Infohazards

a scene for four people.

INT. PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE

The PRINCIPAL (warm, full of human concern but pragmatic) walks from his desk to the window. Outside a violent thunderstorm rages. A child, MORGAN (shaken and frail, wearing a uniform) sits with his hands crossed in his lap.

PRINCIPAL

Good lord. What a storm.

A knock at the door.

PRINCIPAL (CONT'D)

Yes!

A child, PHINUIT (unnervingly calm, a genius, wearing the same uniform as Morgan), and his father, GRAY (a businesslike old money type), enter.

PRINCIPAL (CONT'D)

Oh, yes, welcome in.

Morgan stands.

MORGAN

Hello Phinuit.

PHINUIT

Hello Morgan.

Morgan puts a hand out to be shaken. Phinuit takes it lightly, without a shake, and drifts off to stare out the window. Rain beats against the glass. Gray shakes the principal's hand and sits down opposite him.

GRAY

So, what is it you needed to speak to my son and I about?

MORGAN

(meekly)

And me.

GRAY

Yes, and you, Morgan.

PRINCIPAL

Er, all of you, yes. It's about Phinuit's behavior yesterday--perhaps he's told you?

Gray takes a notepad and pen from inside jacket pocket. Laying this on his lap, he then removes and dons a pair of reading glasses from breast pocket. He flips a sheet or two back.

GRAY

Hm. Yesterday? No, I haven't got anything for that.

Removes glasses and looks up at Principal.

PRINCIPAL

Well, it came to us that your Phinuit was going around to his classmates ... they're quite impressionable you see ... going around and telling them things. Tales, tall tales, you know. But he's really spooked some of them.

Phinuit snickers.

Gray, nodding, performs the whole operation again to take a note in his notebook, as he will do periodically through the conversation hereforward.

GRAY

Tall tales?

PRINCIPAL

Ghouls, you know, monsters, demons, witches. Wickedness!

Morgan shivers. A distant thunderclap. Phinuit clicks his tongue and shakes his head.

GRAY

Phinuit? Have you really been selling this nonsense?

PHINUIT

(scoffing)

I deal in sense alone. And I do not sell it; I give it freely. Ask Morgan.

PRINCIPAL

Morgan?

MORGAN

He told no tales.

GRAY

Then what scared you so, boy?

Something worse than any tale.

GRAY

Worse than tales?

Phinuit looks out the window as lightning flashes outside.

PRINCIPAL

(sighs)

As I understand it, your Phinuit has been telling his classmates that the scariest thing you can imagine is real.
Thunderclap.

GRAY

How's that, Phinuit? The scariest thing you can imagine is real?

Phinuit turns from the window toward them.

PHINUIT

I can prove it, if you'll let me.

GRAY

Young man I should hope you can.

MORGAN

You will wish you hadn't.

PHINUIT

Principal, a cigarette please. For the demonstration.

Principal hesitates, but produces one from a box on the desk. Phinuit takes it and begins smoking, opening the window now and then to blow smoke out. Water sprays in and wind whips the curtains. When not smoking he paces the room.

PHINUIT (CONT'D)

Imagine, if you will, the scariest thing you can. The specifics will vary for each of you.

MORGAN

(distressed)

Mine has to do with a car.

PHINUIT

Fine. What's important is to form a clear and distinct idea: the idea of a scariest thing. Everyone got that?

Everyone nods. Gray takes a note.

PHINUIT (CONT'D)

Now we come to the heart of it. Whether this thing is real or not is a part of the idea of it. Let me explain.

(he pauses, weighing his
words)

Let's do it this way. Suppose, for the sake of contradiction, that the scariest thing you can imagine is not real. If that were true, it would be easy to think of something scarier: the same thing, only real. This is obviously a contradiction, a flaw for which only our faulty premise can be to blame. We must have started with something which was not as scary as possible -- ie., not with your well-formed imagined scariest thing. That thing, therefore, must be real. It's reality follows naturally from the quality of scariest-ness. Q.E.D.

Phinuit finishes his cigarette and flicks it at the trashcan.

PHINUIT (CONT'D)

Kobe! God I'm tired.

Phinuit lies down on his back on the floor. Principal strokes chin in thought. Gray too is using all his intellect to come up with an objection.

