Noses & Spectacles

By Charles Voltaire

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# Chapter 1: The Best of All Possible Scientists

In a laboratory of one of the most prestigious Universities in all of America, worked a professor of science who nature had endowed with an especially unique genius. Being born with the last name Pangloss most assuredly played a part in molding the professor’s disposition because there was never a problem too difficult for him to tackle or a puzzle too hard for him to solve. Professor Pangloss was well known internationally for his scientific achievements and his peer reviewed body of work.

The walls of his Stanford laboratory were adorned with many awards, press articles and pictures of him standing next to world renowned scientists and heads of state. His laboratory was equipped with the most advanced scientific instruments that the university could afford and his students always addressed him as “Professor” and complimented him on the results of his research.

Professor Pangloss was a teacher of Pyromancy-transmuto-chrysopoeia. His life’s most important work was in the study of the effect of fire on metal and he was involved in many scientific studies including those involving the September 11th attacks of the world trade center. He proved time and time again that when fire was applied to metal the effect which took place would cause chemical changes in the metal leading to weakening or a change in form. He asserted that the fires that took place in the twin towers on September 11th should only be measured in Celsius to understand the true effect of their magnitude.

He often called the conspiracy theories of the early 21st century “Preposterous, and in complete disregard for scientific thought!” He stated once that “You can observe that when office fires made up of things like burning books come in contact with metal they make metals act in ways they never should. Only under the supervision of a true scientist of Pyromancy should metals ever perform in such a manner. Those who say that the official story is the best logical explanation of the collapse of the twin towers are foolish because what they should have said is that the official story is the only possible logical explanation.”

One day, not long after the September 11th attacks, professor Pangloss observed a meeting in the halls of their great university. Some of the school’s finest professors were huddled together whispering with dried voices so softly you could almost hear the grass swaying in the wind. Pangloss knew by the sounds and tones of their voices that these were the illogical delusions of the conspiracy theorists who had infiltrated the Democratic party soon after 9/11. He listened as many of them spoke words which had the effect of making his mind feel woozy and disoriented. It was this feeling of uneasiness that made him realize he must put an end to this situation immediately.

Professor Pangloss interrupted his colleagues and began to explain the cause of the collapse of the September 11th attacks in the same manner in which he had explained it in his book “The Evidence is Clear: The 9/11 Attacks in the Light of Physics” which had been published and peer reviewed by the State Science Institute. “The State Science Institute found my explanation to not only be the best possible explanation, but the only possible explanation,” professor Pangloss stated to the group with confidence and pride. “They found it to be perfect in every way.”

The scientists who were huddled together in the hallway looked at each other and shrugged then went back to their classrooms to teach to their students. Professor Pangloss was very concerned though and he decided to head immediately to the office of the Director of the science department, the Honorable Professor Perl.

Director Perl had been with the university for over 30 years and was a close friend of professor Pangloss. When he arrived at the Director’s door though, Pangloss was shocked to find that Director Perl had been replaced with a new department head – Professor Moore. Pangloss already knew who Professor Moore was because he had observed him in many interviews on the evening news spreading his pseudoscientific explanations for the collapse of the twin towers. Now, Director Moore would be in charge of overseeing the curriculum of the entire Stanford science department.

“I object to these new conspiracy theories that are being taught by other professors” said Pangloss “and I think that we need to stick to the scientific method and observation rather than change the entire curriculum to match some skewed view of reality.”

“The changes in curriculum which you are referring to,” replied the director “are merely the effect of instructions from members of the Democratic party who want to create an open environment for speculation and alternative explanations.” He paused and said “since President Wilson took power, the State Science Institute has been re-examining some of our previous conclusions and we are concerned that we may need to consult the philosophies of Socrates and Plato to help us decide what we should do. What is in our best interest is to make sure that these alternative explanations are made readily available to our students.”

“How preposterous” replied professor Pangloss “you plan to teach pseudoscience in place of true science like Pyromancy-transmuto-chrysopoeia” he then turned to look the director right in the eyes and snarled “There is no way I will stand here and put the good name of Pangloss behind this department if you continue this idiocy!”

“I understand Professor Pangloss. We expected as much. We no longer need your services here at Stanford” said Moore “I expect your resignation on my desk, by the end of the day. Clear out your laboratory of its awards and photos because security will be escorting you off of the premises at five p.m. sharp.”

“Well I never…” cried Pangloss but he stopped without saying anything more, then turned around, swung open the door of the director’s office and made his way angrily to his lab.

Professor Pangloss was then escorted from the Stanford campus at five p.m. sharp, and over the course of the next few weeks press articles were released in all major newspapers and evening reports. The rumors and lies spread by the news media about the disgraced professor felt to Pangloss like a barrage of proverbial kicks in the butt.

# Chapter 2: The Golden Fiddle

Dr. Pangloss was not the type of person who liked being silenced, and the more the public shamed him, the more determined he became to stop the conspiracy theorists from spreading their fictitious historical accounts. After the Democrat conspiracy theorists had taken control of both the House and Senate, they passed sweeping legislation banning any type of gathering where the official story would be discussed, and then they instituted harsh punishments for those who broke their new regulations.

What bothered Pangloss the most, though, were the reports he had heard about the disappearing scientists. Scientists, mathematicians, and other important people of reason had begun disappearing all across the globe. The disappearance of these scientists coincided with the disappearance of their peer-reviewed bodies of work as well. People began fearing that they too would disappear if they didn’t do what they were told.

Rumors began to surface that the scientists who had disappeared were not dead, but instead they had found a secret hideout where they could escape their persecutors. Somewhere deep in the unexplored wilderness of Asia, scientists had discovered a hidden sanctuary where they could continue their research without fear of being silenced. Professor Pangloss made it his number one goal to uncover the truth behind these disappearances and to restore the official story to its rightful place in the history books.

He spoke one day with an old colleague of his in Germany, a few months before he too disappeared. His colleague, Professor Thorne, told him that he had learned of a secret meeting organized by a rogue professor from the University of Washington, where students and faculty met to discuss the official story away from the watchful eyes of the conspiracy theorists and their thought police.

Thorne told his old friend "I am planning to go there and become a part of this movement. These meetings, they’re the largest gatherings of their kind in North America since the conspiracy theorists took power." Soon after their conversation, Thorne disappeared, and Pangloss was left with no clues to his whereabouts. He knew this secret meeting in Seattle was the only lead he had, so he booked a hotel and flew to Washington.

Pangloss arrived in Seattle late in the afternoon, and after dropping his belongings at the budget motel, he made his way to the University of Washington campus. He was determined to find out who this professor was and what they might know about his friend and the secret hideout of the last true scientists.

As he walked across campus, the sun hung lazily in the sky, just an hour away from sunset. He had nothing to go on but rumors and innuendo, but he scoured over all of the newsstands and kiosks he could find. He didn’t know what to look for, but he knew they had to communicate with each other and recruit new students somehow. The campus kiosks and bulletin boards might hold some clue as to where this club was meeting and when. He searched for anything out of the ordinary, anything that might give him a hint.

Kiosk after kiosk, he pushed flyers aside to see what was hidden beneath. There were fliers on top of fliers hidden beneath posters for on-campus Bible studies and local hip-hop artists. He sifted through what felt like an endless sea of scams offering thousands of dollars a month to fill out surveys and $50 an hour grad student tutors. All of a sudden, he stopped dead in his tracks. There, just below the bright pink pamphlet for a feminist march on Capitol Hill, was a simple black flier that read:

“What is the Truman Dark Experiment?”

The flier was printed in black all the way to the margins on a white sheet of paper. The words in the middle were big, bold, and white, and just below them was a Gmail address composed of random letters and numbers. Pangloss ripped the flier from the kiosk and turned it over to see if there were any other clues hidden beneath. "I know I've heard these words before," he said to himself. "Maybe it was in the hallway at Stanford or maybe it was in one of those anonymous online forums where people tell their stories in secret. This is it though," he thought to himself. "This flier is the clue I was looking for."

Professor Pangloss pulled out his phone and sent a message to the email address. He left the subject blank and, for the body, he paused for a moment then typed "What is the Truman Dark Experiment?" He hit the send button then waited. He watched his inbox for a few minutes, hitting refresh every once in a while to see if he would get an undeliverable return message. "Nothing," he thought, and with nothing to do next, he made his way to a nearby campus café, ordered himself a cappuccino, then sat down to wait.

Just before the sun dipped below the horizon, the campus lights flickered on one by one, and the crowds of students began to thin. The waiting game had begun, and he tried to keep himself occupied by reading a campus newspaper. When he flipped to page two though, staring back at him was a picture of Director Moore talking about the new campus initiative to remove all books from the library that made reference to the official story. He felt sick to his stomach. Just like that, decades worth of books written about the official story and their breakthrough discoveries in the fields of engineering and architecture - gone, wiped clean.

The buffoons who designed the twin towers made no plan for the weakening of steel due to fire, which led to their collapse. The design flaws caused the towers to fall at a rapid rate with the first one falling less than an hour after impact. Now, at the hands of conspiracy theorists, all of the books that were written to address the mistakes of those designers would vanish. "How can future designers learn from the mistakes of these people if they aren't even allowed to know what really happened?" thought Pangloss.

As Pangloss waited and drank his coffee, he tried to think about anything but the breakdown of reason that was spreading across every campus in the Western world, and then finding its way to the hallway meetings and water cooler gossip of corporate America. "All of this in the name of the State Science Institute," he thought in disgust.

China and Russia were the only true bastions of reason and courage left on the planet. The Western news media, largely controlled by the Democrat conspiracy theorists and their sympathizers, twisted the Russians' words and silenced the Chinese. There was very little reason or logic left on the news or out on the streets. "All these people, too afraid to stand up for themselves," thought Pangloss, "allowing themselves to revert to a useless state of polite subservience."

He heard a ding on his phone and checked it to see. One new message. “It’s them," he thought. “It's really them!” He opened the message and read, “Meet us at the old Irish pub on the corner of 12th and Pine at 8 pm.” He checked his watch, and it was a little past 7. “Perfect, I can head back to the motel for a quick shower and shave and still make it there on time.” He finished his last sip of cappuccino then requested an Uber.

It was 8:15 when he finally arrived at the pub and to his surprise it wasn’t a quiet little hole-in-the-wall dive bar. There was a bouncer outside checking IDs and the line to enter wrapped its way around the corner and past the building next door. “Shit,” he thought, “I have no way of knowing who’s inside waiting for me. How do I know it’s them?” He stood in line patiently anyway though, because he had already come this far, and there was no turning back.

After waiting in line for more than an hour, the bouncer let him through the front door into a warm musty room packed elbow to elbow with patrons. He could hear Irish music playing in the background but it was muffled by the overwhelming sounds of people talking, laughing, and singing their own bar songs together. The crowd was a mix of locals and tourists, and the smell of the pub was thick with the scent of beer and whiskey, mixed with the aroma of freshly cooked bar food.

It was already past nine o'clock and he still wasn't sure who to look for. As he slowly made his way towards the back of the bar, he saw a stage with a band setting up and a couple of tables with young people decked out in purple and gold. "Those colors, I saw those colors all over campus," he thought, and with a quick Google search on his phone, he verified his suspicion. "That's them! Those are the university's colors. This can't be a coincidence, it must be them!"

He pushed his way through the crowd to the group of tables near the stage. As he arrived, he said "Hi, I'm looking for the people who posted this flier." Then he pulled out the flier and showed it to the group.

One of the students quickly looked around the bar then told him "Put that away, it's not safe, but yeah, you're in the right place."

"Where should I sit?" said the professor.

The student looked around again then pointed across the table to a young woman standing in front of an empty chair. "Andrea, over there. She is about to leave. If you hurry, you can grab her chair."

Pangloss quickly made his way around the table dodging beers and cocktail glasses in the hands of rowdy patrons and he arrived just as Andrea was grabbing her purse to walk away.

"Can I sit here," the Professor asked one of the students.

The student from across the table waved to the other students to let them know it was OK, and with a nod they welcomed him to join them. After the customary small talk, his eyes began to scan the room as the students continued their conversations amongst themselves.

He didn't know who he was looking for, but he knew the professor who had organized these meetings had to be nearby. Moving his gaze across the crowd, his eyes landed on a woman sitting two tables over. She was average in height, in her early 30s with a sleek and slender figure. Her long blond hair was parted on the side in a way that framed her face and accentuated her cheekbones and jawline. The hair on the back of her head was drawn up into a ponytail that hung down to the middle of her back. Her skin was a warm light beige with no freckles and her eyebrows were thick and dark. She had a hint of blush on her cheeks, her eyes were delicately lined, and she wore dark black mascara on thick long lashes. Her radiant blue eyes stood out from the electric blue eyeshadow she was wearing, and when she smiled and laughed, her lips shone from a thick layer of pink gloss.

She was casually dressed in a low-cut purple crop top that hugged her curves in all the right places and had a golden “W” in the center. She wore a tight-waisted jean skirt that flared out at her hips, the perfect length to show off her faux suede purple boots that fit snugly against her legs all the way up to her knees.

She had an air of confidence about her that Pangloss couldn't deny, and he thought to himself, "It must be her, the professor who organized these meetings. I have to find a way to talk to her." Before he could make his way to her table, he was interrupted by the sound of bagpipes that cut through the air and sent chills down his spine. Those who weren’t already standing stood up to see what was happening. Walking in a line through the front entrance from outside came a procession of bagpipers, dressed in traditional kilts and plaids. The bagpipers moved in unison, each step perfectly in time with the beat of the song. The piercing, high-pitched notes of the pipes mixed with the deep, resonant drone of the bag, creating a unique and powerful sound.

The crowd parted to make way for the procession, and the pub-goers looked on with a mix of curiosity and excitement. The sound of the pipes was both mournful and celebratory, evoking a sense of nostalgia and longing, and the crowd grew silent as the room became filled with the heaviness of the moment.

Just as the procession reached the back of the room, three Irish singers on stage began singing a traditional Irish song in harmony. The first notes of the fiddle were met with an explosion of clapping and cheering. The sounds of strings and harmony filled the air, and the waiters and waitresses, caught up in the moment, began dancing and singing with the crowd. The bagpipes mixed with the band and the sound of the crowd, creating a chaotic and beautiful symphony of noise, and Pangloss felt himself being swept up in the infectious energy of the music.

As the traditional Irish song ended, Pangloss peered back across the crowd and caught the eye of the blue-eyed woman again, who was now looking in his direction. They locked eyes at the same moment that the lead singer of the band began to sing “The devil went down to Georgia, he was lookin' for a soul to steal, He was in a bind 'cause he was way behind, And he was willin' to make a deal."

The crowd erupted again, and this time the waitresses and waiters jumped up on the tables in front of the patrons and danced between glasses, knocking over half-full beers and empty shot glasses. They were joined by the fiddle player who made his way from table to table while playing his devilish song. The blue-eyed woman jumped up on her table too and Pangloss laughed as he watched the students cheer for her as she danced, then with a leap, she landed on his table and continued to dance to the music. A beer spilled on the table though, and suddenly she slipped a little, leaning toward Pangloss then falling into his arms. He was shocked for a moment as the woman was pushed up against his chest before she regained her balance and continued her dance. “Come, dance with me," she said, and within an instant, she was leading him into the crowd to dance and sing along to the lyrics of the song.

Sweating and short of breath, the woman leaned in to yell something into his ear over the sound of the music. "Let's go get a drink. I’m thirsty," she said. "Follow me."

Grabbing his hand, she weaved her way between the rowdy patrons and led him up to the bar. The bar was packed, and the line was long, but she turned to him and smiled, then put her fingers in her mouth and whistled. Right away, one of the bartenders stopped and came over to take her order.

"It pays to be a regular," she said. "Can I buy us both a Car bomb and a shot of Jameson?" Pangloss smiled and nodded, and she yelled to the bartender, "Two car bombs and two shots of Jameson. Now we’re going to race," she said to him "and if you lose, you have to buy us another round."

"OK, I’ll take that deal," he said. "You’re on." Then he stuck out his hand and they shook on it.

"Are you ready?" she said.

"Of course I am, are you?" he replied.

She smiled and counted, "3, 2, 1, GO!!!"

They dropped the first shot into the glass of Guinness and chugged down their car bombs. Pangloss struggled at first, but finished just in time to see the other professor down not only her own shot of Jameson, but his as well.

"A deal is a deal," she said, and he nodded and ordered another round. Just as the drinks arrived she looked at him and said, “This round we’re going to raise the stakes a little. If you lose to me again, not only will you owe me another round, but I’m also going to collect your soul!”

Pangloss looked at her again then stared deep into her bright blue eyes for a moment. She looked back at him but just beneath the blue, he could see flames and a raging fire of passion staring him in the eyes.

“You're on,” he said “Are you ready? 3, 2, 1, Go!”

The race began again, but this time Pangloss slammed his finished glass on the counter as she slammed her empty shot glass. They both reached for his shot at the same time, but he snatched it from the bar before her, then threw it back himself.

“You lose again,” she said, “pay up.”

He laughed and yelled to the bartender “Another round.” but two rounds later, the Professor finally gave up. “I need to go outside for some fresh air.” he said.

With a smile and a nod, she made her way with him to the entrance.

The harsh cold air outside was a welcome change from the warm crowded bar. He didn’t feel quite as woozy standing outside in the cold, and the fresh air was exactly what he needed. Lighting a cigarette, she turned to him and asked “Do you smoke?”

“No,” he replied, “I gave that up a long time ago.”

“Good for you, it’s a nasty habit but one of the vices I permit myself to enjoy on occasion. The first hit is always the best. It tastes a little nasty as the smoke hits your tongue, but after a few seconds the nicotine sets in and makes its way over your body like the fingers of a thousand lovers just beneath the skin.”

She smiled and closed her eyes as the first hit set in. “The first one that you’ve had in a long time, that one is always the best, but the second drag is almost as good. That second hit sweeps over your body like a true love’s warm embrace, and you want the feeling to last forever. But, as the fire goes out, and the little fag has nothing left to give, you flick it away like a piece of trash because you’ve gotten everything you needed. Just as quickly as you fell in love, you erase it from your memory, with a fading high and dirty taste in your mouth the only lingering clues that it ever happened.”

She glanced at her cigarette, placing it between her lips for another drag. "You're Professor Pangloss, aren't you?" she said as she exhaled. Excitement shone in her eyes as she continued, "I've read your book, 'The Evidence is Clear' at least three times."

"Wow!" Pangloss exclaimed, "It's not often that I meet someone as passionate about the official story as you are."

"I know," she agreed, "Everyday, I meet new students and faculty members who say they believe in the official story, but keep their minds open to other scenarios, like the illogical ramblings of conspiracy theorists. They think there could be other explanations for the events of 9/11, but I always have to correct them. The official story is not just the best logical explanation…”

“It's the only logical explanation." They both said at the same time, locking eyes.

They stared into each other's eyes in silence for a moment before she took another drag and said, "So tell me, Professor, what brought you here? You didn't just come here to buy me a bunch of shots, did you?"

His cheeks turned red as she smiled at him, and he tried to hide his embarrassment.

"No," he said, "but I did come here to find you. I heard rumors about your underground movement and I think you might be the only person who can help me. I have no other leads to go on. The conspiracy theorists are trying to discredit my work and silencing anyone who disagrees with them. I need to know… where are the scientists who are disappearing, and what is the Truman Dark Experiment?"

Her smile faded as she scanned the faces of the people standing outside the entrance.

“Walk!” she said.

“What?” said Pangloss in a startled tone.

