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Strings of Perception

Eben woke up under the lavender hue. Being conscious was something he'd wanted to relinquish these past two weeks. He hadn't known himself to know himself, knowing he could never really know how he knew himself. He was confused. Sitting adjacent to his apartment door, he stretched, pressing the back of his hand to his face, taking in a vast volume of crisp morning air and letting out a sigh. Silence blanketed the world like a heavy fog. Trees and leaves hung limp, unmoving in the still air. The temperature invited the sweet smell of spring newly emerged from the winter. In the past he would have felt the rumble of the city through the concrete medium on which he sat, but now, in place of that vibrant hum of activity, stood a calm lifelessness. His eyes felt heavy, as though he had slept the entire day away. The void had halted. Perhaps he'd wished it.

"Well, look who's awake, about time, sleepy head," a woman calls out to him, perched on top of the balcony ledge. He recognizes her voice, like a melody played on distant strings, only it seems slightly off. Eben rambles a bit in confusion: "Oh sorry, uh... wait, why am I, where... what was I?" He lifts his gaze up to the speaker. He recognizes her—his neighbor Calla, his nephew's teacher. Her upfront interaction felt

like a bad horror movie jumpscare. He was left a bit surprised and confused. Before now, they have mostly kept their interactions to a passing hello.

“I’m here to make sure you are all caught up on the ins and outs of our little world, and oh ya, welcome! You’re Evan, right? From down the hall, oh, your little nephew mentions you all the time in my class.” Calla drops down from the ledge she was sitting on and leans in to inspect Eben. Her face contorts into the manic curiosity of a rare stone enjoyer happening upon a very rare stone of sorts.

They call themselves a 'mani' here. A manifestation of one's perception of another, fixed with either an 'O' or a 'me'—one's perception of someone else or one's perception of oneself, respectively.

“Oh wow, you’re a mani-me, aren’t you? You don’t seem like the rest of your own mani-o’s,” she asks him.

Eben adjusts himself up against the concrete wall and replies, “Calla, where did you come from? And what are you talking about? And wait, what did you call me?

“What? Evan?” she asks.

“No, the other thing, but also, it’s Eben, not Evan,” he implies.

She gives a slight chuckle and says, “I’m joking, of course. I know all about you, Mr. Ebenezer, or at least how the others perceive you. It’s kind of strange we haven’t seen your mani-me up here yet.

“But, no need to worry,” she interjects, “I had a feeling a new mani was about to arrive. I saw that the sky had blackened just a bit. A mystery indeed.” She scrunched her nose as she looked up. “When someone is newly manifested here, the sky changes color oh so slightly for just a second. We call it yunson. We’re not sure why, but most of us feel

it represents their spirit in some capacity or their present situation when it comes to mani-me's. But I've never seen it blacken like that before."

Eben glances at Calla, eyes wide, face frozen in perpetual thought. With so much swirling in his mind, he can't grasp what to say next. He asks her about the yunson.

"Wait, you said mine was the first to blacken like that. Is that bad?"

She scoffs and swats at the air, "Eh, it's probably fine. Here, color symbolizes a ton of things. I wouldn't worry about that; that's more for you to figure out. But first thing first, let me actually introduce myself." She gestures toward herself.

"I'm one of Calla's mani-os. Given my memories, I was brought here by your nephew, and oh man, does he have some high hopes for you. You should meet your mani-o he brought here. He's quite the guy. But enough about that. I'm sure you have a ton of questions.

Eben dusts off his pants as he stands up from the floor. He pauses momentarily to calm the storm of racing thoughts in his head. He strokes his brow. His face scrunches in perplexion. "Alright," he looks at his watch. 8:12 am is displayed on the dial. The usual time he's off to work. He turns and continues muttering to himself. "Did I actually die this time? I don't remember dying. Is it just like falling asleep? I never remember anything before falling asleep, only the part where I woke up. It's not like I wanted to fall asleep, but I guess I'm not that regretful.

