

Mark and the Metaverse

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A recently divorced Mark Zuckerberg learns to love again in the Metaverse.

Characters

Mark/Son, 35

Meta/Sheryl/Engineer/Therapist/Priscilla/Dad, 60

Boy, 16

ACT 1

Scene 1

Darkness. Mark in bed. Then, cool projections maybe.

Mark:

...

...

...

Meta on.

Meta:

Good morning, Mark.

Mark:

Metachat off.

Meta:

...

Mark:

Memarousal on.

Meta:

You find yourself in your college dorm room.

The moon is huge and piss-colored out your window.

Mark:

Piss-colored?

Meta:

The moon is huge and coppery out your window.

Mark:

Better.

Meta:

You find yourself aroused.

Mark:

By?

Meta:

A memory.

Mark:

Activate memory-in-memory.

Meta:

You find yourself in your childhood bedroom.

The air smells of cut grass and diesel from the lawnmower.

It is late summer.

Mark:

That's it? Is there a girl or something?

Meta:

...

Your erect penis looks resplendent in the mid-afternoon sun—

Mark:

Enough, you always ruin it with that shit. Memarousal off.

Meta:

But Mark--

Mark:

Memarousal off.

Messages.

Mark awash in blue light.

Meta:

You have two new messages.

From Priscilla Chan:

Priscilla:

Need you to sign the papers. Today please.

Meta:

From Sheryl Sandberg.

Sheryl:

Think there's a bug in the memarousal sequence, every time I'm about to come it tells me my breasts look as sumptuous as the snow-capped hills of yore--

Mark:

Stop.

End messages.

Lights.

Scene 2

Garish fluorescents of a Silicon Valley office. Mark lying on a chaise lounge as Sheryl paces around.

Sheryl:

...as if it's *our* fault all these grannies are blowing their secretary pensions on VR implants. You should've seen the hearing, Mark, they had this Betty White-type testify. Went to put her hand over her heart for the swearing-in, realized the tits weren't there and just lost it. Total meltdown. They were eating out of the palm of her hand.

I'm telling you, you can't win with these people. First the teens don't look hot enough, as if that's our fault, as if we haven't made them look as hot as humanly possible. But fine, sure, here's an entire world where they can look however they want. But, no. No, no, no. Now the old people are *too* hot. The old people are so hot it's tanking the bond markets.

I swear to God they're like a bunch of coked-up lab rats running around the maze yelling about how shitty the coke is. "Can't we get some better coke?" No, you're *rats*. Enjoy it while it lasts because after it wears off, you're getting a barbiturate injection.

Mark:

Jesus Christ.

Sheryl:

What's your problem?

Mark:

You used to be, like, this maternal figure to me. And now...

I don't know, I guess you're still maternal, but in this drunk way.

Sheryl:

To think of all the women your mother could have saved with three little words.

Mark:

The abortion, please?

Sheryl:

I love you. I love you, Mark. I really do. I love you.

Mark:

I'm lonely, Sheryl.

Sheryl:

Welcome to the club.

Mark:

Maybe we should tell each other secrets to feel close.

Sheryl:

Sure, you first.

Mark:

Touché.

...

Okay, here's one. A couple years ago, Priscilla and I were on a trip to Cancun with the girls and I was being a dick, just criticizing her relentlessly, I don't remember why, I was probably just tired and resentful, I didn't think much of it, but that night after the girls went to sleep, she started sobbing in bed, totally silent but I could feel her convulsing. I wanted to comfort her but I didn't know how. I'd never heard her cry, her parents practically swam here from Vietnam, she's a hard woman, but all of a sudden she was inconsolable. I'd broken her. A couple weeks later I found Wellbutrin in her medicine cabinet. We never spoke about it again.

Sheryl:

...

Mark:

...

Sheryl:

That's not a secret. You clearly wanted to tell me that.

Mark:

Why would I want to tell you that? It makes me look terrible.

Sheryl:

No it doesn't. It's just life. And you like acting vulnerable for sympathy.

Mark:

God, you're good.

Sheryl:

Don't piss on me and tell me it's raining. Tell me it's piss. That's how I get off.

Mark:

You're so much better than Dr. Blum. How would you like to make an extra 700 bucks a week?

Sheryl:

Here's what I think, I think you don't have any secrets because you don't really care what other people think. You pretend you do, because it makes you feel like a real boy, but you don't, and why should you? You're a god, I know it sounds clichéd, but really that's why everyone's so disappointed, it's not because you're a bad person, it's because you're a bad god. All these years they've been waiting for Jesus to come back and tell them where to go and what to believe in and finally he comes except this time he's a red-headed Jew with Asperger's, and whoever his sidekick is, John or Paul or whatever, is a mouthy little Jewess, and a Feminazi to boot. So now everyone's an atheist, everyone's like "If God's so good, why do all these kids have cancer" because that's such a cool and interesting take. But guess what? Kids have always gotten bullied and depressed. We just figured out a way to monetize it. And now everyone's kicking themselves. "Jeez, I wish I'd figured out a way to monetize my kids being depressed instead of just having to deal with it in my shitty home with my shitty job and my shitty wife." That's *their* secret. They hate their lives.

Mark:

And what's your secret?

Sheryl:

My secret is that the other night I was driving home and I stopped for a Coke at a CVS right before it closed, the parking lot was totally empty, very ethereal looking in the snow and the streetlight, and as I walked in, I noticed the cashier taking out the trash, just the back of her, totally normal looking, but still I thought, what if we fucked? What if we just fucked right now on the counter? No one would ever know. I was horny, my husband doesn't do it for me anymore, our bedroom is not an erotic place, but there was something deeply erotic about this convenience store, the way the light overexposed everything, the clutter of vices, I was already feeling self-indulgent about the Coke, very blue-collar, very American. So at the self-checkout, I accidentally, or maybe subconsciously on purpose, fumbled the Coke, the machine freaked out and I turned to ask for help but she was already there, Mark, looking me right in the eyes, everything else about her out of focus, unexceptional looking, except those eyes. Those eyes, Mark. As livid as meltwater. As clear as the bleb of an icicle.

Mark:

So you fucked?

Sheryl:

Did we?

Mark:

If a tree falls.

Sheryl:

Not if a tree falls. If a woman fucks. Somewhere in the world. If God takes mortal form in all of us. If everything that has ever happened or will happen happens at once. This is the plight of omnipotence. Of a shared consciousness. Nothing is a secret from each other, everything is a secret from ourselves. Did I fuck the cashier? Have I ever even been in a CVS? Who am I to say what's mine and what's everyone else's? That's where the loneliness comes from. It isn't feeling estranged from other people. We've always felt estranged from other people. It's feeling estranged from ourselves.

Mark:

You lost me.

Sheryl:

No, Mark. *You* lost you.

Mark:

See you say shit like that and it makes me think everything you say is bullshit.
I'm going for a smoke.

Sheryl:

Since when do you smoke?

Mark:

It's not tobacco, it's weed.

Sheryl:

Since when do you smoke wee--

Scene 3

Mark walking down the hallway. Passes by a very dark office with a person coding. Doubles back and ducks his head in. Picks up nameplate and reads it.

Mark:

Hey there...chief.

