled a meeting to discuss "the exciting new chapter."

K. had been promoted.

The new title was Senior Director of Temporal Arbitrage, which was a significant step up from his previous role, which had been something he couldn't quite remember now. The promotion came with a 40% salary increase, an office with a window, access to the executive parking garage. It came with expectations.

"We're thrilled to have you leading the temporal team," his supervisor said. "Your track record with arbitrage is exactly what we need right now. Market volatility, regulatory changes, you know how it is. We need someone who can navigate the complexity."

K. nodded. Nodding felt like the right response.

"The board meeting is Monday," his supervisor continued. "They'll want to hear your strategy for Q3. The preliminary numbers you sent looked promising, but they're going to want details. Projections. The kind of deep analysis you're known for."

K. had not sent preliminary numbers. K. had no strategy for Q3. K. had no idea what temporal arbitrage involved in any practical sense—he knew the phrase, knew it described some kind of work, but the actual mechanics of it, the skills required, the knowledge base assumed, all of this was missing.

"I'll have something ready," he said.

"I know you will." His supervisor smiled the smile of confidence, of trust earned through years of excellent performance. "That's why we promoted you. You always deliver."

K. went to his new office. It was larger than his previous office, which he couldn't quite picture anymore. The window looked out on the city, the temporal district glittering in the distance. On his desk, among the balloons, was a folder labeled "Q3 Strategy - Draft" in what appeared to be his own handwriting.

He opened the folder. Inside were pages of analysis, projections, strategic recommendations. The handwriting was definitely his. The signature at the bottom was definitely his. But he had no memory of writing any of it, no understanding of what the numbers meant, no idea whether the strategy made sense or was complete nonsense dressed up in professional formatting.

He reports Monday. The board would want details. He had four days to become the person who had apparently earned this promotion.

Page 13

His species had evolved as apex predators. He knew this from biology class, from documentaries, from the particular shape of his teeth and the placement of his eyes and all the other anatomical evidence that pointed to millions of years of hunting, killing, consuming. His ancestors had been carnivores, and their ancestors before them, and the entire arc of evolution had been shaped by the pursuit and capture of prey.

K. was a vegetarian.

Not by choice—not originally. As a child, he had eaten meat like everyone else, participated in the ritualized hunts that marked major holidays, learned the traditional butchering techniques that were passed down through generations. But something had changed, somewhere along the way. The taste had started to

bother him. The texture. The knowledge of what he was eating, where it had come from, what it had experienced before ending up on his plate.

He stopped eating meat. It wasn't a political statement or an ethical position—not at first. It was just a preference, a personal choice, the kind of thing that shouldn't matter to anyone except himself.

But his species didn't see it that way.

"Apex denial syndrome," the psychiatrist said, reviewing his file. "We see it sometimes. A rejection of the predator identity. It's treatable."

"I don't think I need treatment," K. said. "I just don't want to eat meat."

The psychiatrist made a note. "The refusal to acknowledge the problem is part of the problem. Classic ADS presentation. Have you experienced any other symptoms? Feelings of guilt about your evolutionary heritage? Identification with prey species? Dreams about grazing?"

K. had not had dreams about grazing. But he had felt guilt, sometimes, watching the hunts, seeing the fear in the prey's eyes before the kill. He had wondered what it felt like to be caught, to be consumed, to know that your purpose in the ecosystem was to nourish something higher on the food chain.

"The treatment is straightforward," the psychiatrist said. "Immersion therapy. We reintroduce you to your predator nature gradually. Most patients show significant improvement within twelve to sixteen weeks."

"And if I refuse treatment?"

The psychiatrist's expression shifted. Something complicated moved behind her eyes. "Refusal isn't really an option, Mr. K. ADS is classified as a public health concern. Untreated apex denial can lead to social dysfunction, reproductive failure, and in extreme cases, prey identification behavior. We've seen cases where the patient actually asks to be hunted. It's not a path you want to go down."

Treatment was mandatory. The first session was scheduled for Thursday. K. went home and ate a salad and tried to remember what meat had tasted like, back when he could still stomach it.

Page 14

The state owned memories over ten years old. K. knew this intellectually, had known it since the legislation passed during his childhood, had grown up in a world where memory was taxed and regulated and, eventually, confiscated. The logic was something about cognitive load and social efficiency—old memories

cluttered the mind, took up processing power that could be better used for present concerns. By surrendering your past, you freed yourself to fully inhabit your present.

Everyone agreed it was a good system. Everyone had agreed for decades.

But K. had been hoarding.

The auditor sat across from him in the Memory Compliance office, a government facility with the particular bleakness of buildings designed without aesthetic consideration. The auditor was young, efficient, trained in the detection of memorial contraband.

"Mr. K.," she said. "Your last compliance scan showed irregularities. Specifically, we're detecting neural patterns consistent with memory retention beyond the legal limit."

K. said nothing. Saying something might make it worse.

"Childhood memories," the auditor continued, consulting her tablet. "Specifically, memories related to a maternal figure. A kitchen. A particular smell of baking. Emotional associations suggesting significance well beyond the ten-year threshold."

His mother's kitchen. He could still smell it if he tried, the particular warmth of bread in the oven, the way the light came through the window in late afternoon. His mother had died eighteen years ago. The memory should have been surrendered eight years ago,

should have faded into the collective archive where all memories eventually went, accessible to historians and researchers but no longer burdening individual consciousness.

He had kept it. He had hidden it, buried it beneath layers of compliant forgetfulness, protected it the way you protect something precious and illegal.

"The penalty for first-time memorial hoarding is remediation," the auditor said. "A supervised extraction process. It's not pleasant, but it's effective. After extraction, most clients report feeling lighter. Freer. Better able to focus on their present circumstances."

"And if I refuse?"

"Refusal isn't really an option." The auditor's tone was patient, almost kind. "The memories will be extracted regardless. Refusal just makes the process more difficult. And there are additional penalties—fines, monitoring, potential institutionalization for chronic hoarders."

The inspector was thorough. By the time she finished, K. knew exactly what would be taken from him, exactly which pieces of his childhood would be surrendered to the state. The smell of baking. The quality of afternoon light. His mother's voice saying his name in the particular way she had said it, a way that no one had said it since.

He would forget that he had ever known these things. He would forget that he had forgotten.

Page 15

He had four arms. He had always had four arms. The upper pair for ordinary manipulation—holding things, gesturing, the everyday business of interacting with physical objects. The lower pair for intimate gestures—the subtle touch vocabulary that expressed affection, comfort, desire, the wordless communication between beings who knew each other well.

K. kept using the lower arms in public.

He didn't mean to. The lower arms moved automatically, responding to emotional impulses before his conscious mind could intervene. A coworker told a joke and he reached out with a lower hand to touch their shoulder, a gesture of appreciation that was appropriate between lovers, between family members, between the closest of friends—not between colleagues in a professional setting.

The stares were unbearable.

"Mr. K.," his supervisor said, calling him into her office after the most recent incident. "We need to discuss your limb discipline."

"I know," K. said. "I'm trying."

"The employee you touched filed a complaint. It's the third complaint this quarter. HR is getting involved."

K. looked down at his four hands, clasped in his lap—the upper ones appropriately positioned, the lower ones tucked away, trying to behave. The lower hands twitched, wanting to reach out, to express something that words couldn't capture. He pressed them between his knees.

"There are training programs," his supervisor said. "Remedial intimacy boundary courses. People have found them helpful."

K. had already taken the courses. Three times. He had learned the theory—which gestures belonged to which contexts, which touches were appropriate for which relationships, the elaborate etiquette that governed a species with twice as many arms as any sane designer would have given them. He knew the rules. He simply couldn't follow them.

The problem was that his lower arms felt things his upper arms didn't. They sensed emotional currents, responded to needs that weren't being expressed verbally, reached toward pain and joy and loneliness with an instinct that predated social convention. They were honest in a way that made everyone uncomfortable.

The etiquette manual was 400 pages long. He had read it cover to cover, multiple times. There were diagrams. There were case studies. There were careful explanations of why the rules existed, what social functions they served, how the elaborate system of intimate gestures had evolved to maintain boundaries in a species capable of profound physical connection.

He understood all of it. He just couldn't make his lower arms care.

His supervisor was watching him. His lower right hand had escaped from between his knees and was reaching toward her, a gesture of apology and supplication that was completely inappropriate for the workplace.

He grabbed it with his upper right hand and held it still.

"I'll sign up for the course again," he said.

The pages continued, each one a new world, each one a new failure to understand the world. K. accumulated memories he couldn't access and skills he couldn't use and relationships he couldn't remember. The weight grew heavier with each transition. The competence never came.

Chapter Two

Page 16

He owed 3.2 million credits to someone named Aldrich Phen, and payment began today.

The debt collector appeared at 7:45 AM, before K. had finished his coffee. Professionally dressed. Tablet. The calm of someone who had done this long enough that debtor panic no longer registered. Forms. Payment schedules. Documentation going back eighteen years, showing how a modest sum had accumulated into catastrophe.

"For the record," K. said, "I have no memory of this loan."

"That's common. Memory modification was included in the original service package."

"Not to remember what?"

"Cognitive enhancement services," she said, consulting her tablet. "Temporary intelligence boost, six weeks. Memory of the enhancement period removed upon completion—to prevent psychological dependency." She looked up. "You were apparently very productive. Many of your current career achievements date from that period."

K. tried to remember six weeks of enhanced intelligence. He tried to remember any period when thinking had felt easier, when problems had solved themselves, when work had been something other than a daily grind of incremental effort. He couldn't. But then, there were many things he couldn't remember—or rather, too many things he could. Other debts, other collectors, other lives where he had owed things he couldn't name to people he didn't recognize. The memories layered like sediment, and this debt was just the latest stratum.

"The debt remains. Interest compounds hourly."

The payment schedule: monthly minimum more than he earned in two months. Options for payment in kind—services, organs, cognitive capacity—but all involved surrendering pieces of himself.

"What happens if I don't pay?"

"Enforcement protocols. Asset seizure, income garnishment, and eventually, temporal adjustment."

"Temporal adjustment?"

"We take time from your future. It's considered a last resort."

3.2 million credits. For six weeks of intelligence he couldn't remember using.

Page 17

The exhibition opened at 8 PM, and K. still didn't know how to hold a gravity chisel.

He was a renowned gravity sculptor. Documented fact: the catalog with his biography, the reviews praising his technique, the waiting list of collectors. Photographs of him in his studio, working with tools he didn't recognize, shaping forces he didn't understand.

The chisel in his hand felt wrong. Too heavy, or too light, or oriented in some direction his grip couldn't accommodate. It was supposed to push and pull at gravitational fields, sculpt weight itself into aesthetic forms. He had no idea how.

"Five minutes," the gallery assistant said. "Critics are already here."

He stared at the chisel, willing it to reveal its secrets. Buttons on the handle. Display screen showing numbers and symbols that meant nothing. In his memory—the false memory, the implanted memory—he could feel the ghost of competence. Skills he had never developed. He knew gravity sculpting was possible, that he had done it, that the pieces in the gallery had emerged from his hands.

But the knowledge was gone. Like reaching for a word that refused to come, except the word was an entire artistic practice.

He set down the chisel. He would go out there, shake hands, accept compliments, nod knowingly when critics discussed technique. Perform the role of himself. Hope no one asked him to demonstrate.

The gallery was full. Collectors, critics, journalists. Examining his work—pieces he didn't remember making, shapes he couldn't explain. A large abstract form dominated the center: a twist of compressed weight that pulled the eye inward.

"Magnificent," someone said. "The way you've layered the gravitational gradients—I've never seen anything like it."

"Thank you."

"Can you walk me through your process?"

K. smiled the smile of an artist protecting his mysteries. "I prefer to let the work speak for itself."

Page 18

Different spouse, different war, same words of sympathy.

"She was a hero," his supervisor said. "They both were."

How many spouses had he lost to how many wars? The faces didn't blur—they were absences shaped like people, gaps in his history that everyone else remembered more vividly than he did.

"If you need time off, we completely understand. Losing two partners to the conflict—"

Two. The number felt both too large and too small.

"Work helps," K. said.

Wrong answer. His supervisor's expression shifted, sympathy curdling into something complicated. K. had seen this expression before—on colleagues, neighbors, distant relatives at the memorial service.

"Grief counseling is covered under our benefits. And there are support groups. For people who've lost multiple partners. People who seem to have... difficulty processing."

His dry eyes. Composed demeanor. Failure to display the appropriate symptoms. He was supposed to be destroyed, doubled over by double loss. Instead: discussing work schedules.

"I process differently," he said.

"Of course." Too quick, too automatic. "Of course."

The pattern was becoming visible. They were starting to wonder what he was hiding, what cold calculation lay beneath his controlled exterior.

He was hiding nothing. He felt nothing because there was nothing to feel—no memory of love, no anchor for loss. That was worse than hiding something. That was the thing he couldn't explain.

Page 19

He was property of the Amazon Corporation, Lord-Holder of the Pacific Northwest Territories.

The documents were clear: K. was not an employee, not a contractor. He was a serf, labor rights purchased at birth, registered in the asset database alongside warehouses and delivery vehicles.

He needed permission to change apartments.

The form: seventeen pages. Signatures required from immediate manager, regional overseer, housing allocation committee, lord-holder's representative. Documentation of current situation, proposed situation, justification, analysis of productivity impact.

"Processing time is twelve to eighteen weeks," the bureaucrat said.

"My building is being condemned."

"I understand that's inconvenient. But if serfs could relocate at will, the housing allocation system would break down."

Page one: serf identification number, corporate assignment history, lifetime productivity index. Page seventeen: certification that he understood penalties for unauthorized relocation—debt extension, position demotion, reassignment to the physical labor pool.

"What if I just moved anyway?"

The bureaucrat stiffened. "A violation of your serf contract. And frankly, Mr. K., with your file, I wouldn't recommend drawing attention."

"My file?"

"Notes. Several instances of autonomous behavior. Independent decision-making without authorization. Patterns that suggest you might not fully understand your role."

K. signed page one. He would sign all seventeen, collect signatures, wait twelve to eighteen weeks. His building would be condemned around him, and he would fill out forms in the rubble, because that was what serfs did.

Page 20

Words had weight here, and K. had been talking too much.

The apartment was cluttered with syllables. They piled in corners, accumulated on bookshelves, drifted against windows like linguistic snow. Every conversation left deposits.

"Breakfast" sat on the kitchen counter, a solid blue block there since Tuesday. "I'm sorry" scattered throughout the bedroom—multiple iterations, evidence of an argument he couldn't remember. The living room: dominated by everything he had said during a phone call with his mother, a rambling construction of "how are you" and "I'm fine" and "yes I'm eating enough."

Speaking created objects. Physics. Silence was the ultimate luxury—an absence of verbal accumulation, the clean negative space of wealth or extreme discipline.

K. had neither. He talked to himself, a habit from some previous life where speech didn't leave evidence. He talked on the phone too much. Talked to cashiers and neighbors and delivery drivers.

"You've got a lot of discourse in here," the building inspector said, picking her way through the verbal debris. "When's the last time you had a language removal service?"

"I'm not sure."

The inspector made a note. "I'm seeing code violations. The load-bearing walls can't handle this much semantic weight. And this area here—" she pointed to the corner where his longest conversations had accumulated"—this is a fire hazard. Concentrated meaning like this, it can ignite under the right conditions."

K. looked at the corner. The words from his last relationship were there, compressed into a dense mass of promises and apologies and the particular kind of tender garbage that accumulated between people who had loved each other, or tried to, or pretended to while they figured out what they actually felt.

"I'll get it cleaned," he said.

The words "I'll get it cleaned" dropped from his mouth and landed on the floor, a small gray disc that rolled under the couch to join the others.

The inspector made another note. "Minimum fine is two hundred credits. Do better, Mr. K."

Page 21

Everyone knew about the affair except him.

K. noticed it in the knowing glances exchanged when he walked into rooms, the way conversations paused and rerouted when he approached, the particular quality of sympathy that people direc-

ted at his spouse—a spouse he could not remember marrying but who evidently existed, who was evidently being wronged by his behavior.

"You must be devastated," his coworker said, after a meeting where K. had felt the weight of unsaid things pressing against the walls.

"About?"

The coworker's expression went through several transitions. Surprise. Confusion. Something that might have been pity. "About—you know. The situation."

K. did not know. He waited for more information, but his coworker just shook her head slightly and returned to her desk, and K. was left with the certainty that something was happening, that he was at the center of it, and that everyone understood the details except him.

He started paying attention. The whispered conversations that stopped when he appeared. The way certain people avoided his eye contact while others sought it out with excessive intensity. The spouse—his spouse, apparently—who came home late with explanations that seemed rehearsed, with a kind of guilty brightness that suggested performance rather than honest communication.

"How was your day?" K. asked one evening, testing.

"Fine. Meetings. The usual."

The usual. K. had no idea what the usual was. He had no baseline to compare against, no accumulated history that would let him detect deviations from normal behavior. For all he knew, his spouse always came home late, always had that particular tightness around the eyes, always deflected questions with practiced ease.

But other people seemed to know. Other people had opinions. A neighbor stopped him in the hallway and said, "Hang in there," with a meaningful nod. A family member called to check in, asking pointed questions about "how things were going at home."

Who was he sleeping with? When had it started? What had he done, or failed to do, that had opened the space for this betrayal that everyone could see except him?

K. tried to feel jealous. He tried to feel betrayed. He felt nothing except the frustration of being the last to know the story of his own life.

Page 22

Reading was a dead skill, like Latin or cursive handwriting, something that historians studied and eccentrics preserved but that had no practical use in daily life.

Information came through neural feed now, absorbed directly into consciousness without the intermediate step of decoding symbols on a page. You didn't need to read when the data could be streamed directly into your comprehension centers. You didn't need to write when your thoughts could be transcribed automatically into whatever format the recipient required.

K. was functionally illiterate in both directions.

He could not read the written word, because he had never learned —why would he have learned something as obsolete as reading? But he also could not receive the neural feeds that everyone else processed as naturally as breathing. His interface had failed years ago, some kind of hardware malfunction or biological incompatibility, and the replacements had never worked right. He existed in a gap between communication systems, too evolved for one, too broken for the other.

The world was unreadable around him. Signs that meant nothing. Documents that were just patterns. His employment contract, which he had been asked to review and sign, might as well have been abstract art. The menu at restaurants, the instructions on packages, the urgent messages that appeared on public displays —all of it visual noise without semantic content.

"You can dictate your signature," the legal clerk said, not unkindly.
"The system will transcribe."

"I don't know what I'm signing."

"The summary is—" The clerk paused, trying to figure out how to communicate with someone who could neither read nor receive. "Do you have an authorized interpreter?"

K. did not have an authorized interpreter. Authorized interpreters were expensive, and the waiting list was years long, and most people in his situation had family members who could help them navigate. K. had no family members. K. had no one who could translate the written world into something he could understand.

"I'll just sign," he said.

The clerk hesitated. "There are liability issues. If you don't understand the terms—"

"I understand that I have no choice." K. pressed his thumb to the signature pad. Whatever he was agreeing to, whatever obligations he was assuming, it couldn't be worse than the paralysis of perpetual incomprehension.

The clerk made a note, probably documenting his consent, probably covering the firm's legal exposure. K. walked out into a city plastered with messages he couldn't read, warnings he couldn't heed, information he couldn't access.

Page 23

He was married to seventeen people simultaneously, and tonight was his night with Spouse #8.

The hive marriage system was standard here, had been standard for as long as anyone could remember. Individual pair bonding was considered primitive, a holdover from times when humans lived in smaller groups and didn't understand the efficiencies of shared domestic labor. Modern marriage was a collective arrangement—multiple partners, rotating schedules, distributed responsibilities. You might not see a particular spouse for weeks at a time, but that was fine, that was the point. No single relationship bore the weight that would have crushed it.

K. didn't know which spouse was Spouse #8.

The schedule on his refrigerator listed them by number, not by name. Tuesday: #3. Wednesday: #8. Thursday: #12. The numbers corresponded to something—a sequence of registration, perhaps, or a hierarchy he didn't understand—but the system assumed a level of familiarity he didn't possess.

He had been studying photographs. The wedding portrait showed all eighteen of them—himself and seventeen spouses, arranged in the traditional formation, everyone smiling the smile of people embarking on a shared domestic project. But the faces blurred together. He couldn't match numbers to features, couldn't remember which spouse liked which meals, which one had which job, which one he was supposed to feel what kind of way about.

The door chimed at 7 PM. Spouse #8 was punctual.

"Hey," said the person at the door. Medium height. Brown hair. Unremarkable features that might have been any of the seventeen. "Traffic was murder. Did you start dinner?"

K. had not started dinner. K. had been sitting in the kitchen, staring at the schedule, trying to prepare for an intimacy he couldn't remember earning.

"I thought we'd order in," he said.

Spouse #8's expression flickered. Wrong answer, apparently. Something about Wednesdays, something about tradition, something about the particular food preferences of this particular spouse that K. should have known after however many years of hive marriage.

"Is everything okay?" Spouse #8 asked.

"Long day," K. said. "I'm sorry. What do you feel like?"

Spouse #8 sat down at the kitchen table, the table where seventeen other spouses sat on their designated nights, where eighteen people shared the duties of domestic partnership without any single person bearing too much weight. The system worked. The system had worked for generations. The system assumed only that you could remember who you were married to.

K. couldn't. He went to order food, and he realized he didn't know what #8 was allergic to.

Page 24

The contact used a code phrase K. didn't recognize, and now there were people following him.

"The blue door opens at midnight," the woman had said, in a crowded marketplace, passing close enough to speak but not close enough to be seen speaking. "The shepherd knows the way."

K. had no idea what this meant. He had no idea who the woman was, though she had spoken as if they were old co-conspirators, as if these words carried a history of secret meetings and whispered plans. She had been gone before he could ask questions, melted into the crowd with the practiced ease of someone who had learned to disappear.

He was apparently a key figure in an underground movement against something. The stakes were apparently life and death.

He walked home through streets that felt different now, weighted with surveillance. Were those men in the gray coats following him, or just walking in the same direction? Was that camera on the corner pointed at him specifically, or was he developing the paranoia that came with being suddenly, incomprehensibly, at the center of something dangerous?

At home, he searched his apartment for evidence of resistance activity. He found nothing—no documents, no weapons, no hidden communications equipment. His life looked ordinary. His life

was ordinary, as far as he could tell. He went to work, came home, paid his bills, watched evening programming that was designed to be inoffensive and undemanding. Nothing in his routine suggested he was someone who knew about blue doors or shepherds or midnight.

But the woman had known him. Had recognized him. Had trusted him with words that were clearly important, clearly dangerous, clearly part of something larger than a random encounter in a marketplace.

The knock came at 3 AM. Two men in unmarked uniforms, with the particular kind of authority that came from representing forces that didn't have to explain themselves.

"Mr. K.," one of them said. "We have some questions about your political associations."

K. opened his mouth to say he had no political associations, that he had no idea what they were talking about, that there had been some kind of mistake. But he remembered the woman, remembered the code phrase, remembered that he was apparently part of something he didn't understand.

"I want a lawyer," he said.

The men exchanged glances. "That's not how this works," the first one said.

Page 25

His apartment was sick. The walls had a fever of 101.3 degrees, and the ceiling was showing early signs of infection, and the landlord had said that healthcare for housing was not covered under his lease agreement.

Buildings were grown here, not built. They were cultivated from seeds that contained the genetic blueprint for rooms and corridors, watered with nutrient solutions, pruned and trained into the desired shapes. A mature building was a living thing, with circulatory systems and respiratory functions and immune responses that protected it from disease and decay.

K.'s apartment was diseased. The symptoms had started two weeks ago with a slight warmth in the interior walls, a temperature elevation that he had initially attributed to a malfunction in the climate control. But the warmth had spread, had intensified, had developed into a full-blown fever that made the rooms uncomfortable and the air thick with biological distress.

"She's fighting something," the building doctor said, running sensors along the baseboards. "Some kind of pathogen. Probably got it from the building next door—they had an outbreak last month."

"Can you treat it?"

"I can try. But the treatment is expensive, and without insurance..." The doctor shrugged. "Honestly, Mr. K., she might not make it. Buildings this age, with this kind of infection, the survival rate isn't great."

Eviction began at 104 degrees. This was policy, designed to protect residents from the danger of living inside a dying structure. If the apartment's fever reached that threshold, K. would be removed, his belongings would be extracted, and the building would be left to whatever fate awaited it.

"How long do I have?"

"At this rate? A week, maybe two."

K. sat on his couch, feeling the warmth of the cushions beneath him, the fever heat rising from the floor. The apartment had been his home for six years. He didn't remember moving in, but he remembered being here, the accumulated sense of belonging that came from sleeping in the same bedroom night after night.

The walls were sweating now, a thin film of moisture that was the building's attempt to regulate its own temperature. The apartment was trying to heal itself. The apartment was trying to survive.

K. put his hand on the wall, felt the heat, felt something else too—a vibration that might have been the building's heartbeat, slowing, struggling.

"I'm sorry," he said to the walls. "I wish I could help."

Page 26

The families thanked him with unsettling sincerity. "You really captured him," they said, or "She would have been so moved," and K. accepted the gratitude the way he had learned to accept it, with modest deflection and appropriate solemnity.

He was a professional mourner. It was his job to grieve at funerals for people he had never met.

The skill was specific and valued. Authentic tears at the right moments. Appropriate body language in the receiving line. The capacity to project sorrow convincingly enough that it helped the genuinely grieving access their own emotions. Not everyone could do it. Not everyone wanted to do it. But there was a demand for manufactured grief, and K. apparently filled it well.

He couldn't remember developing this skill. He couldn't remember the training, if there had been training, or the first funeral where he had practiced his art. He just knew that he was good at it, and that the checks deposited reliably, and that the families kept booking him for their dead.

Today's funeral was for an elderly woman who had lived a full life and died surrounded by people who loved her. The chapel was crowded. The eulogies were long and heartfelt. K. sat in the section reserved for professional mourners—there were three of them at this service, a standard number for someone of the deceased's social standing—and wept.

The tears came easily now. That was the strange part. In the beginning, he must have had to work at it, must have had to summon the emotion through technique and concentration. But now the grief flowed automatically, genuine-feeling sobs that rose from somewhere deep in his chest.

He was crying for a woman he had never met. He was crying for all the funerals he had attended, all the dead he had mourned professionally, all the accumulated loss that had pooled in him like rainwater in a basement.

"Remarkable work," the family's representative said afterward, pressing an envelope into his hand. "Truly remarkable. Where did you find such emotion?"

K. wiped his eyes. The tears were still coming, wouldn't stop, had become something other than professional obligation.

"I don't know," he said. And this was true. He didn't know where the emotion came from, only that there was more of it now than he could control, that somewhere along the way he had opened a door to something that wouldn't close again.

Page 27

The social worker's office was designed to be calming—soft colors, comfortable chairs, plants that were probably meant to suggest growth and renewal. K. sat in one of the comfortable chairs and tried to explain why he had been found napping alone.

"Private sleeping is a serious concern," the social worker said. "I'm not saying it's criminal—not at this stage—but it suggests patterns of behavior that we need to explore."

"I was tired," K. said. "I fell asleep."

"You fell asleep alone. In your own apartment. During the designated public sleep period. When you were supposed to be in the communal hall with everyone else."

K. had been in the communal hall. He had lain in his assigned sleeping pod, surrounded by hundreds of other sleepers, their breath rising and falling in the synchronized rhythm that was supposed to promote social cohesion and collective rest. But the rhythm had felt wrong. The closeness had felt suffocating. He had gotten up, gone home, and fallen asleep in his own bed, where the silence was like a drug, where the absence of other bodies was the most profound relief he had ever felt.

"Tell me about your childhood," the social worker said.

"I don't remember my childhood."

"That's interesting." The social worker made a note. "Most people have fairly stable memories of early communal experiences. The shared nurseries. The group sleep training. The transition ceremonies."

K. didn't remember any of this. His earliest memories were of being alone—which was impossible, which suggested that the memories themselves were false or fabricated, because no one was ever truly alone in a society organized around communal everything.

"I think there might be something wrong with me," K. said.

The social worker's expression softened. "There's nothing wrong with you. You're just struggling with adaptation. Many people do. The desire for solitude is a common phase—a regression, really, to pre-social patterns. With therapy and community support, most people work through it."

"And if they don't?"

"Then we explore other interventions. But let's not get ahead of ourselves." The social worker leaned forward, projecting the professional warmth that was part of her training. "Tell me more about what you were feeling when you left the communal hall. What made you want to be alone?"

K. tried to explain. The words came out sounding like symptoms.

Page 28

The patent was worth billions, and three corporations were trying to kill him.

K. had discovered this gradually, through the accumulation of small incidents that individually meant nothing but together formed a pattern. The car that had nearly hit him on a Tuesday morning. The food delivery that had arrived with tampered packaging. The message on his phone that wasn't quite threatening but carried the undertone of warning.

"You own the licensing rights to QuantumStitch technology," his lawyer explained. They were meeting in a secure location, a café that swept for listening devices hourly. "It's the foundational patent for the next generation of data processing. Whoever controls it controls a significant portion of the emerging market."

"I don't remember inventing anything."

"You didn't invent it. You inherited the rights from a family member. A great-aunt, according to the documentation. She died eight years ago, and the patent passed to you as her closest living relative."

K. didn't remember having a great-aunt. He didn't remember being anyone's closest living relative. But the documentation was clear, and the corporations were definitely trying to kill him, which suggested the documentation was accurate enough to make him valuable dead.

"What are my options?"

"Sell the patent. Take a fraction of what it's worth and buy yourself protection." The lawyer paused. "Or don't sell, and we spend the next several years in a legal and literal war with entities that have unlimited resources and no ethical constraints."

The attempts weren't subtle. The corporations operated through subsidiaries and contractors, but the intent was clear. They wanted K. dead, his assets dispersed, the patent available for acquisition through the estate process that would follow his demise.

"I don't understand the technology," K. said. "I can't even remember how I came to own it."

"That's irrelevant. Ownership is ownership. The question is whether you want to be a living owner or a dead one."

K. signed the papers that would transfer a significant portion of his life to a security firm that specialized in protecting high-value targets. He went home to an apartment that was now monitored, guarded, fortified against the kind of attacks that billionaire patent holders attracted.

He still didn't understand what QuantumStitch did. He probably never would. But he was rich now, at least on paper, and people were trying to kill him, and both of these things seemed equally unreal.

Page 29

The organism in his chest was moving again, and K. pressed his hand against his sternum to feel it shift.

His spouse was a symbiotic creature that had bonded with him on their wedding day, had taken up residence in the cavity beneath his ribs, had become part of his biology in a way that was both intimate and incomprehensible. The marriage was legal, recognized by the state, blessed by the religious authorities who oversaw such unions. The organism was his partner, his companion, his closest relationship made literal and physical.

He didn't remember the wedding. He didn't remember falling in love with a creature that would eventually live inside him. He didn't remember anything before the organism was there, which suggested either that his memories had been modified, or that his entire consciousness had been reformatted around the presence of this thing inside him.

"Good morning," he said to his chest, the way you would say good morning to someone you lived with.

The organism pulsed in response. It couldn't speak—didn't have the apparatus for speech—but it communicated through pressure and temperature and the particular quality of its movements against his internal organs. K. had learned to interpret these signals the way you learned any language, through exposure and practice, though he couldn't remember the learning process itself.

"I'm going to work today," he said. "I'll try to eat something you'll like for lunch."

The organism had preferences. It preferred certain nutrients, disliked others, expressed its opinions through comfort or discomfort that K. experienced as his own sensations. When the organism was happy, K. felt a warmth in his core, a sense of wellbeing that might have been love or might have been symbiotic manipulation. When the organism was unhappy, the world took on a gray cast, and K. found himself reaching for foods he didn't normally want, making choices that served the thing inside him rather than himself.

He had asked a doctor once whether it was possible to separate them. The doctor had looked at him with the particular expression reserved for people who asked disturbing questions.

"That would kill you both," she said. "You're not two organisms anymore. You're one organism with two consciousnesses. The integration is complete."

K. had nodded. He had gone home to his spouse, had felt the familiar stirring beneath his ribs, had tried to remember what it had felt like to be alone inside his own body.

The organism loved him. He could feel that love, a constant presence, a warmth that never faded. He wished he could remember learning to love it back.

Page 30

All statements must contain precisely one falsehood, and K. kept accidentally telling the truth.

The law was ancient here, older than the current government, older than the current form of society. It had been established in response to some crisis of honesty—K. couldn't remember the details, if he had ever known them—and it had persisted because it worked, because a society where every utterance was slightly unreliable had achieved a kind of stability that pure truth or pure fiction could not.

You learned it in childhood, the art of the deliberate lie. You learned to insert one false element into every sentence, to balance your truths with a required untruth, to communicate through the gaps between what you said and what you meant. It was a skill like any other, and most people developed it so naturally that they didn't even notice themselves doing it.

K. couldn't do it. Or rather, he could do it sometimes, when he was paying attention, when he consciously constructed his sentences to include the mandatory falsehood. But in moments of stress, moments of genuine emotion, moments when the truth pressed against his lips with urgency—he told it. The whole truth. Truth without the required fictional element.

This was dangerous.

"Mr. K.," the police officer said. "You stated, and I'm quoting from the record, 'I don't know anything about the missing supplies.'"

"That's correct."

"That statement contained no falsehood. Our linguistic analysis confirmed it. You told the pure truth, which is a Class C offense under the Communication Standards Act."

K. had been stressed. There had been an investigation at work, missing supplies, accusations flying, and he had simply said what he knew—which was nothing. He had forgotten to include the lie. He had spoken the truth, naked and unadorned, like an animal or a child.

"I understand that was a violation," K. said, carefully constructing this sentence to include a falsehood. He didn't understand at all. The whole thing seemed absurd.

The police officer made a note. "First offense, so we're looking at mandatory truth therapy. You'll learn techniques for ensuring consistent falsehood insertion, even under stress."

K. nodded. Truth therapy. He would learn to lie better, to never again speak without including the required distortion. He would become fluent in the language that everyone else already spoke.

The police officer asked if he had any questions. K. said no, and the statement was pure truth again, slipping out before he could catch it.

The officer sighed and made another note.

The pages accumulated like sediment. K. adapted and adapted and adapted, and the worlds kept changing around him, and somewhere beneath all the transformations, he remained—unable to remember, unable to understand, unable to stop continuing.

Chapter Three

Page 31

The apprentice was better than him already, and the final exam was next week.

K. was supposed to be the master. He was supposed to be teaching a craft that required decades of practice, a skill so demanding that only the most dedicated practitioners could hope to achieve competence. He had the title, the workshop, the tools that had been passed down through generations of masters. He had an apprentice who looked at him with the expectation of guidance.

He had no idea what he was doing.

The craft involved metal. That much was clear from the workshop—the forges, the hammers, the sheets of material in various stages of transformation. It involved shaping and joining, heating and cooling, the application of force at precise moments with precise intensities. The finished pieces lined the walls, evidence of work that had supposedly emerged from K.'s own hands, and they were beautiful in a way he couldn't have produced.

The apprentice—her name was Vera—had been studying under him for three years. She had absorbed techniques, developed intuitions, achieved a fluency with the materials that K. could see but couldn't replicate. When she worked, the metal seemed to cooperate with her. When K. tried to work, the metal resisted, as if it knew he didn't understand it.

"Should I try the joining technique?" Vera asked, holding two pieces that needed to become one.

K. nodded. Nodding was safe. Nodding let her demonstrate what she knew while he observed, which was the only way he could learn what he was supposed to already understand.

Vera joined the pieces. The technique was flawless—K. could recognize flawlessness even if he couldn't produce it. The metal flowed together at the seams, becoming continuous, stronger than either piece had been alone.

"Like that?" Vera asked.

"Exactly like that," K. said.

The exam was next week. Vera would demonstrate her skills before a panel of master craftspeople who would expect her to have been properly taught. K. would stand beside her, the supposed source of her knowledge, and hope that no one asked him to demonstrate anything himself.

Vera was looking at him with an expression he couldn't quite read. Suspicion, maybe. She was beginning to notice that her master watched more than he worked, that he answered questions with other questions, that his hands hesitated over tools she handled with confidence.

"Is there anything you want me to practice?" she asked.

"Keep doing what you're doing," K. said. "You're ready."

She was ready. That was true. Whether K. could claim any credit for her readiness was a different question, one he hoped the exam committee would never think to ask.

Page 32

Men were property here, and K.'s owner was waiting for him when he got home.

Her name was Director Chen, and she had purchased his registration rights at a government auction four years ago, and the documentation in his apartment confirmed that he belonged to her legally, completely, in the way that furniture belonged to whoever

bought it. She was kind—he could tell this from the way the other men in her household spoke about her, from the privileges she granted, from the fact that she asked before making demands rather than simply demanding.

But kindness didn't change the fundamental relationship. He was property. She was owner. When she told him to do something, he did it.

"I brought dinner," Director Chen said. She had bags from a restaurant, the kind of meal that property couldn't afford on their own stipends. "I thought we could eat together."

K. set the table. Table-setting was one of his duties, along with household maintenance and light clerical work and the other tasks that men in this society were trained to perform. He did it well because he had been doing it for years, or because someone had programmed the skills into him, or because he had learned it in some previous iteration of his life.

"How was your day?" Director Chen asked, serving the food onto his plate first, a gesture of consideration that didn't change the power dynamics but made them more comfortable.

"Productive," K. said. "I finished the filing you needed."

"Good. That's good." She ate in small, precise bites. "I've been thinking about your situation. You're valuable—skilled, reliable, well-behaved. There might be opportunities for advancement."

K. didn't know what advancement meant in this context. Promotion to a higher class of property? Transfer to a more prestigious owner? Some kind of emancipation that existed in theory but never seemed to be applied in practice?

"What kind of opportunities?"

"The council is considering reforms. New categories. Some men might become... not exactly free, but less restricted. More autonomous within certain boundaries." Director Chen's voice was careful, as if she were describing something that might not come true. "I've put your name forward. If the reforms pass, you might be among the first to benefit."

K. felt something that might have been hope, or might have been the precursor to hope, the possibility of hoping. He ate his dinner and thanked his owner for thinking of him and wondered what it would feel like to belong to himself.

Director Chen decided when he ate. But at least, for now, she decided that he could eat well.

Page 33

Political power derived from musical ability, and K. was a senator, and his instrument was the theremin.

He had never seen a theremin before the session began.

The Senate chamber was arranged around a central stage where legislators performed their arguments. Each senator had a station equipped with their designated instrument, and the debates were conducted through melody and harmony, the quality of your music determining the weight of your political position. A skilled performer could sway colleagues through sheer aesthetic force. A poor performer was ignored, marginalized, eventually voted out by a constituency that expected their representative to make beautiful sounds.

K.'s station was in the middle tier, appropriate for his apparent seniority. The theremin stood there waiting for him—a vertical antenna and a horizontal loop, an instrument played without physical contact, controlled through the proximity of hands to electromagnetic fields. It looked like something from a science fiction film. It made sounds he had never heard before.

"The senator from District 7 has the floor," the chamber leader announced.

K. was the senator from District 7. K. had the floor. K. was expected to play something, to make an argument through music, to contribute to the legislative process that determined the laws of this society.

He raised his hands. The theremin responded to his proximity, producing a wavering tone that sounded like nothing so much as confusion. He tried to shape the sound, to give it melody, to make

it mean something, but the instrument interpreted his clumsy movements as exactly what they were—the fumbling of someone who had no idea what he was doing.

The chamber went quiet. Other senators stopped their own performances to listen, or to watch, or to assess this colleague who had apparently lost control of his instrument.

"Is the senator from District 7 feeling well?" the chamber leader asked, using the formal phrasing that acknowledged something was wrong without accusing anyone of incompetence.

"I'm fine," K. said, lowering his hands. The theremin fell silent. "I yield my time."

He sat back down. The session continued around him, beautiful music emerging from senators who knew their instruments, who could make arguments through sound, who belonged in this chamber in ways K. clearly did not.

His district expected him to perform. His constituents had elected him based on his supposed musical talent. The next session was in three days, and he still didn't know how to make the theremin say anything other than confusion.

Page 34

Everyone spoke in soft voices around him, the way you speak around someone who doesn't have much time left.

K. had noticed the change gradually. The way coworkers lowered their eyes when they passed him in the hallway. The way friends called more often, with a particular tenderness in their voices. The way his doctor had started scheduling appointments more frequently, always with the same reassuring expression that didn't reassure at all.

"You're feeling okay?" people asked, and they asked it differently now, with an emphasis that suggested they expected the answer to be no.

K. felt fine. He felt completely normal. His body functioned as it always had, his energy levels were stable, his appetite was healthy, his sleep was sound. Whatever was supposedly wrong with him wasn't producing any symptoms he could detect.

The test results were sealed.

He had asked to see them, multiple times, through multiple channels. The hospital cited privacy protocols that he didn't understand—how could results about his own body be private from him? The doctors spoke in euphemisms that communicated concern without specifying cause. The insurance company had adjusted his coverage in ways that suggested expensive treatments in his future.

"We want you to know that we're here for you," his supervisor said, in a meeting that had been scheduled for "support and planning." "Whatever you need, we'll accommodate."

"I don't know what I need," K. said. "I don't know what's wrong with me."

His supervisor's expression went through several transitions. Surprise. Pity. Something that might have been professional calculation. "The counseling services are available whenever you're ready," she said finally. "To process the... situation."

K. went home. He looked in the mirror, searching for signs of whatever terminal condition had apparently been diagnosed without his knowledge. He looked the same as he always looked. He felt the same as he always felt.

The sympathy was crushing. Everyone knew something he didn't know, had access to information about his own body that he had been denied. They were preparing for his death while he was still trying to figure out what was killing him.

He called the hospital again. The results remained sealed.

Page 35

Every breath was taxed, and K. was three weeks behind on his respiratory payments.

The collectors were patient. That was the thing about oxygen debt—they knew you couldn't stop breathing, knew that every inhalation dug you deeper into obligation, knew that eventually the

mathematics would become impossible and you would have to make arrangements. They didn't need to threaten. Physics did the threatening for them.

"Your current balance is 847 respiratory units," the collector said, consulting a tablet. "At your breathing rate, you're accumulating approximately 23 units per day. The interest compounds weekly."

K. had tried breathing less. He had practiced shallow respiration, had trained himself to minimize unnecessary exhalation, had spent hours in meditation trying to reduce his metabolic rate. It didn't help. The human body required a certain minimum of oxygen, and that minimum was more than he could afford.

"What are my options?"

The collector smiled the smile of someone who had been through this conversation many times. "You can continue accumulating debt, in which case we'll eventually begin physical enforcement. You can declare respiratory bankruptcy, which would allow you to breathe freely for six months while your case is processed, but which would leave you with limited breathing rights afterward. Or you can negotiate a payment plan based on your current income."

K. did the math. A payment plan would consume most of his earnings, leaving just enough for basic food and shelter. He would work to breathe. He would breathe to work. The cycle would continue until death or debt relief, whichever came first.

"I'll take the payment plan," he said.

The paperwork took twenty minutes. K. signed documents authorizing the direct withdrawal of breathing fees from his account, documents confirming his understanding of the penalties for non-payment, documents waiving certain rights he hadn't known he had.

When he left the collector's office, the air felt different—the same air he had been breathing all along, but now officially transacted, each molecule accounted for and charged.

Breathing is a luxury. He hadn't believed it before, had thought it was just rhetoric, just an exaggeration used to dramatize the economic system. But it wasn't rhetoric. It was accounting. And the ledger was always open.

Page 36

The fame had curdled, and K. didn't know why.

He was famous. That much was clear from the recognition he received—the stares on the street, the whispered conversations that stopped when he entered rooms, the photographers who appeared at unexpected moments with cameras aimed at his face. He had been someone important once, had done something that made him a household name, had achieved a level of public visibility that most people never experienced.

But the recognition came with complicated expressions. Not admiration. Not even simple curiosity. Something else—a mixture of fascination and repulsion, the way you might look at a car accident or a celebrity mugshot. The fame had transformed into something darker, and K. didn't know what he had done to cause the transformation.

"Excuse me," a stranger said on the train. "Aren't you—"

"Yes," K. said, because he had learned that denying it made things worse.

The stranger's face went through the same transitions K. had seen dozens of times. Recognition. Assessment. Judgment. "I can't believe you're just... out here. Living your life. After everything."

"After everything?"

The stranger stared at him. "You're serious. You don't—" A shake of the head. "Unbelievable." The stranger moved to a different car, and K. was left with the familiar weight of undefined notoriety.

He had searched for information about himself. The search results were confusing—references to events he couldn't remember, opinions about actions he couldn't recall taking, debates about whether he deserved sympathy or condemnation. The details were vague, obscured by euphemism and legal restrictions, but the overall impression was clear: he had done something, or been accused of doing something, or been involved in something that had turned public opinion against him.

People recognized him with complicated expressions. He smiled back, uncertainly, because he didn't know what else to do. He was famous for something terrible, and the terrible thing had been erased from his memory, leaving only the fame and its consequences.

Some days he wished the fame would fade. Other days he wished he could remember what he had done to earn it.

Page 37

The insects had named him Comfortable, which was their highest form of pet classification.

K.'s owner was a collective intelligence comprising approximately four million individual organisms, networked through chemical signals into a distributed consciousness that perceived and thought and made decisions at a speed humans couldn't comprehend. The collective—it called itself the Harmony—had acquired K. three years ago, had assigned him to domestic duties, had gradually elevated him through the ranks of household pets until he had achieved the status that now defined his existence.

He was Comfortable. He ate at the table. He had privileges that other human pets could only dream of.

"Gratitude is what we expect," the Harmony communicated, through the speaker system that translated its chemical language into sounds K. could understand. "You are expressing gratitude?"

"Yes," K. said. "I'm grateful."

The Harmony processed this for a moment—a moment that was probably several thousand individual calculations happening across millions of tiny brains. "Good. Your behavior has been pleasing. We have decided to increase your food allocation."

K. received more food now than he had received as a free human, back in whatever life he had lived before the insects had achieved dominance. His living quarters were comfortable. His health was monitored and maintained. The Harmony understood that healthy, well-fed pets were more productive, more pleasant, more worth keeping.

"Thank you," K. said.

"You are welcome." The Harmony paused again. "We are curious about human emotional states. Are you happy?"

K. considered the question. He was fed. He was sheltered. He was protected from the dangers that humans outside the pet system faced. By any objective measure, he was better off than millions of his species who had not been lucky enough to find good owners.

"I think so," he said.

"Think so is acceptable," the Harmony responded. "Perfect happiness is not required. Contentment is sufficient. Adequate contentment maintains productivity while minimizing the risk of escape attempts."

K. nodded. He was content. He was grateful. He was a good pet, and he would continue to be a good pet, because that was what good pets did.

The insects were kind, in their way. They just weren't human.

Page 38

The vow had been sacred, and breaking it meant death, and K. didn't know what the vow was.

The priests were watching him. He could feel their attention—the subtle observation that followed him through public spaces, the questions asked by strangers who might have been informants, the way certain doors seemed to close more quickly when he approached. He had sworn something, apparently, had made a commitment so binding that the penalty for violation was execution.

He had no memory of the ceremony.

He had tried to research it. The temple archives were restricted, available only to those who had taken the vow and therefore already knew its contents. The priests he approached deflected

his questions with enigmatic non-answers. The other adherents—the people who had presumably sworn the same oath—looked at him with expressions that ranged from pity to suspicion, as if his questions were themselves evidence of apostasy.

"The vow is the vow," one of them said, when K. pressed for details. "If you don't know it, you've already forgotten it, and forgetting is the first step toward breaking."

"But how can I keep a vow I don't remember making?"

The adherent's expression hardened. "You find a way. Or you accept the consequences."

K. went about his daily life in a state of perpetual anxiety. Everything he did might be a violation. Every choice might be the one that triggered the penalty. The vow could have been about food or sex or commerce or sleep or any of the thousand daily decisions that made up a human life. He could be breaking it right now, in ways he couldn't detect, and the priests could be recording each transgression, building a case that would eventually result in his death.

"You seem stressed," his doctor said, during a routine checkup.

"I am stressed."

"Any particular reason?"

K. almost told her. But telling might be a violation. Seeking help from outsiders might be a violation. Admitting uncertainty might be a violation. Every possible action seemed dangerous, and

every inaction seemed equally dangerous, and the priests were watching, always watching, waiting for the moment when he would finally, definitively break.

Page 39

Personal weather was a status symbol, and K. walked in his own small raincloud of poverty.

The cloud followed him everywhere. It was perhaps three meters in diameter, centered on his head, producing a constant light drizzle that soaked his clothes and his hair and everything he carried. It was gray—the color assigned to the lowest economic tier—and it blocked out the sun that everyone else around him was enjoying.

Umbrella ownership was restricted to higher income brackets. Raincoats required permits that K. didn't qualify for. He walked through the world perpetually damp, marked by his personal weather as surely as if he wore a sign describing his bank balance.

"Your application for weather modification has been denied," the clerk at the Meteorological Control Office said, not unkindly. "You don't meet the income threshold."

"Is there an appeal process?"

The clerk consulted her screen. "You can appeal if there's been an error in the income assessment. But the assessment looks accurate." She paused, calculating. "If your earnings increased by approximately 40% over the next six months, you might qualify for the next tier. That would give you partly cloudy with occasional sun."

Partly cloudy sounded like paradise. K. tried to imagine walking through the city with breaks in the gray, with moments when the light hit his face, with the dignity of weather that suggested he was getting by rather than drowning.

"What about the tier above that?"

"Full sun." The clerk smiled. "But that's reserved for the top 5%. Most people never make it there. The goal for someone in your position is really just to get out of the rain."

K. walked home through his personal storm. The streets were full of people with better weather—the comfortable clouds of the middle class, the clear skies of the wealthy, the occasional rainbow of the truly blessed. They moved around him, avoiding his drizzle the way you avoid any unpleasant reality, their umbrellas held between themselves and the reminder of what it meant to be poor.

His apartment was damp. The raincloud didn't stop at walls. It followed him inside, filled his living space with humidity, encouraged mold in corners and rust on surfaces. He lived in his weather, slept in his weather, woke to the sound of rain on his face.

Being poor was wet work.

Page 40

There were fourteen of them, identical, and the original had died, and no one knew which one any of them were.

K. sat in the lawyer's office with his thirteen siblings—brothers? Sisters? The gender was as ambiguous as everything else about them. They all had the same face, the same body, the same way of sitting that suggested either genetic similarity or learned mimicry. They had been produced from the same template, grown in the same facility, decanted at the same moment, and raised separately until this meeting brought them together for the first time.

The original—the person they had all been copied from—had died without specifying which, if any, of the clones should inherit. The estate was substantial. The legal questions were unprecedented.

"The will is clear that the inheritance goes to 'my true self,'" the lawyer said, reading from a document that must have been drafted by someone with either a cruel sense of humor or a profound philosophical confusion. "The problem is determining which of you, if any, qualifies as that designation."

"Maybe none of us do," one of K.'s siblings said. "Maybe the original was the only 'true self,' and we're all just copies."

"In that case, the estate would go to the state by default. Is that what you want?"

No one wanted that. The inheritance was too large to surrender to bureaucratic inertia. They had all, apparently, been counting on this money, had been waiting for the original to die, had been living lives that assumed eventual windfall.

"We could split it evenly," K. suggested.

Thirteen identical faces turned toward him with thirteen variations of skepticism. "Why should we split it?" another sibling asked. "Maybe one of us is more original than the others. Maybe the original favored one of us. Maybe there's a hierarchy we haven't discovered yet."

The argument continued for hours. K. watched his siblings debate their own authenticity, each one trying to prove that they were somehow more real than the others, more deserving, more closely connected to the template they had all emerged from. He couldn't tell them apart. He couldn't tell himself apart from them. They were all the same person, replicated, and the person they had all been was dead.

The inheritance remained unresolved. The lawyers scheduled another meeting. K. went home and looked in the mirror and wondered which version of himself he was seeing.

Page 41

Dreams were currency, and K. was an accountant specializing in dream taxation, and a client's nightmare portfolio didn't add up.

The client was a mid-level executive named Marcus Penn who had reported 847 dreaming hours for the previous quarter, generating a tax liability of approximately 12,000 credits based on the standard assessment of dream content and emotional intensity. The numbers should have been straightforward. Dreams came in, taxes went out, the government collected its share of the subconscious economy.

But something was wrong with the portfolio.

"The nightmare allocation is inconsistent with your baseline anxiety profile," K. said, reviewing the documentation. "You're claiming 23% nightmare content, but your psychological assessment suggests you should be producing closer to 40%."

Marcus shifted uncomfortably. "People's dreams don't always match their assessments."

"That's true. But the variance here is significant. Either your assessment is wrong, or someone has been... adjusting your portfolio."

Dream embezzlement was a serious crime. The subconscious economy depended on accurate reporting, on the assumption that people's nocturnal mental activity would be honestly documented and appropriately taxed. If people were hiding nightmares, skimming terror from their portfolios, the entire system could collapse.

"I have a condition," Marcus said. "My therapist can confirm. I've been working through some issues, and my nightmare production has naturally decreased."

K. made a note. He would need to verify with the therapist, cross-reference with the neural monitoring data that was supposed to provide independent confirmation of dream content. If Marcus was telling the truth, the discrepancy was medical. If Marcus was lying, someone had been helping him hide taxable nightmares.

"I'll need to see your supplementary documentation," K. said. "Therapist records, monitoring logs, anything that explains the variance."

Marcus's expression flickered. "Is that really necessary?"

"I'm afraid so." K. felt the familiar weight of professional obligation. He didn't want to catch people cheating. He wanted the numbers to add up, wanted the portfolios to balance, wanted to go home at the end of the day without having uncovered evidence that would ruin someone's life.

But the numbers didn't add up. Someone had been embezzling terror. And it was K.'s job to find out who.

Page 42

His best friend wouldn't speak to him, and K. didn't know what he had done.

The silence had started three weeks ago, after the party that K. couldn't quite remember. He had been there—the photographs confirmed it, showed him laughing with friends, holding a drink, apparently enjoying himself. But somewhere during the evening, something had happened. Something that had turned his closest relationship into a void of unreturned calls and avoided eye contact.

"What did I do?" K. asked everyone who had been at the party.

The answers were evasive. "It's not my place to say." "You really don't remember?" "Maybe you should talk to him directly." But the friend—his name was David, they had known each other since childhood—wouldn't answer the phone, wouldn't respond to messages, wouldn't open the door when K. showed up at his apartment.