Professor Calla snaps her fingers. "Hey... hey! Pay attention. You're not dead, alright."

"If I'm not dead, and this isn't a dream, then what the fuck happened to me?"

"Hey, I get your confusion. We've all been there. This world is pretty strange, I know. It's a bit hard to explain, but I'll put it this way. Yes, you could theoretically sit

here and say oh, none of this is real, but that's pretty shallow, in my opinion.

Fundamentally, this world of ours is just a piece of fabric woven together by strings of relationships we share with one another. Everyone here is brought here by people who know each other. Who interact on the day-to-day. Whether that be friends, family, teachers, neighbors, or what have you. We're a community born from the perceptions of ourselves and one another. Through those perceptions, we are manifested here. We are manifests, mani's for short. Mani-me's like yourself manifest from self-perception and are inherently most closely intertwined with the real you. Though it's tricky, sometimes your self-perceptions vary wildly from the real you or your own mani-o's, and that's often why they are manifested here. For you to get to know the mani-o's, other's perceptions of you personified, it's much easier to reconcile who you truly are or want to be. Isn't that so cool! Well, at least that's my theory; some others think differently, but that's not important right now. The real Eben probably isn't aware of you, or any of us here for that matter."

Eben cuts her off, "Yeah all of that is cool and all, but I think I'm about ready to head out and see what the hell it is you're talking about." Eben begins walking down the outside balcony toward the stairs. Professor Calla yells and catches up to him.

She stops him just before the stairway, "Hold up Eben, I don't know why some people manifest themselves here, but I'm certain it's for a reason. Just be careful. Sometimes, you don't quite realize when someone's nearing a cliff, even when that someone is you. I hope you get it figured out. I have some stuff to do right now, but in the meantime, you should meet up with some of the others to see if they can help. I'll meet up with you soon. Good luck."

“Yeah, uh, thanks for helping; I appreciate it.” Eben raises his hand and extends out for a handshake, each move hesitant and rigid.

Calla laughs and returns the gesture. “I’ll see ya later.” Eben continues down to the courtyard. As he enters the courtyard, a distant yell from across the way pierces through the silence. Eben spots a figure.

“Yooo Ebenezer, my man, where you off... hold up, you seem different. Where’s big-E, you’re not my, huh? You’re not Calla’s either, and the hell if you’re granny Phee’s, I’d know before you’d even touch the lawn. who brought you here?” The figure striding towards Eben is unmistakably his neighbor Danny, or rather if Calla’s correct, the way Danny sees himself. Taller, with a swagger in his step, a grin that's too confident to be true, and an aura that seems to demand attention. “This guy’s got to be his mani-me. No way anyone else would paint him like this.” Eben thought to himself.

Eben can't help but compare the mani-me before him with the Danny he knows. Sure, Danny is a decent guy, a cool neighbor to have a beer with once in a while to watch the game, but hell, he's nowhere near this magnified.

“Hey Danny, I’m just me. If all this is actually real, then I guess I brought me here somehow. I was actually wondering if you could help me figure that out.” Eben replied in a shaky, uncertain tone.

Danny burst out laughing, the sound jarring in the otherwise tranquil setting. “What!? Shut the fuck up, you're his mani-me? About damn time you got here. I’ve been dying to see ya. And well,” he paused, eyeing Eben critically, “I’m not sure I can help ya out there, buddy. I still haven’t found that out for myself. I’m sure Calla talked to you by now. She was all over my ‘yunson’ or whatever they call it. She was all amazed that it was gold. She could have a spin on my yunson if you know what I’m saying.” Danny was

laughing again, jostling Eben on the shoulder. Eben returned an uncomfortable chuckle in appeasement. Eben was sort of amazed at how easily this guy could make himself cry laughing.

Danny gathered himself. "Huhhh, well, if you're really his mani-me, that's kind of depressing, not gonna lie. I mean, there's always a chance for mani-me's like ourselves to change, but, well, I was kind of hoping for a better start."