"Come with me," she said, grabbing his arm and quickly pulling him away from the pub. "It's not safe here. Follow me and I'll tell you what I know." She held his arm tightly as they walked briskly a few blocks away. "Okay," she said, "I don't think we've been followed, so it should be safe to talk."

“What is the Truman Dark Experiment?” he asked her a second time.

"I'll tell you what I know, but I don't know much. I know that it's a top-secret experiment that took place during the Truman administration. Some of the scientists who had been involved in the Manhattan Project were asked to help with a new project for the military, but the project was eventually scrapped due to lack of funding."

"What was the experiment?" asked the Professor.

"No one knows for sure, but the rumor is that the experiment never actually ended. It just continued on, but was kept so secret that even Truman himself was left in the dark."

"And what about the scientists? What happened to them? Is it true they're living in Asia somewhere?"

"I have a friend in Paris who met a scientist who claimed to have been there. He told her that he left their secret hideout because of a new discovery he made that he wanted to share with the world."

"What was the discovery?" Pangloss asked.

"He didn't say, but a few years later, my friend heard of a scientist in Central America who matched the same description and was working on a new type of airship. She believes they're the same person," she replied.

"But what about the Truman Dark Experiment? Did he mention anything about it? What did he say?" Pangloss pressed.

"Well, that's the interesting part. The scientists working on the Truman Dark Experiment were invited to the secret hideout to continue their research. According to my friend, they succeeded in their endeavor and their experiment can finally prove the official story, in a way that even the conspiracy theorists cannot deny," she said, her excitement evident in her expression.

Professor Pangloss looked at her in amazement and asked, "How do we get our hands on the results of the experiment?"

"I know a professor of philosophy in Portland," she said, "who knows one of the original scientists of the Truman Dark Experiment who hasn't disappeared yet. We should go see him and find out how to get in touch with that scientist."

"Perfect!" he said. "But what about the hideout of the last true scientists? How do we get there?"

"Well, that might be a bit more difficult. We'll need to track down the scientist in Central America. He's the only person I know who could lead us to the hideout."

"So, how do we find him?" asked the professor.

"I'll contact my friend in Paris. I think she might know," she told him.

Pangloss stumbled for a few steps after stepping on a crack in the sidewalk, but quickly regained his balance.

"I'm OK, I'm OK," he said with a smile. "What now?"

She stopped walking and turned to look him in the eyes again. “There’s something I’ve been meaning to say to you. I need to warn you about something. Full disclosure” she said then paused before saying “I’m into men but I’m GAY AS FUCK! Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“You’re gay?” Said Pangloss with a confused look on his face.

“Yeah, you know, like I’m gay *BECAUSE* I like men.” she said to him with a serious look on her face, “Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Pangloss stood there confused for a moment until suddenly his eyes grew wide and he scanned her body up and down, then instantly regretted it and dropped his eyes to the ground with a look of remorse. His cheeks became a bright red with embarrassment because he knew she had seen him scanning her body. He regained his composure though, and lifted his eyes to hers. The blazing fire was still burning deep beneath her blue eyes, but this time he noticed something else. He noticed a small hint of vulnerability. She was trying hard to hide it, but just below the surface was the tiniest hint of fear. With all of the sincerity he could muster, the professor told her, “Yeah, I get it. I understand.”

She squinted her eyes a little for a few seconds then approached him. Her movements were fluid and smooth and his heart beat a little faster with each step she took in his direction. She inched her way closer and closer to him, then stood so close to his face that he could smell the Baileys and Jameson on her breath as she exhaled.

Pangloss tried not to flinch as she moved her head in large exaggerated motions, scanning him up and down his body - in the most obvious way possible. Then, with a whisper, she said, “I’m going to kiss you,” and paused to bite her bottom lip a little then moisten them with her tongue. Without warning, he felt her hand reach out and grab his, running her fingers along the top, then wrapping them around to the inside of his palm. His heart began beating so loud he was afraid she could hear it, and his mind went numb.

With her fingers tightly wrapped around his hand, she pulled it toward her while scanning his face and watching his expression. He felt like his body had become possessed by a demon from whose clutches there was no escape, and the moment the demon moved his lips in anticipation, she slipped her phone into his hand and took a step back to say, "Leave me your number so that we can meet up tomorrow."

Pangloss felt dizzy and could barely comprehend her words, but slowly, as his cognition returned, he looked down at his hand and typed out his number on her phone before handing it back to her.

“You know,” he said, “We’ve been talking and hanging out this whole time and I completely forgot to ask you your name.”

“One second” she said as she typed something out with her thumbs. “There you go!”

The professor’s body jumped at the dinging and vibration sounds coming from his pocket and he tried to hide his embarrassment as he realized what it was.

“My name is Robin” she said, “and now you have my number too.” Then, she turned around and started walking away. “Goodnight, Professor,” she yelled as she faced away from him, “you’re drunk and need to get some rest.”

Professor Pangloss was so confused and startled by her abrupt goodbye that he could barely think of what to say in response. Instead, he just stood there speechless and watched her knee-high boots dodge in and out of the shadows of the dark alleyway.

After about 30 yards, she stopped and turned around again to say, “I still owe you a kiss, Professor… but don’t forget. You still owe me your soul.”

# Chapter 3: Shanghai or Bust

Professor Pangloss walked back to his motel room in downtown Seattle instead of calling an Uber. A light drizzle fell from the sky, creating shiny patches of light on the sidewalk from the reflection of the street lamps. He checked his phone every few minutes to see if Robin had messaged him again, but he knew better than to send her a message right away if he wanted to look confident.

As he entered his room and flipped on the TV, the weather forecaster predicted that the following day would be another gray and cloudy day in Seattle, with a 60% chance of rain. He took off his shoes to sit down on the bed. Just then, the news channel cut to an interview with a highly influential pundit who had proof that Pangloss's book "The Evidence is Clear: The 9/11 Attacks in the Light of Physics" was actually a part of a government cover-up pushed through by the old ruling party. The influencer claimed that his book was based on wild scientific theories with no basis in reality, and laid out all of the mistakes Pangloss had made in his faulty assumptions and conclusions. One of the reporters interviewing the pundit asked if Pangloss should be held responsible for the damage his book had caused, and the pundit made it clear that charges should be brought up against him immediately.

Pangloss felt his anger rising as he listened to the accusations, but he knew there was no way to fight back. The pundit's book didn't need to prove him wrong, as long as it could cast a tiny bit of doubt. That's all it took to ruin his reputation amongst the masses. Still tipsy and depressed from the news, Pangloss fell asleep with the TV on in the background, unable to shake the feeling of betrayal and defeat. He woke in the morning to the sound of his phone on the nightstand. He groggily reached for it and squinted at the bright morning light that was streaming in through the window.

"Hello," he said, his voice still thick with sleep.

"Good morning sunshine, did you get a good night's rest?" The voice on the other end chirped.

"Sort of... I guess. What time is it?" Pangloss mumbled, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"It's close to 7:30. Did I wake you up?" said Robin.

"Yeah, I couldn't fall asleep last night. I don't remember what time I finally nodded off, but it must have been late." he replied.

"Well, you can sleep when you're dead," she said. "Go take a quick shower, and pack your stuff. I just talked to a friend of mine in Portland and you and I are taking a road trip."

Pangloss sat up in bed, suddenly wide awake. "To Portland, When?"

"Right now, I'm on my way over. What hotel are you staying at?"

"The Motel 6," Pangloss replied.

"Big Spender!" she said sarcastically.

"Ha, ha, I didn't know how long I was going to be here and I wasn't expecting company," he said in a defensive tone.

"Don't worry, I won't tell anyone," Robin replied. Then, in a mysterious sounding voice, she said, "My friend in Portland has information about the Truman Dark Experiment."

Pangloss's heart skipped a beat as the possibility of uncovering the truth became a little closer. He quickly brushed his teeth, showered, and got ready for Robin to arrive.

Pangloss and Robin hit the road in a rental car and made their way down I-5 towards Portland. As they drove, they chatted to get to know each other better. They talked about the types of movies they liked to watch and their favorite pizza places.

Robin asked the Professor, “Have you ever heard of the 36 questions that lead to love?”

“No, I haven’t,” said Pangloss, “what are they?”

“Well,” she said, “there was an essay written by Mandy Len Catron that cites a little-known study conducted by psychologist Arthur Aron. In it, Aron studied the levels of intimacy that people felt for each other after asking each other a list of super-intimate questions. It was cited by the New York Times and Cosmo, among other magazines and newspapers. It's all very scientific and documented, but I thought it would be fun if we did a little study of our own during our three-hour drive.”

“Sounds intriguing,” said Pangloss.

“I'm glad you're game,” she said. “I always thought it would be cool to start a band and make an album with 36 songs, each one an answer to one of the questions.”

“But wouldn’t that be kind of scary? Sharing all of that information with people you don’t even know?” he said.

“Yeah, maybe, but think about how free you would feel afterward. Your soul, just lying there, bare, naked, wounded - out there for the world to see, nothing left to hide.”

“It still sounds sort of scary to me, but I get what you’re saying,” said Pangloss.

“Well, it’s on my list. Anyway, here's how we’re going to do it. I’ll ask you a question, then you give me your answer, then I’ll give you mine. Then, the next question we can switch, so that I go first and you go second. Sound good?” she asked.

“Sounds perfect! What’s the first question?”

“What would constitute a perfect day for you?” she asked.

Pangloss thought for a moment then gave her his answer and they continued on answering as many of the questions as she could remember before she had to look up the list again on her phone. They talked and discussed their answers for hours until they barely even realized that they were almost there. The scenery had gradually changed from the bustling city of Seattle to the lush green forests of Oregon. The sun was shining down on the car now, casting a warm glow on everything. Robin turned to Pangloss, with a smile on her face and said, "We're getting close, I can feel it."

Just up ahead was the towering green metallic structure of the Columbia River Interstate Bridge and its many arches. As a professor of Pyromancy, Pangloss was intrigued by the green color of the metal and he asked Robin if she knew what made the structure look tarnished.

“According to Google, the bridges in Portland are painted green on purpose,” she said while looking at her phone, which made more sense to him than if the bridges were made of a copper metal alloy. As they entered the city of Portland, Pangloss couldn't help but be struck by the vibrant energy all around him. The streets were bustling with people and the buildings were a mix of old and new, with Victorian-style houses sitting alongside modern high-rises. The trees were tall and lush, casting dappled shadows on the sidewalks below.

Pangloss and Robin arrived at Powell's Books at lunchtime to meet up with her friend who had information to share with them about the Truman Dark Experiment. As they walked through the doors, the smell of books and freshly brewed coffee filled their noses. They made their way to the cafe located in the center of the store, where they found her friend quietly reading a book at a small table with a cup of coffee and a pastry in front of him.

Her friend stood up with a smile and said "Awe, miss Alexander, so good to see you again," then gave her a kiss on the cheek.

"Alexander?” asked Pangloss, with a confused look on his face.

"Oh, it's just an inside joke. That's his nickname for me," Robin explained with a chuckle, “I want you to meet my old friend, Professor Tom.”

"It’s a pleasure, Professor Tom. May I ask though, do you always go by Professor Tom, or is that just your nickname too?" asked Pangloss.

"Well, to be honest most people butcher my last name, so I tell everyone I meet to call me Professor Tom or, if they like, just Tom," he explained.

"Ok, Professor… Tom it is," said Pangloss with a smile.

“Can I get you both something to drink?” said Tom.

“I’ll take a pour over with soy,” said Robin, “and what about you? What are you having?”

“I already ordered but, I’m drinking a double shot espresso with organic cane sugar,” he said, “with a cream cheese citrus brioche to satisfy my sweet tooth.”

“Mmmm, that sounds good,” said Robin, "I think Professor Pangloss and I will have one of those too.”

“And for you Professor?” said Tom, “anything to drink?”

"Let's get him a flat white," said Robin before Pangloss could reply. "This is his first time in Portland, and I don't think he knows how it works here. I want him to try something new. If that's okay with you," she said to Pangloss.

"Fair enough," he said. "I probably would have just ordered a cappuccino like I always do," then shrugged.

"It's settled," said Tom. "A flat white it is."

As they stood in line to order, Tom looked over at Professor Pangloss and asked, "So has our little darling taken you to one of the many classy strip clubs that you can find here in our fine city?"

"No, we just arrived," he said, "and she never mentioned any strip clubs."

"Really? She didn't mention it to you? It's a tradition here in Portland," he said to Professor Pangloss.

"You have to take him to the strip club darling," he said to Robin. "Before the two of you leave, and don't forget to order him the soy protein BBQ ribs and eggless onion rings. They are truly to die for, Professor!" he said with a huge grin. "Some people from outside of Oregon may not realize it," said Tom, "but there are more strip clubs per capita in Portland than in any other city in the US."

"Really? I've never heard that. There are more strip clubs here than in Vegas?" asked Pangloss.

"Oh yeah, way more than in Vegas. Back in the 80's, the Oregon Supreme Court made a ruling that used freedom of speech as a way to do away with censorship of nudity and lude behavior. It's been a free-for-all ever since, albeit, mostly behind closed doors. It's the same sort of thinking though that has made some forms of public nudity legal in Oregon as well."

"Wow, that's funny, I haven't seen a single strip club since we arrived," said Pangloss.

"You just have to know what to look for," Tom said with a wink. "They're not all that obvious."

"What do you mean?" said Pangloss.

"Have you passed any free-standing buildings? Any buildings with a parking lot but no windows on the side of the building?" asked Tom.

"Yeah, I guess we probably have," said Professor Pangloss, thinking back to their short drive through the city.

"Well, there you have it. There's your strip club. You're going to start seeing them everywhere now that I've told you. You can mark my words on that. The lack of windows is a dead giveaway though."

“We didn’t come here to go to the strip club,” said Robin, slapping Tom's shoulder.

“Well, I thought he might want to take his mind off the news for a little bit. He’s really taking a beating out there,” said Tom.

“We don’t have time for that, Tom. This is important,” she said with an annoyed look on her face.

“Well, then what did you come here for anyway?” he said with a grin. “Oh, wait, yes, yes, yes, I remember… THE TRUMAN DARK EXPERIMENT!!!” he said loudly and boldly with a sinister look on his face.

They both looked shocked and Robin spoke up to say, “Should you be yelling those words out loud in a public place like this?”

"Oh, what are you so worried about? When was the last time you saw a conspiracy theorist in a bookstore?" Then all three of them began laughing so much, the people around them started glancing over to see what was happening.

"We're trying to be serious, Tom, and you keep making jokes." Robin said while still chuckling. "Can you help us?"

"You'll have to excuse me. I keep forgetting that we don't live in China where we can speak about whatever we want publicly without fear of repercussions," said Tom.

"I’ve heard that China isn’t as bad as they say it is, but isn't it still worse than the U.S.?" Asked Pangloss.

"No, I would have expected a man like you to know that," he said. "The conspiracy theorists have been spreading lies about our overseas neighbors for so long, no one knows what's real and what's not anymore. You've never heard the true story of Tiananmen Square?"

"I didn't know there was anything else to know, other than the Chinese government hid the incident from the world and tried to erase it from the public memory."

"That's the story the Democrat conspiracy theorists want you to believe," Tom said. "Let me tell you the real story. It was 1989 in Beijing, and Tiananmen Square was packed with spectators, all eager to see the impressive display of China's military might because a military parade had been scheduled for that day. But it was also spring break for the Chinese university students, so thousands of them who were excited to watch the parade, spent the entire day partying and drinking. But as the first tanks and soldiers began to march, something out of the ordinary happened. A group of loud, rowdy students stumbled out in front of the parade, clearly drunk and acting wild. One student ran out in front of the tanks on a dare, and that's the video the entire world has seen."

"Yeah, I've seen it," said Pangloss.

"But most of the footage is usually cut from the end of the video. The student's friends came out and grabbed him and pulled him out of the way. You can look it up. It's on YouTube."

"No, I think you're right, I've never seen that part," he said to Tom.

"But, the part of the video that always gets cut and can only be found in China and Russia is the part that came after that. You see, the rest of the crowd was annoyed at first by the rowdy students. As the students continued to dance and sing though, something crazy happened. The soldiers and tanks, who had been marching in strict formation, stopped and started dancing too."

"Are you serious?" Said Robin with a look of astonishment on her face.

"I'm not kidding. They all started dancing together in the streets, firing off their weapons in the air in celebration. The whole military parade turned into an impromptu party for the soldiers and spring breakers."

Pangloss and Robin just stared at him in amazement as he continued, "The government officials watching the parade were understandably horrified, but they couldn't help but laugh as some of the young female college students jumped up on the tanks to dance with the soldiers. They were waving Chinese flags and singing popular Chinese songs together caught up in the moment. That's how a few of them met and ended up raising families together. They found love at Tiananmen Square."

"But this was the military. Was anyone held responsible for ruining the parade?" asked Pangloss.

"There were some officers that got reprimanded for the whole thing," said Tom, "but the Chinese officials didn't see any need to punish the students. That part was completely fabricated by the Democrat conspiracy theorists in order to make China look worse than our *more civilized* society."

“But how did the conspiracy theorists get away with it?” asked Pangloss.

“Simple,” he said, “they silenced any news articles that mentioned the official Chinese story, then replaced it with their own distorted version. They control the publishers of the history books in the public school system as well, and any version that may contradict their own is labeled ‘misinformation’ or ‘propaganda’ circumventing the freedom of press guaranteed by the constitution. Even today, they keep the word from spreading on social media by strong-arming the social media platforms into deboosting and shadowbanning accounts. If no one is talking about it, it must not be true. They even silence official government twitter accounts of Chinese and Russian officials in the name of national security.”

“National security. They need to silence their official public channels, in the name of national security? That’s not democracy,” said Robin, “that’s tyranny.”

“I agree with you Robin, but Tom, may I ask you, how did you get this information?” said Pangloss, “I have never heard this story before so how do I know you're not the one spreading misinformation to me?”

“If you don’t believe me, just ask him,” said Tom, then he slid the book he was reading to their side of the table. Robin picked it up and in the center was a bookmark made from a torn piece of paper, and scribbled on the bookmark was a protonmail address and a name that was hard to pronounce.

“That is your professor,” Tom said, “the one you are looking for. His name is Professor Jones and he was there in Tiananmen Square. He saw it all. He’s been working on the Truman Dark Experiment since the 70’s and he wrote that book on Pyromancy at around the same time.”

“Pyromancy?” said Pangloss, “let me see that.”

"I met him in Germany while I was studying in grad school," he said. "I spoke with him a few months ago when the war in Ukraine began. I heard that he was working on a top-secret project to protect the leaders of Ukraine against a nuclear attack. The email address and the city name are all I have. I sent him a message last night, but he hasn't responded yet. The internet is sparse sometimes in Ukraine right now, so it may take him a little longer to respond. If he doesn't respond right away, you'll have to make your way to Melitopol to track him down."

"This book is a work of pure genius," said Pangloss as he flipped through the pages. "There aren't many people in this field who could have written something like this."

"So we go there to find him!" said Robin with an excited look on her face.

"No," said Pangloss. "I need you to visit your friend in Paris and find out what she knows about the scientist in Central America."

"Well," said Tom, "it sounds like the two of you have a little adventure ahead of yourselves. I'm off though because I need to get back to the office. Will you be staying in the tunnels tonight?" he asked.

"Yes, as long as it's still OK with you," Robin said.

"Of course," said Tom. "You're always welcome to stay there whenever you wish."