PRINCIPAL

Logic problem, eh? Let's see if I can figure that. In school they called me the Principal of Sufficient Reason! Ha! Alright.

(idea)

Suppose I'm scared by unreal objects?

GRAY

Yes, ha!, what then, boy!

PHINUIT

Gentlemen, two easy counters lie before me. But before that, let me point out, though I am not insulted: your argument is in bad faith.

(MORE)

PHINUIT (CONT'D)

There is nothing "scary" about any nonexistent entity: there is no possibility of entering into any relation therewith, let alone some relation that decomposes your own internal relations—and that, we all can see, is the structural description of scare-quality. But even—

PRINCIPAL

Well now, what about loss? Death? Disappearance?

GRAY

Yes, a lack, what about a lack?

PRINCIPAL

Allow me to finish and you shall see.

He waits.

PRINCIPAL (CONT'D)

Go ahead.

PHINUIT

Counter one: the same argument applies as in the positive case. Why? Because the nonexistence of some object--be it yourself, a lover, or the world entire--is not the absence of the existence of something, as we naively imagine, taking language at its word, but in fact something larger than and including the apparently absent object. Namely, it is the object plus the idea of its negation and the context in which that negation occurs. Hence nonexistence relies on and thus implies by priority the existence of that scariest thing. The argument does not shift. Now the second reason--

PRINCIPAL

I think one counter is enough, Phinuit--

GRAY

Hold on, Principal. I'd like to hear it.

I too.

Phinuit nods, grimacing. He sets to work again. These explanations are delivered with much condescension.

PHINUIT

Very well. The second reason: the nonexistence of some thing is scary only when, as we have shown, that thing exists and in fact is not scary itself. But of course the nonexistence can either be or not be, that is a part of its hidden positive construction described already. And so its positive being is again the fact that conditions the well-formedness of our "scariest idea." So equally we might have said "the scariest thing you can imagine NOT existing really does not exist."

GRAY

God damn.

Gray writes with vigor, nodding and shaking his head, scratching things out.

MORGAN

(to Gray)

The car I can imagine has no way to get in, no doors or windows.

GRAY

(looking up)

Eh? What's scary about that?

MORGAN shrugs like I don't know.

PRINCIPAL

But it has tires and a steering wheel and so on?

MORGAN

Tires, yes. Steering wheel, who knows? There's no way in.

(eyes go wide)

GRAY

What color is it?

The steering wheel? Hard to be sure--

PHINUIT

Principal, may I borrow your computer? For the demonstration?

Phinuit is propped up on an elbow on the floor.

PRINCIPAL

Isn't the demonstration over?

PHINUIT

I need your computer for the next part.

PRINCIPAL

I don't think so. It's low battery anyway.

Phinuit stands.

PHINUIT

Father, may I borrow your phone?

GRAY

Hm? Oh, no. I sold my passcode.

PHINUIT

You sold it?

GRAY

Yes. This orphanage isn't free, you know. And caring for you was never really my thing. When your mother passed ... on marrying me ... I became resentful of you and your costs. But I do what I can.

PRINCIPAL

Bah, there are no free orphanages and never will be. Grow up!

GRAY

Tell it to the boy!

PRINCIPAL

When both parents are in the picture, we operate on a sliding scale--

GRAY

Fallacy! I know a scam when I smell one, and I do: it's my nose I'm paying through.

Principal scoffs, annoyed with Gray.

PHINUIT

I like to think I do my part.

GRAY

Oh? When was the last time you actually *sold* one of those paper airplanes?

PHINUIT

When was the last time you sold a poem? I don't believe you about the passcode, by the way. Who bought it?

GRAY

(defensive)

An old woman!

PHINUIT

What does she want with a passcode?

GRAY

I don't know! She wouldn't tell me. That's economics.

PRINCIPAL

(mutters)

Number scavenger.

Principal leans back in chair, gets up and goes to the window.

PRINCIPAL (CONT'D)

A lot of drifters these days do it. Serial numbers, barcodes. Theres a big market for random numbers now. I've no idea. But there's something romantic about that lifestyle. Spend all day in the alleys of the hospital district, stripping digits from any discarded whatever...