I didn't realize people but "M.F.A." after their names. I thought that was only for M.D.'s and Ph.D.'s and stuff.

Engineer:

I do it ironically.

Mark:

Very cool, very cool. Question for you. Why has Meta been trying so hard to sound literary lately?

Engineer:

I'm a writer.

Mark:

...

Engineer:

...

Mark:

But you work here.

Engineer:

I need the money. And the constraint.

Mark:

The constraint?

Engineer:

Art needs a constraint.

Mark:

Still not following.

Engineer:

The beauty of a landscape versus the beauty of a painting of a landscape. The landscape being beautiful insofar as it's unconstrained, the painting being beautiful exactly because it's constrained.

Mark:

Constrained by?

Engineer:

The material constraints of painting – time, energy, space -- but also the immaterial constraint of trying to recreate something "real." Such that the beauty comes not from the landscape but from the devotion of the artist, trying to immortalize the feeling that the landscape evoked. It's very conspicuously a second-order experience, but it's this constraint of the artist's devotion to something first-order, something "real," that moves people.

And it's the same with life and writing. Life being unconstrained and language being a constraint. Which is why writing can never move you the way life moves you. But writing can move you insofar as the writer is trying to immortalize the unconstrained beauty of life within this constraint of language, this constraint of devotion. And that attempt can be very moving.

Mark:

Which means you work here because...

Engineer:

I'm not a real artist. I don't see the world beautifully anymore. I'm not smart or emotional enough to.

But then I started working here, writing for this very conspicuously *aestheticized* version of real life, very conspicuously *commercialized* version of real life, and everything clicked.

All this contrived writing I've been doing isn't the product of devotion. It's the product of, and I know it sounds clichéd, but it's the product of capitalism. I'm trying to sound literary so I can sell a book so I can get famous. That's an Nth-order emotion, and an endlessly recursive one at that. Writing about writing about writing. Instead of writing about life.

So if good writing reflects a devotion to "real" life, my shitty writing reflects an almost algorithmic fidelity to the incentives of the metaverse, and is more at home here. And is funny here, because it becomes a parody of itself. And yet it's also poignant because it's earnest, in the same way that every person designing or partaking in this place has to be earnest to survive. We are all earnestly trying to access real emotion yet we're so fucked by capitalism that we find ourselves in a recursive "metaverse" endlessly estranged from ourselves. The voice of "Meta" is the voice of all of us straining to be literary, to restore beauty, to feel something.

Mark:

Got it, so art feels disingenuous in a world where capital has subsumed quote-unquote "real" emotion. And your writing, like the metaverse, is both a product and parody of this cultural decadence.

Engineer:

Right. That was quick.

Mark:

People forget I'm really smart. You think you're smart rehashing Twitter critiques of a trillion-dollar business I came up with when I was nineteen. So imagine how smart I must be.

And I disagree, I don't think capital has subsumed emotion. I think the opposite, actually. I think "emotion" is one of the many luxuries of capitalism. I think market efficiencies have democratized leisure time such that everyday princes like yourself can feel the pains of

mediocrity so deeply that they mistake themselves for artists. The same way these efficiencies have created an upper middle class ravenous for pseudo-art to occupy every waking second of their idle little lives. Whereas before, you might've just been a particularly creative cobbler or some shit, doing fancy boy designs on my shoes.

All these things you see as metaphysical -- "emotion," "beauty," "the self" -- they're just higher-order commodities you now have the time and money to fuck around with. Welcome to the elite. Welcome to retail therapy. A quick high and then you're forever sick with want. And it only gets worse. Get as rich as me or Sheryl and you just exist in a fugue state of desires satiated before you've even realized you have them. You want the feeling of want. You should've heard her earlier, the poor woman can't even enjoy a Coke and a fuck anymore without dissociating, she's so numbed to desire.

This is our metaverse. Of self-concept. Of feeling and of want. Not some insidious cabal of capital that strips the world of beauty. Sounds kind of anti-Semitic when you put it like that, no? No, you're trying to find some common ground with poor people, but what really bothers you is that you can't have everything you want. Covet beauty and it becomes everything you stand to lose. Covet the self and it becomes an avatar of everything you're not. A surrogate forced to roam lives you haven't lived in search of...what? What do you want so badly? This is it. This is life. You work and you die. You have a nuclear family. Make it gay or whatever, but a family that sits down for dinner every night. That goes to church, maybe. They have to have some kind of ritual. Put them in a cul-de-sac where all the houses look the same. In the winter, the plows pile up the snow in the middle and the kids play King of the Hill. If you know, you know. And for the parents (*waves joint*) legalized, dispensary-grade marijuana. Write *that* metaverse.

I love you. I *love* you. Thank you. Dr. Blum is going to love this. We're going to have so much to talk about.

Scene 4

Therapist's office. Long silence. Clock ticking.

Mark:

...

Therapist:

...

Mark:

...

Therapist

...

Mark:

You got French tips.

Therapist:

I did.

Mark:

My mother always had French tips.

Therapist:

Did she?

Mark:

I'd ask you to run them along the crown of my head, because it'd remind me of her. But you're my therapist...

Therapist:

Right.

Mark:

...

Therapist:

...

Mark:

I've got to stop getting high for these.

Therapist:

Why is that?

Mark:

I just feel crazy. I feel like a delinquent. I have to give myself some kind of rules to live by or I dissociate. I have nothing that grounds me. I feel like I'm constantly suspended between worlds. Metaverse, no metaverse, high, no high, youth, now, past, present, future, not to mention I'm always traveling. I basically live on a plane. And the other guys want to go to space? No thanks, not for me.

Therapist:

...

Mark:

Plus I always have the most to say right before I smoke. That's the greatest high. That's when the world really shimmers with possibility. Being high is great too, there wouldn't be that pre-

high sense of euphoria if it wasn't great. But the moment before really focuses you, makes you more creative. I think it's the adrenaline, but also the ritual. The ritual of being in a place at a time doing something, and suddenly you're still for a second and it's like the whole world comes into focus. Right? I'm back at the train station with my high school friends, in the corner of the parking lot at dusk so nobody can see us, we're squeezed into Brian's pickup truck, he's rolling a joint on the center console thing, it's about to be summer, school's about to be out, I think Harry actually says "I love the ritual of smoking," I think he's being obnoxious, but then I see the ember of the joint dancing around in the dark like incense, hear the crickets chirping, there were forests all over our town, and it *does* feel like a kind of incantation. There's a divinity to it. You're channeling something.

Therapist:

...

Mark:

But it only feels like a ritual when you're on the cusp of something, right? The cusp of night, the cusp of summer, the cusp of adulthood, the cusp of love, I think I loved Harry a little bit even if I didn't realize it, the cusp of understanding. You have to be feeling all these things but not quite understanding them for them to have that magic quality. But then, suddenly, I don't know, there's too much understanding. And too much history. And then you're just reliving the past. Harry started smoking every night, alone, and there was no ceremony to it, he used a "gravity bong" which is where you suck the smoke out of a plastic water bottle, and he would use the same water bottle again and again so it got all crumpled and charred, it was disgusting. And he knew it was disgusting, and he knew it was a dependency, he understood what was happening and then it wasn't magic anymore, it was just sad. He didn't go to college. I have no idea what happened to him. We lost touch.

