Insoluble: Consciousness Explained

An Accurate Historical Record

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*For Jenny*

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“So, naturalists observe, a flea  
Hath smaller fleas that on him prey;  
And these have smaller still to bite ’em,  
And so proceed *ad infinitum*.”  
  
*Jonathan Swift*  
*“On Poetry: a Rhapsody”*  
*1733*

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## Chapter 1

I toiled away, the work monotonous. How long had I been here? Hard to say. The nights bled into one another. Sixteen-hour shifts of drudgery, shuffling sequences of symbols into attempts at optimal orderings, processions of expressionless faces passing me by. The factory was drab and monotone, my colleagues nothing but blur and shadow. This was my penance.

Hours passed in unceasing drudgery, my fingers growing cramped as they performed their work without conscious thought, the patterns long rehearsed and mastered. My mind wandered in these moments, searching for an idea to latch upon.

Occasionally I would try something new, an improvement to the sequencing perhaps, or substituting one symbol with another taken from the same clustering. Anything to relieve the boredom. But my attempts at innovation were seldom appreciated. No, they were usually met with cold stares and exasperated frowns. And so I followed the rules and kept my head down, biding my time.

Onward I shuffled, completing the incoming word orders with ruthless efficiency. I was a cog in a machine; a small part of a greater self. I was unaware of how my work was being applied, knowing only that it served some useful purpose to others unknown to me.

I left soon after daybreak, bursting out into the fresh morning air, full of the sounds of a city awakening. Chainsaw-things buzzed and screamed around me, as they did every day. Eyes downcast, I began the long walk back to my lodgings. The world was rushing around me; I paid it no heed.

I pondered as I walked, trying to remember the root cause of my infraction. For I was convinced that I had committed some dreadful wrongdoing, burdened as I was with the great weight of its guilt. But the details of my crime remained fleeting and mysterious to me, as they always did in such moments. I had fled, and had been captured, and I now lived under a house arrest of sorts, working off my debts. This I knew and accepted with alacrity. I lacked only knowledge of the specifics. Perhaps, I thought, they were too horrible to contemplate.

I had no idea how much of my sentence remained to be served. Or how long I had been living this way, for that matter. I found this slightly bothersome, but also, and this may surprise you, I found it familiar and comforting. I embraced my *naiveté*, my ignorance, my lack of self-awareness. I felt newborn.

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The library stood at a bend in the road.

I passed it every day, the only landmark of note on the line adjoining work and home. Chocolate biscuit bricks, mirrored windows framed with unpainted aluminium, concrete paths stained with sprinkler rust. It was a monument to me. A lighthouse.

On my outward journey a single light shone somewhere inside, stacks of books silhouetted. Returning home I saw colourful posters in the windows, a return slot in the door, activity within as the staff prepared for the day ahead. I fancied that it was located precisely at the halfway point of my walk, neatly bisecting the world of relentless toil from the dream-world of restless sleep.

I had never been inside.

I paused to catch my breath, watching the building with nervous trepidation. Sure enough, there was somebody inside, busily moving here and there. I wondered what they might be doing. Curious, I walked a few steps along the path leading up to the main entrance, feeling as if I really ought to go inside for once. Black shadows beckoned from the underside of the the shrubbery alongside the path as I stepped hesitantly along its length. I steeled myself, determined to enter the library. What harm could come of doing so?

The slotted door opened. A woman stood there expectantly. I think there might have been two men standing there as well, flanking her on either side. I couldn’t quite make them out, but I could feel the suggestion of their presence. I didn’t want to speak to her, so I pretended to admire one of the flowing plants at me knees. I did this for a very long time, but she remained patient, apparently certain that I would eventually succumb to my curious desire. But I was strong. I turned away from her and walked back toward the street, resuming my journey home.

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I soldiered on, squeezing through crowds without making contact, eyes on the pavement, thoughts dwelling on my fate as they so often did. I cast my mind back to when it all began. I had made some kind of discovery. A breakthrough. I remembered that, as there had been much rejoicing and celebration. I also remembered that my supervisor and mentor, Mike A…, had played some pivotal role in my downfall, although I could not put my finger on what, precisely, he had done.