"I love you so much! You're the best," she said with a look of gratitude.

"Anything for you, miss Alexander. If you change your mind though, and plan to go to the strip club, don't you dare go without me," he said with a devilish grin.

"Oooo Kkkkk, we won't," she said, then shook her head while smiling at him.

Tom got up, shook Pangloss's hand, and said, "A pleasure to finally meet you, Professor. Your reputation precedes you!"

"Thank you for your help," replied Pangloss. "I don't know how to repay you."

"Just prove the conspiracy theorists wrong for me. That's all the payment I need," he said, then walked away towards the entrance.

As he left, Professor Pangloss whispered to Robin, "The tunnels?"

"Are you ready to get Shanghai'd?" she said, then stared at him for a moment with her deep blue eyes full of flames. "Come on, let's go get some doughnuts."

# Chapter 4: Voodoo Curse

Professor Pangloss spent most of the afternoon reading through the book on Pyromancy to see what information he could learn about Professor Jones and his mindset. Robin stayed busy as well, making her way through the endless stacks of books looking for long-lost, forgotten treasures with ripped bindings and handwritten notes in the margins.

“Look at this," she said to the Professor as she walked up. She held up an old, faded book and said, “this looks like it could be a first edition version of ‘On the Road.’ It’s like stepping into a time machine as you flip through the pages.”

“Exactly,” he said as he pointed to the book on Pyromancy, “look here. This is where he makes mention of a project that he was working on which involved preparing cities for nuclear war. Based upon what I’m reading, I think this has something to do with the Truman Dark Experiment and his work in Ukraine.”

“That’s incredible!” she said then paused, “I was just thinking about what you said earlier. What if instead of going to Paris, I just messaged my friend and waited for her to respond? Then we could head out to Ukraine together to meet with Professor Jones.”

“Email isn’t safe and neither is phone or text," said Pangloss.

"I know, but one of the students back in Seattle introduced me to a new router called Peachy. It was developed by the KGB to counter US intelligence from intercepting their transmissions. A few years ago, the Russian government open-sourced it to the public for free, and translated it into a bunch of languages. It’s supposed to be the most secure peer-to-peer router ever created. It's so secure that the Russians themselves can't decrypt the traffic."

“That sounds pretty interesting. I know the Russians are known for being privacy advocates, but I’m still concerned that it might be a little too dangerous to send a message like that online, even with a router as secure as that one," said Pangloss.

“But look at this,” she said while showing him her phone, “Their logo is a cartoon peach. It’s so cute, and their motto is ‘Keep it Peachy.’"

“Yeah, it looks like they’ve spent a lot of money on graphic design and branding, which is always a good sign, but what if your computer is compromised? What if your connection isn’t secure when you go to download the router, and someone is able to intercept it? The government could have already backdoored your laptop and hijacked its DNS. VPN or not, your message would get intercepted. Think about it. You don’t want to be the person without a chair, that everyone is staring at, when the music stops playing.”

“You’re right. I’ll let my friend in Paris know that I’m coming, but I won’t tell her why. We haven't hung out in a while, so I’m sure she’ll be happy to see me.”

"I'm getting a little hungry," said Pangloss, "and I can't stop thinking about donuts ever since you mentioned them earlier. Do you want to go grab something to eat?"

"Yes! I thought you'd never ask. I'm starving and I know this hip little donut shop just down the street. I used to go there all the time when I lived here. Let's go, I want to show you. It's only a few blocks away."

As the two of them stepped outside, the sun had already set and the sky was getting darker by the minute. They made their way a few blocks down the street to the little local doughnut shop. The place was small and quaint, but there was a line that wrapped around the block and the people in line were laughing and smoking and carrying on like the line was the reason for coming.

"Wow, I didn't realize how popular this place was," said Pangloss.

"I know. Pretty crazy, huh?" said Robin. "There's an old legend that the infamous Marie Laveau once visited this donut shop and cursed the land that it was built on."

"That sounds horrible. Maybe we should go somewhere else," said Pangloss as he laughed.

"It's not what you think though. According to the legend, there was a local Portland businessman, a real tycoon of the area, who ate donuts at this shop like clockwork every Sunday. The man became involved in a legal dispute and won the battle in court, but Marie Laveau was paid by the offended party to make the man suffer."

"Who is Marie Laveau?" asked Pangloss.

"Some call her a Priestess and others call her the Voodoo Queen," she replied.

"I don't understand. Why did she curse the shop instead of just cursing him?" he asked.

"Well, according to the legend,” she said, “the curse made the donuts in this shop so delicious that the businessman became addicted to them. He began eating them twice a week, then daily, then every hour. He began gaining weight so uncontrollably that it ultimately led to his untimely death from obesity a few years later. The curse continues to this day, and it takes hold of all of those who eat here. But the shop is so popular and busy, no one wants to stand in line more than once a week. Otherwise, they'd all die of obesity too."

Pangloss stopped to look at her and smiled, then instinctually put his arm around her as she naturally put her arms around him at the exact same moment. Leaning in again like she was about to kiss him, she moved in closer, then stopped. With a playful tap of her finger on his lips, she said, "Not yet," then grabbed his hand to pull him into the line.

"Back at Powell's bookstore, you mentioned the 'tunnels' to Tom," said Pangloss, "What were you guys talking about?"

"I haven't told you about the Shanghai tunnels yet?" she asked.

"No, we talked about a lot on the car drive down here, but I don't think you ever mentioned those," said the Professor.

"Well, back in the 1800s, Portland was known as the 'Forbidden City of the West' and the Shanghai Tunnels were built beneath the old Chinatown to connect bars and hotels underground to the shipping docks down by the river."

"That was here?" asked Pangloss.

"Yeah, right below us. It gets more interesting though. The tunnels became a hotbed of illegal activities like prostitution and liquor smuggling during prohibition. They get their name though from all the men who were 'shanghaied' through hidden trap doors in bars and knocked out to be sold to ship captains as slave crew for the trips back to China. The unsuspecting victims would wake up on the deck of a ship and be forced to work for nothing or starve."

"Wow, that's intense," he said, "I had no idea that sort of thing used to happen."

"Well, some say that the stories of shanghaied sailors and people held in cages were completely exaggerated,” she said, “but there is no doubt that the tunnels were the center of crime and corruption in the city back in those days."

"So can you still go down in the tunnels today?" asked Pangloss.

Before Robin could say anything, a thin young man in line behind them, who was dressed in Goth attire, replied, "Oh yeah, they do tours down in the tunnels all the time."

The young goth had pale white skin and was tall and slender with jet-black hair and dark circles under his eyes. His girlfriend, standing next to him, had chocolate-colored skin, thickly lined brown eyes, and dark, frizzy, brown hair down to her shoulders that bounced a little as she moved. She wore a black corset on top of her tight black pants and dark, black leather boots with chunky heels.

"I went down there with some friends on Halloween one year. They say the place is haunted, and I could feel the ghost so close to me in the dark, its breath sent chills down my neck," said the goth.

Robin smiled at her and replied, "Yeah, I've felt her presence too sometimes. I forget what people say her name was, but her presence feels comforting to me when I'm down there in the dark."

"Is that 'On the Road' you're reading?" said a young, tall hipster with a handlebar mustache who was standing just beside the goth couple. He wore a vintage band t-shirt with high-waisted denim jeans and a pair of converse. "I really love Kerouac," he continued. "Have you read Dharma Bums?"

"Years ago," she replied, "but I'd love to read it again up in the mountains while I'm hiking. It feels like he was so in touch with nature."

"And his body," the hipster said with a tone of intrigue then continued, "His description of playing Yabium is so serene and spiritual, wouldn’t you agree?" he asked Robin with a look of intensity in his eyes.

Robin smiled at him and replied, "Poetry, Yabium, and the mountains. Sounds like a spiritual paradise, wouldn't you agree, Professor?" Then she grabbed Pangloss by the arm and looked him in the eyes.

"Yes, searching for one's Dharma," he said to her and their neighbors, "is the endeavor of every spiritual person's life. Poetry and nature are almost always a central part of that journey."

As they reached the front of the line, everyone redirected their attention inside.

"Which one of the donuts are you going to get?" asked Pangloss.

"Oh, I can never decide, so I usually just order a dozen and tell them to surprise me, and I leave before I have time to change my mind," she said to him with a laugh.

"Ok, let's do it!" he replied, and they rushed inside, ordered a random assortment of donuts, then rushed outside again before they could look to see what donuts they had been given.

"Are you ready?" she said as they made their way away from the line.

"Donut me up," said Pangloss with a smile.

She opened the box and picked one out for him and for herself and they took a bite at the same time.

"Mmmm, this is so incredible," said Pangloss. "I can already taste the curse."

"By the way," Robin said, "There is something I've wanted to tell you all day but I didn't quite know when I should tell you, so here goes. Full legal disclaimer: these donuts won't give you AIDS… but I will… so, I won't be offended if you want to get yourself another place to stay tonight."

Immediately Pangloss spit out his donut and leaned over to cough.

Before he could respond, she continued, "Or, if you still want to hang out with me tonight, you can come stay with me down in the tunnels."

With the Professor still leaned over and coughing, she asked "Are you OK, honey? I didn't mean to scare you like that. I just like to get right to the point."

"Ok, slow down," he said to her. "One thing at a time. The tunnels? I thought you said they were just a tourist attraction and that nobody used them anymore."

"That is sort of true, but technically there are parts of the tunnels that people can access that aren't a part of the official tours," she said. "And I was going to explain it to you, but the goth kid interrupted. Tom and I were talking about one of those places."

"Tom owns part of the tunnels?" Pangloss asked.

"Well, not exactly. But the place he owns can only be accessed from the tunnels. Tom owns a little barber shop around the corner, but back in the day it was a front for an underground speakeasy hidden in the basement. During prohibition, the speakeasy operated around the clock and all sorts of illicit activities took place there. They eventually walled up the entrance from the front and made it accessible only from the tunnels. Tom's grandfather kept the whole thing secret for years, even after the illegal activities stopped."

"Wow, this is crazy," Pangloss said. "How many people know about this?"

"Tom only found out about it later, after his father passed away. He found an old picture of him behind the bar when he was going through his stuff. In the same trunk that had the picture, he found a blueprint that included the plans for a basement underneath the barber shop he had just inherited. Tom lets his friends hold parties or stay down there sometimes, and that's how I know."

"So, you're telling me that there's a secret speakeasy hidden in the basement below Tom's barber shop, and you want me to stay down there with you tonight?" Pangloss asked.

She looked at him with the sweetest, most vulnerable look he had ever seen on her face and replied, "If you want to."

Professor Pangloss closed his eyes and looked like he was about to cry for some time, but then his expression changed and he smiled while opening his eyes.

“Of course,” he said, “I’d love to.”

Like an explosion of color the two of them immediately embraced and they kissed each other more passionately than any kiss the Professor could ever remember. He held on tight, hoping the feeling of his lips against hers would never end, but when it did, she laid her head against his chest and he kept on holding her tight.

“I’ve never told anyone this,” said Pangloss hesitantly, “but I have it too.”

She looked up with wild eyes, even more excited than before and with a smile as big as the moon she said “I knew it! I could feel it. My AIDS’ar was sending me all kinds of crazy signals about you and I had a feeling you had it too.”

“Really,” he said, “How could you tell?”

“It’s hard to explain. It’s a feeling that gets more accurate with time,” she said with her arms still wrapped around him, “Plus you’re kind of a big deal in the world which means you’re sort of high risk. I already knew the odds were leaning in that direction.”

“What do you mean?” he said, stepping back for a second, “I’m high risk?”

“Yeah, it sort of comes with territory doesn’t it?” Robin replied.

“No, I don’t know what you’re talking about. What do you mean?”

“Oh, honey, no one told you?” she said with a look of compassion.

“Told me what? I don’t understand.” he said, confused.

“No one told you, did they?” she then said with a more serious look, “Well, we need to fix that right away.”

“Fix what?” he said with a tiny hint of desperation.

“Open your mouth,” she told him.

“What?” exclaimed Pangloss.

“Just open your mouth,” she said again.

So he reluctantly opened his mouth and she stuffed a donut in it.

“Ok Professor,” she said, “listen up while you eat that donut. I’m going to yank you from the matrix, and I won’t lie, it’s probably going to hurt a little. Are you ready?”

And with a mouthful of donut, he nodded for her to proceed.

“Ok. You were never given the “rules” like I was, so listen up. FIRST: Just like the kings and queens of Europe never got syphilis, the powerful power brokers and celebrities of today will never come down with HIV either. Have you ever heard of a popular, attractive woman with AIDS?”

“No, I don’t think I have, now that you mention it,” mumbled Pangloss with a half-full mouth of donut.

“That’s because it never happens. I think it’s written in the constitution somewhere between the 5th and 6th amendment. It’s a rule that even doctors are afraid to break.”

“So what you’re saying is…” said Pangloss just before she interrupted.

“What I’m saying is, they don’t get it. Don’t question why, because questioning it could be hazardous to your health.”

“I see, which explains why no one has ever explained this to me,” replied Pangloss.

“Exactly. You’re my hero. You’re the shining light of truth and reason in my life. I’ve imagined meeting you a thousand times and I pinched myself the other night when I saw you at the bar. I don’t explain all of this to everyone I meet, but if you’re going to hang out with me, you need to know what you’re getting yourself into.”

“But…” said Pangloss, before he was interrupted again by Robin.

“SECOND: you can go around telling everyone you know that you have AIDS if you want to, but you never reveal the identity or status of your lovers to anyone. Do you understand?”

“Got it,” he said.

“We’re here,” said Robin, “the entrance to the tunnels. I want to tell you more, but first let's get inside.”

# 

# Chapter 5: The Hair Salon

### Entering the Hair Salon

Pangloss and Robin made their way down a long, outdoor concrete staircase, the sound of their footsteps echoing in the still air. At the bottom, they came to a pile of wooden pallets stacked up against a wall, and hiding behind them in the shadows was an old rusty metal door. Robin reached out and grasped the big metal latch, the sound of metal grinding against metal ringing out as she lifted it. With a heave, she pushed the door open, the hinges creaking in protest.

"Come on, follow me,” Robin said.

Stepping inside, they were immediately met with a musty smell, the damp air clinging to their skin like an unwelcome second layer. The odor of stagnant water was pervasive, mixing with the earthy scent of mold and decay. The sound of dripping echoed throughout the passageway, creating an eerie atmosphere that filled their senses and heightened their awareness.

Robin turned on the flashlight on her phone, casting long shadows on the walls as they walked. The steady drip, drip, drip of water and the shuffling of their feet were the only sounds that broke the silence. Pangloss shuddered as a chill ran down his spine, the cold air hitting him as Robin led the way deeper into the tunnel. The ground beneath their feet was uneven and slick, forcing them to move carefully to avoid slipping on the damp, moss-covered stones. As they ventured deeper, the sound of their footsteps echoed against the concrete walls. They came to a fork in the tunnel, and without a word, Robin gestured to the left and the two of them continued into the unknown depths.

A distant rumbling noise began to echo. Pangloss paused, straining to identify the source. He glanced at Robin, a mix of curiosity and concern on his face. The rumbling grew louder, vibrating through the ground beneath their feet. Soon, it was directly above them, a deafening roar that seemed to shake the very foundations of the tunnel.

"What is that?" Pangloss asked, his voice barely louder than the rumbling.

"That's the light rail," Robin replied. "We’re getting close to the Chinatown station."

"How much farther do we have?" Pangloss asked.

"Not far," Robin replied, then reached down and wrapped her fingers around his hand again.

A cold breeze blew past them, carrying a scent that was hard to describe—a mix of rotting wood, dirt, and mildew, but with a sweet, elusive note that Pangloss thought he recognized but couldn’t quite place. Suddenly, the sound of rushing water filled the tunnel, followed by a resonant metallic vibration from a large pipe right next to his head. He flinched, startled by the unexpected noise.

Robin squeezed his hand reassuringly. “Someone must have flushed a toilet,” she laughed, seeing the look on his face.

“Funny,” he smiled back, appreciating her attempt at humor.

The narrow corridor seemed to close in on them as they ventured further. The ceiling was low, causing Pangloss to duck occasionally to avoid hitting his head. The walls, slick with moisture, were covered in patches of mold and graffiti, some of which appeared to be decades old. Stories of people being kidnapped, drugged, and sold to ships as forced laborers in the past whispered through his mind.

They approached a heavy wooden door marked with a “Do Not Enter” sign. Through the cracks in the aged wood, Pangloss could see nothing but darkness within. Robin pushed the door open, and the beam of her flashlight revealed a messy, unoccupied workshop. The air inside was still and cold, thick with dust and the lingering scent of grease and metal. Workbenches, piles of wood, and toolboxes were scattered throughout, with metal fixtures hanging on the walls and sawdust covering the ground.

Robin led him to a wall locker on the far side of the workshop. She opened it and pushed aside some old overalls hanging on a hook, revealing a hidden door at the back. With a nod, she motioned for him to follow her through.

Pangloss peered into the locker and chuckled. "Well, this is it. We're entering Narnia."

Robin grinned. "Very true, and I've got some Turkish delight waiting for you on the other side," she said with an evil wink.

They stepped through the locker and into an unlit hallway, the air thick with the smell of old wood and leather. As they moved forward, Robin closed the door behind them, and they stood in the dark in complete silence.

### Welcome to the Hair Salon

“Welcome to the Hair Salon,” Robin said as she flipped on the hallway light switch. “Prepare to be pampered by your personal stylist” She moved in close again to lean against him and softly touched the sides of his face with her hands, then pressed her lips against his. Pangloss kissed her lips slowly, focusing on one lip at a time. He opened his mouth slightly and touched the tip of his tongue against hers, which instantly made her face light up. She pulled back a little with a huge smile and bit her bottom lip.

“Come on,” she said, “I want to show you around.”

They came to the end of the hallway to what looked like a receptionist table.

“So I assume the name ‘Hair Salon’ has some connection with the barber shop upstairs,” said Pangloss.

“Look at you, Professor,” she said with a smile. “You catch on quickly. Yes, upstairs has a very masculine energy, you know, like the classic barber shop atmosphere with the black and white checkered floor and leather barber chairs. Down here the Hair Salon is a place to relax and to feel beautiful and seductive.”

“So it’s sort of like a contrast between the masculine and feminine,” said Pangloss.

“Exactly. The two balance each other out.” Robin replied.

### The Reception Area

Robin flipped on the lights in the reception area, and four small wall lamps flickered to life in the corners, revealing the decor. As Professor Pangloss scanned the room, he felt like he had just stepped into a time capsule from the 70s. The artwork and furniture, unchanged for over 50 years, were still in remarkably good condition.

The walls were painted in a warm golden-yellow color, and the wall lamps in the corners cast a soft light across the space and the polished wooden floors. The reception desk was the centerpiece of the room, made of a deep brown wood with a sleek, polished surface. To the left of the desk was a small seating area with a matching sofa and armchair in an avocado green color, with a low glass coffee table in front of it.

“This is where we do coat check during our invite-only parties,” Robin said. “If your name isn’t on the list, you need to be with someone who is.” She gently tugged on Pangloss’s hand. “Let’s continue.”

### Dance Floor

To the right of the reception area, they turned and stepped into a dark room that was bigger than the last. Robin flipped a switch, revealing under the glow of wall lamps a dance floor, complete with a gleaming stripper pole in one corner and a disco ball hanging from the ceiling in the center. A DJ booth stood in another corner, equipped with a turntable and an array of DJ lighting gear positioned on stands around it.