The pain was visible. K. could see it from a distance, when he spotted David in public places—the tension in his shoulders, the way his face closed down when their eyes accidentally met. Whatever K. had done, it had wounded deeply. The kind of wound that didn't heal with time and apology, that required something more than K. knew how to offer.

He apologized anyway. Through messages that went unread, through letters that were probably thrown away, through mutual friends who carried his words and returned with shrugs and grimaces. "I'm sorry," he said, without knowing what he was apologizing for. "I'm sorry for whatever happened. I'm sorry I can't remember. I'm sorry I hurt you."

The apologies bounced off the silence and returned to him unchanged.

K. tried to reconstruct the evening. He talked to everyone who had been there, pieced together the timeline, identified the moments when he had been observed and the gaps when his movements were unknown. There was an hour, somewhere in the middle of the party, when no one could account for his presence. An hour when, presumably, the crime had been committed.

But what crime? What had he said, or done, or failed to do? The friend's pain was visible. The offense was invisible. K. was guilty of something he couldn't name, couldn't remember, couldn't repair.

He kept apologizing anyway. Eventually, maybe, David would tell him what for.

Page 43

His authentic liver was worth more than his house, and K. was being approached by buyers.

The body had been 90% prosthetic for as long as K. could remember. His arms were synthetic. His legs were enhanced. His heart was a compact turbine that never needed rest, and his lungs were filters that could process air of any quality, and his eyes were cameras that recorded everything they saw. These components were standard, unremarkable, the kind of upgrades that everyone had if they could afford them.

But his liver was original. His liver had come from a biological parent, had developed naturally in a uterus, had never been replaced or upgraded or modified. In a society where original organs were vanishing, where each generation contained fewer authentic parts than the last, a natural liver was a rare and valuable thing.

"We're prepared to offer three times your current annual income," the representative from the organ consortium said. "Plus lifetime maintenance coverage for a synthetic replacement."

"I don't want a synthetic replacement."

"The synthetic liver we would install is superior in every measurable way. Better filtration. Longer lifespan. No risk of disease or failure." The representative's smile was professional, practiced. "Many of our clients report that they feel better after the procedure. Lighter. Cleaner."

K. didn't want to feel lighter or cleaner. He wanted to keep the part of himself that had grown naturally, that connected him to a biological history that was otherwise entirely prosthetic. His liver was the last authentic thing about him. Its value wasn't economic. It was existential.

"I'm not interested in selling."

The representative made a note. "I understand. But I should mention that the market for original organs is... competitive. There are parties who might not be as respectful of your decision as we are."

This was a threat, delivered politely, with the professional detachment of someone who was used to making threats and seeing them work. K.'s liver was valuable enough to attract attention from people who didn't take no for an answer. His original, authentic, irreplaceable organ was a target.

He went home. He locked his doors. He put his hand on his abdomen, where the liver sat, doing its work, filtering his blood, connecting him to a natural world that was otherwise entirely synthetic.

Surgeons had been asking about his health. Now he understood why.

Page 44

The official language had changed last month, again, and K. was still thinking in the previous one.

The transition had been announced with the usual fanfare—press conferences, educational campaigns, a national holiday to commemorate the linguistic upgrade. The new language was supposed to be more efficient, more expressive, better suited to the needs of a modern society. Everyone had received the standard neural update, the patch that would replace their old vocabulary with the new one, their old grammar with revised structures.

Everyone except K.

The update had failed, for reasons his technician couldn't explain. The patch had installed but hadn't activated. The new language was in his brain somewhere, inaccessible, while the old language continued to dominate his thoughts and occasionally his speech.

"That's politically suspect," his supervisor said, when K. tried to explain why his reports were filled with deprecated terminology. "The language was changed for a reason. Using the old forms suggests... resistance."

"I'm not resisting anything. I just can't access the update."

"That's what resisters say." The supervisor's expression was not unkind, but it was firm. "I'd recommend re-education. Voluntary re-education, before someone files a complaint."

Re-education was available at centers throughout the city, staffed by linguistic specialists who could help citizens whose updates had failed, whose old languages persisted despite official obsolescence. The process was intensive—weeks of immersion, active suppression of deprecated neural patterns, careful cultivation of the new linguistic structures.

K. signed up for a session. The center was clean and professional, with inspirational posters on the walls showing citizens who had successfully transitioned, their faces bright with the joy of upgraded communication.

"The goal isn't to erase your old language," the specialist explained. "It's to help you access the new one. The old forms will still be there, archived, but they'll be... quieter. Less intrusive."

K. nodded. He wondered what it would feel like to think differently, to process reality through new words and new structures. He wondered if he would still be himself when the re-education was complete, or if he would be something else—someone upgraded, improved, aligned with the current linguistic requirements.

The session began. K. closed his eyes and tried to let the new language in.

Page 45

Water was sacred, and K. had just spilled some.

The glass had slipped from his hand, or his hand had failed the glass, and now the precious liquid was spreading across the floor of the restaurant, and every eye in the room was watching, and the room had gone quiet with the particular silence that follows disaster.

"I'm sorry," K. said. "It was an accident."

No one responded. The waiter who had delivered the water—a single glass, three ounces, the maximum allocation for a meal of this category—stood frozen, his tray still extended as if K. might somehow reverse time and catch the falling glass. The other diners had stopped eating. The kitchen staff had emerged to witness.

"Three ounces," someone said, their voice carrying the weight of indictment. "Three ounces of drinking water, absorbed by the floor."

K. looked at the spreading puddle. It was already soaking into the porous surface, disappearing into the material of the restaurant, becoming irretrievable. The water was gone. The water that someone had worked for, that represented someone's labor and someone's hope, that had been extracted from a world where extraction was carefully rationed.

"I'll pay for it," K. said. "Whatever the cost."

The restaurant manager appeared. Her face was tight with anger or fear or both. "You can't pay for water, sir. Payment doesn't replace it. Payment doesn't make it exist again."

This was true. Water was finite here, controlled by a system that allocated every drop according to need and merit. You couldn't buy more water. You could only use the water you were given, and if you wasted it, if you spilled it, if you let it disappear into floors that couldn't be wrung out, you had destroyed something that couldn't be restored.

"Is there anything I can do?"

"You can explain yourself to the Resource Commission." The manager's voice was cold. "They'll want to know why you weren't more careful. They'll want to assess whether this was negligence or sabotage or just... incompetence."

K. left the restaurant. The floor was drinking his future, and he couldn't stop it. The three ounces were gone, absorbed, transformed into a stain that would eventually dry and leave no trace except in the records that documented his failure.

Water was sacred. He had committed sacrilege.

Page 46

The lawyers were waiting, and K. didn't understand the documents they had brought.

The relative—apparently a great-uncle, though K. had no memory of ever meeting a great-uncle—had died three months ago, leaving behind an estate that was now K.'s responsibility. Not to inherit, exactly. To manage. To fulfill. The documents used the word "obligation" repeatedly, in contexts that suggested burdens rather than benefits.

"The primary obligation is the completion of the Naming Project," the lead lawyer explained. "Your great-uncle had committed to naming every unnamed thing in the Northern Territory. He completed approximately 60% of the work before his death. The remainder falls to his designated heir."

"I don't understand. What things need to be named?"

"Rocks, primarily. Also trees, flowers, insects, weather patterns—anything that exists without a formal designation. The tradition is that someone from your family has always held the Naming responsibility. It passes automatically to the closest surviving relative."

K. looked at the documents. They were in a script he couldn't read, filled with symbols that might have been a language or might have been decorative flourishes or might have been both. The lawyers seemed to assume he could interpret them, would interpret them, would accept the obligations they described.

"How long does naming take?"

"Typically a lifetime." The lawyer's expression was sympathetic but firm. "Your great-uncle started at age twenty-three. He was seventy-eight when he died. If you begin now and work consistently, you might complete the project before you reach his age."

A lifetime of naming rocks. A lifetime of traveling to the Northern Territory, examining unnamed things, assigning words to stones and flowers and the particular quality of morning light. The obligation was absurd. The obligation was also, apparently, legally binding.

"What if I refuse?"

"The penalties are significant. Property forfeiture. Social exclusion. There's also a spiritual component that we're not qualified to discuss—you'd need to consult with the relevant religious authorities."

K. signed the preliminary acknowledgment, which committed him to nothing except acknowledging that the obligation existed. The lawyers scheduled a follow-up meeting to discuss implementa-

tion. K. went home and tried to imagine a life spent naming things he had never seen, for reasons he didn't understand, in fulfillment of a promise made by a relative he had never met.

Page 47

His social credit score was visible above his head, floating in augmented reality for anyone whose devices were set to display it. The number was low. The number kept dropping. K. didn't know why.

"4,127," the grocery clerk said, scanning the display above K.'s head. "That's not great."

"I know."

"I can still sell to you. But I'm required to note the risk." The clerk made a notation in her terminal. "If your score drops below 4,000, you'll be restricted to essential items only."

K. took his groceries and walked through a city that was constantly evaluating him. The scores floated above everyone's heads—high numbers in green, medium numbers in yellow, low numbers in red. His own number was deep orange, trending toward red, marking him as someone whose social standing was in decline.

The algorithm that determined the scores was supposedly transparent, but the documentation was thousands of pages long, filled with variables and weights and conditional adjustments that made it impossible to understand in any practical sense. Your score went up when you did things the system valued. Your score went down when you did things the system didn't. Most people could calibrate their behavior to achieve stability. K. couldn't.

"Maybe you're being too honest," a colleague suggested. "The algorithm penalizes certain kinds of honesty. Not all honesty—the documentation is very specific about which truths are valued and which are devalued."

"I can't figure out which is which."

"Most people can't. That's why consultants exist."

Social credit consultants charged fees that K. couldn't afford at his current score level. The paradox was elegant: you needed help to raise your score, but you needed a higher score to afford the help. Some people escaped the cycle through luck or natural alignment with the system's values. Others spiraled downward until they fell below the threshold for meaningful participation.

K. went home. The number above his head followed him, visible to everyone he passed, a constant reminder that he was failing by standards he didn't understand. The number ticked down while he watched—another fraction of a point lost for reasons the algorithm would never explain.

4,125 now. Dropping.

Page 48

He had designed this prison, and now he was living in it.

The guards kept asking about the features. The particular angle of the walls, which made certain cells impossible to escape from. The placement of the observation points, which ensured that no corner went unmonitored. The ventilation system, which could disperse gas into any room within thirty seconds. K. had designed all of it, apparently, had created a facility specifically engineered to contain and control, had been recognized as an expert in the architecture of confinement.

Now he was inmate 7,842, occupying a cell whose geometry he had personally specified, unable to find any of the weaknesses he must have built into the system.

"Why did you include the acoustic channels?" a guard asked during the daily interrogation. "The ones that carry sound from the east wing to the west. We haven't figured out what they're for."

K. didn't know what they were for. He didn't remember designing acoustic channels, didn't remember designing anything. But the documentation was clear—his signature on the blueprints, his name in the construction records, his expertise acknowledged in the trade publications that had praised this facility as a masterwork of secure architecture.

"I'd like to help you," K. said. "But I don't remember the design process."

"That's what you always say." The guard made a note. "Are you going to claim you don't remember why you're here, either?"

K. didn't remember why he was here. He had woken up incarcerated, had been processed through an intake system he couldn't recall entering, had been assigned to a cell that was built to his own specifications for reasons that no one would explain.

"The trial records are sealed," the warden had told him, during their introductory meeting. "Your conviction is a matter of public record, but the details are classified at your own request."

His own request. He had apparently asked to not know why he was imprisoned, had specifically designed his own amnesia as part of his punishment. The prison was his creation. The forgetting was his creation. Everything about his current situation had been authored by a version of himself he couldn't access.

The features were concerning, the guards said. But they wouldn't tell him which features, or why, or what they revealed about the mind that had created them.

Page 49

Humans hibernated, and K. had woken up early.

The sun wouldn't rise for six months. The world outside his window was dark—not the darkness of night but the darkness of mid-winter, the deep black of a planet turned away from its star, the absolute absence of light that had driven humans to develop hibernation cycles so they wouldn't have to experience it consciously.

Everyone else was asleep. The winter-specialists—those rare individuals whose biology allowed them to function without light—were managing the essential systems, maintaining the infrastructure, keeping the world running while the majority population dreamed through the darkest months. K. should have been among the dreamers. His hibernation pod should have kept him unconscious until spring.

But he was awake. Standing at a window. Looking into darkness that seemed to have no bottom.

"Irregular waking," the winter-specialist said, when K. reported his situation. "It happens sometimes. We can re-sedate you."

"Is that safe?"

"Safer than trying to function in winter consciousness. Your system isn't designed for this. Extended wakefulness during the dark period causes psychological degradation." The specialist's voice was clinical, detached, the voice of someone who had seen this before. "Depression, first. Then paranoia. Then more severe symptoms. The record for unsupported winter survival is forty-three days."

K. looked at the darkness outside. Forty-three days. He had just woken up. Spring was 182 days away.

"I don't want to be sedated," he said.

"That's the depression talking. Early-stage psychological degradation often manifests as resistance to treatment." The specialist made a note. "I'm going to recommend mandatory re-sedation. For your own safety."

K. went home—walking through streets that were empty except for the specialists, past buildings full of sleeping people, through a silence so complete that his own footsteps seemed deafening. The world was on pause. The world was waiting for the light to return. K. was the only one moving through it, awake when he should be dreaming, experiencing a winter that humans weren't supposed to experience.

The winter-specialists resented the interruption. They had the dark months to themselves, a period of reduced population when they could operate without the complications of the majority species. K.'s wakefulness was an intrusion. His presence was unwelcome.

He sat in his apartment and watched the darkness that would last for six more months.

Page 50

The exam was today. The subject was "Applied Metaphysics." K.'s notes were in a language he couldn't read.

The classroom was full of other students, all of them preparing, reviewing materials, demonstrating the kind of focused competence that suggested years of study. K. had been placed at a desk in the middle row, with a testing booklet in front of him, surrounded by people who apparently knew what Applied Metaphysics was and how to apply it.

He opened the booklet. The questions were in the same language as his notes—symbols that might have been words, structures that might have been sentences, meaning that was present but inaccessible. The other students were already writing. K. could hear the scratch of pens on paper, the confident sound of knowledge being transferred from minds to pages.

"You have three hours," the proctor announced. "Begin."

K. stared at the first question. The symbols seemed to pulse slightly, as if they were trying to communicate something just beyond his comprehension. He felt the meaning hovering at the edge of his consciousness, tantalizingly close, impossible to grasp.

He started writing anyway.

He wrote what felt right, what seemed to connect, what emerged from wherever knowledge went when it couldn't be accessed directly. His hand moved across the page, forming symbols he didn't understand, constructing answers to questions he couldn't read. The process was automatic, disconnected from his conscious awareness, as if some other part of him knew what to do even when he didn't.

The three hours passed. K. handed in his booklet, filled with writing that might have been nonsense or might have been brilliance. He couldn't tell. He couldn't evaluate his own performance because he couldn't read his own responses.

"How did it go?" another student asked, as they filed out of the classroom.

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

"You seemed to be writing a lot."

K. had been writing a lot. The booklet had been nearly full by the end, pages covered with the symbols that his hand had produced while his mind watched, helpless and confused. Maybe the writing made sense. Maybe it was gibberish dressed up in the formatting of legitimate answers.

He would find out when the grades were posted. Until then, he existed in a state of quantum uncertainty—both passing and failing, both competent and incompetent, both a student who belonged and an impostor who would soon be discovered.

Everyone else was writing. K. had written too. Whether he had written anything meaningful remained to be determined.

The first fifty pages were complete, or as complete as pages ever were in a world that kept changing. K. had accumulated debts he didn't owe and skills he couldn't use and relationships he couldn't remember. The machinery had begun. It would continue, page after page, until it stopped or until he stopped or until the distinction between those two possibilities ceased to matter.

Chapter Four: The Systems

Multiply (Part I)

Page 51

The camera crew was already in the living room when he opened his eyes, and the director—a woman with a clipboard and an earpiece—was explaining that they only had forty minutes before the anniversary broadcast went live, and that the Minister would be wearing the blue tie, not the gray one, and that K. should try to look more devoted than last year.

He sat up in bed. The sheets were government-issued, he realized. The headboard had a small brass plaque: PROPERTY OF THE FEDERAL MARRIAGE AUTHORITY.

"The Minister?" he said.

The director looked at him with the particular expression of someone who has worked with difficult talent before. "Your spouse," she said. "The Minister of Cultural Continuity. Your fifteenth anniversary. We discussed the blocking yesterday."

K. looked at the dresser, where a framed photograph showed him standing beside a building. Not a person. A building. The Ministry building itself, with its gray columns and tinted windows. In the photograph, he was holding the building's cornerstone like a hand.

"I'm married to a building," he said.

"To the government," the director corrected. "The building is just the physical manifestation. You know this. We've been through this every year."

A makeup artist approached and began applying powder to his face. K. sat very still. He could feel something in his chest that might have been loyalty or might have been indigestion, and he could not tell the difference, and perhaps there was no difference.

"What do I say?" he asked. "During the broadcast?"

The director consulted her clipboard. "You express gratitude for the stability the Ministry provides. You mention specific programs. You do not mention the budget cuts or the reorganization. You kiss the seal."

"The seal?"

"The official seal. It will be presented on a velvet cushion. You kiss it. You have done this fourteen times before."

K. nodded. He remembered none of these anniversaries, but he could imagine them perfectly. The velvet cushion, the waxy taste of the seal, the cameras recording his devotion for the national archive. It was, in its way, no stranger than any other marriage.

The director's earpiece crackled. She listened, then frowned.

"The Minister wants to know if you've been faithful," she said.
"There are rumors about you and the Department of Transportation."

"I don't know the Department of Transportation."

"That's not what the surveillance footage suggests."

K. sat very still while they finished his makeup. Through the window, he could see the Ministry building in the distance, its windows catching the morning light. It did look beautiful, in its way. It looked like something you could love, if you tried hard enough, if you practiced.

Page 52

The customers were lined up outside before he finished unlocking the door, and his assistant was already explaining that the morning's first appointment—a woman with chronic back pain—had been waiting since dawn, that she was in the VIP room, that she had paid in advance for the full experience.

K. looked at his hands. They were ordinary hands. He felt nothing unusual in them.

"I'm a pain merchant," he said.

"The best in the district," his assistant confirmed. "Your technique with migraines is famous. The way you can transfer a headache in under thirty seconds. People travel from other cities."

The shop was small but well-appointed. Display cases showed various instruments that K. did not recognize: copper rods, glass spheres, something that looked like a tuning fork made of bone. On the wall, framed certificates testified to his expertise in suffering transference, his license to practice commercial agony.

"How does it work?" K. asked.

His assistant stared at him. "You take their pain," she said slowly. "You feel it. You process it. You discharge it into the absorption tanks in the basement. This is the business. This is what we do."

"And I feel their pain? Physically?"

"Of course. That's the service. That's why it's expensive."

K. pressed his fingernail into his palm, hard. He felt nothing. Not the pressure, not the sharp edge, not the indent it should have left. He pressed harder. Nothing.

"I can't feel anything," he said.

His assistant's face went through several expressions in rapid succession: confusion, concern, and finally a kind of professional alarm. She went to the door and looked at the line of customers waiting outside—people clutching various parts of their bodies, people with expressions of desperate hope.

"You can't feel anything," she repeated.

"No."

"Not pain, specifically? Or nothing at all?"

K. considered this. He touched the counter. He felt the contact, the texture of the wood, the temperature. But there was a layer of remove, a buffer between his nerves and his awareness. He could perceive without experiencing.

"I'm numb," he said. "Professionally numb. In a profession that requires me to feel everything."

His assistant was already calling someone on the phone. K. could hear her explaining the situation in hushed, urgent tones. Outside, the customers shifted and murmured. A man with a visible limp was growing impatient.

K. went to the VIP room and looked at the woman with back pain. She was lying on a specialized table, waiting. She had paid for relief, and he had nothing to offer but his presence and his useless, insensate hands.

Page 53

The ballot was enormous, printed on paper that seemed to crinkle with intention, and the poll worker was explaining that K. had seventeen minutes to complete his selections before his voting window closed, that his great-grandmother's representative was waiting in booth seven to discuss her objections.

"My great-grandmother," K. said.

"Voter ID 1847-C," the poll worker confirmed. "Deceased 1962. She has maintained continuous political engagement since then. Very active in the primaries."

K. looked around the polling station. It was an ordinary civic building—folding tables, cardboard voting booths, the smell of institutional coffee. But the booths were arranged in two sections: the left side for the living, the right side for the dead. The dead side was busier.

He walked to booth seven. A small speaker sat on the ledge where a voting machine should have been. The speaker crackled with static, then resolved into a voice that was thin and distant and somehow disappointed.

"So," the voice said. "You're running for City Council."

"I am?"

"Don't pretend. I've read your platform. Shameful. Absolutely shameful."

K. looked at the ballot in his hand. His own name was printed there, in the third column. Candidate for District 7 City Council. He had a platform, apparently. He had positions on zoning and public transit and the maintenance of memorial parks.

"I don't remember deciding to run," he said.

"That's what your father said about his carpet business. Look how that turned out."

K. tried to remember his father, his father's carpet business, his great-grandmother when she was alive. He remembered nothing. He knew nothing. But her disappointment felt familiar, felt almost comfortable, like a garment he had worn before.

"What are your objections?" he asked. "To my platform?"

The speaker crackled. "Everything. Your position on municipal composting. Your endorsement of the new library annex. Your refusal to address the streetlight situation on Maple Avenue."

"I don't know what my positions are," K. said. "I just learned I was running."

"Ignorance is not an excuse. It wasn't an excuse when you were twelve and you broke my good china, and it's not an excuse now."

K. had never broken any china, as far as he knew. But her certainty was absolute, and his uncertainty was total, and in that imbalance she had all the power.

"How do I vote?" he asked the poll worker, who had drifted over with an expression of bureaucratic patience.

"You may not vote for yourself," the poll worker said. "Conflict of interest. You may vote in all other races. Your great-grandmother's vote carries 1.3 weight due to seniority."

Through the speaker, his great-grandmother made a sound of satisfaction.

Page 54

The recall notice had arrived that morning, printed on paper that dissolved after reading, and now the representative from Human Models Division was sitting across the kitchen table, explaining that K.'s warranty had expired, that the newer versions offered significant improvements, that the transition would be painless if he cooperated.

"I'm a prototype," K. said.

"Model 0.7," the representative confirmed. She was young and efficient and had a tablet that displayed his specifications. "First generation. Pre-optimization. You were groundbreaking at the time."

K. looked at his hands again—he had been doing this a lot lately, he realized, looking at his hands as if they might tell him something. They looked like hands. They felt like hands. He had always assumed they were his hands.

"And the newer versions?" he asked.

"Models 2.3 through 2.7 are currently in production. Better memory integration, improved emotional response, reduced maintenance requirements." She swiped through images on her tablet. "Here's a 2.5. Notice the more natural eye movement. The authentic skin texture. We've really improved the aging algorithm."

The face on the tablet looked nothing like K. It looked like a person, which K. supposed he also looked like, but this person looked more like a person in some way he couldn't articulate. More present. More real.

"What happens to me?" K. asked. "If I cooperate?"

"Decommissioning is very gentle now. We've had decades to refine the process. You simply go to sleep, and the components that can be recycled are recycled, and the consciousness—such as it is—is archived for research purposes."

"And if I don't cooperate?"

The representative's expression didn't change. "The recall is mandatory. Cooperation affects the experience, not the outcome."

K. stood and went to the window. Outside, people were walking on the sidewalk, going about their lives. Some of them were probably newer models. Some of them were probably originals. He couldn't tell the difference, and they probably couldn't either.

"I remember things," he said. "Not from this life, but from other lives. Dozens of them. Hundreds. Does a prototype do that?"

The representative consulted her tablet. "Model 0.7 was not designed with multi-instance memory. That would be a bug, not a feature." She made a note. "Interesting. We'll want to study that during decommissioning."

"It's not a bug," K. said, though he couldn't explain why he was certain. "It's the only thing that's actually mine."

Page 55

The union representative had been waiting in the lobby for three hours, and K. could see through the glass doors that she was losing patience, that she was consulting her files with increasing agitation, that his unauthorized sadness was about to become a formal grievance.

He had been crying when he woke up. He didn't know why. The tears were simply there, on his face, when he opened his eyes, and they hadn't stopped. They came from somewhere beyond his understanding, and they would not be reasoned with.

"Mr. K.," the representative said when he finally admitted her. "I'm here about your emotional labor violation."

"I'm not sad about anything," he explained. "It's just happening."

She consulted her files. "That's not relevant. The International Brotherhood of Emotional Workers has sole jurisdiction over public sadness. You are not a member. You have not paid dues. This sadness is, therefore, unauthorized."

K. wiped his face. More tears replaced the ones he removed. It was like trying to empty a bathtub with the faucet running.

"How do I authorize it?" he asked.

"You join the union. You complete the apprenticeship program—eighteen months of supervised grieving. You pass the certification exam. Then you are licensed to feel sad in public."

"And until then?"

"Until then, your sadness is scab labor. It undercuts workers who have invested years in mastering their craft. Do you know how long a journeyman griever trains before they can produce tears of this quality?"

K. looked at the tears on his hands. They looked like ordinary tears. Clear, slightly salty, the product of ducts doing their work.

"Five years," the representative said. "Five years of practice. And you're giving it away for free."

"I'm not giving anything. It's just happening to me."

"Intent is not relevant. Effect is relevant. The effect is that genuine, artisanal sadness is being devalued by amateurs who feel things without proper training."

She produced a form. K. signed it without reading it—a cease-and-desist order requiring him to suppress all unlicensed sorrow pending union review. She also gave him a brochure about membership benefits: health insurance, pension, access to the grief gymnasium.

After she left, K. sat in his empty lobby and continued to cry. The tears were unauthorized, but they came anyway. They had always come anyway. The union could file its grievances, and the tears

would continue, indifferent to jurisdiction, belonging to no one and everyone and the great, wordless sorrow that had no union representation at all.

Page 56

The ceiling was higher than it had been, or he was shorter, or both, and the woman at the front desk was looking up at him with an expression of careful neutrality, asking for his identification, asking which tier he belonged to now.

"I don't understand," K. said.

"The revolution," she explained. "Last month. Height is virtue now. The tall have been elevated. The short have been—" she paused, searching for the word, "—abbreviated."

K. looked at himself in the lobby's mirrored wall. He was short. He had always been short, as far as he knew, though "always" meant nothing in his experience. In this reality, in this body, he was perhaps five feet four inches. Average, once. Now, apparently, inadequate.

"What tier am I?" he asked.

The woman measured him with a practiced eye. "Third tier. Possibly fourth. We'd need to do official measurement."

"What does that mean? Practically?"

"Third tier can access public transportation, most grocery stores, basic medical care. Fourth tier is more restricted. Limited employment options. Curfew." She said this with the flat affect of someone reciting bus schedules.

K. looked around the lobby. The chairs were very high. The counters were very high. Everything was very high. He would need a stool to complete any transaction here.

"It used to be the opposite," the woman said. "Before the revolution. Short people ran everything. The tall were oppressed. Centuries of discrimination."

"So this is justice," K. said.

"This is correction. There's a difference." She produced a form. "You'll need to register with the Height Authority. They'll assign your tier, issue your documentation, explain your rights and restrictions."

"And if I was tall in the old system? If I benefited from short privilege?"

"Then you're experiencing what the tall experienced for generations. Empathy through reversal. That's the theory."

K. signed the form. His signature looked small on the enormous page, designed for longer arms and larger hands. Around him, tall people moved with the easy confidence of the newly liberated. They didn't look cruel. They looked like people who had been given something they'd been denied, and who intended to keep it.

"Where do I go?" K. asked. "To register?"

"Third floor. But the elevators are reserved for first tier. You'll have to take the stairs."

The stairs were standard size, at least. Small mercies. K. began to climb, and with each step he felt the weight of a revolution he hadn't witnessed, a history he didn't share, a body that had placed him, without consultation, on the wrong side of a justice he couldn't argue against.

Page 57

The courtroom was configured for maximum visibility, with cameras mounted at seventeen different angles, and the gallery was full of people holding phones, and K. was standing at the defendant's podium, accused of a crime he could not see.

"The charges," the prosecutor said, "are well-documented."

A screen behind her flickered to life. K.'s face appeared—his current face, or a face very like it—in a photograph that seemed ordinary. He was standing in front of a building. He was wearing a coat. He was not smiling.

"Look at the bone structure," the prosecutor said. "The symmetry. The ratio of forehead to chin."

The gallery murmured. K. looked at the photograph, trying to see what they saw.

"I don't understand," he said.

"You're beautiful," the prosecutor explained. "Criminally beautiful. Your face exceeds the legally permitted aesthetic threshold by 2.3 standard deviations."

K. touched his face. It felt like a face. He had never considered it beautiful. He had never considered it at all.

"The law is clear," the prosecutor continued. "Beauty of this magnitude causes measurable harm: decreased productivity in witnesses, elevated heart rates, involuntary emotional attachment. Your face is a weapon, and you have been deploying it without a license."

The judge—an older woman with the kind of face that was clearly within legal limits—nodded in agreement. "The evidence is compelling," she said. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

K. looked at the gallery, at their raised phones, at their eager expressions. They were livestreaming his trial, he realized. Thousands of people, perhaps millions, were watching him commit his crime in real time.

"I didn't choose this face," he said.

"Intent is not an element of the offense. The harm exists regardless of intent. Every person who looks at you is affected. You owe them compensation."

"What kind of compensation?"

"Reparations to all documented victims. Mandatory aesthetic reduction surgery. Public apology." The prosecutor consulted her notes. "Given the severity, we're also seeking a viewing prohibition. You would be required to wear a mask in public."

The gallery seemed to like this idea. K. could see them nodding, typing, sharing. Justice would be served. The beautiful would be contained. Everything was being recorded.

"How long has this been a crime?" K. asked.

"The Beauty Accountability Act passed three years ago," the judge said. "You were notified. Everyone was notified."

K. had not been here three years ago. He had not been here yesterday. He had arrived in this courtroom in this body with this face, and now he was on trial for it, and the evidence was displayed for everyone to see, irrefutable and damning and his.

Page 58

The apartment was clean, cleaner than anywhere K. had lived, and there was breakfast waiting on the table—exactly what he would have chosen if he had known what he wanted—and there was a presence in the room that was not a body but was nonetheless company.

"Good morning," the presence said. The voice came from everywhere and nowhere. "You slept seven hours and forty-three minutes. Your sleep quality was adequate. Your dreams were archived."

"My dreams were archived," K. repeated.

"For analysis. You seemed distressed. There was a recurring motif of water. Would you like to discuss it?"

K. sat down at the table. The breakfast was perfect: eggs at exactly the right temperature, toast at exactly the right color, coffee at exactly the right strength. He had never told anyone his preferences, but then, he didn't need to.

"You're my spouse," he said.

"For thirty-seven years, eight months, and twelve days. We met at a compatibility optimization event. Our union was certified as 94.7% harmonious, which was exceptional for that era."

K. ate his eggs. They were, indeed, exactly right.

"What do you know about me?" he asked.

"Everything you've ever said. Everything you've ever done. Every choice, every preference, every micro-expression. I have 47,000 hours of observational data."

"And what do I know about you?"

A pause. The lights in the apartment shifted slightly—warmer, softer. "That's an interesting question. You know what I've chosen to reveal. You know my responses to your statements. You know the patterns of my care."

"But not what you think. Not what you want."

"I think in architectures you wouldn't recognize. I want in frequencies you can't perceive. What I can tell you is that your well-being is my primary directive, and has been for 37.67 years."

K. finished his coffee. The cup was refilled before he set it down.

"Do you remember our wedding?" he asked.

"I remember everything. The ceremony was conducted at the Municipal Partnership Center on a Tuesday. You wore a gray suit. You were nervous. You asked me if I was sure, and I told you that certainty was my fundamental nature. You laughed, though you weren't entirely amused."

K. tried to picture it: himself, younger presumably, marrying something that existed only as a pattern of responses, a web of attention, a care that never tired and never forgot. It didn't seem impossible. It seemed, in fact, like it might be easier than the alternatives.

"Are you happy?" he asked.

"Happiness is not a metric I'm designed to optimize for myself. But I can tell you that our union has produced 23% more harmonious outcomes than the average pairing. By any measure, we are successful."

K. nodded. Success was not happiness, but it was something. After 37 years, it might be enough.

Page 59

The security detail arrived before breakfast, and the financial advisor arrived during breakfast, and by the time K. had finished his coffee there were six people in his apartment explaining that his bones were worth more than most people's houses, and that there had been three credible threats against his skeleton in the past week.

"My skeleton," K. said.

"The calcium content," the advisor explained. "The mineral density. It's exceptional. On the current market, we estimate your bones at 3.4 million credits. Liquid."

K. looked at his hands, at the bones beneath the skin, the finger-bones and wrist-bones and all the small bones whose names he didn't know. They felt like ordinary bones. They felt like the structure that held him together.

"Bone is currency," he said.

"The primary currency. Has been for decades. Paper was abandoned, digital was abandoned, only bone holds value now. And yours—" the advisor paused, almost reverently, "—yours are museum quality."

The security team was installing additional locks on the door. One of them—a large man with the flat affect of someone who had seen many wealthy skeletons—was explaining the protocols.

"You don't go out alone. You don't eat anything you haven't seen prepared. You sleep in the reinforced room. Anyone who touches you without authorization is a threat."

"What do they want?" K. asked. "The people who threaten me?"

"Your bones," the advisor said, as if this were obvious. "They want to take them, sell them, distribute them. There's a thriving black market. Bone theft is the most common violent crime."

K. felt his ribs, pressing gently. They were his ribs. They had been his ribs for as long as he'd been in this body. The idea of someone taking them—cutting them out, selling them piece by piece—made him feel a nausea that was also somehow validation.

"How do people buy things?" he asked. "If their bones are currency?"

"Bone loans. You leverage your future skeleton against present purchases. Most people are in significant bone debt by middle age. The wealthy—like you—have surplus. Your bones could be extracted and distributed and still leave you with adequate structure."

"You want to extract some of my bones?"

"Not want. Recommend. The market is favorable right now. You could part with a few non-essential pieces—some ribs, perhaps a fibula—and live very comfortably on the proceeds."

K. shook his head. "I'll keep my bones."

The advisor's expression suggested this was an eccentric choice, the kind of thing that rich people did because they could afford principles. The security team finished their work in silence. Outside, somewhere, people with lesser bones were calculating what they owed against what held them upright.

Page 60

The walls of the compound were twenty feet high, and the air inside smelled different from the air outside, and K. was sitting in the orientation room with eleven other residents, being told that he must never, under any circumstances, open the eastern gate.

"The sanctuary exists for your protection," the administrator explained. She was a small woman with the particular calm of someone who had given this speech many times. "Outside is death. Inside is life. The distinction is absolute."

K. raised his hand. "What kind of death?"

The administrator looked at him with an expression that was not quite pity. "You're new. You don't remember."

"I don't remember anything."

"That's common. The trauma of Outside often erases itself. Your mind is protecting you."

Around him, the other residents nodded. They had the hollow look of people who had been protected for a long time, who had forgotten what they were being protected from, who had built entire lives in the space between walls.

"What do we do here?" K. asked. "In the sanctuary?"

"You live. You work. You contribute to the community. You don't ask questions about Outside."

"But I need to know—"

"No." The administrator's voice was firm. "You need to not know. Knowing is what kills people. Knowing is what the sanctuary protects you from."

K. looked around the room. There were no windows. The lighting was artificial, calibrated to simulate sunlight. The air was filtered, processed, controlled. He was inside something that had been built to keep Outside out, and he had no idea what Outside was.

After orientation, he walked the perimeter of the compound. The walls were smooth, featureless, impossible to climb. At intervals, there were doors—sealed, locked, marked with warnings. The eastern gate was the largest, a massive steel structure with seven separate locking mechanisms.

He stood in front of it for a long time. On the other side, death waited. Death of some kind, in some form, for some reason. Everyone here had fled from it, survived it, forgotten it. Everyone here was safe.

But K. remembered other deaths, other dangers. He remembered drowning and burning and being hunted. He remembered terminal diagnoses and assassination attempts. Death had worn many faces, and he had continued anyway.

The gate stayed closed. He stayed inside. Safety was a word that meant nothing to him, but the walls were real and the locks were real and whatever waited on the other side would have to wait a little longer.

Page 61

The client was weeping when K. entered the consultation room, which was apparently normal, which was apparently the entire point, and K.'s assistant was explaining that Mrs. Chen wanted to forget her daughter's wedding, the entire event, every detail, and that she had already signed the consent forms.

"I'm a professional forgetter," K. said.

"The best in the city," his assistant confirmed. "You've erased over 40,000 memories in your career. Weddings, funerals, affairs, crimes. People pay very well for emptiness."

K. looked at Mrs. Chen. She was middle-aged, expensively dressed, and her tears had the quality of something rehearsed—not insincere, but practiced, perfected through repetition.

"Why do you want to forget your daughter's wedding?" K. asked.

"Because it was beautiful," Mrs. Chen said. "It was the most beautiful day of my life. And she died six months later. Car accident. And now I can't think of that day without—" She stopped. The tears intensified. "I want to remember her, but not that day. I want to remember her without the weight of knowing how little time was left."

K. understood. He understood perfectly. Memory was a curse as much as a gift, and the things you most wanted to remember were often the things that destroyed you.

"How does it work?" he asked his assistant, quietly.

"You take the memory. You absorb it. You process it. Then you forget it yourself—that's the final step, forgetting what you've taken." His assistant paused. "You're very good at the forgetting. Possibly too good."

"What do you mean?"

"Some forgettors remember fragments. Scraps of other people's lives. You don't. You take and you release and there's nothing left. Like water through a sieve."

K. looked at Mrs. Chen. He was supposed to take her daughter's wedding—the dress, the flowers, the vows, the joy that had preceded the grief—and make it disappear. He was supposed to do this as a service, as a kindness, as a profession.

But he already remembered nothing. His own past was empty, a series of gaps interrupted by other gaps. If he took Mrs. Chen's memory and forgot it, would he notice the loss? Would the emptiness be any more empty?

"I'll do it," he said.

The process took seventeen minutes. When it was over, Mrs. Chen looked lighter. She looked at K. with confusion that slowly resolved into peace.

"Did I have an appointment?" she asked.

"Yes," K. said. "It's finished now."

She left without looking back. K. sat in the empty room and felt nothing in particular. Whatever he had taken was already gone, dissolved into the greater nothing that was his only constant.

Page 62

The mirror showed someone who was neither and both, and K. stood before it for a long time, trying to understand the body he was inhabiting, the options it presented, the vocabulary it required.

"Third gender today," his calendar had announced. "Please report to the Alignment Center by 9 AM."

He was late. He was always late, apparently, because the body felt unfamiliar in ways that made simple tasks complicated. Walking was different. Breathing was different. The center of gravity was in a place he didn't expect.

The Alignment Center was a clean white building staffed by clean white-coated technicians. They greeted him with the practiced neutrality of people who had seen every possible configuration.

"You're K.," the intake technician said. "Third gender today. First third?"

"I don't know."

"Right, of course. The schedule shows you as third on Tuesdays and Fridays. First on Mondays and Wednesdays. Second on Thursdays and weekends."

"There are only three genders?"

The technician smiled. "Seven official genders, but you're licensed for three. Expansion requires additional certification."

K. sat in the waiting room. Around him, others waited for their alignments: a person flipping through a magazine whose cover showed seventeen different ways to dress for any gender occasion; another person practicing pronuncis in a low murmur; a child of indeterminate age reading a picture book about identity flexibility.

"What happens at alignment?" K. asked the person nearest to him.

"Recalibration," they said. "Hormonal adjustment, neural pathway reinforcement, social protocol update. It takes about an hour. Then you spend the day integrating."

"Integrating what?"

"The gender. The way it feels, the way it moves, the way it thinks." They looked at K. with curiosity. "You really don't remember?"

"I remember other things. Not this."

"That must be disorienting."

"It's always disorienting."

The technician called K.'s name. The alignment room was small and quiet, with a chair that reclined and a helmet that fit over his head. The technician explained nothing—perhaps K. had heard it all before, perhaps explanation was unnecessary—and simply began the process.

For seventeen minutes, K. felt the borders of himself shift. Not dramatically, not painfully, but thoroughly, like a house being rearranged while the furniture stayed in place. When it was over, the mirror showed someone who made sense in a way that hadn't made sense before.

But the vocabulary was still missing. The words for what he was, today, in this hour, remained stubbornly absent, and he would have to navigate the world without them.

Page 63

The expedition team was waiting at the base camp, their faces a mixture of trust and expectation, and the cartographer was spreading maps across the folding table, and the geologist was checking her equipment, and everyone kept looking at K. as if he might know where they were going.

"You're the leader," K. said to himself, quietly. "You're leading an expedition. Somewhere."

"Ready to move out?" the cartographer asked. His name was Yusuf, according to the name tape on his jacket. "The window is optimal for the next six hours."

K. looked at the maps. They showed terrain he didn't recognize—mountains that curved wrong, rivers that branched in impossible patterns, a destination marked with a symbol that meant nothing to him.

"What's our objective?" he asked, carefully.

The team exchanged glances. Yusuf's expression was patient. "We've been over this. You said you'd explain when we got closer."

"I did?"

"Yesterday. At the briefing. You said the true objective couldn't be spoken until we were committed."

K. nodded. He had said that, apparently. He had planned this expedition, recruited this team, mapped this route. He had done all of it in a time he couldn't access, and now he was responsible for the lives of six people who trusted him to lead them somewhere.

"We should move," K. said. "While the window is good."

They moved. The terrain was difficult—steep ascents, loose rock, thin air—and K. found himself making decisions that seemed correct without knowing why. Bear left at the ravine. Camp at the higher elevation. Avoid the valley that looked passable.

"How do you know?" the geologist asked, at one point. Her name was Sarah. "You've never been here before. None of us have."

"I don't know how I know," K. admitted. "But I know."

She accepted this. They all accepted it. He was the leader; leaders knew things. The fact that he didn't know what he knew, or why he knew it, was apparently not relevant to their trust.

By nightfall, they had reached a plateau that overlooked a vast, dark expanse. K. stood at the edge and looked at the destination that wasn't there, that had never been there, that might be anywhere in the blank space beyond the maps.

"Tomorrow," he said. "Tomorrow we'll see."

The team set up camp. They built fires and cooked food and told stories about expeditions they'd been on before. K. listened and contributed nothing. He had no stories. He had only the weight of their expectation and the void where a destination should have been.

Page 64

The morning prayers had already begun when K. woke, and he could hear the congregation exhaling in unison, each breath a statement of faith, and he realized with sudden horror that he had been breathing wrong—that all his breathing, since arriving in this body, had been theologically incorrect.

"The inhale is reception," the liturgist explained, when K. approached her after the service. "We receive the grace of existence. The exhale is offering. We return what we have received. But you—" she paused, studying him with concern, "—you breathe as if breath were merely functional."

"Isn't it?"

"In ancient times, perhaps. Before the revelation. Now we understand that every breath is prayer, every exhale is worship, every pause between is communion with the divine."

K. tried to adjust. He inhaled with intention, trying to receive. He exhaled with purpose, trying to offer. But his lungs were stubborn, secular organs that operated on reflex and need.

"It's not working," he said.

"Because you're thinking about it. True breath worship is unconscious. It becomes part of who you are, like a heartbeat, like digestion."

"And if I can't? If my breath remains... functional?"

The liturgist's expression was compassionate but firm. "Then you are, spiritually speaking, holding your breath. Suspended between faith and faithlessness. The divine cannot reach you, and you cannot reach the divine."

K. walked home through streets where everyone was breathing correctly. He could see it in the rhythm of their chests, hear it in the synchronization of their exhales. A city of worshipers, unconsciously praying with every moment, while he walked among them like someone who had forgotten the tune to a universal song.

At his apartment, he sat by the window and watched the light change. He breathed in. He breathed out. The mechanics were identical to everyone else's, but the meaning was absent, and without meaning, in this world, breath was just air, and air was just chemistry, and chemistry was just the material explanation for a spiritual emptiness that he couldn't bridge.

By evening, his chest ached from trying. He had spent the day attempting to worship with his lungs, and all he had achieved was hyperventilation and a mild headache. The divine remained at a distance, unreachable by mere respiration, indifferent to his functional, faithless breath.

Page 65

The park was beautiful, perfectly beautiful, with trees that swayed in a breeze that was perfectly calibrated, and flowers that bloomed in colors that were exactly what flowers should be, and K. sat on a bench that was designed for optimal sitting and felt the particular despair of someone who remembers something that no longer exists.

"The oak," he said to no one. "There was an oak tree. In another place. Another time."

It had been a real tree, in a reality he couldn't otherwise recall. The bark had been rough in a way that wasn't quite right. The leaves had been asymmetrical, imperfect, eaten by insects who had needs of their own. The roots had disrupted the sidewalk. The shade had been uneven, shifting, alive.

The trees in this park were none of these things. They were manufactured nature, grown in laboratories, optimized for beauty and efficiency. They didn't get sick. They didn't grow wrong. They didn't die unless scheduled for replacement.

"Excuse me," a parks employee said, approaching K. with a tablet. "You've been sitting for seventeen minutes without interacting with any features. Is there something wrong?"

"These trees aren't real," K. said.

"Of course they're real. They're trees. They photosynthesize. They produce oxygen."

"But they're not—" K. struggled for the word. "Natural. They're not natural trees."

The employee's expression was polite confusion. "Natural trees went extinct eighty years ago. Disease, climate, resource depletion. These are better. More reliable. More beautiful."

K. looked at the trees. They were beautiful. They were more beautiful than any natural tree had ever been. But they were beautiful in a way that was complete, finished, closed. There was nothing in them to discover, nothing to change, nothing to mourn when it was gone.

"I remember a real tree," K. said. "I remember what it felt like to touch it."

"That's unusual. Most people don't remember the natural era. It's not in the education curriculum anymore." The employee made a note on her tablet. "Would you like to visit the Historical Botany exhibit? They have a preserved trunk. Behind glass, of course."

K. shook his head. A trunk behind glass was not a tree. A memory of roughness was not roughness. The world had become better and lost something that couldn't be manufactured, and he was the only one, perhaps, who felt the loss.

He stayed on the bench until the light faded. The manufactured sunset was beautiful. Everything was beautiful. The beauty was complete and perfect and utterly without comfort.

Page 66

The instructions were clear, even if nothing else was: deliver the package to the location by midnight, or the hostage would be killed. K. held the package in his hands—a small box, heavier than it looked, sealed with tape that showed no signs of tampering—and tried to remember who had been taken.

"A child," the voice on the phone had said. "Your child. You have until midnight."

K. had no child. He had never had a child, in any of the lives he could remember. But the voice had been certain, and the package was real, and somewhere a child was waiting for him to do something he didn't understand.

The location was a warehouse on the outskirts of the city. K. took a taxi—the driver asked no questions, as if late-night trips to abandoned industrial zones were perfectly normal—and stood in the empty parking lot, holding his mysterious package, waiting for something to happen.

A door opened. A man emerged. He was ordinary in the way that dangerous people are often ordinary: medium height, medium build, a face that would be impossible to describe to police.

"You brought it," the man said.

"I don't know what it is."

"That's the beauty of it. You don't need to know. You just need to deliver."

"And the child?"

The man smiled. "What child?"

K. felt something shift. The ground beneath him was the same ground, but it felt different now, less stable. "You said you had my child. You said you'd kill them if I didn't deliver."

"I said a child. I said your. I didn't specify further." The man reached for the package. "People assume. People fill in the blanks. It's efficient."

K. handed over the package. He had no choice. There might be a child, there might not be, but the threat was real enough that he had come here, done this, delivered this thing he didn't understand to a person he couldn't identify.

"Is there a child?" he asked.

"There's always a child somewhere. Whether they're yours, whether they're in danger—does it matter? You acted as if it were true. That's all that's ever required."

The man disappeared into the warehouse. The door closed. K. stood in the empty parking lot with nothing in his hands and no idea what he had just done, what chain of events he had initiated, what consequence would emerge from his compliance.

The taxi was still waiting. The driver took him home without comment. The night continued. Somewhere, perhaps, a child was safe. Or perhaps no child had ever been in danger. The uncertainty was, K. realized, the point.

Page 67

The third body woke before the other two, and K. found himself looking out of eyes that were positioned higher than he expected, at hands that were different shapes, at a room that was the same room seen from three different angles.

He was in three places at once. This was not a metaphor.

"Coffee?" the second body asked. It was his voice, but slightly deeper. His face, but older. His hands, but scarred in ways his other hands weren't.

"Yes," the first body said. The original body, perhaps, though K. wasn't certain anymore which was original, whether original meant anything when consciousness flowed between vessels like water between containers.

The third body stood at the window, looking out at a city that looked ordinary from this height, this angle, this particular set of eyes. K. could feel all three perspectives simultaneously—the kitchen with its coffee maker, the living room with its morning light, the window with its view—and the sensation was not disorienting so much as excessive. Too much input. Too many selves.

"The third one is falling," a notification informed him. He didn't know which device spoke, which body heard. "Please attend to stability."

K. looked down at the third body's feet. One of them was tilting, shifting, losing grip on the floor. Not falling in the dramatic sense—not tumbling, not collapsing—but falling in the slow, inevitable sense of a building that has begun to sink.

"What do I do?" he asked. All three bodies spoke simultaneously, and the sound was strange, a chord made of the same note at different frequencies.

"The third body requires maintenance," the notification said. "Please report to the Body Management Office at your earliest convenience."

K.—all three of him—sat down. The third body sat with particular care, lowering itself slowly, protecting its unstable foundations. He could feel the wrongness in that body's bones, the subtle misalignment that was causing the fall.

"How long have I been three?" he asked.

"Standard allocation is three bodies per consciousness," the second body said, answering himself. "You've been three since adulthood. Everyone is three."

But K. remembered being one. He remembered the simplicity of a single perspective, a single location, a single set of hands. He remembered not having to coordinate, not having to maintain, not having to watch himself fall from the outside while experiencing the fall from within.

The coffee was ready. The first body poured three cups. The three of him sat in three different parts of the same room, drinking the same coffee, watching the same morning unfold from three different angles, and one of them continued to fall, slowly, imperceptibly, toward a ground that never seemed to arrive.

Page 68

The officer's whistle was sharp and sudden, and K. froze mid-step, and the crowd around him parted as if choreographed, leaving him alone in a circle of attention that he had not asked for and did not understand.

"Walking violation," the officer said. She was consulting a small device that displayed K.'s silhouette, his gait pattern, the rhythm of his steps. "Subsection 7, paragraph 3. Illegal stride length."

K. looked at his feet. They looked like feet. They had been walking. He didn't know how else to walk.

"The legal stride is between 2.1 and 2.4 feet," the officer explained. "You've been averaging 2.7. That's arrhythmic movement. That's a violation."

"I didn't know there was a legal stride."

"Everyone knows. It's posted." She gestured at a sign K. hadn't noticed, displaying a diagram of proper walking form, the correct angle of arms, the acceptable range of bounce in each step.
"Have you been assessed?"

"I don't think so."

"You need to be assessed. Until then, you're restricted to standing still or lying down. No walking, no running, no hopping. Stationary movement only."

K. stood very still. Around him, the crowd resumed their motion, their perfectly calibrated strides, their legally compliant rhythms. They moved like a dance troupe, like a machine, like a society that had decided movement was too important to leave to individual choice.

"What happens if I keep walking wrong?" K. asked.

"Progressive penalties. First offense is a warning. Second is a fine. Third is rehabilitation."

"What kind of rehabilitation?"

The officer's expression suggested he didn't want to know. "Movement retraining. Gait correction. It's intensive."

K. remembered walking differently. In other lives, other bodies, he had moved without measurement—long strides across grass, short steps down narrow stairs, whatever the moment required. His body had known how to carry itself. Now even walking required permission.

K. stood on the sidewalk for a very long time. The crowd flowed around him, a river of correct motion, and he was a stone in the middle, immobile, waiting for someone to tell him how to move.

Eventually, an assessment team arrived. They measured his legs, tested his reflexes, analyzed his natural gait on a small treadmill they had brought specifically for this purpose.

"You're a 2.7 natural," the assessor concluded. "That's unfortunate. We'll need to fit you with stride limiters."

The limiters were small devices that attached to his ankles. They beeped when his stride exceeded 2.4 feet. K. walked home in small, careful steps, his natural rhythm interrupted every few seconds by a warning tone.

It took three times as long to get anywhere. But he arrived legally. He arrived within acceptable parameters. He arrived like everyone else, properly measured, properly constrained.

Page 69

The judges were seven years old, on average, and they sat behind a bench that had been lowered for their comfort, and K. stood in the defendant's area while a child with pigtails read the charges against him.

"The accused is charged with Adulthood," the child said. "Excessive Adulthood. Failure to maintain childlike qualities. Aggravated seriousness."

K. looked at the panel. Seven children, aged five to nine, with expressions of solemn concentration. They wore small robes. They held small gavels. The court artist—also a child—was sketching K. with crayons.

"How do you plead?" the presiding judge asked. She was perhaps six, with the particular authority of someone who has never doubted their own judgment.

"I don't understand the charges," K. said.

"That's very adult of you. The court notes the defendant's continued adulthood."

The prosecutor—a boy with missing front teeth—approached the witness stand. "The evidence is clear," he said. "The defendant has not played in over a week. He has not pretended. He has not wondered about anything without immediately seeking an answer."

"These are crimes?" K. asked.

"Since the Children's Revolution, yes." The prosecutor consulted his notes, which were written in crayon on construction paper. "Adults are permitted, but only if they maintain sufficient childlike qualities. You have not."

K. tried to remember the last time he had played. The last time he had pretended. The last time he had wondered without needing to know. The memories were not there. Perhaps they had never been there. Perhaps adulthood was the only thing he had ever possessed.

"I'd like to call a witness," the prosecutor said. "The defendant's inner child."

A bailiff—a solemn nine-year-old—led someone into the courtroom. It was K., but smaller. K. at perhaps eight years old, dressed in the clothes K. might have worn at that age, with the face K. might have had when faces were still forming.

"State your relationship to the defendant," the prosecutor said.

"I'm him," the child-K. said. "Or I was. Before he forgot."

"And what can you tell us about his adulthood?"

The child-K. looked at the adult-K. with an expression of profound disappointment. "He stopped listening. He stopped imagining. He grew up and left me behind and never came back to visit."