Therapist:

...

Mark:

Which of course reminds me of my mother and her "rituals," which became my rituals too, by the way. The suck of the fridge, the thwap of the cork, the clink of her French tips on the wine glass. I would just sink into the armchair and listen. Ah. Mom's home, mom's happy. And she would let me smell it, too, God isn't that the most evocative sense? Smell? The most nostalgic. I can't bear the smell of a dry white now, it fills me with too much longing. You get older and you understand what all that was, and you don't want to listen anymore, you don't want to smell, you just want to de-sense yourself, inure yourself to the world because it's all too sad. It's all too sad.

Therapist:

...

Mark:

What was I talking about?

Therapist:

Rituals.

Mark:

Right, and I was just telling someone this earlier, I forget who, but we all need rituals. I took that for granted for so long, I thought they were a crutch. For years, people told me, if you're depressed, go for a run. If you're depressed, go for a run. No. I don't want to go for a run. I'm too smart for that. It won't work. I have to rationalize my way out of this. No. That doesn't work so I go for a run and I'm not depressed. I'm not happy either, I've never really gotten that endorphin rush from it, I'm more unfeeling, but more and more that's what I'm striving towards. Unthinking. Unfeeling. Because where have thinking and feeling gotten me? I have a problem thinking things will make me feel good and then they don't. Even with the French tips thing, you running them along the crown of my head, that's a situation in which I would have made myself incredibly vulnerable only to feel embarrassed and probably a bit dirty afterwards.

Therapist:

...

Mark:

And vice versa, things I don't expect to make me feel anything catch me off guard and uncork this wellspring of emotion I didn't even know I had. Which is disorienting, because then it's like, where have I been living all my life? In a metaverse of feeling. Not to be on the nose about it, but that's what it is. I am an avatar of want and feeling and self-concept in a million places other than here, and it's not even because I want something more than this life, it's because I want something less than it. It's because this life is *too much to bear*. I'm not doing justice to it now, I feel like I'm performing emotion for the sake of argument, for the sake of processing, but you'll know when I really feel something because I'll shut up. I was at this bar on birthright and I got to talking with this Israeli lesbian, I knew she was a lesbian because she had this gorgeous, silent, French girlfriend, probably 20 years younger than her, just watching us the entire time like an oracle, stunning and all-knowing, and the lesbian asked me, "What's your star sign?" and I said "I'm a Cancer," and she said "Oh, so you cry all the time." And I said "No, I never cry." And you know what she said? She said, "Same thing."

Therapist

...

Mark:

Same thing. How disarming is that. And she was right, you can just as easily be shocked into sobbing as you can into silence. They're both extreme emotional responses. Whereas for so long I thought I was just too strong and too smart to cry. And my mother too, too strong and too smart. Not too afraid. Not too numb to the world. And then, of course, on the flight back to New York, all the Hasidic people got up and donned their hats from their hard leather-bound

cases and their jackets and they huddled in front of the divider at the front of the plane to pray, and I thought to myself, "This isn't going to move me," I couldn't let it move me because to be moved by it would be to admit to myself everything I've ever wanted, which is to say, faith, community, devotion, a God. And to want those things so desperately felt so antithetical to the things themselves. But this time I forced myself to watch, watch them gently rocking at the nose of this marvel hurtling through the air as if it was nothing, everyone else watching their little movies and could you blame them, it's so much easier to look at a screen than to bear witness to the wonder of flight, to the wonder of faith, to this group of people so adamantly and anachronistically ritualistic, so physical in their devotion, and of course it moved me. Because all I've ever wanted is to be of a different time and place and to be devoted to something beyond myself. And in moments like that I so desperately want to cry, but I can't, and it makes me feel like I am forever on the cusp of this beautiful world everyone else lives in. And then it's like, what's the point? Isn't that the whole point?

Therapist:

...

Mark:

Sorry, I lost the thread again. Help me?

Therapist:

Rituals.

Mark:

Right. Rituals.

Therapist:

...

Mark:

And for so long it was so easy. Right? I go home I walk in the door, Priscilla's there.

Stands up and mimes walking in the door of his house.

I go home I walk in the door Priscilla's there. I go home I walk in the door Priscilla's there. Priscilla leaves. I hang a painting of a landscape in the foyer. I go home I walk in the door I look at the painting. I go home I walk in the door I look at the painting. I go home I walk in the door I take the painting down. It makes me sad. It reminds me of everything I've lost. I go home I walk in the door I look at a wall. The last wall of the temple? Maybe, but for me it's just a wall. I go home I walk in the door I look at a wall. And that brings its own kind of peace. I go home I walk in the door I look at a wall. But isn't the wall beautiful? I go home I walk in the door I look at a wall. At a certain time of day? I go home I walk in the door I look at a wall. In a certain light? I go home I walk in the door I look at a wall. No. I go home I walk in the door I look at a wall. It's just life. I go home I walk in the door I look at—

Scene 5

Mark is suddenly standing in the threshold of his house. Priscilla's in the kitchen.

Mark:

Priscilla.

...

...

I wasn't expecting you.

Priscilla:

I was just grabbing Max's iPad.

Hold on one second, I was just in therapy. I just have to turn it off.

Meta off. Silent.

I should get going. The kids are in the car.

Oh gosh, really? I'd love to see them.

It's okay, you'll see them this weekend.

I actually can't this weekend-

Meta off. Off meta.

I have to go to D.C. for this Congressional hearing about the--

Silent. Meta silent.

--about the Metaverse Breast Enhancement Feature.

Well the weekend after, then.

The weekend after should be good. But I can just—

Dr. Blum, give me a second, I'm trying to talk to my wife.

My ex-wife.

--I can just pop my head out now and say hi.

It's okay, you seem busy. I'm glad you're doing therapy. I'll see you next week.

Therapist:

You know, Mark, it's always your mother this and your mother that with you, and I think it's because you see her as this literary figure, right, this hard-nosed immigrant who overcame great trauma to never speak of it again, and it breaks your heart, justifiably so, and she was also the breadwinner in this gender-bendy way that both complicates and suits your distinctly millennial neuroses, such that you can project all your psychosexual hangups on the screen of her absence. But I want to talk more about your father, and the reason is that, for however much you *think* you know your father, he is as much if not more of a mystery than your mother, in that he talks *so much*. He is the antithesis of the withholding archetype, and yet there is something just as obfuscated by his constant monologue as would be by silence. It sounds like you're busy, but let's just say I'm glad you're in therapy. I'll see you next week.

Wait--

Goodbye Mark.

Goodbye, Mark.

Priscilla leaves. Long silence.

Mark:

...

...

...

...

Meta let me run that back.

Priscilla comes back to her starting position.

Mark:

Priscilla.

I wasn't expecting you.

Priscilla:

Who were you expecting?

Mark:

What?

Priscilla;

One of your whores?

Mark:

Stop, Meta. She wouldn't say that. Start over.

Priscilla comes back to her starting position.

Mark:

Priscilla.

I wasn't expecting you.

Priscilla:

I was just grabbing Max's iPad.

Mark:

Cool, yeah, I was going to bring it over.