“This is where you come to unwind, dance to some funky music, and get up close to people you’ve never met before,” Robin said to Pangloss with a smile. “It’s all about letting your body language do the talking.”

“Kind of like how we met?” Pangloss asked, grinning.

“Exactly professor,” Robin replied with a playful wink.

Robin moved to the DJ booth, powered it up, and began flipping through the vinyl records. She selected an album labeled "Friday Night Mix" and, with practiced ease, set the needle on the groove. The first song that began to play was "Le Freak." She pressed a button, and the disco ball sprang to life, casting glittering lights on the polished floor. Another button activated vibrant spotlights that filled the room with color.

As the colors danced across the room, so did she, her movements fluid and inviting. Pangloss couldn't resist joining her, the infectious energy pulling him in. They moved together, Robin brushing her body against him as she moved, keeping steady time with the music. He felt his excitement rising as she danced backward, her eyes beckoning him to follow.

Out of the corner of his eye, Pangloss noticed a knife lying on the DJ booth. Robin saw his gaze and quickly grabbed it, holding it up to her eye with a mischievous glint. She closed the distance between them, a teasing smile playing on her lips.

"You know what they say about lesbians, right?" she asked, her tone playful and provocative.

"They bring a U-Haul on the first date?" he replied, a hint of amusement in his voice.

Robin chuckled softly, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "Well, unlike lesbians, girls like me bring a backhoe and a priest. Any last words?" She said as she twirled the knife lightly between her fingers, the metal catching the light and reflecting it in a dazzling display.

"Are you planning to use that?" he said, pointing at the knife with a hint of uneasiness in his eyes. "I just met you. How do I know you’re not the next Jeffrey Dahmer?"

Robin laughed, her eyes gleaming with mischief. “No, I’m not Dahmer, but I am going to Hannibal Lecter your brain.”

"What’s that supposed to mean?" he said with a chuckle.

She grinned. "You know, the Socratic method. I have so much to teach you, Professor."

Pangloss raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "Should I be taking notes?"

Robin stepped closer, her eyes locking onto his. "You already passed the exam."

“Oh really, I passed already? Did I get an A?” he asked with a playful smile.

Robin twirled the knife again with a mischievous glint in her eyes. "You kept your composure and didn’t get scared, so I’ll give you an A-," she said with a teasing smile. "The knife is supposed to scare you, and even though I saw a hint of hesitation, you looked more intrigued than worried. We can work with that." She leaned in closer, her voice dropping to a seductive whisper. "I like a man who's curious." With a wink, she tossed the knife back next to the turntables, the metal clinking against the surface.

As the music played on, Robin pulled back and looked into his eyes with an intensity he hadn’t seen since the first night they danced at the bar in Seattle. “Come on, dance a little bit closer. You wouldn’t want to make a poor little girl like me cry right here on the dance floor, would you, Professor?” she said while batting her eyes seductively.

Pangloss shook his head, a smile playing on his lips. "No, of course not. Why would I want to make you cry?"

Robin’s expression shifted from devious to disappointed, but then a seductive smile slowly spread across her face, accompanied by a smug look of satisfaction. She leaned in as if to kiss him, but instead, she gave him a playful peck on the cheek. "So, what do you say, Professor?" she purred, tracing a finger down his chest. "Ready for the next test?"

"Will you be providing a study guide?" he quipped, a playful grin spreading across his face.

Robin chuckled, her eyes sparkling with amusement. "Oh, I think you’ll do just fine without one," she replied, her voice filled with confidence.

She grabbed his forearm and led him off the dance floor, her hips swaying enticingly as they walked. She guided him through another doorway, revealing a series of rooms. “This place has secrets hidden in every corner,” she said, her voice dripping with mystery and allure. “You’ve only just begun to see what it has to offer.”

### The Couples Rooms

As they moved down the hallway, the vibrant music and lights of the dance floor began to fade, the sound growing quieter and light growing more distant with each step they took.

Pangloss asked, “So on a typical night, how many people would you say come to one of these parties?”

“Oh, maybe 50 to 100, but not all at once,” Robin replied. “People come and go, bouncing between here and other parties. But often, they end the night here because everything else has already died down.”

Continuing down the hallway, Pangloss noticed signs on the doors that read “Couples.” Robin explained, “These rooms are for when you want to get more intimate, but only if you already have a partner. If you don’t have a partner, you aren’t allowed in these rooms.”

“I see,” said Pangloss. “But there are rooms for people without partners?”

“Oh yeah, basically every other room, including the main one, is open to everyone. You can join the fun or just lean back against the wall and voyeur out if you want,” she said with a grin.

“This is all very new to me,” Pangloss admitted. “I’ve heard of places like this before, but I’ve never actually been inside.”

Robin chuckled softly, a hint of surprise in her eyes. “You’ve never been to a sex party?” she asked, raising an eyebrow. “Well, we’ll have to come back one night for one of Tom's infamous IRL parties. Follow me, I’ll show you one of the couples rooms.”

She led him to one of the doors marked “Couples” and opened it.

“Come on inside,” Robin said, leading Pangloss into one of the couples' rooms and flipping on the lights. The room was softly lit, with plush furnishings and heavy drapes that created a sense of privacy and intimacy. The walls were adorned with rich, dark fabrics, giving the space a luxurious and intimate feel. The air was filled with the faint scent of incense, and various antique objects decorated the room, including a single plague mask hanging on the wall at the far end.

With a mischievous grin, Robin reached for the mask and put it on, turning to Pangloss. She began to dance slowly and seductively to the muffled music from down the hallway.

“Are you awake yet, Professor?” she said, her voice slightly deeper and altered by the mask.

Pangloss smirked, intrigued by her playful demeanor. “I think so,” he replied, a smile spreading across his face. “This place certainly is... interesting.”

Robin stepped closer, her bright blue eyes peeking out from behind the mask with a mischievous glint. “Good. Because we’re not done yet.”

### The Speakeasy Bar

She removed the mask and carefully returned it to its place on the wall. Then, taking Pangloss by the hand, they made their way back down the hallway. As they approached the dance floor, the music grew louder, a pulsating rhythm that seemed to sync with their heartbeats. They stepped into the space with colorful lights dancing around them, casting a kaleidoscope of patterns on the walls and floor. As they moved towards the reception area, Robin raised Pangloss’s hand and did a playful twirl under his arm, while flashing him a radiant smile. Her laughter mingled with the music, as they danced their way across the room.

As they moved into the reception area, the music began to fade, and the lights grew dimmer giving way to a calmer ambiance. They made their way to a doorway that lead into a bar.

“This is the original bar from Prohibition days,” Robin said after flipping on the lights. “They kept almost all of it intact and only added a few modern amenities.”

“The woodwork does feel a bit older than the rest of the decor,” Pangloss replied, his eyes scanning the room.

The professor noted the details in the intricately carved wooden bar that stretched along one side of the room, its dark rich mahogany gleaming under the soft yellow lighting. Vintage bar stools with plush, red velvet seats lined the counter, inviting patrons to sit and stay for a while. Behind the bar, shelves held an array of antique bottles and glassware, each piece telling a story of a bygone era. The glassware sparkled faintly, catching the light and adding a touch of elegance.

The walls were adorned with old photographs and memorabilia, capturing the speakeasy's storied past. Black-and-white images of lively parties and well-dressed patrons from decades ago, along with a vintage cash register, stood as a testament to the establishment’s history. The register, its brass and copper surfaces polished to a warm glow and adorned with ornate designs and mechanical keys, seemed to whisper tales of the ghosts who haunted these walls.

Pangloss took a deep breath, taking in the rich scents of aged wood and old leather that permeated the air and made the entire space feel like a portal to another time. Robin moved behind the bar and poured two shots. She slid one across the polished wooden surface to Pangloss, then raised her own.

“What are we celebrating?” Pangloss asked.

“New friends and old secrets,” Robin replied, clinking her shot glass against his.

Robin then disappeared down into the cabinets under the bar. “I always keep a stash down here,” she said, rummaging through the shelves.

“Stash of what?” Pangloss inquired.

“Oh, miscellaneous party favors,” she replied, in a playful tone. “Ah, here they are, mushrooms.”

She pulled out a small tin and opened it to reveal a supply of dried magic mushrooms. "I like taking mushrooms whenever I’m here. Do you want a little? They aren’t too strong, just enough to give a euphoric, trippy effect."

Pangloss raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "Sounds interesting. I've never tried them before."

“No, never?” replied Robin with a surprised look on her face.

“No,” he said, “I smoked a little weed in college, but that’s about it.”

“We’re going to have to change that, Professor,” she replied, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

“I’m not sure if I’m ready,” he replied with an uneasy look.

“Don’t be scared silly.” she said as she leaned in closer, “Here, open your hand. I’m going to give you one of the smaller ones. Trust me, you're going to want to be high for this.”

Pangloss hesitated for a moment, then extended his hand. Robin placed a short slender mushroom with a brown tip in his palm and closed his fingers around it. “Don’t worry, we’ll take it slow,” she said.

The two of them placed the mushrooms in their mouths at the same time and as Pangloss began to chew his tongue was met with a rich, earthy bitter taste that made him grimace. "That’s not very pleasant," he admitted.

Robin laughed softly. "Here, this will help," she said, reaching into the mini fridge under the bar and taking out an ice cube. She placed the cube into a whiskey glass, poured sugar and lime juice over it, then, examining it closer, decided to sprinkle a bit more sugar on it until it was completely covered. With a playful glint in her eye, she pulled the ice cube from the glass and placed it between her teeth, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

Pangloss watched her, captivated, as she climbed up onto the bar and sat down in front of him. Leaning in, she draped her arms over his shoulders, bringing her face close to his, offering the ice cube. He took it from her mouth, tasting the sharp tang of lime, the sweetness of sugar, and the cold ice as their lips brushed together.

Their kiss was slow and sensual, the cold ice melting between them as they passed it back and forth. Robin then reached for the shots she had poured earlier, handing one to Pangloss.

"To new experiences," Robin said, her voice low and alluring.

"To new experiences," Pangloss echoed, his eyes locked on hers.

The professor threw back a shot, the alcohol burning pleasantly down his throat, chasing away the lingering taste of mushrooms. The warmth of the whiskey spread through him as they started making out again, this time with more intensity. Their tongues intertwined as the kiss deepened into a type of tunnel vision and Robin wrapped her legs around him to pull him in tighter.

### The Main Room

Robin stopped for a moment pulling back slightly, her warm breath against his lips. "There's something else I want to show you," she whispered, her voice laced with desire.

Pangloss nodded, his pulse quickening. "Lead the way."

Robin unwrapped her legs and slipped off the bar, taking Pangloss by the hand. They made their way past the bar and into the next room, where they were met with a room full of plush beds with 70s-style bed coverings that matched the aesthetic of the space. The walls were adorned with erotic artwork depicting various intimate acts, and in the center of the room stood a large king-sized bed, surrounded by smaller double and queen-sized beds scattered about. The beds were draped in silky sheets, looking inviting and luxurious under the soft lighting. The room was lit by lava lamps on the nightstands, casting multicolored shadows that danced across the walls, adding to the sensual ambiance. Pangloss's attention was momentarily interrupted by the sound of a new funk song playing on the decks near the dance floor down the hall.

Robin walked over to one of the nightstands and opened a drawer, pulling out a bottle of lube. “We keep the essentials handy,” she said with a playful smile. “There are toys in the drawers too.”

Pangloss glanced around and noticed a Mickey Mouse hat from Disneyland next to one of the lava lamps. “That’s uhhh … unexpected,” he remarked, nodding towards the hat.

“You never know what fantasies people might want to explore so you have to be prepared,” Robin replied, pulling him towards the center of the room, her eyes gleaming with anticipation.

“What do you mean,” he replied with a chuckle, “are you trying to tell me that you're into cartoon characters?”

Ignoring his question she continued her way to the large king-sized bed in the center and sat down, patting the space next to her with a playful grin. "*Come here,*" she teased, as if calling her pet dog.

Pangloss squinted his eyes in mild annoyance, but the intensity of his attraction for her was clear in the smile on his face. He walked over slowly and sat down next to her, feeling the luxurious softness of the sheets beneath him. Robin leaned in, her lips brushing against his ear.

“This is where the real fun begins,” she whispered, her voice sending a shiver down his spine.

### The Garden

Pangloss closed his eyes in anticipation, feeling her hands against his chest. Suddenly, she shoved him hard and backwards onto the bed. His legs flew up as his back hit the mattress, bouncing slightly on the soft sheets. He opened his eyes to see Robin had already stood up and was making her way toward the hallway. After a few steps, she paused and turned around, her gaze locking onto his.

“I’m going to smoke a cigarette if you want to join me,” she said with a girlish, seductive smile. “Or you can just keep lying there until I get back. The choice is yours.” She cast a teasing glance over her shoulder and continued walking out of the room.

Pangloss chuckled a little, shaking his head in amusement. After a moment’s hesitation, he got up and followed her out of the room, past the bar, and into the reception area. On the left-hand side, he noticed a door labeled “The Garden.” Robin eagerly pushed open the door, turning on the lights as she entered. The room was suddenly bathed in an array of neon lights, creating an otherworldly atmosphere. The floor was covered in artificial turf and the walls were adorned with fake plants and trees, neon sculptures, and white Greek statue lawn ornaments. The sculptures and trees cast eerie shadows, making the room feel alive with movement.

As Pangloss stepped inside, the sweet smell in the air was stronger than when they first entered the tunnels. He finally recognized it as the distinct aroma of weed. The sweet scent now mingled with the smell of old, stale cigarettes and the synthetic chemical smell of plastic. Robin took a seat on a bench beneath a glowing neon tree, pulled out a pack of cigarettes, and started tapping them hard against her hand.

“So, what do you think of our little neon chapel?” she asked while opening the pack.

Pangloss smiled, taking in the strange yet captivating scene around him. “It’s like stepping into a hidden corner of Tokyo,” he replied “I can see why you like it.”

Robin lit a cigarette and took a slow drag, her eyes closing momentarily as a slight look of ecstasy crossed her face. She paused for a moment, then said,

“I don’t think I mentioned it before, but nicknames are a big deal here at the Hair Salon. Everyone has one. Someone will eventually give you one too.” Then she paused to take another drag and slowly exhale. “*Ma petite nom c’est Paquette*,” she purred with a French accent, her voice dripping with dark allure, “Because I am the kindling that set’s the night ablaze - my flame is the one that burns from dusk till dawn. You can breathe me in like a drug, and I’ll course through your veins until you shiver.” Looking at him again with a naughty look, she took another slow deep drag. “I’m everyone’s dirty little secret addiction.”

Robin wandered around the room, her hands brushing over the leaves of the fake plants, feeling their texture between her fingers. She paused to examine a neon sculpture, its vibrant colors casting a red glow on her face. Reaching out, she touched the cool surface of a white Greek statue, tracing its features with her finger. The faint smoke from her cigarette hung in the air like a delicate mist. Illuminated by the neon lights, the smoke cast an otherworldly glow around her as she moved.

Picking up a bouquet of plastic flowers, Robin turned to look at Pangloss with a smile then laid down on a white concrete bench in the middle of the garden.

“Oh look, your forbidden fruit has died. Save me, Leo!” she joked then closed her eyes.

Without skipping a beat, Pangloss began walking toward the bench, reciting the words, “O my love, my wife! Death, that hath sucked the honey of thy breath, hath had no power yet upon thy beauty.” He paused, kneeling down next to the bench and leaning in closer.

Robin lay there with eyes shut, the lit cigarette still in her mouth. "Here's to my love!" the professor continued, "O true apothecary! Thy drugs are quick. Thus with a kiss I die."

The professor leaned in closer, but with every inch he moved towards her lips, the harder it became for him to keep the smoke out of his eyes. Just as he was about to cough, Robin cracked one eye open slightly to peek at him, then squealed in delight. She quickly removed the cigarette from her mouth and after tossing the flowers across the room she pulled him in for a passionate kiss. Their kiss was fiery and intense, their lips melding together as the sensations of whiskey and smoke intertwined with the aroma of her perfume.

"Speaking of taboo,” Robin chirped, “there's one more room I want to show you."

## Chapter 6: You scratch my back I’ll scratch yours

### The Domination Room

Rising to her feet, Robin finished her cigarette and stamped it out in the shell of a Venus de Milo statue. Taking his hand, she led Pangloss out of The Garden and back into the reception area. She pulled back a curtain, revealing the entrance to another hidden room.

Robin stepped into the small room with Pangloss following close behind. With the flip of a switch, the room was illuminated, revealing walls adorned with instruments of torture. In the center stood a wooden cross, leaned back at an angle and equipped with arm and ankle cuffs. Ropes and whips hung from hooks on the walls. In one corner, a few leather ottomans and a chaise were scattered about, inviting those who entered to lounge while exploring their dark desires.

Robin walked around the room with a playful look on her face and the curiosity of a little girl alone at night exploring a toy store full of dolls and tiny outfits. She approached the wooden cross, grabbed the arm cuffs, and tugged on them hard to test their strength. Satisfied, she looked up at the instruments of pain hanging on the wall next to the cross, her eyes lingering over a crop and a flogger. After a moment’s deep contemplation, she decided on the flogger. She picked it up and slapped it against the cross, producing a loud, harsh sound that echoed through the room. Turning to Pangloss, she smiled mischievously.

"Do you want me to tie you up and whip you?" she asked, a playful glint in her eye.

Pangloss smiled with wide eyes and said, "No I don’t think so. I'm not really into giving or receiving pain."

"Awww," Robin whined, with a pouty look on her face. “You’re no fun! So, what does that make you? More of a 'you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours' kind of guy?"

"Maybe," Pangloss replied. "Why don’t you show me what you mean and I’ll let you know."

Robin's eyes sparkled with mischief. "Okay, Professor, your wish is my command."

### Massage Scene

She moved in close again, circling him slowly, her fingers tapping like claws all the way across his back and around to his chest. She then playfully rubbed up against him, purring softly to Pangloss's delight. Reaching out, the professor gently placed the tip of his finger just beneath her chin, lifting her lips to his for a slow, tender kiss.

"Well then, Professor," Robin said, her lips lingering close to his, "I've got an itch that needs scratching too. Let's head back to the bed, and I'll show you something that'll make us both want to purr." She playfully ran her nails over his back again for a moment before dashing out of the room, her laughter echoing off the walls. She leaped onto the king-sized bed in the center of the main room, the luxurious, silky sheets crinkling under her weight as she settled in with a playful grin.

Pangloss followed, his heart racing with anticipation. Robin turned to him, her expression serious but her eyes dancing with excitement. “Take off all of your clothes except your underwear,” she commanded, a hint of seduction in her voice.

Pangloss hesitated a little, asking, “What are you going to do to me?”

“This isn’t Basic Instinct or something, there’s no ice pick waiting for you under the pillow” she said with a playful grin. “I’m going to give you a massage, and when I’m done, you can give me one in return,” she replied with a reassuring smile.

Pangloss smirked at her, then complied, undressing down to his underwear. He lay face down on the bed, feeling a mixture of anticipation and curiosity. Robin slipped out of her jeans, revealing her lacy underwear, and walked over to one of the nightstands, retrieving a bottle of massage oil. After climbing onto the bed and straddling his hips, she poured some oil onto her hands, warming it up before gently spreading it across his back.

The room was quiet now, the music had stopped, leaving only the sounds of their breathing and the slick slathering of the massage oil as her hands glided over his skin. He felt her fingers working their way across his shoulders and back with a firm yet gentle rhythm, expertly finding knots and tension points. Her touch was confident and skilled as she kneaded his muscles with her elbows.