Eben bristled at the thought of being judged by a guy like him. "Wow, thanks,"

"God, you gotta meet my mani-O of you. We call him big-E he's great." Danny insisted.

Eben could only imagine. Most of the time spent with Danny is only tolerable after a few drinks. Right now does not seem like a good time to meet that version of himself. "Great, can't wait," he said, backing away slowly. "But really gotta go. I think I'm needed in this... general direction," he added, pointing vaguely away from Danny.

"Oh no, ya don't come here ya fucker, you just got here," Danny says as he exasperably swipes at the air in his direction. "What? You don't think I'm gonna show my pal a good time? C'mon, me and the gang are about to have in on some poker." Danny grasps Eben by his neck and aggressively pulls him toward a smaller building off to the side. Eben recognizes it. It's the detached laundry room, sat at the side of the building. They enter the building. Washers and dryers line the sides as you'd expect. However, there's a pale door on the far side of the wall. Eben notices this and observes Danny going up and knocking on this strange passageway.

Knock Knock!

"Get ye ass in here, Danny. I know it's you!"

The voice came from a small room behind the door. To Eben, it sounded familiar but had more life to it. They both walk in. Awaiting them is quite the crowd.

Before them lay a round poker table with seven seats around it. Four of them were currently occupied, and seated in the middle was Granny Phee's Mani-me. Eben noticed this immediately; she looked half her age, energetic, and he had to admit it, not so bad looking. Just to the left sat the delivery driver for our complex. Judging by his overexaggerated physic and overly tight jumper, Eben guessed that it was Granny Phee's mani-O of him. His name was Jeff. She would always use her sweet old lady charm on him whenever she ordered her cat litter. Something else was sitting there to the left of him that jolted Eben's focus—a skeleton. There was a whole skeleton, except it was moving and talking. Its raspy voice scraped through Eben's body. Eben was a little amazed at how quickly he accepted this fact. Just to the right of Granny Phee, Eben noticed a different Calla. Eben couldn't help but take note of her charm. Her curly brown hair bounced graciously over her shoulders as she twirled it into a spiral. She was the first to notice Eben. Her bright blue eyes sparkled with curiosity as she met his gaze. As the two made their presence known to the group, Granny Phee took an interest.

“Good lord, do my eyes deceive me! I was wondering when you'd show up darling. Come here right now!” She says as she throws her cards on the table gets up and greets Eben with a hearty embrace.

“Holy hell, granny, someone's been getting their steps in. You look fantastic.” Eben's voice rose in genuine surprise.

“Oh now, now, you know what they say. I may be old as dirt, but I'm still young at heart.”

Danny outstretched his arms in protest. “What, Granny Phee, none for me?”

“Danny, you have three seconds to get away from me or I swear on all that’s good and holy, I will knock you back to the real world.”

Danny folded his arms to his heart. “Ahh, Love you too, Granny.”

“Alright, now have yourselves a seat. Join in on the game.” Granny yelled out.

Like nails on a chalkboard, the skeleton’s raspy voice chimed, “Good fuckin luck, we’ve played hundreds of games, and we can’t win shit. Granny’s got one hell of a poker face. And that’s coming from a girl with no face, for god’s sake.”

They all proceeded to take their seats. Eben chose wisely to sit next to this new Calla instead of the slightly disturbing side with the skeleton and hunky Jeff.

“Oh, silly me,” Granny’s arms fell to the table as she apologized. “I completely forgot to introduce everyone. Eben, Danny, these are my mani-O’s of Jeff and Calla, or as I call her ‘Bones.’ The real me is quite the delusional old lady apparently I thought Calla died a year ago. I might have mixed her up with someone else, but I forget who. Oh well... where was I why? Oh ya, Eben, here’s your mani-O of Calla. She’s such a sweet little thing.”

This takes Eben a bit by surprise, as he becomes a little red in the face. Granny then takes the deck and clears her throat. “Ehem, alright, that’s enough chit-chat for now. Let’s get this show on the road.”

The game ensues.