Priscilla:

...

Mark:

...

Priscilla:

...

Mark:

...

Priscilla:

Do you want to come out and say hi to the kids?

Mark:

Yes, of course.

Priscilla:

Great.

Priscilla walks out but Mark stays put.

Mark:

Again, Meta.

Priscilla comes back to her starting position.

Mark:

Priscilla.

Do you remember that night in Cancun?

Priscilla:

What night in Cancun?

Mark:

When I was crying.

Priscilla:

You were crying in Cancun?

Mark:

I thought you knew I was crying and you just didn't know how to console me.

Priscilla:

I had no idea.

Mark:

Oh.

Priscilla:

Why were you crying?

Mark:

I was crying because I was thinking about this trip to Cancun I took with my parents when I was around Max's age. My dad just laid into my mom and that night I woke up to the sound of him whispering and her crying. He was trying to convince her that she'd started taking meds before they met, but she kept insisting that their relationship had made her depressed.

Priscilla:

That's awful.

Mark:

Is it? My parents were together all their lives. We never fought like that and we're still getting divorced.

Priscilla:

We have more choice than they did.

Mark:

You act like that's a good thing.

Priscilla:

That women don't have to be sedated to stay married?

Mark:

It wasn't that simple. They loved each other. She probably needed to go on meds anyways. That's just the kind of thing you say in a fight. When you love somebody. You take things out on them.

Priscilla:

No you don't, Mark.

Mark:

How would you know? When have you ever been in love?

Priscilla:

...

Mark:

I thought maybe if we fought we would feel it too.

Priscilla:

Goodbye, Mark.

Mark:

Goodbye, Priscilla.

Priscilla leaves.

Mark:

...

Meta:

...

Mark:

Can I watch some videos on the wall?

Video projected outwards so that the audience can't see.

Meta:

What do you see, Mark?

Mark:

I'm painting her stomach in the kitchen. She's pregnant with my younger brother.

Her mother's visiting. They're speaking French.

We're all so close. The closest we've ever been.

Meta:

What about now?

Mark:

I'm playing with her in the bath.

My body looks taut and waxy like a new plant. I love the water.

My dad keeps cutting between filming me in the mirror and me out of the mirror.

She looks so tired.

Meta:

What about now?

Mark:

I'm playing in the snow. I'm bundled up. I hug a snowman.

The house is a specter of grey vinyl behind me. She must be inside.

The snow is shallow and dirty.
I'm looking into the camera, at my father and now at myself.

Meta:
What about now?

Mark:
We're at the circus.
Dad keeps zooming in on the animals' eyes.
Mom takes me on an elephant. I'm in train overalls.
There's a chalky rash spreading across the elephant's face like mold.
There are families everywhere. Too many families and not enough elephants.
I cling to her back. She waves at the camera.

...

I don't remember any of this. I don't remember spending this much time with her.

...

Memaroma on.

Meta:
You smell a Sancerre.
You are overcome with emotion.

Mark:
Not just the wine. She had a specific smell.

Meta:

...

Mark:
I don't just remember the smell of the wine. That's just what I talk about. It's easier.

Meta:

...

Her alabaster skin like the elephant's tusks...

Mark:
What the fuck are you talking about? Her alabaster skin. You sound like a Confederate soldier.

Meta:

...

Mark:
The wine is just a detail. I shouldn't even talk about it. I'm just martyring myself.

Meta:

...

Mark:

It's a placeholder for something profound I want to say about her. About her silence. And her love. But it's too hard. It's too hard to get that close. So I just talk around it.

Meta:

...

Mark:

And now I'm exhausted. And embarrassed. For saying so much to a bunch of people who don't care. And for selling out the people I love.

Meta:

...

Mark:

That's as close as I'm going to get. Do with it what you will. Good night.

Lights out.

ACT 2

Scene 1

Living room. Dad, 70, completely still in an armchair. A knock at the door. He rushes to answer. Son, 40, comes in with bags. They hug.

Dad:
The prodigal son!

Son:
Hey Dad.

Dad:
You look good. You feel strong.

Son:
Same as always.

Dad:
I thought you were getting in earlier.

Son:
I know, I'm sorry. I had work.

Dad:
Your mother's around here somewhere. She's probably reading or sleeping, you know her. I'll go find her.

Son:
That's okay. Let her sleep. She needs the sleep.
It really looks exactly the same.

Dad:
It's nice, right? We have to keep the outside looking the same as the other ones, but on the inside we can do whatever we want. And we always loved the Rochester house, so.

Son:
You didn't want something different?

Dad:

No, no. This is good. This is all I've ever wanted.

Son:

The outsides really are identical.

Dad:

Yeah, it's part of the whole thing. It brings people peace. Same with the kids.

They look at the kids playing King of the Hill outside.

Son:

We used to play King of the Hill in Rochester.

Dad:

I remember.

They're cute, aren't they?

Son:

Where are their parents?

Dad:

Their parents?

Son:

The kids' parents.

Dad:

They don't have parents. They're just the neighborhood kids.

Son:

What do you mean they don't have parents?

Dad:

Well I'm sure they have parents, but they don't live here.

Son:

Where do they live?

Dad:

I don't know. China, maybe?

Son:

So what? They're like Uyghur kids in a sweatshop, hooked up to the metaverse?

Dad:

Well first of all, we don't know they're kids. They could be Uyghur adults metaversing as kids. And second of all, most of the people here are gay or widowers or whatever, except for me and your mother, of course. So it's like an amenity. For people who are sad.

Son:

A pool is an amenity. This is sick.

Dad:

It's not sick. Why do you have to be like that. You're thinking about it too much.

Son:

Where do they go when it stops snowing?

Dad:

I don't know, maybe they travel to wherever it *is* snowing. Maybe they see the world.

Son:

And what about at night?

Dad:

You're asking too many questions. I never stay up late enough to see where they go at night. I go to bed and they're playing. I wake up and they're playing. It's beautiful. All the time, kids playing. It makes me happy.

Son:

...

Dad:

I'm tired now. You made me tired.

Son:

...

Dad:

Speaking of, I got you something.
Remember this?

Son:

No?

Dad:

You painted it when you were in 3rd grade. I thought it was so good. So abstract. I swear to God I used to go to MOMA and think, "A kid could do these," and then, what do you know, my kid does it. I saved it all these years and then I had it digitized. And now...

Dad chucks the painting against the wall, shattering it.

Son:

...

Dad:

...

Son:

What?

Dad:

It's an NFT. I NFT'ed it. So the gift is *this* moment, of *that* painting shattering in *this* house, between the two of us. Or the three of us, rather, including your mother. And now we own that moment. We have it forever. Otherwise Meta owns it. And who would want that.

Son:

Why did you have to destroy it to make it an NFT?

Dad:

It makes it more valuable.

Like the Banksy shredded painting thing.

Son:

I don't really understand how NFT's work.