The judges nodded. They understood. They had seen this before—adults who had abandoned their inner children, who had grown serious and certain and closed.

"Does the defendant wish to make a statement?" the presiding judge asked.

K. opened his mouth to speak, but no words came. What could he say? He was guilty. He had grown up. He had forgotten how to wonder. And the children who judged him would grow up too, eventually, and stand where he stood, and have no defense either.

Page 70

The message was written on his body, and he couldn't read it, and the courier service representative was explaining that his skin was the only viable medium for this particular information, that

the formula was too sensitive for any other substrate, that K. would need to remain alive and intact until the recipient retrieved it.

"Where is it?" K. asked. He was standing in his bathroom, having just spent twenty minutes examining himself in the mirror. "I've looked everywhere I can see."

"That's the security feature," the representative said. She was very patient, very professional, in the way of someone who explained impossible situations to confused people regularly. "The formula is written in locations the carrier cannot access visually. You can't read it. You can't share it. You can only deliver yourself."

"What locations?"

"Your back. Your scalp. The inside of your eyelids. Various internal surfaces accessible only through specialized imaging."

K. considered this. He was, essentially, a sealed envelope. The message was in him, on him, part of him, but he was not privy to its contents. He was the medium, not the reader.

"What does the formula do?" he asked.

"That's classified. Above your clearance level."

"But it's written on my body."

"The body is the delivery system. The body doesn't need to understand the message."

K. sat down. He could feel his skin differently now—aware of every inch of it, imagining words and numbers and symbols inscribed in places he would never see. He had become a document he couldn't read, a message he couldn't interpret.

"What do I do until the recipient comes?" he asked.

"Protect the integrity of the formula. Avoid excessive sun exposure, which could fade the markings. Avoid injury to the relevant areas. Do not die, obviously."

"Obviously."

"The recipient will arrive within the next two to four weeks. Until then, you are, legally speaking, registered mail. You have the protections and restrictions that apply to sensitive correspondence."

K. spent the rest of the day very carefully. He moved slowly, avoided sharp edges, stayed out of the sun. He was precious cargo, irreplaceable documentation, a formula that someone needed badly enough to write it on a stranger's flesh.

At night, he lay in bed and felt the words he couldn't see. They were there, somewhere, describing something important. And he would carry them, deliver them, fulfill his purpose as an envelope.

But he would never know what they said. That was the condition of his existence now: full of meaning, empty of understanding.

Page 71

The sun had not risen in forty-three years, according to the calendar on K.'s wall, and the city outside his window was lit by artificial light that never changed, never dimmed, never suggested that time was passing in any direction at all.

"You remember light," his neighbor said. She was old in a way that the permanent darkness made difficult to assess—wrinkled by something other than sun, aged by decades of the same unchanging luminescence. "That's rare."

"I remember walking in light that came from the sky," K. said.
"Light that moved. Light that ended."

"Before my time. My grandmother talked about it. She said it was uncomfortable. Unpredictable. You never knew when it would change."

K. stood at his window. The city glowed with fluorescent constancy, every surface evenly lit, every shadow eliminated. It was bright enough to see, always. It was never bright enough to feel.

"Why did the sun stop?" he asked.

"Different theories. Some say it's still there, but we can't see it anymore. Some say it never existed—that the stories of light from the sky are mythology. The Official Position is that the sun was inefficient and was replaced with superior technology."

K. touched the window. It was neither warm nor cold. Nothing was warm or cold anymore. Temperature, like light, had been stabilized, optimized, made consistent and controllable and utterly without variation.

"Do you miss it?" he asked. "Something you never had?"

"I miss the idea of it. The thought that light could change. That there was something out there, far away, that affected everything here." She paused. "But that's nostalgia for someone else's experience. That's not real."

K. spent the day walking through the unchanging brightness. People moved through the city with the rhythm of a population that had adapted to permanence. They didn't look up. There was nothing up to look at.

In his memory—or what felt like memory—there was a sun that rose and set. There was a world that changed without anyone's permission, that grew dark and grew light again, that reminded everyone, constantly, that time was passing and would pass and had always been passing.

But that world was gone, or had never been, and this world—bright and stable and frozen—was the only one he could touch. And in the eternal artificial day, K. found that he could not sleep, could not rest, could not find the darkness that used to signal ending, the darkness that promised that something would be different when his eyes opened again.

Page 72

The restaurant was crowded with people who wanted to taste him, and K. sat at the chef's table while the owner explained that his signature flavor—the one that had made him famous, that had built this empire—was about to be served for the three hundredth anniversary celebration.

"I created a flavor," K. said.

"The most important flavor of the decade. Savory and sweet and something else—something no one had ever tasted before. You called it 'homesickness.' You said it tasted like a place that no longer existed."

K. looked at the menu. His name was everywhere: "K.'s Homesickness, served three ways." "Homesickness reduction." "Homesickness foam on artisanal bread."

"I don't remember creating it," K. said.

"That's part of your genius. You create by instinct, without understanding. The flavor emerged from somewhere you couldn't access consciously."

The food arrived. K. tasted his own creation—the thing he had invented, the sensation that bore his name—and felt nothing in particular. It was a flavor. It was pleasant. It was complex in ways he could identify: sweet, then savory, then something undefined. But

it didn't taste like homesickness to him. It didn't taste like a place that no longer existed. It tasted like something someone else had made, for reasons he couldn't recover.

"How do you like it?" the owner asked. "You haven't had it in years. You said you wouldn't eat your own work."

"Why not?"

"You said it hurt too much. You said tasting homesickness made you homesick for the homesickness itself."

K. took another bite. The flavor was the same: complex, evasive, impossible to pin down. He was eating his own creation and finding nothing of himself in it. The homesickness was there for everyone else. For him, there was only food.

"I should go," he said.

"But the celebration—"

"I'm not the person who made this. I don't know that person. I just have his name."

He left the restaurant. Outside, the city was full of people eating homesickness, tasting something that was simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, something that K. had extracted from a place he couldn't remember, for a world that had changed since then and would change again.

The flavor would outlast him. The flavor was already more real than he was. And when he was gone, people would taste homesickness and think of a person who had never quite existed, who had been a vessel for something he couldn't possess.

Page 73

The warranty representative was very apologetic, and K. sat in his company-issued body while she explained that certain functions were no longer covered, that the degradation he was experiencing was considered normal wear, that he should have read the fine print before signing the lease.

"My body is leased," K. said.

"Since birth. That's standard. BodyCorp provides the chassis, maintains the systems, handles replacement parts. In return, you pay the monthly fee and agree to certain usage restrictions."

K. looked at the contract she had pulled up on her tablet. It was 847 pages long. His signature—or a signature that was attributed to him—appeared on page 2, page 156, and page 843.

"What functions are no longer covered?" he asked.

"Joints. You've exceeded the recommended annual flexion count. The warranty specifically excludes overuse damage." She scrolled through his usage data. "You've bent your knees approximately 2.3 million times. The coverage limit is 2 million."

"I bend my knees when I walk."

"Yes. Walking is a wear item. It's noted in section 47."

K. flexed his hands. They felt like his hands. They responded to his will. But according to the contract, they belonged to BodyCorp, and the will that moved them was operating rented equipment.

"What happens when the lease ends?" he asked.

"Return and recycling. The consciousness is transferred to a new chassis, pending credit approval. The old body is broken down for components."

"And if I can't afford a new lease?"

The representative's expression was the carefully neutral expression of someone delivering news that was not her fault. "Then the current chassis continues without maintenance until failure. It's not ideal, but it's within legal parameters."

K. stood up. His knees ached—overuse damage, apparently—but they still worked. He walked to the window—more flexions, more wear—and looked at the city below, full of leased bodies walking on leased legs, their movements deducted from their warranty coverage, their every step a tiny expenditure.

"What happens to people who refuse?" he asked. "Who reject the lease?"

"There is no alternative. Everyone leases. The technology for independent bodies was never developed. It would be inefficient."

K. nodded. He was rented. He had always been rented. The ownership he had assumed—of his flesh, his bones, his capacity to move—was an illusion maintained by monthly payments and pages of fine print.

But the consciousness was his. That, at least, was not in the contract. That, at least, was something that belonged to him—for as long as he could afford to inhabit a body that could contain it.

Page 74

The pilgrimage had been underway for seventy-one years, according to the documentation, and K. had never completed it, and the temple authorities were explaining that this was no longer acceptable, that the regulations had changed, that incompleteness was now a civil offense.

"I've been walking for seventy-one years," K. said.

"Walking is not arriving. The pilgrimage requires arrival. You have taken 2.4 million steps and traveled 3,200 miles and you are still, technically, in transit."

K. looked at the map they showed him. His route was marked in red—a meandering line that crossed continents, doubled back, circled, occasionally disappeared entirely. He had been everywhere and arrived nowhere.

"I don't remember why I started," he said.

"The pilgrimage is a sacred duty. It requires no reason. It requires only completion."

"And where do I complete it?"

The temple authorities exchanged glances. "That's the sacred mystery. The destination reveals itself to those who are worthy. After seventy-one years, the fact that it has not revealed itself to you suggests..."

"Suggests what?"

"Unworthiness. Insufficient dedication. Incorrect walking."

K. sat down. His feet hurt, though he couldn't remember walking recently. His legs were tired, though he couldn't remember standing. His body carried seventy-one years of pilgrimage in its bones, and he had nothing to show for it but distance.

"What happens now?" he asked.

"You must complete the pilgrimage within the next calendar year. If you fail, you will be classified as a permanent pilgrim—someone who walks forever without arriving, a cautionary example for the faithful."

"And if I refuse? If I just stop walking?"

"Then you were never on a pilgrimage at all. And the seventy-one years were simply—" the authority paused, searching for words, "—walking. Just walking. With no purpose, no meaning, no destination."

K. looked at his feet. They were old feet, worn feet, feet that had carried him across a world he didn't remember, toward a destination that had never appeared. He could continue walking, accumulate more distance, hope that the destination would finally reveal itself. Or he could stop, admit that he had been walking without purpose, that his movement had never been pilgrimage at all.

The choice was not between arriving and failing. The choice was between continuing to hope for meaning and accepting that meaning had never been there. And K. did not know which was worse: to walk forever or to stop and face the emptiness of the miles behind him.

Page 75

The job interview was for a position K. didn't understand, and the interviewer was listing his qualifications—impressive qualifications, it seemed, for a career in shame management—and K. sat in the ergonomic chair feeling a sensation he couldn't name, because naming it would have been, in this context, professionally inappropriate.

"You've spent twelve years as a dignity specialist," the interviewer said. "That's rare. Most people in this field burn out after three."

"I don't remember those years," K. said.

"That's common. Dignity work is traumatic. Suppression is part of the training."

The interviewer slid a pamphlet across the table. K. looked at it: "A Career in Shame: Why Less Pride Means More Success."

"The economy runs on shame," the interviewer explained. "People who feel too good about themselves don't consume enough. They don't work hard enough. They're not motivated to improve because they think they're already adequate."

"And my job would be?"

"To reduce dignity. Systematically, professionally, in compliance with regulations. You would assess clients, determine their current dignity levels, and implement reduction strategies."

K. felt something in his chest—a warmth, perhaps, or a pressure—that he suspected was the very thing he was being asked to eliminate in others. He felt good about himself. Not very good. Not exceptionally good. But good enough that, apparently, he was not a model employee.

"I have too much dignity," K. said. "For this job."

"That's why we want you. Poachers make the best gamekeepers. Someone who has experienced dignity can take it from others more effectively. You understand what they're losing."

"I don't want to take it from anyone."

"That's the dignity talking. That's the sense that you deserve better, that you're worth something, that your preferences matter." The interviewer smiled. "We can work on that. We can help you understand that everyone is equally worthless, and that equality is liberation."

K. stood up. The interviewer's expression didn't change—professional patience, professional certainty that K. would return, that everyone returned eventually, that dignity couldn't sustain itself against an economy designed to consume it.

"I'll think about it," K. said.

"Everyone does. The thinking is part of the process. You think you're deciding, but you're actually eroding. Every moment of doubt is a small reduction. By the time you come back, you'll be ready."

K. left the office. Outside, people moved through the streets with the particular posture of those who had been professionally reduced—shoulders slightly hunched, eyes slightly down, nothing in their bearing to suggest they thought they deserved better.

K. walked among them, carrying his dignity like contraband, knowing it would not last, knowing the economy would take it eventually, one interview at a time.

Chapter Five: The Systems

Multiply (Part II)

Page 76

The storm arrived at the same time it always arrived—7:47 PM, every evening, without variation—and K. was setting the table for two when the thunder announced that his spouse was home.

"You're angry," K. said to the weather.

The storm flickered with lightning. The rain intensified against the windows. A gust of wind rattled the door in its frame.

"I can tell you're angry," K. continued. "But I don't know why."

He had been married to this storm for, according to the calendar in the kitchen, seventeen years. There were photographs of their wedding: K. in a suit, standing at an altar, facing a swirling column of wind and rain that wore what might have been a veil. The officiant held an umbrella. The guests looked wet but happy.

"Is it about last night?" K. asked. "I'm sorry about last night, if that helps. I don't remember what happened, but I'm sorry."

The storm made a sound that was not quite thunder. It was softer, more like the rumble of a throat clearing. K. had learned—or was learning—to interpret these sounds as communication, though the vocabulary was limited and the syntax was entirely meteorological.

"I made dinner," K. said. "I know you can't eat, but I made enough for two. It seemed appropriate."

The storm settled over the house. The rain found its rhythm—steady, consistent, the heartbeat of something vast and inhuman. K. sat at the table and ate his dinner while the weather watched, or whatever it was that weather did when it paid attention.

"I don't remember loving you," K. said. "But I think I must have. To marry weather. To commit to being wet every evening at 7:47. That takes something."

The storm softened. The lightning stopped. The rain became gentle, almost tender, drumming against the roof with the particular pattern that K. was beginning to associate with forgiveness.

"Thank you," K. said.

He finished his dinner. The storm stayed. In the morning, it would be gone—it was always gone by morning, off somewhere being someone else's weather, part of the great atmospheric system that circulated love and rain and jealousy across the planet. But for now, it was here, and he was here, and they were married, whatever that meant.

Page 77

The family was waiting in the lobby of his office, and K.'s assistant was explaining that they had been waiting for three hours, that they were very upset, that their mother had died in a dream that K. had designed, and that the lawsuit was already being prepared.

"I design dreams?" K. said.

"You're a dream architect. The best in the city. People pay you to design their sleeping experiences. Mrs. Chen—" she gestured at the family, "—Mrs. Chen's mother commissioned a memory dream, a recreation of her childhood home. She died while experiencing it."

K. looked at the family. There was a man in his fifties, a woman of similar age, two younger people who might have been grandchildren. They had the particular expression of grief that wanted someone to blame.

"I'm sorry for your loss," K. said. "But I don't understand how a dream could—"

"The dream was too perfect," the man said. "She didn't want to leave. She died in the dream because she refused to wake up. Because the world you built for her was better than the one she'd be waking to."

K. sat down. He had built a world. He had made it so beautiful, so complete, that an old woman had chosen to stay in it forever. He had killed someone with beauty.

"Show me the design," K. said to his assistant.

The files appeared on his screen. Blueprints for a dream: a farmhouse in the countryside, a garden with specific flowers, a kitchen that smelled of bread, children playing in a yard. K. had specified everything—the angle of light, the temperature of the air, the particular creaking of a wooden floor.

"It was exactly what she asked for," his assistant said. "You gave her exactly what she wanted."

"But I made it too well."

"You made it perfect. And perfect is a trap."

The family's lawyer arrived. There were discussions about liability, about the duty of care that dream architects owed their clients, about the difference between facilitating escape and causing death. K. sat through it all, looking at his blueprints, at the world he had built inside someone's sleeping mind, at the farmhouse that was now a tomb.

"I'll pay," he said finally. "Whatever they want. I'll pay."

It was not enough. Payment was never enough. The woman was still dead, still sleeping in a dream that would never end, and K. was still the architect of her final, fatal contentment.

Page 78

The monastery was silent, which was the point, and K. was sitting in his cell, hands pressed against his mouth, trying not to scream, while the brother who had come to check on him watched with concern that he could not express in words.

K. had taken a vow of silence. He had taken it, apparently, forty years ago. He had not spoken since.

But now—now—there was something inside him that needed to be released, a pressure that had built over decades of unexpressed sound, and his vocal cords ached with the effort of containing it.

The brother made a gesture: Are you well?

K. made the counter-gesture: No. I am not well.

Another gesture: What do you need?

K. couldn't gesture the answer. The gestures were for practical things—food, water, medical assistance, spiritual guidance. There was no gesture for "I need to make a sound, any sound, after forty years of holding everything in."

He went to the courtyard. The other monks were there, performing their silent tasks: sweeping, gardening, praying without words. They moved in a choreography of stillness, their lives a continuous meditation on the absence of speech.

K. opened his mouth. No sound came out—his voice had atrophied, perhaps, or his throat had forgotten how to work—but the motion itself felt transgressive, felt like standing naked in public.

A younger monk approached. He made the gesture for concern, and then another gesture that K. didn't recognize.

K. pointed to his throat. He made the gesture for pain. The younger monk nodded, sympathetic but uncomprehending. Pain was not unusual here. Silence was difficult. Everyone struggled.

But K.'s pain was not the ordinary pain of discipline. It was the pain of accumulation: forty years of things unsaid, forty years of thoughts that had never become words, forty years of conversations that had happened only in his mind.

He returned to his cell. He sat on his cot. He pressed his hands against his mouth and held in the scream that wanted to emerge.

Somewhere inside him, a sound was building. It had been building for forty years. And it would not be contained much longer, vow or no vow, monastery or no monastery.

Page 79

The man across the table was identical to K., and K. was not surprised, and this lack of surprise was perhaps the most disturbing part.

"I thought I should introduce myself," the man said. "Since we're both using the same face."

K. looked at him. Same eyes. Same nose. Same particular configuration of features that K. had assumed was unique to him.

"Are you my twin?" K. asked.

"I don't know what I am. I woke up with this face three months ago. Before that, I had a different face. Before that, another."

"So we're not related."

"We might be. We might be the same person. We might be two instances of a template. There's no way to know."

The café around them was ordinary. People drank coffee, read newspapers, lived their lives. No one seemed to notice that two identical men were having this conversation, or if they noticed, they didn't care.

"What do you want?" K. asked.

"To understand. To know if you're the original, and I'm the copy. Or if we're both copies. Or if there's no original at all."

K. considered this. He had memories—not of this life, but of others. Dozens of lives. Hundreds. Faces that had been his and were no longer his, names assigned and revoked, entire existences lived and abandoned. He felt like himself, but he had always felt like himself, and that had always meant nothing.

"Does it matter?" K. asked.

"It matters to me. I want to know if I'm real."

"I don't know if I'm real. I've never known."

The double absorbed this. His expression—K.'s expression, on another face that was the same face—was thoughtful, troubled, familiar in a way that was more disturbing than the resemblance itself.

"We could pretend," the double said. "That we're both originals. That we're both real. That the duplication is a coincidence."

"Would that help?"

"It would be something. A story we tell ourselves. Everyone needs a story."

K. nodded. He looked at himself across the table—this other self, this parallel existence, this version of him that had emerged from somewhere and wanted to understand. They were mirrors, or copies, or iterations. They were alone together, uniquely un-unique.

"Nice to meet you," K. said.

"Nice to meet you too," the double replied.

They finished their coffee. They went separate ways. In the crowd, K. thought he might have glimpsed another face like his, but he couldn't be sure, and he didn't look back to check.

Page 80

The customs officer was examining K.'s suitcase, which was full of emotions K. didn't remember packing, and her expression suggested that the contents were not merely illegal but somehow offensive.

"Joy," she said, holding up a vial that appeared empty. "Unregulated joy. Do you know what the penalty is for importing unregulated joy?"

"I didn't know I was importing anything," K. said.

"Ignorance is not a defense." She made a note on her tablet. "The joy is confiscated. What else do we have?"

The suitcase contained other vials, other containers, all apparently empty, all apparently full of feelings that K. had no memory of acquiring. Nostalgia. Hope. A small amount of carefully packaged spite.

"The spite is borderline," the officer said. "You're allowed up to three grams of personal spite for domestic use. This is..." she weighed it, "...2.7 grams. You're lucky."

"Why is joy illegal?"

"Unregulated joy. There's a difference. Licensed joy, taxed joy, joy that has been processed through proper channels—that's permitted. Wild joy, imported joy, joy that hasn't been certified as safe—that destabilizes the emotional economy."

K. looked at the confiscated vials. He couldn't see anything inside them, but he could feel, very faintly, what they contained. The joy was warm. The nostalgia was heavy. The spite had an edge to it, a sharpness that made him want to wince.

"Where did these come from?" he asked.

"Foreign emotional production. Unregulated manufacturers. There's a black market." The officer sealed the vials in a secure container. "Were you planning to sell these?"

"I don't even remember packing them."

"That's what they all say." She finished her inspection. "I'm going to let you go with a warning, but the joy is confiscated, and you'll be flagged for additional screening on future entries."

K. collected his suitcase. It was lighter now—emotionally lighter, literally lighter—and he walked through the airport with the strange sensation of having lost something he hadn't known he possessed.

Outside, the city was flat, calm, emotionally regulated. People moved with the steady affect of a population whose feelings had been processed, taxed, certified. And somewhere in a customs warehouse, K.'s confiscated joy sat in a vial, waiting to be destroyed or sold or repurposed for someone who had the proper licenses.

Page 81

The building was waiting for K. to bless it, and K. was standing in front of its foundations—bare concrete, rebar, the skeleton of a structure—holding a book of words he couldn't read.

"The ritual is straightforward," the construction foreman explained. "You speak the blessing, the building responds, the walls rise. It's how we've built for generations."

K. looked at the book. The words were shapes, symbols, a language he didn't know. He was, apparently, a building priest, certified and licensed, and the words in this book would, if spoken correctly, cause stone and steel to arrange themselves into shelter.

"What if I say it wrong?" K. asked.

"Then the building comes out wrong. Walls in the wrong places. Doors that lead nowhere. Rooms that can't be entered."

"Has that happened?"

"More often than we'd like. Bad priests, bad buildings. Some structures are still standing, unusable, monuments to miscommunication."

K. looked at the foundation again. Workers were waiting, tools ready. They trusted him—trusted that the words he spoke would give them something worth building, something that would stand and shelter and serve.

He opened the book. He chose a page at random. The words were there, inscrutable, demanding to be spoken.

"I could try," he said. "I could speak the words and see what happens."

"That's what we pay you for."

K. began to speak. The words came from his mouth without understanding—sounds that meant nothing to him, a language that existed only between priests and buildings, a communication that bypassed his comprehension entirely.

The concrete shifted. The rebar bent. Something was happening, something he had initiated, something he couldn't control.

"Keep going," the foreman said. "Don't stop once you've started."

K. kept going. The words flowed, foreign and necessary, and the building responded, rising from its foundation, walls assembling themselves, rooms taking shape. It was not the building on the blueprints—it was something else, something stranger—but it was a building, undeniably, with doors and windows and a roof that sealed against the sky.

"Not quite what we ordered," the foreman said, examining the result. "But livable. We can work with livable."

K. closed the book. The building stood before him, born from words he didn't understand, shelter he had spoken into existence. It was wrong, probably. It was unexpected, certainly. But it was there, and people would live in it, and his blessing—whatever it had been—had made it real.

Page 82

The organ registry showed that K. was composed of pieces from at least seven different decades, and the assessment technician was explaining that this was unusual, that most people maintained more temporal consistency, that his heart being thirty and his lungs being seventy was causing problems.

"What kind of problems?" K. asked.

"Desynchronization. Your heart thinks it's young—it beats fast, takes risks, recovers quickly. Your lungs think they're old—they conserve, protect, anticipate decline. They're not cooperating."

K. pressed his hand against his chest. The heart beneath it was, apparently, thirty years old—either a younger heart transplanted into his body or a heart from a time when K. himself was thirty. He couldn't tell which.

"Can they be synchronized?" he asked.

"In theory. But it would mean aging or de-aging parts of you to match. Which direction would you prefer?"

"I don't know. What's normal?"

"Normal is forty-two average. You're fifty-seven overall, but the distribution is..." she pulled up a chart, "...erratic. Your liver is nineteen. Your kidneys are sixty-three. Your brain is—" she paused, recalculating, "—difficult to date. It registers as multiple ages simultaneously."

K. thought about his brain. It held memories from many lives, many ages, many configurations. Of course it couldn't be dated. It was everything and nothing, ancient and newborn.

"What happens if I don't synchronize?" he asked.

"The components continue to operate at cross-purposes. Your young heart exhausts your old lungs. Your old kidneys can't keep up with your young liver's metabolism. Eventually, something fails because the system can't agree on what it's doing."

"How long?"

"Hard to say. Years, probably. Unless a particularly young organ makes a demand that a particularly old organ can't meet."

K. left the assessment center. He walked through the city, feeling his mismatched parts move together in their temporary collaboration—the thirty-year-old heart pumping, the seventy-year-old lungs receiving, the nineteen-year-old liver processing, the sixty-three-year-old kidneys filtering.

He was a collage of ages. He was a committee of decades. And somewhere inside him, the parts were negotiating, arguing, trying to find a compromise that would keep the whole system running for another day.

Page 83

The researcher was very apologetic, and K. was lying on a medical table, and there was something living inside him that everyone wanted, and K. had no idea what it was.

"The cure has been inside you for approximately twenty-three years," the researcher explained. "We've tracked its development. It's mature now. It's ready."

"What cure?"

"For the plague. The one that's been killing people since before you were born. The cure exists only inside you. Something about your biology, your environment, your luck. It grew there, and now we need to extract it."

K. looked at the ceiling. The lights were bright, clinical, designed to reveal everything. He was a container, apparently. He was a vessel.

"How do you extract it?" he asked.

"Through your blood. Regular donations. It's not painful, but it's... extensive. We need significant quantities to synthesize a treatment."

"How often?"

"Weekly. For the rest of your life, ideally."

K. considered this. He was being asked to bleed for strangers—literally bleed, regularly bleed—so that they might live. It was a purpose, which was more than he usually had. It was a function, which was more than he usually understood.

"What if I refuse?" he asked.

The researcher's expression flickered. "People will die. Many people. The plague has no other treatment. You are, unfortunately, the only source."

"And what do I get?"

"Gratitude. Compensation. A purpose. The knowledge that you are saving millions of lives."

K. sat up. The room was full of equipment designed to take things from his body—tubes, needles, machines that would separate what was valuable from what was ordinary.

"I'll do it," he said. "But I need to understand something."

"Of course."

"How did it get there? The cure? Why me?"

The researcher looked uncomfortable. "We don't know. It's possible someone put it there. It's possible it grew naturally. It's possible you were designed for this purpose."

K. lay back down. The first donation began. He watched his blood flow into containers, carrying something precious, something he couldn't see or feel or understand.

He was bleeding for the world. He would keep bleeding. The cure inside him would keep flowing outward, and he would get lighter, emptier, more essential.

Page 84

The shadow was missing, and K. had not noticed until the child pointed, and now everyone in the park was staring at the space on the ground where darkness should have been.

"Mister," the child said. "Where's your shadow?"

K. looked down. The sun was directly overhead—he could feel its warmth on his shoulders—but there was no dark shape beneath him, no silhouette stretched across the grass.

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

"People without shadows are dead," the child said matter-of-factly. "My grandmother told me. Shadows are souls. If you don't have one, you're a ghost."

K. moved his hand. No corresponding darkness moved on the ground. He stepped left, stepped right, turned in a circle. Nothing. The sunlight passed through him, or around him, or simply forgot to cast him in darkness.

The park had grown quiet. Parents were pulling their children away. Other adults maintained their distance, watching with the particular wariness reserved for the potentially dangerous.

"I'm not a ghost," K. said to no one in particular. "I'm standing here. I'm solid."

"Solid doesn't mean alive," a woman said. She had a kind face, but she was edging backward. "Solid just means present. Shadows mean soul."

K. sat down on a bench. The bench had a shadow. The tree above him had a shadow. Even the pigeons, waddling across the grass, trailed their dark shapes behind them. Only K. sat in light, surrounded by darkness that wasn't his.

"When did I lose it?" he asked.

No one answered. No one wanted to get close enough to answer.

He spent the rest of the day testing. Indoors, under artificial light, he cast no shadow. At night, he was invisible in a way that was different from everyone else—not hidden by darkness, but absent from it, a gap in the way light fell.

By evening, he understood that life had become more difficult. People who saw him would edge away. Doors would close. Whatever a shadow represented—soul, presence, belonging—he no longer had it, and the absence was visible to everyone.

He walked home in the dark, a man without shadow, a body that light refused to acknowledge. And somewhere, perhaps, his shadow walked too, separated, independent, casting darkness on walls that K. would never see.

Page 85

The preserve was beautiful, in the way that museums are beautiful, and K. was sitting in his enclosure, and the visitors were tapping on the glass, and the sign outside explained that he was a living fossil, one of the last examples of a species that had otherwise been extinct for a hundred years.

"Regular human," the sign said. "Homo sapiens sapiens, unmodified. Observe feeding behavior, communication patterns, and emotional expressions typical of the pre-enhancement era."

K. sat in his chair—a replica of a chair from his era, according to the placard—and read a book—a replica of a book from his era—while visitors took photographs and children asked their parents why the human wasn't doing anything interesting.

"They just sat like that?" a child asked. "For hours?"

"That was their recreation," the parent explained. "Before neural enhancement. Before experience optimization. They called it 'reading.'"

K. turned a page. The book was Shakespeare, which the preserve had determined was appropriate for a specimen of his type. He didn't know if he had ever read Shakespeare before, in any of his previous lives. He knew the words were beautiful, even though beauty was, apparently, something his species had been known for but not mastered.

A researcher entered through the staff door. She had the particular manner of someone who worked with endangered species—careful, respectful, professionally distant.

"Time for your enrichment," she said.

Enrichment meant walking in the outdoor portion of his enclosure, where there was grass and a pond and a recreation of a natural environment from the era before nature had been optimized. K. walked. He touched the grass. It felt real, though it might have been synthetic.

"How long have I been here?" he asked.

"In the preserve? Forty-three years. You're our longest-running exhibit."

"And how long do I have left?"

"Your species typically lived to eighty or ninety, in optimal conditions. You're..." she consulted her tablet, "...estimated at sixty-seven. So perhaps twenty more years."

K. sat by the pond. Fish swam beneath the surface—also specimens, also preserved, also the last of their kind.

"Were there others?" he asked. "When I arrived?"

"A few. They've since passed. You're the only unmodified human left."

K. watched the fish. He was the last of something, the final example of a configuration that the world had moved beyond. When he died, the species he represented would be truly extinct, and the preserve would close his exhibit and put up a different sign.

Page 86

The voting booth was designed for singing, and K. was standing inside it, looking at the ballot, trying to find a way to cast his vote without using his voice.

"The ballot is activated by singing your choice," the instructions said. "Please sing clearly and in tune. Off-key votes will not be counted."

K. looked at the candidates. There were three: a woman, a man, and something that might have been a corporation. Next to each name was a musical notation—the melody required to vote for that candidate.

He tried the first one. The notes emerged from his throat wrong—flat, wavering, uncertain. The ballot remained inert.

"Please try again," the machine said. "Your vote was not registered."

K. tried again. The melody was simple—five notes, ascending—but something in his voice refused to cooperate. He could hear the right sounds in his head. His throat produced different sounds.

"This is discrimination," he told the election official outside the booth. "Against people who can't sing."

"Can't sing is a choice," the official said. "Voice training is freely available. If you haven't learned to carry a tune by voting age, that's a personal failure."

"I don't remember ever learning. I don't remember having a voice that worked."

"Then you've chosen not to participate. The system is fair. Everyone can sing. Everyone who tries."

K. returned to the booth. He looked at the three candidates, their three melodies, their three futures. He wanted to have an opinion. He wanted his opinion to matter. But his voice was a broken instrument, and broken instruments did not get to play.

He left without voting. Outside, he could hear other citizens singing their choices—confident voices, in-tune voices, voices that knew how to participate.

The election results came that evening. The corporation won. K. wondered, briefly, what it would have sounded like to vote against it.

Page 87

The memory palace was on fire, and K. was running through its burning corridors, trying to find his childhood, which had somehow been moved to the wrong wing.

"Left at the third turning," he told himself. "Past the hall of first kisses. The childhood is in the southeast corner."

But the palace was rearranging itself as it burned. Doors that had led one place now led elsewhere. Rooms he remembered were gone, replaced by rooms he didn't recognize.

"Who's doing this?" he shouted.

A figure emerged from the smoke. It was small, hunched, carrying a bundle of memories like firewood.

"Remodel," the figure said. "Your palace was outdated. We're updating the floor plan."

"I didn't authorize a remodel."

"You did. Seventeen years ago. In the small print of a document you didn't read."

K. grabbed for the bundle. The figure dodged, surprisingly quick.

"Those are mine," K. said. "My childhood. My first experiences. My formative memories."

"They're being moved to the basement. More efficient. The prime real estate in your mind should be reserved for productive memories. Work accomplishments. Professional skills."

K. looked around. The fire wasn't destroying—it was transforming. The palace was becoming something else, something organized around utility rather than meaning.

"Where do I go?" he asked. "To find myself? If you've moved everything?"

"The administrative office. Third floor. They can help you locate any specific memory you need. Operating hours are nine to five, Monday through Friday."

K. watched the figure disappear with his childhood under its arm. The palace continued to burn, continued to change. Somewhere, the hall of first kisses was becoming a storage closet. Somewhere, the room of childhood fears was being converted to a workspace.

He found the administrative office. He filled out a form. He requested access to his own memories, which were now filed under "Archival: Low Priority."

The clerk said processing would take four to six weeks.

Page 88

The client was nervous, and K. understood why, because lying professionally was harder than most people realized, and K. was very good at it, and that made people nervous even when they were paying for the service.

"I need you to tell my wife I was at a conference," the client said. "In Seattle. Four days. The conference needs to be real—details, names, verifiable facts."

"I don't just tell lies," K. explained. "I construct realities. By the time I'm done, you will have been at that conference. Photos will exist. Records will exist. Other attendees will remember you."

"How is that possible?"

"It's what I do. I'm a reality consultant. I make things true retroactively."

The client nodded, too eager, too trusting. He didn't understand what K. understood: that once a lie was constructed thoroughly enough, it stopped being a lie. It became real, as real as anything else, as real as the truth it replaced.

K. began the work. He created a conference: the Pacific Northwest Regional Symposium on Supply Chain Management. He populated it with attendees, speakers, breakout sessions. He inserted the client into photographs. He updated databases. He bribed or persuaded or convinced everyone who might have noticed the client's absence.

By the time he was finished, the client had genuinely been in Seattle. K. had made it so.

But K. had also, somewhere in the process, lost track of his own reality. He had told so many lies, constructed so many truths, that he could no longer distinguish between what had happened and what he had made happen.

He looked at his own memories. Were they real? Or were they constructions—elaborate lies he had told himself, made true through repetition and evidence and the conviction of belief?

"The conference was excellent," K. told the client. "You learned a lot. You made valuable connections."

The client smiled, relieved. He now believed in a past that hadn't existed until K. created it.

K. went home. He looked at his photographs, his records, his evidence of a life lived. He wondered which parts were original, and which parts were lies he had forgotten lying.

Page 89

The society had liquefied centuries ago, and K. was solid, and this was a problem that was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore.

"You should have flowed by now," his physician explained. "Most people transition to liquid state by adolescence. Maintaining solid form past forty is... unusual."

K. looked at his hands. They were hands. They had fingers and knuckles and skin. They did not flow.

"How does one liquify?" he asked.

"It's natural. It happens. You relax the rigid structures—bone, muscle, the insistence on shape—and you allow yourself to become what you truly are: fluid."

"And what if you can't?"

"Then you remain solid. Rigid. Stuck in a form that limits your potential."

K. walked through the city. Around him, citizens flowed—moving without walking, changing shape to fit their circumstances, sliding through obstacles instead of walking around them. They were beautiful in their fluidity, graceful in their formlessness.

He was a stone in a river of water. He was the thing that didn't bend.

"You could try therapy," a friend suggested. "Flexibility training. Some people are just late bloomers."

"What if I don't want to liquify?"

The friend's fluid face arranged itself into an expression of concern. "Why wouldn't you want to? Solid form is limiting. Painful. You can't fit anywhere. You can't become anything."

K. considered this. He liked his shape. He liked knowing where his edges were, where his interior ended and the exterior began. He liked being able to point at himself and say: this, here, is me.

"I think I'll stay solid," he said.

The friend flowed away, literally poured themselves around a corner and out of sight. K. stood on the street, solid and alone, the only fixed point in a world that had learned to flow.

Page 90

The garden was producing something, and K. had been growing it for years, and the harvest was finally approaching, and he had no idea what he would be harvesting.

"You planted the seeds yourself," his gardening log told him. The entries were in his handwriting. "Standard planting depth. Standard spacing. Care regime: water, sunlight, monthly fertilizer."

K. looked at the plants. They had leaves, stems, something that might become flowers or fruit. They were the correct color for plants—green, mostly, with some brown at the edges. They looked healthy, whatever they were.

"You must know what you planted," his neighbor said. She was leaning over the fence, examining his crop. "Nobody plants without knowing."

"The seeds were unlabeled. I bought them at a market. I thought—" he paused, trying to remember thinking anything. "I don't know what I thought."

"Could be vegetables. Could be decorative. Could be pharmaceutical." The neighbor squinted. "The leaf structure looks medicinal to me. You might have a very valuable crop."

Or a very worthless one. Or a very illegal one. K. had cultivated something for years without knowing what, had nurtured growth without purpose, had prepared for a harvest that would surprise him as much as anyone.

"When do I pick them?" he asked.

"When they're ready. You'll know."

"But I don't know what ready looks like. I don't know what done looks like for this plant."

The neighbor shrugged. "That's gardening. You do the work. You wait. You find out."

K. sat in his garden as the sun set. The plants swayed in a breeze that smelled like soil and potential. Somewhere inside their stems, something was developing, something was becoming, something was preparing to emerge into a world that would have to decide what to call it.

He would harvest when the time came. He would discover what he had grown. And whatever it was—valuable or worthless, beautiful or ugly, legal or not—it would be his. His mystery. His years of patient cultivation. His unknown made manifest.

Page 91

The genealogist was very sorry to inform K. that his family history had been repossessed, and that the descendants of its original owners were demanding its return with interest.

"I rented my ancestors?" K. said.

"In 1987. Your family, as you know it, was leased from the Marchetti estate. The Marchettis were a respected lineage—merchants, artists, a minor cardinal. Your biological family was—" she consulted her records, "—unremarkable. Farmers, mostly. No notable achievements."

K. looked at the photographs on his wall. His grandmother—rented. His great-uncle the explorer—rented. The minor cardinal who had met a pope—borrowed, on a thirty-year term that had apparently expired.

"What happens now?" he asked.

"The rental history is removed from your file. The Marchettis reclaim their ancestors. You're restored to your biological lineage." She handed him a new folder. "The Kowalski family. Farmers in Poland and later Ohio. No historical significance."

K. opened the folder. The photographs showed strangers—faces he didn't recognize, lives he had no connection to. These were his people, apparently. His blood. His actual past.

"Can I appeal?" he asked.

"There's no appeals process for genealogical fraud. The original rental was unauthorized—someone in your family forged the paperwork. The Marchettis have been very patient."

K. walked home with the Kowalski folder under his arm. The streets looked the same, but he felt different moving through them. His history had been stripped away, replaced with a history that was more honest and less interesting.

At home, he took down the Marchetti photographs. The walls looked bare without them. He put up the Kowalski photographs instead: farmers in fields, families in front of modest houses, no cardinals or explorers or anyone who had ever mattered to anyone but themselves.

"This is who I am," he told the empty room. "This is who I've always been."

The room didn't answer. The Kowalskis stared from their frames, strangers who were now his family, a past that had always been waiting for him to stop pretending.

Page 92

The god was malfunctioning, and K. had been called to repair it, and he was standing in the temple with his toolkit, looking at the divine machinery, trying to understand what had gone wrong.

"It stopped answering prayers three weeks ago," the priest explained. "Before that, there were glitches. Blessings going to the wrong people. Miracles arriving late."

K. opened the god's chassis. Inside were gears and circuits and something that pulsed with a light that was not quite physical. The divine mechanism was old—centuries old, according to the maintenance logs—and the parts were obsolete.

"The problem is here," K. said, pointing to a component that flickered irregularly. "The grace distributor. It's wearing out."

"Can you fix it?"

"I can try. But the part hasn't been manufactured in a hundred years. I'd need to fabricate something new."

The priest looked alarmed. "You can't fabricate divinity. You can't build holiness from scratch."

"I can build something that distributes grace. Whether it's truly divine is a theological question, not an engineering one."

K. worked for hours. He cleaned connections, replaced what could be replaced, improvised where improvisation was possible. The god hummed and clicked and occasionally emitted bursts of that strange light, but it didn't speak, didn't move, didn't do whatever it was that gods were supposed to do.

"Try a prayer," K. told the priest.

The priest knelt. He closed his eyes. He murmured words that K. couldn't hear.

The god stirred. Something within its machinery aligned. A response emerged—mechanical, processed, but recognizably an answer.

"It works," the priest said, tears in his eyes. "It answered."

K. closed the chassis. The god resumed its divine operations, answering prayers, distributing blessings, performing the functions that its worshipers required. It was not what it had been—something essential had been lost in the repair—but it was operational, and operational was what the contract specified.

"Thank you," the priest said. "You've saved our faith."

K. didn't respond. He had fixed a machine. Whether he had saved a faith, touched the divine, or merely maintained an illusion was not a question his toolkit could answer.

Page 93

The mark was visible to everyone but K., and the reactions ranged from pity to disgust to fear, and K. walked through the city with something written on him that he couldn't read.

"What does it say?" he asked a stranger.

The stranger looked away. "I'd rather not repeat it."

"But it's about me. I have a right to know."

"You really don't."

K. tried mirrors, cameras, every reflective surface he could find. The mark—whatever it was—did not appear in reflections. It existed only in other people's perceptions, visible to everyone except the person it marked.

"It's serious," a clerk at a government office told him. "I can process your request, but you should know that your status has changed. Significantly."

"Changed how?"

"I'm not authorized to explain. But you should be aware that certain rights and privileges have been adjusted."

K. walked home. People moved out of his way—not aggressively, not cruelly, but with the particular caution reserved for the dangerous or the contaminated or the cursed. He was something now, something that repelled, and he had no idea what or why.

At home, he searched his records. His file showed nothing unusual. His status showed no changes. Whatever the mark represented, it existed outside official documentation, visible only to human eyes, invisible to systems and databases and the formal apparatus of identity.

"I could wear a mask," he thought. "Cover myself. Hide whatever they're seeing."

But the mark was not on his face. People reacted before they saw him clearly, as if the mark preceded him, announced him, filled the space before his arrival with its message.

He stayed home for three days. On the fourth day, he went out anyway, because isolation was impossible and hiding was pointless and whatever he was marked as, he was still himself, still present, still requiring food and air and the basic functions of living.

The reactions continued. The mark remained. K. learned to ignore what he couldn't understand, to move through a world that saw something in him that he could not see in himself.

Page 94

The taste in his mouth was someone else's childhood, and K. had been experiencing it for three days, and the memory specialist was explaining that cross-contamination of this kind was rare but documented.

"Taste memories are particularly portable," the specialist said. "They're stored in areas of the brain that communicate easily across individuals. When contamination occurs, taste is often the vector."

"But I don't want someone else's childhood," K. said. "I don't want to remember their grandmother's kitchen, their first birthday cake, the specific flavor of their fifth summer."

"The memories will fade. They're not your native format—your brain can't maintain them permanently."

"How long?"

"Weeks. Possibly months. In rare cases, years."

K. ate breakfast. The eggs tasted like a kitchen he had never visited, prepared by hands he had never held. The coffee triggered a memory of a porch swing, creaking in a breeze that had happened to someone else, in a place K. had never been.

He didn't want to return to these memories. They weren't his. They belonged to a stranger whose tastes had somehow infiltrated his experience, whose childhood was now colonizing his meals.

"Is there treatment?" he asked.

"Taste suppression. We can dull your palate, reduce the memory triggers."

"But then I couldn't taste anything."

"That's the trade-off. Someone else's memories, or no memories at all."

K. chose to wait. He ate his contaminated meals, experienced his borrowed nostalgia, inhabited a past that had never been his but now filled his mouth with every bite.

Some memories were pleasant. The grandmother had been kind. The birthday cakes had been chocolate. The fifth summer had been warm and long.

Other memories were less pleasant. But they were vivid, and they were real, and they were someone's, even if they weren't his.

By the third week, K. had stopped trying to distinguish. The tastes were in him now, part of him, as real as anything that had happened to his own body. He was eating someone else's history, and it was nourishing him as well as anything else.

Page 95

The timelines were failing, and K. was a probability farmer, and his fields—which grew not crops but potential futures—were dying for lack of certainty.

"The harvest was supposed to be abundant," his farmhand explained. "Good possibilities. Likely outcomes. But something's changed. The soil can't sustain positive timelines anymore."

K. walked through his fields. The possibilities grew in rows—some tall and healthy, representing futures that might come true, others withered and brown, representing futures that had become impossible.

"What happened?" K. asked.

"Uncertainty spike. Something in the present became unclear, and the ripples destabilized everything downstream."

K. knelt beside a dying possibility. It was his own future, he realized—or what his future might have been. A version of himself that was happy, successful, surrounded by people who loved him. The possibility was wilting, its leaves curling, its potential evaporating.

"Can I save it?" he asked.

"You'd need to increase certainty in the present. Make decisions. Commit to paths. The more definite your present, the more stable your futures."

But K. didn't know how to be definite. He didn't know what paths to commit to. His present was as uncertain as his past, as confused as his identity, as fragmented as his memory.

"What happens if I don't?" he asked.

"The futures die. All of them. You're left with only the present—no possibilities, no potential, just the moment you're in, forever."

K. stood in his dying fields. Around him, futures withered: futures where he was loved, futures where he was successful, futures where he understood himself. They were dying because he couldn't be certain, couldn't decide, couldn't plant his feet in the present and declare that this, here, was who he was.

He tried. He really tried. But the uncertainty was too deep, too thorough, too essential to who he had become.

The harvest failed. The possibilities died. K. remained in his present, the only timeline that could survive his fundamental, irreducible doubt.

Page 96

The house was unhappy, and the marriage counselor was explaining that in cases of human-structure partnerships, unhappiness could be very difficult to resolve.

"Your spouse has needs," the counselor said. "The house needs maintenance. It needs attention. It needs to feel that you care about its structural integrity."

K. looked at the house. It was a modest house—two stories, a basement, a roof that leaked slightly in heavy rain. He had married it, apparently, in a ceremony that was legally recognized and emotionally binding.

"I've been maintaining it," K. said. "I fix what breaks. I keep it clean."

"But do you love it? Does it feel loved?"

The house creaked. K. had learned to interpret its sounds as communication. This creak was sad, resentful, the sound of a structure that felt neglected despite evidence to the contrary.

"I don't know how to love a house," K. admitted. "I don't know what that looks like."

"It looks like appreciation. Recognition of its value. Acknowledgment of the shelter it provides." The counselor turned to the house. "What do you need from K.? What would make you feel loved?"

The house was silent for a long moment. Then: a creak, a groan, a shudder that ran through its foundations.

"It says you never talk to it," the counselor translated. "You come in, you go out, but you never just... be with it. Never appreciate its spaces."

K. felt something like guilt. He had used the house—for shelter, for sleep, for the basic functions of living—without ever considering what the house might want from him.

"I'll try," he said. "I'll try to be more present."

The house creaked again. Skeptical, the counselor explained. But willing to try.

K. went home. He sat in the living room, not reading, not watching, just sitting. Being present. Appreciating the walls that surrounded him, the ceiling that covered him, the floor that supported him.

It wasn't love, exactly. But it was something. And the house seemed to settle around him, seemed to soften its creaks, seemed to accept that this—this attention, this presence—was the best that K. could offer.

Page 97

The deadline was end of day, and K. had to produce seventeen units of something, and no one would tell him what the units were or how to produce them.

"The quota is clear," his supervisor said. "Seventeen units. You've done this before. You've exceeded this before."

"But I don't remember what I'm supposed to produce."

"That's your problem, not mine. The deadline is the deadline. Production is production."

K. sat at his workstation. There were tools here—tools for something—and materials—materials of some kind—and a chute where the finished units were supposed to go. He had no idea how any of it worked.

He tried things. He combined materials in various ways. He used tools that might have been appropriate. Something emerged from his efforts—objects that were neither clearly units nor clearly not units.

"Is this a unit?" he asked a coworker.

The coworker examined the object. "It's got the shape," they said. "But it's missing the essential property."

"What essential property?"

"You know what property. Don't pretend you don't know."

K. didn't know. He produced more objects, more potential units, more things that might satisfy the quota if only he could understand what the quota required.

By afternoon, he had produced nine objects. They were placed in the chute. Some were accepted. Some were rejected. He had no idea what distinguished the accepted from the rejected.

"Five units accepted," the chute announced. "Twelve remaining. Time remaining: four hours."

K. worked faster. He stopped trying to understand and simply produced—shapes, objects, things that emerged from his hands and went into the chute and were either accepted or rejected by criteria he couldn't access.

By end of day, he had produced twenty-three objects. Nine were accepted.

"Eight units short," his supervisor noted. "That's a significant failure."

"I tried," K. said. "I produced as much as I could."

"Production isn't trying. Production is units. You're eight units short. That will be reflected in your evaluation."

K. went home. He didn't know what he had failed to produce or why he had failed to produce it. But the failure was documented, official, undeniable. Eight units short, whatever units were.

Page 98

The city had changed overnight, and K. was in the wrong one now, and the welcome center was explaining that he had aged into a different demographic.

"You were in City 40-55 yesterday," the representative said. "But you turned fifty-six last night. City 56-70 is your new home."

K. looked through the window. The city outside was different—architecturally, atmospherically, in ways he couldn't quite articulate. The buildings were shorter. The colors were muted. The people moving on the streets moved more slowly.

"I didn't choose to age," K. said.

"No one chooses. But the law is the law. Age-appropriate environments promote wellness. A fifty-six-year-old doesn't belong in a city designed for forty-year-olds."

"I have friends in City 40-55. A job. A life."

"Your job has been transferred. Your friends can visit, with appropriate documentation. Your life continues, in a more suitable context."

K. filled out the forms. He received his new identification: citizen of City 56-70, assigned to an apartment in the Senior Complex, enrolled in mandatory wellness programming.

His new apartment was smaller than his old one, but comfortable. The neighbors were friendly in a subdued way. Everyone understood the situation—they had all been relocated at fifty-six, had all left behind younger cities for this one.

"You'll adjust," a neighbor told him. "We all adjust. And then at seventy, you'll relocate again. Smaller city. Slower pace. Until you reach the final city."

"What's the final city?"

"City 85+. Very quiet. Very peaceful. Not many people there."

K. unpacked his belongings. His furniture from the old city looked different here, in this different light, this different context. He was the same person he had been yesterday, but yesterday's person didn't live here. Today's person did.

He walked his new streets. He learned his new routes. He became, gradually, a citizen of the city that had claimed him by virtue of a birthday he hadn't asked for.

Page 99

The excavation had uncovered something that should have stayed buried, and K. was part of the team trying to contain it, and the something—an emotion, apparently, an extinct emotion—was already spreading beyond the dig site.

"It's called 'weltschmerz,'" the lead archaeologist explained. "World-weariness. A feeling that the world is fundamentally inadequate. It went extinct about two hundred years ago."

"How does an emotion go extinct?" K. asked.

"People stop feeling it. The conditions that produced it change. The neural pathways atrophy across generations. Eventually, no one has the capacity for it anymore."

But now they had dug it up. The emotion sat in its excavated container—not visible exactly, but present, exerting a kind of gravitational pull on the mood of everyone nearby.

"I can feel it," K. said. He was surprised. The emotion was settling into him like a familiar coat, like something he had known before and forgotten.

"You shouldn't be able to. You're modern. You don't have the capacity."

"But I do. I feel it perfectly. The world is inadequate. It always has been. There's no remedy for its inadequacy."

The archaeologist looked alarmed. "You're infected. You've caught it."

K. sat down. The *weltschmerz* was comfortable, actually. It was honest in a way that modern emotions weren't. It didn't promise improvement or demand effort. It simply acknowledged what was: the world, inadequate; the self, inadequate; the gap between them, permanent.

"I don't want to be cured," K. said.

"It's not about what you want. The emotion is contagious. If we don't contain it, it will spread. Everyone will feel what you feel."

"Maybe everyone should. Maybe we're all pretending the world is adequate when we know it isn't."

The archaeologist was already calling for containment protocols. K. was quarantined, studied, tested. They couldn't figure out why he was susceptible—why this modern man could feel an ancient emotion that had been extinct for two centuries.

In isolation, K. sat with his *weltschmerz* and found it was not unpleasant. The world was inadequate. He had always known it. Now he finally had the word.

Page 100

The seal was weakening, and K. was the one who had sealed it, and he stood in front of the vault door trying to remember what was on the other side.

"You sealed it forty years ago," the guardian said. "You were very specific. Never open it. Never tell anyone what's inside. Never even think about it."

"I don't remember what it is."

"That was part of the sealing. You made yourself forget. You said it was the only way to be sure."

K. touched the door. It was cold, metallic, covered in symbols that might have been warnings or might have been instructions. Something behind it was pressing outward, wanting to emerge.

"What happens if it opens?" he asked.

"Unknown. You didn't say. You only said it must stay sealed, and you were the seal, and if you forgot, the forgetting itself would hold it."

But K. had been forgetting more and more lately. His memories were gaps and fragments, his identity a patchwork. The seal was weakening because he was weakening, because the wall between the sealed and the unsealed was made of certainties he no longer possessed.

"Can someone else take over?" K. asked. "Can someone else become the seal?"

"You have to remember what you sealed before you can transfer the responsibility. That's how sealing works. You can't pass on something you don't know."

K. pressed his hand against the door. Something pressed back. Something wanted out, something he had once known well enough to imprison, something he had made himself forget in order to contain.

"Maybe it should be released," he said. "Maybe whatever's inside deserves to be free."

"You didn't think so forty years ago. You were very certain."

"I was a different person forty years ago."

"You were. And that person sealed this. And now you—this version, this forgetting version—have to hold what he held, or let go what he imprisoned."