GRAY

Phinuit, does that interest you? Perhaps I could set you up with one of these drifters as an apprentice? Phinuit walks over to the principal's desk and sits in his chair.

PHINUIT

Anything would be better than this place.

Principal nods forlornly looking out the window. Lightning strikes slowly.

GRAY

(excited, rubbing hands)
Suppose I found one who really
could use the help—some vagabond
with dyscalculia, like, bad with
figures. You would really consider
that? You promise?

Phinuit nods. He opens the principal's computer. Gray begins writing excitedly.

PRINCIPAL

Oh, that reminds me, Morgan, we were interrupted. The reason I called you here: your mathematics grades are rather in the proverbial toilet, you ... you know that?

MORGAN

Yes sir.

A slow thunderclap.

PRINCIPAL

Ah. There goes my only hypothesis. So what's up, little guy?

MORGAN

Well sir, perhaps if I were allowed to spend a bit less time stringing bead--

PRINCIPAL

Impossible. Those necklaces are just about the only thing in the gift shop that still sells.

MORGAN

Yes but this way the abacus makes my eyes cross--

PRINCIPAL

Enough. We cannot reduce your hours in the workshop. We could reduce your pay?

MORGAN

Pay?

PRINCIPAL

Ah, perhaps not. Business matters are the Abbott's concern anyway, not mine. There must be some ... (idea) tell me, Morgan, do you have a little sweetheart?

GRAY

Phinuit, suppose I am afraid of Hell not existing. Hell is scary, yet so is its nonexistence.

PHINUIT

And?

Morgan colors.

PRINCIPAL (CONT'D)

Actually--that's what I meant in the first place. What if I'm scared of something because it doesn't exist?

Suddenly a loud alarm noise disturbs everyone. It comes from the Principal's computer. Flashing lights light up Phinuit's face. He looks with horror and fascination at the screen. Gray looks up from his notebook.

PRINCIPAL (CONT'D)

ARGH! What did you do!

PHINUIT

I think you have a virus.

PRINCIPAL

(angry snap))

Of course I have a virus! But I've learned to live with it. If I keep it low battery, it won't flare up.

MORGAN

How did you get a virus, sir?

PRINCIPAL

Pirating music software. One night I was up looking for new wavetables and there was a section on the site I'd never noticed before: viruses. I couldn't resist.

GRAY

What kind of music do you make?

PRINCIPAL

Folk songwriter, orphanage-

PHINUIT

What does the virus do? What are all these images?

Morgan and Gray come around to the other side of the computer to look. There is a flashing stream of what seem to be family photos. Most include a woman, she's in her thirties and forties, depending on the picture. In between the photos the screen flashes red and a laughing skull gif overlay fades in and out.

PRINCIPAL

I don't know. The woman, her name is Marion. Some of the pictures you can see it. Like on a cake or a novelty check.

PHINUIT

Do you think you're supposed to find her?

PRINCIPAL

(chuckles))

No, no.

GRAY

(leaning in)

Oh ... my ... god!

(pause)

That's odd.

PRINCIPAL

Quite.

MORGAN

(astonishment)

Look, sir, she's just aged!

She looks older in this photo, maybe fifty-five. Her hair is almost completely gray. She poses with a rhinoceros she's shot.

GRAY

..Wow. She's strong.

PRINCIPAL

The photos aren't in age order. I've seen her as a teenager and as an old widow. There's a few baby pictures—phone pictures of color prints. The woman lead a lot of lives. She was at Abu Ghraib.

A photo of her younger at a drag show in Miami.

PRINCIPAL (CONT'D)

Yeah, Miami. Looks fun, but I think she was glad to leave.

A photo of her in the hospital, looking close to death, but only thirty or so years old.

PRINCIPAL (CONT'D)

This is when her twin died. Tragic, but ... I think it freed her in a way. It's a burden--oh.

A photo of a man, kind of hippie looking, handsome, dirty, playing the oud. Principal pulls an apple from desk and starts eating it.

GRAY

What's that?

PRINCIPAL

That's Bill.

GRAY

Lover?

PRINCIPAL

Oh yeah. Big time.

A photo of Bill in bed in the middle of a few other people. Covers drawn up to chin. All sweaty and laughing.

PRINCIPAL (CONT'D)

I never liked Bill.

PHINUIT

You're jealous.