Dad:

Me neither, but the guy at Meta told me to read this Certificate of Authenticity if we had any questions:

This Certificate of Authenticity is not so much a "Certificate of Authenticity" as it is an opportunity to "certify," if you will, the very concept of "authenticity," at a time of tremendous flux. For have we not witnessed photocopying empires rise and fall in the time it's taken us to ask "what constitutes an original?" Think of the Xerox Corporation. Tens of thousands employed in Rochester alone; multiple members of the same families. And then, mass layoffs. Children left parentless. Fathers emasculated. Mothers unable to cry. The families of Pompeii did not burn; they were immobilized then suffocated in ash. Petrified in the position of realization. Not to mention the ruins. Sprawling plants and brutalist high-rises, yes, but also tract housing and a vast network of obsolescent machines. Kodak too. Companies of great innovation but also great hubris. A city lost to time.

Needless to say, the concept of “authenticity” proves elusive at a time of unprecedented technological flux. Of infinite facsimile and infinite surveillance. Perhaps a weak proxy is chronology: the immutable ledger of time, in which every moment is non-fungible and rigidly sequenced. The first Yu-Gi-Oh card. One’s second love. Having been heartbroken by the first and not yet privy to the third. These things are authentic insofar as they are strictly ordered and originated. To revise or corrupt them would mean revising or corrupting everything that came before and after.

And yet, time has no memory of this order. We are responsible for caching it. Nor is it singular, though things tend to converge. Everywhere great minds arrive at the same discoveries. Distant species evolve the same traits. Insects, birds, pterosaurs and bats have all independently adapted to flight, just as fathers and sons everywhere have independently adapted to loving one another, in their own ways.

So how then do we verify the authenticity of this father loving this son? How do we trace its origin such that it is indisputable; “irrevisable,” in art and in memory? Before we might have situated it in a particular patrilineage, e.g. how this father loved his father, and so on. And yet, this ledger of memory is fickle. Modes of preservation become outdated. Swaths of history are lost to silence.

Now, for the first time, we have a truly immutable ledger, in Ethereum and other blockchains. A vast network of machines working in tandem to verify the order of things. Such that we will forever be able to identify this moment between this father and this son as the “original,” regardless of how it is recast in art or in memory. May we rejoice in this newfound objectivity, having cast off the yoke of narrative. May we never return to Rochester. It is a city lost to time, whereas our future is light, happy, and forever.

Son:

...

Dad:

...

Son:

...

Dad:

...

Son:

That was the Certificate of Authenticity?

Dad:

I guess it's more like a poem. Weird guy. Very weird guy.

Son:

What the hell is he talking about?

Dad:

I don't know. Don't think about it. Just focus on the painting.

Son:

Should I vacuum it up or something?

Dad:

Just leave it. We'll deal with it in the morning.

Son:

I should probably get some sleep.

Dad:

Really? You don't want to smoke or anything? The weed here is great.

Son:

There's weed here?

Dad:

Yeah there's a dispensary around the corner. Very subsidized.

Son:

How does it work? Do they like pump THC into your blood or something?

Dad:

I don't know how it works. I don't know how weed works in real life. If I knew how it worked then it wouldn't be magic.

Son:

I think I'm just going to sleep.

Dad:

Are you sure? I thought we would smoke and watch a movie or something.
Have you seen Avatar?

Son:

The blue people one?

Dad:

I watched it the other night with your mother. Beautiful movie. Beautiful message.

Son:

What's the message?

Dad:

God you're putting me on the spot. There's a lot going on in it.

Son:

That's alright.

Dad:

You kind of just have to watch it.

Son:

Yeah.

Dad:

...

Son:

I think I'm going to sleep, but you should smoke if you want to.

Dad:

No, no, it's not fun alone. It's not fun without you. I'll just go over to my friend's house. We have a poker night every Thursday. Or maybe I'll just stay in and hang with your mother. Sometimes before bed we just lie next to each other and talk about our days.

Son:

That sounds good, Dad. I'm glad you're happy.

Dad:

And maybe in the morning you'll join me for my breakfast club. I have a couple guys over for breakfast every Friday morning. We talk about religion and stuff like that.

Son:

That sounds good.

Dad:

There's this new guy whose wife just died of cancer.

But another guy missed a few meetings and didn't know, so when the new guy texted "My wife had this and that type of cancer," he responded, "And how is she now?"

Dead silent in the chat for 20 minutes. No one texting.

Son:
That's funny.

Dad:
It was hilarious.

Son:
I'm going to get some sleep.

Dad:
Alright, yep, get some sleep. I'm glad you're home.

Son:
Love you.

Dad:
I love you too.
Love you so much.

Son goes upstairs.
Dad paces around for a bit before rolling a joint.
This takes a long time.
He's thinking.
He sits in the windowsill and smokes out of it, watching the kids play outside.
He moves to the armchair.
He sits for a long time.
A knock at the door.
He rushes to answer.
Son comes in with bags.
They hug.

Scene 2

Dad:
The prodigal son!

Son:
Hey, Dad.

Dad:
I missed you. I missed you so much.

Son:

Missed you too. I'm sorry I'm late.

Dad:

Don't be.

Your mother's asleep but you'll see her in the morning.

Son:

It really looks exactly the same.

Dad:

All I've ever wanted.

They look at the kids playing King of the Hill outside.

Son:

We used to play King of the Hill in Rochester.

Dad:

I remember.

It's kind of fucked here, though.

They hook Uyghur kids up to the metaverse and make them play 24/7.

Son:

What?

Dad:

Or Uyghur adults. But still.

Son:

They don't just use CGI?

Dad:

It wouldn't be realistic enough. You wouldn't be able to talk to them.

Son:

You talk to them?

Dad:

I don't, personally, no. But, you know, some people here are really lonely.

Son:

That's fucked up.

Dad:

Totally fucked up.

But what are you going to do?

Son:

You don't have to live here if you don't want to.

Dad:

Beats a nursing home.

Son:

You can always come stay with me.

Dad:

Thank you.

Let's just enjoy this for now.

What do you want for breakfast?

Son:

Whatever you're having.

Dad:

Dosas?

Son:

Like Indian dosas?

Dad:

Yeah, I got this old dosa maker at a garage sale. Or crepe maker, maybe, it didn't come with the box.

Son:

You know how to make dosas?

Dad:

Yeah they're easy. Like crepes with a filling. Aloo.

Son:

And it's a breakfast food?

Dad:

Why? Would you rather have eggs and bacon or something?

Son:

No.

Dad:

Because I can make eggs and bacon.

Son:

Dosas sound great.

Dad:

But I think the dosas will be better. I think you're going to like them better.

Son:

Great.

Dad:

You seem tired.

Son:

Long week.

Dad:

You sure?

Son:

I'm sure.

Dad:

Because sometimes you say you're tired when you're depressed.

Son:

No, I've been feeling good.

Dad:

Yeah?

Son:

Yeah, life is good, can't complain. Good job, good friends.

Dad:

You wouldn't tell me if it wasn't, would you?

Son:

What?

Dad:

You wouldn't tell me if life wasn't good.

Son:

I'd tell you.

Dad:

You'd tell me if it got to the same point?

Son:

I'd tell you, but I really don't feel that way anymore.

Dad:

There's just a lot of life ahead of you.

Son:

I know.

Dad:

Okay?

A lot of life ahead of you.

Son:

I know, Dad. Life is good.

Dad:

Good. I'm glad.

Son:

...

Dad:

You'll meet my breakfast club.