"Let me know if it’s too hard, or not hard enough," she reassured him, her voice soothing.

“It’s perfect,” he replied with a groan.

The scent of the massage oil filled the air, a blend of lavender and chamomile and Pangloss closed his eyes, allowing himself to fully enjoy the sensation. Robin’s hands moved with practiced ease, her palms pressing into his back in slow, rhythmic motions. She worked her way down his spine, her thumbs applying just the right amount of pressure to release the built-up tension.

As she continued, her hands moved to his lower back, circling and pressing in a way that made Pangloss sigh with relief as waves of relaxation flowed over his entire body. Her touch was both firm and tender, each movement expertly designed to melt away tension. She moved to his legs next, her fingers tracing the contours of his muscles and easing out the stiffness with every stroke.

He began to lose track of time as his mind wandered into a dreamlike state, entranced by her soft, careful touch. Each caress felt like a whisper from another world, drawing him deeper into a realm where reality blurred with fantasy. It was as if her hands wove a spell, wrapping him in an ethereal cocoon of timeless tranquility, carrying him away on a gentle current of pure, unadulterated bliss.

### The Opera Scene

“Are you asleep?” Robin asked, her voice gently rousing him from his drowsiness.

“No, just drifting,” he replied softly.

“Perfect,” she said with a smile. “I’m done with the massage but just keep relaxing a little bit longer. I want to sing something for you.”

Still lying face down with Robin straddling his legs, he was jolted from his groggy trance by the unexpected intensity of her voice. Singing in a familiar yet incomprehensible language, her words sliced through the air like a razor.

“Tod kündend trat ich vor ihn,

gewahrte sein Auge, hörte sein Wort;

ich vernahm des Helden heilige Noth;”

He recognized the sound of opera ringing in his ears, causing goosebumps to spread across his arms, but he was unsure of its origin. Her voice was incredibly beautiful and powerful, resonating through the air with such intensity that the shadows on the basement walls began to tremble. She continued.

“tönend erklang mir des Tapfersten Klage:

freiester Liebe furchtbares Leid,

traurigsten Muthes mächtigster Trotz!

Meinem Ohr erscholl,

mein Aug' erschaute, was tief im Busen

das Herz zu heil'gem Beben mir traf.”

The room felt crisp and new in the moment of silence that followed her final drawn-out note, the shadows now bowing to her magnificent performance. Professor Pangloss was transported in his mind back to memories of a choir echoing within the dark, vaulted corridors of a gothic church, and the profound chants of Tibetan monks in their secluded mountaintop monastery. It was as if light and dark had united in spiritual union, bringing him and the ghosts who haunted the tunnels to the brink of tears. In that instant, everything between them had transformed.

The professor turned over to look her in the eyes, waiting for her to open them. “That’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever heard,” he said in awe. “What was that?”

“It’s from Wagner’s Die Walküre,” she replied. “It’s a German opera. The part I just sang are the words of Brünnhilde, a Valkyrie, just before she loses her wings and is stripped of her immortality. She is condemned to slumber in the veils of time alone until a true and worthy hero comes to awaken her.”

Pangloss nodded, the understanding of her song dawning in his eyes. “I thought I recognized the language. I could sense the immense wells of emotion in your voice. The fluctuation in pitch, the richness in tone, the somber vibration - I hung off of every syllable.”

Robin leaned down, cupped his face, and kissed him. She then slowly ran her fingers through his hair, pausing to examine the tips with intense focus. “Your hair, my dear,” she said, her voice tinged with concern. “It’s a bit long. Remind me to trim it around the edges and then it'll be just right.”

Pangloss smiled at her, feeling the tenderness in her touch. The beauty and magic of her voice had woven his soul to hers in a way he had never experienced with another person. Almost collapsing from exhaustion, she gently plopped down next to him on the bed. They both turned to look each other in the eyes.

### Welcome to the World of AIDS

“Are you high?” he asked softly, noticing how her eyes were dilated and seemed to expand into the surrounding darkness.

“Yeah, a little,” she admitted, her lips curling into a small smile. “The room just got a little more colorful. Here, let me see your hand,” she said suddenly, reaching out to take his hand in hers. She held it up, inspecting it closely, then with a look of glee said, “Look! Look at your freckles. They’re moving.”

Pangloss quickly looked down, his heart jumping into his throat as he saw the freckles on the back of his hand shifting like tiny ants. He felt a wave of panic rise within him, his breath quickening.

“No, no, no, don’t worry, honey, it’s totally fine,” Robin said soothingly, noticing his distress. “Shared hallucinations are usually just optical illusions.” She then looked him in the eye and winked.

“I’ve never hallucinated before, so this is a first," he said a little uneasy. "I thought you said these mushrooms weren’t that strong.”

“Oh, you might have some visual hallucinations, but it shouldn’t be too intense. I gave you a small dose. When I want to have a good time, I usually take two.”

“Ok, well, I trust that you wouldn’t give me something I couldn’t handle,” he said.

“Of course not, honey,” she said, cuddling up next to him.

As Pangloss began to relax, he started examining the room around him. His eyes caught details he hadn’t noticed before. Everything was more vibrant. The colors cast by the lava lamp on the nightstand seemed richer and more alive. He felt a warm tingling all over his body and an anxiousness as his senses seemed to blend together. But when he peered into the dark corners of the room, it felt as though something was lurking, silently watching him from within the shadows. The inky blackness seemed to conceal motionless figures, their presence both elusive and unnerving, giving him the eerie sensation of being observed by unseen eyes.

Robin turned her head, scanning the room before letting her eyes drift to the ceiling. She grew silent for a moment and appeared to be deep in contemplation before saying “This is where it happened,” her voice tinged with a mix of nostalgia and sorrow.

“Where what happened?” Pangloss asked, his curiosity piqued.

“This is where I was infected. This is where they welcomed me into the world of AIDS,” she said, her tone more solemn.

Pangloss felt a chill sweep over him as he processed her words. Robin took a deep breath, her eyes distant as she began to recount her story.

“I was invited by one of my close girlfriends, someone I confided in with everything. She told me I had to keep the party a secret but she knew it was exactly what I was looking for. It was one of the scariest and darkest moments of my life. I thought I might have a panic attack.”

Her voice wavered slightly, but she continued. “‘Welcome to the world of AIDS,’ he said to the group. They all sort of snickered after he said it. All except for me. I was the only virgin in the room—not a real virgin, but the only one without it. I knew I would get it eventually. I’d always known, and I never even imagined I wouldn’t. It was like an initiation, I guess.”

Robin’s gaze dropped to the floor, her hands playing nervously with the fabric of the sheets. “Some of them stopped to watch us for a while.”

“Watch?” Asked Pangloss.

“Me and the dark mysterious host of the party.” She replied

“I’d look over every once in a while and see them all cuddling up with their partners, just staring in our direction. We were fucking like animals and we just kept going for what felt like hours.”

Pangloss' eyes grew bigger as he listened intently to her recalling the memory. “My heart was pounding, and I wanted to run away. That is until *he looked at me* from across the room. The other people had already paired off to have sex with each other. He and I were the only ones left without a partner. He looked at me with those big, dark mysterious eyes, blacker than night, and asked me if I was okay.”

She paused, her voice trembling a little. “I ran so fast from across the room and leaped up into his arms and wrapped my legs around him and he was so startled he barely had time to catch me. We started making out and then, as he held me, we slowly inched our way backwards until we plopped down on the bed - this bed right here, the one we are lying on now. I was terrified, but the fear was like a drug coursing through my veins as we tore each other’s clothes off, transforming into two ravenous animals devouring each other’s flesh.”

Robin’s eyes met Pangloss’s, a mixture of fear and defiance in her expression. ““Once you’ve been initiated, sex becomes like water; It’s like shaking hands; It’s like grabbing a cup of coffee on your lunch break. I’ve heard there are underground clubs in San Francisco that won’t let you through the front door until you’ve taken a 20-minute AIDS test—to prove that you’re positive.”

“Really?” Pangloss said, astonished.

“Yeah, you don’t understand. That’s what I’m trying to say, Professor. It’s like waking up one day and finding out you just won a golden ticket!”

Pangloss shook his head with a hint of disgust, trying to comprehend her perspective. “I definitely never looked at it that way. That's a pretty radically positive point of view. No pun intended”

Robin chuckled softly, a hint of sadness lacing her laughter. “In the queer world, you know there’s a good chance you’ll get it. So I wasn’t even afraid that I might get it one day. I already figured I would.”

She looked away, her gaze drifting to the ceiling again. Pangloss reached out and took her hand in silent support, feeling her squeeze it tighter in acknowledgment.

After a moment, she turned her eyes back to him, locking onto his with an intense, almost vulnerable expression. “It’s a crazy world, Professor,” she said quietly. “But sometimes, you find beauty in the strangest places. In the midst of all the chaos, there are moments that make it all worthwhile.”

“And Tom?” Pangloss asked.

“I’m sure you’ll keep it between the three of us, but yes, of course, he has it too,” Robin replied. “He wasn’t here that time, but he lets his friends hang out down here and throw crazy parties. I was introduced to him later through someone in the community, and we’ve been friends ever since.”

She paused, a thoughtful look crossing her face. "You know, it's been a long time since I've told someone that I was infected and they decided they didn't want to hook up with me even though they knew I had it," she began, her tone reflective. "It was different in the beginning, before it became second nature to sense out who might already have it. These days, the people I tell either already have it or don’t care, and I've gotten pretty good at picking both types out of a crowd."

She paused, looking at Pangloss intently. "But this is what I wanted to talk to you about. You've been infected for a while, but you've never discovered the whole other world that exists for people like you and me. When I was younger, it felt like some dark new playground for adults, hidden in the shadows, off-limits to those who haven’t learned its secrets. Some people who wouldn’t even hang out with me before I got infected would now run into me at a club and take me into the bathroom to fuck me bareback."

Pangloss looked a little embarrassed but managed to say, “Ok, ok, I get that you’ve experienced this, but how could someone like me be a part of something like that. I’m too old-fashioned, and how many people could actually know about this anyway?”

Robin smiled knowingly. "Some people go out and get infected just so they can join in the fun. I know that's what I would have done if I hadn't already been invited by my friend. Have you ever seen the movie Rent?”

“Yeah of course, I’ve watched it multiple times,” replied Pangloss.

“Well then you sort of get it. They made it look romantic, but to be completely honest, it is actually really *hot*. Once you have HIV, it’s the only social lubricant you need; it’s the guest of honor at every party. It’s the reason for your bad behavior, both the cause and the scapegoat.”

She leaned in a little closer, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "Look, I’m telling you this, but there are a few small drawbacks I must mention. First off, it’s very important you never repeat what I just explained to you out loud to another person. You need to be a little more subtle than that."

Robin's eyes sparkled with admiration. "You’re like my hero. You’re the one who defends the official story when everyone else is too scared to speak up. I've dreamed about you. I always pictured bumping into you at an underground party like this one and just devouring you!"

Pangloss blushed, and she smiled when she saw his reaction.

"I'm telling you this because I want you to be a part of this community with me. I already suspected you might have it. A lot of powerful people do, but they go to great lengths to keep their status secret. I could share some of their names because I trust you, but I wouldn’t want to put a dangerous rumor in your jaw. These individuals still need to maintain their public appearances. They are powerful people—ones you definitely don’t want to mess with."

She looked at him earnestly. "But you already know how to deal with people like that. You stand up to powerful people every day to fight for truth and science."

### Rich Men

"So, if so many rich and powerful people have it," he asked, "why do so few of them talk about it publicly?”

“The rich and powerful are good at keeping secrets. They have their ways,” Robin replied. “But sometimes, things happen that make it harder to keep it under wraps. That’s the only reason we know that any of them are infected in the first place.”

“So, when I think about celebrities with HIV, the first person that comes to mind is Magic Johnson because everyone knows he has it,” Pangloss said. “But you’re saying he’s probably not the only basketball player to ever contract the virus?”

With a chuckle she replied, “Let’s just say, due to NDAs and some serious pinky swears, I can’t directly answer that question, but I’m sure if Magic Johnson knew of someone who had it, you can bet he’d keep it to himself.”

“Of course, that makes sense,” said Pangloss.

“I’ve never used a condom with a rich, powerful man. I just assume they all have it. We don’t even need to have the conversation most of the time.”

“So, you think all rich men have it?” Pangloss asked.

“No, no, that’s not what I'm saying. What I’m saying is, at that level, it doesn’t really matter anymore. For a couple of million dollars, you can hire a voodoo witch doctor to make it go away for you. Pay enough, and that doctor can even make you taller, thinner, younger, or can say in public whatever you want them to say.”

“And the less adventurous rich guys,” he asked, “the ones who aren’t the bad-boy types?”

“They all just use matchmakers,” Robin said with a shrug. “If they’re not into taking risks, they find safer ways to play.”

### Roy Cohn

“But how did this all start?” Pangloss asked.

"Well, I can’t say with total certainty how it all began, but one name always comes to mind when I think about HIV," Robin replied. "Roy Cohn. He was one of the most powerful men in American history to contract the virus, but many knew him by another name—the Devil."

"The Devil?" Pangloss questioned, raising his eyebrows in surprise.

“Well, at least his advocate,” she said with a smirk. “He is infamous by that name in many circles, even today. People called him that for a reason. His was the hand up Mona Lisa's skirt," she added with a wink.

Pangloss furrowed his brow. "Where have I heard that name?"

“Most people today know him as Trump's lawyer and mentor, but back in the ‘50s, Roy Cohn was actually the legal counsel for Joseph McCarthy’s anti-communist crusades,” Robin explained. “These were known as the 'Red Scare' and the 'Lavender Scare,' targeting suspected communists and homosexuals in the government, respectively.”

“Oh yeah, I remember hearing my parents talk about McCarthyism when I was growing up. They kind of glossed over that whole time period in the history books, though,” he replied.

"True. I was raised protestant Christian and what always fascinated me about Roy Cohn was how evil he was and how blind conservatives were to it. From a biblical perspective, who better to convince Christians that the collectivism of the Book of Acts was from the Devil, than the Devil himself? That's what Christians would call 'the sin unto death' or 'unforgivable sin' — blaspheming against God by attributing the works of God to the Devil. And Roy Cohn was McCarthy's right hand man! What a cruel joke he played on Americans with that one. *Isn’t it ironic?*” She sang playfully, “It’s practically an Alanis Morissette song."

“Fascinating! I was raised atheist. My mother was actually Jewish and my father came from Poland, but they raised me and my siblings to look at the world through the lens of science, so the biblical stuff you’re talking about is all sort of new to me,” said Pangloss.

“Oh wow, I had no idea you were Jewish,” said Robin. “My father's side came from Denmark and my mother's side came from somewhere in Estonia, but I’ve never investigated my family tree all that much. Beyond Cohn’s blasphemy, though," she said, "he was also well-known for the lavish parties he would throw for celebrities and power brokers. It wasn’t until he died that his doctor revealed he had succumbed to complications from AIDS. No one saw that coming, or maybe some people did, but no one wanted to admit it in public. Making accusations about someone like that came at a price.”

“I see,” said Pangloss.

“Publicly Cohn was a homophobe, but in private he was allegedly known to regularly have sex with men.” she continued.

Pangloss leaned forward, intrigued. "Were there any men that came forward claiming that he had sex with them?”

“Not that I’ve heard of,” Robin said. “But there were no women who came forward to claim that either. It’s not the kind of thing that the powerful men and women who attend these types of high society parties go around blabbing about.”

“So why was he the only one who was identified as having the HIV virus?” Asked Pangloss.

“Great question! It’s most likely because of the rumors that he was homosexual.” She said, “It made it easier to hide his partners of the opposite sex. Whether he was or was not homosexual doesn’t matter, it became the excuse for why he had it."

Pangloss nodded in understanding.

“It’s probably comparable to the rumors that Charlie Sheen contracted HIV from a transgender lover,” Robin said with a laugh. “Like Cohn, Sheen was likely sleeping with women at the same time. Who he slept with and whether he infected any of them or not, we will never know, but it was wildly entertaining when it happened, don’t you agree? Did you ever watch any of his viral live rant videos from that period?”

“Off the wall,” Pangloss replied with a chuckle.

“Fun fact, I do actually have tiger’s blood,” Robin said, trying to keep a straight face as Pangloss continued cracking up. “Sheen just got a little sloppy. Multiple people accused him of giving them diseases, and he got sued too many times, making it difficult to keep his HIV status a secret.”

Robin looked him in the eyes again as they playfully touched each other’s feet, their laughter mingling in the air and creating a light-hearted moment that brought them a brief reprieve from the heavy topic.

"Back in Cohn’s time, his parties and sophisticated gatherings were the epitome of exclusivity, attended by a who's who of celebrities and powerful figures," Robin continued. "These events, often held at iconic venues like Studio 54, attracted a mix of judges, mayors, writers, actors, and businessmen. His social circle included not only influential figures but also high-profile personalities like Nancy Reagan and Gloria Vanderbilt. It was rumored that even mobsters found their way into his gatherings, making him a dangerous person to cross."

Pangloss's eyes widened. "Yeah, it sounds like it. It must have been quite the scene."

Robin nodded. "Absolutely. The mix of glamour and danger was intoxicating. His charm and influence allowed him to navigate various circles seamlessly. People were drawn to him, but they also feared him. He even threw a birthday party for Bianca Jagger, the wife of the Rolling Stones' lead singer."

"I'll bet the devil made his rounds at that party," Pangloss replied, raising his eyebrows.

"Oh, he was there, alright. And he answered to more than one name." She leaned in closer, and the professor could see the fire in her eyes. “Despite being a closeted homosexual, Cohn was often seen with attractive young men at these parties, which only fueled the rumors." Accusing a conservative of being gay, especially back then, was like accusing a Nazi of having Jewish heritage. No offense to you, obviously,” she added with a sincere nod.

“None taken,” he replied, smiling.

“It had to be the scariest thing a conservative could ever be accused of,” she continued. “From what I know, I'd imagine many powerful elite men and women of that time got infected the same way he did—at one of his parties. The need to hide their HIV status created the extreme secrecy surrounding the virus that persists even today.”

She paused, her eyes reflecting a mix of frustration and understanding. “The stigma and fear were so intense that it forced many to live double lives. The wealthy had the means to keep their secrets buried, but it also meant they could never fully trust anyone. This secrecy created a shadow world where people like Cohn ruthlessly navigated, masking their true selves while mingling with the elite noble class of our society.”

### Syphilis in history

“It’s really no different than the syphilis outbreaks in Europe in the early 1500s after Columbus brought it back from the New World,” she said.

“Really? I never heard about that,” said Pangloss.

“Oh yeah, it was a huge problem, and there’s a lot of historical evidence to back it up. Back then, they didn’t have a cure, so once you were infected, you had to live with it for the rest of your life. It slowly degraded the quality of life and could even shorten it. In the long term, it affected the brain, causing people to act a little *crazy*. It wasn’t all that different from HIV today.”

“That’s incredible,” Pangloss said, nodding thoughtfully. “I had no idea the impact was so severe and could be compared to the effects of HIV.”

“The common churchgoers back then weren’t the ones who were spreading it though. It was the noble elites, the ones who engaged more often in extramarital and premarital sexual activities who were the main vectors for the virus. Their social status and involvement in courtly life, which often included interactions with multiple partners, increased their risk of contracting syphilis,” Robin explained.