PRINCIPAL

Of course I am. But he killed her twin.

GRAY

What?!

PHINUIT

Did you see him do it? Is there a picture?

A photo of her standing with an alligator she's shot with a giant trumpet gun.

MORGAN

Miami again, sir.

PRINCIPAL

Very good, Morgan. Uh, no. I didn't see him do it. But you get so much information you basically know.

GRAY

How can you be sure?

PRINCIPAL

It's not interesting to explain.

A photo on the great wall of china, she's in a racist get up.

GRAY

Aw man...

PRINCIPAL

Yikes. Different times. I believe that's Bill's influence anyway.

PHINUIT

(dreamlike, quiet)
He thought it was her.

GRAY

But that photo is dated 2040.

PRINCIPAL

Yes. It was her 50th birthday trip.

GRAY

In 2040?

Morgan looks down and begins counting on fingers. A photo of her, young, leaning against a car with no windows or doors appears.

PHINUIT

(dreamlike)

He thought it was her.

MORGAN

2040 is fifteen years in the future.

A photo of her in very old age standing with the corpse of an alien/robot. She holds a laser gun.

GRAY

No, fifty years from now would be 2075.

PRINCIPAL

Mm, so it is. Morgan, that reminds me, we will have to modify you with a chip—

PHINUIT

(loud)

He thought it was her!

GRAY

(roaring at Phinuit)
I said shut up!

PHINUIT

When?

PRINCIPAL

(awestruck)

Good god.

Computer goes black.

PRINCIPAL (CONT'D)

He thought it was her! Bill! He thought it was her! The twin! How did I miss that?

MORGAN

Computer died. Sir.

PRINCIPAL

Yes. It was low battery.

Principal shuts the computer slowly. Goes to the window again, shaking head. Lightning strikes nine times.

PHINUIT

She's alive still, the twin. You know it.

Eight thunderclaps. Principal winces tragically.

MORGAN

We must save her, sir.

PRINCIPAL

Morgan, goddamnit, how many times must I tell you? We need you in the workshop!

Another thunderclap.

GRAY

I can't go.

(all look over)

Sorry. I have responsibilities in town. Some other Brahmins and I are planning a research outing to Singapore and I am to take point.

Gray walks to the door.

PRINCIPAL

Very well, Mr. Choate. But before you go--

GRAY

Oh right, the boy! Phinuit, no more of these infernal prooves, you hear me?

PHINUIT

But father--

GRAY

No! I am your lawman and you will obey me. Or whatever worst consequence you can imagine will be real, oh-ho, I can promise you that.

PHINUIT

(bitterly)

Fine.

GRAY

(softer)

And I'll see about finding a vagabond for you.

Principal nods. Phinuit leans wearily against the wall. Gray goes over, pats his head, and then departs.

PHINUIT

I'm very weary.

PRINCIPAL

I, too, tire. So many visitors, so little time for me and my music.

So you really won't try and save her?

PRINCIPAL

Morgan. Not everything is for acting upon. And I may as well confess I'm fairly shaken still by Phinuit's proof. I'll think on it some more. What I need now is a good meal and some rest.

Morgan shakes head sadly.

PRINCIPAL (CONT'D)

Would you boys like to accompany me to the rectory?

The boys don't stir. Principal goes to the exit.

PRINCIPAL (CONT'D)

How about it, eh? It's so humid you may even be able to smell the food from outside.

No response. Morgan walks over to Phinuit and whispers something in his ear. Phinuit nods.

PRINCIPAL (CONT'D)

(awkwardly)

All right, well. I'll leave you to it. Good night.

The principal departs. There is a long moment of silence. Thunder, then lightning. Phinuit walks over to the desk, treating himself to a cigarette and holding out the open box toward Morgan, who shakes his head.

MORGAN

She'll die. Because of us.

PHINUIT

No, Morgan. She'll die. But not because of us.

MORGAN

Why then? Their cowardice? Your father is a terrible coward, Phinuit.

Phinuit nods, taking a long drag.

PHINUIT

She will die, Morgan, by the same eternal necessity by which the nature of a triangle determines its angles to sum to a straight line.

MORGAN

Ah, sums. What necessity is that Phinuit?

Phinuit shrugs.