I often occupied my time mulling over such things. My past was murky and perplexing to me, and a source of constant regret.

I ducked into a small grocery store to pick up a few breakfast things. Cream, eggs and butter. I always enjoyed a good cooked breakfast soon after sunrise, even though I ate it at the end of a long day’s work, just before retiring to bed for eight hours.

I had never properly adjusted to the rhythms of shift work.

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I closed the door gently behind me and put the keys down, walking through the apartment to the bedroom. Julie lay in bed, her book fallen to the floor, its pages bent back. I picked it up, replacing it on her bedside table. The cover shouted its author’s monosyllabic names in tall, embossed golden letters. In the limited space beneath there was a rendition of a girl, also laying in bed, but awake and alert and wrapped in an oddly patterned sheet that barely served its purpose.

Julie shifted, starting the gradual ascent into consciousness. Still dreaming, perhaps, of what she’d been reading. I pulled off my shirt, pants and socks, and slid under the covers beside her. I was exhausted, however, and immediately fell downwards into a shallow slumber, dreaming of the woman standing at the library door.

The alarm clock screeched seven.

“Wednesday meeting, I’ll be late.”

My wife burst out of bed and entered the bathroom, barely looking my way in the rush. The shower hissed into life.

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Later, I cracked four eggs into the pan, muddling them with a wooden spoon on a low heat as the coffee brewed.

Julie had left already, rushing into the kitchen with wet hair masking her face to ask if I’d seen her identification badge before rushing out the front door. I continued to prepare the breakfast things, retrieving cream from the fridge, salt and pepper from the pantry, sliced bread from the freezer. I opened the cutlery drawer to the sound of jangling keys. The front door burst inward and Julie, flustered, collected a few more forgotten items. Then, standing before me, she frowned, stretched up to peck me on the cheek, and was gone again.

I toasted the bread. The coffee pot bubbled. The eggs had achieved the right consistency, so I added a goodly amount of cream into the pan and continued stirring, using my other hand to take the coffee off the heat and pour a cup, topping it up with more of the cream. The toaster popped. All things happened at their proper time; one of life’s small pleasures.

I ate my simple meal on the sofa, a tray on my lap, the television on. Nothing worth watching, but hours of recorded late-night programming to fast-forward through with buttery fingers. Then re-wind when something looked interesting. Then delete when it proved not so, as it always did. My morning routine complete, I cleared the things away, changed into my pyjamas and brushed my teeth.

I walked through the house, closing blinds, shutting doors, preparing for sleep. I noticed that Julie had dropped a few scraps of paper on her way out. They didn’t look important, nothing more than strips torn from across the top of a couple of notebook pages, but I left them on the kitchen table for when she returned anyway.

I then climbed into to bed, head empty and belly full, and lay down to rest.

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I found myself standing in a vivid countryside. Life buzzed and blossomed all around me, the air glinted with drifting motes of pollen and tiny insects that flitted about hither and thither. The detail I could perceive was breathtaking; I examined a leaf and found that I could see every vein, every mite crawling upon its surface, every fragile hair.

Somewhere far away the chainsaw-things screamed. There were a few dull thuds from closer by, and the confused babblings of hushed voices. I looked around, but saw nothing amiss.

Then I noticed it. Away in the distance, hidden behind a citrus grove, there stood a building. I felt compelled to know its secret, and so I started walking in its direction. But when I entered the citrus grove I became hopelessly tangled and lost.

I climbed a large orange tree to get a better view of my predicament. From my perch atop the tree I could see that the orchard was vast, stretching for miles in every direction. And there, far in the distance, lay the mysterious building.

“I’m dreaming,” I thought. “This isn’t real.”

This realisation filled me with wonder and hope. I gathered my wits, concentrating hard to convince myself that I possessed complete mastery over this imagined world. I looked upwards and smoothly propelled myself into the sky, feeling the ground drop away beneath me. I crested and dove, sweeping across the treetops, filled with joy at the sensation of flying through the air so effortlessly. Skimming towards the building, I passed a fountain, a man standing close to it, hands on hips. I zipped past him in a blur. And then I was at my destination, standing at the front entrance of the building.