“Really? History can be so fascinating,” Pangloss said, his intrigue evident.

“Absolutely,” Robin continued. “For instance, the Medici and their court were suspected of various illicit affairs and Anna Maria Luisa de' Medici was rumored to have died from it. Even the clergy were involved in these high-risk activities. The Borgia family, for example, were infamous for their alleged moral corruption. The sexually permissive atmosphere and frequent intimate encounters in courtly life spread the disease quickly. The son of Pope Alexander VI, Cesare Borgia, suffered from syphilis, and later in life, as the disease ravaged his face, he was compelled to wear a leather mask to cover the disfigurement.”

“Wow, that’s crazy. Even the son of a Pope. Do you think the Pope was ever infected?” Pangloss asked, clearly shocked.

“We'll never know for sure, but it’s entirely possible,” Robin replied. “And then there was Casanova. His name is synonymous with seduction and romance, but he wrote extensively in his memoirs about struggling with venereal diseases. Despite knowing the risks, he continued his hedonistic lifestyle, inevitably infecting more and more women.”

“It's incredible to think about how these historical figures lived such dangerous lives, yet their stories are romanticized,” Pangloss mused.

Robin nodded. “Exactly. The glamorous image often hides the harsh realities they faced. It’s a stark reminder of how much things have changed, yet how some aspects of human behavior remain essentially the same.”

Pangloss leaned back, absorbing the weight of her words. “It really makes you think about the legacies we leave behind and the truths that get buried.”

“Precisely,” Robin said with a knowing smile. “History is full of hidden truths waiting to be uncovered. Casanova knew his sexual escapades led to repeated infections, but he accepted it and just kept going.”

Pangloss raised an eyebrow. “So he just...embraced the risk?”

Robin nodded. “Exactly. And it doesn’t stop there. Although we don’t know for sure, like many of these stories, Henry VIII’s erratic behavior later in life is sometimes attributed to syphilis. Some even believe it was a factor in the inability of many of his wives to give birth.”

“Oh wow, I think I did hear something about that once, but I don’t remember where I heard it,” Pangloss said, frowning in thought.

Robin nodded. “Henry VIII’s desperation for a male heir and his subsequent marriages were pivotal moments in English history. If syphilis played a role in his wives' inability to bear children, it indirectly influenced the religious and political upheavals of the time.”

“That’s crazy,” Pangloss said as he looked up at the ceiling, contemplating the implications. “It makes you wonder how many other historical events were shaped by such hidden factors.”

Robin smiled. “Oh it doesn’t stop with the monarchy. Even as democracy became the norm and the noble class became less pronounced, there were still people in positions of power whose STDs played a huge role in the history of nations. There’s a story about a Confederate general who may have lost the Battle of Gettysburg due to a really bad case of the clap.”

She glanced at Pangloss, her eyes twinkling with amusement. “Can you believe that? A sexually transmitted disease affecting the outcome of one of the most important battles in American History?”

Pangloss chuckled, shaking his head in disbelief. “It’s almost too incredible to be true.”

Robin continued, her smile widening. “He was bedridden and unable to lead his troops, which may have played a huge part in their loss and retreat to Virginia.”

“So, a disease most likely contracted from a prostitute or during an affair could have been a turning point in the Civil War?” Pangloss asked, his eyebrows raised in disbelief.

“Yes, but it wasn’t just the South that suffered from it,” Robin continued. “Even Abraham Lincoln confided to his biographer that he had been infected with syphilis, and it was suspected to have caused the premature death of three of Lincoln’s children.”

Pangloss shook his head. “And here I thought I knew everything about Lincoln.”

Robin nodded. “And then there’s Pavlov—you know, the guy with the dog experiment.”

“Yeah, I know exactly who you’re talking about,” the professor replied.

“Well, he is famously remembered for saying that the Communist revolution was ‘made by a madman with syphilis on the brain.’ Lenin was reportedly infected with syphilis, and the Soviets went to great lengths to cover up the real reasons for his erratic behavior and sudden bouts of rage in the years leading up to his death.”

“So, your point is that many powerful men and women throughout history have had debilitating sexually transmitted diseases because their lifestyles allowed for risky, debaucherous behavior. And these diseases have also had a huge influence on the outcome of many historical events,” the professor summarized.

“That’s it,” Robin replied with enthusiasm. “Even in more recent times, just before the cure for syphilis was discovered, some modern-day mobsters like John Dillinger and Al Capone contracted it. The treatments they used, like silver nitrate and mercury down the urethra, were actually worse than the symptoms. Syphilis likely contributed to the deterioration of Capone’s mental faculties shortly before he died as well. As soon as we found a cure for syphilis though, it wasn’t long before it was replaced with HIV.”

### Transmission Rate of HIV

Robin looked at the professor again and asked, “So how long do you think it will take before everyone on the planet has HIV?”

The professor was a little confused by the question. “I don’t know, we’d have to look at the transmission rates, wouldn’t we?”

“Yes, we need to look at the… Oh, what is that word again?” Robin said, pulling out her phone to Google it. “You know, it’s represented by an ‘R’ and a ‘0’. I forget how you say it.”

“R-naught,” replied the professor. “I think that’s the word you’re looking for.”

“Yes, exactly,” Robin said with a nod. “HIV has an R-naught of between two and five, which is lower than a lot of other viruses like measles, which has an R-naught of close to 18.”

“And R-naught, what does that represent again, I forgot?” asked Pangloss.

“That’s the average number of people that each infected person will eventually infect while they are still contagious,” she replied.

“Okay, so if the R-naught is two, for example, then for every person like you or me who is infected,” He asked, “we will eventually infect another two people on average, correct?”

Yes and that’s a conservative estimate; if the R-naught is closer to five, then every infected person will eventually infect 5 others” Robin explained. “There are countries in Africa where over 27 percent of the adult population has HIV. Unless we can slow the disease down to an R-naught of less than one, the US could eventually end up in the same position. That’s how exponential growth works.”

Pangloss shook his head. “I don’t even need to run the math to know that’s going to be a lot of people.”

“It might only take a few generations before HIV is as prevalent as HPV or worse,” Robin continued. “Did you know that more than 80% of sexually active men and women will be infected with HPV at some point in their lifetime? Those are current statistics, but we rarely discuss how similar HIV will be one day if we don’t find a vaccine or a cure.”

“Yeah, the same goes for herpes,” he replied.

“Yes, herpes. The gift that keeps on giving. Let me look up the numbers for that.” Robin said with a smile.

“No need, I already have them,” Pangloss said. “It says here that over two-thirds of the world’s population—around 3.7 billion people—have oral herpes, and about half a billion, or 8%, have genital herpes.”

Robin grimaced. “Do you remember the first time you saw herpes sores on your body? It's a real sight for sore eyes, if you know what I mean.”

“Absolutely horrific,” he agreed. “It’s a nightmare.”

“Or how about right after you get it and you just lie in the bathtub shivering for like five hours, crying?” she said, her voice tinged with a twisted sense of glee. The professor nodded with a knowing smile.

“But then, the first time you’re out at a bar with friends and you see a hot guy across the room screaming at the top of his lungs, ‘I have herpes! I have herpes!’ without saying a word... that can actually be a real turn on,” she continued, a mischievous glint in her eye.

Pangloss leaned in with a smile to kiss her, and they both started cracking up.

“See, I knew you had a sense of humor, Professor. I just had to break through that stuffy exterior,” she teased, biting his lip and tugging on it playfully. “Our estimates are based on average numbers though,” Robin explained as she continued. “Most people who are infected won’t infect that many others. Just like with most things in life, a small percentage of HIV-positive individuals will do the majority of the infecting. Some of them will have an R-naught closer to measles. You’ve never infected anyone, have you?” she asked Pangloss.

“No, I haven’t,” he said. “I haven’t had sex with anyone since I found out, other than my ex-wife—the person who gave it to me.”

“For legal reasons, I can’t tell you how many people I’ve infected, but let’s just say I’ve done more than my fair share to keep the R-naught higher than 2,” she said with a smirk. “I went through that phase a lot of people experience at the beginning, where you just want to infect as many people as possible because you know they’re all going to get it eventually anyway. Unless they’re a Mennonite or a nun or something.”

“I can’t say it didn’t cross my mind a time or two during my depression. Misery loves company,” he said with a sigh.

“You know, it’s crazy how they handle HPV,” Robin said, leaning back in her chair. “They don’t even test men for it. Do you know why?”

“No, why?” Pangloss asked, genuinely curious.

“Because the powers that be knew that If they tested men for HPV and those men knew they had it, they could be held liable in court for transmitting it. But now, with the HPV vaccine, they don’t have to worry about being sued or having a young woman get pissed off at them for breaking out in warts.” Robin replied, rolling her eyes.

“That’s ridiculous,” Pangloss said, shaking his head.

“Now we just need to keep AIDS researchers from dying in plane crashes,” Robin said, “so we can finally come up with a vaccine like HPV or maybe even a cure.”

“Have a lot of them died in plane wrecks?” he asked, eyebrows raised.

“Enough to slow down progress,” she replied.

### Scare and attract

"So how do you figure out who has HIV and who doesn’t? I’m curious how you know,” Pangloss asked.

Robin smirked. “It’s all about how you let people know you have it. I like to use the 'Scare and Attract' method. One person's temptation is another person's warning. You can scare away the ones who don’t understand while attracting those who do.”

“How do you do that?” Pangloss leaned in, intrigued.

“Well, think of it this way. If you want to scare away the innocent types, you bring up topics that would frighten them. But for the more adventurous or daring individuals, those conversations won’t scare them—in fact, they might even get a little excited.”

“Interesting,” Pangloss nodded thoughtfully.

“It’s a bit like extreme sports,” Robin continued. “I remember hearing that when wingsuit sports first started, the life expectancy was so low that most people died within the first two years.”

“It was that dangerous?” asked Pangloss, wide-eyed.

“So I was told. For those afraid of dying, wingsuiting was too dangerous to even consider,” Robin explained. “But for the people who loved riding the tail of the dragon, wingsuiting was exactly what they were looking for. It’s the same with HIV. The risk and danger attract a certain type of person, the ones who aren’t afraid of pushing boundaries.”

Pangloss nodded again, his mind racing with the comparison. “So, by talking about HIV in a certain way, you filter out those who are too scared and attract those who are intrigued or already in the know.”

“Exactly,” Robin said with a satisfied smile. “It’s like social Darwinism. Only those who are meant to be part of our secret world will stick around.”

“That’s a fascinating way to look at it,” Pangloss admitted. “It’s like a hidden language or code.”

“Precisely,” Robin agreed. “And once you learn to speak it, you can navigate this hidden world with ease. There’s a whole different language that people in our community use, one that isn’t understood outside of it. It’s a way to identify and connect with each other without drawing unwanted attention.”

“Do you have an example?” he asked.

Robin paused, thinking for a moment. "Okay, here's a trick I use. If I'm chatting with someone at a bar who I think might be infected, I'll casually say something like, ‘Yeah, my boyfriend is high risk because of his social circle,’ and watch to see their response. Based on how they respond, I can usually gauge whether or not they’re infected or at least if they understand what I’m implying.”

Pangloss nodded, clearly intrigued. "That's clever. So, you're using their reaction as a way to determine if you should share more information with them or not.”

“You get it,” Robin replied with a satisfied smile. “It’s a subtle way to figure things out without being too direct. If they get nervous or confused, it’s a clear sign they’re not part of our world. But if their eyes light up and they nod knowingly, or if they get really excited and engage with the topic, I know I’m dealing with someone who understands.”

“Wow. I never thought to do it that way,” Pangloss said, with admiration in his voice. “It’s like having a secret handshake.”

Robin chuckled. “Exactly. It’s like Neo being pulled from the Matrix and suddenly seeing the code. You have to read the signs and know how to interpret them. There are specific cues and phrases that only someone in the know would recognize.”

Pangloss leaned back, absorbing this new insight. “It must feel like being part of a secret underground society, with its own rules.”

“It does,” Robin agreed. “Once you’re in, you start to notice those subtle hints everywhere. It becomes second nature to sense who might already know and who’s just clueless.”

Pangloss nodded thoughtfully. “It’s fascinating. I never realized there were so many layers to it.”

Robin smiled. “There are. But it can create its own problems sometimes. Every once in a while, new people slip through the cracks. Either you misread their reaction, or you convince yourself they already knew, even though they probably don’t.”

Pangloss looked concerned. “So it’s not foolproof.”

“Not by any stretch of the imagination,” Robin admitted. “It can also become pretty dark and manipulative. Sometimes, people use it to convince someone new, who isn’t infected, that they’ve already told them about their infection. When the person finds out they are infected and confronts the one who infected them, the offender will bring up an early conversation and point out the subtle hints they gave. They will remind them of their reactions to make it seem like they thought they understood. The truth is, it’s usually a lie. They knew the other person wasn’t infected and didn’t understand the hints.”

“That sounds extremely manipulative,” Pangloss said, frowning.

“Oh, that’s not even the worst part,” Robin continued. “I’ve known people who go through phases where they intentionally infect someone, then turn around and accuse that person of infecting them.”

“That’s horrible,” Pangloss said, shaking his head in disbelief. “You ruin someone’s life by infecting them without their consent, and then make them believe they were the ones who did it to you?”

“As long as they are relatively sexually active, they won’t be able to prove where they got it, and they won’t be able to prove that you were actually the one who gave it to them. This phase often overlaps with the phase where people intentionally cause outbreaks, infecting as many people as possible. If it ever comes back around, you can always just blame one of the people you infected instead of yourself.”

“That is twisted,” Pangloss said, his voice full of shock.

Robin nodded. “It’s a dark world we live in. Boyfriends and girlfriends who cheat on each other do this sometimes too. One finds out they are infected and says, ‘I can’t believe you gave it to me,’ and pours on the guilt. The other person feels horrible because they don’t know which partner they were cheating with gave it to them, so they accept responsibility. Then their partner forgives them and says they can stay together, but they use it as leverage for the rest of the relationship.”

“That’s just... I don’t even have words,” Pangloss said, his voice heavy with disappointment. “It’s so cruel.”

“It is. When I was younger, I had a few girlfriends who went through those phases. They even looked young enough to convince men they didn’t need to wear condoms because they were still virgins.”

“I never imagined that people could be so evil,” he replied, shaking his head.

“That’s just human nature,” Robin said softly. “They were afraid of being alone and thought that if they could infect someone and convince them to stay, that person would stay and take care of them. Sometimes it’s hard to understand, but it happens more often than you’d think. What happens more often than that with rich people,” Robin said, “is that they find out they are infected and pay their doctor to keep it from their partner. The doctor ensures that both of them get the medication they need and manipulates the test results so their partner never even finds out they had it in the first place.”

Pangloss took a deep breath, struggling with his thoughts. “I’m not sure how to say this, but as I was listening to you, I realized that what you described—some of your friends accusing their partner of infecting them—that’s exactly what happened to me.”

### Pangloss explains how he got HIV

“Oh, honey, I’m sorry,” Robin replied, her tone softening. “I know it’s hard to talk about, but you can tell me.”

“It was my wife,” Pangloss confessed. “She cheated on me and gave it to me then tried to blame me. I knew I hadn’t cheated but she tried to convince me it wasn’t her and she stuck to her guns till the bitter end of our relationship. She never admitted it. After she left, I withdrew into my work. I wouldn’t let anyone get close to me.”

“Professor, you don’t have to be afraid anymore,” Robin said gently.

“The first time my wife told me she had it, I went to a local clinic where no one knew me so I could get tested in private,” Pangloss explained, his voice heavy with the memory. “I was ashamed and couldn’t bear talking to my regular doctor about it.”

Robin’s eyes widened. “And how did it feel when you got your results?”

“Well,” Pangloss continued, “that’s actually the weird part. I went home and waited about two weeks for the clinic to contact me by email. The results were supposed to be in the week before, and my wife got anxious, so I decided to call the clinic to see if they had finally received my results. The person who answered asked me what I was calling about, and I told them. They regretted to inform me that the clinic had burned down the week before, and all the samples and test results of their patients had been lost.”

Robin’s eyebrows shot up. “You have to be shitting me!” she exclaimed, shock written all over her face. “See, that’s what I’m talking about!”

“What do you mean?” Pangloss asked, confusion evident in his voice.

“You were already connected; you just didn’t know it yet,” Robin said, leaning forward.

“What are you implying?” Pangloss asked.

“What do you think I’m implying?” Robin countered with an incredulous expression.

“That someone burned down the clinic on purpose to hide my results?” Pangloss suggested, a look of disbelief on his face.

“I didn’t say that,” Robin said, her eyes wide with astonishment. “But yeah, now that you’ve mentioned it... of course!!! What did you think happened, it was just a coincidence?”

“I mean, it crossed my mind back then, but it felt too paranoid for me to entertain the idea,” Pangloss admitted.

“And what did your wife say?” Robin asked, leaning in.

“Come to think of it, she looked sort of pissed off, which I thought was weird at the time. But the whole thing was confusing, and I just wanted to move on. I ended up getting an at-home test, and it came back positive,” he said.

Robin sighed, gazing deeply into his eyes with a mix of sympathy and excitement. “It’s a whole new world now, my dear, sweet, sweet Pangloss. Maybe we can rewire that beautiful mind of yours to see the glass as half full. Honestly, in some strange way, getting infected feels like the greatest thing that ever happened to me.”

“Really?” Pangloss said, confused.

“It’s my life, it’s my community,” Robin explained. “I can be a dirty little slut in the World of AIDS, and no one judges me. They love me for who I am, and I’m free to head out into the night as an unchained woman, free of rules and inhibitions.”

“I sort of see what you’re saying, but it still doesn’t sound real to me,” Pangloss admitted.

“It’s way realer than you could ever imagine,” Robin said, her eyes shining with conviction.

Pangloss held her hand and looked her in the eyes. “It’s fascinating how a whole subculture can develop around something as intense as shared diseases.”

“I know,” she chuckled. “There are a lot of wolves out there searching for fresh meat, but when two of them connect, it can actually be an incredible experience,” Robin concluded, staring back at him with her deep blue eyes.

Pangloss squeezed her hand gently. “I’m so glad I found you, Robin. I feel such a deep connection with you, even though we’ve only just met.”

Robin’s eyes softened. “Okay, enough talk about AIDS. Let’s change the subject. I want to tell you a knock-knock joke,” she said, a mischievous grin spreading across her face.

“Okay,” Pangloss replied, looking amused. “Shoot.”

“Alright, here goes. So there was a chicken and an egg lying in bed together…” Robin began.

“I thought you said this was a knock-knock joke,” Pangloss interrupted.

“Shut up, I’m trying to tell the joke,” she said, pushing him a little as she leaned back to light a cigarette.

“Aren’t you supposed to smoke that in the garden room?” Pangloss asked.

“No one’s here to enforce the rules. You gonna call the cops or something?” she replied, leaning back to take a drag, then letting a smoke ring slowly exit her mouth as she formed an O shape with her lips. “The best jokes,” she continued, “are the ones where you say the punchline first but only imply the joke.”

“Who’s there?” Pangloss quipped with a cheeky grin.

“Ha, ha,” Robin replied, smiling at him before continuing. “So the chicken is smoking a cigarette…”

“Is this really the joke?” he asked, cracking up.

“You have to wait until the end, jackass,” she said, slapping his chest playfully and taking another drag. “So the chicken is smoking a cigarette, and the egg is lying next to it with its back turned to the chicken. The egg says to the chicken with a hint of annoyance, ‘Well, I guess we answered that question.’” Robin then immediately turned to scan his face and gauge his reaction.