Granny Phee deals out the cards with what seems like expert precision and effortless grace. The dimly lit laundry room began to serve as a small refuge in Eben’s mind. It felt real. With the exception of Bones getting the shit hand every round, this all began to feel real for the first time in a long while. Eben felt no pain. His head was clear, no more anxiety, no more dependence. He felt free. The game went on, and Bones was

right. How did Granny Phee get so lucky, a royal flush? She just won the last round with a high card.

“Oh, so sorry, Jeff. Better luck next time!” Granny Phee taunted as she siphoned her chips.

“This is crazy. I can’t even win with four of a kind. This is some kind of witchcraft.” Jeff retorts.

Was it this world? As the game progressed, Eben’s memories slowly returned. A small lamp illuminated the small, dark room. An empty pill bottle sat on the nightstand. An open letter just beside it. There were no photos on the wall. There was only a cut-out piece of paper hung up by tape. A drawing of two red-colored cylindrical animals with four legs and two eyes. They were blasting off on rockets from a green-colored house with two candy canes on the front. A drawing from his nephew. He hadn’t taken it down yet.

“I’m all in,” Eben proclaimed. An uneasy silence fell over the table. The air thickened with tension.

Bones folded first, “fuck this, I’m out. Couldn’t we have played something fun like Guess Who?”

“I’m out”

“Ya, I got nothing, me too.”

“Me three,” Calla pronounced. That was about the most words she’s spoken all game.

Granny Phee locked eyes with Eben. Eben did not move a fiber of muscle in his face. He was determined to win.

“Ah fuck it, can’t win ‘em all, I fold,” Granny Phee slapped her cards down. A two-pair. Eben revealed his hand. A two-seven offsuit. The room gave a collective gasp.

“Haha, would you look at that? You had me fooled,” Granny said with a laugh.

“I guess I have a way of doing that.” Eben muddled to himself.

Knock, knock! Before anyone could react, there was a loud crash as the door flew open, and someone stumbled into the room.

“Big-E, where ya been? It’s about time your dumbass showed up!” Danny hollered at the man.

“Oh, for heaven's sake, Jeff! Honey, could you help me get him out of here? We’re just about done anyway,” Granny says as she stands up and makes her way to the intruder.

“Ok, I’ll see y’all later. It was nice meeting you. I think I’ll just head out for a walk.” Eben says to the remaining table members.

“Sounds good bro. I’ll catch ya later.”

“See ya.”

“Bye, it was nice meeting you.”

Eben uses the commotion to slip away back outside.

Eben walked away, a bit relieved to put distance between all the noise. He meandered, seemingly without direction but inwardly seeking solace. The landscape unfurled around him. Bathed in the strange, liminal light that seemed to define this world—a lavender hue that cast everything in an otherworldly glow. The tranquility of the scene contrasted sharply with the thoughts in his mind, the pervasive weight of his

recent encounters. He continued navigating the ethereal terrain, mirroring his real world in an inverted sense.

He happened upon the bottom of a hill. The unkempt foliage birthed from the hillside had no sway. Absent was the gentle push offered by the lightest breeze. He recognized the hillside, with its steep, windy path, woving around its gentle curves. It gave way to some of the best views of the valley below. He remembered he would come here often to cleanse his mind of trouble.

The atmosphere was calm and peaceful. No noise, no distraction, no wind, no rain. Simply calm. He came upon a bench just near the path going up the hill. Placed beneath a beautiful tree, looking out over the valley. It hosted a vibrant, dense array of tall trees stretching far and wide. He sat there, taking in his surroundings' breathtaking views and serenity. However, his mind drifted back to his previous interaction. As he sat there, Eben's thoughts churned. Eben sat on the bench, lost in the tranquility of his surroundings, yet his mind was still corrupted. He still didn't feel closer to reconciling himself.

Eben noticed a figure walking down the hill. It was him in likeness, yet it felt very uncanny. Mimicking Eben's form but not his essence. "This must be one of them," he thought.