MORGAN (CONT'D)

Phinuit, I've been thinking. I have an objection.

Phinuit raises an eyebrow. He has idly returned to the computer and is jamming the power button to no avail.

MORGAN (CONT'D)

There's something that doesn't follow. Your argument rests on the fact--which I'll grant--that something is scarier when it is real than when it is not. The principal and your father, the coward Gray Choate, were wrong to argue that point.

Phinuit nods but is not really listening. He sighs and gives up on the computer, closing it again.

MORGAN (CONT'D)

But in granting that you constrain the choice of scariest thing to the set of real things, and that's not the same as asserting, let alone effecting, the reality of some previously hypothetical thing. Do you see how I mean?

PHINUIT

(staring blankly)

No.

MORGAN

The point is, the scariness of the thing relies on the reality of the object, not the other way around. I am constrained to choose a real object; my chosen object is not forced in virtue of its scariness to be real.

(MORE)

MORGAN (CONT'D)

There is no possibility of choosing a non-real object, so the result is tautological.

PHINUIT

All logical statements are tautological. They all belong to the same space of mutual implication--

MORGAN

Come on Phinuit, you know what I mean. Your proposition would be more clearly stated as: the scariest real thing you can imagine is real. It's real because it's real! Tautology, no? Reality cannot not extended to any new objects by this argument.

PHINUIT

Yes. Fine. I would never deny that. If you must, think of it is a way of approaching a more natural definition for scariness. A sort of litmus trap.

While speaking, Phinuit moves the computer to the trash.

MORGAN

Like in a dryer? How so, Phinuit?

PHINUIT

Well. If everyone understood that reality is the principal determinant of scariness, the argument would be, as you say, tautological. But think of the reactions of our schoolmates. Of the principal and that poor coward to which I am by cruel filiation bound. So long as it is not obvious to them, the child people--this is my name for them--that a wellformed notion of scariness relies on the reality of its objects, they will suffer under the confused reversed implication you point out: that somehow reality could follow from superlative scariness.

MORGAN

Have you no sympathy?

PHINUIT

My sympathy is infinite. In fact I adore the child people. It is because I adore them that I provide them tools of this sort for thought. That they may break their chains.

MORGAN

Earlier you called it a trap.

PHINUIT

A trap is a kind of tool. Sometimes only once you're caught do see what freedom might mean.

MORGAN

But the car, the damn car! How is it, Phinuit, that I can be so scared by this car I've imagined? I don't know where the idea came from. Why won't it go back.

PHINUIT

(musing to self)

A car with no windows or doors.

Lightning strikes outside.

MORGAN

There's no way in or out.

Someone knocks. The boys look at each other. Lightning strikes again. The boys creep over to behind the door and turn off the lights. Another knock. They press against the wall. A long silence. Someone is trying the door.

A VOICE FROM BEHIND THE DOOR It's a push.

The door opens and Gray comes crashing through, falling over a chair and to the ground. He is dirty and beat up. He cowers from the Principal who storms in after him wearing a bib. In his fist he clutches a few printed pages.

PRINCIPAL

(furious)

Dog! Scoundrel!

(looking around calmly)

Ah. They must have stepped out. Good.

(back to Gray)

Bastard, rogue! I will have you strung up!

Principal advances toward Gray, looming over him. Gray blubbers. The Principal shakes the papers in his hand.

GRAY

Please, Principal sir, I--I won't do it again--

PRINCIPAL

There will be no again, Gray. Selling poetry to minors, to working children, you are a sick man. You have a screw loose. What god has got in you, man, you have a madness.

The principal furiously turns to his desk, grabs a cigarette, and a match, lighting the latter, then the former, and then an oil lamp in the same long furious motion. He adjusts the wick with a dial until the room is fair aglow with its eerie light.

GRAY

I cannot help it sir, I cannot! I try not to write, each night I promise myself no more. I swear it to anyone around. Policemen, women, brother Brahmin's at the club...

Gray struggles to his feet. Lighting strikes.

GRAY (CONT'D)

O but when the child of morning, rosy-fingered dawn finds me, comes and greets me, knocks on my window, (he knocks on the window)
I cannot refuse her.

PRINCIPAL

Bohemian!