Pangloss sat there, looking at her, then looking away, then looking back again, clearly puzzled. Finally, he chimed in, “Well, I know it has something to do with the chicken and egg metaphor, but I’m still trying to understand what the joke is. Give me a minute, I’ll figure it out.”

Robin started laughing uncontrollably, then pulled him in and kissed him again, holding her puckered lips against his for nearly a minute before pulling back for another drag. “I wouldn’t worry too much about it, Professor. I didn’t get the joke right away the first time either. I’m sure it will dawn on you later tonight or tomorrow. I don’t want to give it away and spoil the surprise.”

“To get to the other side?” Pangloss guessed, still looking puzzled but hopeful.

Robin giggled, shaking her head. “No, but nice try. Here’s another one for you: Knock, knock.”

Pangloss played along, “Who’s there?”

“Boo,” Robin said, her eyes twinkling.

“Boo who?” Pangloss responded, smiling.

“Don’t cry, it’s just a joke!” Robin said, bursting into laughter.

Then they both started laughing together, their laughter filling the air. As it faded, they looked into each other’s eyes. Robin pulled him close, her warm skin and lips igniting a flame of desire that swirled around them as their bodies intertwined and they began to lose track of time.

## 

## Chapter 7: Moonlight Sonata

### Mushrooms

As Pangloss lay in bed with Robin, a strange sensation began to creep through his body. Invisible tendrils of energy wrapped around his legs, slowly winding their way up to his torso. At first, it didn't bother him. It reminded him of the feeling you get when your foot falls asleep—a tingling numbness followed by tiny pins and needles as the blood starts to flow again. But as the sensation grew stronger, it made him uneasy. Having never felt anything like it before, he knew it must be the mushrooms.

The sensations crept up his body like vines wrapping around a tree, inching closer and closer to his pelvis. His heart raced with anticipation as the feelings reached his crotch, and his groin stirred to life, pressing itself against Robin's leg. For a moment, she lay next to him, half asleep and motionless. Suddenly, her body shifted, her leg moving back and forth ever so slightly, as though testing the new presence that had sprung to life and pressed itself against her. She quickly opened her eyes and looked at Pangloss, who was both alarmed and aroused by the strange sensations. A smile crept across her face as she continued staring into his eyes, her leg moving back and forth as he grew.

Something began to unfurl within him. His senses heightened, and the room seemed to breathe, its once straight lines now curved and organic. The air remained thick with the haze of Robin's cigarette smoke, tinted a deep, almost crimson pink, as if the very atmosphere itself was aroused. They looked into each other's eyes once more, and Pangloss noticed that the blue of her eyes now shone so brightly it seemed to glow from within.

"What are you thinking about?" Robin's voice said as it cut through the haze, her tone a blend of curiosity and amusement.

Pangloss blinked, the world around him momentarily snapping back into focus. "I'm... I'm not sure," he admitted, a slight tremor in his voice. "It's like the room is alive, and there are feelings in my body that I've never experienced before that are kinda scary but feel good at the same time. And your eyes... they're so... *radiant*."

Robin smiled, "Anything else?"

Pangloss looked past her for a moment. "The walls, they are covered in texture, and when the light shines in my eyes, I see geometric patterns that seem to undulate with the feelings inside of me. The whole room seems to be pulsing."

"Oh, I know. I can feel something pulsing against me right now," she said with a mischievous smirk. She then moved her hand down his shoulder and along the small of his back, tracing her fingers down the side of his torso. As she softly caressed the skin, she worked her way down to his leg, causing him to shudder a little as the invisible force clenched around his whole body. As he took a deep breath she could see him becoming more and more aroused. A smile spread across her face as she moved her hand between his legs and gently placed it on top of the bulge in his underwear.

"It seems you are about to awaken!" she whispered into his ear, then slowly worked her tongue delicately around his earlobe, the sounds of her saliva softly crackling in his ear drum. The room itself was alive as she slowly worked her tongue from his ear down to his neck and to his collarbone.

"It's like the world is a painting," Pangloss murmured, his voice filled with awe. "And each moment is just a single stroke of the brush."

Robin nodded with a smile, her eyes never leaving his. "That's exactly it," she said softly. "We're part of the art. Part of the beauty. And everything is connected, including you and I. It shifts your consciousness," she said softly. "There is no going back once you’ve seen past the illusion and have experienced the beauty and magic hidden in the details."

As they spoke, the room seemed to grow darker, the shadows undulating in waves, the corners of the room growing deeper, more mysterious. But in the midst of this darkness, there was a sense of safety, of comfort. They were together, two tortured souls cuddling amidst the darkness all around them.

Robin's touch was electric, each brush of her hand against his skin sending a jolt of sensation through him. He could feel the texture of the sheets beneath him, every crinkle and fold, as if they were alive with energy. When her nails traced a path down his chest, he felt each individual strand of hair stand on end, each tiny bump of skin responding to her touch.

His breath stuttered as she moved her hand again, her fingers grazing the edge of his waistband. The air between them crackled with anticipation, the room's pulsing energy mirroring the beating of his heart. Robin's eyes, now almost luminescent in the dim light, held his gaze with an intensity that seemed to pierce through to his very soul.

"Do you trust me?" she whispered, her voice a soft caress against his ear.

Pangloss nodded. His body hummed like a high voltage live wire, every nerve ending alight with sensation.

"Good," she murmured, her hand slipping beneath the waistband of his underwear. Her touch was both gentle and insistent, her fingers exploring with a deliberate slowness that made him gasp. The sensation was overwhelming, a heady mix of pleasure and the lingering strangeness of the mushrooms. Robin's movements were hypnotic, drawing him deeper into a state of heightened awareness. The boundaries of his body seemed to blur, his senses merging into a singular, all-encompassing experience. The room's colors and textures swirled around them, a vibrant tapestry of light and shadow that seemed to pulse in time with their breaths.

As Robin's hand continued its exploration, Pangloss felt a surge of emotion welling up within him. It was a raw, primal feeling, a blend of desire, fear, and an almost overwhelming sense of connection. He had never felt so exposed, so utterly vulnerable and alive. Robin's touch grew more insistent, her movements a symphony of sensation that played along his nerves. Each stroke, each caress, sent ripples of pleasure through his body, building to a crescendo that left him trembling. He could feel the tension coiling within him, a tight knot of anticipation that begged for release.

Robin paused, her fingers resting lightly against his skin as Pangloss's breath came out in ragged gasps, his body taut with unspent energy.

"Hold that thought," she whispered, her voice a soothing balm against the tempest within him. "I need to freshen up." She gave him a lingering kiss on the lips, then slipped out of bed, her movements graceful and unhurried.

As the distant sound of the bathroom door clicked shut behind her, the room seemed to darken once more. The shadows grew longer, and the vibrant colors that had danced before his eyes began to fade into muted tones. It was as if the light itself had dimmed, retreating in her absence. The silence felt thicker, more oppressive, and the air seemed to weigh heavier on his skin. Without Robin, the room felt colder, less alive, and the pulsing energy that had filled every corner now ebbed away. He could hear the distant hum of the bathroom fan, a stark contrast to the electric ambiance that had filled the room moments before.

He lay there, staring up at the ceiling, and time seemed to stretch on endlessly, each second a small eternity. He could hear his own heartbeat, a steady drumbeat in the quiet darkness. Closing his eyes, strange color patterns danced across his mind. Just as he began to feel truly alone, the bathroom door creaked open. Robin reappeared, and as she moved closer, the light seemed to follow her, filling the space with a gentle warmth. The air felt lighter, more breathable, and the colors began to return, vibrant and alive once more. The pulsing energy returned, stronger than before, as if her mere presence reignited the room's vibrancy but deeper and more intense. Pangloss felt his body respond instantly, every nerve ending sparking with sensation.

"I'm back," she whispered, her lips brushing against his ear. "Did you miss me?"

Pangloss nodded, his voice caught in his throat once more. The room pulsed with energy, now a living, breathing entity again. Robin's eyes locked onto his, the connection between them palpable.

"Let's pick up where we left off," she whispered, and with a slow, deliberate motion, Robin seductively removed her blouse, revealing a lacy bra underneath. With a teasing motion, she let her panties drop to her knees, then to the floor. Stepping out of them gracefully, she climbed back on top of him and with another quick motion, her bra joined her underwear on the floor. The mattress shifted under her weight, and Pangloss felt a rush of relief as her warmth rested against his body once more.

"I've never..." Pangloss began, his voice faltering with a mix of nerves and excitement. "I've never..."

Robin placed a gentle finger on his lips, her touch soothing. "Shhhh," she whispered, her voice a soft caress. "You don't have to say it. I know. Don't be scared. I'll show you. Some people can't even tell the difference."

She held his face in her hands, her fingers slightly tangling in his hair. Their eyes met, locking in a moment of intense connection and longing. Robin's hands moved down to his chest, her touch sending shivers through his body. "I've got you," she whispered, her voice a soothing balm. "Just let go."

Pangloss nodded, feeling a mix of vulnerability and excitement. He reached up, tracing the outline of her face with his fingers, marveling at the softness of her skin. "I trust you," he murmured.

She smiled, a blend of mischief and warmth in her eyes. "Good," she said, leaning in to kiss him deeply, her breath mingling with his. "This is just the beginning," she promised, her voice full of anticipation.

### Transition to Sex

"Are you ready?" she asked.

Pangloss's heart swelled with a mixture of emotions as he looked at her. "I'm ready," he said softly, his voice full of resolve. She slipped her fingers under the waistband of his underwear again, slowly pulling them down to reveal his erection.

"Ooo, well, hello there," she said, her eyes fixed on his groin with a mischievous smile.

Pangloss grinned back at her, feeling a rush of excitement as she examined him with a playful, naughty glint in her eye. She grabbed the lube from the nightstand, then crawled back onto the bed and positioned herself between his legs. She squirted some lube on her hand, looked at the label, and said, "Mmm, watermelon."

She then grabbed him around the base of his penis and began running her slick, lube-covered hands up and down his shaft, adjusting her grip with a strong, steady rhythm. He looked down into her deep blue eyes that burned hot with desire as she moved her mouth into position. She maintained eye contact with him as she worked the head with the tip of her tongue. Then, with a smooth, deliberate motion, she took it into her mouth, wrapping her tongue around it in long, soft strokes. The professor couldn't help but arch his back a little as she moved, and he felt himself grow harder as he slipped deeper inside her mouth. His breath quickened as he watched Robin's every move, her fingers skillfully working his length, her tongue dancing along the sensitive skin. Robin then lifted herself up and straddled him, her eyes locking on to his.

### Temple

"This is my temple," she said in a hushed tone, "and you’re welcome to come inside."

With a delicate, yet firm grip on his shaft, Robin gracefully slid down onto him, her body shuddering with pleasure as a soft, sensual moan escaped her lips. The sensation was intense, causing Pangloss to groan as he felt her warmth envelop him. Robin paused for a moment, teasingly leaving just the tip inside of her, which made Pangloss's body ache with anticipation. As she began to move again, she adjusted the angle of her hips, allowing him to slide deeper inside until he filled her entirely. Her hips swayed in a slow, rhythmic motion, drawing Pangloss in deeper with each movement, the sensation both overwhelming and utterly intoxicating. Robin's hands traced patterns on his abs, her nails lightly scraping against his skin, sending shivers down his spine. Her eyes, dark with desire, met his, and he saw in them a reflection of his own passion.

"Now, let go," she murmured softly as she rocked back and forth, "Just let everything else fade away."

Pangloss nodded, his hands finding her hips, his fingers gripping her skin as they moved together in a beautiful, intimate waltz. The room was filled with the sound of their breaths, their whispered words, and the soft creak of the bed beneath them.

"It’s never felt anything like this before." Pangloss murmured, his voice a blend of awe and desire.

She leaned closer and giggled, her breath warm against his cheek. "I know," she said, her voice a gentle whisper. "Mushrooms make everything so... intense. It makes it so much easier for me to cum sometimes. Here," she said as she rose slowly along his length before sinking back down again, "give me your hands."

Pangloss lifted his hands to hers and their palms pressed together as she moved with him. She slowed for a moment, rocking gently, and guided one of his hands to the base of her pelvis. Pressing his palm against her clit, she moved in slow, circular motions until he took over. He watched her body react to his touch as her legs shivered with each rotation.

With a playful grin, she took his other hand and guided it to the sensitive spot where her leg met her cheek. She then led his fingers down through the crevice, tracing the curve of her body until they reached the slippery entrance. His fingers rested against the sticky moistness and his own shaft which throbbed in anticipation.

"Tease me," she whispered, her voice a soft command.

"Oh God," he moaned softly, his voice steady and filled with longing. "I want you, every day, every moment."

Robin's smile was radiant, her eyes sparkling with joy. "Then you shall have me," she promised, her voice a soft vow. "We have all the time in the world, my love."

In the warm glow of their passion for each other, they moved together with a fluid grace, as if the world around them had faded away, leaving only the two of them in this moment of pure connection. The soft rustle of the sheets, the beads of sweat glistening on their skin, the tender sighs, and the synchronized movement of their forms created a symphony of sensation, each note more powerful than the last. As time began to fade their movements became more urgent, more intense, as if each touch, each kiss, each shared breath was a desperate attempt to make the moment last forever.

Robin began to moan, the moans growing louder with each thrust inside, filling the room with the intoxicating sounds of pure pleasure. She guided his hand against her clit again applying more pressure and increased speed. As his hand worked its magic, her body began to tremble, and her moans erupted into a powerful climax.

### Wings

As her moans echoed through the room, a deep bassy rumbling sound grew in the background, and her shadow on the ceiling began to morph. In an instant, two wings sprouted from her shadow, spreading from one side of the room to the other. The wings were a deep, velvety black, with feathers that seemed to absorb light itself, casting an ominous darkness over the room. They were both beautiful and terrifying, filling Pangloss with a profound horror that transcended all understanding. Yet, amidst this dread, he felt an unstoppable desire. His deepest, darkest, most unspoken fear had transformed into an all-consuming need that he craved more than life itself.

As the walls around them erupted in a cacophony of banging and the floor seemed to shake with the force of her ecstasy to distract him, his focus never left her, the dark sensation overtaking his entire body as madness ensued around them. The invisible force inside of him clenched once more at the base of his spine causing his blood to boil over with pleasure, then flood from the center of his loins and flow deep inside of her. Nothing could hold back the flow as it spilled out around the sides of his shaft as her body made one final upward movement before thrusting down against his pubic bone.

The fear, excitement, and pleasure drove the demon within Pangloss to lift his back from the sweat-soaked sheets, his hands moving to Robin's shoulder blades. With a fierce grip, he dug his nails into her skin, pulling himself deeper inside. She moaned in delight as he reached around to the scruff of her neck, his teeth grazing her skin as he took hold of her like a lion. Her body instinctively became limp and submissive in response to his bite. For the first time since they had met, Pangloss felt a sense of complete and utter control over her now docile and delicate body. He bit down harder, and she arched her back, a wave of relaxation sweeping over her as he pushed himself deeper inside. He could feel her body melt into his embrace as he continued to hold her neck gently between his teeth. With a single, powerful movement, he released all of his pent-up desire in one final, throbbing thrust.

Exhausted, they collapsed onto the bed and Robin rolled off to lie next to him. They turned to face the ceiling, the room filled with the sound of their heavy breathing. As they gasped for air the remnants of their climax lingered above the bed, slowly dissipating as it left their bodies, leaving them in a state of blissful exhaustion. The room grew silent again except for the sounds of their steady breathing.

"Holy shit, that was incredible," Pangloss said after catching his breath, "I've never..."

"Stop saying that," Robin interrupted with a giggle, her eyes twinkling with excitement. "There's a lot of things you've never experienced that I want to show you." She gently intertwined her fingers with his, closing them around his hand. With a tender tug, she pulled his hand close, burying her head in his chest as she snuggled against him.

"What was that rumbling sound?" Pangloss asked, his brow furrowed in confusion.

"What sound? I didn't hear anything," she replied with an innocent look on her face.

"It was loud, it started like a deep bass and then as you started... you know... it was like people were banging on the walls and the ground was shaking," he explained, still perplexed.

"Oh, I don't know. I was so caught up in the moment that I might have missed it," she said with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "It was probably just the light rail."

"Ahhh, okay, yeah, you're probably right," he replied, still a bit confused but willing to accept her explanation. "Those mushrooms were no joke. They really took me on a wild ride."

"But you liked it. Right?" she asked with an excited tone, her eyes searching for confirmation.

"There are no words to describe it," he said, his voice filled with a mix of awe and confusion.

"And now?" she inquired.

“I can still feel them, but for a moment, everything felt so dark and distant, like I was in some chaotic alternate reality," he confessed, his gaze fixed on the ceiling as if replaying the experience in his mind.

"It's like that sometimes," she said, her voice soft and reassuring. "The mushrooms can take you on a journey, from light to dark and back again, but remember, it's all in your head. You're safe here with me and the feelings will eventually go away."

“How long do they last?” he inquired.

"Oh, it might take a few hours, but you could experience an afterglow effect that lingers into tomorrow and possibly even into the week. It really depends on how many of your inner demons you are able to confront and slay during your journey," she said, her eyes narrowing with an evil gleam.

Pangloss took a deep breath, his heart still racing. "It's like I was facing my deepest, darkest fears head-on," he said, his voice trembling slightly. "The kind that lurk in the repressed recesses of your mind."

Robin nodded, a small smile playing on her lips. "Exactly. And the more you confront them, the more you grow. It's a transformative experience."

He looked at her, his eyes a mixture of wonder and intrigue. "I never anticipated it feeling like this," he murmured, his voice tinged with disbelief. "It's nothing like what I imagined."

"Good!" she exclaimed, her voice brimming with excitement. "That's exactly the point—to push beyond your limits, to experience something new, and for the first time, to get introduced to your true self."

Pangloss hesitated, then asked, "But what about you?"

She chuckled, the sound low and almost musical. "Oh, I have my fair share of demons. Everyone does. But it's not always about slaying them. Sometimes, it's just about understanding them."

He nodded then, with eyes closed, he leaned in and pressed his lips against hers. He could feel the texture of her mouth, the wetness of her kiss, and he breathed in her breath as if it were the very essence of life itself.

### Moonlight Sonata Conversation

"I wanted to ask you something," Robin said, her voice a gentle whisper. "It's a question I usually ask people when I'm getting to know them, but it never came up during our car ride."

Pangloss tilted his head, his curiosity piqued. "What is it?" he asked, his voice filled with genuine interest.

Robin hesitated for a moment, choosing her words carefully. "It might sound a little weird at first, but I want you to think about it carefully before you give me your choice."

"Oh, so I have to choose something?" he said, intrigued by the mysterious nature of her question.

"Yes," Robin confirmed with a nod. "You have to make a choice. It's sort of like an inkblot test. It's about your gut reaction, your instinctive response."

Pangloss smiled, a spark of excitement in his eyes. "Hmmm, sounds interesting. Go ahead, you can ask me."

Robin took a deep breath, gathering her courage before she spoke. "Okay, here it is. Picture this: you have one chance to choose between two distinct moments in time. You can only select one, and once you've made your decision, you'll be instantly transported to that moment in time, with no opportunity to reconsider. From that moment on, you must live out your life from that point forward, unable to revisit any other point in history. Do you follow?"

Pangloss nodded, his expression serious. "I understand. I can only choose one moment, and once chosen, I live from that point on without any possibility of return."