"Hey, I heard you were new in town. I knew I'd find you eventually," the man said. "You mind if I join you?" the man gestured to the empty space on the bench.

"Sure. Who, well, you're me, but uh, who brought you here?" Eben asked the man. "Granny Phee, of course." the man chuckles, "Man, isn't she something? You

know, the funny thing is, you'll only manage to find two of them here. Everyone perceives her as the sweet old lady she is, so she only has one mani-o. Well, as you know, her mani-me is still here. She still refuses to accept her age. Such a fiery spirit that one."

"Ya, I could definitely tell down there, but is that really the reason she's still here? Eben asked

"Uh, well I guess it could be. People manifest themselves here all the time, problems big or small, but Granny, she's been here for a while now. When she arrived, her yunson was sort of a mustard yellow. Quite befitting honestly, not a particularly graceful color, but strong and assertive nonetheless. It's such a complex color, and most of us realize the dullness of it could represent a sort of loneliness. She's such an open book that one, but rarely does she ever bring up her own family. It's a shame."

Eben lets out a deep sigh, "I.."

"Ya, know actually, we haven't seen you here, ever. Why do you think you were manifested here Eben, If you're so subconsciously reluctant to be here, what has driven you here now all of a sudden? Even if you are not technically the real Eben, a personification of one's own perception still carries the memories, wants, needs, and desires with them. Being a Mani-O, I have no real connection to the living person they perceive. We Mani-o's we live here, This is our home. We don't carry a desire to leave." The man exclaims.

Eben interlocks his hands, staring at the grass below. He counted the endless blades of still green. Blending into each other. No one is more significant than the other. How human we all are.

“I remember. I’ve always spent so much time on my own, trying to figure out what it is that holds weight on me.”

“You come up here often in your own world, don’t you? When you come here to look outward onto the valley, your mind eventually falters. You look inward instead. No?”

The man asks.

“Sure, and where does it ever get me? It’s pretty much just a waste of time.” Eben replied.

“Perhaps. You can spend a lifetime looking inward, but without the help of someone else’s perspective, it’s a lost cause.” The man suggests. “Granny Phee refuses to open up a certain part of her life. It causes her pain. Danny refuses to meet with any other mani-O’s of himself. He’s confident in himself, but he’s blind to recognizing how others view him. They don’t quite understand that their battles are not to be fought alone. If they don’t learn to open up, they aren’t any closer to leaving this place than you are.

The corner of Eben’s lip started to curve upward, his tongue straining against the roof of his mouth. “I try,” he says. I really do. I try so hard not to end up like my father.”

“We here only know the things we perceive of each other. There’s a lot I don’t know about you. Granny Phee shares so much with you, but you never reciprocate that. I’m curious about your father if you don’t mind my asking.”

“Well, I don’t know much about him. He died when I was real young. My mom never really talked about it much. But I learned he died of addiction. I’m starting to think that’s why I’m here.

“Is that why you’re here. After you learned of this?” The man asks him.

“No, that’s not it. I learned that a while back. I started to remember some things just before I got here. It’s a bit fuzzy, but I’m afraid I’ve finally caught up with him. I’ve worked incredibly hard to be better than him, but over the past year, I feel like I finally understand him. That’s what terrifies me. All because of my job, I pushed myself too hard. I injured myself pretty badly on the job. It was excruciating, and I found relief in the pills.”

“Who’s setting these expectations?” asked the man.

“Me, I guess,” Eben replied.

“I just feel like, at least for me, I mean... No one in my life ever pushed me. Motivated me. Set the stakes. I never had a goal to reach, never a bar to raise. Whatever effort I put in was always good enough, but I saw people around me achieving things that seemed unreachable to me without that push, and I grew tired of it. So I put that burden on myself.” Exclaimed Eben. “I feel guilty for wanting criticism and not appreciating the unconditional support.”

“That guilt comes from comparison. You’re trying too hard to see your own problems from the perspective of others.”

“When my Nephew visits, I do the best I can to show him how to be his best self, even if that means pretending to be my best self.”