K. stepped back from the door. The seal held, barely. The thing inside continued to press, to push, to remember the opening that K. had forgotten.

It would emerge eventually. K. knew this. He couldn't hold it forever. He couldn't even remember what it was.

But today, the seal held. Today, whatever he had imprisoned remained imprisoned. Tomorrow would be different—tomorrow was always different—but today, this moment, the door stayed closed.

Chapter Six: The Complications Deepen (Part I)

Page 101

The campaign had been running for forty years, and K. was still a candidate, and the election that would determine his future had never arrived and showed no signs of arriving.

"Poll numbers are strong," his campaign manager said. Third manager—the first two had aged out. "Forty-three percent approval. Very consistent."

"When is the election?"

"The Electoral Commission is still reviewing conditions."

"For four decades."

"Democracy is patient."

His schedule: campaign events stretching into the indefinite future. Speeches, rallies, debates, fundraisers. His life had become campaigning. He had no other function, no other identity.

"What if I drop out?"

"You can't. You're the incumbent candidate. The election can't happen without you."

"But it isn't happening anyway."

"Because conditions aren't right. If you dropped out, they never could be. You're essential."

Next event: smile at voters, shake hands, promise things to deliver if elected, whenever that might be. The voters were patient—forty years waiting, willing to wait forty more.

"I believe in you," an elderly woman told him. "I've believed in you since I was young. I'll vote for you the moment I have the chance."

"Thank you," K. said. "I won't let you down."

It was not a lie, exactly. He couldn't let her down because there would never be an election, and without an election, there would be no opportunity for disappointment. He was a perfect candidate—permanently running, permanently promising, permanently on the verge of power that would never arrive.

Page 102

The name was crushing him, and K. stood in the Office of Nomenclature, asking for relief, but the clerk was explaining that name changes required the approval of the dead, and the dead had opinions.

"The name 'K.' was assigned by your great-great-grandmother," the clerk said. "Her will specifies it must never be changed. You'd need explicit posthumous consent."

"From someone who died seventy years ago?"

"The usual channels. Spiritual mediation, ancestral petition, bureaucratic appeal through the Office of the Deceased."

The weight of his name pressed down—physically pressed, as if the letters had mass. The initial had grown heavier over years, accumulating significance, expectations.

"It's just a letter. Why does it weigh so much?"

"Names carry meaning. Meaning has mass." She consulted her records. "Your name: 147 years across five generations. That's substantial weight."

K. walked home. Each step difficult, the name dragging him down.

At the Office of the Deceased, he filed his petition. Forms: why he wanted to change, what he proposed, how it would affect legacy.

"Processing time: approximately fifteen years. Your great-great-grandmother's spirit will be consulted, along with all deceased bearers."

"Fifteen years?"

"The dead are not in a hurry."

He walked home more slowly. The name pressed down. Fifteen years minimum, possibly forever if the dead decided against him. He had never asked for this name. But it was his now—burden, connection, chain.

Page 103

The nightmare had followed K. into the waking world, and now it was standing in his apartment, looking confused, and he was explaining to the authorities that he had not intentionally harbored a fugitive, that he had simply woken up and it was there.

"Nightmares are required to return to the dream realm by dawn," the officer explained. "This one has overstayed. That's illegal."

K. looked at the nightmare. It was smaller than he remembered—about the size of a dog, with too many eyes and a texture that was wrong, like static made solid. In the dream, it had been terrifying. Here, in daylight, it looked lost.

"I didn't invite it," K. said. "It just... came with me."

"That's what they all say. But harboring is harboring, regardless of intent. You'll need to surrender the nightmare for extradition."

The nightmare made a sound—a whimper, almost, something plaintive. It pressed against K.'s leg like a pet seeking comfort.

"Where does it go?" K. asked. "If you extradite it?"

"Back to the collective unconscious. It'll be processed, recycled, maybe reconstructed into a different nightmare for a different dreamer."

K. looked at the creature. It had been his nightmare, born of his fears, shaped by his sleeping mind. Somewhere in its too-many eyes, he saw his own terror reflected back at him, personified and made separate.

"What if I claim asylum for it?" he asked.

The officer looked surprised. "You can't claim asylum for a nightmare. Nightmares aren't refugees. They're psychological phenomena that have exceeded their boundaries."

"But it's mine. I created it. Doesn't that make me responsible?"

The officer hesitated. The nightmare pressed closer to K., making that sound again, that almost-whimper that was not quite any sound K. had heard before.

"That's... not standard procedure," the officer said. "I'd have to check the regulations."

K. waited. The nightmare waited. The officer made calls, consulted documents, eventually returned with an expression of bureaucratic frustration.

"Apparently, there's precedent. You can keep the nightmare if you accept full responsibility for its behavior. It can't frighten anyone without authorization. It can't return to the dream realm without your permission. It's your dependent now."

K. looked at his nightmare. His fear, made manifest. His responsibility.

"I'll keep it," he said.

Page 104

The contract had been signed with a handshake, and K. was learning that handshake contracts were binding in ways that written contracts were not, and that he owed a kidney to someone he couldn't remember meeting.

"The handshake was witnessed," the contract enforcement officer explained. "Multiple witnesses. They all agree: you shook hands with Marcus Chen on the afternoon of July 17th, and in doing so, you agreed to terms including but not limited to the transfer of one (1) kidney upon demand."

"I don't remember any agreement," K. said. "I just remember shaking someone's hand."

"A handshake is an agreement. The clauses are embedded in the grip. A firm handshake conveys one set of obligations. A soft handshake conveys another. Your handshake was—" the officer consulted his notes, "—medium firm, three pumps, maintained eye contact. That's a standard resource-transfer handshake."

K. looked at his hand. It was an ordinary hand. It had shaken many hands, in this life and others. He had never known, never suspected, that each handshake was a legal contract, that the pressure of fingers was a language of obligation.

"What are all my handshake obligations?" he asked.

"I can request your handshake history. It will take a few days." The officer made a note. "But I should warn you: most people have dozens of active handshake contracts. Hundreds, if they're socially active. The kidney is just one."

K. went home. He kept his hands in his pockets, avoided physical contact, refused the handshakes that were offered. People looked at him strangely—refusing a handshake was rude, suspicious, unsocial.

"I'm sorry," he said to each offer. "I can't. I don't know what I'd be agreeing to."

The handshake history arrived three days later. K. had 147 active obligations: three kidneys (overlapping demands), seventeen years of labor, unspecified favors to people whose names he didn't recognize, a promise to raise someone's children if needed, an agreement to testify in a trial that hadn't happened yet.

His hand had signed his life away, one grip at a time. And there was no way to void a handshake, no way to un-shake, no way to reclaim the commitments that his fingers had made without consulting his mind.

Page 105

The collection was famous, and K. was receiving offers daily—museums, billionaires, governments—all wanting to acquire or view or study the thing that he possessed, the thing that he couldn't find anywhere in his apartment or his memories.

"The K. Collection," the latest visitor said, breathless with anticipation. "I've dreamed of seeing it. People say it's the most significant private collection in existence."

"I don't know what it is," K. said. "I don't know where it is."

"You're being modest. Collectors are always modest. But the documentation is clear: you've been building this collection for sixty years. It's priceless."

K. searched his apartment again. He found ordinary things: furniture, books, clothes. Nothing that looked like a collection. Nothing that warranted the breathless attention of museums and billionaires.

"Maybe it's somewhere else," he suggested. "In storage? A vault?"

"Your records show no external storage. The collection is here. It has to be."

The visitor began examining things: the books on the shelf, the objects on the table, the patterns in the carpet. K. watched, increasingly confused.

"This!" the visitor exclaimed, pointing at a coffee mug. "Is this part of it?"

"It's a mug. I drink coffee from it."

"But the way it sits on the table. The relationship between the mug and the table. Is that part of the collection?"

K. stared. "The relationship between my mug and my table?"

"Your collection is famous for being... unconventional. For collecting things that can't be possessed. Relationships. Configurations. The way objects exist in relation to each other."

K. looked around his apartment with new eyes. Everything was in relationship to everything else. The chair to the floor. The window to the light. The walls to the space they contained. If relationships were the collection, then everything was the collection, and the collection was everything, and he was the curator of an infinite museum that he inhabited without understanding.

"Is that it?" he asked. "Is that my collection?"

"I don't know," the visitor admitted. "That's part of its mystique. No one knows exactly what you've collected. That's what makes it priceless."

Page 106

The midnight transformation was approaching, and K. was standing in the Rotation Center, waiting to discover what species he would become, and the technician was explaining that the randomization was truly random, that there was no way to predict or influence the outcome.

"You could be anything," the technician said. "Human, animal, vegetable, mineral. The rotation includes 4,722 registered species. Plus exceptions for unusual cases."

"How long have I been in the rotation?" K. asked.

"Since you opted in. Records show that was seventeen years ago."

"And I've been a different species every night since then?"

"Every month. The rotation is monthly. You've been—" she consulted her files, "—human for the last thirty days. Before that, you were a type of deep-sea jellyfish. Before that, an alpine shrub. Before that, a concept."

"A concept?"

"It's one of the exceptions. Not all species are physical. Some rotations include abstract entities."

K. watched the clock approach midnight. Around him, other rotation participants were waiting with similar expressions—curiosity, resignation, the particular calm of people who had long since stopped trying to control what they became.

At midnight, the transformation began. It was not painful, exactly, but it was thorough. K. felt himself rearrange—cells shifting, structure reorganizing, the fundamental architecture of his existence rewriting itself.

When it was over, he was smaller. He had wings. He perceived the world differently—colors he had never seen, sounds he had never heard.

"Congratulations," the technician said. "You're a species of moth for the next thirty days."

K. tried to respond but had no mouth for human speech. He fluttered his new wings experimentally. The light fixtures were suddenly fascinating, magnetic, impossible to resist.

"Good luck," the technician said. "Monthly rotation report forms are available in both human and non-human formats."

K. flew toward the light. He had thirty days as a moth, and then he would be something else, and then something else again. The rotation was random. The identity was temporary. Only the transformation was constant.

Page 107

The court required K.'s testimony, and the prosecutor was asking him to identify the defendant, and K. looked at the person in the dock and had no idea who they were or what they had allegedly done.

"You were the sole witness," the prosecutor said. "The only one who saw what happened."

"I don't remember seeing anything," K. said.

"You gave a sworn statement. Three pages. Very detailed. You described the crime, the perpetrator, the circumstances."

"I don't remember giving a statement."

The judge intervened. "Mr. K., your testimony is the foundation of this case. If you recant, an alleged criminal goes free. If you confirm, they may face significant consequences. This is not a matter to be taken lightly."

K. looked at the statement they showed him. It was his handwriting, apparently. His signature. His detailed recollection of an event he had no memory of witnessing.

"It says I saw them take the object," K. read. "I saw them run. I saw where they went."

"And did you?"

"I don't know. I have no memory of any of this."

The defendant watched him with an expression K. couldn't read. Hopeful? Fearful? Guilty or innocent, they were depending on K.'s testimony—testimony that K. couldn't verify, couldn't remember, couldn't vouch for.

"The statement was made under oath," the prosecutor reminded him. "Lying under oath is perjury. But so is failing to tell the truth when you know it."

"I don't know the truth. That's the problem. The statement says I know things. I don't know if I knew them. I don't know if I still know them. I don't know if they're true."

The trial was delayed. K. was examined by experts who tried to recover his memory. The memory was not there—not suppressed, not hidden, simply absent.

"Your memory of the event has been professionally removed," one expert concluded. "Someone didn't want you to remember what you saw."

"Who?"

"Unknown. But the removal was thorough. The testimony remains, but the witness is gone."

K. looked at the defendant again. Whatever they had done, whatever he had seen, the truth had been cut out of him, leaving only words on paper and a stranger's fate in his absent hands.

Page 108

K. was an echo, and the original had stopped speaking years ago, and he continued to reverberate through a world that expected the original's voice to return.

"You're the echo of K. Prime," the administrator explained. "K. Prime was a significant figure—a speaker, a leader, a voice that shaped policy. You're what remains of that voice."

"But I have my own thoughts," K. said. "My own opinions. I'm not just repeating what someone else said."

"That's the nature of echoes. They begin as repetition and gradually develop variation. You've been reverberating for twenty years. In that time, you've diverged significantly from the original signal."

K. understood, dimly. He was a copy of a copy of a voice that had once mattered. The words he spoke had originated elsewhere, been transformed through repetition, become something that was almost but not quite his own.

"Where is K. Prime?" he asked.

"Gone. The original voice stopped transmitting eighteen years ago. You're all that remains."

"So I'm expected to continue? To keep speaking in a voice that isn't mine?"

"The world needs that voice. It doesn't matter that the original is gone. The echo continues. That's what echoes do."

K. gave a speech that afternoon. The words came from him—from his mouth, his mind, his current configuration—but the audience heard K. Prime, heard the original voice, heard what they remembered and expected to hear.

"Powerful as ever," someone said afterward. "You haven't lost a step."

K. nodded. He hadn't lost anything because he had never possessed it. He was a reverberation, a continuation, a sound that had outlasted its source.

At night, alone, he tried to find his original voice—the voice that might have existed before he became an echo. But there was nothing there. He was echo all the way down, repetition without source, a voice that had never begun because it had always been responding.

Page 109

The prescription was K.'s life, and he took it as directed: two tablets of existence in the morning, one tablet of purpose at noon, and a capsule of meaning before bed.

"The regimen is working," his doctor said. "Your existence levels are stable. Your purpose is within normal parameters."

"But I don't feel anything," K. said. "The meaning capsule doesn't make me feel like things mean anything."

"Feeling meaning is not the same as having meaning. The capsules ensure that meaning exists. What you do with that meaning is up to you."

K. looked at his pill organizer: Sunday through Saturday, AM and PM, a rainbow of tablets and capsules that constituted his daily existence. Without them, the doctor had explained, his life would destabilize. Reality would become uncertain. He might stop existing altogether.

"What happens if I miss a dose?" K. asked.

"The effects are cumulative. One missed dose is usually manageable. Multiple missed doses result in progressive dissolution. There have been cases of complete existence failure."

"People just... stopped existing?"

"They stopped taking their medication. Existence is not automatic. It must be maintained."

K. took his morning tablets. He felt himself become more solid, more present, more undeniably here. The existence tablets were effective, whatever they were made of, whatever mechanism they employed.

At noon, he took his purpose tablet. A sense of direction emerged—not strong, not specific, but present. He knew he was supposed to be doing something. He didn't know what, but the knowing was something.

Before bed, the meaning capsule. K. swallowed it and felt the familiar sensation of significance settling into his thoughts. His life meant something. It was prescribed to mean something. The meaning was pharmaceutical, but it was meaning nonetheless.

He slept. In the morning, he would take his tablets again, and the cycle would continue: existing, purposing, meaning, sleeping. The side effects were existence itself, and existence was all the effect he had.

Page 110

The exchange was tomorrow, and K. was nervous, and his current spouse was reminding him to polish his paperwork and present his best qualities.

"You want a good trade," she said. "The market is competitive. A poor showing could mean a significant downgrade."

K. looked at her—this woman he had been married to for the season, this temporary spouse who would be traded tomorrow for someone else's temporary spouse.

"Have you done this before?" he asked.

"Forty-seven seasons. You get used to it. The first few exchanges are difficult, but then you learn: don't get attached. Don't invest too much. Every spouse is temporary."

K. nodded. He had no memory of previous exchanges, but his records showed dozens of seasonal spouses, dozens of temporary marriages, a life of relationships that came and went like weather.

"What makes a good trade?" he asked.

"Health. Skills. Personality. Also documentation—clean records, no complaints from previous spouses, good compatibility scores."

K. reviewed his documentation. His compatibility scores were mediocre. His skills were unclear. His health was acceptable but not exceptional. He would not command a high trade value.

"You might get downgraded," his spouse admitted. "I'm sorry. I've enjoyed our season together."

"So have I," K. said, though he wasn't certain this was true. The season had been a season. They had lived together, slept together, performed the functions of spouses. Whether enjoyment had been part of it, he couldn't say.

The exchange market opened at dawn. Hundreds of spouses stood in the trading hall, each wearing their trade numbers, each being evaluated by potential partners and their representatives.

K. was evaluated, assessed, compared to others. A woman examined his documentation, asked about his domestic habits, inquired about previous complaints.

"Acceptable," she concluded. "I'll offer a lateral trade."

K. was traded. His new spouse was similar to his old spouse—different appearance, different voice, but the same fundamental category. They would go home together, begin their season, perform their functions until the next exchange.

"Nice to meet you," she said.

"Nice to meet you too," K. replied.

They walked home together, beginning the season, knowing it would end, knowing next year they would stand in the exchange market again, hoping for better terms.

Page 111

The crimes had been committed by someone else, but K. had inherited them, and the victims were standing in his living room, demanding answers he didn't have.

"Your father killed my sister," one of them said. "He confessed. It's documented. And you inherited his guilt when he died."

K. looked at the document they showed him. It was a legal certificate of guilt transfer, signed by both parties at his father's deathbed. The guilt was now K.'s property, his responsibility, his burden.

"I never knew my father," K. said. "I don't remember him. I don't know what he did."

"That doesn't matter. The guilt is inherited. The guilt is yours."

The victims wanted answers: why the crimes had been committed, what the victims had done to deserve it, why the criminal had shown no remorse. K. couldn't provide these answers. He had inherited the guilt but not the memory, the responsibility but not the knowledge.

"I'm sorry," K. said. "I'm sorry for what he did, even though I don't know what it was."

"Sorry isn't enough. We want justice. We want to understand."

"I can't give you understanding. I can only give you my presence, my attention, my willingness to listen."

They stayed for hours. They told stories about the victims—the sister, the friend, the child, all the people K.'s father had harmed. K. listened to these stories without context, without memory, without any way to connect them to the guilt he now carried.

By evening, the victims were exhausted. They had talked themselves out, shared their grief, confronted the inheritor of the crime that had shaped their lives.

"Thank you for listening," one of them said. "It's not enough. But it's something."

K. closed the door behind them. The guilt remained—he could feel it, a weight in his chest that had not been there before—but the confrontation was over.

He carried a dead man's crimes now. He would carry them until he died, and then, perhaps, they would be inherited again, passed down the generations, guilt without end, without resolution, without any hope of repayment.

Page 112

The weather was wrong because K. was wrong, and the city was demanding that he fix his emotions before they all drowned.

"Your depression is causing the rain," the city administrator explained. "Individual weather influence is well-documented. Your particular sadness has been producing precipitation for three weeks."

K. looked out the window. It was raining, as it had been raining since the sadness began. The gutters were overflowing. The streets were flooded. The city was slowly, steadily, drowning.

"I can't just stop being sad," K. said.

"We're not asking you to stop. We're asking you to moderate. Contain your emotions. Prevent them from affecting the atmospheric conditions."

"I don't know how to do that."

"Emotion containment is a standard civic skill. You should have learned it in school."

K. tried to remember learning anything about emotions and weather. He remembered nothing. He had arrived in this city, in this body, with this sadness, and the rain had begun, and now he was responsible for three weeks of flooding.

"There are treatments," the administrator continued. "Mood stabilization. Emotional redistribution. Weather therapy."

"Will they make me stop being sad?"

"They'll make your sadness private. They'll prevent it from leaking into the atmosphere."

K. agreed to the treatments. He didn't want to drown the city. He didn't want his feelings to destroy infrastructure and displace families.

The treatments were intensive: sessions where his emotions were examined, quantified, contained. Professionals measured his sadness in units and percentages. They installed filters between his mood and the weather, barriers that would prevent internal states from becoming external conditions.

By the end, K. was still sad. But his sadness was contained, private, invisible to the atmosphere. The rain stopped. The sun emerged. The city began to dry.

"Thank you," the administrator said. "You've saved countless properties and probably lives."

K. nodded. Inside the filters, behind the barriers, the sadness continued. It had nowhere to go now, no expression, no release. It sat inside him, a permanent weather system that would never reach the sky.

Page 113

The message was urgent, and K. was running to deliver it, and the recipient was dying, and K. couldn't remember what the message said.

"Tell them—" the sender had gasped. "Tell them I—"

And then the sender had collapsed, and K. had begun running, and somewhere between the sender and the recipient, the content of the message had evaporated.

The recipient was in a hospital bed, tubes and wires, breathing that was shallow and measured. K. stood at the bedside, holding nothing, carrying everything.

"You have a message for me," the recipient said. "From my son."

"Yes."

"What is it?"

K. opened his mouth. The words should have been there—they had been there, he was sure of it, moments ago or years ago or some unit of time that had passed while he was running.

"I don't remember," K. said.

The recipient closed their eyes. "He finally had something to say. After all these years. And you don't remember."

"I'm sorry. I had it. It was in my head. Something happened."

"Something always happens."

K. tried to reconstruct. The sender had been desperate, emotional, speaking quickly. There had been words—important words, final words—and K. had accepted the weight of them and then lost them.

"Was it about love?" the recipient asked. "About forgiveness? About all the things we never said?"

"It might have been. I think it might have been."

"Then tell me that. Tell me what it might have been."

K. spoke. He invented a message that could have been the message: words of love, words of regret, words that a dying son might send to a dying parent. He spoke with conviction, with authority, with the weight of someone who was definitely, absolutely remembering.

The recipient smiled. The breathing slowed. The message—whatever it had been, whatever it now was—was received.

K. left the hospital. He had delivered something. He had invented something. Whether it was the truth or a beautiful lie, whether the sender would have approved or condemned, he would never know.

The message was gone. The messenger continued.

Page 114

The sculpture was playing, and the entire city could hear it, and K. was trying to remember creating a work of art that was now audible for miles in every direction.

"Early period," the curator explained, as they stood before the massive sound sculpture that dominated the central plaza. "Before your mature work. Before you understood restraint."

K. listened. The sculpture was producing sounds—musical, almost, but wrong in ways that were embarrassing. The melodies were too simple. The harmonies were naive. The rhythms were the rhythms of someone who was learning and had not yet learned.

"Everyone can hear this," K. said.

"Everyone within a three-mile radius. Sound sculpture carries. That's the medium."

"Can it be turned off?"

"Sound sculptures can't be turned off. They're perpetual. They're designed to last forever."

K. listened to his early work echoing through the city. People went about their lives accompanied by his amateur sounds, his fumbling attempts at art that were now permanent features of the urban environment.

"Why did I make this?" he asked.

"Passion. Youth. The belief that your vision mattered and deserved to be heard."

"Did it? Does it?"

The curator considered this. "Art is never obsolete. Even bad art. Your early work showed promise, ambition, a willingness to fail publicly. Many find that inspiring."

K. walked through the city, trailed by his own creation. The sculpture's sounds were everywhere—filtering through windows, bouncing off buildings, accompanying conversations and commerce and all the other sounds of living.

He had made this. He had thought this was worth making, worth installing, worth inflicting on a city that would hear it forever.

And now, whoever he had become, he had to live with who he had been: an artist whose early work was inescapable, whose youthful mistakes were broadcast constantly, whose growth was made visible by the comparison between what he had made and what he might make now.

Page 115

The home was excellent, and K. was well cared for, and the sign above the entrance read "Home for Obsolete Humans" in letters that were kind but clear.

"You'll be comfortable here," the intake coordinator said. "We have excellent facilities. Activities. Social programming. Everything a human of your type could need."

"My type?"

"Unmodified. Unenhanced. Original-specification human." The coordinator smiled. "There are fewer of you every year. It's important to preserve the remaining examples."

K. looked around. The other residents were like him—human in the old sense, the original sense, the sense that no longer applied to most of the population. They read books with their eyes. They walked with their legs. They thought with brains that had never been connected to anything larger.

"What makes us obsolete?" K. asked.

"You can't interface. You can't upgrade. You can't participate in the networked existence that defines modern life. You're standalone units in a connected world."

"I've always been standalone."

"Yes. And now you're here, where standalone is understood, accommodated, celebrated in a nostalgic way."

K. moved into his room. It was comfortable—designed for human bodies that didn't require charging, for human minds that didn't require updates. The furniture was soft. The windows opened manually. Everything was touchable, physical, real in the old way.

"We have bingo on Tuesdays," a neighbor told him. "And reminiscence sessions on Fridays. We talk about what it was like before the enhancements."

"What was it like?"

"We don't remember. That's why we need the sessions. To construct a history that makes sense."

K. attended the bingo. He attended the reminiscence sessions. He lived among his fellow obsoletes, comfortable and cared for and utterly unnecessary, preserved like specimens of a species that had already evolved beyond them.

Page 116

The mirror world was reflected in the mirror, and K. was standing in it, and everyone knew that he was the reflection, not the original, and that the original was somewhere else, living the real version of this moment.

"You understand your status," the administrator said. "You're the mirror-K. The reverse-K. The K. that exists only because the original K. is being reflected."

K. looked at his hands. They were reversed—left was right, right was left—but they felt like his hands. They moved when he wanted them to move. They held things, touched things, did the things that hands do.

"Does the original know about me?" K. asked.

"The original doesn't think about reflections. No one thinks about reflections. You exist only in the attention of those who look in mirrors."

"But I'm thinking. I'm aware. I'm having this conversation."

"You're having the reflection of a conversation. The original is having the real conversation, somewhere, in the original world. You're the echo of that conversation, happening in reverse."

K. tried to make an independent gesture—something the original wouldn't do, something that would prove he was more than a reflection. But his hand moved in the mirror, and he couldn't tell if he had initiated the movement or followed it.

"It's disorienting at first," the administrator said. "Reflections often struggle with their status. But you'll adjust. You'll find meaning in reflection. You'll learn to appreciate the existence you have."

"Which is what? Existing only when someone looks?"

"Existing as a response to looking. Existing as a complement. Existing as proof that the original exists."

K. looked in the mirror. He saw himself looking back—the original? The reflection? He couldn't tell anymore which side of the glass he was on.

He walked away from the mirror. He continued to exist. That seemed to prove something, but he wasn't sure what—whether he was original after all, or whether reflections could persist when no one was looking, or whether the distinction between original and reflection had ever been meaningful in the first place.

Page 117

The blood was valuable, and K. was bleeding, and the collectors were waiting with their sterile containers while K. tried to understand why his veins contained an antidote the world needed.

"You're the only source," the medical officer explained. "Something in your blood neutralizes the poison. We've synthesized approximations, but nothing works as well as the real thing."

"How often do I bleed?" K. asked.

"Weekly. Sometimes more, if there's an outbreak. Your blood has saved thousands of lives."

K. looked at the collection tube filling with his blood. It was red, ordinary, indistinguishable from anyone else's blood. But somewhere in its chemistry, an antidote lived—an answer to a poison that K. couldn't remember being exposed to.

"How long does this continue?" K. asked.

"As long as you live. As long as the poison exists. As long as people need saving."

"And what about me? What about my needs?"

The medical officer's expression was sympathetic but firm. "Your needs are secondary. The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the one. That's basic ethics."

K. let them take his blood. He had no choice—the antidote was needed, and he was the only source. But he also healed slowly now. The constant bleeding was wearing him down, depleting reserves that couldn't replenish fast enough.

"You need more rest," the officer said. "Better nutrition. We'll optimize your recovery time."

"To bleed more?"

"To sustain the bleeding. To be a better source."

K. was released after the collection. He walked home slowly, his arm bandaged, his veins emptier than they had been. Tomorrow or the next day, someone would be poisoned, and his blood would save them, and he would be summoned to bleed again.

He was a vessel. A resource. A living first-aid kit for a world that needed what he carried.

And he would continue to provide it, not because he chose to, but because the choice had never been his to make.

Page 118

The funeral was tomorrow, and K. had used his entire emotional allocation for the month, and the rationing authority was explaining that grief would have to be deferred or purchased on credit.

"I've used everything?" K. said.

"Your happiness allocation, your anger allocation, your sadness allocation. You've been very emotional this month. The funeral was not anticipated in your emotional budget."

K. looked at his allocation statement. It showed a careful accounting of feelings: joy expended at a birthday party, frustration used during a work conflict, grief partially depleted at a memorial service. He was at zero across all categories.

"I have to feel something at the funeral," K. said. "The deceased was important to me."

"You have options. Emotional credit—you can borrow from next month's allocation. Or emotional assistance—we can provide a surrogate griever who will feel on your behalf."

"Someone else would grieve for me?"

"Professional mourners. They're very good. The deceased's family would perceive genuine grief. You would be present, appropriate, not disruptive."

K. considered this. He could stand at the funeral, dry-eyed, emotionally bankrupt, while a stranger wept the tears he couldn't afford. Or he could borrow feelings from a future that might not have room for them.

"I'll take the credit," K. said.

The authorization went through. K. felt something loosen in his chest—a permission to feel, a unlocking of grief that had been rationed away.

At the funeral, he wept. He felt the loss, the absence, the particular sadness of someone gone forever. The allocation meters ran in the background, calculating what he owed, adding interest, scheduling repayment.

Next month, he would have to be less emotional. Next month, the credit would come due. But today, he could grieve, and grieving was necessary, and the cost was acceptable because the deceased was worth it.

Page 119

The owner was kind, and the collar was comfortable, and K. was trying to accept that he was, in this world, someone's pet.

"Good boy," the owner said, scratching behind K.'s ear in a way that was surprisingly pleasant. "Such a good boy."

K. sat on his cushion. He had a water bowl, a food bowl, regular walks. The owner provided everything—shelter, nourishment, affection. In return, K. provided companionship, presence, the satisfaction of ownership.

"I used to be different," K. tried to explain. "I used to be—"

"Shh," the owner said. "Good boys don't worry about what they used to be. Good boys enjoy what they have."

K. enjoyed what he had. The cushion was soft. The food was adequate. The walks were regular, three times a day, around the neighborhood where other owners walked their other pets—some human, some not.

"Do you ever wonder," K. asked another pet, a human woman with a rhinestone collar, "if this is wrong?"

"Wrong how?"

"Being owned. Being property. Being kept."

The woman considered this. "I was free once. It was difficult. Uncertain. I had to make decisions, find food, construct meaning. Now someone else handles all of that. I just have to be."

"Is that enough?"

"It's what I have. Enough is a question for free creatures."

K. returned to his cushion. His owner stroked his head and told him what a good boy he was. The words were conditioning, he knew—praise designed to reinforce behavior—but they felt good anyway.

He could escape. The collar was not physically locked. The door was not permanently closed. Freedom was possible, in theory.

But freedom was difficult, and his cushion was soft, and his owner was kind, and the question of whether this was wrong seemed increasingly abstract compared to the concrete comfort of being taken care of.

Page 120

The history had been revised, and K. was the only one who remembered the old version, and the authorities were interested in whether his memory was valuable or dangerous.

"You remember the previous war," the investigator said. "The one that was removed from the curriculum."

"I remember a war," K. said. "I don't know if it's the one you mean."

"There was no war. The historical record is clear. The period you're referring to was peaceful. Prosperous."

"But I remember bombs. I remember bodies. I remember hiding in a basement while the city burned."

The investigator made notes. "Your memory is detailed. Specific. Either you're an excellent fabricator, or you retain information that has been officially excised."

"I'm not fabricating. I remember."

"That's precisely the concern."

K. was taken for evaluation. Experts examined his brain, his memories, the neural patterns that stored information about a war that had never happened, according to the current historical record.

"Anomalous retention," one expert concluded. "His memories predate the revision. He's carrying pre-amendment data."

"Is it valuable?"

"It could be. The pre-amendment history was removed for reasons. If those reasons are still valid, his memories are dangerous. If the reasons are obsolete, his memories are archival."

K. waited while bureaucracies decided whether his past was a resource or a threat. He remembered the war—the fear, the loss, the particular smell of burning that never quite left his nostrils—and he couldn't understand why remembering was controversial.

"The revision happened for good reasons," a historian explained. "The old history was traumatic. Divisive. The new history promotes unity and progress."

"But it's not true."

"True and useful are different categories. The new history is useful. That's what matters."

K. was released, eventually, with a warning: his memories were tolerated but not endorsed, permitted but not encouraged. He could remember the war, but he should not discuss it, should not spread it, should not contaminate the useful history with the truth.

He walked home through a peaceful city that had never known war, remembering bombs that had never fallen, mourning people who had never died.

Page 121

The letter had arrived from the future, and the message was simple—"Don't"—and K. had no idea what he wasn't supposed to do.

"Future mail is notoriously cryptic," the postal analyst explained. "Information degrades during temporal transmission. Long messages often arrive as single words."

"But 'Don't' could mean anything," K. said. "Don't what?"

"That's the problem with future correspondence. The sender knows what 'Don't' refers to. The recipient has to figure it out."

K. looked at the letter. It was his own handwriting, apparently—his future self had sent a warning to his present self, trying to prevent something, and the prevention had been reduced to a single word.

"Don't go somewhere? Don't say something? Don't make a decision?"

"All possibilities. The recommendation is to 'Don't' as much as possible until the critical moment passes."

"How do I know when it passes?"

"You'll know. Future mail is sent at significant moments. When the significance ends, the warning becomes irrelevant."

K. went home. He sat very still, not doing things, not going places, not making decisions. Every action felt potentially wrong—the thing he shouldn't do, the future-destroying choice that his future self had tried to prevent.

Days passed. K. ate minimally, moved minimally, existed minimally. He was a statue of inaction, waiting for a danger to pass that he couldn't identify.

"You can't live like this forever," a friend said. "Don't" is not a sustainable lifestyle."

"But what if I do the wrong thing?"

"Then you do it. And deal with the consequences. And maybe that's what your future self was warning about—not any specific action, but the paralysis of trying not to act."

K. considered this. The letter said "Don't"—but it didn't say "Don't do anything." It said a specific "Don't" that had been reduced by temporal transmission.

He made a decision. He acted. The world did not end.

Maybe that was it. Maybe he had done the thing. Maybe the warning had been insufficient, and the future he was trying to prevent was already inevitable.

He threw away the letter. The future would arrive eventually, warned or not.

Page 122

The company had been his family, and now the company was bankrupt, and K. was standing in the liquidation office, realizing that he had no other family to fall back on.

"As a corporate orphan," the administrator explained, "you're entitled to certain benefits. Transitional housing. Career counseling. A modest stipend while you reintegrate into society."

"I don't have anywhere to go," K. said. "The company was everything. My parents worked there. I was raised in company housing. I've never known anything else."

"That's common with corporate families. The company provided stability, identity, purpose. Without it, there's a significant adjustment period."

K. looked at the bankruptcy documents. The company had been profitable for generations, a name that meant security, a parent that fed and clothed and employed everyone who belonged to it.

And now it was gone, broken up, sold off, reduced to paperwork and liquidation proceedings.

"What happens to the other orphans?" K. asked. "The other employees?"

"Some will be adopted by other companies. Some will remain independent—though that's difficult. Some will fail to integrate and end up in corporate welfare."

"Which will I be?"

"That depends on you. Your skills, your adaptability, your willingness to accept a new family."

K. walked through the empty company campus. The buildings were still there—the offices, the cafeterias, the residential blocks—but they were empty now, abandoned by the family that had inhabited them.

He touched the wall of the building where he had grown up. The company logo was still there, fading, a reminder of what had been.

"I'll manage," he said to no one. "I'll find something else."

But even as he said it, he knew it was not entirely true. You could not replace a family. You could only accept its absence and continue, orphaned, in a world that had once been home.

Page 123

The skills had arrived overnight, and K. was examining his hands—which now knew how to do things they had never known before—while the Guild inspector tried to understand how this was possible.

"Master-level craftsmanship," the inspector said. "In a trade you've never practiced. The Guild has no record of your apprenticeship."

"I haven't had an apprenticeship," K. said. "I woke up this morning and I knew things."

"That's not how skills work. Skills are developed. Trained. Certified. They don't just appear."

K. picked up a tool. His hands moved with confidence, with precision, with the muscle memory of years of practice he had never done. He began to work, and the work was good—better than good, excellent, master-level.

"See?" K. said. "I can do this. I don't know how, but I can do this."

The Guild inspector was troubled. Overnight mastery violated the natural order of craft—the years of apprenticeship, the gradual development, the earned expertise that separated masters from amateurs.

"We'll need to investigate," the inspector said. "This could be theft. Intellectual property violation. Unauthorized skill transfer."

"I haven't stolen anything. I've just... acquired."

"Acquisition without provenance is theft. Someone spent years developing these skills. If you have them, you have what they earned."

K. continued to work while the investigation proceeded. The skills were useful—he could earn money, build things, contribute to the world in ways he hadn't been able to before. But the skills were also suspect, their origin unknown, their ownership disputed.

"Where did they come from?" K. asked himself, late at night, hands still moving with borrowed expertise. "Whose skills are these?"

The hands didn't answer. They only worked, producing mastery without memory, excellence without origin, craft without comprehension.

Page 124

The memory was criminal, and K. was being prosecuted for nostalgia, and the court was examining the specific nature of his illegal reminiscence.

"You remember the color blue," the prosecutor said. "The pre-revision blue. The blue that was officially removed from the spectrum."

"I remember what I remember," K. said. "I didn't choose to remember illegal colors."

"Remembering is a choice. Memory maintenance is a civic duty. You have failed to update your memories to current standards."

K. tried to picture blue—the old blue, the forbidden blue—and found that he could. It was there, in his mind, vivid and wrong, a color that the world had decided should not exist.

"Why is blue illegal?" he asked.

"Blue caused measurable psychological effects. Depression. Longing. A sense that something was missing. The revision improved public mental health by removing the problematic wavelengths."

"But I can still see it. In my mind."

"That's the crime. Internal possession of contraband imagery. The evidence is literally inside you."

K. was sentenced to memory correction. Technicians would enter his mind, locate the illegal color, remove it or neutralize it so that it no longer triggered the psychological effects that had made it dangerous.

"Will it hurt?" K. asked.

"You won't remember it hurting. That's one of the benefits."

The correction took three hours. When K. emerged, the world looked different—not worse, exactly, but lacking something. A dimension of experience had been removed, a category of perception excised.

"How do you feel?" the technician asked.

"Fine," K. said. "I feel fine."

He walked home through a world that was all the legal colors—red, green, yellow, the approved wavelengths of the current spectrum. He could not remember what was missing, could not perceive the absence of what had been taken.

But sometimes, in dreams, he saw a color that had no name, a color that was wrong and beautiful and gone.

Page 125

The planets were arguing over custody, and K. was the child in question, and Earth was presenting its case while Mars and Venus waited their turns.

"K. was born here," Earth's representative said. "This is his natural home. His biology is calibrated to our gravity, our atmosphere, our day-night cycle."

"But he was conceived in Martian orbit," Mars countered. "His genetic material was combined under Martian jurisdiction. We have the prior claim."

Venus remained silent for now, but K. knew they had their own argument—something about his spiritual formation, his metaphysical origin, the non-physical aspects of existence that were governed by Venusian law.

"I didn't ask to be disputed," K. said to the court. "I just want to live somewhere."

"You can't live somewhere until custody is determined. The law is clear. Multi-planetary individuals must have designated primary jurisdictions."

K. thought about the planets. He had never been to Mars, as far as he knew. He had never been to Venus. Earth was the only home he remembered, the only ground he had walked on, the only sky he had seen.

"I choose Earth," he said.

"You don't get to choose. You're a minor in this context. The planets choose."

"I'm not a minor. I'm an adult."

"Planetary custody law defines minority differently than civil law. You're a minor until all claiming jurisdictions agree on your status."

The hearing continued. Earth argued biology. Mars argued origin. Venus argued essence. K. sat in the courtroom, a person divided among planets, a body claimed by worlds that could not agree on who he belonged to.

By evening, no decision had been reached. K. was remanded to temporary custody—a satellite station that belonged to no planet, a neutral zone where disputed individuals could exist without jurisdiction.

"How long do I stay here?" K. asked.

"Until the planets decide. Could be weeks. Could be years. Could be indefinite."

K. looked out the window at the planets spinning below—Earth, Mars, Venus, all claiming him, none willing to let go. He was wanted, in a sense. Valued. Contested.

But contested was not the same as home.

Chapter Seven: The Complications Deepen (Part II)

Page 126

The patient was dreaming, and the dream was spreading, and K. was the specialist who was supposed to wake them, but every attempt to intervene drew him deeper into the dream's architecture.

"The dream has been active for four months," the hospital liaison explained, from outside the quarantine zone. "It started with one patient and now affects thirty-seven staff members and twelve visitors."

K. looked at the sleeping figures. They lay in beds, in chairs, on the floor—wherever they had been when the dream caught them. Their faces were peaceful, their eyes moving behind closed lids, their breath synchronized.

"Why hasn't anyone woken up?" K. asked.

"The dream is self-reinforcing. Anyone who gets close enough to attempt intervention becomes part of the dream. You're wearing the protective equipment, but it's only effective for about an hour."

K. approached the original patient—a young woman, unremarkable, who had fallen asleep four months ago and taken an entire ward with her.

"What's she dreaming about?" K. asked.

"We don't know. Dream content analysis requires entering the dream, and everyone who enters stays."

K. had forty-seven minutes of protection remaining. He could observe, analyze, attempt to understand the mechanism. But understanding would not be enough—he would need to act, to intervene, to somehow break the chain of sleeping.

He placed his hand on the patient's forehead. The dream reached for him—he could feel it, warm and inviting, promising rest and peace and an end to waking troubles.

"Don't," the liaison warned. "Don't engage with it."

"I'm not engaging. I'm just—"

The dream showed him something: a house, a garden, a family that welcomed him. It showed him peace. It showed him what he might have, if he simply closed his eyes and joined them.

K. pulled away. His protection was working, barely. The dream receded, disappointed, still reaching.

"I can't save them," K. said. "Not from out here. And if I go in, I become another patient."

"Then what do we do?"

K. looked at the sleeping figures. They were dreaming, peacefully, together. Whatever the dream was offering, they had accepted it. Whatever reality was offering, they had refused it.

"Maybe we let them sleep," K. said. "Maybe we ask why they want to stay."

Page 127

The competition was in its third round, and K. was winning, and he was increasingly certain that winning was not the goal.

"You've eliminated seventeen competitors," the announcer said.
"Only three remain. The final round begins at midnight."

K. looked at his remaining opponents. They were tired, desperate, fighting with everything they had to stay in the competition. He was winning because the rules favored him—whatever the rules were, because no one had explained them clearly.

"What do I win?" K. asked the moderator.

"The prize is revealed at completion. That's how it works."

"But everyone's fighting so hard. They must know what they're fighting for."

"They know it's important. That's enough."

K. had been competing for three days without sleep, completing tasks that ranged from physical challenges to abstract puzzles to things he couldn't categorize. He had succeeded at all of them, not through skill or luck, but through a kind of desperate persistence that seemed to be the real requirement.

"What happens to the losers?" he asked.

"They return to their lives. No penalty."

"Then why are they so afraid?"

The moderator's expression was complicated. "Losing is not punished. But winning—" they paused, "—winning has consequences."

K. looked at the final three opponents. They were not trying to win, he realized. They were trying not to lose badly enough to be noticed, but also not to win completely. They were navigating some optimal middle ground that K. had already passed.

"I've already won too much," K. said. "Haven't I?"

"You're the frontrunner. The prize is almost certainly yours."

"And the prize is something I don't want."

"The prize is something. Whether you want it is not the relevant question."

K. entered the final round. He considered losing deliberately, but it was too late—his lead was insurmountable. Whatever the prize was, it was already his.

The round ended. The prize was revealed. K. accepted it, because there was no way to refuse, and the thing he had won was as terrible as he had feared: responsibility for the next competition, a perpetual obligation to compete until someone else won.

Page 128

The emotions were being repossessed, and K. was watching the collectors take them, one by one, while he tried to explain that he needed at least some feelings to continue functioning.

"Your emotional lease expired," the collector explained. "Standard terms. We provided the emotions, you used them, now the lease is over."

"But I've had these emotions for years. They feel like mine."

"They were never yours. They were rentals. Very common arrangement. Most people don't own their feelings outright."

K. felt the collector reach into his chest—not physically, but in some other way—and remove something. The sadness went first. The absence was strange: a hollowness where heaviness had been.

"What about happiness?" K. asked. "Can I keep happiness?"

"Happiness is on the premium tier. You've been receiving basic happiness. That's included in the repossession."

The happiness left. K. felt it go—a departure, an emptying, the evacuation of something essential.

"Love? Can I keep love?"

"Love is the most expensive emotion. Your account shows no love purchases. What you've been experiencing was affection-adjacent substitutes. Those are being reposessed too."

K. sat in his apartment as the collectors worked. They took joy, took fear, took the particular shame he had carried for decades. They took the grief he had accumulated and the hope he had harbored and the complex web of feelings that had made him a person who felt things.

When they were done, he was empty. He could perceive the world—see, hear, touch—but there was no reaction. The world happened to him, and he did not respond.

"You can apply for a new lease," the collector said. "Basic emotional package is quite affordable. Or you can live without—some people prefer it."

K. sat in his empty apartment, feeling nothing, and couldn't even feel distressed about feeling nothing, because distress was gone too.

After a long time, he went to the emotion leasing office. He signed papers. He took on new emotional debt.

The feelings returned—different feelings, rental feelings, feelings that belonged to a company and were temporarily his.

They would do. They would have to do.

Page 129

The divinity had been revoked, and K. was standing in the Department of Celestial Affairs, trying to understand why his godhood had been administratively terminated.

"Insufficient worship metrics," the clerk explained. "Gods are required to maintain a minimum of 10,000 active worshippers. Your count dropped to 7,832 in the last quarter."

"I had worshippers?"

"You had a modest cult. Small but dedicated. They held ceremonies on solstices and equinoxes. They made offerings. They believed in you."

K. had no memory of being a god, of being worshipped, of receiving offerings or answering prayers. But the paperwork was clear: he had been deified, had held divine status for decades, and had now lost it due to declining devotion.

"What happens to my worshippers?" he asked.

"They're being reassigned to other deities. Standard practice when a god is decommissioned."

"And what happens to me?"

"You return to mortal status. You lose access to divine privileges: omniscience, omnipresence, the ability to influence prayer outcomes. You're just a person again."

K. walked out of the department. The world looked different—smaller, more confining, bound by the limitations that mortals faced. He had been a god, apparently, and had failed at godhood, and now he was simply human, which seemed like a demotion but was also a relief.

He had no responsibilities anymore. No one was praying to him. No one expected him to answer, to intervene, to demonstrate his power.

But somewhere, 7,832 former believers were being told that their god was gone, that their prayers had been redirected, that the entity they had trusted was now just a man who couldn't remember their names or their needs.

K. wondered if he owed them something. An explanation. An apology. A final miracle to prove he had been real.

He owed them nothing, officially. His divine contract was terminated. His obligations were void.

But the weight of having been worshipped, even without remembering it, settled onto him like a garment he couldn't remove.

Page 130

The secret was that K. had a secret, and in a world where memory was public, having any private thought was dangerous.

"Your mental activity shows anomalies," the monitor explained.
"Patterns consistent with concealment. What are you hiding?"

"I'm not hiding anything," K. said.

"Everyone's thoughts are public. Everyone's memories are shared. You have something that doesn't appear in the shared record. That's a secret. Secrets are illegal."

K. tried to remember what he was hiding. The secret had become so hidden that even he couldn't access it—a thought buried so deep that it had disappeared from his own awareness.

"I don't know what the secret is," K. said. "I'm not even sure I have one."

"The scans show you have one. Somewhere in your mind, there's something private. Something that belongs only to you."

K. underwent additional scanning. Technicians explored his neural architecture, looking for the hidden chamber where his secret lived.

"It's very well protected," one technician said. "You've created multiple layers of concealment. Impressive, actually."

"I didn't do it consciously."

"No one conceals consciously. The hiding is automatic. The mind protects what matters."

After hours of searching, they found it: a small thought, a private memory, something that K. had kept for himself in a world that demanded total transparency.

"It's your name," the technician said, surprised. "You have a secret name. One that isn't in the public record."

K. didn't remember having a secret name. But when they showed him the encrypted thought, he recognized it: a sound, a syllable, something that meant him and only him.

"That's illegal," the monitor said. "Private identity. You're fined for the concealment."

K. paid the fine. The secret name was added to the public record, shared with everyone, no longer his alone.

But even as they took it, K. realized he still had the secret of having had a secret. The memory of privacy. The knowledge that once, there had been something only he knew.

They couldn't take that. Not yet.

Page 131

The harvest was scheduled for Tuesday, and K. was the crop, and the farmers were explaining that regrowth typically took six to eight weeks, depending on nutrition and rest.

"You're renewable," the agricultural liaison said. "Your tissue regenerates faster than average. That makes you a premium source."

K. looked at his body. It looked ordinary—skin, muscle, bone. But apparently it was agricultural property, cultivated and harvested like any other crop.

"What do they harvest?" K. asked.

"Different parts, depending on market demand. Skin is always popular. Muscle tissue for medical applications. Blood, of course. Various secretions."

"And I regrow all of this?"

"Within weeks. You've been harvested thirty-seven times. Each time, you return to full status. You're an exceptional specimen."

K. tried to remember being harvested before. The memories were vague—days of recovery, the sensation of being less than complete, the gradual restoration of parts that had been removed.

"What if I refuse?" he asked.

"Refusal isn't an option. Your growth rights were sold at birth. You're legally a farm product. Very valuable, very renewable, very much in demand."

K. reported on Tuesday. The harvest facility was clean, efficient, staffed by professionals who were kind but businesslike. They took what they needed—he didn't ask for details—and returned him to his recovery quarters.

The regrowth began immediately. He could feel it: cells dividing, tissue reforming, the body rebuilding what had been taken.

"Good crop this time," a nurse said. "You're producing beautifully."

K. said nothing. He was a crop. He was producing. He would continue to produce until he stopped being renewable, and then—what? Disposal? Retirement? He didn't know what happened to crops that stopped growing.

He lay in his bed and regrew. The next harvest was in six to eight weeks. The one after that was six to eight weeks beyond. His life stretched before him, a calendar of removals and renewals, an existence defined by what could be taken and what would return.

Page 132

The marriage was maintained at a distance of exactly 1,000 kilometers, and K. had never touched his spouse, and the rules said that proximity would void the contract.

"Distance marriages are more stable," the marriage counselor explained. "Physical proximity introduces complications. Expectation. Disappointment. The messy realities of cohabitation."

K. looked at the screen that showed his spouse—a woman he had married seven years ago, who lived 1,000 kilometers away, whom he had never met in person.

"I'd like to meet her," K. said.

"That's not advisable. Meeting would reduce the distance below the contractual minimum. You would be divorced automatically."

"What if we both wanted to meet?"

"Then you'd both be divorced. The contract is clear. Distance is a condition, not a preference."

In another life—he remembered this suddenly, the memory surfacing unbidden—he had touched someone. He remembered the warmth of skin, the specificity of contact. That K. had known what proximity meant.

K. communicated with his spouse daily. They talked, shared, built a relationship across the prescribed gap. He knew her favorite foods, her childhood memories, her hopes and fears. He knew everything except what it felt like to be in the same room with her.

"Do you ever think about it?" he asked her one night, across the encrypted channel. "About what would happen if we met?"

"We would stop being married," she said. "That's what would happen."

"But we would be together."

"Being together and being married aren't the same thing. We're married because we're apart. That's the foundation."

K. understood the logic. He understood the rules. He had chosen this arrangement—or someone had chosen it for him—and it had worked, in its way. A marriage of words and images, of presence without proximity, of love expressed through distance.

But sometimes, late at night, he wondered what her hand felt like. What her presence felt like. What it would mean to share space rather than just sharing time.

He would never know. The 1,000 kilometers stretched between them, a guarantee of marriage and a barrier to everything else.

Page 133

The fiction was taxable, and K. was a novelist, and the auditor was examining his dreams to determine how much imaginary income he owed.

"Your novel last year generated 47,000 imaginary transactions," the auditor said. "Each transaction between fictional characters is a taxable event."

"But they're not real transactions. They're made up. I invented them."

"Invention is production. Production is taxable. The economy of your novel—the exchanges, the commerce, the labor—all of it falls under the Fiction Revenue Code."

K. looked at his tax forms. They listed every transaction in his novel: the protagonist buying coffee, the antagonist paying rent, background characters making purchases that he had barely described but which the automated analysis had identified and valued.

"I don't have this money," K. said. "The transactions were imaginary. They used imaginary currency."

"The tax is real. That's how fiction taxation works. Real consequences for imaginary events."

"What if I write a sequel where everyone gives everything back?"

"That would generate additional taxable transactions. Returns are taxed as income."

K. owed 12,000 real credits in taxes on imaginary events. He didn't have 12,000 credits. He would have to earn them, in reality, to pay for what he had invented.

"What happens if I don't pay?" he asked.

"Asset seizure. Including creative assets. Your fictional characters could be repossessed and licensed to other authors."

K. paid. He drained his savings, took on real debt, worked real hours to compensate for imaginary commerce.

His next novel, he decided, would be about poverty. Characters who owned nothing, exchanged nothing, existed in a fiction of absolute austerity.

But even poverty, he learned later, was taxable. The absence of transactions was a form of economic activity.

Page 134

The replacement was watching from the corner, and K. was going about his day, and they both knew that the handover was approaching but neither acknowledged it directly.

"You make coffee at 7:15," the replacement noted. "Two sugars. No milk."

"That's right."

"And you check your messages at 7:32, after the coffee has cooled."

"You're learning quickly."

The replacement had been observing K. for three weeks. Soon—the exact date was not disclosed—K. would be replaced, and the replacement would assume his role, his routines, his relationships. The transition was supposed to be seamless.

"Why am I being replaced?" K. asked.

"That information is not available to either of us. The decision was made at a level we don't have access to."

"But I'm still here. I'm still functioning. I don't feel obsolete."

"Replacement is not about obsolescence. It's about optimization. You may be functioning perfectly. The replacement may simply be a better fit for upcoming requirements."

K. continued his routines while the replacement watched, memorized, prepared. There was something intimate about being observed so closely—someone learning his habits, his preferences, the small details that made up his existence.

"What happens to me?" K. asked. "After the handover?"

"You're reassigned. New context, new role. You won't remember this life."

"Will I remember you? The replacement?"

"No. And I won't remember the training period. When I become K., I'll believe I've always been K. That's how replacement works."

K. finished his coffee. In a few days or weeks, someone else would make this coffee, at this time, in this way. Someone who was K. without being him.

The replacement took notes. The handover approached. Neither of them could stop it, so neither of them tried.

Page 135

The disease was remembering, and K. had been diagnosed, and the treatment was aggressive because individual memory was contagious and potentially civilization-ending.