"Perfect!" she exclaimed, her eyes twinkling with mischief. "But remember, this choice will completely transform the course of your life. Whichever moment you choose, your current life as you know it will cease to exist, except for your memories of it."

"Alright, I get it. So what two moments do I get to choose from?" he asked, trying to suppress his excitement.

"Before I tell you," she said, "I want to reiterate that this is about your gut reaction. You have to promise that you'll give me your honest, immediate response without stalling or overthinking. Do you promise?"

"How much time do I have to make a decision?" Pangloss asked.

"Ten seconds," she replied.

"Ten seconds?" he said, eyes wide. "That's not much time, but I suppose it's enough to give you my gut reaction." He nodded in agreement.

"Perfect," she said, her face lighting up with excitement. "Just remember, you get one chance to choose between two moments in time. Once you pick, you're stuck there forever. No take-backs."

"Got it," Pangloss replied, feeling a little excited.

"Okay," she began," the first moment to choose from is…" She paused for dramatic effect. "The night you lost your virginity."

"Ooo, that's not what I was expecting," Pangloss said, his eyes narrowing in surprise.

Robin laughed, her voice ringing out like a bell. "See, I told you it was a bit unusual. But no stalling ok? You promised. The second moment that you get to choose from is the moment in time when Beethoven played Moonlight Sonata for a live audience for the first time."

"Wow! How did you come up with this?" Pangloss asked, his voice filled with awe.

"You've got 10 seconds, professor, and it starts now," she said firmly.

"Okay, okay, let me think about it..." Pangloss said, his brow furrowing deep in thought.

"Nine, eight, seven..." she counted down.

"Well, it seems like a no-brainer at first, but then you have to stop and think a little bit more..." Pangloss continued, his voice trailing off.

"Four, three, two..." she interrupted.

"What is Moonlight Sonata?" he said with a smile, his eyes twinkling.

"Ding, ding, ding, ding! That's the correct answer!" she exclaimed, laughing uncontrollably and clapping her hands together like a child. She leaned in, her eyes closed, and their lips met in a slow, passionate kiss.

As they pulled away, Robin's fingers gently intertwined with his again, pulling him in close. "You made the right choice, Professor," she said, her voice filled with emotion. "Now, tell me, what went through your mind while making the decision?"

Pangloss paused, contemplating her question. "Well, the first thing that struck me was how hard it was to compare the two moments. My instant reaction was that my first time wasn’t all that noteworthy."

"It sucked, right?" Robin said with a smirk.

"Yeah, sort of. I mean, it wasn’t horrible, but it’s hard to imagine it making my top 100," Pangloss replied.

"No, it probably wouldn’t. It’s not that great for most people," she agreed. "The first time I bought myself a bra was more exciting than when I lost my virginity. I was so giddy and nervous that my palms were sweating. It felt like I was finally a woman, as if I were claiming a part of my identity for the first time."

"Oh wow,” he said thoughtfully “I never imagined what that would feel like."

"Losing my virginity was awkward and clumsy,” she said, “and not all that memorable."

"Same for me. I was sort of glad it was finally over with I guess," he replied.

"I know, right?" she agreed. "It’s one of those moments that you build up so much in your mind, but when it happens the reality often falls way short."

"But isn’t choosing Moonlight Sonata also about choosing a completely different life than this one," he continued.

"Yes, you hit the nail on the head, Professor. At its core, the question isn’t so much about comparing the two moments. Most, if not all, people agree that hearing Beethoven live would be a far more profound experience than their first time," Robin replied. "But choosing your first time is like opting for a mulligan, like in the movie Groundhog Day. It’s a chance to redo a significant portion of your life, hoping it turns out better."

"Huh, yeah, I see what you’re saying. I didn’t have time to think about it all that much, but a part of me thought that it would be better to be someone else rather than myself," Pangloss mused. "It's very interesting, though, because how I would live my life differently didn’t even cross my mind—at least not in words."

I want you to imagine something else now," she said. "Imagine that you’re 15 years old and haven’t lost your virginity yet. Would that change your decision?"

"You know, that's an interesting perspective," Pangloss replied. "I definitely see where you’re going with this. Losing your virginity is something we all fantasize and obsess about, so if you’ve never experienced sex, you might choose that moment instead."

"Absolutely, some young people might prefer to experience their first time over listening to Moonlight Sonata live, because they are just really eager to experience adulthood."

"But here's a question," Pangloss said, leaning in with a curious expression. "I assume you could still have sex once you're there, right? There's no rule saying you can never have sex again, is there?"

"No, definitely not," she clarified. "The assumption is you would be able to live out your life like anyone else back then, which would include finding a partner and maybe even having children."

"That brings up an intriguing point," Pangloss mused. "I chose Moonlight Sonata without knowing what kind of body I'd inhabit upon arrival. What if it turned out to be an 80-year-old man with only a week left to live?"

"That definitely changes things, doesn’t it?" Robin agreed. "The real question is, what would it take for you to change your decision?" she continued. "Do you arrive in the body of a child? What if you were a woman? Are you rich or poor? What would make you reconsider?"

"And this is precisely why you limited me to 10 seconds," Pangloss quipped, a grin spreading across his face. "I was contemplating the very same thing but didn't have time to think it all the way through. While I'm perfectly comfortable with my current body, the uncertainty of inhabiting someone else's body in a different time period is a little daunting. I suppose I assumed I would be placed in the body of someone who would be attending one of Beethoven's concerts."

"Yes, and there's an implication that if they are attending one of his concerts, they are probably well off or even nobility," she replied.

"True, there weren’t many poor people who would have attended something like that," Pangloss agreed.

"Exactly," Robin replied. "So for many people, whether consciously or unconsciously, choosing Moonlight Sonata might mean upgrading their status in society. Even for successful people today, they wouldn’t have to give up all their success to make the choice."

Pangloss nodded deep in contemplation.

Robin leaned back, her eyes thoughtful. "Now, imagine you are 4 years old with no perception of what either of those things are. You have no frame of reference to even begin understanding the consequences of choosing one or the other."

Pangloss chuckled softly. "At that age, the idea of losing your virginity or listening to Beethoven live would be completely abstract. A 4-year-old wouldn't understand the significance of either choice."

"Absolutely," Robin agreed. "A child would likely choose something based on immediate gratification or a whim, not understanding the deeper implications."

"That sounds about right," Pangloss replied, then continued, "But now that I’m thinking about it, Beethoven lived in a time before air conditioning, before refrigerators, and before automobiles. He lived in a time when humans hadn't even dreamed of flying."

"Not exactly true. They did have hot air balloons back then," she corrected.

"Okay, you're probably right," he conceded. "However, it wasn’t a method of travel that an ordinary person could utilize to reach a precise location by simply purchasing a ticket."

"No, probably not," she agreed.

"You know, there's something else I've been contemplating," he said, his voice growing more serious. "We’ve advanced so much as a society since then, both culturally and politically. It might be hard to deal with all the injustices that existed back then. You’d be choosing a time when women, people of color, and queer people were treated horribly."

"This question comes up quite often, which is part of why I put a 10 second limit on the choice. Do you regret your decision?" she asked, watching his expression closely.

"A little, maybe," Pangloss admitted. "I’m starting to realize that I might not have considered all the ways life is better today than it was during Beethoven’s time."

"Yes, but just like with air travel, you could be the person who brings about change in the world," she said, her eyes lighting up with possibility. "You could be John Stuart Mill or Thomas Paine—you could be the one history remembers."

Pangloss nodded slowly, the weight of her words sinking in. "That's true. I could use my knowledge and values to influence positive change.”

“You could be anyone you wanted to be.” She agreed.

"Okay, I understand your reasoning behind presenting the choice between experiencing Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata and losing my virginity," he said to her. "But now I'm beginning to ponder what would I choose if I compared Moonlight Sonata to other significant moments in history."

"I'm so glad you mentioned that because I was about to ask you to envision something else. Imagine this for me. Imagine that you are Beethoven now, and you are given the choice between performing Moonlight Sonata for the first time or... Drum roll, please," she said, mimicking the sound of drums with her hands against the bed.

"... Being the first man to step on the moon," she said, a look of satisfaction on her face.

"Wow!" he said, his eyes wide with wonder. "I'm imagining that scenario right now. How does one even make such a choice? I'd assume he would choose the moon. Is that the wrong choice?" he asked, seeking her reaction.

"It's difficult to say since we can't ask him directly, but I believe you're likely correct," she replied with a wink.

"Yes, landing on the moon would certainly surpass Moonlight Sonata live," he agreed. "It would definitely beat losing your virginity too."

"Oh for sure! The moment when a human being first set foot on the moon is arguably one of the most historic and memorable moments in human history. As a species, we will likely remember that moment for as long as we can remember that our home planet is Earth," she explained. "But don't be so quick to assume all moon landings are equal, Professor."

"Remind me of something, would you? If I ever land on the moon, please remind me to play Moonlight Sonata during the descent," he said with a mischievous grin.

“Oh my God, that’d be epic!” She said while laughing.

"But, as you were saying, not all moon landings are equally significant?"

“This is a special moment in time,” She said, “a moment in which we’ve shot ourselves past the thin blue atmosphere of our planet out to the bottomless pit of space. Although stepping foot on the moon will always be impressive to most people, it may happen at a point in history that is less romantic than Beethoven’s, or ours.”

“So what you’re saying is that we have to remember this isn’t just about comparing moments but also about what it would be like to live during that period of time.”

“Precisely,” She said. “If you had more time to think about it before making your decision you might have chosen your virginity because you have the possibility today to not only fly like a bird but to sail yourself to the moon.”

“Can I take it back?” He asked with a grin.

“Nope,” she said with a giggle, “it's already done. You have to live with your choice forever now.”

With a gentle smile, Pangloss leaned in and their lips met in a soft, tender kiss. His hand softly cupped the side of her face as their lips moved in a slow, deliberate dance.

"I have one more choice for you, Professor," she murmured, her lips still brushing against his.

"I thought you said it was already decided," he quipped.

"Well, not exactly," she replied. "There's still one more thing to consider."

Robin looked deeply into Pangloss's eyes and asked, "What about Moonlight Sonata and this moment with me tonight? Which one would you choose?"

Pangloss closed his eyes, a wave of emotion washing over him. Tears began streaming down his cheeks, and when he opened his eyes, he saw that tears were running down Robin's face as well. He gently moved a strand of hair away from her face, then pulled her in closer. They lay there in silence, their eyes locked, the dim light casting a soft glow on Robin's fire-blue eyes.

"So, I take it you enjoyed tonight?" Robin asked softly, her voice a gentle whisper.

Choking back tears, Pangloss laughed and replied, "More than anything."

"I'm glad!" she exclaimed as she bit her lip playfully. "From now on, you have a benchmark to compare every other moment," she said softly. "I'm always imagining how to create moments in this life that I would choose over that beautiful moment - the moment when Beethoven's surgical blade began reshaping humanity's perception of beauty."

"Well, you're doing a fantastic job," he said.

"Thank you," she replied, her tone playful and light. "And now I think it's time."

“Time for what?” He asked.

She paused for a moment choosing her words. "We're already dead professor, you and I.” she said with a mysterious tone. “So why don't we just start over?"

"I'd start over with you," he replied with a sincere look in his eyes.

"I'm glad you said that," she said, then gave him a playful peck on the lips. "Wait here, I'll be right back."

### Moonlight Sonata Playing on Record Player

As she got up from the bed Pangloss held onto her hand, reluctant to let go of the tips of her fingers until she had moved too far away for him to hold on any longer. Her footsteps echoed softly down the hallway to the dance floor as she walked. Pangloss laid on the bed quietly listening to the distant sounds of her rustling about, his mind conjuring up images of what she might be searching for.

After a few moments of silence, he heard the distinct pop of a turntable needle being placed on a record. The room filled with the soft, crackling sound of the needle finding its groove, followed by the somber, haunting sounds of a piano.

When Robin returned to the doorway, she paused for a moment, her silhouette striking a perfect pose in the darkness, showcasing her elegant curves and beautiful form, all draped in shadows. She now wore a Cleopatra wig with short bangs and medium-length straight black hair. In a deliberate, seductive pose, she held a piece of paper in one hand and a lit cigarette in the other, smoke trailing behind her. In that moment, as the somber sound of Beethoven echoed down the hallway, Pangloss thought to himself that Robin must be the most beautiful woman he had ever laid eyes on.

"There we are,” she said, her voice drifting down the hallway carrying with it a hint of mystery “'Sonata quasi una fantasia.' That's the original name if you didn't know. We have to set the scene, professor, if this spell is going to work."

"A spell?" He asked with a hint of surprise.

"Yes, of course! How else did you think we'd be able to travel back in time? Travel to see Beethoven with our own two eyes?" she responded with a hint of amusement, taking a slow, deliberate drag from her cigarette, the smoke curling around her words.

The professor laughed a little, but the laughter quickly faded as a strange feeling gripped him. He realized it wasn't just the mushrooms; there was something in her voice that suggested this was no mere joke. His heart raced, and his mind began to entertain the possibility that he had truly experienced something ‘real’ tonight—something beyond the reach of words.

"As I recite these words, listen closely to the music," she instructed, her voice taking on a rhythmic, almost hypnotic quality, the smoke from her cigarette swirling around her. With a slow exhale, she began:

The sundial's shadow,

But in reverse,  
Sailing time's ocean,

To hear it first.

The moon's cold light,

Fate's ghostly keys,  
The whispers of sorrow

On night's somber breeze.

The lines once straight,

We must now bend,  
To dream this dream

Which waking will not end.

As she finished, she moved towards him with a grace that seemed almost supernatural. Her silhouette glided through the dark hallway, weaving in and out of shadows, tracers trailing behind her like spectral companions. It was as if alternate versions of her from different dimensions had converged in this moment, dancing in perfect harmony with the haunting, echoing melody of the piano and the ghostly spirals of smoke from her cigarette.

### Tantric Sex

"Now, I want to introduce you to the practice of Yab-Yum," she purred seductively, her voice a velvety caress. She flicked the cigarette away as she approached the bed, her movements fluid and graceful. Pangloss couldn't help but notice a subtle transformation. With her black wig framing her face like Uma Thurman and the music filling the room, she exuded a power and grace that left him spellbound. There was a palpable shift in her demeanor as she shed her previous self and embraced a new persona, leaving Pangloss feeling as though he was in the presence of someone completely different.

“Is that buddhism?” He asked.

“Yes, specifically the tradition of tantric sexual practice.” She replied, “Come sit with me here and I will guide your body.”

Robin sat down in the middle of the bed and Pangloss joined her.

"Sit up straight and cross your legs," she softly commanded, the sounds of the piano still filling the room as Pangloss moved into position. Robin then sat in his lap, wrapped her legs around his waist, and draped her arms around his shoulders.

“Now put your arms around my waist” she said in a soothing tone. “Yab-yum symbolizes the sacred union of Masculine and Feminine.” She explained, “Prajna or the feminin represents wisdom," she said while looking deeply into his eyes. “And upaya, the masculine, represents compassion.”

Pangloss nodded in understanding as she continued.

“Your lingam” she said as she reached down and softly held his penis in her hand, “must enter my yoni and we must weave together wisdom with compassion in order to escape maya - the illusion which binds us to this reality.”

As the energy surged within him once more, Pangloss could feel himself becoming erect in her hand.

"Breathe with me," she said. "Breathe in and hold…"

They both took in a slow, deep breath that filled their lungs and expanded their diaphragms. She continued to softly hold his erect penis in her hand as the connection between them intensified.

“Now release your breath.” She said as she slowly exhaled.

With a deliberate, yet tender motion, she guided his lingam into her yoni, their bodies melding together. As she swayed her hips, the tendrils of energy that were coiled at the base of his spine now unfurled again, weaving their way up his lingam and into her body. He could feel the energy pulling from within as he imagined the spirals of energy entwining themselves around her spine, joining them in a spiritual union. The soft, melodic sound of the piano played in the background as she swayed. With another soft command, she told him once again to breathe in.

"Hold," she said as they held their breath again, motionless, the tension in their bodies palpable. "Now let go," she whispered, and as they exhaled, the tension seemed to evaporate with their breath. Pangloss felt entranced by her voice and the sound of the piano, instinctively responding to her touch and breathing in sync with the rise and fall of her chest. It seemed as though time stood still as they breathed together and Robin rocked her hips against him.

Suddenly, in the corner of his eye, he noticed the silhouette of a person standing in the doorway of the dancefloor. His heart quickened as he turned to see Robin standing there again, cigarette in hand. Her body was poised just as it had been a few moments before, and the mysterious figure in the doorway began reciting the spell once more.

*“The sundial’s shadow, but in reverse…”*

"Do you see that?" he said, looking back at Robin, who still gently rocked against him.

"See what, my dear?" she replied softly, her voice unattached yet thoughtful.

He turned back, but she was gone. "You were standing in the doorway again, reciting the poem," he said, his tone a mix of confusion and awe.

Robin's smile was slow and knowing, her eyes closed as she continued to move with him in smooth, deliberate motions. "Hmmm," she hummed, her voice a dark, seductive murmur. "It sounds like the magic is working."

"That's supposed to happen?" he asked, his expression uncertain.

"Nothing is *supposed* to happen, my love," she murmured, her voice a soft, low groan as the piano notes flowed seamlessly through the room. As she rocked against him, each chord seemed to linger in the air, gently fading away. "Focus on my chalice, my yoni. Feel the connection as we breathe together," she said, cupping his face and softly turning his head to look her in the eyes once more. As he stared into her eyes, it felt as though he was sinking deep into their depths. His lingam pulsed harder, his heart overflowing with love as the room seemed to disappear around them once more.

"When the magic starts, Professor," she whispered softly, still rocking with him, "time becomes more like a feeling. Like an emotion. It's possible to become unstuck from that feeling and join your soul with another."

"I see," he replied, not fully understanding but trusting her voice and her guidance.

"We must remove ourselves from the illusion of time," she whispered, her voice a soft, hypnotic murmur as the piano notes tumbled out in a cascade of sound that filled the room with its intensity.

"*Sailing time's ocean, to hear it first…*" Pangloss heard the voice again and in an instant saw her apparition once more, standing in the doorway, the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

"Focus on the base of your spine," she whispered in his ear, and he turned to look at Robin again, her body rocking against his, filling him with warmth and pleasure.

"How…" he began, his voice trailing off.

"Don't worry about that," she said softly, interrupting him. "Focus on your breath and the feeling inside as your compassion weaves itself into my wisdom, and we leave this illusion behind us, together."

### Vienna

He closed his eyes again, and like a whisper, he could hear her voice reciting the words. *"The lines once straight, We must now bend…"* He felt Robin's skin against his and he tried to focus his mind on the feeling emanating from inside him. The feeling that bound him to her. The feeling that merged their souls together. Lost in her embrace, the illusion of the room began to fade entirely even as he could still hear the ghostly voice softly repeating its mantra. The walls dissolved into a swirling kaleidoscope of color, the ceiling disappearing to reveal a starlit sky. They were floating in space, weightless, free.

In the background, the haunting notes of the piano fell like gentle raindrops, each drop nourishing the desert of his soul. The music flowed around them like a river, carrying them away softly on its current.

The ghostly voice filled the space around them again this time in all directions, like echoing whispers that danced in the starlight. "*To dream this dream, which waking will not end,"* it whispered.

Robin leaned in close, holding his face between her hands and pressing her forehead against his own. "Come with me, my love," she whispered, her breath warm against his skin. "Vienna is where we belong."