“You care deeply, Eben, and that’s a strength, not a weakness. But caring doesn’t mean you have to carry the weight of everyone’s expectations, nor does it mean negating your

own needs and desires. It's about finding a balance, understanding that while you value others' perceptions, your self-worth isn't solely defined by them. I think you need forgiveness. Not from anyone else but from yourself. Your body has healed, but you continue to poison your spirit."

"I had a feeling that's why I'm here. I don't have much time left if I can't stop. I'll just end up like him soon." Eben says

Eben turns back to face the man. "What about Calla? Why is she here? Or wait, is she here? I haven't seen her mani-me yet."

"Oh she's here, she arrived a little while before you. She's a teacher, that alone comes with it's own inherit challenges. Especially now a days. At least we think that's why she's here, I don't see her around much. I remember her yunson was teal. Take that as you will." The man replies.

"Interesting," Eben says.

Another figure emerged from the bottom of the hill. It was Teacher Calla again. "Oh hey guys, thought I'd catch up to y'all eventually. What ya been chatting about? Mind if I join?" She says after already taking the empty space on the bench.

"Hey Eben, I managed to track down Calla's mani-me," she informs him. He shutters a bit at this information. "You're nephew, he misses you, and you know... your mom..."

"I get it. You don't need to..."

The man cut him off. “We’re not the ones you need to open up to, Eben. If you keep fighting this battle alone, ashamed of what the people closest to you will think of you, you’re going to lose. You already know what they think of you now. Do you not see it in me, for Christ's sake? If you don’t let them in and let them see you at your lowest, then you won’t be there, and that will be all that’s left for them. That’s how they would perceive you.”

Calla chimed in hastily to the man, “C’mon, you don’t need to be that harsh.”

“It’s fine,” Eben announced in a weary tone. “He’s right. I held such disgust for my father leaving us in such a selfish way. I thought If they’d see me like this, they’d only think the same.”

Calla leans in, “We can bring you your Nephew’s perception, but I know you don’t need to see it. I believe you know who it is. If you open up, I promise, he will be the same man, perhaps even stronger.” She insists.

Eben stands up and looks back out over the valley.

His nose starts to burn. Thick smoke occupies the once-sweet fragrance of spring. Heat slowly begins to culminate around them. The speed of induction is slow but powerful. Like a fiery snowfall, embers begin to rise and fall. The tree beside them, the trees in the valley below, the tall grass around them, and the tall grass siding the hill, once still and unmoving, now breathe life. Life, energy taken, the energy given, until death, until nothingness, until ash. The silence now roared with the crackling of vibrant action opposed by the force of inaction. Eben hears them from behind.

“The sky, now red and purple, it makes magenta. It’s a nice color. It doesn’t even have its own wavelength. It’s associated with harmony and emotional balance.” The man announces.

Eben turns back to the two. They sit in contemplation.

They both looked up at him, their motions eerily in sync. They lock their gaze unto him again in contemplation for a bit. The man turns to Calla.

“This is sort of like when his nephew’s mani-me left, It rained for days, we were flooded for a while.” The man said.

“Ya I remember, but blue and purple, it mixed into a sort of periwinkle yunson, a blueish-purple. It had a dreamy quality to it. His nephew had fortified his dreams for the future it seemed. I’m not sure what decision Eben made though.” Calla said to the man. The man then turned back to Eben.

Eben announced in a strong voice, “Magenta, a color of change and harmony, thank you.”

"We're more than the sum of our perceptions," The man said.

"And less confined by them than we thought," she added.

Before Eben could muster a reply, the fire roared around him, engulfing the two in front of him. He closed his eyes. He felt the blazing heat of the fire on his face, and silence followed.

Eben felt the warmth of the sun on his face, the breeze in his hair, and the sound of birds singing. His watch read 5:05 pm. He remembers hiking up the hill to clear his head after a particularly monotonous day at work. For some reason, he feels lighter and content. There's no one around. No thoughts to shout at him. He had only mind for one thing. "What a beautiful view."