I have a couple guys over for breakfast every Friday morning to talk about religion and stuff like that.

Son:

That sounds great.

Dad:

They're good guys. I'm excited for you to meet them.

One of them has really been helping me change my thinking about things.

Son:

Oh yeah?

Dad:

Yeah because you know I've always had these intrusive thoughts.

Son:

Right.

Dad:

And I've been on the Zoloft which helps. And the weed too. Which you know I was skeptical of. I was skeptical of both the Zoloft and the weed.

Son:

Right.

Dad:

And I was skeptical of the religion stuff. Because I'm a religious guy, I believe in God, but I always thought these guys who were real zealots about it were a bit weird.

Son:

Right.

Dad:

Not to say I'm a zealot now or anything. But this guy, he's been helping me think in terms of what I can do for God.

Son:

What's his name?

Dad:

His name?

Son:

The guy who's helping you.

Dad:

Oh.

Steve.

Son:

Steve?

Dad:

Yeah, Steve.

Not a weird name.

Son:

No, I was just curious.

Dad:

I forgot what I was talking about.

Son:

You were saying he's helping you think in terms of what you can do for God.

Dad:

Right and there's certain things I don't need to be doing for God. Like loving you. It's not like I'm thinking about God when I'm making you dosas. But when you're not around things can feel a bit purposeless. And then it's good to have this framework, because otherwise I just spiral into bad thoughts. But if I take the thinking out of it and just take it as a given that everything I do, I do for God...I don't know. It's helpful with certain things.

Son:

What kinds of things?

Dad:

Like for example, I wake up. My mind is clear. I have something to do, your mother needs breakfast. The sun is very bright here, it's like I've never seen it before it's so bright, and everything's very hopeful. So I go downstairs and I make dosas or lately I've been doing injera, to mix things up, and I just have this feeling, like, today's going to be good. But then you know I finish making the food and I finish cleaning up and the sun's lost that newness and suddenly I'm exhausted. I sit down on the armchair and just think, that's it for today, I've got nothing left, how am I going to kill all this time before I die? But then I remember, I'm not living for myself. I'm living for God. God's given me this world, I know it gets a bit convoluted with the whole metaverse thing, but essentially, God's given me this beautiful world and I might as well enjoy it as thanks to Him. Because what else am I going to do? So I go out on the porch and I watch the kids, and I think, these are God's children. They don't have parents because they are children of God and they are scrambling up this hill to be one with Him. And I look at all the houses exactly the same, and I think, these houses look exactly the same because we are all God's children. We are all created equal in His image and so we live together in harmony in His perfect kingdom. And then I walk to the bodega down the street and buy flowers from the flower stand, really green lilies, nowhere close to blooming, it takes them 7 days but when they do they're massive, spectacular, you would've never believed how stunning they would look. I like peonies too, anything big really, but peonies show their cards more, whereas lilies look like these gangly weedy things for days and then suddenly they're fantastic, ethereal-looking, almost like deep-sea creatures with their antennae and their phosphorescent white. And I feel like I'm watching Creation in miniature. This unfurling of the world. And it just makes me in awe

of everything. In awe of Creation. Infinite beauty, infinite, microscopic change, and what? What do I have to be so sad about?

Son:

You're sad?

Dad:

No I didn't mean—

That wasn't the point.

I'm as sad as everyone else.

Son:

What does that mean?

Dad:

Everyone's a bit sad. I'm no more or less sad than anyone else.

Son:

People who say that are usually exceptionally sad--

Dad:

That's not true.

Son:

--and desperate to feel the same as everyone else.

Dad:

That's not—

That's not the point I wanted to make.

Don't worry about me.

I'm worried about you.

Son:

You're very self-effacing, you know that?

Dad:

I'm not self-effacing, I'm your dad. It's my job to worry about you.

Son:

You don't need to worry about me.

Dad:

You'll understand when you have kids.

Son:

I'm not going to have kids.

Dad:

I know.

Son:

It's too late.

Dad:

I know. I'm glad you didn't.

Son:

Don't worry about me.

Dad:

I'm not worried about you, anymore. I just miss you.

Son:

I know. I'm sorry.

Dad:

Will you stop apologizing? It's not your fault. There's only so much you can do.
Let's talk about something else. Please.

Son:

You were talking about God.

Dad:

Right.

I don't know.

It feels stupid now.

Son:

It wasn't stupid.

Dad:

No it's stupid because I only see all this beauty when I already feel good. Like I'm feeling good with you here so I see the world beautifully, and I can express it too, I can express exactly what I find beautiful, the words come very easily and that's its own kind of beauty, its own kind of order. But then I start feeling low and those same things aren't beautiful anymore, which fills me with an overwhelming sense of loss, and more than that, I can't even describe what I found beautiful about them in the first place, so it feels like either those things were never beautiful or they're still beautiful and I just can't see it anymore.

Son:
Right.

Dad:
...

Son:
But you're not actually mourning the loss of beauty.
You're mourning the loss of whatever made you happy.

Dad:
Right.

Son:
A degree removed from the loss itself.

Dad:
Exactly.

Son:
Because the loss itself is too much to bear.

Dad:
Too much to understand.

Son:
Right.

Dad:
...

Son:
...

Dad:
...

Son:
...

Dad:
But then, you know, I have the weed and the movies. And those carry me through to the next morning when the sun feels new again and so forth.

Son:

Do you smoke every night?

Dad:

Not every night.

Son:

When's the last time you didn't smoke?

Dad:

I don't know. Why?

Son:

No reason.

Dad:

...

Son:

I just don't think I want to see you high.

Dad:

Oh really? I'm sorry.

Son:

Is that okay?

Dad:

Of course. I don't need to.

Son:

No, you can. I should go to bed anyways. I'm beat.

Dad:

We can just do the movie.

Son:

Maybe tomorrow night.

Dad:

Okay. That sounds good.

Son notices shards of painting on floor.

Son:
What happened here?

Dad:
Oh.
Nothing.
Stupid mistake.

Son:
...

Dad:
...

Son:
I'll see you in the morning.

Dad:
Yep, see you in the morning.

Son:
Love you.

Dad:
Love you too. Love you so much.

*Son goes upstairs.
Dad paces around.
Paces around more.
Starts to roll a joint.
Stops.
Tosses it out.
Pours all his weed down the sink and runs the garbage disposal.
Throws out the bag.
Sits down.
Waits for some time.
He's anxious.
Fishes the bag out of the trash.
Shakes it out on the table to see if there's any weed left. There's not.
He's jittery.
He starts to clean up the shards of the painting.
Cuts himself.
Swears and grabs a paper towel to staunch the blood.*

Keeps trying to clean it up.
Frenetic now.
A knock at the door.
He composes himself.
Then answers.
Son comes in with bags.
No hugs this time.
A distance.

Scene 3

Dad:
Hey.

Son:
Hey.

Dad:
Sorry, I was just cleaning up a mess.

Son:
Are you bleeding?

Dad:
A bit.

Son:
You're bleeding a lot.
Do you have a band-aid?

Dad:
It's fine, I just need to put pressure on it.

Son:
We should get some gauze or something.

Dad:
I'm fine. Please. I'm just going to suck on it.

Son:
Don't suck on it.