The principal knocks Gray to the ground again with a backhand blow. He then grabs Gray by the jacket and lifts him to his feet, pushing him into a chair. Gray is bleeding from the mouth.

PRINCIPAL (CONT'D)

Poetry is no occupation for a man of your stature. Or any other. You have no wife?

GRAY

Yes sir.

PRINCIPAL

But you have money?

GRAY

No sir.

PRINCIPAL

Drank it all up, I'll bet.

GRAY

Yes, sir. In ink! Oh, damn that darkest liquor. Infernal swill--and oakier, more gall than the bitt'rest barrel spirit. Ink. In ink I have ruined myself twice, three times over! For years my inheritance supported me, then my family. And I was still in the black. Now, god save me, I am so deep in the red--it is my blood, I think, I know it, it is my blood I write out. Until there is no strength left animating my frame. It is then I collapse and then I make my promises, certain I am at the end. But there is no end.

PRINCIPAL

There is an end, Gray. You have reached it.

The Principal opens the window. He again manhandles Gray, now placing him into the open window and trying to push him out. Gray struggles to hold on, eventually kicking the Principal hard enough to get away. Gray pounces and grabs the oil lamp, brandishing it.

GRAY

Come any closer and I will break it.

PRINCIPAL

(hissing)

You lunatic, we'll both die! My computer is in here!

For a second he looks around for it puzzled but, overwhelmed by danger, stops his search.

GRAY

Your computer. Oh yes, you are a terrible hypocrite, Principal, to come after my poetry when you waste your time on music. What good does that do?

PRINCIPAL

Shut up!

GRAY

You don't even release anything, do you? I bet you don't even finish songs.

PRINCIPAL

I'm still learning how to use everything.

GRAY

You just like tutorials.

PRINCIPAL

Shut up! Put the lamp down, will you? For god's sake man, you'll kill us all.

GRAY

You're no artist. You don't even like music. You're a vile hobbyist. How can you lecture me, the last American flaneur? Ha! HA!

PRINCIPAL

Shut up! Shut up!

GRAY

I have sacrificed everything for my poetry. Do you know what my scariest thing was? My son, my poor genius son, wasting away in this sorry place. Real real REAL! I will find him a master, one of those number people you mentioned--

PRINCIPAL

A scavenger.

GRAY

Yes. And he'll be free of me and you and Morgan and this place.

PRINCIPAL

I like Morgan.

GRAY

Yes, me too.

Morgan smiles to himself in the darkness. The tension is slightly let out.

PRINCIPAL

Listen, Mr. Choate, I can help you find a scavenger. You don't know that world and they won't trust you. I am low-born; I was an orphan myself.

Gray considers. He seems to come around to the idea.

GRAY

You really know where to find one?

PRINCIPAL

Yes. We can go now--they work all night.

GRAY

Alright.

PRINCIPAL

One condition: once we settle this, with Phinuit gone, promise that I will never again find you selling poems to my children.

GRAY

Fine.

Gray puts the lamp down and they shake hands. A nightingale song sounds out the open window. Morgan steps out into the light and grabs the lamp. Gray and Principal scream in surprise.

MORGAN

Take us with you!

PRINCIPAL

Morgan! Shouldn't you be at work?! And Phinuit! What--

MORGAN

You're going to the hospital district, take us with you!

GRAY

Phinuit has to come. But why do you want to go Morgan?

There's still time to save the twin! Bill won't be there yet.

PRINCIPAL

Morgan, I'm sorry, but--

MORGAN

(brandishing the lamp)
I'm not asking. If you will not do
what's asked of you, I will. You
are all of you cowards.

PHINUIT

Cowardice--

MORGAN

You too, Phinuit, you hide behind your cleverness and rhetoric. I love you, you know that, but I can never respect that.

Phinuit shrugs but he's wounded by these words.

PRINCIPAL

Morgan...

MORGAN

I'll be back at work tomorrow morning. I promise.

Principal and Gray share a look and both nod.

PRINCIPAL

Alright.

GRAY

Phinuit? You ready?

Phinuit whispers something to Morgan, who nods. Gray pats him on the head.

GRAY (CONT'D)

It'll be alright, Phinuit. Are you scared?

PHINUIT

I don't know.

GRAY

Well. What you don't know can't hurt you.

All exit.