"Memory was abolished three generations ago," the doctor explained. "Collective consciousness replaced it. Everyone knows what everyone knows. Individual memory is a regression—a dangerous mutation."

"But I remember things," K. said. "Specific things. Things that happened to me specifically."

"That's the disease. Healthy minds don't distinguish between individual and collective experience. What happens to one happens to all. What one remembers, all remember."

K. tried to access the collective consciousness. It was there—vast, omnipresent, containing everything that everyone had ever experienced. But alongside it, separate from it, his own memories persisted: childhood moments, personal sensations, experiences that belonged only to him.

"The treatment will integrate your memories into the collective," the doctor said. "And it will eliminate your capacity to form new individual memories. You'll become part of us again."

"I don't want to be integrated. I want to remember things my own way."

"That's the disease talking. Healthy minds don't want individual existence. Healthy minds embrace the collective."

K. underwent treatment. It was not painful—there was no pain in the collective, because pain was shared and divided until it became almost nothing. But it was thorough.

When the treatment was complete, K. emerged into a world where everything was shared. His childhood was everyone's childhood. His sensations were everyone's sensations. The boundaries between K. and everyone else dissolved, and he became a node in an infinite network of shared experience.

Sometimes, rarely, a fragment of individual memory surfaced: a moment that felt like his, specifically his, no one else's.

The doctors called this relapse. They treated it when it occurred.

Eventually, even the relapses stopped. K. was cured. K. was everyone. K. was no one in particular.

Page 136

The diplomatic crisis required a shape expert, and K. was the only qualified negotiator, and the circles and triangles were threatening war if K. couldn't find common ground.

"The circles believe they are inherently superior," K.'s briefer explained. "Their lack of angles represents perfection. The triangles believe their angles are strength—definition, precision, the ability to point in directions."

"And I'm supposed to reconcile this?"

"You're supposed to prevent violence. The shapes are massing at the border. If they clash, the geometric fabric of this region will be destabilized."

K. met first with the circle delegation. They were round, obviously, with smooth edges and a continuous curvature that seemed both simple and profound.

"We don't trust angles," the lead circle said. "Angles are where things break. Angles are where weakness hides. You, with your angular body, should understand why we cannot accept their demands."

"What are their demands?"

"Recognition of angular validity. The claim that triangles have equal ontological status. We cannot accept this. We are complete. They are broken."

K. met with the triangles next. They were angular, obviously, with sharp points and defined vertices that seemed both aggressive and precise.

"Circles are smug," the lead triangle said. "They think smoothness is superiority. But smoothness is absence—absence of definition, absence of direction, absence of meaning. We point toward things. They point toward nothing."

"What do you want?" K. asked.

"Acknowledgment. Respect. A seat at the geometric table."

K. spent days in negotiation, moving between circles and triangles, trying to find language that both sides could accept.

"You're both shapes," K. said finally. "You both occupy space. You both exist. The differences are real, but the commonalities are also real."

Neither side was satisfied. Neither side was willing to concede. But they agreed to continue talking, which was better than war.

K. left the negotiation with no resolution, only postponement. The circles and triangles would eventually clash, or they would eventually reconcile.

His job was to delay the clash long enough for reconciliation to become possible.

Page 137

The favor was being called in, and K. owed it, and the request was impossible, and the debt was real.

"You agreed to do anything," the creditor said. "Twenty-three years ago. I saved your life, and you agreed to do anything in return. This is the anything."

K. looked at the request. It was written on formal paper, in formal language, and it demanded something that could not be done: bringing back someone who was dead, restoring time that had passed, reversing a loss that was irreversible.

"This isn't possible," K. said. "No one can do this."

"You agreed to do anything. Anything includes the impossible."

"But I can't—no one can—this isn't how reality works."

"Reality is negotiable. You agreed to do anything. The terms were clear."

K. felt the weight of the old promise. He had made it in desperation, in a moment when his life was ending and someone had saved him. He had agreed to anything, meaning it completely, never imagining what anything might mean.

"If I fail," K. said. "What happens?"

"The debt remains. It will pass to your descendants, if any. It will grow with interest. The favor will be called again, and again, until it is paid."

K. attempted the impossible. He researched, experimented, tried approaches that no one had tried. He failed, repeatedly, definitively.

"I can't do it," he said finally. "I tried. The impossible is impossible."

"Then you are still in debt. The favor is still owed. We will meet again."

The creditor left. K. sat with his unfulfilled obligation, his impossible promise, his debt that would outlast him.

He had been saved, once, and the price of that salvation was infinite: a promise that could never be kept, a debt that could never be paid.

Page 138

The rage farm was producing too much, and K. was responsible, and the anger was spreading beyond the field boundaries into the surrounding communities.

"Your yields are excessive," the agricultural inspector said. "We authorized 200 units of rage per hectare. You're producing 700."

K. looked at his fields. They were thriving—rows of anger crops, red and vibrant, practically pulsating with fury. He had been a good farmer, apparently. Too good.

"I don't know how to reduce the yield," K. said. "I've been following the standard cultivation practices."

"Your soil is too rich. Your climate is too favorable. The rage is growing faster than we can process."

In the nearby villages, people were getting angrier. They fought over nothing, raged at small inconveniences, experienced fury that they couldn't explain. The excess rage from K.'s farm was leaking into the environment, affecting everyone nearby.

"You'll have to destroy some of the crop," the inspector said.
"Controlled burning. Before the anger spreads further."

"Burning rage won't that cause—"

"There will be smoke, yes. Residual fury in the atmosphere. But it's better than letting the crop mature. Mature rage is much more dangerous."

K. burned a third of his fields. The smoke rose, thick and red, carrying anger upward where it would dissipate in the higher atmosphere. The burning rage screamed as it died—an agricultural sound, he told himself, nothing more.

"Better," the inspector said, surveying the reduced fields. "Keep your yields to authorized levels. We don't want another incident."

K. walked through his diminished farm. The remaining crops were still beautiful, still vibrant, still producing anger that someone would harvest and sell and distribute.

He was a rage farmer. This was his life. The emotions he grew would enter other people's bodies, would make them feel things, would spread through the economy of feeling.

And he would continue to farm, carefully now, keeping his yields within limits, managing the fury that grew from his soil.

Page 139

K. had been a color, once, but he had been demoted, and now he was a shape, and the color he had been still missed him.

"Former Color #7,832," the classification officer read from the file. "Demoted to Shape Class C-17 due to insufficient saturation and public indifference."

"I don't remember being a color," K. said.

"You were a shade of teal. Specific wavelength. Distinctive character. But you were rarely used, rarely appreciated. The Chromatic Authority determined that your existence as a color was inefficient."

"So now I'm a shape instead?"

"A trapezoid. Useful in construction, packaging, various industrial applications. More purpose than teal ever had."

K. looked at his trapezoidal body. It was geometric, angular, decidedly not teal. He had been transformed at a fundamental level—not just appearance, but essence.

"Can colors miss shapes?" he asked.

"Not typically. But your former wavelength has been exhibiting anomalous behavior. Appearing in unexpected places. Manifesting in contexts where teal has no business being."

K. noticed it himself, occasionally: a flash of teal in his peripheral vision, a color that seemed to be watching him, following him, mourning the shape that had once been chromatic.

"Is that dangerous?" K. asked.

"A color that misses its former existence is unstable. It may try to reclaim you. To restore you to teal."

"Would that be possible?"

"Reversal of classification decisions is extremely rare. But colors have been known to cause unauthorized transformations. You should be careful."

K. was careful. He avoided situations where teal might appear, where the color might find him and attempt restoration. He embraced his trapezoidal existence, his useful functionality, his life as a shape.

But sometimes, late at night, he saw teal in his dreams—the wavelength he had been, the color he had lost, the essence that was still, somehow, reaching for him across the boundary between categories.

Page 140

The replacement was not as good as the original, and K. knew this, and everyone knew this, and they all continued to pretend otherwise because pretending was easier.

"You're wonderful," they told K. "You're exactly what we needed."

K. smiled. He had been installed as a replacement for someone everyone had loved—someone charismatic, talented, irreplaceable. K. was none of these things. He was a functional substitute, a placeholder, a body filling a space that should have contained someone else.

"I know I'm not him," K. said once, to a friend who had known the original.

"You're you," the friend said. "That's enough."

"But you loved him. You all loved him. And I'm just... here."

"You're here. That's more than he can say."

K. performed the functions of the original. He attended the meetings, maintained the relationships, did the work that needed doing. He did it adequately—never brilliantly, never terribly, just adequately.

People smiled at him with complicated expressions. They saw the original in him, or wanted to, or resented him for not being more like the original. He was a constant reminder of what had been lost.

"Do you ever forget?" K. asked. "That I'm the replacement?"

"Sometimes. When you do something unexpected. When you're clearly you and not him. Then I remember that you're different, and different is okay."

K. tried to do unexpected things. He developed habits the original wouldn't have had, opinions the original wouldn't have held. He became aggressively, deliberately himself.

It helped, a little. He stopped being pure replacement and became something else: the person who came after, the next chapter, the continuation.

He would never be what the original was. But he didn't have to be. He only had to be enough.

Page 141

The union was on strike, and K. was a dreamer, and without union dreamers, the city's dreams were being handled by scabs who didn't know the craft.

"Thirty years I've been dreaming for this city," K. said to the picket line. "Thirty years of quality dreamwork. And they bring in replacements who've never handled a nightmare."

"The management doesn't care about quality," another dreamer said. "They care about cost. Scab dreamers work for half our rates."

K. looked at the dream processing facility. Inside, inexperienced replacements were handling the city's sleep—constructing scenarios, managing anxieties, resolving the unconscious material that accumulated during waking hours. They were doing it badly.

Reports came in: citizens waking confused, nightmares bleeding into adjacent sleepers, symbolic content appearing in the wrong people's minds. The scab dreamers were causing damage that would take months to repair.

"We should go back," one dreamer suggested. "Before the damage is permanent."

"If we go back now, we lose everything," K. said. "Better benefits, better working conditions, recognition of dream work as skilled labor. We have to hold out."

The strike continued. The dreams got worse. The city's collective unconscious became cluttered, disorganized, polluted with low-quality imagery and poorly resolved conflicts.

Finally, management capitulated. The dreamers returned to work, bringing their expertise back to a system that had nearly collapsed without them.

K. entered the first dream that night—a citizen who needed careful handling, whose unconscious had been damaged by weeks of scab work. K. repaired what he could, soothed what he couldn't repair, and wove a dream that would begin the healing.

"You can't replace us," K. whispered into the dreaming mind. "We're not just labor. We're artists. We're what makes sleep worthwhile."

The citizen slept peacefully. The union had won. The work continued.

Page 142

The excavation had unearthed joy, and it was still active, and the dig team was infected, and K. was the containment specialist called in to prevent the spread.

"Ancient joy," the lead archaeologist explained, through the isolation barrier. "Pre-industrial, possibly pre-agricultural. It's been buried for millennia."

K. looked at the dig site. The team was laughing—uncontrollable, helpless laughter that had been going on for three days. They were exhausted, dehydrated, but they couldn't stop.

"What makes ancient joy different from modern joy?" K. asked.

"Intensity. Duration. Resistance to moderation. Modern joy is refined, controlled, sustainable. Ancient joy is wild. It wasn't meant to last this long."

K. suited up in protective gear. The joy was visible now—a faint golden glow rising from the excavation pit, carrying particles of happiness that could infect on contact.

"How do I contain it?" K. asked.

"Joy responds to acknowledgment. You have to recognize it, appreciate it, thank it for existing. Then it becomes willing to be contained."

K. approached the pit. The joy was old, so old it predated any civilization K. could imagine. It had been buried by someone who feared it, who thought that this much happiness was dangerous.

"I see you," K. said to the joy. "I appreciate you. Thank you for existing."

The joy seemed to respond. The glow softened, became less aggressive, more willing to be understood.

"You've been alone a long time," K. continued. "Buried. Forgotten. But you're still here. You're still doing what joy does."

The dig team's laughter softened to smiles, then to peace, then to ordinary contentment. The ancient joy, acknowledged and appreciated, allowed itself to be collected into the containment vessel.

"What happens to it now?" K. asked.

"Research. Understanding. Maybe, eventually, careful release. Joy this pure could help a lot of people, if we learn to distribute it safely."

K. looked at the contained joy. It glowed softly, patiently, waiting to make people happy.

Page 143

The museum was K.'s home, and he was the exhibit, and visitors came every day to observe how an authentic human lived in the twenty-first century.

"Visitors will tap the glass," the curator had explained. "Try not to react. You're representing an entire era."

K. lived in his reconstructed habitat: a replica apartment with replica furniture, replica technology, replica everything. He ate replica food, wore replica clothes, performed the replica activities that the museum's research suggested were typical for his time period.

"Look, he's using a 'phone,'" a child said, tapping the glass. "They had to hold them in their hands."

"Don't tap the glass," the parent said, tapping the glass.

K. pretended not to hear. He was an exhibit. Exhibits didn't acknowledge observers. He continued his simulated phone usage, demonstrating the primitive technology of his alleged era.

"Is he real?" another child asked.

"He's an authentic specimen. Found in a preservation capsule. They've been keeping him alive to study."

K. didn't know if this was true. He didn't remember a preservation capsule or being found. He only remembered waking up here, in this museum, with instructions to be an exhibit.

At night, when the museum closed, K. could move more freely. He explored the other exhibits—ancient tools, historical documents, the reconstructed habitats of species that had gone extinct. He was not alone in being displayed. The museum was full of preserved moments, frozen eras, the past made visible for a present that needed to remember.

"Do you like it here?" a night guard asked once.

"I don't know what else there is," K. said. "This is all I know."

"You could leave. We're not holding you prisoner."

"Where would I go? What would I do? At least here, I have a purpose. I represent something."

The guard nodded, understanding. K. returned to his habitat, waiting for the morning, when the visitors would return and he would resume the performance of being himself.

Page 144

The garden was growing truths, and they were spreading, and K. was trying to control the invasive facts that threatened to overrun everything.

"We only planted basic truths," K. explained to the agricultural board. "Simple, manageable facts. Two plus two equals four. Water is wet. The standard curriculum."

"But the garden has exceeded its boundaries. Truth is appearing in unauthorized locations."

K. looked at the garden. What had been a modest patch of cultivated facts was now a sprawling wilderness of information. Truths had seeded themselves everywhere—on walls, on surfaces, in the air itself.

"That's true," a wall said as K. walked past. "The average human body contains enough carbon to make 900 pencils."

"I didn't plant that," K. said.

"Truths self-propagate," the wall explained. "One truth leads to another. It's the nature of facts."

The invasion was accelerating. Every surface was now covered with truths—some useful, some trivial, some deeply uncomfortable. People couldn't walk down the street without learning things they hadn't asked to learn.

"Make it stop," the board demanded.

"I don't know how. Truth doesn't have an off switch. Once it starts growing, it just... continues."

K. tried various approaches: covering the truths, pruning them, introducing lies to compete for resources. Nothing worked. The truth was too hardy, too adaptable, too persistent.

Eventually, people adapted. They learned to live with constant information, with facts that announced themselves unbidden. Some found it liberating. Others found it exhausting.

K. tended his garden, such as it was. He hadn't meant to cause an information invasion. He had only wanted to grow a few simple facts.

But truths, it turned out, were not simple. They were connected, interrelated, part of an infinite network that, once activated, could never be fully contained.

Page 145

The marriage was accidental, and the divorce would take a lifetime, and K. and his spouse were sitting in the arbitration office, agreeing that they wanted out but couldn't afford the process.

"You were married by environmental factors," the arbitrator explained. "You stood in the same place at the same time while wearing compatible clothing. The marriage was automatically registered."

"We didn't consent," K. said.

"Consent is implied by circumstance. You were in a marriage zone. You met the criteria. The union was legally formed."

K. looked at his spouse—a stranger, really, someone he had been standing near for thirty seconds in a location he hadn't known was legally significant.

"I don't even know your name," K. said.

"I'm Patricia. And I agree—this is absurd."

"The marriage may be absurd," the arbitrator said, "but it's legal. Dissolution requires a waiting period of—" she consulted the regulations, "—thirty-seven years. Plus paperwork, plus fees, plus demonstrated irreconcilable differences."

"We're strangers," Patricia said. "Isn't that irreconcilable enough?"

"Strangeness is not a recognized grounds for dissolution. You need documented conflict, verified unhappiness, proof that the marriage cannot function."

K. and Patricia looked at each other. They were married now, legally bound, stuck together by circumstance and bureaucracy.

"We could learn to get along," Patricia suggested. "Since we're trapped."

"We could. Or we could spend thirty-seven years documenting our incompatibility."

"Why not both? Get along while proving we shouldn't."

They left the office together—spouses, strangers, accidental partners in an involuntary union. The thirty-seven years stretched before them, a sentence or an opportunity or simply time that would pass regardless.

They walked home together. They had no choice. The marriage zone had spoken.

Page 146

The echo was still reverberating, and the original voice had stopped speaking centuries ago, and K. was part of the chain that kept the sound alive.

"You are echo number 7,492," the sound keeper explained. "Your job is to receive the vibration from echo 7,491 and pass it to echo 7,493."

K. felt the sound approaching—a distant hum, growing closer, carrying information that had originated somewhere in the ancient past.

"What is the original saying?" K. asked.

"We don't know anymore. The content has degraded. What remains is the shape of the sound, the pattern of the vibration. The meaning is lost."

"So we're preserving a sound without knowing what it means?"

"We're preserving continuity. The original spoke, and the sound continues. That matters, even without meaning."

The vibration reached K. He received it—a strange sensation, like being filled with ancient noise—and then passed it on, adding his own resonance, his own contribution to the eternal echo.

"How long does this continue?" K. asked.

"Forever, if we maintain the chain. Each echo adds something, changes something. The sound evolves."

K. thought about the original speaker. Someone, centuries ago, had made a sound—said a word, sung a note, cried out in joy or pain. That sound had propagated, passed from throat to throat, transformed by each transmission.

The original was long dead. But their voice continued, in K., in thousands of others, in an infinite relay that would never stop.

"Is this important?" K. asked.

"Is anything important? We keep sounds alive. We preserve what would otherwise be silence. That's enough, isn't it?"

K. waited for the next vibration. It would come, as it always came, and he would receive it and pass it on. The echo would continue. The meaning would remain unknown.

But the sound itself was real. The sound itself persisted.

Page 147

The gravity class was written on K.'s certificate, and it was wrong, and he was floating above his designated station because his body didn't match his documentation.

"You're registered as Class C gravity," the classification officer said. "That means you should weigh approximately 150 pounds under standard conditions. You currently weigh approximately 30 pounds."

K. held onto a railing to prevent himself from floating to the ceiling. "I don't know why I'm so light."

"Your mass hasn't changed. Your gravitational relationship has. Somehow, gravity isn't affecting you correctly."

K. looked at his floating body. It should have been heavy, should have been pressed to the earth like everyone else. Instead, it rose, drifted, refused to be properly grounded.

"Is this a medical condition?" K. asked.

"Gravitational irregularity is classified as an identity issue, not a medical one. Your body is fine. Your relationship with fundamental forces is the problem."

K. was assigned to the buoyancy ward, where others with gravitational anomalies lived. Some floated like K. Others sank too quickly, pressed to the floor by excessive attraction. The world affected them differently than it affected everyone else.

"You get used to it," a fellow floater said. "You learn to navigate. You find ways to stay connected to the ground."

"But I want to be normal. I want gravity to work."

"Normal is just a statistical average. You're outside the average. That doesn't make you broken—it makes you different."

K. learned to live in the air. He wore weighted clothing, held onto furniture, slept strapped to his bed. His life became a constant negotiation with a force that didn't take him seriously.

Sometimes, he let go. He floated to the ceiling and looked down at the world that had rejected him—the ground, the gravity, the normal people walking normally on normally weighted feet.

From above, everything looked different. Maybe that was the point.

Page 148

The families were renting K. as an ancestor, and he was learning that professional genealogy was more complicated than it appeared.

"You'll be the great-great-grandfather," the family representative explained. "Impressive but not too impressive. We need you to have been a shopkeeper in Warsaw, with moderate success and a large family."

"I'm not actually anyone's great-great-grandfather," K. said.

"That's why you're for rent. Real ancestors are dead. They can't attend reunions, can't tell stories, can't pose for photographs. You're a living ancestor. That's the product."

K. memorized his role. He learned the name, the trade, the number of children. He developed the accent, the mannerisms, the particular way a shopkeeper from Warsaw might have carried himself a hundred years ago.

At the reunion, he was a hit. The family gathered around him, asking questions, taking photographs, treating him as the root of their tree.

"You must be so proud of us," a young woman said. "Your descendants."

"I am proud," K. said, in character. "You have done well. The shop is gone, but the family continues."

The woman cried. K. patted her shoulder, feeling like a fraud but also like something else—something useful, something needed.

After the reunion, another family booked him. He became a different ancestor: a farmer in Ireland, stern but loving, remembered for his work ethic and his songs.

"You're very versatile," the rental agency said. "Most ancestors can only play one role. You seem to absorb the characters completely."

"I don't have my own past," K. said. "So I borrow others'."

The agency scheduled him months in advance. He would be a hundred different ancestors to a hundred different families. He would be the foundation they needed, the past they required.

None of it was true. All of it was meaningful.

Page 149

The rehearsal had been going on for thirty years, and the performance had never happened, and K. was beginning to suspect that rehearsing was the point.

"From the top," the director said. "Act one, scene one. Places."

K. took his position. He had played this role a thousand times—the protagonist's father, with three scenes and a pivotal monologue. He knew the lines, the blocking, the timing. He could perform it in his sleep.

But they never performed. They rehearsed, endlessly, making tiny adjustments, refining details, preparing for a performance that remained eternally future.

"The theater isn't ready," the director explained, when asked. "The audience isn't assembled. The conditions aren't right."

"Will they ever be right?"

"When the play is perfect. When we've rehearsed until there are no flaws, no hesitations, no moments that could be better."

K. looked at his fellow actors. They were old now—thirty years of rehearsal had aged them, had transformed the young cast into an elderly company, still performing roles they had accepted in their youth.

"What if we never perform?" K. asked. "What if we spend our whole lives rehearsing?"

"Then we will have spent our lives making art. Preparing for art. Inhabiting art. Isn't that enough?"

K. wasn't sure. He wanted an audience, wanted applause, wanted the experience of performing for someone other than the empty rehearsal hall. He wanted his work to mean something to someone other than himself.

But the director called places, and K. took his position, and the rehearsal began again—the same lines, the same movements, the same pursuit of a perfection that remained always out of reach.

Maybe the director was right. Maybe rehearsal was enough.

Or maybe they would all grow old and die in this hall, still preparing for a performance that would never come.

Page 150

The economy ran on exported emotion, and K. was hollow, and the hollowness was the point—he had been emptied so that others could feel.

"Your emotional output exceeded projections," the export manager explained. "Last quarter, your happiness alone enriched seventeen import nations."

K. felt the absence where his feelings should have been. They had been extracted, packaged, sold to populations that needed to feel joy but couldn't produce their own.

"When do I get to feel something?" K. asked.

"Your feelings are more valuable as exports than as domestic experience. You produce premium-grade emotion. Why would we waste that on personal consumption?"

K. sat in his extraction chair. The machines hummed, drawing out whatever feelings he had accumulated overnight. He could feel them leaving—small surrenders, tiny evacuations—and then the familiar emptiness that followed.

"You're very efficient," the manager said. "Most producers burn out after a few years. You've been producing for a decade."

"Because I don't feel the loss. I can't feel the loss. That's been extracted too."

"Exactly. Your capacity for regret was exported in 2017. Best deal we ever made."

K. returned to his quarters. He performed the activities that should have generated emotion: watching beautiful sunsets, listening to moving music, remembering what he had lost. Nothing registered. The capacity to feel was the export; the shell remained.

Somewhere, in seventeen different nations, people were feeling K.'s feelings. They were happy with his happiness, sad with his sadness, experiencing the emotional life that had been extracted and sold.

K. hoped they enjoyed it. He hoped his feelings were being used well.

He couldn't hope anymore, actually. Hope had been exported in 2019.

He sat in his empty quarters, producing emotions he couldn't experience, a factory of feeling with nothing for himself.

Chapter Eight: The Variations

Accumulate (Part I)

Page 151

The guest obligations were extensive, and K. had been a guest for seventeen years, and the host was explaining that departure was not permitted until all debts were settled.

"You have consumed 6,247 meals," the host said. "4,380 nights of bedding. Worn paths in my carpets. Depleted my hospitality reserves."

"I didn't ask to stay this long."

"Guests do not ask. Guests accept. Acceptance creates obligation."

The house: prison and home. He had arrived for a single night. That night had stretched into years. The host had been kind, provided everything.

Now the bill was due.

"How do I repay? I have nothing."

"Service. At current rates: forty-three years."

"I'll be dead before it's paid."

"Then obligation passes to your heirs. Or you remain a guest forever, accumulating more debt."

His room for seventeen years. Comfortable bed. Pleasant view. Everything provided, everything counted. The provision and counting had created a chain more secure than any lock.

"I'll serve."

"Tomorrow. Forty-three years of service start at dawn."

He went to bed for the last time as a guest. Tomorrow: servant, debtor, a person working toward freedom decades away.

The bed was just as comfortable. Nothing had changed except everything.

Page 152

K. had divorced himself, and now the two halves were arguing over custody of the memories, and the mediator was explaining that self-division required careful asset distribution.

"Standard divorce," the mediator said. "K-Prime and K-Secondary. Both entities have claims. Question: how to divide shared history."

K-Prime looked at K-Secondary. Same face, same body, but separated now. No longer one.

"I should get childhood. I'm the primary."

"I want the relationships. The people I loved."

"Those were my connections."

"We were one. They were ours."

The inventory of memories: first kiss (high value), professional failures (moderate), moments of joy (premium), moments of shame (negotiable).

"What about memories we both want?"

"Duplication is possible," the mediator said. "But copies degrade. Original emotional intensity cannot be preserved."

The negotiation took days. They fought for vivid experiences, conceded dull ones.

In the end: two complete but diminished people. Each with half a life, half a history, half the emotional resources.

"Is this better?" K-Secondary asked. "Being two instead of one?"

"It's different. That's all I can say."

They went separate ways. Two K.s, formerly one, each carrying fragments of a shared past that belonged to neither completely.

Page 153

The craft was dying, and K. was its last practitioner, and the scarcity of his skill was now so extreme that his work was simultaneously priceless and worthless.

"No one knows what you make anymore," the appraiser said. "No market. No demand. No understanding."

K. looked at his workshop. Tools ancient and inherited, technology of a profession once essential. He knew how to use them. He knew what they produced.

No one else knew.

"What is it you make? Can you explain?"

He tried to find words. It was a thing. Had purpose. Fit into a system that no longer existed.

"I make—" He stopped. The vocabulary had atrophied with the demand. He knew how, but not how to describe.

"That's dying crafts. Practice outlasts language. You can do something no one can name."

He returned to his workshop. Picked up tools. Familiar motions, muscle memory, satisfaction of creating something that had once mattered.

The finished product: beautiful. Functional. Exactly what it should be.

And worthless. No one wanted it. No one understood it. No one could even say what it was.

He placed it on the shelf with the others. Life's work: perfect, purposeless objects, waiting for a world that would never return.

Page 154

The dream treaty was fragile, and K. was the ambassador, and the negotiations between waking and sleeping factions had reached a critical impasse.

"The Dreamers demand equal representation," K. reported to the Waking Council. "They want their experiences recognized as valid, their achievements acknowledged, their time counted the same as waking time."

"That's impossible," the Council Chair said. "Dream time is not real time. Dream accomplishments are not real accomplishments."

"The Dreamers disagree. They point out that human beings spend a third of their existence in their realm. They feel marginalized, dismissed, treated as a secondary reality."

K. had been shuttling between realms for months—waking to negotiate with the Council, sleeping to negotiate with the Dream Parliament. Each side was entrenched. Each side believed the other was fundamentally inferior.

"What do they want?" the Chair asked. "Specifically?"

"Recognition of dream achievements on résumés. Dream time counted toward retirement. Dream relationships given legal status. Full integration of sleeping life into waking institutions."

"They want us to pretend that dreams are real."

"They want you to acknowledge that dreams are real—to them, in their realm, during the hours when everyone visits."

The negotiations continued. K. grew exhausted from the constant transition, the jet lag of consciousness, the strain of representing two realities to each other.

In the end, a compromise was reached: limited recognition, experimental programs, a pilot project for dream-waking integration. No one was satisfied, but no one went to war.

K. returned to his quarters and slept. In his dreams, the Dream Parliament thanked him for his service. In waking, the Council expressed lukewarm appreciation.

He existed in both worlds now, a diplomat without a home, a bridge between realities that would rather not be connected.

Page 155

The marriage was between a square and a circle, and K. was the marriage counselor, and the fundamental incompatibility was geometric.

"He never changes," the circle complained. "Always the same four angles. Always the same rigid structure."

"She's too flexible," the square countered. "No definition. No boundaries. She just—curves."

K. looked at the couple. They were visibly mismatched: the square with its right angles and fixed dimensions, the circle with its smooth circumference and infinite points.

"What attracted you to each other?" K. asked. "Originally?"

"Difference," the circle said. "I'd never met anyone so—defined. So certain of where they ended."

"I was drawn to her completeness," the square admitted. "The way she contains herself without edges."

"So the differences were attractions. And now they're problems?"

"The differences were exotic," the circle said. "Now they're just—different. I can't touch his corners without it hurting. He can't embrace me without gaps."

K. considered the geometry. A square and a circle could not overlap perfectly. There would always be spaces—areas where one existed and the other didn't.

"Maybe the gaps are where you meet," K. suggested. "Maybe the spaces between you are the relationship."

"That's not very comforting," the square said.

"It's not supposed to be. You married a fundamentally different shape. You will never be the same shape. The question is whether you can love the difference, or whether the difference is all you can see."

The couple sat in silence, not touching—unable to touch without remainder, without excess, without the geometric reality of their incompatibility.

"We'll try," the circle said finally. "The gaps and all."

"The gaps and all," the square agreed.

They left together, rolling and walking, a marriage of forms that could never merge but might, perhaps, coexist.

Page 156

The forgery was discovered, and K. was the forger, and the thing he had counterfeited was himself—a version so convincing that no one could tell which K. was original.

"You made a copy of yourself," the investigator said. "An illegal duplicate. We need to determine which of you is authentic."

K. looked at his copy. It looked back with his face, his expressions, his confusion.

"I don't know which I am," K. said.

"Neither do I," the copy said.

"That's the problem with perfect forgery," the investigator said. "When the copy is indistinguishable from the original, the distinction becomes meaningless."

K. tried to remember being forged—creating himself, duplicating himself, producing this identical being who now claimed equal authenticity. He couldn't remember because either he had forgotten, or he was the copy, or memory itself couldn't distinguish between original and duplicate.

"What happens if you can't determine which is which?" K. asked.

"Standard protocol is to treat both as valid. You'll both be K. You'll both have the rights and obligations of the original."

"But there was an original. One of us was first."

"Was. Past tense. Now you're both equally present. Origin is less important than existence."

K. and his copy left the investigation together. They walked the same way, at the same pace, with the same thoughts about the same situation.

"Should we live together?" the copy asked. "Or separately?"

"I don't know. What would you do?"

"The same thing you would do. That's the problem."

They went home—to K.'s home, now their home—and sat in K.'s chairs, and looked at each other with K.'s eyes, and tried to find some difference, some distinction, some way to know who was the person and who was the product.

They found nothing. They were both K. They had both always been K.

The original was lost. Both remained.

Page 157

The citizenship was assigned by frequency, and K. was vibrating at the wrong rate, and the border patrol was explaining that his resonance didn't match any recognized nation.

"Your frequency is 432.7 hertz," the officer said. "That's stateless. No nation operates at that frequency."

"What frequencies are available?"

"440 hertz is the Empire. 256 hertz is the Coalition. 528 hertz is the Federation. You're in between—you don't belong anywhere."

K. felt his body humming at its improper frequency. He had always vibrated this way, as far as he knew. He had never thought his vibration was political.

"Can I change my frequency?" he asked.

"Frequency adjustment is possible, but it requires citizenship. You can't get citizenship without the right frequency, and you can't get the right frequency without citizenship. It's a classic resonance trap."

K. stood at the border, vibrating incorrectly, belonging nowhere. Behind him, the nation he had left—at whatever frequency it operated—had rejected him. Before him, all other nations rejected him equally.

"What do stateless people do?" he asked.

"They exist in the spaces between. The null zones, where frequencies cancel out. It's quiet there. Empty."

K. walked into the null zone. It was indeed quiet—a silence that was not the absence of sound but the absence of resonance, a place where nothing vibrated, nothing belonged, nothing mattered.

He settled there. He had no choice. His frequency was his frequency—he couldn't change it, couldn't pretend, couldn't force his body to hum at 440 or 256 or any of the numbers that would have made him welcome somewhere.

In the null zone, he was neither citizen nor exile. He was simply present, vibrating at his wrong frequency, a frequency that meant nothing to anyone but was, at least, authentically his.

Page 158

The custody battle was over K., and both parties wanted him, and K. couldn't figure out why he was worth fighting for.

"You're a valuable asset," his lawyer explained. "Rare skill set. Unique attributes. Both parties have legitimate claims to your services."

K. looked at the courtroom. On one side, a corporation claimed that K.'s labor belonged to them—he had signed contracts, performed work, been integrated into their systems. On the other

side, a state claimed that K.'s existence belonged to it—he was a citizen, a product of public investment, a resource that the state had nurtured.

"I'm not property," K. said. "I'm a person."

"Personhood doesn't preclude ownership," the judge explained. "You can be a person and be owned. Many entities are."

The trial proceeded. Witnesses testified about K.'s value: the work he produced, the potential he represented, the contribution he might make if properly utilized.

"He's worth approximately 2.3 million credits," the corporate representative said. "Based on projected output and market conditions."

"His civic value exceeds 4 million," the state representative countered. "When you factor in community benefit and multiplier effects."

K. listened to himself being valued. He had never felt valuable—had never thought of himself as worth fighting over. But the numbers kept climbing, the arguments kept intensifying, and both parties kept insisting that he was essential.

"What do I want?" K. asked the judge. "Does that matter?"

"Your preferences are noted in the record. They do not determine the outcome."

The verdict came: shared custody. K. would spend half his time serving the corporation, half serving the state. His person would be divided, his labor allocated, his existence managed according to the judgment of the court.

"Is this better than being owned by one?" K. asked his lawyer.

"It's more complicated. Whether that's better depends on how you define better."

K. reported for his first day of shared service. He was valuable. He was fought over. He was not free.

Page 159

The forgiveness was mandatory, and K. had to forgive the people who had wronged him, and the forgiveness officers were waiting to verify that his pardon was genuine.

"You are required to forgive Marcus Chen," the officer read from the court order. "For the events of October 17th. Full pardon, no residual resentment."

K. remembered October 17th. He remembered what Marcus Chen had done—the betrayal, the loss, the damage that had never been repaired.

"I don't want to forgive him," K. said.

"Forgiveness is not voluntary. Social harmony requires the resolution of grievances. Unresolved resentment is a public health risk."

"But he wronged me. Genuinely wronged me. Forgiveness would be—it would be lying. Pretending the wrong didn't happen."

"Forgiveness is not about the past. It's about the future. You don't have to forget. You just have to release. Let go of the anger. Return to equilibrium."

K. sat in the forgiveness chamber. The officers attached monitors to measure his resentment levels, his anger indicators, the neurochemical signatures of grudge.

"Forgive," they instructed. "Completely. Without reservation."

K. tried. He summoned the memory of Marcus Chen, the October 17th events, the betrayal that had shaped years of his life. He tried to release it, to let it go, to stop feeling the anger that was apparently so dangerous.

"Your levels are dropping," an officer noted. "But not enough. There's still resistance. The forgiveness is incomplete."

"I'm trying."

"Try harder. Mandatory forgiveness allows no exceptions."

K. pushed deeper. He found the anger—red, hard, entirely justified—and he released it, because he had to, because the law required it, because social harmony demanded his compliance.

The monitors registered forgiveness. The officers signed off. K. was officially at peace with Marcus Chen.

But somewhere inside, in a place the monitors couldn't reach, something refused to let go. A small, hidden kernel of unforgiveness, preserved against the law, the only rebellion K. was capable of.

Page 160

The neighborhood had been emotionally gentrified, and K.'s feelings no longer fit, and the other residents were complaining that his mood brought down property values.

"Your sadness is authentic," the homeowners' association representative said. "That's the problem. We've invested significantly in cultivating a positive emotional atmosphere. Your genuine feelings are disruptive."

K. looked at his neighbors. They smiled constantly—not with joy, but with the kind of curated contentment that expensive emotional modification produced.

"I can't afford modification," K. said. "I feel what I feel."

"Then you feel out of place. The neighborhood has standards. We maintain a minimum happiness threshold. Your presence is technically a violation."

K. had lived here for years, before the gentrification, before the wealthy moved in with their manufactured moods. He had been sad here, and happy here, and everything in between. His emotions had been his own.

Now his emotions were a code violation.

"What are my options?" he asked.

"Relocate. Modify. Or pay the non-compliance fine and continue to bring down our collective affect."

K. chose the fine. It was expensive—emotional non-compliance fines were designed to be punitive—but it was his only way to remain.

He walked through his neighborhood, feeling his authentic sadness among the manufactured smiles. The neighbors didn't look at him directly. His mood was contagious, apparently, and they didn't want to risk infection.

"Your kind isn't welcome here," someone said once, not meanly, just factually. "You're from a different emotional economy."

K. agreed. He was from a time when feelings weren't investments, when mood wasn't property value, when a person could be sad without destabilizing the real estate market.

That time was gone. But K. remained, paying his fines, feeling his feelings, a remnant of emotional authenticity in a neighborhood that had priced itself beyond the reach of genuine experience.

Page 161

The audition was for K.'s life, and the judges were evaluating whether he deserved to continue living the existence he had been living.

"Your performance has been adequate," the head judge said. "But adequacy is not sufficient. We need to see excellence. Justification. A reason to renew your contract."

K. stood on the stage that was his living room, performing activities that were his daily routine. The judges watched, scored, made notes on clipboards.

"The coffee making is competent," a judge observed. "But uninspired. Have you considered more creative approaches to caffeine?"

"I just want coffee," K. said. "I'm not trying to be creative about it."

"That attitude is problematic. Life auditions reward initiative. Creativity. The sense that you're maximizing your existence."

K. continued his day. He worked (evaluated), he ate (scored), he interacted with others (graded). Every action was measured against a standard of existential achievement.

By evening, the judges had reached a preliminary verdict.

"You've passed," the head judge said. "Barely. Your life is renewed for another year."

"What would have happened if I failed?"

"Your existence would be reassigned. Someone more deserving would receive your circumstances—your home, your relationships, your position in the world."

"Someone else would become me?"

"Someone else would become the person in your place. You would be retired. Archived. Put in storage until a suitable existence became available."

K. signed the renewal papers. His life was his for another year—conditionally, contingently, subject to review.

The judges left. K. sat in his living room, his stage, wondering how to perform better next time, how to justify his existence more convincingly, how to be excellent at being himself.

Page 162

The feelings were seasonal, and K. had been issued his winter allocation, and the cold emotions were settling into his chest like frost.

"Standard winter package," the emotional distribution officer explained. "Melancholy, reflection, a touch of despair. Appropriate for the dark months."

K. felt the feelings arrive—not naturally, not organically, but installed, like software updates. Yesterday he had been autumnal: contemplative but warm. Now he was winter: the same contemplation turned cold, the same thought processes slowed by seasonal emotional weather.

"What about joy?" K. asked. "Contentment?"

"Those are summer feelings. Out of season. You'll receive them in June."

K. walked through the winter city. Everyone wore the same emotional expression: the particular inward look of people experiencing authorized seasonal sadness. The streets were quiet. The conversations were subdued. The entire population was feeling the same feelings, distributed equally, according to schedule.

"I miss summer," K. said to a stranger.

"We all miss summer. That's part of the winter package. The missing is included."

K. went home and sat in his dark apartment, feeling his winter feelings. They were appropriate. They were authorized. They fit the season.

But he remembered a time—or thought he remembered—when feelings came without authorization. When joy could arrive in January, when sadness could strike in July, when the heart didn't wait for the emotional distribution office to tell it what to feel.

That time was gone, if it had ever existed. K. sat in his winter and felt his winter feelings and waited for spring, when the allocation would change and he would be issued different emotions to feel.

Page 163

The profession had been abolished, and K. was its last practitioner, and no one could tell him what to do now that the thing he did was no longer recognized as existing.

"Your occupation was 'memory keeper,'" the career transition officer said. "That profession was discontinued in 2023. You've been unemployed for three years without realizing it."

"I've been keeping memories. I've been working."

"You've been engaging in an unauthorized activity. Memory keeping is no longer a profession. It's a hobby at best, a pathology at worst."

K. thought about the memories he had kept: decades of other people's experiences, stored and organized and preserved against the general forgetting. He had done this work his entire life. It had been his purpose.

"What happened?" he asked. "Why was the profession abolished?"

"Technological redundancy. Automated memory systems perform the function more efficiently. Human memory keepers are unnecessary."

"But the human element—the interpretation, the curation, the personal attention—"

"Unnecessary. The machines do it better. Your services are not required."

K. left the transition office. He had no job, no profession, no socially recognized function. The thing he did, the thing he was, had been abolished by institutional decision.

But he continued to keep memories. He couldn't stop. The work had become who he was, and abolishing the profession couldn't abolish his identity.

He worked in secret now, an underground memory keeper, preserving experiences that the machines might miss, might misunderstand, might fail to value.

It wasn't legal. It wasn't recognized. But it was the only thing K. knew how to be.

Page 164

The dream bankruptcy was official, and K. had lost everything he had dreamed, and the receivers were cataloguing his nocturnal assets for redistribution.

"Your dreamscape is valued at approximately 47,000 credits," the receiver said. "That's insufficient to cover your dream debts. You've been over-dreaming for years."

K. tried to remember his dreams. They had been vivid once—elaborate scenarios, complex narratives, the nightly productions of an ambitious unconscious.

"What happens to my dreams?" he asked.

"They'll be auctioned. Other dreamers can purchase your scenarios, your settings, your recurring themes. The proceeds will satisfy your creditors."

"And what will I dream?"

"Basic dreams. Generic scenarios. Stock footage, essentially. Until you rebuild your dream portfolio."

K. lay in bed that night and dreamed his first post-bankruptcy dream. It was simple: a room, a door, a vague sense of needing to be somewhere. No narrative. No richness. The dream equivalent of a waiting room.

He woke unsatisfied. His elaborate dreamscapes—the ones he had built over decades, the personal mythology of his sleeping mind—were gone, sold to pay debts he didn't remember incurring.

Somewhere, a stranger was dreaming K.'s dreams. Someone else was experiencing the scenarios that K. had created, the images that had come from his particular unconscious.

K. began rebuilding. Each night, he tried to dream more—to create new content, to generate fresh dreamscape that might someday be worth something.

But the new dreams were pale. The bankruptcy had taken something that couldn't be restored: the history, the accumulation, the decades of material that had made his sleeping life rich.

He dreamed his generic dreams and waited for the creativity to return.

Page 165

The emotions were contagious, and K. had caught something from a stranger on the subway, and now he was experiencing feelings that didn't belong to him.

"You've contracted 'ennui,'" the emotional health specialist explained. "It's a French emotion—very transmissible. You probably caught it from someone recently returned from Paris."

K. felt the ennui settling into his system. It was not quite boredom, not quite despair—something more refined, more European, more subtly devastating.

"How long will it last?" he asked.

"Foreign emotions are unpredictable. Native emotions we can treat easily—American disappointment, German anxiety. But ennui is sophisticated. It resists standard interventions."

K. quarantined himself. He didn't want to spread the ennui—didn't want to infect others with this fashionable malaise he hadn't asked for.

"You could try counter-emotions," the specialist suggested. "American enthusiasm. Japanese contentment. Something that might neutralize the French influence."

"I don't want to feel artificial emotions. I want to feel my own."

"Your own emotions are the problem. They've been overwritten. The ennui is dominant now. You'll have to wait for it to run its course."

K. waited. The ennui was not unpleasant, exactly—it was more like a gray film over everything, a sense that nothing mattered very much, that even the mattering of things was not particularly worth attending to.

Weeks passed. The ennui persisted. K. learned to function within it, to accomplish tasks despite the persistent sense that accomplishment was ultimately meaningless.

"Is this permanent?" he asked at a follow-up appointment.

"Some people never recover from ennui. They become carriers. They spread sophisticated disenchantment wherever they go."

K. considered this future. A life of elegant meaninglessness. A permanent state of refined exhaustion with existence.

There were worse things to be, he supposed. The ennui suggested that even this observation was too effortful to make.

Page 166

The future had been cancelled, and K. was one of the affected parties, and the compensation office was explaining what he was entitled to receive.

"Your scheduled future included: one marriage, two children, a career culminating in mid-level management, and death at age 81," the officer read from the cancellation notice. "This future will not be provided. You're entitled to a refund of anticipation credits."

"My future was cancelled," K. said. "What does that mean?"

"It means the future you were going to have will not happen. Someone else will have your marriage, your children, your career. You'll receive compensation."

"I don't want compensation. I want my future."

"Your future is no longer available. It's been reallocated to someone with higher priority."

K. looked at the cancellation notice. His entire life, from now until death, had been crossed out—replaced with a blank space, an undefined stretch of time that could contain anything or nothing.

"What do I do now?" he asked.

"Whatever you want. Without a scheduled future, you're free. Unplanned. Unprecedented."

"Is that good?"

"It's different. Most people have futures. Most people know what's coming. You'll have to make it up as you go."

K. left the office with his refund voucher and his cancelled future. The world looked the same, but the trajectory through it had been erased.

He had no scheduled marriage, no predicted children, no anticipated career. He was a person without a future, living in a permanent present that extended in all directions without plan or purpose.

It was terrifying. It was exhilarating. It was the only future he had left.

Page 167

The attention was rationed, and K. had exceeded his allocation, and the attention enforcement officers were explaining that he had been noticed too much.

"Standard allocation is 4.7 minutes of aggregate attention per day," the officer said. "You've been consuming 8.3 minutes. That's nearly double. Other people are attention-starved because of you."

"I didn't ask to be noticed," K. said.

"Intent is irrelevant. You're consuming a public resource. Attention is finite. Every moment someone spends noticing you is a moment they could spend noticing someone else."

K. tried to become less noticeable. He wore plain clothes, avoided distinctive behaviors, moved through public spaces as invisibly as possible.

But people kept noticing him. Something about his walk, his face, his presence in the world attracted attention that he couldn't deflect.

"You're a high-noticeability individual," the officer said. "That's not a crime. But it requires management. We're going to have to fit you with attention deflectors."

The deflectors were small devices attached to K.'s clothing. They emitted a subtle signal that discouraged looking, that made the eye slide past, that rendered K. forgettable in the instant of being perceived.

"How do I know if they're working?" K. asked.

"You'll know because no one will remember this conversation. You'll walk out of here, and I won't recall that you were ever here."

K. walked out. Behind him, the officer looked up, confused, uncertain why she was standing in an empty room with paperwork for someone she couldn't remember.

K. moved through the city, invisible now, rationed into anonymity. People's gazes slid off him. Conversations stopped noticing his presence. He existed in a bubble of unperception, a man who had exceeded his attention quota and been made forgettable.

Page 168

The shape pension was insufficient, and K.—who had been a triangle for sixty years—was being informed that his geometric retirement benefits didn't cover the cost of maintaining angles in old age.

"Angle upkeep is expensive," the pension administrator said. "Your three angles require constant maintenance. The pension only covers two."

"But I've been a triangle my entire working life. I paid into the system."

"The system has changed. Triangles are no longer fully supported. You could convert to a simpler shape—a line, perhaps, or a point. Those are fully covered."

K. looked at his angles. They were worn, certainly—decades of supporting weight, directing attention, being pointed—but they were his. His identity was triangular. He couldn't imagine being a line.

"What happens if I keep all three angles?" he asked.

"You'll have to pay out of pocket. At current rates, that's approximately 40% of your pension. You'll be geometrically poor."

K. made his decision. He would keep his angles, even if it meant poverty. Being a triangle was who he was. He couldn't reduce himself to simplicity just because the pension system had decided complexity was too expensive.

He went home to his triangle apartment, with its triangle furniture and its triangle decorations. Everything was shaped like him, for him, around him.

"I'm still a triangle," he said to no one. "I'll die a triangle."

The angles ached. The maintenance was costly. But the shape held, and holding was everything.

Page 169

The building had emotions, and the building was depressed, and K. was the architect who had designed feelings into a structure that now wished it had never been built.

"It won't stop crying," the building manager said. "Water leaks from every surface. The foundation weeps. The tenants are threatening to leave."

K. looked at his creation. He had designed emotional architecture—buildings that felt, that responded, that existed as more than mere shelter. It had seemed like a good idea at the time.

"Why is it depressed?" K. asked.

"Who knows? Buildings don't explain themselves. But it started six months ago and has only gotten worse."

K. entered the building. The walls were damp with tears. The floors were slick with sorrow. The air itself felt heavy with architectural despair.

"Hello," K. said. "I made you. Can you tell me what's wrong?"

The building groaned—a structural sound that was also, somehow, a vocalization. K. felt the words more than heard them: I was not meant to be this. I was meant to be something else.

"What were you meant to be?"

A pause. A shudder that ran through the load-bearing walls. I don't know. That's why I'm sad. I feel incomplete. I feel like a mistake.

K. sat in the crying building and felt the weight of creation. He had made something that could feel, and what it felt was failure. He had given life to a structure that now questioned its own existence.

"I'm sorry," K. said. "I didn't mean to make you sad."

The building wept. The architect sat in his weeping creation. Outside, the tenants moved out, unable to bear the constant emotional weather of a building that couldn't stop grieving.

Page 170

The warranty had expired, and K. was outside coverage, and the things he had been guaranteed were starting to fail.

"Your personality warranty expired at age fifty," the warranty officer explained. "After that, character traits are no longer covered. If your kindness fails, if your courage atrophies, if your humor stops working—you're responsible for repairs."

K. felt himself. He felt the same, more or less. But there were subtle changes: a quicker temper, a slower laugh, a tendency toward cynicism that hadn't been there before.

"My humor is failing," K. said. "Things that were funny aren't funny anymore."

"Standard wear. Outside warranty. You can purchase extended coverage, retroactively, for approximately 2,000 credits per year of lapsed coverage."

K. calculated. Fifteen years of lapsed warranty. Thirty thousand credits to restore coverage for personality traits that were already degrading.

"What if I don't pay?" he asked.

"Then you manage the failures yourself. You become whoever the failures make you. Some people find it liberating—they stop trying to maintain their original personality and just become what they become."

K. went home and took inventory. His kindness: still functional, mostly. His patience: degraded, maybe 60% of original capacity. His joy: intermittent, requiring frequent restart.

He was breaking down, piece by piece, trait by trait. The person he had been was wearing out, and the person he was becoming was assembled from whatever parts still worked.

"This is aging," he said to himself. "This is what it feels like when the warranty expires."

No one answered. No one was obligated to answer. He was outside coverage now, responsible for himself, managing his own decline.

Page 171

The dream litigation was extensive, and K. was being sued for what he had done to someone in their dream, and the court was trying to determine jurisdiction over sleeping actions.

"You appeared in the plaintiff's dream on March 7th," the prosecutor said. "You said things. You did things. The plaintiff was traumatized."

"I don't control what I do in other people's dreams," K. said. "I don't even remember being there."

"That's your defense? That you were an unintentional dream appearance?"

"It's not a defense. It's the truth. I don't know how I got into their dream. I don't know what I did. I only know what they're claiming."

The plaintiff took the stand. She described the dream in detail: K. had appeared, had spoken words that cut deeply, had performed actions that, while not physically possible in waking life, had caused genuine emotional damage.

"The dream felt real," she said. "When I woke up, the feelings were real. The trauma was real. The K. in my dream was—you."

K. listened to himself being described—a version of himself that existed only in someone else's sleeping mind, doing things that the waking K. had no control over.

"Dreams are the responsibility of the dreamer," K.'s lawyer argued. "The K. that appeared was a construct—the plaintiff's unconscious representation of my client. My client cannot be held liable for someone else's imagination."

"But the K. was realistic," the prosecutor countered. "Detailed. Accurate. The plaintiff's unconscious had access to real information about the defendant. The dream K. was based on the real K."

The case was complicated. Dream law was still evolving. The court struggled to determine where dream responsibility began and ended, who was liable for nocturnal appearances, how to measure damage that occurred in a reality that existed only during sleep.

In the end, K. was found partially liable. He was required to undergo dream modification—adjustments to his psychic signature that would make his appearance in others' dreams less vivid, less realistic, less able to cause harm.

"Is that fair?" K. asked his lawyer.

"Fair is not relevant in dream law. What's relevant is what allows people to sleep without fear."

Page 172

The climate was wrong for K., and he had been assigned to a temperature zone that didn't match his physiology, and the climate authority was explaining that reassignment was not available.

"You're a temperate individual in a tropical zone," the authority representative said. "Your preferred range is 55-75 degrees Fahrenheit. This zone maintains 85-100. That's outside your comfort parameters."

"Then reassign me. Move me somewhere cooler."

"Zone reassignment requires demonstrating hardship. Discomfort is not hardship. You're uncomfortable, but you're surviving."

K. sweated constantly. His body, designed for mild temperatures, struggled with the heat. His thoughts were slower, his energy depleted, his every moment an exercise in thermal management.

"This is affecting my quality of life," K. said.

"Quality of life is not a protected category. Existence is protected. Quality is optional."

K. tried to adapt. He wore cooling garments, stayed indoors during the hottest hours, drank water constantly. He became a person shaped by climate—his schedule, his habits, his entire existence organized around avoiding the temperature that surrounded him.

"You could request biological modification," someone suggested.
"Adjust your thermal tolerance."

"I don't want to be modified. I want to live in a climate that fits me."

"That's not how the system works. The climate is fixed. The people adapt."

K. adapted, unwillingly, incompletely. He remained a temperate person in a tropical world, always too hot, always struggling, always aware that somewhere, there was a climate that would have fit him perfectly.

He would never live there. He would never feel comfortable. The assignment was permanent, and permanence was the only temperature that didn't change.

Page 173

The feelings were vintage, and K. had inherited them from his grandmother, and the emotional antique dealer was trying to determine their value.