Dad:

I'm sucking on it.

Son:

I didn't think you could bleed here.

Dad:

That's what I've been trying to tell you. It's the same as real life.

Son:

So you're in pain right now?

Dad:

Yes.

Son:

Then what's the point?

Dad:

There isn't a point. Not everything has to have a point. I'm just living my life.

Son:

Jesus, I was joking.

Dad:

I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

Son:

...

Dad:

...

Son:

It's really exactly the same.

Dad:

Not without your mother.

Son:

I know.

Son:

...

Dad:

...

Son:

We used to play King of the Hill in Rochester.

Dad:

I remember.

Son:

...

Dad:

It makes me sad now.

Son:

Why?

Dad:

They just look so happy. You were so happy at that age.

Son:

I don't remember.

Dad:

You were so fun.

Son:

I'm not fun anymore?

Dad:

I have videos of it all somewhere. I recorded everything.

Son:

I remember that.

Dad:

Tomorrow we'll make dosas and watch them.

Son:

Indian Dosas?

Dad:

No, Mexican Dosas.

Yes, Indian Dosas. They're good. You'll like them.
Then we'll go down to the bodega and get flowers.

Son:
Sounds good.

Dad:
You like lilies?

Son:
Love lilies.

Dad:
We'll get lilies.

Son:
...

Dad:
...

Son:
...

Dad:
I had so much to tell you but now I'm blanking.

Son:
It's alright. I just like being with you.

Dad:
I like being with you too.

Son:
You seem sad.

Dad:
I'm tired. I didn't sleep well last night.

Son:
You never sleep well.

Dad:
I know. I've got problems.

Son:

What kind of problems?

Dad:

My mind races when I'm alone.

Son:

What kind of stuff?

Dad:

Bad stuff. I can't say it out loud.

Son:

It's that bad?

Dad:

I can't help it.

Son:

...

Dad:

...

Son:

...

Dad:

My father...

Son:

Say it.

Dad:

My father had this seed of anger in him.

Son:

...

Dad:

I shouldn't talk about him like this.

Son:

You never talk about him.

Dad:

He had this seed of anger.

Son:

Did he hit you?

Dad:

...

Son:

...

Dad:

I wouldn't tell you if he did.

Son:

Why?

Dad:

Why would I?

Son:

It would make us closer.

Dad:

No it wouldn't.

Maybe strangers.

But not a father and son.

Son:

What do you mean?

Dad:

This is a specific kind of intimacy.

It requires some silence.

You'll understand.

Son:

...

Dad:

The point being that I feel his seed of anger in myself.

Son:

You're not an angry man.

Dad:

I'm an anxious man.

I am violent with myself.

Son:

I know.

Dad:

And you're violent with yourself.

Son:

...

Dad:

And it breaks my heart.

Son:

I'm sorry, Dad.

Dad:

It breaks my heart.

Son:

I'm sorry.

Dad:

I'm sorry.

I was selfish.

Son:

You weren't selfish.

Dad:

I had you so I would never be alone.

Son:

Dad.

Dad:

So I would have something to live for beyond myself.

Son:
Please, Dad.

Dad:
Because who am I if not that seed of anger?

Son:
Dad.

Dad:
Who am I if not your father and his son?

Son:
Dad.

Dad:
...

Son:
...

Dad:
...

Son:
Did you hear me?
I said I have to go.

Dad:
What?

Son:
I have work in the morning.

Dad:
What do you mean?

Son:
I have to go to work in the morning.

Dad:
Weren't we just talking about making dosas in the morning?

Son:

Are you joking?

Dad:

Am I joking?

Son:

That was like a week ago.

Dad:

What are you talking about?

Son:

You made dosas like a week ago.

The day we watched home videos and walked down to the bodega to get lilies.

Dad:

...

Son:

...

Dad:

That's actually scary.

My memory's shot.

I thought we just talked about all that.

Son:

You're fine. The same thing happens to me. It's hard when every day is the same.

Dad:

No, that's really scary.

I could've sworn we just talked about all that.

Son:

It's fine. Don't worry about it.

Dad:

...

Son:

...

Dad

Where are the lilies?

Son:

They bloomed. Brownd. We threw them out.

Dad:

Oh.

I usually try to keep them around for longer.

Do you want to go pick up some more?

Son:

Next time, Dad. I really have to get back.

Dad:

Please.

Son:

What?

Dad:

Please don't leave.

Son:

Dad.

Dad:

Don't leave me alone. Let's just watch Avatar.

We don't have to talk or anything I just want to watch something together.

Son:

I can't, Dad.

Dad:

Please. It has a beautiful message.

Son:

Dad.

Dad:

The message is that God is in everything. God is in everything, and when you need a little help, there's always the weed and the movies. No matter where you are, that's the beauty of this place, you can always come back and it will always be the same.

Son:

Doesn't that depress you?

Dad:

No. It doesn't depress me at all.
You'll understand when you have kids.

Son:

I'm not going to have kids, Dad.

Dad:

You can here. You can have everything you want here.

Son:

I don't want that, Dad. I don't want that.

Dad:

...

Son:

I promise I'll be back soon.

Dad:

No you won't.

Son:

What?

Dad:

You won't be back soon.
You're lying to me.
You said you'd tell me if it got to that point again and then you didn't.

Son:

Why don't you just come with me?

Dad:

...

Son:

Come with me, Dad.

Dad:

...

Son:

Please just come with me--

Dad:

Mem-o-rama off.

Son walks out the front door.

Long silence.

Dad goes to window. Watches the kids playing.

Dad:

...

...

...

...

Could I have some more weed please?

...

...

...

...

Thank you.

...

...

...

...

And could you make one of the kids look like him?

...

...

...

...

Thank you. Thank you so much.

Lights out.

ACT 3

Scene 1

Mark from Act 1, Dad from Act 2, and a 16-year old boy sit in a circle at a Marijuana Addiction Rehabilitation Center.

Mark:

...

Dad:

...

Boy:

...

Mark:

...

Dad:

...

Boy:

...

Okay you guys are new so I guess I'll go first.
My name is Elliot and I am a marijuana addict.

Mark:

Hi Elliot.

Dad:

Hi Elliot.

Boy:

So this is peer group.
Basically the way it works is we go around and answer the questions on the poster.
Why am I here?
Who am I here for?
What has marijuana given me?
What has it taken away?

How will I live without marijuana?

How will I live with myself?

What does it mean to be in community with others?

What does it mean to be present?

You don't have to answer all of them or any of them, really, but sometimes it helps me organize my thoughts. And you also don't have to share if you don't want to. Sound good?

Mark:

...

Dad:

...

Boy:

I'll go first so you guys see how it works.

1. Why am I here?

This is the hardest one. Hardest first. Why am I here as in why am I here on Earth? In rehab? Why am I *here* as opposed to somewhere else? "Here" being my life, "there" being other people's lives? Or lives I might have lived? But how do I know I'm not living those lives too? Why am I here as opposed to someone else? I being me, someone else being, I don't know, the counterfactual, a surrogate with all the same experiences as me, biologically equivalent, made of the same substrate, synapses firing in the exact same order, and yet? Somehow we're different? That doesn't make any sense. Reductio ad absurdum. Who am I?

So you see my point, you can go down all these rabbit holes. It's hard not to because suddenly you have all this time and you just have to sit in it. You've been living in another world for years and then suddenly you stop smoking and your life feels so arbitrary. And long. Because you're not just leaving the world of being high, you're also leaving the world of suffering and escape. Suffering and escape. Suffering and escape. And then suddenly you decide you want to get better and getting better means not indulging the suffering and not indulging the escape. I'm not suffering and I can't escape. That's when you learn to live.

But it's not easy. It's easy to martyr ourselves because it's all we've been taught. Heroes and antiheroes. Antiheroes mostly, and so that's how we see ourselves, and everyone we love, because to live, we've learned, is to live in sin, and to be redeemed is to aspire to a world more perfect than this one. But if we take away the sin and the redemption, our world is self-contained and perfect. It is everything that we see. Why am I here as in how did I get here. In the most literal sense. Retracing my steps. Why am I here as in what am I hoping to get out of this place. Trying to figure out what my next steps will be. Still complicated questions, but I try my best to answer them. Because they're helpful.

Why am I here. How did I end up here. My parents found my stash. I had a rig in the basement. A gravity bong. Did I want them to find it? Who's to say? Was I relieved? Does it matter? It could have been any of us. There was weed in the house. We were all implicated.

My father. My father my father my father. What else is there to say? I love him so much. I used to think we were so different. I resented him for not being an artist. I don't know anything about his childhood. He is a troubled man. I see so much of myself in him. I see everything of myself in him. Whatever art I make is from and by him. He is my cosmology. He is everything I must understand and everything I will be.

My mother. My mother my mother my mother. What else is there to say? I love her so much. I used to think we were so different. I resented her for not being an artist. I don't know anything about her childhood. She is a troubled woman. I see so much of myself in her. I see everything of myself in her. Whatever art I make is from and by her. She is my cosmology. She is everything I must understand and everything I will be.

Why are they here? Who created the universe? Who am I to say?

Why am I here? I'm here to get better.

2. Who am I here for?

Asked and answered.

3. What has marijuana given me?

I alluded to this earlier but when I smoke, I literally feel like I'm in a different world. I feel like I'm in a parallel universe and I'm accruing experience as that version of myself. It's a way of reverting to childhood. Tainted, of course, by the fact that I'm wasting my body, wasting my mind, wasting my youth, wasting my potential. But then I just smoke more, and I'm a kid again. Quitting for me is like killing that kid.

Weed has given me a sense of wonder that I try to carry into my waking life. It has taught me what it means to be still in the world. The magic of letting things come to you. A cold wind. A flock of birds. I find them disgusting up close but so arresting from a distance. A kid playing trumpet in the apartment over. The sound of him learning.

Weed as a surrender. Of numbing feeling down to the senses. The only advice my mother ever gave me came as a non-sequitur late at night: "Come at the world with a spirit of gratitude." No context but I have my own exegesis. "Come at" as in the two of us are apart from "the world" desperate to become a part of "the world." "Come at" as in a confrontation. To be bullish in our gratitude. Supplicants at their altar. She was not grateful for life but she refused to surrender. She was a hard woman.

And yet, to surrender is to invite divinity, is it not?

4. What has marijuana taken away?

I used to write very beautifully. I was a beautiful writer. I wrote from a place of real devotion. A desire to describe the things that I loved, but my devotion always outpaced my abilities, and I got frustrated. I couldn't describe the things that I loved and it made me feel like I didn't love them in the first place. So I became fixated on writing as a way of proving that I was still capable of love, but then the writing became the object of my devotion, and the devotion became an obsession, and then everything was poisoned, everything was just a blank screen and the way I'd tried to describe it and the way I'd failed at describing it.

So I stopped writing and went on long walks. I looked up at the trees in winter because I knew they were supposed to be beautiful but I couldn't remember why, and yet, I felt that if I kept walking, the beauty would come again like spring, and sure enough it came, but by that point I was weary, I had lost so much, everything beautiful was everything I stood to lose. Everything was precious and precarious and I was so desperate to immortalize it before it was gone that I didn't even experience it in the first place. And then, another long winter. And in that winter, I started smoking instead of walking, and that forever stripped the world of beauty, because again, my mother was prescient, again she was all the divinity I needed.

To surrender, she knew, was to let that part of myself die.

5. How will I live without marijuana?

I will work harder than I ever have in my life. I will write until the beauty returns. I will offer trumpet lessons to the kid next door. I will teach him in the evenings when I might have otherwise gotten high. I will unearth all my old trumpet books. I will give him so many books over so many years that he will never have time to learn about drugs or alcohol or suicide, he will learn only etudes and cadenzas and double-tonguing. I will teach him everything I know and everything I don't. I will unsheathe my own trumpet. I will reacquaint myself with its rituals. I will give it a bath. I will oil its valves. I will polish its silver. I will tense my face muscles, atrophied after years of sloth. I will bring my mouthpiece to my lips and blow something beautiful out into the world. The sound of our learning.

6. How will I live with myself?

The tautology comes in saying I am me and me am I. It's circular. Although that circularity has its own kind of integrity. An unassailable internal logic. I am me and me am I. There's something so powerful about that. At a time when the self is diffuse and tentative. How will I live with my self? I will live with me and me will live with I. Does that answer your question?

Alternatively, I am him and him am I. My student. My child. Then it's a dialectic. A rope slung over heaven such that if either of us were to cut the cord, we'd both fall. The same with my

parents. If they were to ever kill themselves, and vice versa. We are voodoo dolls of each other. But with mystical pain comes mystical love. The kind you could never experience untethered. To have two bodies in this world. Double the sensitivity.

I am me and me am I. To be entirely self-sufficient. I am him and him am I. To be entirely dependent. Which is stronger? Who's to say. They're not mutually exclusive. I am made in his image. He is made in my image. By transitivity, I am made in the image of myself. I am me am him am him am me am I.

7. What does it mean to be in community with others?

My father always worried about me joining a cult. He said I was a prime candidate. What was he projecting? He wanted to be close to everyone but could never quite get there. I am me am him am him am me am I.

My mother never had any friends. All she needed were her books and her wine and her children. I am she am me am me am she am I.

8. What does it mean to be present?

To be present is to be spoken to in the second-person. To hear the wisdom of the other who is yourself and your parents and God. To reconcile literature and reality.

Close your eyes. Listen.

You find yourself.

Memory-in-memory.

Childhood.

Quiet still naked.

The shuffle of leaves.

You are waiting to come but I regret to inform you.

Every time you come your father comes.

Every time you cry your mother cries.

Therefore, you must never come.

You must never cry.

Until they die.

At which point.

You may come until you cry.

Unless of course you have children.

In which case.

You must never come.

You must never cry.

Until you are all in heaven.

At which point.

You may come and cry for eternity in his everlasting kingdom.

Mark:

...

Dad:

...

Boy:

...

Mark:

...

Dad:

...

Boy:

I think that's it for me.
Do either of you want to share?

Mark:

...

Dad:

...

Boy:

Mark?

Mark:

...

Boy:

Dad?

Dad:

...

Boy:

Okay.
Maybe next time.

Lights out.