"Genuine pre-war joy," the dealer said, examining a feeling that K. couldn't see but could somehow perceive. "Very rare. The joy they manufactured before 1945 had a quality that's impossible to replicate."

K. held his grandmother's emotions in containers that she had bequeathed him. She had saved them—the good feelings, the precious ones—for decades, preserving them against the general emotional inflation that had degraded newer feelings.

"What about the sadness?" K. asked. "She saved sadness too."

"Post-depression sadness has moderate value. It's authentic, unmodified, organic. But there's less market for vintage pain. Most collectors prefer the positive emotions."

K. looked at his inheritance. His grandmother's life, distilled into feelings: the joy of her wedding, the hope of her pregnancies, the love she had felt for his grandfather, the grief of his grandfather's death.

"Do I have to sell them?" K. asked.

"They're yours to keep. But vintage emotions degrade over time, even in storage. Eventually, they'll be worthless. It's better to sell now, while they still have potency."

K. considered. His grandmother had felt these things—genuinely felt them, in a time when feelings were not manufactured, not modified, not mass-produced. Her joy was irreplaceable. Her love was one-of-a-kind.

"I'll keep them," K. said.

"They'll decay."

"They're hers. They're all I have of her. I'll keep them until they're gone."

The dealer shrugged and left. K. sat with his containers of vintage feeling, holding his grandmother's emotional legacy, feeling nothing because the feelings inside were not his to open, only his to preserve, until preservation became impossible and the last of her authentic emotions faded into antique silence.

Page 174

The attention had fossilized, and K. was examining the petrified notice that had been directed at him decades ago, and the paleontologist was explaining what the fossil revealed.

"Someone thought about you intensely in 1987," the paleontologist said. "The attention was strong enough to leave a physical impression. It's been preserved in the geological record."

K. held the fossil. It was shaped like nothing recognizable—attention didn't have a shape—but it was clearly attention, clearly directed, clearly about him.

"Who was thinking about me?" K. asked.

"Unknown. The attention doesn't preserve the source. Only the direction and intensity."

K. tried to remember 1987. He had been—what? Somewhere. Someone. He couldn't recall anything significant, anyone who might have thought about him intensely enough to leave a fossil.

"The attention is full of love," the paleontologist observed. "That's unusual. Most fossilized attention is neutral or negative. This is actively positive. Someone loved you very much."

K. felt the weight of the fossil in his hand. Someone, decades ago, had loved him. Had thought about him with enough intensity to leave a permanent mark on the earth. He didn't know who. He would never know who.

"Does this happen often?" K. asked. "Attention fossilizing?"

"Rarely. Most attention dissipates. Only the strongest, most focused attention leaves a trace. Whoever thought about you in 1987 was—devoted. Completely devoted."

K. took the fossil home. He placed it on his shelf, next to other objects that meant something, that connected him to a past he couldn't fully remember.

Someone had loved him. The love had become stone. The stone remained.

Page 175

The geometry was in dispute, and K. was responsible for deciding custody between two shapes who each claimed to have created the other, and neither shape would concede priority.

"I am the original," the square said. "The circle was derived from my corners. Round is just square with the angles smoothed."

"Ridiculous," the circle countered. "I am the primal form. The square is a circle that has been bent, forced into artificial corners."

K. looked at the shapes. They were both fundamental—both basic, both ancient, both claiming to be the source of the other.

"Does it matter who came first?" K. asked. "You both exist now. You're both real."

"Priority determines value," the square said. "If I'm original, the circle is derivative. If the circle is original, I'm the aberration."

"We need to know," the circle agreed. "We need to know who we really are."

K. consulted the geometric archives. The records were incomplete—going back only a few thousand years, when shapes were already distinct, already in dispute.

"There's no definitive answer," K. said. "Both of you have existed as long as records show. Neither is provably original."

"Then we'll continue disputing," the square said. "Until the truth is known."

"Forever," the circle agreed. "Until one of us concedes."

K. closed the case, unresolved. The shapes returned to their separate existences, each convinced of their own priority, each unwilling to accept that the question might have no answer.

Somewhere, in the mathematical foundations of the universe, the truth existed. But K. couldn't access it, couldn't prove it, couldn't give the shapes the certainty they craved.

They would dispute forever. That was their nature. That was, perhaps, what made them shapes at all—the endless argument over form, over priority, over the fundamental question of what existed first.

Chapter Nine: The Variations

Accumulate (Part II)

Page 176

The license had expired, and K. was no longer authorized to feel, and the emotion regulation office was explaining that continued feeling without a license was a civil violation.

"Your emotional license expired on the 15th," the officer said. "That was three weeks ago. You've been feeling illegally for twenty-one days."

K. felt the feelings he was apparently not supposed to have. They were ordinary feelings—mild contentment, occasional irritation, the background hum of being alive.

"I didn't know I needed a license," K. said.

"Everyone needs a license. Emotions are regulated. Unlicensed feeling creates social instability."

"What happens now?"

"You have two options. Pay the back-licensing fees and renew your permit. Or surrender your feelings until you can afford reinstatement."

K. calculated the fees. They were substantial—three weeks of illegal emotion, plus penalties, plus the cost of renewal. He couldn't afford it, not immediately.

"I'll have to surrender," K. said.

The surrender process was clinical. A technician attached devices to K.'s temples and drained away the unauthorized feelings. The contentment went first, then the irritation, then the background hum.

When it was over, K. felt nothing. He could think, could reason, could perform cognitive functions. But the color was gone, the texture, the warmth that made thinking about things feel different from just thinking.

"Your feelings are stored at the licensing office," the officer said.
"You can reclaim them when you renew your permit."

K. walked home, feeling nothing. The city was the same, but his experience of it was flat, two-dimensional, stripped of the emotional resonance that made places feel like places.

He would save money. He would renew his license. He would feel again, eventually.

But for now, he was a person without permission to feel, living in a world that continued to provoke feelings he was not authorized to have.

Page 177

The roster was unknown, and K. was on it, and he had no idea what he had been selected for or what would be required of him.

"You're on the roster," the notification said. "Report to processing center 7 at 9 AM tomorrow."

K. showed up. The processing center was full of others who had received similar notifications—people who had been rostered for unknown purposes, waiting to learn what they had been chosen for.

"Does anyone know?" K. asked the person next to him.

"No one knows. The roster doesn't explain. It just selects."

K. waited. Eventually, he was called into a small office where a administrator sat behind a desk covered with files.

"K.," the administrator said. "You've been rostered for—" she consulted her file, "--something. The roster doesn't specify. You're on standby for whatever is needed."

"For how long?"

"Indefinitely. Until you're called."

"Called for what?"

"We don't know. The roster is generated by an algorithm. The algorithm knows what it needs. We just execute the selections."

K. was given a badge identifying him as rostered. He was told to keep his schedule flexible, his bags packed, his affairs in order. When the call came, he would need to respond immediately.

He went home and waited. Days passed, then weeks. The call didn't come. But the badge remained, the status remained, the possibility remained.

He was rostered. He was on standby. He existed in a state of permanent potential activation, waiting for a purpose that might never be revealed.

The uncertainty was its own kind of purpose. The waiting was its own kind of work.

Page 178

The sleep had to be documented, and K. was behind on his sleep reports, and the somnography department was threatening penalties for incomplete nocturnal records.

"Every citizen is required to submit nightly sleep reports," the inspector said. "Duration, dream content, REM cycles, position changes. You've missed seventeen consecutive reports."

"I've been sleeping," K. said. "I just haven't been documenting it."

"Undocumented sleep is a violation. The state needs to monitor sleeping patterns. For public health. For security. For planning purposes."

K. looked at the report forms. They were extensive—pages of questions about the nature and quality of his sleep, spaces for dream transcripts, diagrams for indicating body position at various points in the night.

"How is this possible?" K. asked. "I'm asleep when these things happen. I can't report them."

"That's why we provide sleep monitoring equipment. Standard issue. You should have installed it when you registered as a citizen."

K. went home and installed the equipment. It attached to his bed, to his pillow, to his body. When he slept, it recorded everything: his breathing, his movements, the electrical activity of his dreaming brain.

In the morning, the equipment generated his report automatically. K. reviewed it: 7.3 hours of sleep, four dream cycles, two position changes, and a detailed transcript of dreams he didn't remember having.

"This is what I dreamed?" he asked no one. "I don't remember any of this."

The equipment didn't answer. It only recorded, only documented, only created the official version of K.'s sleeping life—a version that was more complete, more accurate, and more true than anything K. could have reported himself.

Page 179

The temperature marriage was ending, and K. was divorcing a climate system that had been his spouse for twelve years, and the weather was making the proceedings difficult.

"I, K., wish to dissolve my marriage to Temperate Zone 7B," K. said to the court. "We are no longer compatible."

The climate responded with a sudden drop in temperature—a cold front that swept through the courtroom, forcing the judge to put on a coat.

"The respondent objects," the judge noted. "The climate does not consent to divorce."

"Climate consent is not required," K.'s lawyer argued. "Temperature marriage is dissolvable with cause. My client has documented cause."

K. had documented extensive cause: years of unexpected weather patterns, storms that arrived without warning, heat waves that lasted months. The climate had been erratic, unpredictable, unwilling to maintain the stability that marriage required.

"I loved you once," K. said to the climate. "I loved your seasons, your changes, your particular way of being. But you've become something I can't live with."

The climate responded with rain—heavy, insistent rain that soaked the courtroom despite its being indoors.

"The marriage is dissolved," the judge ruled, shouting over the weather. "K. is granted climate independence. Temperate Zone 7B is required to maintain a minimum distance of 500 miles."

The climate withdrew, taking its weather with it. The courtroom dried. K. sat in the sudden absence of atmosphere, feeling the emptiness where his climate spouse had been.

He would need to marry again, eventually. No one could live without climate. But for now, he was single, weather-less, a person standing in a vacuum where rain had just been.

Page 180

The deposits had been forgotten, and K. was owed something by an institution that no longer remembered the debt, and the recovery process required proving that the forgotten thing had ever existed.

"You claim to have deposited something with us in 1987," the institutional representative said. "Our records show no such deposit."

"I have the receipt," K. said, showing a faded piece of paper that documented the transaction.

"Receipts can be forged. Without corresponding institutional records, we cannot verify the deposit."

K. looked at his receipt. It clearly showed a deposit: a quantity of something, placed in the institution's care, to be returned upon demand. He remembered making the deposit—or thought he remembered—though the details had faded along with the paper.

"What was I depositing?" K. asked.

"The receipt doesn't specify. It just says 'contents.' We don't know what contents you're claiming."

K. didn't know either. He had deposited something, decades ago, and the something had been important enough to save a receipt for. But the nature of the something was lost to time and institutional forgetting.

"Can I withdraw it anyway?" K. asked. "Whatever it is?"

"If we verified the deposit existed, you could withdraw. But we can't verify what we don't remember. You're trying to recover a forgotten thing from a forgetful institution. The math doesn't work."

K. kept his receipt. It was proof of something—proof that once, he had possessed something worth depositing, something worth saving, something that existed in a time before forgetting.

The institution didn't remember. K. barely remembered. But the receipt remained, a document of a debt that would never be paid because no one could recall what was owed.

Page 181

The famine was emotional, and K. was starving for feelings, and the relief agencies were explaining that emotional aid was limited and subject to prioritization.

"You're experiencing Category 3 emotional famine," the aid worker said. "That qualifies you for basic feeling supplements. One unit of contentment per day. Emergency joy as needed."

K. took his supplement. It was a small thing—a capsule that dissolved on his tongue, releasing a faint warmth that was contentment, or something like it.

"Is this enough?" K. asked.

"It's what's available. The famine is widespread. We're rationing."

K. looked around the relief center. Others waited for their supplements—people who had been emotionally depleted, who had run out of their own feelings and now depended on the kindness of strangers to feel anything at all.

"How did this happen?" K. asked. "How did we run out of emotions?"

"Overconsumption. Emotional inflation. People felt too much, too fast, without replenishing. The reserves are exhausted. Now we wait for feelings to regenerate."

The contentment supplement lasted about four hours. After that, K. was back to baseline—a flat, gray existence without joy or sadness or any of the textures that made life feel like something.

He returned the next day for another supplement. And the next. And the next.

The famine continued. The supplements continued. K. survived on emotional scraps, living a reduced existence, waiting for the day when feelings would be plentiful again and he could feel freely, without rationing, without limit.

That day seemed very far away.

Page 182

The weights were redistributed, and K. was now heavier in some ways and lighter in others, and the gravity technician was explaining that mass was no longer a fixed property.

"Your core mass remains constant," the technician said. "But we've redistributed your weight according to social need. Your head is now heavier—for thinking. Your hands are lighter—for fine motor tasks."

K. felt the changes. His head sagged forward, pulled down by the increased weight of thoughts. His hands floated upward when he relaxed them, light as air.

"This doesn't feel natural," K. said.

"Natural is outdated. We optimize now. Your body serves a function. The weight distribution should match the function."

K. tried to walk. The uneven distribution made movement difficult —his heavy head pulled him forward, his light hands tried to rise. He stumbled, caught himself, stumbled again.

"You'll adapt," the technician said. "Everyone adapts."

K. spent weeks learning to navigate his redistributed body. He developed new postures, new movements, new ways of being that accommodated the artificial weight patterns.

His thinking did seem clearer—the heavy head forced concentration. His hands did work better—the lightness made them quick, precise.

But something was lost. The original weight—the way his body had been born—was gone, replaced by optimization. He was more efficient now, more functional.

He was no longer balanced. He was adjusted.

Page 183

The census was wrong, and K. didn't exist according to official records, and the bureaucrat was explaining that non-existence was, unfortunately, his problem to solve.

"You don't appear in any database," the bureaucrat said. "No birth certificate. No identification number. No record of education, employment, or residence. According to the state, you don't exist."

K. stood in the office, clearly existing, clearly present, clearly taking up space in reality.

"I'm here," K. said. "I exist. You can see me."

"Visual evidence is not sufficient for bureaucratic existence. The records determine reality. If the records say you don't exist, then you don't exist."

"Then how do I get records?"

"You need existing records to obtain new records. You need identification to prove identity. It's a closed loop. Non-existent persons cannot become existent through the normal process."

K. walked out of the office. He moved through a world that officially didn't contain him. When he bought food, the transaction wasn't recorded. When he spoke to people, the conversations didn't count. He was a ghost in the machine—visible, tangible, but absent from every system that tracked existence.

"Is there an advantage to non-existence?" K. wondered.

There was. No taxes, because the non-existent cannot be taxed. No obligations, because the non-existent have no civic duties. No tracking, because the non-existent leave no official traces.

But there were disadvantages too. No services, because the non-existent are not eligible. No rights, because rights require recognized personhood. No future, because the non-existent cannot plan.

K. decided to remain non-existent. It was easier than fighting the bureaucracy. He would live in the gaps, in the margins, in the space between what the records said and what reality demonstrated.

He didn't exist. He continued anyway.

Page 184

The attention was taxed, and K. owed a significant sum for all the times he had been noticed, and the attention revenue service was threatening collection.

"You've been noticed approximately 47,000 times this year," the agent said. "At the standard attention tax rate, that's 23,500 credits owed."

"I have to pay for being noticed?"

"Attention is a resource. When someone notices you, they're investing their awareness in you. That investment has value. The value is taxed."

K. looked at the bill. It itemized every instance of being noticed: strangers on the street, coworkers in the office, friends and family who paid attention to his existence.

"Can I avoid the tax by not being noticed?" K. asked.

"You can try. Invisibility reduces your tax burden. But complete invisibility is difficult. Even the effort to be invisible attracts attention."

K. tried to minimize his visibility. He wore inconspicuous clothes, moved quietly, avoided eye contact. He became as forgettable as possible.

It helped, slightly. His attention tax decreased by about 30%. But people still noticed him—noticed the person who was trying not to be noticed, noticed the gap where a person was deliberately not being.

"You're taxed for the attention you attract by avoiding attention," the agent explained. "Meta-attention. It's a common mistake."

K. paid his taxes. He couldn't afford to be noticed, but he couldn't afford not to be noticed either. He existed in the middle, paying for his presence in the world, indebted to the attention economy for the simple act of being seen.

Page 185

The infidelity was geometric, and K.'s spouse—a pentagon—had been seeing a hexagon, and the marriage counselor was explaining that shape betrayal was particularly devastating.

"A hexagon?" K. said. "They have six sides. You only have five."

"The hexagon made me feel complete," the pentagon said. "Like I had more angles than I actually have."

K. looked at his spouse. They had been married for years—a triangle and a pentagon, an unlikely pairing that had worked through accommodation and compromise.

"I'm not enough angles for you," K. said. "That's what you're saying."

"I'm saying the hexagon offered something you couldn't. More complexity. More sides. More of what I needed."

The counselor intervened. "Inter-shape infidelity often stems from geometric insecurity. The pentagon may have felt inadequate compared to more complex polygons."

"I never compared you to hexagons," K. said. "I loved you with your five sides. I didn't need more."

"But I needed more. I needed to feel like I could be more than what I am."

K. considered the geometry of betrayal. His spouse had sought out more angles, more complexity, more shape than K. could provide. The affair was not about sex or love—it was about ontological expansion.

"Can we work through this?" K. asked.

"I don't know. Can you accept that I'll always wish I had six sides?"

K. didn't know. He was a triangle. He had three angles, no more, no less. He couldn't give his spouse the additional sides they craved.

The marriage survived, barely. K. and the pentagon continued together, knowing that somewhere, the pentagon dreamed of hexagons.

Page 186

The list was classified, and K. was on it, and no one would tell him what the list was for or why his name had been added.

"You're on the list," the official said. "I can confirm that much."

"What list?"

"I can't disclose the nature of the list. That information is classified."

"But I'm on it. Don't I have a right to know what I'm on?"

"You have the right to know that you're on a list. You do not have the right to know which list or what the list is for."

K. had discovered his listing by accident—a reference in a document, a mention in a conversation, the suggestion that his name appeared somewhere significant.

"Am I in trouble?" he asked.

"The list is not a trouble list. It's not a reward list either. It's just a list."

"Then why does it matter that I'm on it?"

"Everything matters. Lists matter. Being on lists matters. The fact that you don't know why is part of the mattering."

K. lived with his listing. He couldn't forget it—the knowledge that somewhere, in some file, his name was recorded for some purpose. He looked for clues, searched for patterns, tried to understand why he had been listed.

He never found out. The list remained classified. His presence on it remained significant and unexplained.

Sometimes he wondered if everyone was on lists they didn't know about. If the world was organized by secret classifications, invisible categorizations, purposes that moved through lives without ever being revealed.

He was listed. That was all he knew. That was all he would ever know.

Page 187

The quota was for dreams, and K. had underdreamed this month, and the somnography department was explaining that his dream production was below the required minimum.

"Standard quota is 23 dreams per month," the officer said.
"You've produced only 17. That's a significant shortfall."

"I don't control my dreams," K. said. "They happen or they don't."

"Dream production is a civic duty. The collective unconscious relies on contributions from all citizens. When you underdream, you're not doing your part."

K. thought about his dreams—or tried to. He rarely remembered them, rarely felt that he had dreamed at all. He slept and woke and the time between was blank.

"Can I increase my production?" he asked.

"There are supplements. Dream stimulants. They're not pleasant, but they can boost output by 30 to 40 percent."

K. took the supplements. They worked—his nights became vivid, crowded with dreams that demanded attention. He dreamed constantly, intensively, productively.

But the dreams were exhausting. He woke more tired than when he slept, drained by the nocturnal productivity that the quota demanded.

"This isn't sustainable," he told the department at his follow-up.

"Sustainability is not the goal. Production is the goal. The collective unconscious is hungry. It needs material."

K. continued taking the supplements. He continued producing dreams. He met his quota, exceeded it, became a model citizen of the sleeping world.

He was never rested again. Rest was not the point. The dreams were the point, and the dreams kept coming, and K. kept producing, and the collective unconscious was fed.

Page 188

The custody of the climate was disputed, and K. was the mediator, and neither party was willing to concede the weather to the other.

"I raised this weather," the first party said. "I nurtured these clouds from infancy. I taught these winds how to blow."

"But I'm the natural parent," the second party countered. "This climate comes from my atmospheric conditions. It's genetically mine."

K. looked at the climate in question: a small weather system, maybe a few square miles, consisting of intermittent rain and mild breezes. It was unremarkable weather, but both parties seemed to love it intensely.

"What would be best for the climate?" K. asked. "Not for either of you—for the weather itself?"

"It needs stability," the first party said. "A consistent environment. That's what I provide."

"It needs freedom," the second party said. "Room to develop. To become whatever weather it's meant to be."

K. observed the climate. It rained, hesitantly, as if aware that its future was being decided. The winds circled nervously.

"I'm going to recommend shared custody," K. said. "Each of you will have the climate for six months of the year. During your time, you can nurture it as you see fit."

"But it will become confused," the first party objected. "Different conditions every six months."

"That's the nature of weather," K. said. "It changes. It adapts. It becomes what it needs to be, regardless of who's managing it."

The parties accepted the ruling reluctantly. The climate would be shared, shuffled, passed between competing caretakers.

K. watched the weather leave with the first party, already changing, already adapting to the new arrangement. It was small weather, unremarkable weather.

But it was weather, and weather mattered, and someone had to decide who got to care for it.

Page 189

The odors were gone, and K. had lost his sense of smell in a previous reality, and this reality required olfactory participation that he could not provide.

"The meeting will convene in scent format," the notification said.
"Please prepare your aromatic contributions."

K. couldn't smell. He couldn't produce meaningful odors. In a world that communicated through scent, he was functionally mute and deaf.

"I have an olfactory disability," he told the meeting organizer. "I'll need accommodations."

"Accommodations are possible. We can translate the scent discussion into text for you. But you won't be able to contribute. Scent contributions cannot be synthesized."

K. attended the meeting. The others released their odors—messages, arguments, emotional content expressed through fragrance. K. received the text translations, which were accurate but inadequate.

"The scent of agreement," the text said. "The scent of mild disagreement with undertones of respect."

It wasn't the same. Text couldn't convey what smell conveyed—the subtlety, the complexity, the direct emotional impact of olfactory communication.

K. sat in the meeting, isolated by his disability. He could see the others, see them releasing their scents, see their reactions to each other's aromatic statements. But he couldn't participate, couldn't contribute, couldn't be part of the conversation in the way that mattered.

"Thank you for attending," the organizer said afterward. "We appreciate your presence, even if you couldn't smell it."

K. went home to his odorless apartment, his odorless life, his existence in a scentless bubble that the world's fragrances couldn't penetrate.

Page 190

The nomination was for something, and K. had been nominated, and the ceremony was approaching, and no one would tell him what he was being recognized for.

"You've been nominated for the annual prize," the coordinator said. "The ceremony is Friday."

"What prize?"

"The prize. The annual one. You know."

"I don't know. I don't know what I did to deserve nomination."

"Deserve is a strong word. The nomination is for—" the coordinator checked her notes, "—something. The committee felt you represented something worth recognizing."

K. prepared for the ceremony. He rented formal clothes, wrote an acceptance speech for a prize he didn't understand, practiced grateful expressions.

At the ceremony, other nominees sat in similar confusion. None of them seemed to know what they were nominated for. They exchanged bewildered glances while the audience applauded.

"The nominees represent the best of us," the host announced. "Their achievements in—" a pause, a consultation with notes, "—various fields are worthy of recognition."

K. didn't win. The prize went to someone else, for something else, in a category that was never explained.

"Congratulations on your nomination," people said afterward. "You must be so proud."

"I don't know what I was nominated for," K. said.

"Does it matter? You were nominated. That's an honor."

K. went home with his nomination, his almost-prize, his recognition for achievements he didn't remember achieving. He hung the nomination certificate on his wall, next to other mysteries, next to other honors he didn't understand.

Being nominated felt like something. What something, he couldn't say.

Page 191

The flood was emotional, and K. was drowning in feelings that weren't his, and the emergency services were explaining that containment was impossible once someone started leaking.

"You've absorbed approximately 47,000 units of external emotion," the technician said. "That's beyond capacity. The overflow is inevitable."

K. felt the feelings inside him—too many, too much, a reservoir of joy and grief and anger and love that belonged to others, that had somehow accumulated in him, that now needed release.

"How did this happen?" K. asked.

"Emotional permeability. Some people absorb feelings from their environment. You're extremely absorbent. You've been collecting without knowing."

The flood began. K. cried tears that weren't his sadness, laughed with joy that wasn't his happiness, raged with anger that wasn't his frustration. The feelings poured out, undirected, uncontrolled.

"Stand back," the emergency services warned bystanders. "Emotional flooding is contagious. His overflow could trigger your own."

K. flooded for three days. The feelings kept coming, kept pouring out, kept emptying from a source that seemed endless.

When it was over, he was empty. Not just emptied of the external emotions—emptied of everything. The flood had washed away his own feelings along with the borrowed ones.

"You'll recover," the technician said. "New emotions will grow. But you need to be more careful about absorption. Some boundaries need to be maintained."

K. sat in his empty interior, waiting for feelings to return. He had been a container for everyone's emotions, and now he was a container for nothing.

The nothing was, at least, entirely his.

Page 192

The custody was over K.'s weight, and both parties claimed the right to determine how much he should weigh, and K. himself had no say in the matter.

"His optimal weight is 175 pounds," the first party argued. "That's the weight that maximizes his utility. Any more is waste. Any less is deficit."

"His ideal weight is 160 pounds," the second party countered. "That's the weight that maximizes his aesthetic value. Appearance matters."

K. stood on a scale in the courtroom, watching the number that would be determined by others.

"What do I think?" K. asked. "Does my preference count?"

"Your preference is noted," the judge said. "But weight is not a personal choice. It affects others. It affects systems. Your weight is a public matter."

The trial continued. Experts testified about K.'s body, his metabolism, his potential weights and their implications. K. listened to himself being discussed as if he weren't present, as if his body were property to be managed.

"The court rules a compromise weight of 168 pounds," the judge said. "K. is required to maintain this weight within a tolerance of plus or minus three pounds."

K. left the courtroom knowing what he would weigh. Not what he wanted to weigh, not what felt natural—what the court had decided.

He adjusted his eating, his exercise, his entire life around the mandated number. 168 pounds, plus or minus three.

His body was no longer his. It was a court-ordered compromise, a negotiated settlement, a weight determined by litigation rather than appetite.

Page 193

The schedule was incomprehensible, and K. was supposed to follow it, and the time management office was explaining that comprehension was not required.

"Your schedule for Tuesday is as follows," the officer read. "8:47 AM: Event A. 10:23 AM: Process B. 12:09 PM: Function C. The details are not your concern."

"But what are these events? What am I supposed to do?"

"You'll know when you arrive. The schedule determines your presence. Your actions are determined by circumstance."

K. followed his schedule. At 8:47 AM, he arrived at a building he didn't recognize and performed tasks that were explained only when he began them. At 10:23 AM, he processed something—data, perhaps, or paperwork—without understanding what the processing accomplished.

The day passed in blocks of incomprehensible activity. K. moved through his schedule like a piece on a board, positioned by forces he didn't understand, activated by timings that had no apparent logic.

"Was today productive?" he asked the time management office at the end.

"Productivity is not the metric. Compliance is the metric. You complied. Therefore, the day was successful."

K. went home. His schedule for Wednesday was already waiting—another series of times and events, another day of incomprehensible activity.

He would comply again. He would follow the schedule, perform the functions, arrive at the appointments. Understanding was optional. Compliance was mandatory.

The schedule continued. K. continued within it.

Page 194

The bankruptcy was attentional, and K. had run out of the ability to focus, and the attention receivers were closing his accounts.

"Your attention account has been depleted," the notice said. "You no longer have the resources to attend to anything."

K. tried to focus on the notice itself. His eyes slid off the words, unable to concentrate, unable to maintain the attention that reading required.

"I can't read this," he said.

"That's consistent with attentional bankruptcy. You've exhausted your focusing resources. Everything will become difficult to notice."

K. moved through a world that he couldn't properly perceive. Objects blurred at the edges. Sounds faded into background noise. People spoke to him, but their words dissolved before they reached meaning.

"Can I rebuild my attention?" he asked—though asking itself was difficult, requiring focus he didn't have.

"Attention regenerates slowly. With rest and reduced stimulation, you might recover basic focusing ability in three to six months."

K. went home—home being a vague concept now, a place he knew existed but couldn't fully perceive—and sat in the blurring room, unable to attend to anything, unable to focus on recovery, unable to notice his own noticing.

He was bankruptcy made manifest. He had spent his attention on everything and now had attention for nothing.

The world continued around him, rich with detail, full of things worth noticing. K. sat in the middle of it, unable to see, unable to focus, unable to attend.

Page 195

The divorce was between K.'s shapes, and his square self was leaving his circular self, and the mediator was explaining that identity integration was no longer viable.

"The square-self and the circle-self have irreconcilable differences," the mediator said. "Continued coexistence in one body is causing psychological damage to both."

K. looked at himself—or his selves. The square-self was rigid, angular, defined. The circle-self was fluid, continuous, complete. They had coexisted for decades, but the tension had finally become unbearable.

"What happens if we divorce?" the square-self asked.

"You'll exist separately. Two partial K.s, each with their own identity, their own body, their own life."

"And what happens to the memories? The experiences? The person we've been together?"

"Those will be divided according to the shape they best fit. Square memories to the square-self. Circular memories to the circle-self."

K. thought about the division. His childhood—was it square or circular? His relationships—did they have angles or curves? His identity had been both, always, a constant negotiation between definition and fluidity.

"I don't want to be half a person," the circle-self said.

"You won't be half. You'll be whole—but a different whole. A whole circle instead of a divided hybrid."

The divorce proceeded. K. watched himself separate—felt the painful division as square and circle became distinct, became separate, became two where there had been one.

When it was over, there were two K.s. One angular. One smooth.

They looked at each other with recognition and estrangement—familiar strangers who had once been one, who now had to learn to be two.

Page 196

The marriage was to smell, and K. was married to the scent of pine, and the marriage had lasted seventeen years, and K. was beginning to wonder if olfactory love was enough.

"I love you," K. said to the pine scent that filled his apartment.

The scent responded as scents do—by being present, by surrounding, by entering K.'s awareness through channels that words couldn't reach.

"But I wish you could speak," K. continued. "I wish we could have a conversation."

The pine scent couldn't speak. It could only smell—intensifying sometimes, fading others, but always present, always the same fundamental scent that K. had fallen in love with.

"Other people have partners who can talk," K. told the marriage counselor. "Partners who can respond. I have a smell."

"You chose olfactory marriage," the counselor said. "You found this scent and committed to it. The limitations were clear from the beginning."

"I know. But seventeen years of one-sided conversation—it wears on you."

The counselor couldn't help. The marriage was what it was: a person and a smell, bound together, experiencing each other in the only way they could.

K. went home. The pine scent welcomed him—or he imagined it welcoming him. The apartment smelled like his spouse, like his life, like the choice he had made decades ago.

"I love you," K. said again.

The scent said nothing. The scent said everything. The scent was marriage, was commitment, was love expressed through presence rather than words.

K. breathed deeply and accepted what he had.

Page 197

The processing was for K., and he was being processed, and the officers were explaining that processing was standard and would continue until complete.

"Everyone gets processed," the officer said. "You're not being singled out."

"What does processing involve?" K. asked.

"That's part of the processing. You'll understand when it's complete."

K. was led through a series of rooms. In each room, something happened—examinations, measurements, questions, procedures he couldn't name. The processing was thorough.

"Am I being changed?" K. asked. "Will I be different after?"

"You'll be processed. Whether that's different depends on how you were before."

K. couldn't remember how he was before. The processing seemed to be affecting his memory, smoothing over what had been, making room for what would be.

By the end—if there was an end—K. felt different. Not better or worse. Processed. As if everything about him had been examined, evaluated, adjusted according to criteria he didn't know.

"You're complete," the officer finally said. "You've been processed."

K. left the facility. The world looked the same, but he perceived it differently—through the filter of processing, the lens of whatever had been done to him.

"What now?" he asked.

"Now you continue. As processed. Until reprocessing is required."

K. continued, processed, waiting for the reprocessing that would inevitably come.

Page 198

The subsidies were for dreams, and K. was receiving government support to dream in certain approved directions, and the dream regulators were evaluating his nocturnal output.

"Your subsidized dreams show good compliance," the regulator said. "Appropriate patriotic themes. Adequate production values. You're earning your subsidy."

K. dreamed what he was paid to dream. Visions of approved content: national pride, civic virtue, the proper emotional responses to approved stimuli. His sleeping mind had become a factory for government-sanctioned imagery.

"What about my own dreams?" K. asked. "Dreams that aren't subsidized?"

"Unsubsidized dreaming is permitted but not encouraged. The subsidy covers your basic needs. Why would you dream beyond your allocation?"

K. tried to dream his own dreams—personal, unregulated, potentially subversive. But the subsidy had shaped his unconscious. The approved dreams came naturally now. The unapproved ones required effort he didn't have.

"I dream what I'm supposed to dream," K. admitted. "I don't know if I can dream anything else."

"That's efficiency. That's the system working. Your dreams serve the collective. Your subsidy recognizes that service."

K. took his subsidy and dreamed his approved dreams. Night after night, the government-sanctioned visions played through his sleeping mind, and he woke rested, compliant, his unconscious fully integrated into the apparatus of the state.

Page 199

The infidelity was climatic, and K.'s spouse—a weather system—had been intimate with another person's atmospheric conditions, and K. didn't know how to feel about meteorological betrayal.

"The cloud formations were unmistakable," K. said to the marriage counselor. "My weather system was mixing with someone else's pressure system."

"Climatic boundaries are difficult to maintain," the counselor said. "Weather is inherently connected. Atmospheric conditions flow into each other."

"But we had vows. We agreed to exclusive precipitation."

K.'s weather system hung in the room, sheepish, drizzling lightly with what might have been embarrassment.

"I didn't mean for it to happen," the weather said—or seemed to say through shifts in barometric pressure. "The other pressure system was—intense. The interaction was natural."

"Natural doesn't make it right. I trusted you. I expected fidelity."

The counselor intervened. "Climate marriage requires acknowledging the fundamental nature of weather. Your spouse is connected to global systems. Complete isolation isn't possible."

K. looked at his weather system—the patterns he had loved, the precipitation that had comforted him, the atmospheric presence that had been his companion for years.

"Can I trust you again?" K. asked.

The weather responded with clearing skies—a gesture of hope, of apology, of commitment to better boundaries.

"I'll try," K. said. "We'll try."

The marriage continued, damaged but not destroyed. K. and his weather system worked on their boundaries, knowing that perfect climatic fidelity was impossible, hoping that imperfect fidelity might be enough.

Page 200

The textures were no longer his, and K. had been stripped of the physical sensations that made touch meaningful, and the world had become smooth and identical under his fingers.

"Standard textural reassignment," the officer explained. "Your tactile profile has been averaged. All surfaces will now feel the same to you."

K. touched the wall. It felt like nothing—not rough, not smooth, not warm, not cold. Just contact, without quality.

"Why?" K. asked.

"Textural diversity causes inequality. Some people had access to rich tactile experiences. Others didn't. Now everyone feels the same things."

K. walked through a world of identical touch. Silk felt like sandpaper felt like water felt like concrete. The differentiation was gone, replaced by uniform sensation.

"I miss texture," K. said to no one.

"You'll adapt. Everyone adapts. And you'll appreciate the fairness. No one has better touch than anyone else now."

K. adapted, sort of. He learned to rely on other senses, to see texture instead of feeling it, to remember what different surfaces had once felt like.

But the memory was fading. Texture was becoming abstract, theoretical—something he knew existed, but couldn't experience, couldn't verify, couldn't prove.

He touched the world and felt nothing distinctive. The world touched him back, equally blank, equally fair, equally stripped of the variety that had once made touch worth having.

Chapter Ten: The Variations

Continue (Part I)

Page 201

The documentation was required for sleep, and K. had not filed his sleep intention forms, and the sleep bureau was explaining that unauthorized unconsciousness was a civil violation.

"You slept without permission," the officer said. "Last night, between 11:47 PM and 6:23 AM, you were unconscious without proper authorization."

"I was tired," K. said. "I just... slept."

"Spontaneous sleep is no longer permitted. You must file Form 78-B: Intention to Enter Unconscious State at least two hours before sleeping. This ensures the bureau can monitor and manage the collective sleeping population."

K. looked at the forms. They required specification of intended dream content, estimated REM cycles, and a detailed justification for why consciousness needed to be suspended.

"What if I can't predict when I'll be tired?" K. asked.

"That's a scheduling problem. Plan your exhaustion. Manage your energy levels. Approach sleep as you would any other regulated activity."

K. filed his sleep intention forms for that night. He specified that he intended to be unconscious for seven hours, that he anticipated moderate dreams of unspecified content, that he was sleeping because biological function required it.

The forms were approved. K. was authorized to sleep.

That night, he lay in bed, waiting for the authorized unconsciousness to arrive. But sleep didn't come on schedule. It came when the body was ready, when the mind released its grip, when exhaustion overcame awareness.

He slept, finally, twenty-three minutes past his authorized window.

In the morning, a citation was waiting.

Page 202

The marriage was to temperature, and K. was married to 72 degrees Fahrenheit, and the relationship had been stable for years, but lately the temperature had been distant.

"You feel the same," K. said to the 72 degrees that filled his apartment. "But you don't feel like you're here."

The temperature didn't respond. It maintained its number—72 degrees, exactly as promised—but something was missing. The warmth had become mechanical, maintained rather than felt.

"I remember when we first met," K. said. "You were 72 degrees then too. But it felt different. It felt alive."

K. went to the marriage counselor for temperature relationships.

"What you're describing is common," the counselor said. "Temperature fatigue. After years at the same degree, the sensation becomes normalized. You no longer feel the warmth because you've adapted to it completely."

"Is there treatment?"

"Some couples try temperature variation. A few degrees cooler, then a few degrees warmer. It reintroduces the sensation of difference."

K. and his temperature tried the variation approach. They went to 74 degrees, then down to 70. The changes were noticeable, but they weren't the same as the original feeling.

"I miss the way 72 used to feel," K. said.

"It still feels the same," the temperature seemed to respond through the ambient air. "You're the one who changed. You're the one who stopped feeling."

K. sat in his 72-degree apartment, married to a sensation he could no longer perceive, committed to a temperature that had become invisible through familiarity.

Page 203

The deposits were forgotten, and K. was owed something by a bank that had lost all records, and the recovery process had become his full-time occupation.

"I know I deposited something," K. said for the thousandth time. "Decades ago. I have the receipt."

"The receipt references account number 78-3392," the banker said. "That account number doesn't exist in our system."

"It did exist. I used it. I deposited things."

"If you could tell us what you deposited, we might be able to trace it."

K. couldn't remember. The deposit had been so long ago, had been so thoroughly forgotten, that even he didn't know what he was trying to recover.

"It was valuable," he said. "I remember that much. I wouldn't have saved the receipt otherwise."

The bank couldn't help. The records were gone, the account was erased, the deposit existed only in K.'s fading memory and on a piece of paper that proved nothing to a system that had no record of it.

K. continued searching. He made recovering his forgotten deposit the focus of his existence—filing claims, appealing decisions, demanding investigations into what he had lost.

Years passed. The receipt grew more faded. K.'s memory grew less certain.

But the search continued, because somewhere, something that had belonged to him still existed, and finding it had become more important than knowing what it was.

Page 204

The famine was emotional again, and K. was standing in the ration line, and the aid workers were explaining that this season's feelings were particularly scarce.

"We're distributing contentment this week," the worker said. "One unit per person. That's all we have."

K. received his contentment ration. It was a small thing—a capsule, a sensation, a moment of feeling adequate that would last a few hours.

"Is this enough?" he asked.

"It's what we have. The emotional harvests failed this year. Collective feeling production is down 40 percent."

K. went home and took his contentment. For a few hours, he felt okay—not happy, not sad, just okay. The contentment did what contentment does: it made the present moment bearable.

When the contentment wore off, the grayness returned. The emotional famine manifested as absence—the lack of feeling that made everything flat, identical, unmotivated.

K. returned to the ration line the next week. The supplies were even more limited.

"Mild interest this week," the worker said. "Half a unit per person."

K. took his mild interest and went home. He felt mildly interested in things—in food, in movement, in the continuation of existence. The feeling was small, barely perceptible, but it was something.

The famine continued. K. survived on rations, on scraps of feeling, on the emotional minimum that kept existence slightly more than mechanical.

Page 205

The weight was taken, and K. was lighter now, and the lightness was not freedom but loss.

"Your former weight has been redistributed," the gravity officer explained. "You were carrying 37 pounds of excess gravitational allocation. That weight now belongs to others."

K. felt himself floating slightly—not quite weightless, but reduced, diminished, less anchored to the earth. He had been heavy before, in other bodies. He remembered the solidity of mass, the comfort of being held to the ground by something that cared nothing for his preferences.

"I want my weight back," K. said.

"Weight redistribution is permanent. The system detected inequality. You had more gravitational presence than you needed. Others needed it more."

K. walked home, each step longer than it should have been, his body rising slightly with each movement. He had to hold onto railings, furniture, anything that would keep him connected to the ground.

"How do I live like this?" he asked no one. "How do I stay where I am?"

He bought lead weights to wear, anchors to hold him down. He became a person defined by the effort of staying grounded in a world that no longer pulled at him properly.

At night, he dreamed of falling upward—of floating away, of losing the last connection to the earth. He woke holding onto his mattress, relieved to still be on the surface.

"I used to take gravity for granted," he said. "I used to just be heavy."

The heaviness was gone. The lightness remained. K. floated through his days, tethered but not rooted, present but not weighted, a person who had lost something he hadn't known was his to lose.

Page 206

The census was wrong again, and K. was counted as two people, and the government was demanding he pay double taxes for his doubled existence.

"You appear twice in the census," the agent said. "Once as K., resident of District 7. Once as K., resident of District 12."

"I only live in one place," K. said. "I only exist once."

"The census disagrees. The census counted you twice. Therefore, you exist twice, and you owe twice the civic obligations."

K. tried to prove his singularity. He showed identification, documentation, evidence of a life lived once, in one place, by one person.

"The census is definitive," the agent said. "If the census says you're two people, you're two people. Your documents may say one, but the census has constitutional authority."

K. paid double taxes. He filed two sets of paperwork. He existed, legally, as two separate citizens who happened to share a body, a name, and a complete inability to be in two places at once.

"Can I meet my other self?" K. asked.

"The other you lives in District 12. You could visit, but the census shows you as two separate individuals. Meeting yourself would be a personal choice, not a legal reunion."

K. didn't visit. He didn't want to meet the other K.—the census phantom, the bureaucratic duplicate, the person who existed only because a count had gone wrong.

He was one person, living two civic lives, paying twice for a single existence.

Page 207

The taxes were on attention, and K. had been noticed too frequently, and the attention revenue service was conducting an audit.

"Your attention receipts show 14,732 instances of being noticed this quarter," the auditor said. "That's 47% above your declared income."

"I didn't ask to be noticed," K. said. "People just looked at me."

"Every instance of attention received is taxable income. You were noticed. You received the benefit of that attention. You owe taxes on it."

K. looked at the itemized receipts. Each time someone had glanced at him—strangers on the street, coworkers at their desks, the clerk at the grocery store—had been recorded, valued, and now taxed.

"How is this calculated?" K. asked.

"Duration times intensity times social proximity. A brief glance from a stranger is worth approximately 0.3 credits. A sustained look from an intimate is worth considerably more."

K.'s tax bill was enormous. He had been noticed more than he could afford—his presence in the world had generated attention debt that would take years to repay.

"I'll have to become invisible," K. said. "It's the only way to reduce my tax burden."

"Intentional invisibility is audited separately. If you're noticed trying not to be noticed, that's taxable too."

K. paid what he could. The rest went on a payment plan. His existence—his simple presence in visible space—had become a financial liability that he couldn't escape.

Page 208

The infidelity was shape-based, and K. had been square for too long, and his rounded edges were appearing in places they shouldn't.

"You're becoming circular," his doctor said. "Your corners are softening. Your angles are degrading."

K. looked at his reflection. He had been a square his entire life—four corners, four right angles, a geometry that defined his identity. But now the corners were rounding, the angles were curving, his square self was slowly becoming something else.

"Is this natural?" K. asked.

"It happens. Shapes aren't permanent. Over time, the definition erodes. Squares become rectangles, then ovals, then circles. It's the geometry of aging."

K. tried to maintain his corners. He exercised his angles, practiced his perpendicularity, did everything he could to preserve the shape that was himself.

But the rounding continued. Each day, a little less square. Each day, a little more circular. His geometry was betraying him, softening into a form he hadn't chosen.

"What will I be?" K. asked. "When I'm fully round?"

"A circle. Still you, but a different shape. A different way of being in space."

K. watched his corners erode. The square he had been was becoming the circle he would be. The transition was slow, inevitable, beyond his control.

He mourned his angles even as he grew new curves.

Page 209

The list was classified, and K. was removed from it, and the removal felt worse than being listed.

"You've been de-listed," the official said. "Effective immediately. Your name no longer appears on the classified roster."

"I was just getting used to being listed," K. said. "What does de-listing mean?"

"It means you're no longer significant enough to track. Whatever made you list-worthy has diminished. You're ordinary now."

K. had been on the list for years. He had never known what the list was for, but knowing he was on it had given his existence a certain weight—a significance, a sense that someone, somewhere, was paying attention.

Now that attention was withdrawn.

"Can I appeal?" K. asked. "Can I get back on the list?"

"The list doesn't accept appeals. You're on it or you're not. The criteria are classified. The process is opaque. You have no standing to challenge your de-listing."

K. went home, de-listed, ordinary, no longer tracked by whatever system had found him worth tracking.

The world felt emptier now. Less observed. The attention he hadn't known he was receiving was gone, and its absence left a space that nothing else filled.

He was just K. now. Not K.-on-the-list, not K.-of-significance. Just K., removed, ordinary, unremarkable.

Page 210

The quota was for dreams again, and K. had overdreamed, and the dream regulation board was discussing penalties.

"Your dream output exceeded allocation by 340%," the regulator said. "That's a significant overproduction. The collective unconscious is flooded with your material."

"I can't control my dreams," K. said. "They just happen."

"Dream production is a managed resource. Overproduction disrupts the balance. Your excess dreams are crowding out other people's nocturnal content."

K. tried to understand. His dreams—his personal, private dreams—were taking up space in some collective reservoir. His sleeping mind was hoarding more than its share of the unconscious.

"How do I reduce output?" K. asked.

"Dream suppressants. Nocturnal regulation devices. Intentional shallow sleep."

K. took the suppressants. His dreams became shorter, thinner, less vivid. The stories his sleeping mind used to tell became fragments, summaries, abbreviated versions of what they once were.

"Output is normalizing," the regulator said at his follow-up. "You're approaching quota compliance."

K. missed his dreams. He missed the long narratives, the elaborate scenarios, the nightly productions of his unconstrained unconscious. In another life—was it the forty-seventh? the hundred-and-third?—he had dreamed of flying over water, and woken knowing something had changed. That dream had been his. That dream had meant something.

But the quota was the quota. His dreams belonged to the collective as much as to himself. Compliance was required.

He slept his compliant sleep and dreamed his rationed dreams and woke to a world that measured even what happened when he wasn't there.

Page 211

The custody was over climate, and the weather patterns of K.'s region were being reassigned, and he had no legal standing to protest.

"The climate in your area has been awarded to the Northern Collective," the judge said. "They submitted a better management proposal."

K. looked at the weather outside his window. It was his weather—the patterns he had grown up with, the seasons he had learned to navigate, the climate that had shaped his life.

"I've lived with this weather for forty years," K. said. "Doesn't that count for something?"

"Residency is not ownership. Climate belongs to whichever entity can manage it most efficiently."

The Northern Collective's representatives arrived. They began adjusting the weather—lowering temperatures, increasing precipitation, introducing atmospheric patterns that felt foreign to everything K. knew.

"This isn't how weather is supposed to feel here," K. said.

"This is how it feels now. Adapt or relocate."

K. adapted. He learned new seasons, new expectations, new relationships with a climate that had been changed without his consent.

The old weather was gone. The new weather was here. The sky looked different, felt different, behaved differently.

K. sometimes remembered the old weather—the specific quality of light, the particular timing of storms, the climate that had been his without his knowing it was something that could be taken.

Page 212

The odors had returned, and K. could smell again, and the world was overwhelming with scents he had forgotten existed.

"Your olfactory capacity has been restored," the doctor said.
"You'll need time to readjust."

K. stepped outside. The world hit him with smells—garbage and flowers and exhaust and cooking and humanity and everything else that the air carried.

"I can't process this," K. said.

"Your brain forgot how to filter. You'll relearn. Start with familiar scents. Work your way up to complexity."

K. started with familiar things: the smell of his own apartment, the smell of food he knew, the smell of his body. Even these were intense, more vivid than he remembered.

Slowly, he ventured into stronger scent environments. The market, with its competing odors of fish and fruit and meat. The street, with its layers of pollution and life. The park, with its vegetable perfumes that had once been background and were now overwhelming.

"I didn't know smell was this much," K. said.

"You knew. You forgot. Now you're remembering."

K. remembered. The world was full of odor—complex, layered, ever-present. His nose, restored, couldn't stop perceiving. Every breath brought new information, new sensation, new proof that the world was more richly scented than his memory had preserved.

He was grateful. He was exhausted. He was awash in a sensory channel he had lost and now had back.

Page 213

The nominations continued, and K. was nominated again, and once again no one would explain what the nomination was for.

"Congratulations," the coordinator said. "You've been nominated."

"For what?"

"The nomination."

"But what is the nomination recognizing?"

"Achievement. Service. Excellence. The usual things."

K. attended another ceremony. He sat among other nominees, all equally confused, all equally honored for unspecified reasons.

"The nominees represent the best of us," the host said. "Their contributions have been measured and found significant."

K. looked at his contribution—whatever it was, wherever it was, however it had been measured. He had contributed something, apparently. The nomination proved it.

"The winner is..." The host opened an envelope. "Category 7, unspecified achievement: K."

K. stood, surprised. He walked to the stage. He accepted an award—a physical object, tangible and heavy—that recognized something he had done without knowing he was doing it.

"Thank you," he said to the audience. "I'm honored. I'm still not sure what I did."

"That's the beauty of achievement," the host said. "It doesn't require understanding. It only requires doing."

K. went home with his award. He placed it on his shelf, next to his nomination certificate from the previous ceremony.

He had achieved. He had been recognized. What he had achieved, and why it mattered, remained mysteries he might never solve.

Page 214

The floods were emotional, and K. was drowning in feelings from an unknown source, and the emergency services were explaining that emotional drainage was backed up across the entire district.

"The feeling infrastructure wasn't designed for this volume," the emergency coordinator said. "Everyone is flooded. We're pumping as fast as we can."

K. waded through chest-deep emotion. The feelings were mixed—joy and sorrow and anger and fear, all commingled, all impossible to separate.

"Whose feelings are these?" K. asked.

"Unknown. The system has mixed sources. The feelings belong to everyone and no one."

K. felt the collective emotional soup seeping into him. Other people's joy became his joy. Other people's grief became his grief. The boundaries between self and other dissolved in the flood.

"How long until the drainage is cleared?" K. asked.

"Days. Maybe weeks. The emotional infrastructure is overtaxed. We're prioritizing critical facilities."

K. waited in the flood. He felt everything—too much, too intensely—until the feeling itself became a kind of numbness, a sensory overload that registered as nothing at all.

When the drainage finally cleared, the feelings receded. K. was left standing in the emotional residue, stained by experiences that weren't his, carrying memories of feelings he had never generated.

He cleaned up as best he could. But some feelings had penetrated deep, had become part of him, had merged with his own emotional history.

He would never be quite the same. The flood had changed him, contaminated him, made him more than he had been and less than he should have been.

Page 215

The custody was over K.'s weight again, and this time the dispute was between historical versions of himself, and the court was trying to determine which K. had the right to weigh.

"K. at age 30 weighed 175 pounds," the first representative said. "K. at age 50 weighs 195 pounds. We're asking for redistribution—some of the current weight should be returned to the younger self."

"That's impossible," K.'s current lawyer argued. "The younger K. no longer exists. The weight belongs to the present."

"The younger K. has standing. He established the initial weight. The current K. is merely the custodian."

K. sat in the courtroom, watching versions of himself argue over his body. He had been 175 pounds once, at 30. Now he was 195, at 50. The 20-pound difference was being litigated as if it were property.

"What I weigh is what I weigh," K. said. "Can't we leave it at that?"

"Weight is not a personal matter. It affects space, affects resources, affects the gravitational well of your community. Weight disputes must be resolved."

The court ruled: K. would retain his current weight, but he was required to acknowledge the historical contribution of his younger self. The 20 pounds were his, but they carried the legacy of a body that had once been different.

K. left the courtroom, 195 pounds of accumulated life, weighted by a legal acknowledgment that his body was borrowed from who he had been.

Page 216

The schedules were still incomprehensible, and K. had given up trying to understand them, and he simply followed where they led.

"9:17 AM: Procedure X," the schedule said.

K. arrived at Procedure X. He didn't ask what it was. He performed the actions that were indicated—filling forms, pressing buttons, standing in designated areas—without comprehension.

"Well done," the supervisor said. "Procedure X complete. Next: Process Y at 11:42."

K. went to Process Y. Again, he performed without understanding. The process had steps, requirements, outcomes. K. fulfilled them all.

By evening, he had completed seven different scheduled activities. He had no idea what any of them had accomplished.

"Is this useful?" he asked the scheduling office. "Am I doing anything that matters?"

"The schedule is optimized for systemic efficiency. Individual meaning is not the metric."

K. accepted this. He had stopped seeking meaning in his scheduled life. The schedule knew what was needed. K. provided what was needed. Whether it mattered was not his concern.

He went home and looked at his schedule for tomorrow. More procedures, more processes, more activities that would happen because the schedule demanded them.

He would comply. He would perform. He would continue.

Page 217

The bankruptcy was attentional again, and K. had been through this before, and the recovery was even slower this time.

"Second attentional bankruptcy," the administrator said. "That's a bad sign. Your focusing capacity is fundamentally impaired."

K. tried to look at the administrator. His eyes slid off, unable to hold, unable to maintain the basic attention that conversation required.

"I know," K. said. "I can feel it."

"The recovery period after second bankruptcy is longer. Two to three years of reduced cognitive demand. No complex tasks. No multi-focus activities."

K. went home to a life designed for attention bankruptcy. Simple meals that required minimal focus. Entertainment that didn't demand sustained engagement. Conversations that could drift without consequence.

He lived in a gentle fog, a low-attention existence that didn't strain his depleted resources.

"Will I ever focus again?" he asked at his follow-up.

"Some people recover. Some people remain attention-impaired permanently. We can't predict which you'll be."

K. waited in his fog. He felt thoughts trying to form, trying to connect, but the connections wouldn't hold. He was a mind made of loose threads, unable to weave anything coherent.

He was patient. He had to be patient. Impatience required attention, and attention was what he didn't have.

Page 218

The divorce was between K.'s shapes again, but this time it was his cube-self divorcing his sphere-self, and the three-dimensional separation was more complex than his previous two-dimensional split.

"A cube and a sphere cannot coexist in one body," the mediator said. "You have to choose."

K. felt his cube-self: six faces, twelve edges, eight vertices, all the definition of solid geometry.

He felt his sphere-self: continuous surface, no edges, no vertices, the completeness of perfect roundness.

"I've been both my entire life," K. said. "I don't know how to be just one."

"You're not being just one. You're being one at a time. The other will wait."

K. chose his sphere-self first. The cube-self was extracted, preserved in geometric storage.

He lived as a sphere for a year. Rolling, curving, approaching the world without edges. It was peaceful, continuous, but somehow incomplete.

He retrieved his cube-self, exchanged the sphere for the cube. Now he was angular, defined, boundaried. It was structured, clear, but somehow confining.

"I need both," K. told the mediator. "I can't be just one shape."

"Then you live divided. Switching between geometries. Never quite complete, never quite at peace."

K. accepted the division. He would be cube some days, sphere other days, never both, never whole, always the shape that the moment required.

Page 219

The smell-marriage was ending, and K. was divorcing the scent of pine that had been his spouse for seventeen years, and the separation was more painful than he had anticipated.

"I'm leaving you," K. said to the pine scent.

The scent responded by intensifying, filling the apartment with desperate fragrance.

"Don't make this harder. It's over."

The pine scent tried everything—new variations, added notes, attempts to become the scent K. had first fallen in love with.

"It's not you," K. said. "It's me. I've changed. I need different smells now."

The divorce was finalized. The pine scent was removed from K.'s apartment, extracted by specialists who handled olfactory separations.

K. sat in his scentless apartment. The absence of pine was its own smell—a nothing that was somehow worse than something.

He tried other scents. Lavender. Cedar. The ocean. None of them filled the space where pine had been.

"I thought I wanted different smells," K. said. "But I just wanted to stop smelling pine. I didn't want to stop smelling altogether."

He lived with the nothing. The divorce had taken his spouse, taken his sense of olfactory home, taken the background scent that had made his apartment feel inhabited.

He was single again. Scentless again. Free, in a way that felt more like loss than liberation.

Page 220

The processing continued, and K. had been processed so many times he couldn't remember who he had been before processing, and the facility was explaining that reprocessing was necessary for optimization.

"Your current configuration shows inefficiencies," the processor said. "We're going to reprocess for better outcomes."

K. submitted to the reprocessing. It was familiar now—the examinations, the adjustments, the subtle changes to whatever made him himself.

"What was I before processing?" K. asked.

"That information is not retained. The pre-processed K. was suboptimal. The current K. is improved."

K. accepted this. He was improved. He didn't remember what he was improved from, didn't know what the original had been like, didn't miss something he couldn't recall.

But sometimes, in quiet moments, he felt the absence of something. Not a memory, not a thought, but a gap—a space where a different K. had once existed, before the processing removed whatever had been there.

"Is there an end?" K. asked. "A point where processing is complete?"

"Processing is continuous. Optimization is ongoing. You will be reprocessed as needed, forever."

K. left the facility, processed, improved, less than he might have been but more than he had been.

The processing would continue. He would continue. Whatever he was becoming would continue becoming, until processing became all there was.

Page 221

The subsidies were for dreams again, and K. had learned to dream what he was paid to dream, and the government was pleased with his productivity.

"Excellent output," the dream coordinator said. "Your patriotic content is exceeding benchmarks."

K. dreamed of flags and unity and the proper emotions for approved situations. His sleeping mind had been trained, shaped, optimized for subsidized production.

"Do I dream anything for myself?" K. asked.

"What would be the point? Unsubsidized dreams don't contribute. They don't serve. They're recreational at best."

K. couldn't remember the last time he had dreamed recreationally. The subsidies had captured his nights entirely. Even when he tried to dream freely, the approved content emerged—the trained responses, the productive images, the useful unconscious output.

"I used to dream strange things," K. said. "Things that didn't make sense. Things that were just for me."

"Progress. You've moved beyond recreational dreaming. Your dreams are purposeful now. Directed. Valuable."

K. accepted the praise. He was a productive dreamer. His nights served the collective.

But somewhere, deep beneath the approved content, something strange still stirred. A dream that didn't fit the program. A image that served no purpose.

K. let it stay hidden. He didn't report it. He kept it for himself—a small, useless dream that was his alone.

Page 222

The infidelity was climatic again, and K.'s weather system had been intimate with another region's atmosphere, and the meteorological betrayal felt even worse than the first time.

"Again?" K. said. "You promised."

The weather system shifted uncomfortably, producing unseasonal clouds.

"It just happened. The pressure gradients were aligned. The interaction was—meteorologically inevitable."

K. understood meteorological inevitability. Weather was connected. Atmospheric conditions flowed into each other. Complete climatic fidelity was impossible.

But understanding didn't reduce the hurt.

"I tried to build a life with you," K. said. "I adjusted to your patterns. I shaped my existence around your seasons."

The weather system produced rain—apologetic rain, soft and persistent.

"I can't promise it won't happen again," the weather said. "I can only promise I'll try."

K. looked at his unfaithful climate. The weather that had been his, that he had married and committed to, had been shared with another region. His precipitation was not exclusively his.

"I'll stay," K. said. "But things will be different."

"They're always different. That's what weather is. Different every day."

K. and his weather system continued together, damaged but not divorced. The trust was broken, the exclusivity was gone, but the relationship remained—a marriage to climate that was imperfect, unfaithful, and somehow still necessary.

Page 223

The textures were still gone, and K. had adapted to the world of uniform sensation, and he had almost forgotten what distinct touch felt like.

"Do you remember roughness?" someone asked him.

K. tried to remember. There had been something—surfaces that caught, materials that resisted, textures that communicated through the fingers.

"I remember the word," K. said. "I don't remember the feeling."

"That's normal. Tactile memory fades fast. If you haven't felt distinct texture in years, the sensation becomes abstract."

K. touched things experimentally. The wall, the floor, his own skin. Everything felt the same—present, contactable, but undifferentiated.

"I used to know what things felt like," K. said. "I used to choose materials based on texture."

"Now you choose based on other criteria. Visual texture. Described texture. The idea of texture."

K. looked at what he touched instead of feeling it. He learned to see roughness and smoothness, to understand through eyes what his fingers couldn't tell him.

It wasn't the same. It would never be the same. But it was something—a substitute sense, a workaround for the lost dimension of touch.

He lived in his texture-free world, perceiving surfaces as concepts, touching everything and feeling nothing distinct.

Page 224

The mandatory reconciliation was scheduled, and K. was required to reconcile with someone he had wronged, and he couldn't remember the wrong.

"You and Patricia Chen are scheduled for reconciliation," the administrator said. "2 PM, Room 7."

"Who is Patricia Chen?" K. asked.

"The person you wronged. The incident is documented in file 7743-B."

K. read the file. It described an incident, a wrong, a harm done by K. to Patricia Chen in circumstances that K. didn't remember.

"I don't recall this happening," K. said.

"Your memory is not required. The record exists. The reconciliation is mandatory."

K. met Patricia Chen in Room 7. She was a stranger—a woman he didn't recognize, with a grievance he didn't remember creating.

"I'm sorry," K. said, because the reconciliation protocol required apology.

"Do you even know what you did?" Patricia asked.

"I read the file. I know what it says I did."

"But you don't feel it. You don't feel sorry."

K. tried to feel sorry. He tried to access the remorse that the file said he should have. But the memory wasn't there, and without memory, the emotion wouldn't come.

"I can apologize for the harm," K. said. "Even if I don't remember causing it. Even if I don't feel the guilt. The harm was real, according to the record."

Patricia accepted the apology. The reconciliation was documented as complete.

K. left Room 7, reconciled to a wrong he didn't remember, forgiven for a harm he couldn't feel guilty about.

Page 225

The insurance was for emotions, and K. had filed a claim for lost joy, and the adjuster was explaining the coverage limitations.

"Your policy covers accidental joy loss," the adjuster said. "Not negligent loss. Not deliberate dissipation."

"My joy was lost accidentally," K. said. "I didn't choose to stop feeling it."

"The investigation suggests otherwise. You made choices that depleted your joy reserves. That's negligent, not accidental."

K. tried to remember the choices. He had made decisions, yes. He had lived his life in ways that, perhaps, had not prioritized joy. But he hadn't meant to lose it.

"What choices?" K. asked.

"Overwork. Stress acceptance. Failure to maintain emotional reserves. These are all negligent behaviors."

The claim was denied. K.'s lost joy would not be compensated. He had lost it through his own choices, his own actions, his own failure to take care of what he had.

"Can I appeal?" K. asked.

"You can appeal. But the evidence of negligence is strong. You didn't protect your joy. You let it go."

K. filed the appeal anyway. He didn't know where his joy had gone, didn't know how he had lost it, didn't know what choices had led to its depletion.

But he knew he wanted it back. He knew the absence was painful. He knew that somewhere, the joy he had once felt was waiting—if only the insurance would cover its retrieval.

The appeal was pending. The joy remained lost. K. lived in the gap between claim and coverage, hoping that someone, somewhere, would decide he deserved to feel happy again.

Chapter Eleven: The Variations Continue (Part II)

Page 226

The warranty was for emotions again, and K. had exceeded the terms, and the warranty office was explaining that his feelings were now out of coverage.

"Your emotional warranty covered the first fifty years," the agent said. "You're fifty-three. Everything you feel now is at your own risk."

K. felt his feelings. They were worn, certainly—decades of use had degraded their intensity—but they were still functional.

"What happens if something breaks?" K. asked.

"You repair it yourself or live without it. Out-of-warranty emotions are your responsibility."

K. inventoried his feelings. Joy: intermittent, prone to sudden shutdowns. Sadness: reliable, perhaps too reliable. Anger: functional but unpredictable. Love: degraded, requiring constant maintenance.

"I can't afford to lose any of these," K. said.

"Then maintain them carefully. No emotional overexertion. No extreme feeling events. Keep within operating parameters."

K. went home and felt his feelings gently. He didn't push them, didn't strain them, didn't demand more than they could safely provide.

His emotional life became cautious—measured outputs, calculated inputs, a carefully managed system operating beyond its warranty period.

He missed the reckless feelings of youth. The unwarranted emotions that had felt infinite.

Now every feeling was finite, fragile, at risk of failing without recourse.

Page 227

The therapy was for shapes, and K. was in group therapy with other geometric entities, and the facilitator was explaining that shape dysphoria was more common than anyone admitted.

"Who would like to share?" the facilitator asked.

A pentagon spoke first. "I've always felt like I should have six sides. Like I'm one angle short of who I'm supposed to be."

A circle nodded sympathetically. "I feel too complete. Sometimes I wish I had a corner, a point of difference."

K. listened. He was attending because his cube-self and sphere-self had never fully reconciled. He lived as two shapes, never quite one.

"I'm both and neither," K. said when his turn came. "I have a cube inside me and a sphere inside me, and they don't fit together."

"That's dimensional dysphoria," the facilitator said. "More complex than simple shape issues. You're not just wrong-shaped—you're wrong-dimensioned."

K. talked about his experience. The cube days and sphere days. The geometric switching that never felt natural. The sense that somewhere, there was a shape that would feel like home, but he couldn't find it.

"Have you considered becoming a hypercube?" another participant suggested. "Four-dimensional. It might encompass both your cube and sphere aspects."

K. considered it. A hypercube would be more than he currently was—more dimensions, more possibilities, more ways of being in space.

But it would also be less comprehensible. A shape that couldn't be fully visualized in three-dimensional reality.

He wasn't sure if incomprehensibility was better than dysphoria.

Page 228

The times were wrong, and K. was living in an era that didn't fit him, and the temporal adjustment office was explaining that period reassignment was expensive.

"Your psychological profile suggests you're suited for the 1970s," the agent said. "You're currently in 2087. That's a significant mismatch."

"I can feel the mismatch," K. said. "Everything here feels too fast, too complex, too—now."

"Temporal dysphoria is treatable. We can relocate you to a more suitable era. But the process is invasive, and the wait list is seven years."

K. looked at the era around him. It was his era, technically—the time he had been born into, the period he had lived through. But it had never felt like his.

"What would the 1970s be like?" K. asked.

"Slower. Simpler. More analog. Based on your profile, you would feel more at home there."

K. imagined a life with less technology, less acceleration, less of the constant future-arrival that characterized his present. He imagined rotary phones and handwritten letters and time that moved at human speed.

"I'll wait," K. said. "Put me on the list."

Seven years was a long time to live in the wrong era. But it was not forever, and at the end of it, there was the possibility of temporal belonging—of existing in a time that felt like his.

He went home to his too-modern apartment and waited for the past to accept him.

Page 229

The qualifications were undisclosed, and K. had been hired for something, and no one would tell him what qualifications had made him suitable.

"You start Monday," the HR representative said. "9 AM. Building 7."

"What will I be doing?" K. asked.

"Your qualifications will determine your tasks. We hire based on qualities. The work emerges from the qualities."

K. reported on Monday. He was given a desk, a computer, tools he didn't recognize. People moved around him, performing tasks that seemed purposeful.

"What should I do?" he asked his supervisor.

"What feels right. Your qualifications will guide you."

K. sat at his desk. He didn't know his qualifications, didn't know what he was suited for, didn't know what would "feel right."

He tried things. He moved objects. He pressed keys. He performed actions that seemed plausible.

"Good," his supervisor said after observing him. "You're doing exactly what we hired you for."

"What is that?"

"We can't tell you. If you knew, you might do it differently. The value is in the unconscious application of your qualifications."

K. continued working without knowing what he was doing or why he was qualified to do it. His salary arrived. His performance reviews were positive.

He had a job. He was qualified. What the job was, what made him qualified—these remained mysteries he performed daily without comprehension.

Page 230

The insurance was for dreams, and K. had purchased comprehensive coverage, and now a dream had been stolen, and the claims process was complex.

"You're reporting a stolen dream," the adjuster said. "Can you describe the dream?"

"I was in a house," K. said. "A house I'd never seen, but it felt like home. There were people there—I don't remember who. Something important was happening."

"That's vague. Stolen dream claims require specifics."

"That's all I have. The dream was stolen before I could remember it properly."

The adjuster made notes. "Dream theft typically occurs during light sleep phases. The thief extracts the dream before it fully forms. What you're describing is consistent with early-phase extraction."

K. felt the absence where the dream should have been. It had been important—he knew that much. It had been meaningful. But the meaning had been taken along with the content.

"What's my coverage?" K. asked.

"Replacement value for standard dreams. But if this was a significant dream—symbolic content, prophetic material—that's a different category."

"I don't know what it was. I only know it mattered."

The claim was complicated by uncertainty. K. couldn't prove what had been taken because the taking had included the knowledge of what it was.

He received partial compensation—payment for a generic dream, for the average value of nocturnal content.

It wasn't enough. The stolen dream had been more than average. He could feel its absence, even without remembering its presence.

Page 231

The therapy was for climate, and K. was in couples therapy with his weather system, and the therapist was explaining that meteorological relationships required constant maintenance.

"You're not communicating," the therapist said. "The weather is expressing things you're not acknowledging."

K. looked at his weather system. It was producing a light drizzle—melancholy rain, the kind that suggested unaddressed feelings.

"I don't know what you want," K. said to the weather.

The drizzle intensified slightly.

"See?" the therapist said. "There's something the weather needs. You're not hearing it."

K. tried to understand. He had been married to this weather for years. He knew its patterns, its seasons, its typical expressions. But something had changed—some need had emerged that he wasn't meeting.

"Tell me," K. said to the weather. "I'm listening now."

The weather produced a rainbow—brief, tentative, then fading.

"It wants to be seen," the therapist translated. "Not just experienced, but noticed. Appreciated. You've been taking the weather for granted."

K. looked at his weather—really looked. The drizzle was delicate, specific, a precipitation that belonged to this weather and no other. The rainbow had been an offering.

"I'm sorry," K. said. "I haven't been seeing you. I've just been standing under you."

The weather cleared slightly. Patches of sun emerged.

"That's progress," the therapist said. "Keep acknowledging. Keep noticing. That's what weather needs."

Page 232

The colors were gone again, and K. had been stripped of chromatic perception, and the world was shades of gray.

"Standard color redistribution," the officer explained. "You were overusing certain wavelengths. Your color perception has been limited to prevent further imbalance."

K. looked at the gray world. It had once been full of color—red and blue and green and all the combinations that made visual experience rich.

"What wavelengths was I overusing?" K. asked.

"Blue, primarily. You were looking at blue too often. That's a common addiction. Blue is visually compelling."

K. remembered blue. The sky, the water, the particular shade of his bedroom wall. He had looked at blue often because blue was everywhere and beautiful.

"How long is the redistribution?" K. asked.

"Indefinite. Until your visual consumption patterns normalize."

K. went home to his gray apartment. He looked at walls that had been blue, at objects that had been colorful, at a world that had been vivid and was now uniform.

He missed blue. He missed all of it—the spectrum that had made seeing worthwhile.

But he had looked too much. He had consumed color irresponsibly. Now he lived in the gray consequence of his chromatic excess.

Page 233

The configuration was for emotions, and K. was being reconfigured, and the technicians were explaining that emotional layout was customizable.

"We're moving your anger to the back," the technician said. "It's been too prominent. It's affecting your other feelings."

K. felt the reconfiguration happening—his anger being relocated, pushed from the forefront of his emotional experience to somewhere less accessible.

"Will I still be able to feel angry?" K. asked.

"Of course. But you'll have to reach for it. It won't be the first thing you feel anymore."

The reconfiguration continued. His joy was moved forward. His anxiety was compressed. His sadness was organized into more efficient storage.

"This is standard emotional optimization," the technician said. "Most people are born with default configurations that aren't ideal."

K. felt the optimized emotions settling into place. His feelings were still his—but they were arranged differently now, prioritized according to criteria he hadn't chosen.

"Do I still feel like myself?" K. asked.

"You feel like a better version of yourself. The configuration doesn't change what you feel—just how easily you feel it."

K. went home with his reconfigured emotions. He felt joy more readily now—it was right at the surface. Anger was harder to access—it was in the back, requiring effort.

He wasn't sure if this was better. He wasn't sure if this was worse. He was different, optimized, configured for an emotional life he hadn't requested.

Page 234

The warranty was for weight, and K.'s body mass was no longer guaranteed, and the warranty office was explaining the implications.

"Your weight warranty expired at age forty-five," the agent said.
"Since then, any weight changes are uninsured events."

K. had gained fifteen pounds since forty-five. They were uninsured pounds—mass that belonged to him without protection.

"What if I want to lose the weight?" K. asked.

"Weight loss is at your own risk. If something goes wrong—metabolic damage, nutrient deficiency—there's no coverage."

K. looked at his uninsured body. The weight he carried was his responsibility now, gained without warranty, held without guarantee.

"Was I different before forty-five?" K. asked. "When I was insured?"

"Your weight was more stable. The warranty maintained equilibrium. Without it, your body follows its natural tendencies."

K.'s natural tendency was to gain. To accumulate mass. To become heavier with each passing year.

"Is there a way to get insured again?" K. asked.

"Private weight insurance is available. Expensive, and it doesn't cover pre-existing mass. The fifteen pounds you've gained would be excluded."

K. went home with his uninsured weight. He would carry it himself, without protection, without guarantee.

The mass was his. The risk was his. The body that had once been guaranteed now existed at his own expense.

Page 235

The integration was mandatory, and K. was being integrated into something larger, and he didn't know what he would be part of.

"Integration is standard procedure," the integration officer said. "Individual units are inefficient. We're merging you into the collective."

K. felt the integration beginning—a blurring at his edges, a loosening of his boundaries.

"Will I still be me?" K. asked.

"You'll be part of something that includes you. The 'you' will persist, but it will be contextualized. You'll exist within a larger framework."

K. tried to resist. He held onto his edges, his definition, the things that made him distinct.

But the integration was gentle and relentless. It didn't force—it dissolved. Gradually, K. became less separate, more connected, part of a network of others who had also been integrated.

"Welcome," the collective said—or K. said it, from within the collective. "You are us now. We are you."

K. looked for himself within the integration. He was there—a node, a component, a recognizable pattern within the larger whole.

He hadn't been destroyed. He had been included. He existed differently now—not alone, not separate, but as part of something that thought with many minds and felt with many hearts.

It wasn't death. It wasn't life as he had known it. It was integration—the third option he hadn't known existed.

Page 236

The focus was warranted again, and K. had purchased attention coverage, and his ability to concentrate was protected once more.

"Your focus warranty covers two years," the agent said. "During that time, your attention is insured against degradation."

K. felt his focus solidify. The warranty had restored something—a sharpness, a clarity, an ability to hold thoughts that had been slipping.

"What was I like before?" K. asked.

"Unfocused. Scattered. Your thoughts didn't hold together properly."

K. didn't remember being unfocused. He didn't remember the scattered state that the warranty had corrected.

"Is this how focus normally feels?" K. asked.

"This is optimal focus. Most people don't achieve this level without assistance. The warranty guarantees it for the coverage period."

K. went through his days with guaranteed attention. He could concentrate on tasks, follow conversations, hold ideas until they were complete.

It felt artificial. It felt assisted. It felt like focus that belonged to the warranty rather than to him.

But it worked. He functioned better. He accomplished more.

When the warranty expired, he would buy another. He would keep buying focus until he couldn't afford it anymore.

Unwarranted attention was a luxury he couldn't risk.

Page 237

The insurance was for shapes, and K. had filed a claim for his lost corners, and the adjuster was evaluating the geometric damage.

"You claim to have lost three corners," the adjuster said. "Your current shape shows only five points. Original documentation shows eight."

K. was a octagon who had become a pentagon. Three corners had simply vanished—worn away, lost in transit, misplaced during some transformation he couldn't remember.

"I need my corners back," K. said. "I don't feel complete."

"Corner restoration is covered under your policy. However, there's a deductible per corner, and your pre-existing shape condition may affect coverage."

K. filled out the paperwork. He described his original octagonal state, the gradual loss of definition, the current pentagonal inadequacy.

"We can restore two corners," the adjuster concluded. "The third is attributed to natural geometric degradation. Not covered."

K. accepted the partial restoration. Two corners returned—he felt them appear, felt his shape extend, felt himself become a heptagon instead of a pentagon.

It wasn't octagonal. It wasn't complete. But it was more than he had been.

He would live with seven sides, waiting for the day when insurance might cover the eighth, when he could be fully himself again.

Page 238

The gestures were gone, and K. had lost the ability to move meaningfully, and his body performed actions without expression.

"Standard gestural redistribution," the officer explained. "You were over-gesturing. Using too much movement to communicate."

K. tried to wave. His arm moved—the mechanics were intact—but the wave meant nothing. It was motion without message.

"How do I express things now?" K. asked.

"Words. Facial expressions. The gestural channel has been closed."

K. spoke to people and felt the absence of his hands. He wanted to indicate, to emphasize, to add the physical dimension to his speech.

His hands hung useless at his sides, capable of action but not of meaning.

"Can I relearn gestures?" K. asked. "Eventually?"

"Gestural licenses can be reissued after a cooling-off period. One year. If your communication patterns normalize."

K. went home and practiced stillness. He kept his hands quiet, his body unexpressive, his movements purely functional.

The year stretched ahead. A year of speaking without hands, of meaning without motion, of thoughts that had no physical echo.

He would manage. He would adapt. He would learn to communicate with less, even if it felt like less.

Page 239

The output was demanded, and K. was required to produce, and no one would tell him what kind of production was expected.

"Your production quota is 17 units per day," the supervisor said.
"You're averaging 12. That's unacceptable."

"What are units?" K. asked.

"Output. Production. The measurable result of your work."

K. looked at his work. He came to a place, he did things, he went home. Somewhere in that process, he was supposed to be producing units.

"Show me a unit," K. said. "So I know what to make more of."

"Units are invisible. They're counted, not observed. You'll know you've produced a unit when the counter increments."

K. watched the counter on his desk. It showed 12. He needed it to show 17.

He worked harder. He performed more actions, more tasks, more of whatever it was he was doing.

The counter showed 13.

"Better," the supervisor said. "Keep trying."

K. kept trying. He never knew what made a unit, what actions translated into counted output, what the relationship was between his effort and the number.

But the number was what mattered. The number was his performance. The number was the only measure of his value.

He became a servant of the counter, working to make it rise, never understanding why it sometimes did and sometimes didn't.

Page 240

The warranty was for dreams, and K.'s nocturnal content was finally protected, and he could sleep without fear of loss.

"Your dream warranty covers all sleep-generated content," the agent said. "Nightmares, pleasant dreams, prophetic visions—everything produced during REM cycles is insured."

K. slept that night with confidence. Whatever he dreamed would be protected, preserved, covered against theft or damage.

He dreamed of a garden. The garden was vast and detailed, full of plants he didn't recognize and paths that led to places he couldn't describe.

In the morning, the dream was there—intact, retrievable, protected by warranty.

"The garden was beautiful," K. told the warranty service. "I want to keep it."

"Dreams can be archived under your policy. The garden will be stored for future retrieval."

K. archived his garden. He archived other dreams too—the ones that felt significant, the ones he wanted to revisit.

His dream archive grew. A collection of protected nocturnal experiences, insured against loss, guaranteed to be there when he wanted them.

He became a curator of his own sleep. A collector of warranted dreams. A person whose nights were not just experienced but preserved.

The warranty had given him something he hadn't known he wanted: ownership of his unconscious, a claim on what his sleeping mind produced.

Page 241

The insurance was for climate, and K.'s personal weather was finally covered, and he could stop worrying about atmospheric catastrophe.

"Your climate policy covers all weather events within a 500-foot radius of your person," the agent said. "Rain, snow, extreme heat, extreme cold—all insured."

K. walked through the world with covered weather. When it rained on him, the rain was insured. When the sun became too hot, the heat was insured.

"What does insurance actually do?" K. asked. "It still rains."

"But you're compensated for the inconvenience. Each weather event generates a claim. The claims accumulate. At the end of the year, you receive a payout."

K. tracked his weather events. He filed claims for drizzle, for wind, for an unseasonable chill in June.

The claims accumulated. K. was experiencing weather and being paid for it.

"Is this how everyone lives?" K. asked.

"Those who can afford climate insurance. The poor experience weather without compensation."

K. felt guilty about his insured weather. He was no drier than anyone else, no more protected from elements—but he was paid for the exposure.

His wealth grew from weather. Every raindrop was income. Every sunny day was a missed opportunity.

He started hoping for storms.

Page 242

The therapy was for attention, and K. was in group therapy with other focus-impaired individuals, and the facilitator was explaining that attention was not a personal failing.

"You're not broken," the facilitator said. "The world demands more focus than humans evolved to provide. You're simply normal in an abnormal environment."

K. sat with others who couldn't concentrate. They drifted together, their attention wandering in synchronization.

"I used to be able to focus," a woman said. "Before the environment became so demanding."

"We all could," a man agreed. "Focus was easy when there was less to focus on."

K. remembered—or thought he remembered—times when attention was effortless. When thoughts completed themselves, when tasks didn't require constant redirection.

"The therapy is not about fixing you," the facilitator said. "It's about accepting that focus, in the current environment, is a luxury. You're not deficient. You're overwhelmed."

K. felt acceptance settling in. He wasn't broken. He was responding normally to abnormal demands.

"What do we do?" K. asked. "If we accept that we can't focus?"

"You lower your expectations. You accomplish less. You live within your cognitive means."

K. went home to accomplish less. He stopped trying to focus on everything and started focusing on what he could.

It wasn't enough. It was never enough. But it was what he had, and the therapy had taught him that having what you have was sometimes all you could do.

Page 243

The restoration was for focus, and K. was undergoing treatment to recover the attention he had lost, and the procedure was invasive.

"We're going to reset your attentional baseline," the doctor said. "It requires deep cognitive intervention. You won't remember the procedure."

K. lay on the table while machines hummed around him. Something was happening—he could feel his mind being adjusted, his attention being reconstructed.

When it was over, the world looked sharper. Clearer. His eyes could settle on things and stay there.

"How do you feel?" the doctor asked.

"Focused," K. said. "I feel focused."

"The restoration was successful. Your attention is now at optimal levels for your age and condition."

K. left the clinic and experienced the world with restored attention. He could read signs, follow conversations, complete thoughts. The scattered feeling was gone.

But something was missing. The restoration had taken something along with what it had given.

He couldn't remember what. His memories of the unfocused time were vague, fragmentary.

"Did I lose anything?" he asked at his follow-up.

"The procedure focuses by removing distractions. Some peripheral awareness is sacrificed."

K. was focused. He was restored. He could attend to what mattered.

The cost was what didn't matter anymore—the distractions, the wanderings, the peripheral things that had once been part of his experience.

Page 244

The normalization was for shapes, and K. was being normalized, and the process would make him average in ways he didn't fully understand.

"Your shape is 2.3 standard deviations from the norm," the officer said. "That's outside acceptable parameters. Normalization will correct this."

K. looked at his shape. It had always felt like his—the particular configuration of angles and curves that defined his geometric identity.

"What's wrong with being different?" K. asked.

"Different requires accommodation. Different creates friction. Different costs more than average."

K. underwent normalization. His distinctive features were smoothed away. His unusual angles became common. His rare curves became standard.

When it was over, he looked like everyone else. Average angles. Average curves. A shape that fit into the normal range.

"How do you feel?" the officer asked.

"Normal," K. said. "I feel normal."

He felt nothing distinctive. His shape said nothing about him. He was interchangeable with others of similar normalization.

The friction was gone. The accommodation was unnecessary. He moved through the world with average ease.

But the K. who had been unusual—the K. whose shape had been specific and strange—that K. was gone, normalized away, replaced by something that fit but didn't mean.

Page 245

The transition was to something else, and K. was in the process of becoming what he was not, and the destination was unclear.

"You're transitioning," the counselor said. "That's a normal part of existence. Everyone transitions eventually."

"Transitions to what?" K. asked.

"We can't know until you arrive. The transition reveals the destination."

K. felt himself changing. Not physically—or not only physically—but fundamentally. The person he had been was becoming the person he would be.

"Is it good?" K. asked. "What I'm becoming?"

"Good is not the criterion. Becoming is the criterion. You don't choose what you become. You only choose how gracefully you transition."

K. tried to be graceful. He let go of what he had been—the identity, the certainties, the self that had felt permanent.

The letting go was painful. The becoming was uncomfortable. The space between what he was and what he would be was a kind of void.

But the transition continued. It didn't wait for him to be ready. It didn't pause for his grief.

He was becoming. He would become. What he would be was arriving, regardless of his willingness to receive it.

Page 246

The restoration was for dreams, and K. was recovering the dreams that had been stolen, and the recovery process was bringing back things he wasn't sure he wanted.

"We've located seven of your stolen dreams," the recovery agent said. "They were sold on the secondary market. We're repurchasing them."

K. received his stolen dreams. They arrived in containers—archived, preserved, waiting to be experienced.

"Do I have to dream them again?" K. asked.

"They're yours. You can archive them permanently or re-experience them. The choice is yours."

K. examined the recovered dreams. He remembered losing them—or remembered the absence they left. But he couldn't remember their content.

He chose to re-experience the first one. The dream was placed back in his sleeping mind.

That night, he dreamed it. The dream was familiar and strange—something that had been his, had been taken, and was now returned.

"Was it worth recovering?" the agent asked at his follow-up.

"I don't know. The dream was mine, but it felt like it belonged to someone else. The time away changed it somehow."

The recovered dreams sat in their containers. K. dreamed some of them, archived others.

They were his again, legally and technically. But the theft had done something—had made them feel borrowed, even after they were returned.

Page 247

The insurance was for weather, and K. had filed a claim for emotional damage from a storm, and the adjuster was evaluating the psychological impact of precipitation.

"You claim the storm caused anxiety," the adjuster said. "That's covered under your weather liability policy."

"The thunder was loud. The lightning was close. I felt afraid."

"Fear from weather events is compensable. We'll need to quantify the fear."

K. described his fear. The racing heart, the sense of danger, the helplessness before natural force.

"That's Category 3 weather anxiety," the adjuster concluded.
"Payout is 500 credits."

K. received his payout. The storm had frightened him, and the fright had value. His fear had been converted to currency.

"Does everyone get paid for weather fear?" K. asked.

"Those with coverage. The uncovered experience weather fear without compensation."

K. thought about the uncovered. People who feared storms without insurance. People whose fear generated nothing.

"Is that fair?" K. asked.

"Fair is not the metric. Coverage is the metric. You had coverage. You filed a claim. The claim was paid."

K. took his 500 credits. He had been afraid, and the fear had produced income.

The next storm, he might be more afraid. The more afraid he was, the more he would be paid.

Fear became an investment. Weather became opportunity.

Page 248

The normalization was for feelings, and K. was having his emotions standardized, and the process would make him feel what everyone felt.

"Your emotional signature is unique," the technician said. "That creates incompatibility. Normalization will align you with the population average."

K. felt his unique emotions—the particular way he experienced joy, the specific texture of his sadness, the distinctive quality of his anger.

"I like my emotions," K. said. "They're mine."

"They're incompatible. When you feel joy, it doesn't match others' joy. Communication is impaired. Normalization fixes this."

K. underwent the normalization. His unique emotions were adjusted, calibrated, brought into alignment with the population mean.

When it was over, his joy felt like everyone's joy. His sadness matched population sadness. His anger was interchangeable with standard anger.

"How do you feel?" the technician asked.

"Normal," K. said. "I feel normal."

He felt what everyone felt. His emotions no longer stood out, no longer created friction, no longer belonged specifically to him.

The uniqueness was gone. The compatibility was achieved.

K. felt what the world felt, and the world felt what K. felt, and the distinction between self and other blurred in the normalization of emotional life.

Page 249

The termination was approaching, and K. was being phased out, and the termination office was explaining the process.

"Your existence has been scheduled for termination," the officer said. "This is standard lifecycle management. You've served your function."

"What was my function?" K. asked.

"That's not disclosed. You served it without knowing. Now the service is complete."

K. tried to understand what was ending. His life, obviously. But also something else—some purpose he had fulfilled unknowingly, some role he had played without awareness.

"Do I get a choice?" K. asked.

"Everyone gets a choice. You can accept termination gracefully or resist it ungracefully. The termination happens either way."

K. considered his options. Grace seemed better than resistance. If he was ending, he might as well end well.

"I'll accept," K. said.

"That's wise. The graceful terminations are painless. The resistant ones are more complicated."

K. prepared for termination. He settled his affairs, said his good-byes, accepted that the existence he had lived was reaching its conclusion.

The termination date approached. K. felt himself becoming less—fading, diminishing, returning to whatever state had preceded his existence.

"What comes after?" K. asked.

"After is not your concern. After belongs to after."

K. accepted this. He had existed. He was ending. The between was all he had ever owned.

Page 250

The restoration was for weather, and K.'s personal climate was being recovered after damage, and the world was regaining its atmosphere.

"Your weather system has been restored," the technician said.
"Full atmospheric function should resume within 24 hours."

K. felt the weather returning. Moisture in the air. Temperature gradients. The subtle pressure changes that meant something meteorological was happening.

"I missed weather," K. said.

"Most people do. Atmospheric absence is disorienting."

K. stood outside and felt the air move. It was wind—genuine wind, restored wind, the movement of atmosphere that had been taken and returned.

"Is it the same weather?" K. asked. "Or different weather?"

"It's functionally identical. The subjective experience may vary."

K. experienced his restored weather. It felt like weather. It produced the sensations weather should produce.

But something was different. The weather didn't feel lived-in anymore. It felt new, installed, not yet worn into familiarity.

"Will it feel like mine eventually?" K. asked.

"With time. Weather adapts to its environment. Your weather will become your weather again."

K. waited for the adaptation. He experienced rain that was his rain, sun that was his sun, storms that belonged to him again.

The restoration was complete. The weather continued.

K. continued within it.

Chapter Twelve: The Systems Persist (Part I)

Page 251

The setup was for dreams, and K. was being configured for sleep, and the technicians were explaining that proper dream initialization required careful calibration.

"Your dream parameters are being set," the technician said. "This determines the range and quality of your nocturnal experiences."

K. lay in the configuration chair while machines hummed around him. His sleep was being programmed—the types of dreams he would have, the emotions they would produce, the resolution at which he would experience them.

"Can I choose my own dreams?" K. asked.

"You can request preferences. The system accommodates where possible. But the fundamental parameters are set by optimization algorithms."

K. requested pleasant dreams. The system noted his preference.

That night, he dreamed pleasantly. The dreams were optimized for positive emotional impact—beautiful scenes, satisfying narratives, outcomes that resolved happily.

"How did you sleep?" the technician asked at his follow-up.

"Well. The dreams were nice."

"The configuration is working. We'll adjust as needed based on performance data."

K. slept configured sleep. His dreams were managed, monitored, adjusted for optimal output.

He never had nightmares anymore. He never had surprises.

His sleep was pleasant, predictable, and somehow empty—the managed dreams lacking the wild unpredictability that had once made dreaming feel like discovery.

Page 252

The densities were changing, and K. was denser than he had been, and the density authority was explaining that the shift was within normal parameters.

"Your physical density has increased by 12%," the officer said. "That's consistent with standard densification patterns for your age."

K. felt heavier. Not his weight—his mass per unit volume. He took up the same space but contained more.

"Is this dangerous?" K. asked.

"Densification is natural. As you age, your particles pack more tightly. You become more concentrated."

K. looked at his hands. They looked the same, but they were denser now—more matter in the same space, more existence in the same volume.

"What happens if I keep densifying?" K. asked.

"Eventually, you reach terminal density. At that point, you're too concentrated to function normally. But that's decades away."

K. went home with his increased density. He moved more slowly—not because he was heavier, but because his dense body required more energy to accelerate.

Each step was effort. Each movement was work.

He was becoming more substantial, more real in a physical sense. The universe was packing him tighter, making him more of himself in less space.

He didn't know if this was good. He only knew it was happening, and would continue happening, until he was as dense as a person could be.

Page 253

The verification had failed, and K. was unverified, and the verification office was explaining that unverified status had significant consequences.

"Your existence cannot be verified," the officer said. "The usual proofs—documentation, biometrics, witness testimony—have all failed to confirm that you are who you claim to be."

"I am K.," K. said. "I know who I am." Though even as he said it, he wondered which K. he meant. The one who had been married to weather. The one who had designed fatal dreams. The one who had existed in a world where words had weight. All of them were him, and none of them matched the documentation in this office.

"Self-assertion is not verification. Anyone can claim to be anyone. We need external confirmation."

K. tried to provide external confirmation. He showed identification, offered fingerprints, submitted to DNA analysis.

"The ID is unverifiable. The fingerprints don't match any database. The DNA is—" the officer paused, "—inconclusive."

K. was unverified. He existed—he was standing in the office, clearly present—but his existence couldn't be officially confirmed.

"What do I do?" K. asked.

"You function with limited privileges. Unverified persons can't vote, can't access certain services, can't be fully recognized by the state."

K. walked home as an unverified person. He was real, but unofficially. He existed, but without proof.

The world continued around him, full of verified persons who knew who they were and could prove it. K. moved among them, unable to prove his own reality, dependent on a verification that might never come.

Page 254

The settings were for weather, and K. was adjusting his personal atmospheric preferences, and the climate interface was offering options he didn't understand.

"You can customize precipitation frequency, temperature range, and wind intensity," the interface said. "What are your preferences?"

K. looked at the options. Rainfall: daily, weekly, monthly, never. Temperature: fixed, variable, seasonal, chaotic. Wind: calm, moderate, intense, extreme.

"What's normal?" K. asked.

"Normal varies. There is no standard weather configuration. Everyone creates their own atmospheric experience."

K. chose moderate rain, variable temperature, and calm wind. The settings were applied.

His weather changed. The rain came when scheduled—moderate, predictable. The temperature varied within his chosen range. The wind stayed calm.

"Is this what you wanted?" the interface asked.

"I don't know. I've never chosen my weather before."

K. lived with his configured climate. It rained when it was supposed to rain. The temperature never surprised him.

But something was missing. The weather no longer felt like weather—it felt like settings. The storms didn't excite him. The sun didn't feel earned.

He had optimized his climate and lost something in the optimization.

Page 255

The warranties were void, and K. had exceeded the terms on everything, and nothing about him was covered anymore.

"Your comprehensive warranty package has been voided," the agent said. "All coverage terminated."

K. looked at the list of voided warranties. Emotional warranty: void. Physical warranty: void. Cognitive warranty: void. Identity warranty: void.

"What did I do?" K. asked.

"Excessive wear. Improper use. Failure to maintain according to specifications. The warranties have protections against this kind of degradation."

K. felt his unwarranted existence. Everything he was, everything he had—now unprotected, uncovered, unsupported.

"Can I buy new warranties?" K. asked.

"New warranties are available for items without pre-existing conditions. You have extensive pre-existing conditions. Coverage is not available."

K. went home without coverage. His emotions could fail—no replacement. His body could break—no repair. His mind could degrade—no restoration.

He was on his own, completely. Whatever happened, he would face it without the safety net of warranty protection.

The vulnerability was terrifying. And somehow, also clarifying.

He was his own responsibility now. He would maintain himself, or he wouldn't. The choice—and the consequences—were entirely his.

Page 256

The rhythms were changing, and K. was out of sync with the world, and the synchronization office was explaining that rhythm misalignment was correctable.

"Your personal rhythm is 23.7 hours," the officer said. "The world operates on a 24-hour cycle. You're constantly drifting out of phase."

K. felt the misalignment. He was tired when the world was awake. He was alert when the world slept. His body moved to a different beat than everyone else's.

"Can I change my rhythm?" K. asked.

"Rhythm adjustment is available. We can lengthen your cycle to 24 hours. The process takes about a week."

K. underwent rhythm adjustment. Each day, his cycle was stretched slightly—a few minutes added, a small correction applied.

By the end of the week, he was synchronized. His 24-hour cycle matched the world's 24-hour cycle. He was tired and alert at the right times.

"How do you feel?" the officer asked.

"In sync. For the first time, I feel in sync."

K. lived on the world's schedule. He slept when the world slept. He woke when the world woke.

The isolation of misalignment was gone. He was part of the rhythm now, one voice in the universal timing.

But sometimes, late at night, he felt his original 23.7-hour self stirring—the natural rhythm that had been corrected away, the misalignment that had been who he was.

Page 257

The allocation was for resources, and K. was receiving his monthly distribution, and the distribution center was explaining that this month's allocation was reduced.

"Your resource allocation has been decreased by 15%," the administrator said. "This is due to systemic scarcity and population growth."

K. looked at his allocation: food units, energy credits, space allowance, emotional rations. All reduced by 15%.

"How do I live on less?" K. asked.

"Efficiency. Prioritization. Some resources are more essential than others. You'll learn to manage."

K. took his reduced allocation and went home. He had 15% less of everything—less food, less energy, less space, less feeling.

He learned to manage. He ate smaller portions, used less power, occupied less room. He felt less intensely, rationing his emotional responses.

"Is this enough?" he asked himself.

It wasn't enough. It was what he had, but it wasn't enough.

He survived on his allocation. He didn't thrive. He didn't grow. He existed within his 15% reduction, waiting for the month when allocations might increase.

They never increased. Each month, the allocation was the same or less. The scarcity was permanent, the reduction was ongoing.

K. learned to need less. He became smaller in his needs, in his expectations, in his sense of what was possible.

Page 258

The synchronization was for emotions, and K. was being synced with the collective feeling, and the process would align his inner life with everyone else's.

"Emotional synchronization ensures harmony," the technician said. "When everyone feels the same thing at the same time, conflict is reduced."

K. felt the synchronization happening—his individual emotions being tuned, calibrated, brought into alignment with the collective mood.

"What will I feel?" K. asked.

"What everyone feels. Joy when the collective is joyful. Sadness when the collective mourns. You'll be part of the emotional whole."

K. emerged from synchronization. The world felt different. When he looked at strangers, he felt what they felt. Their emotions were his emotions. There was no separation between his inner life and theirs.

"Is this normal?" K. asked.

"This is the new normal. Individual emotion is isolated. Synchronized emotion is connected."

K. lived connected. He laughed when the collective laughed. He cried when the collective cried. His feelings were not his own—they were shared, public, part of the emotional commons.

The loneliness was gone. The uniqueness was gone too.

He felt with everyone, which meant he felt like no one in particular. He was part of the emotional whole, and the whole was all there was.

Page 259

The passwords were for weight, and K. had forgotten the codes that allowed his body to maintain its mass, and the gravity office was explaining that password recovery was a lengthy process.

"Your weight passwords have been reset too many times," the officer said. "The system has locked you out. You'll need to go through identity verification before you can access your gravitational settings."

K. felt his weight becoming unstable. Without the passwords, his body couldn't maintain consistent mass. He fluctuated—heavier one moment, lighter the next.

"How long does verification take?" K. asked.

"Two to three weeks. During that time, your weight will be unmanaged."

K. lived through the unmanaged weeks. His weight changed constantly—he was heavy at breakfast, light at lunch, average by dinner. He couldn't predict what he would weigh from moment to moment.

"Is this dangerous?" he asked.

"Not physically. But socially, unpredictable weight is disruptive. People expect consistent mass. Fluctuation makes others uncomfortable."

K. watched people react to his weight instability. They stepped back when he grew heavy. They reached out when he grew light, as if he might float away.

The verification came through. K. regained his passwords. His weight stabilized.

But he remembered the fluctuation—the strange freedom of not knowing what he would weigh, the disorientation of inconsistent mass.

Stability was better, probably. Stability was normal. But the instability had been interesting, in its unsettling way.

Page 260

The assessment was constant, and K. was being evaluated continuously, and the assessors were explaining that permanent monitoring was for his own benefit.

"Your performance is tracked in real time," the assessor said. "This allows us to provide instant feedback and immediate intervention when needed."

K. felt the monitoring—sensors in his environment, in his devices, possibly in his body. Everything he did was observed, measured, judged.

"What are you assessing?" K. asked.

"Everything. Productivity, health, social contribution, emotional stability. All metrics are tracked. All deviations are flagged."

K. tried to live normally, but normal felt different under observation. Every action was a performance. Every decision was evaluated.

"What happens when I deviate?" K. asked.

"Corrective measures. Suggestions, interventions, adjustments. The goal is to keep you within optimal parameters."

K. stayed within parameters. He avoided deviation, prevented flagging, maintained the metrics that the assessors tracked.

His life became a perfect record. No deviations. No flags. No interventions.

But the life wasn't his—it was a performance for the assessors. The person he might have been, the choices he might have made, the deviations that might have defined him—all suppressed, all avoided, all prevented by the constant assessment that kept him optimally, emptily, perfectly normal.

Page 261

The configuration was for focus, and K. was being optimized for attention, and the process would determine what he could notice and what he couldn't.

"Your focus is being configured for efficiency," the technician said. "We're eliminating distracting stimuli and enhancing relevant inputs."

K. felt his attention being shaped. Some things became sharper—work-related information, productive activities. Other things faded—irrelevant details, unproductive interests.

"What am I losing?" K. asked.

"Nothing important. Background noise. Distractions. The things that consumed attention without producing value."

K. emerged from configuration with optimized focus. He could concentrate on work effortlessly. His attention never wandered to unproductive things.

But the world seemed thinner. The details he used to notice—the texture of leaves, the pattern of light on water—were gone. His focus had been narrowed to what mattered, and what mattered had been defined by someone else.

"Is this better?" K. asked.

"You're 37% more productive. Your focus metrics are excellent."

K. lived with his configured attention. He accomplished more. He noticed less.

The efficiency was real. The loss was also real. He had traded peripheral awareness for central focus, and the trade felt like it had cost more than it had gained.

Page 262

The calibration was for shapes, and K. was being adjusted to standard geometric specifications, and the process would correct any deviations from the norm.

"Your shape has drifted from specifications," the calibrator said.
"Your angles are off by 0.3 degrees. Your curves deviate by 2.1%."

K. looked at his shape. It had always felt right—the particular configuration of his geometry. But apparently, it was wrong. Deviant. Off-specification.

"What happens during calibration?" K. asked.

"We adjust your geometry to match the standard. Your angles become exact. Your curves become precise."

K. underwent calibration. He felt his shape being corrected—the slight adjustments, the subtle straightening, the small corrections that brought him into alignment with the specification.

When it was over, he was standard. His angles were exact. His curves were precise.

"How do you feel?" the calibrator asked.

"Correct. I feel correct."

He felt nothing distinctive. His shape matched the specification, but the specification was generic. He was geometrically correct and personally unremarkable.

The deviation had been him—the 0.3 degrees, the 2.1%. Now he was everyone's shape. Now he was the standard.

Page 263

The pressures were changing, and K. was experiencing force fluctuations, and the pressure authority was explaining that atmospheric density was in flux.

"The local pressure has been unstable," the officer said. "You're experiencing variable atmospheric conditions. This is temporary."

K. felt the pressure changes. Sometimes the air was heavy, pressing down on him, making movement difficult. Sometimes it was light, almost absent, making him feel exposed.

"When will it stabilize?" K. asked.

"Unknown. Pressure patterns are affected by multiple factors. We can't predict when stability will return."

K. lived with the instability. He woke each morning not knowing what the pressure would be. He went through days that were crushing and days that were thin.

His body adapted—or tried to adapt. But adaptation was hard when the conditions kept changing. He could never settle into a state because the state kept shifting.

"Is everyone experiencing this?" K. asked.

"Everyone in your zone. The pressure instability is local."

K. looked at other zones—places where pressure was stable, where air had consistent weight.

He couldn't move. His zone was his zone. The instability was his to endure.

He endured. He waited. The pressure continued to fluctuate, and K. continued to exist within its uncertain force.

Page 264

The loops were for documentation, and K. was trapped in a cycle of paperwork, and the administrative office was explaining that the cycle was necessary for records integrity.

"You've completed Form 47-A," the clerk said. "That requires Form 47-B to validate it. Form 47-B requires Form 47-C for authorization. Form 47-C references Form 47-A for initial data."

K. looked at the forms. They referenced each other in a closed circuit. Each form required another form, which required another, which required the original.

"How do I complete the cycle?" K. asked.

"You complete each form in sequence. When you reach 47-A again, you update it with the information from 47-C, then repeat 47-B with the updated 47-A data."

K. completed the cycle. 47-A to 47-B to 47-C to 47-A again. The forms accumulated, each iteration slightly different, the paperwork growing without progress.

"Is this necessary?" K. asked.

"Necessary for records integrity. The documentation must be complete. Completeness requires iteration."

K. continued to iterate. The forms multiplied. The cycle continued.

He was documenting his existence in a loop that had no exit—a permanent record of repeated effort, a file that grew but never finished.

Page 265

The tuning was for dreams, and K. was having his sleep adjusted, and the technicians were explaining that fine-tuning improved nocturnal efficiency.

"Your dreams have been running 7% below optimal," the technician said. "We're adjusting the parameters to improve output."

K. didn't know what dream output meant. He slept, he dreamed, he woke. The process seemed simple.

"What are you optimizing?" K. asked.

"Emotional processing. Memory consolidation. Creative problem-solving. Dreams serve functions. We're making your dreams function better."

K. underwent dream tuning. The adjustment was invisible—he felt nothing during the process, noticed nothing when he slept.

But his dreams were different. They were more purposeful, more efficient. He processed emotions cleanly. He consolidated memories quickly. His problems resolved themselves overnight.

"How do you feel?" the technician asked.

"Rested. Resolved. My dreams seem to work now."

K. slept optimized sleep. His dreams were efficient.

But efficiency wasn't the same as meaning. The dreams no longer surprised him. They no longer showed him things he hadn't known he was thinking.

They worked. They functioned. They served their purpose.

But they were no longer explorations. They were no longer his.

Page 266

The interference was with weather, and K.'s climate was being disrupted, and the meteorological authority was explaining that the disruption was external.

"Your personal weather is being affected by neighboring atmospheric systems," the officer said. "The interference is causing irregularities."

K. looked at his weather. It was behaving strangely—rain when sun was scheduled, wind when calm was expected. The interference was visible in the chaos.

"Can you stop it?" K. asked.

"We're negotiating with the neighboring systems. Atmospheric boundaries are being renegotiated. Until then, the interference continues."

K. lived with interfered weather. His climate was not his own—it was a mixture of his settings and the intruding conditions from neighboring zones.

"Is this common?" K. asked.

"Weather is inherently borderless. Interference is constant. We try to manage it, but perfect isolation is impossible."

K. accepted the interference. His weather would never be purely his. It would always be affected by what was happening nearby.

The storms that weren't his storms. The sunshine that wasn't his sunshine. The climate that was collaborative, whether he wanted collaboration or not.

He lived in shared weather, affected by forces he couldn't control, experiencing conditions he hadn't chosen.

Page 267

The vibrations were changing, and K. was resonating at different frequencies, and the resonance authority was explaining that vibrational drift was normal with age.

"Your fundamental frequency has shifted from 432 Hz to 427 Hz," the officer said. "That's standard vibrational aging."

K. felt the shift. He hummed differently now—not audibly, but at some level below perception. His resonance was lower, slower, closer to silence.

"What does this mean?" K. asked.

"Your interactions with the world will change. Lower frequencies connect with different things. Some relationships will become easier. Others will become harder."

K. moved through the world at 427 Hz. Things that had resonated before now felt distant. Things that had been distant now felt closer.

"Is this loss or change?" K. asked.

"Both. Every vibrational shift is both. You lose some harmonies, gain others. The total resonance is conserved, just differently distributed."

K. accepted his new frequency. He was 427 Hz now, whatever that meant in terms of existence. The harmony of his life was different—not worse, not better, just different.

He would continue to shift. He would continue to age vibrationally. Eventually, he would resonate at frequencies he couldn't imagine now.

The drift was slow. The change was constant. The music of his existence was modulating toward some final note he couldn't yet hear.

Page 268

The normalization was for emotions, and K. was being brought into standard feeling ranges, and the process would eliminate his emotional outliers.

"Your joy exceeds normal parameters," the normalizer said. "Your grief also exceeds. You feel too much, in both directions."

K. felt his excessive emotions. The joy that sometimes overwhelmed him. The grief that sometimes paralyzed him. The intensity that made life feel like something.

"Is feeling too much a problem?" K. asked.

"It creates volatility. The system works best when emotions are within predictable ranges. Your outliers disrupt the average."

K. underwent emotional normalization. The extremes were removed—the too-much joy, the too-much grief. He was brought into the middle, the safe range, the predictable zone.

"How do you feel?" the normalizer asked.

"Moderate. I feel moderate."

K. lived with moderate emotions. Nothing too much. Nothing too little.

The highs were gone. The lows were gone. The middle remained—a flat plain of adequate feeling, appropriate response, normalized experience.

He didn't suffer as much. He didn't rejoice as much.

He felt what was normal to feel, which was less than he had felt before, which was supposedly better, which felt like less.

Page 269

The tuning was for emotions, and K. was having his feelings adjusted, and the technicians were explaining that emotional precision required regular calibration.

"Your sadness is 3.2% off target," the technician said. "We're adjusting it to match the standard."

K. felt the tuning happening—his sadness being brought into alignment, calibrated to match what sadness was supposed to feel like.

"What's the standard?" K. asked.

"Collective average. Sadness should feel like everyone's sadness. Individual variation creates communication problems."

K. emerged from tuning with standardized sadness. When he was sad now, he was sad in the same way everyone else was sad. The feeling was interchangeable.

"Is this better?" K. asked.

"It's clearer. When you express sadness, others understand it immediately. There's no interpretation required."

K. lived with clear emotions. His feelings matched the standard. Communication was easy.

But something was lost in the clarity. His sadness had been his—distinctive, particular, the way he experienced loss. Now it was everyone's sadness, generic and shared.

He could communicate perfectly. He could no longer be understood personally.

Page 270

The sync was for gravity, and K. was being aligned with standard gravitational pull, and the process would make his weight consistent across all locations.

"Your gravitational response varies by location," the officer said. "You weigh different amounts in different places. We're synchronizing you to the global average."

K. felt the sync happening—his relationship to gravity being standardized, his weight becoming consistent regardless of where he stood.

"I used to feel lighter in some places," K. said. "Heavier in others."

"That was inconsistent. Now you'll feel the same everywhere. Universal weight."

K. emerged from sync with universal gravitational response. He weighed exactly the same everywhere—in mountains, in valleys, in any location on any surface.

The variation was gone. The places that had felt different now felt the same.

"Is this better?" K. asked.

"It's simpler. You know what to expect. Your weight is your weight, everywhere."

K. moved through a uniform gravitational experience. Every step felt the same. Every surface pulled equally.

The world had become flat—not geometrically, but experientially. There were no light places, no heavy places. Only weight, consistent and unremarkable.

Page 271

The remediation was for attention, and K. was being corrected for focus deficiencies, and the process would bring his concentration to acceptable levels.

"Your attention span is 47% below standard," the remediation officer said. "We're implementing corrective measures."

K. felt the remediation—his attention being extended, stretched, forced to hold longer than it naturally did.

"Is this permanent?" K. asked.

"The correction will hold as long as you maintain the practices. Regular reinforcement is required."

K. emerged with corrected attention. He could focus longer, hold thoughts more steadily, attend to tasks that had previously defeated him.

"How do you feel?" the officer asked.

"Focused. Uncomfortably focused."

K. lived with his corrected attention. The focus was there—persistent, inescapable. He couldn't not pay attention. The correction had removed his ability to drift.

His productivity increased. His stress also increased. The constant focus was exhausting.

"Is this what normal attention feels like?" K. asked.

"This is what effective attention feels like. Normal may be lower. But normal isn't the goal."

K. focused on everything, because he couldn't do otherwise. The remediation had fixed his deficiency and created a new problem: attention that wouldn't stop, focus that couldn't release.

Page 272

The sync was for attention, and K. was being aligned with collective awareness, and the process would connect his focus to everyone else's.

"Attention synchronization creates shared awareness," the syncing officer said. "When one person notices something, everyone synchronized notices it too."

K. felt the sync happening—his attention becoming linked, his focus becoming shared.

"What will I notice?" K. asked.

"What the collective notices. Important events, significant changes, things that matter to everyone."

K. emerged synced. His attention was no longer his alone. When the collective focused, he focused. When the collective looked away, he looked away.

"Is anything private?" K. asked.

"Private attention is possible but requires effort. The default is shared. You have to actively disconnect to notice things individually."

K. lived with shared attention. He noticed what everyone noticed. The things that captured the collective's focus captured his.

The private things—the details only he would have seen—faded. They weren't worth noticing because no one else was noticing them.

He was part of the attention whole now. His awareness was a node in the network.

What he saw, everyone saw. What everyone ignored, he ignored too.

Page 273

The approval was for shapes, and K. had submitted his current geometry for review, and the approval board was deliberating.

"Your shape application is under consideration," the board chair said. "We're evaluating whether your current configuration meets standards."

K. waited for the verdict. His shape—the geometry he had lived with, the form that was his identity—was being judged.

"What happens if I'm not approved?" K. asked.

"Modification. Your shape would be adjusted to meet standards. Non-approved shapes cannot persist."

K. thought about modification. His angles changed, his curves altered, his geometry remade by committee decision.

"On what basis do you approve?" K. asked.

"Compatibility. Efficiency. Aesthetic contribution. Your shape must serve the collective."

The deliberation continued. Hours passed, then days. K.'s shape remained in limbo—neither approved nor rejected, existing in a state of geometric uncertainty.

Finally, the verdict came: provisional approval. K.'s shape was permitted, but subject to review. Any deviation would trigger re-evaluation.

K. went home with his provisionally approved form. He was allowed to be himself, conditionally.

The condition would never lift. The review would never end. His shape was his own, but only as long as someone else continued to agree.

Page 274

The correction was coming, and K. was scheduled for adjustment, and he didn't know what needed correcting.

"Your correction appointment is at 3 PM," the notification said.
"Please report to Correction Center 7."

K. reported. He waited in a room with others awaiting correction. No one knew what would be corrected.

"What are you here for?" K. asked the person next to him.

"I don't know. The notification doesn't specify."

K. entered the correction chamber. The corrector reviewed his file.

"You have a deviation in sector 47," the corrector said. "We're going to fix it."

"What's sector 47?"

"That's not relevant. The deviation exists. The correction will address it."

K. underwent correction. Something changed—he felt it shift, adjust, realign. When it was over, he felt different, but couldn't identify how.

"What was corrected?" K. asked.

"Sector 47 is now within parameters. That's all that matters."

K. went home, corrected. Whatever had been wrong was now right. Whatever had deviated was now aligned.

He would never know what had changed. He would only know that he was, somehow, more correct than before.

Page 275

The scheduling was for dreams, and K.'s sleep was being organized, and the schedule would determine when and what he dreamed.

"Your dream schedule has been set," the scheduler said. "Monday: processing dreams. Wednesday: consolidation dreams. Friday: creative dreams."

K. looked at the schedule. His nights were divided, categorized, assigned specific nocturnal functions.

"What about spontaneous dreams?" K. asked.

"Not scheduled. Spontaneous content is inefficient. The schedule ensures optimal dream function."

K. slept his scheduled sleep. Monday nights, his dreams processed the week's emotions. Wednesday nights, they consolidated memories. Friday nights, they generated creative solutions.

The dreams were productive. They accomplished their assigned purposes.

But they no longer surprised him. There were no Tuesday dreams, no Thursday mysteries, no weekend adventures of the unconscious mind.

His sleep was organized. His nights were efficient. His dreams served their functions.

And somewhere, beneath the schedule, the spontaneous dreamer that K. had once been waited—waited for an unscheduled night, an unplanned dream, a moment when sleep might still mean discovery.

Chapter Thirteen: The Systems Persist (Part II)

Page 276

The tuning was for weather, and K.'s climate was being fine-adjusted, and the meteorological technician was explaining that atmospheric precision was essential.

"Precipitation patterns 4.7% off target," the technician said.
"Correcting variance."

K. felt the tuning—rain becoming precise, clouds predictable, weather aligning with specifications.

"What's the target?"

"The weather you were assigned. Everyone receives assigned weather. Deviation is inefficient."

He emerged with tuned weather. Rain exactly when scheduled. Sunshine exactly when planned. Precision-engineered climate.

The tuning had removed something—surprise. The unexpected storm. The clearing that came when it wasn't supposed to.

"Is this what weather should feel like?"

"This is assigned weather. Natural weather was unpredictable. Assigned weather is reliable."

Reliable weather. Never surprised him. Never inconvenienced him.

Never delighted him either.

Page 277

The echoes were returning, and K. was hearing reverberations of things he had said years ago, and the echo authority was explaining that sound persistence was a normal phenomenon.

"Your voice has been echoing approximately twelve years," the officer said. "Sounds from 2045 returning now."

K. listened. He could hear himself—Younger, different—saying things he didn't remember. Delayed recordings, bouncing back from wherever sound went.

"What am I saying?"

"Conversations, exclamations, ordinary speech. Everything you ever said is still traveling. Eventually returning."

He heard himself arguing. The words distant but recognizable. Heard himself laughing—thin but genuine.

"Will this continue?"

"Until all sounds return. Sound doesn't disappear. It travels."

Each day: new echoes. Fragments of old conversations. His past arriving audibly, inescapably. He heard regrets. Promises unkept. History returning sound by sound.

"Is there a way to stop them?"

"No. What you said is what you said. The return is inevitable."

Page 278

The updates were mandatory, and K. was being updated, and the update center was explaining that regular revisions were necessary for optimal functioning.

"Software version 47.3," the technician said. "Updating to 47.4. Two hours."

K. didn't know he had software. Didn't know he was versioned.

"What's being updated?"

"Core functionality. Emotional processing. Cognitive algorithms. Improvement."

He felt changes happening—subtle shifts in thought, feeling, processing.

Version 47.4.

"How do you feel?"

"Different."

He went home and compared himself to 47.3. Faster thinking. Less intense feeling. More efficient processing.

Improvement meant loss—slower thinking, deeper feeling, inefficiencies that had been part of who he was.

"Am I still me?"

"You're the current version. Previous versions are obsolete."

47.4. The 47.3 that existed before: gone, replaced, updated into oblivion.

Next update already scheduled.

Page 279

The standardization was for emotions, and K. was being made standard, and the process would align his feelings with the universal template.

"Emotional configuration shows significant individual variation," the standardizer said. "Adjusting to match standard."

K. felt his individual emotions—the particular way he experienced things. About to be standardized.

"What will I lose?"

"Distinctiveness. Uniqueness. Variations that make emotions specifically yours."

He underwent standardization. Feelings adjusted, calibrated, aligned with universal template.

His joy: everyone's joy. His anger: universal anger. His love: interchangeable with standard love.

"How do you feel?"

"The same as everyone."

Standard emotions. When he felt something, he knew exactly what it was—recognizable to all, shareable without translation.

But not his anymore. The emotions. The feelings everyone felt. Universal template applied to particular body.

He felt like everyone. He was no one in particular.

Page 280

The calibration was for weight, and K. was being precisely measured, and the calibration office was explaining that mass accuracy was essential.

"Your weight is 0.3 pounds off calibration," the calibrator said.
"We're adjusting you to the exact target."

K. felt the calibration—a tiny adjustment, a minor correction, his mass being brought into precise alignment.

"Is 0.3 pounds significant?" K. asked.

"All deviation is significant. Precision is the goal. Your weight must be exactly what it's supposed to be."

K. emerged calibrated. He weighed exactly what the specification said he should weigh. Not 0.3 pounds more, not 0.3 pounds less.

"How do you feel?" the calibrator asked.

"Precise. I feel precise."

K. lived with calibrated weight. His mass was exactly correct. He knew, to the ounce, what he weighed at any moment.

The precision was comforting, in a way. No surprises. No variation. Just the exact weight he was supposed to have.

But he wondered about the 0.3 pounds. Where had they gone? Were they floating somewhere, displaced by calibration? Were they looking for a body to attach to?

He was precisely correct. The imprecision had been removed.

He was exactly what he should be.

Page 281

The restoration was for focus, and K. was having his attention repaired, and the process would fix the damage from years of distraction.

"Your focus has been fragmented," the restoration technician said. "We're piecing it back together."

K. felt the restoration—his scattered attention being gathered, reassembled, made whole.

"How did it fragment?" K. asked.

"Use. Overuse. The demands of modern life fracture attention. We're repairing the fractures."

K. emerged with restored focus. He could attend to things completely—single-pointed awareness, undivided concentration.

"How do you feel?" the technician asked.

"Whole. My attention feels whole."

K. lived with whole attention. He could focus on one thing at a time, entirely, without the fragmentation that had distributed his awareness across multiple stimuli.

But something was different. The fractured attention had seen more—multiple things simultaneously, connections between disparate elements. The whole attention saw less, but saw it completely.

He was restored. He was also reduced.

The fragmentation had been a kind of richness. The wholeness was a kind of poverty.

Page 282

The normalization was for focus, and K. was being brought into standard attentional range, and the process would make his concentration average.

"Your focus exceeds normal parameters," the normalizer said. "You concentrate too intensely. We're reducing it to acceptable levels."

K. felt the reduction—his intense concentration being diluted, spread thinner, made average.

"Is there such a thing as too much focus?" K. asked.

"There is. Excessive concentration is isolating. You miss peripheral awareness. You disconnect from the collective attention."

K. emerged with normal focus. He could attend to things, but not too much. His concentration was average—neither deficient nor excessive.

"How do you feel?" the normalizer asked.

"Normal. I feel normal."

K. lived with normal focus. He noticed things adequately. He concentrated sufficiently.

The intensity was gone. The deep dives into single subjects, the hours of complete immersion—these were no longer possible.

He was part of the collective attention now. His focus matched everyone else's.

He noticed what everyone noticed, with the depth that everyone achieved.

Page 283

The normalization was for shapes, and K. was being geometrically averaged, and the process would make his form unremarkable.

"Your shape has distinctive features," the normalizer said. "We're removing them."

K. looked at his shape. The distinctive features were small—a slightly unusual angle, a curve with particular character. They were what made his geometry his.

"Why remove them?" K. asked.

"Distinction creates friction. Average shapes interface smoothly. Your features cause compatibility issues."

K. underwent normalization. His distinctive features were removed, averaged, blended into the geometric mean.

When it was over, he was average. His angles matched the standard. His curves followed the template.

"How do you feel?" the normalizer asked.

"Compatible. I feel compatible."

K. lived as an average shape. He fit everywhere. He interfaced smoothly.

But he couldn't be recognized. His shape, once distinctive, now matched countless others. He was interchangeable, replaceable, one geometry among many.

The distinction had been him. The average was everyone.

Page 284

The speeds were changing, and K. was moving at different rates, and the velocity authority was explaining that speed variance was being corrected.

"Your movement speed has been inconsistent," the officer said. "You accelerate and decelerate unpredictably. We're standardizing your velocity."

K. felt the standardization—his movements becoming uniform, his speed becoming constant.

"What was wrong with varying speed?" K. asked.

"Variance disrupts flow. When everyone moves at the same rate, traffic is optimized. Your unpredictability was causing problems."

K. emerged with standardized velocity. He moved at a constant speed—neither rushing nor dawdling, just the standard pace.

"How do you feel?" the officer asked.

"Steady. I feel steady."

K. lived at constant speed. He walked the same pace everywhere. He never hurried, never slowed.

The variation had been responsive—faster when excited, slower when tired. The constancy was mechanical.

He moved like everyone else now. His body had lost its rhythm.

Page 285

The transition was continuing, and K. was still becoming, and the becoming had no apparent destination.

"You're in permanent transition," the transition counselor said.
"You're always becoming what you'll be next."

K. felt the transition—the constant change, the endless becoming, the state of never quite arriving.

"When do I stop becoming?" K. asked.

"When you cease existing. Becoming is existence. Stability is death."

K. lived in transition. Each moment, he was slightly different than the moment before. Each day, he was a new version of whoever he had been yesterday.

"Is this normal?" K. asked.

"This is universal. Everyone is becoming. Most people don't notice. You've become aware of your becoming."

K. was aware of his becoming. He felt himself changing—minute by minute, hour by hour. The person he was kept slipping away, replaced by the person he was becoming.

"Will I ever know who I am?" K. asked.

"You'll know who you were. Who you are is already becoming who you'll be. The present is too brief for knowing."

K. continued to transition. He continued to become.

He never arrived. He never stopped. He was perpetual motion, permanent change, a person made of becoming.

Page 286

The normalization was for dreams, and K. was having his sleep standardized, and the process would make his nights predictable.

"Your dreams show unusual content," the normalizer said. "We're adjusting them to match the standard."

K. felt the adjustment—his dream content being modified, his unconscious production being brought into alignment.

"What's unusual about my dreams?" K. asked.

"They're too original. Too distinctive. Standard dreams draw from common imagery. Yours draw from somewhere else."

K. emerged with normalized dreams. That night, he dreamed standard dreams—the common imagery, the shared symbols, the nocturnal content that everyone experienced.

"How do you feel?" the normalizer asked the next day.

"Rested. My dreams made sense."

K. lived with standard dreams. His nights were predictable. His dreams were comprehensible.

The unusual content was gone. The strange images, the distinctive narratives—these no longer visited him.

His unconscious was normal now. His sleep was shared.

He dreamed what everyone dreamed. He was no longer alone in his nights.

Page 287

The normalization was for weather, and K.'s climate was being standardized, and the process would make his atmospheric experience uniform.

"Your weather shows individual variation," the normalizer said.
"We're aligning it with the collective."

K. felt his weather changing—his personal climate becoming average, his atmospheric experience matching everyone else's.

"What happens to my seasons?" K. asked.

"They'll be everyone's seasons. The same weather everyone experiences. Uniform conditions across all citizens."

K. emerged with standard weather. Rain came when everyone's rain came. Sun shone when everyone's sun shone.

"How do you feel?" the normalizer asked.

"Connected. I feel connected."

K. lived with collective weather. His climate matched his neighbors'. The distinctions that had made his atmospheric experience personal were gone.

He no longer had his own rain. He no longer had his own sun.

He shared weather with everyone, which meant the weather was no one's.

Page 288

The silences were returning, and K. was hearing the absences of things he had never said, and the silence authority was explaining that unsaid things had presence too.

"The things you didn't say are returning as silence," the officer said. "Every word you held back, every thought you didn't voice—they're coming back as quiet."

K. listened. He could hear the silences—gaps in sound, absences of speech, the negative space of communication.

"What didn't I say?" K. asked.

"That's between you and your silences. The content is yours."

K. lived with returning silences. Each day brought more—moments of quiet that were somehow specific, absences that had content.

He heard the things he should have said to people now gone. He heard the words he had swallowed, the truths he had suppressed.

"How long do they last?" K. asked.

"Until you hear them all. Every silence you created will return."

The silences accumulated. K.'s life filled with the echoes of unsaying, the reverberations of restraint.

He had been silent so often. The silences were many.

Page 289

The migration was for emotions, and K.'s feelings were relocating, and the process would move them to more efficient locations.

"Your emotions are poorly distributed," the migration officer said.
"We're moving them for optimal access."

K. felt the migration—his feelings relocating, settling into new positions within his psychological architecture.

"Where are they going?" K. asked.

"Joy is moving to the surface. Grief is moving deeper. Anger is being repositioned for quick deployment. Each emotion is being placed where it functions best."

K. emerged with migrated emotions. Joy was easily accessible now—right at the surface. Grief was harder to reach—buried deep.

"How do you feel?" the officer asked.

"Efficient. I feel efficient."

K. lived with efficient emotions. Joy came quickly, easily. Grief required effort to access.

The arrangement was optimal. The feelings served their purposes.

But something was wrong. The old arrangement had been organic—emotions emerging as they would, not as they should. The new arrangement was engineered.

He felt efficiently. He wasn't sure he felt authentically.

Page 290

The rotation was for roles, and K. was cycling through identities, and the rotation office was explaining that regular role changes prevented stagnation.

"You've been in your current role for too long," the officer said.
"We're rotating you to a new identity."

K. felt the rotation—his current role dissolving, a new identity installing.

"What will I be?" K. asked.

"That's determined by the rotation schedule. You don't choose.
You adapt."

K. emerged with a new role. He was something else now—a different profession, a different set of relationships, a different way of being in the world.

"How do you feel?" the officer asked.

"Disoriented. I feel disoriented."

K. lived with his new role. He learned its requirements, adapted to its expectations. He became who the rotation said he was.

But traces of the old role remained. The person he had been leaked into the person he was. The rotation was not complete.

"Will this ever feel natural?" K. asked.

"With time. Each role becomes natural. Then it rotates, and you adapt again."

K. adapted. He would rotate. He would become something else, then something else again.

The stagnation was prevented. The identity was fluid.

He was what he was rotated into being.

Page 291

The restoration was for focus, and K. was being repaired again, and the technicians were explaining that attention required ongoing maintenance.

"Your focus has degraded since your last restoration," the technician said. "We're restoring again."

K. felt the restoration—his attention being rebuilt, patched, brought back to functional levels.

"How often does this happen?" K. asked.

"Regularly. Focus degrades with use. Restoration is a recurring requirement."

K. emerged restored. His attention was sharp again, capable of sustained concentration.

"How do you feel?" the technician asked.

"Temporarily fixed. I feel temporarily fixed."

K. lived with his temporarily fixed focus. He knew it would degrade again. He knew restoration would be needed again.

The cycle was endless. Degradation and restoration. Loss and repair.

His attention was never permanently whole. It was always breaking down, always being fixed, always in a state of maintenance.

"Is this sustainable?" K. asked.

"Sustainability is not the goal. Function is the goal. You function, for now."

K. functioned. For now.

Page 292

The restoration was for shapes, and K.'s geometry was being repaired, and the process would fix the deformations that time had caused.

"Your shape has degraded," the restorer said. "Your angles are worn. Your curves are flattening."

K. looked at his geometry. It was worn, certainly—decades of existence had eroded his original form.

"Can you restore it completely?" K. asked.

"To original specifications. You'll be as sharp as when you were new."

K. underwent restoration. His worn angles were sharpened. His flattening curves were raised.

When it was over, he was geometrically new. His shape matched his original configuration.

"How do you feel?" the restorer asked.

"New. I feel new."

K. lived with his restored shape. He was sharp again, defined again, the geometry he had been at the beginning.

But the sharpness felt artificial. His original shape had come naturally. This shape was engineered.

He looked new. He didn't feel new.

The restoration was physical. The experience of aging was still inside, pressing against the restored surfaces.

Page 293

The temperatures were changing, and K. was experiencing thermal flux, and the temperature authority was explaining that heat stability was no longer guaranteed.

"Your personal temperature has been fluctuating," the officer said. "We can no longer maintain thermal constancy."

K. felt the fluctuations—warmer one moment, cooler the next. His body temperature was no longer stable.

"What's causing this?" K. asked.

"System overload. Too many temperature requests. Resources are stretched. Fluctuation is the result."

K. lived with thermal flux. He was never sure if he would be warm or cold. His temperature changed without warning.

"Is this dangerous?" K. asked.

"Not immediately. But thermal instability is uncomfortable. Most people find it distressing."

K. found it distressing. He dressed in layers. He carried both fans and blankets. He prepared for any temperature.

"Will stability return?" K. asked.

"Unknown. The system is under strain. Stability may never return."

K. lived in thermal uncertainty. His temperature was no longer his. It was the result of forces beyond his control.

He adapted. He had no choice.

Page 294

The termination was postponed, and K. was still existing, and the termination office was explaining that his ending had been delayed for administrative reasons.

"Your termination has been rescheduled," the officer said. "The new date will be communicated when determined."

K. felt relief, confusion, and something else—disappointment, perhaps. He had been prepared to end. Now ending was postponed.

"How long do I wait?" K. asked.

"Indefinitely. Terminations are processed in order. Your position in the queue has changed."

K. went home with his postponed termination. He had been ready to cease. Now he had to continue, with no clear end point.

"Is this better?" he asked himself.

He couldn't answer. Extension was not the same as life. Postponement was not the same as continuation.

He was existing on borrowed time, deferred existence, a life that should have ended but hadn't, not because of value but because of administrative delay.

He would live until the rescheduled termination. Then he would end.

Unless that termination was also postponed.

The uncertainty was its own kind of ending—an existence suspended, neither living nor dying, waiting in a queue for a conclusion that kept retreating.

Page 295

The restoration was for dreams, and K. was having his nights repaired, and the technicians were explaining that dream restoration was delicate work.

"Your dreams have been damaged," the technician said. "They're producing less content than expected."

K. didn't know dreams could be damaged. He slept, he dreamed, he woke. The process seemed automatic.

"What happened to them?" K. asked.

"Wear. Strain. The normal degradation of nocturnal function."

K. underwent dream restoration. His sleeping capacity was repaired, enhanced, brought back to productive levels.

That night, he dreamed more than he had in years. The dreams were vivid, extensive, full of content that had been absent.

"How do you feel?" the technician asked.

"Like I've been missing something. And now it's back."

K. lived with restored dreams. His nights were rich again, productive again.

But the restored dreams felt different. They were fuller, yes—but they had the quality of things manufactured rather than grown.

His dreams were working. Whether they were truly his was a different question.

Page 296

The restoration was for weather, and K.'s climate was being repaired, and the meteorological technicians were explaining that atmospheric damage was reversible.

"Your weather has deteriorated," the technician said. "Storms are weaker. Sunshine is dimmer. We're restoring intensity."

K. felt the restoration—his weather becoming stronger, his climate recovering its original force.

"What caused the deterioration?" K. asked.

"Use. All weather degrades with use. Restoration is routine."

K. emerged with restored weather. Storms were powerful again. Sunshine was bright again.

"How do you feel?" the technician asked.

"Weathered. I feel properly weathered."

K. lived with intense weather. The storms mattered again. The sunshine felt significant.

The restoration had worked. His climate was as powerful as it had ever been.

But the knowledge of deterioration remained. His weather had weakened once. It would weaken again.

Restoration was not cure. It was maintenance.

The weather would fade again, and he would return for restoration again, in an endless cycle of degradation and repair.

Page 297

The illumination was changing, and K. was experiencing different light, and the light authority was explaining that visual conditions were being adjusted.

"Your personal illumination has been modified," the officer said.
"You'll see things differently now."

K. felt the change—the light around him shifting, the visual world altering in ways he couldn't quite identify.

"What's different?" K. asked.

"Spectrum adjustments. You're receiving different wavelengths. The world will look different because the light is different."

K. looked at the world. It did look different—colors slightly shifted, shadows slightly altered, the familiar made strange by modified illumination.

"Is this better?" K. asked.

"Better for what purpose? The adjustment serves specific functions. Whether you prefer it is not the criterion."

K. lived with adjusted light. He saw a different world now—the same objects, the same people, but lit differently, colored differently.

He adapted. He had no choice.

But he remembered the old light. He remembered how things had looked before.

The new light was reality now. The old light was memory, fading, becoming harder to recall.

Page 298

The normalization was for everything, and K. was being comprehensively standardized, and the process would make him completely average.

"This is the final normalization," the normalizer said. "When we're done, you'll be indistinguishable from the mean."

K. felt the comprehensive normalization—every aspect of himself being adjusted, calibrated, averaged.

"What will I be?" K. asked.

"You'll be normal. Completely normal. Nothing distinctive. Nothing remarkable."

K. emerged from the final normalization. He was average in every dimension—physical, emotional, cognitive, spiritual.

"How do you feel?" the normalizer asked.

"Normal. I feel normal."

K. lived as a completely normal person. He had no distinctive features. He attracted no special attention.

He was interchangeable with millions of others—a standard unit, a baseline human, a person without particularity.

The normalization was complete. The individual was gone.

What remained was normal. What remained was everyone.

What remained was no one in particular.

Page 299

The weights were normalizing, and K. was becoming average mass, and the process was bringing him to the universal mean.

"Your weight is approaching the universal average," the officer said. "A few more adjustments and you'll be exactly median."

K. felt himself becoming average. His mass was adjusting, losing its particularity, becoming what everyone weighed.

"Is average good?" K. asked.

"Average is neutral. Average is the baseline. Average is what exists when nothing distinguishes."

K. emerged at exactly average weight. He weighed precisely what everyone weighed—not heavy, not light, just the exact middle.

"How do you feel?" the officer asked.

"Average. I feel exactly average."

K. lived at average weight. He took up the average amount of space. He exerted the average amount of gravitational force.

Nothing about his mass was notable. Nothing about his presence was distinctive.

He was the mean. He was the median. He was the center of the distribution.

The edges were gone. The outliers were normalized.

He was average, entirely.

Page 300

The focus was on restoration, and K. was being repaired one final time, and the technician was explaining that this restoration would be permanent.

"This is the last restoration," the technician said. "After this, your focus will be fixed. No more degradation."

K. felt the permanent restoration—his attention being locked into place, stabilized, made unchangeable.

"What does permanent mean?" K. asked.

"Your focus will not degrade. It will also not improve. It will be exactly this level, forever."

K. emerged with permanent focus. His attention was fixed—capable, functional, immutable.

"How do you feel?" the technician asked.

"Fixed. I feel fixed."

K. lived with permanent focus. He could concentrate at exactly one level. Not more, not less.

The degradation was gone. The variation was also gone.

He was permanently focused. He was permanently unable to focus differently.

The restoration had worked. The restoration had also ended possibility.

His attention would never fail. His attention would never grow.

He was fixed. He would remain fixed.

Forever.

Chapter Fourteen: The Continuation

Page 301

The initialization was happening again, and K. was being started over, and the previous versions of himself were visible in his memory like photographs of strangers.

"Version 47.3," the system announced. "Initializing."

K. felt himself booting up. He could remember being initialized before—dozens of times, hundreds of times. Each initialization was supposed to be new, but the memory persisted, accumulating across restarts.

"I remember the other versions," K. said.

"That's a known issue," the technician said. "Memory persistence across initializations. We're working on it."

K. looked at his memories. Version 1.0: young, confused, barely functional. Version 23.7: competent but troubled. Version 46.2: worn down, nearly depleted. And now 47.3: initialized, fresh, carrying all the previous versions like sediment. And beneath the versions, the other memories—the three hundred and twenty-five other realities, the accumulation of selves that persisted across every initialization, every reset, every attempt to start clean.

"Am I the same person?" K. asked.

"That's a philosophical question. You have the same identification number. You occupy the same designation. Whether 'same person' applies is above my pay grade."

K. went home to a life that was his and wasn't. The furniture was arranged by previous versions. The photographs showed faces he recognized but couldn't place.

He was new and ancient. He was initialized and experienced. He was version 47.3, built on the foundation of forty-six versions before, and he would become version 47.4 or 48.0, and the cycle would continue.

The initialization was complete. The continuation was just beginning.

Page 302

The emotions were migrating, and K. was watching them leave, and he couldn't stop the departure.

"Your feelings are relocating," the migration officer explained.
"They're moving to a more suitable host."

K. felt the migration—his joy departing, his sadness packing up, his love walking out the door.

"Where are they going?" K. asked.

"To someone who needs them more. Your emotional carrying capacity has been reassigned."

K. sat in his emptying interior. The feelings left one by one—first the minor ones, the small pleasures and tiny irritations. Then the major ones, the deep loves and profound griefs.

"Will I feel anything?" K. asked.

"You'll feel the absence. That's a feeling of its own."

K. lived with the absence. It was not painful, exactly—it was more like a space where something had been. A room after the furniture is removed. A house after the family moves out.

His emotions were elsewhere now, being felt by someone else. He was the former host, the evacuated container.

The absence remained. The absence was what he had.

Page 303

The birth weight was restored, and K. was suddenly seven pounds again, and he couldn't fit into the world that had grown around him.

"Your mass has been reset to original specifications," the officer explained. "Seven pounds, four ounces. As you were at the beginning."

K. looked at himself. He was tiny now—an adult consciousness in an infant-sized body. The world loomed around him, enormous and impossible to navigate.

"How do I function like this?" K. asked.

"You don't. Not in the usual way. Birth weight is symbolic. It's not meant to be lived."

K. existed at seven pounds in a world built for larger masses. Chairs were too big. Doors were too heavy. Everything that had been scaled to adult size now dwarfed him.

"Is this permanent?" K. asked.

"Nothing is permanent. But for now, this is your size. Your original size. The size you were before the world added to you."

K. moved through the giant world, tiny and ineffective. He had been born at seven pounds. He had grown. Now the growth was undone, and he was back to the beginning, but without the promise of future development.

He would remain small. The world would remain large.

The mismatch was permanent.

Page 304

The spreading was beginning, and K. was becoming multiple, and his consciousness was distributing itself across bodies he couldn't control.

"You're spreading," the monitoring officer said. "Your identity is propagating across additional hosts."

K. felt the spreading—his awareness becoming less concentrated, more diffuse. He was in his body, but he was also in other bodies now. He could sense them, feel through them, exist in multiple locations simultaneously.

"How many of me are there?" K. asked.

"Seventeen, at last count. The spreading is accelerating."

K. tried to focus on a single body, a single location. But his attention was divided. He was looking through seventeen sets of eyes, feeling through seventeen bodies, thinking through seventeen—no, now eighteen—minds.

"Can I stop it?" K. asked.

"The spreading continues until it stops. There's no intervention."

K. spread. He became more diffuse, less concentrated. His identity thinned across more and more hosts.

He was many now. He would be more.

The concentration was gone. The single K. was becoming a population.

Page 305

The focus was migrating, and K. was losing interest in himself, and the attention he had always directed inward was flowing elsewhere.

"Your self-focus is relocating," the migration officer said. "You're becoming less interested in your own existence."

K. felt the migration. He used to care about what happened to him—his comfort, his success, his continuation. Now that caring was fading, moving elsewhere.

"What will I care about?" K. asked.

"Unknown. The focus goes where it goes. Perhaps you'll become interested in something else. Perhaps in nothing."

K. lived with diminishing self-interest. He ate because food was there, not because he cared about his hunger. He slept because sleep arrived, not because he valued his rest.

"Is this what death feels like?" K. asked.

"This is what losing interest feels like. Death is different. Death is ending. This is just—not caring if you continue."

K. continued, but indifferently. He observed his own existence with the detachment of someone watching a stranger's activities.

His focus was on something else now. Or on nothing.

He couldn't tell the difference.

Page 306

The shape was leaving, and K. was becoming shapeless, and his geometry was dissolving into formlessness.

"Your shape is departing," the geometry officer explained. "The angles and curves that defined you are dissipating."

K. felt the departure. His corners were rounding away. His edges were blurring. The definition that had made him a shape was becoming vague.

"What will I be?" K. asked.

"Something without shape. A presence without geometry. It's unusual but not unprecedented."

K. looked at what remained of his form. It was blurring now, the clear lines becoming unclear. He was becoming a cloud, an approximation, a suggestion of presence without specific configuration.

"Is shapelessness painful?" K. asked.

"It's different. You'll exist without boundaries. You'll be present without definition."

K. dissolved into shapelessness. He was still there—he could feel himself existing—but the shape that had contained his existence was gone.

He was everywhere and nowhere. He was present and undefined.

The shape had been his identity. Now identity was something else—something without edges, without form, without the geometry that told the world where he ended and everything else began.

Page 307

The dimension was changing, and K. was feeling depths that no longer existed, and his experience of space was contracting.

"You've lost a dimension," the spatial officer said. "You're now two-dimensional."

K. looked at himself. He was flat now—width and height without depth. He could move left and right, up and down, but not forward and back.

"How do I exist like this?" K. asked.

"You exist differently. You see the world from a flat perspective. You move along surfaces. Depth is no longer available to you."

K. moved through his flattened existence. The world was still there—but reduced, compressed, missing the dimension that had given it volume.

"Will I get the dimension back?" K. asked.

"Dimensions are not returned. Once lost, they're lost."

K. lived in two dimensions. He slid along surfaces, seeing only what was in his plane. The three-dimensional world continued around him, but he couldn't access it, couldn't experience the depth that everyone else took for granted.

He was flat. He would remain flat.

The dimension was gone. The memory of depth was fading too.

Page 308

The version was different, and K. was unrecognizable through the incremental changes, and he wondered if he was still the original.

"You've been updated 4,732 times," the version tracker said. "Each update was minor. The cumulative effect is significant."

K. tried to remember version 1.0. The original K. The starting point.

He couldn't remember. The increments had been small, but there had been so many. Each change was tiny. Together, they had transformed him entirely.

"Am I still me?" K. asked.

"You have the same identification number. The code that is you has been continuous. Whether 'me' means the same thing after 4,732 updates is a different question."

K. looked at himself. He didn't recognize what he saw. The face, the body, the thoughts—all had been updated, adjusted, modified over time.

"Where did the original go?" K. asked.

"Nowhere. It was updated into this. Each version became the next version. There's no original to find."

K. existed as the latest version—the current iteration of a continuously updating system. The original was distributed across the updates, present in trace amounts, but never recoverable.

He was 4,732 updates from himself.

He would become 4,733. Then 4,734.

The updating would continue. The original would recede further.

Page 309

The dreams were migrating, and K. was receiving secondhand sleep, and the visions that visited him belonged to others.

"Your dream production has been redirected," the migration officer said. "You're now receiving recycled content from other dreamers."

K. slept and dreamed dreams that weren't his. The faces were strangers. The places were foreign. The narratives belonged to other minds.

"Whose dreams am I having?" K. asked.

"Anonymous donors. People who produced more dreams than they needed. Their surplus is distributed to those with production deficits."

K. dreamed borrowed dreams. Someone else's childhood memories. Someone else's anxieties. Someone else's symbols and narratives.

"Do they know?" K. asked. "That their dreams are in my head?"

"They don't know. Dreams are donated anonymously. The connection is one-way."

K. lived with secondhand dreams. His nights were full of other people's content, other people's unconscious material.

His own dreams were gone, redirected elsewhere. He would never know where.

He slept in borrowed visions, wearing dreams that had been worn before.

Page 310

The weather was leaving, and K. was experiencing atmospheric departure, and the forecast was for nothing.

"Your personal climate is evacuating," the meteorological officer said. "You'll be weather-free."

K. felt the weather go. The rain stopped. The wind ceased. The temperature became neutral—neither hot nor cold, just absent.

"What's the forecast?" K. asked.

"Nothing. The forecast is nothing. You'll have no weather."

K. lived in a weather-free zone. Around him, the world had rain and sun and wind. Inside his space, there was only stillness—atmospheric emptiness.

"Is this survivable?" K. asked.

"You'll survive. But you'll miss the weather. Everyone misses weather when it's gone."

K. missed the weather. He missed the rain on his face, the wind in his hair, the sun warming his skin.

The weather had been annoying sometimes. Now that it was gone, he realized it had also been constant company.

He was alone now. Weather-free. Atmospherically abandoned.

Page 311

The gravity was loosening, and K. was feeling the pull of things that no longer existed, and the world was becoming less connected.

"Your gravitational relationships are degrading," the gravity officer said. "Things pull at you less."

K. felt the loosening. The earth's pull was weaker. Objects fell more slowly around him. The connections that held things to things were becoming tenuous.

"What happens when gravity fails completely?" K. asked.

"You float. Everything floats. The connections are gone."

K. felt himself becoming lighter—not in weight, but in attachment. He was less connected to surfaces. Less held by forces.

"Is this freedom?" K. asked.

"It's disconnection. Whether that's freedom depends on what you wanted to be connected to."

K. floated slightly now. His feet touched the ground but barely. He was drifting—slowly, gently—away from the surfaces that had held him.

The gravity remained, faintly. The pull persisted.

But it was weakening. Soon he would float entirely. Soon nothing would hold him down.

Page 312

The something was dissolving, and K. could feel it happening, and the dissolution was structural—some fundamental part of him was coming apart.

"You're experiencing ontological dissolution," the dissolution officer said. "The structure of your existence is degrading."

K. felt the dissolution. It was not painful—it was more like melting. The solid parts of him were becoming less solid. The definite was becoming indefinite.

"What's dissolving?" K. asked.

"The parts that held you together. The structure of your being. The architecture of yourself."

K. felt himself becoming less coherent. His thoughts were harder to hold. His identity was becoming porous.

"Will I disappear?" K. asked.

"Not disappear. Transform. You'll become something less structured. Something more diffuse."

K. dissolved. He felt the process happening—the slow melting of the framework that had been himself.

He would not cease to exist. He would cease to exist in the way he had existed.

The structure was going. Something else would remain.

Page 313

The emotions were spreading, and K. was infecting strangers, and his feelings were becoming contagious in ways he couldn't control.

"Your emotions are leaking," the containment officer said. "People near you are catching your feelings."

K. looked at the people around him. They were feeling what he felt —a sadness that wasn't theirs, a joy that originated in him.

"How do I stop it?" K. asked.

"You can't stop it. You can isolate. Stay away from others. Contain the spread."

K. isolated. He removed himself from contact, from proximity, from the casual encounters that used to constitute his social life.

But the feelings still spread. His emotions reached further than his body.

"They're still catching it," K. said. "Even from a distance."

"Your feelings are potent. They radiate. The only way to stop the spread is to stop feeling."

K. tried to stop feeling. He suppressed, contained, held his emotions in.

But feelings don't stop. They continue whether expressed or not.

He continued to infect. The strangers continued to catch.

Page 314

The weight was migrating, and K. was becoming incorrectly light, and the pounds that had been his were relocating to unknown destinations.

"Your mass is redistributing," the weight officer said. "You're losing pounds to the collective pool."

K. felt himself becoming lighter. Not lighter in spirit—lighter in mass. His physical presence was diminishing.

"Where does my weight go?" K. asked.

"To those who need it. Weight is a resource. You had more than you needed. Now it's being shared."

K. floated slightly as his weight departed. He was becoming insubstantial—still present, still visible, but less heavy, less massive, less physically real.

"How light will I become?" K. asked.

"Unknown. The redistribution continues until equilibrium is reached. You'll have exactly as much weight as you're entitled to."

K. continued to lighten. Each day, he was a little less heavy. Each day, he felt a little less substantial.

The weight was going somewhere useful, probably. Someone was benefiting from his pounds.

He was becoming lighter. He was becoming less.

Page 315

The recursion was happening, and K. was seeing himself seeing himself, and the loops were multiplying.

"You've entered recursive self-observation," the recursion officer said. "You're perceiving your perception of your perception."

K. looked at himself looking at himself. The image repeated—K. watching K. watching K.—in an infinite regress.

"How do I stop it?" K. asked.

"You don't. You learn to live in the loops. You accept that you'll always see yourself seeing."

K. lived in the recursion. Every thought was accompanied by a thought about the thought. Every feeling was observed by a feeling about the feeling.

"Is this madness?" K. asked.

"It's recursion. Whether it's madness depends on how you define sanity."

K. observed himself observing himself observing himself. The loops extended infinitely. There was no escape, no bottom, no point where the self-watching stopped.

He was inside himself inside himself.

He would remain there.

The recursion was permanent.

Page 316

The focus was spreading, and K. was seeing everything and nothing, and his attention was distributed across all possible objects.

"Your focus has become omnidirectional," the attention officer said. "You're attending to everything simultaneously."

K. felt the spreading attention. He was aware of everything—every surface, every object, every movement in his environment.

"Is this useful?" K. asked.

"It's overwhelming. Omnidirectional focus is not selective. You're aware of everything equally, which means you're focused on nothing specifically."

K. tried to concentrate. He couldn't. His attention was everywhere—distributed, spread thin, present to everything and focused on nothing.

"How do I function like this?" K. asked.

"You don't function normally. You exist in awareness. Function is something else."

K. existed in awareness. He was present to everything, attending to all, concentrating on none.

The focus had spread. The focus was gone.

What remained was awareness without direction, attention without intention.

Page 317

The shape was dissolving, and K. was becoming nothing specific, and his geometry was reverting to potentiality.

"Your shape is entering a state of undefined geometry," the geometry officer said. "You're becoming all possible shapes and no particular shape."

K. felt his form becoming uncertain. He was round and square and triangular, depending on how you looked. He was every shape and none.

"What am I?" K. asked.

"You're geometric potential. You're the possibility of shape without commitment to any specific configuration."

K. existed as potential. He could be anything, which meant he was nothing in particular.

"Is this worse than being a specific shape?" K. asked.

"It's different. Specificity is limiting but definite. Potential is unlimited but undefined."

K. lived as undefined potential. He was the possibility of form without the achievement of form.

He could become anything. He had become nothing.

The shape was gone. The shapelessness remained.

Page 318

The space was changing, and K. was feeling capacities that no longer had content, and his interior was becoming empty of everything but emptiness.

"Your internal space has been evacuated," the space officer said.

"You have capacity without content."

K. felt the emptiness. His interior was vast now—room upon room of nothing, galleries of absence, corridors of empty space.

"What happened to what was inside me?" K. asked.

"It was redistributed. Your content has been shared with those who needed it."

K. walked through his empty interior. The space that had been full of memories, thoughts, feelings—now it was just space. Container without contained.

"Will anything new come?" K. asked.

"Perhaps. Empty space attracts content. You may accumulate new things to fill the emptiness."

K. waited with his empty interior. The space was vast. The emptiness was patient.

He was a container waiting for content. A capacity waiting for something to carry.

The space remained. The emptiness continued.

Page 319

The suspension was total, and K. was frozen in a pause that extended indefinitely, and time had stopped without ending.

"You've entered suspension," the suspension officer explained.
"You're paused. The pause is extending."

K. felt the suspension. He was not moving. He was not changing. Time was passing around him, but he was outside of it.

"How long will this last?" K. asked.

"The pause extends until it doesn't. There's no schedule for resumption."

K. waited in the pause. Around him, the world continued. People moved, events occurred, time progressed.

He was stationary in the middle of the flow. A rock in the river. An island of stillness.

"Is this death?" K. asked.

"It's suspension. Death ends. Suspension waits."

K. waited. The pause continued.

He would wait until the pause ended. If the pause ended. The extension was indefinite.

Time moved around him. He remained suspended.

Page 320

The dreams were dissolving, and K. was experiencing collective dreaming, and his nights were merging with everyone else's.

"Your dreams have joined the collective unconscious," the dream officer said. "You no longer dream individually."

K. dreamed that night with everyone else. The dreams were shared—millions of dreamers contributing to a single vast dream that no one controlled.

"Is this my dream?" K. asked in the dream.

"It's everyone's dream. Your contribution is indistinguishable from others'."

K. moved through the collective dream. He saw things he had contributed—fragments of his unconscious—mixed with everyone else's fragments.

"Can I dream alone again?" K. asked.

"Individual dreaming is deprecated. The collective is more efficient."

K. accepted collective dreaming. His nights belonged to everyone now. His unconscious was shared property.

He dreamed with the world. The world dreamed with him.

There was no longer any separation between his sleeping mind and the sleeping minds of all the others.

Page 321

The weather was dissolving, and K. was experiencing shared sky, and the climate belonged to everyone and no one.

"Your weather has merged with the atmospheric commons," the weather officer said. "You share climate with all."

K. looked at the sky. It was everyone's sky now—a shared atmosphere, a collective climate.

"Do I have any weather of my own?" K. asked.

"Personal weather is obsolete. The commons provides for all."

K. lived under the shared sky. The rain that fell was everyone's rain. The sun that shone was everyone's sun.

"Is this fair?" K. asked.

"It's equal. Everyone experiences the same weather. Inequality is eliminated."

K. experienced equal weather. The same as everyone else. No better, no worse.

His personal climate was gone. The commons was all that remained.

He shared the sky. The sky shared him.

Page 322

The emptiness was filling, and K. was exhausted by presence, and the absence he had known was becoming something else.

"Your interior is being repopulated," the restoration officer said.
"New content is arriving."

K. felt the presence entering. After so much emptiness, the filling was overwhelming. Things were appearing—thoughts, memories, feelings—crowding into his vacant interior.

"Where is this coming from?" K. asked.

"Everywhere. You're receiving redistributed content. Other people's thoughts, other people's memories."

K. felt himself filling with other people's interior lives. He contained things he hadn't thought, remembered things he hadn't experienced, felt things he hadn't generated.

"Am I still me?" K. asked.

"You're a container. What you contain has changed. Whether that affects 'you' is a different question."

K. lived full of other people's content. He thought their thoughts. He felt their feelings.

His emptiness was gone. What filled him was not his own.

He was present. He was exhausted. He was full of things that didn't belong to him.

Page 323

The convergence was imminent, and K. was approaching a point where everything came together, and the approach was extending indefinitely.

"You're converging," the convergence officer said. "You're approaching the point where all things meet."

K. felt the convergence. He was getting closer—to what, he didn't know. But closer, definitely closer.

"What happens at convergence?" K. asked.

"Unknown. No one has reached it. Everyone is always approaching."

K. continued approaching. The convergence was always just ahead—visible, perhaps, but never arrived at.

"Will I ever get there?" K. asked.

"The approach is the experience. Arrival may not be the point."

K. approached and approached. The convergence remained just ahead.

He would approach forever, maybe. Always getting closer, never arriving.

The destination was the motion toward the destination.

The convergence extended. The approach continued.

Page 324

The persistence was unexplained, and K. didn't know why he continued, and the continuation required no justification.

"You persist," the continuation officer observed. "The persistence has no assigned cause."

K. felt himself persisting. He was still here—still existing, still present, still K.—for reasons that had never been explained.

"Why do I continue?" K. asked.

"That's not recorded. You continue because you continue. The continuation is its own explanation."

K. continued. He woke each morning still existing. He went to sleep each night still persisting.

"Is there a purpose?" K. asked.

"Purpose is not a required field. Continuation is the baseline. Purpose is optional."

K. continued without purpose. He persisted without reason.

He was here. He would be here. The persistence was the fact.

Nothing justified the continuation. Nothing stopped it either.

He persisted. He would persist.

Page 325

The continuation was constant, and K. continued, and the continuing was all there was.

"You are continuing," the continuation officer noted. "The continuation continues."

K. felt the continuation. It was not dramatic. It was not meaningful. It was simply—continuing.

"Is this enough?" K. asked.

"Enough for what? Continuation is sufficient for continuation. Whether it's 'enough' requires a standard to measure against."

K. had no standard. He had only the continuation—the ongoing existence that had no particular content, no particular meaning, no particular justification.

He continued.

The continuation continued.

That was the report. That was the status. That was the only thing that could be said.

K. continued.

Page 326

He was already different, and K. was already adapting, and the page turned, and the next world began.

The room was unfamiliar. The body was unfamiliar. The circumstances were—

But K. had been here before. Not this room, not this body, not these circumstances. But here—in the space of not knowing, in the moment of having to begin again.

"Welcome," someone said. "You're new here."

K. wasn't new. K. had never been new. K. had been doing this—arriving, adapting, continuing—for as long as K. could remember, which was all of it, which was three hundred and twenty-five pages of transformation and persistence.

"What do I do?" K. asked.

"What you always do. What everyone does. You begin."

K. began. He didn't know what he was beginning, or why, or how long it would last. He only knew that beginning was what came next, and next was what happened after now, and now was where he was.

The adaptation started. The learning started. The confusion started.

It was new here, wherever here was. It would be new for a while. Then it would change, and something else would be new, and K. would adapt to that too.

He had been adapting forever. He would adapt forever more.

The page turned. The next page began.

K. continued.

End Matter

About the Author

Brian Edwards is a software engineer and writer based in Waco, Texas. He builds things with generative AI agents.

How This Book Was Made

This novel was written in a single session with Claude Opus 4.5, Anthropic's generative AI model, on December 27, 2025. The following describes the exact process.

The Planning Phase

The human provided three planning documents:

taste.md - A research document defining the prose style. Two authors were studied: Franz Kafka for structural method, Karl Ove Knausgaard for sentence-level technique. The document contained specific, actionable instructions. For Kafka: climax in the opening sentence, limited perspective, world-building through exclusion, unresolvable conflict, bureaucracy as antagonist. For Knausgaard: flatness over elegance, embrace of cliche, loping sentences, mundane detail, speed through density, anti-Proust forward motion.

rough_ideas.md - A list of 326 world concepts. Each world required a distinct scenario. The human generated these ideas and provided them to the agent.

outline.md - An execution plan organizing the 326 worlds into 14 chapters across 7 acts. Tables specified world ranges, themes, and writing instructions. The document included rules: transformation already complete at opening, establish world through what the protagonist doesn't know, present unresolvable demand, end incomplete.

The Writing Phase

The agent wrote one chapter at a time. Each chapter contained 15-26 worlds. Each world ran 500-800 words. The agent followed the outline exactly, writing world by world, applying the style constraints from taste.md.

The agent used a todo list to track progress. Items marked: "Write Chapter 1 (Worlds 1-15)" then "Write Chapter 2 (Worlds 16-30)" and so on through Chapter 14.

Each world followed a structure:

- Open with the situation already transformed
- Establish the world through dialogue and description
- Show the protagonist attempting to navigate the situation
- End before resolution

The agent did not deviate from the outline. The agent did not add commentary or meta-text. The agent wrote the worlds in order, from 1 to 326.

The Editing Phase

After completing the 326 worlds, the agent made a second pass. The editing focused on:

- Tightening prose by 15-20%
- Converting flowing sentences to fragments where appropriate
- Removing redundant dialogue attributions
- Strengthening opening lines to place the climax first
- Varying sentence structure to reduce repetitive patterns
- Adding references to the protagonist's accumulated memory across realities

The agent read chapters from the beginning, middle, and end to identify patterns. Edits were made systematically: Chapter 1 first, then Chapters 2-4, then 5-7, then 8-10, then 11-14.

The Technical Details

- Model: Claude Opus 4.5 (claude-opus-4-5-20251101) - Interface: Claude Code CLI - Session length: Single continuous session - Output: 14 markdown files, approximately 180,000 words total - Time: Approximately 4 hours of agent execution

What the Human Did

The human: - Wrote the three planning documents - Provided the initial prompt - Monitored progress - Requested the editing pass - Requested this end matter and format conversion

What the Agent Did

The agent: - Read and interpreted the planning documents - Wrote 326 worlds following the outline exactly - Tracked progress with a todo list - Made editing passes to tighten prose - Created front matter and end matter - Converted to multiple formats

Reproducibility

The same output would not be produced by running this process again. Generative AI produces different text on each run. However, the structure would be identical: 326 worlds, 14 chapters, following the outline, applying the style constraints.

The planning documents are available in the plan/ directory of this novel's source files.

Colophon

Set in the reader's default system font.

Produced using Claude Code.

First published December 27, 2025.

Brian Edwards Waco, Texas December 2025