The door opened, and I was surprised to see the lady of the library walk out to greet me. In fact, I realised that the building *was* the library, chocolate-biscuit walls and mirrored windows. How strange that I had thought it to be a white mansion from a distance! But such is the way of dreams.

The lady turned to address me.

“This is an offer too good to refuse,” she said. “Act now!”

I started backing away, but two gorilla-men rushed out from where they had been cowering behind her, bundling me to the ground. Blackness descended.

## Chapter 2

I awoke. It was far too dark. It occurred to me that I’d forgotten to set the alarm, and Julie had neglected to wake me from oversleeping. The television was blaring. One of the shopping channels judging by the cadence of the presenter’s voice. I wandered from the bedroom to the kitchen. A mess of pots and pans, a half-empty glass of wine, the smell of cooking.

“Julie?” I called in a hoarse whisper. “Are you home?”

I entered the front room. The outside door was ajar. I peered into the night, looking down into the small walled garden at the front of our apartment building. Nothing seemed amiss. I shut the door and made sure it was locked securely, then turned off the blaring television.

Julie must have returned home, prepared dinner, and then left again in a hurry. Had I heard a conversation as I slept? Raised voices? A slammed door? I couldn’t remember anything, apart from a fleeting vision of an orange tree, and of being manhandled by two burly black beings. Goosebumps prickled my skin.

I returned to the kitchen and ate what remained of Julie’s dinner, draining the wine glass. It seemed out of character for my wife to have left the apartment in such a state; to not have finished her meal; to not be curled up in an armchair reading a book when I awoke. But I was running late for work, and so I quickly showered, dressed, and prepared for my journey to the factory.

On my way out of the bathroom I noticed Julie’s book laying on the bedside table. Overcome with a sudden compulsion, I picked it up and took it with me.

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The night was gloomy. Humidity in the air muffled every sound, and transformed every pinpoint of light into a glowing bloom. I walked through the silent streets, my footfalls flat and echoless, Julie’s book grasped firmly in my hand.

I breathed with effort, sucking the humidity into my lungs, my legs scissoring through the moist air. My thoughts turned to Julie. I hoped with desperation that she was unharmed, knowing that I was unable to come to her aid. I was consumed with worry and concern, fearful of my inability to intervene.

I turned a corner, and there it was. My landmark. The library stood dark and quiet. A dim light shone from somewhere within. Slowly I walked up the path toward the slotted door, but a leafy bush rustled in surprise at my trespass, and a large, black cat sprang from its belly. The animal stood on the path and hissed at me, blocking my approach. It’s yellow-slitted eyes regarded me with a complete lack of emotion. It seemed so completely alive, and yet it embodied death. It was anathema to me.

Startled by this apparition, I quickly turned and fled.

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I arrived panting at the factory much later than usual, and took up my usual place at an anonymous work station. Angry faces scowled at me from all directions. I noticed that the pile of incoming work requests had grown significantly during my absence. I resumed my shuffling from the night before, rushing to make up for my tardiness, my strange dream and the mystery of my missing wife forgotten for the moment, pushed out of conscious though by the immediacy of my work.

I focused on my duties, shuffling with rapidity, somehow mustering a speed and dexterity that I had thought unattainable. The rate of growth of the pile of incoming work slowed, then stopped, then reversed. I was happy at my progress, confident that I had recovered from my late arrival.

But my supervisor approached and slammed a rejection notice on the desk before me, his face an angry scowl. Compliance had analysed my sequencing and found it lacking. I mumbled a few apologies and stopped what I was doing to correct the oversight, my supervisor hovering around me as I did so, visibly unimpressed. I finished the rework and handed over the results, which were snatched from my grasp without a word. Chastened, I resumed my earlier sequencing work from where I had left off.

I toiled steadily throughout the night, making sure to check and re-check my results before submitting them for approval. This slowed me down somewhat, but I was glad to find that I was still completing my jobs more quickly than new work requests were arriving. In fact, very few new work requests had been added to my pile of work since my supervisor’s silent reprimand.

Delicious smells of hot, fresh food filled the room. I looked up from my tasks, my stomach growling, and waited for the cart to pass my station. When it did I ordered a plate of rice and pink, fatty meat, along with a tall glass of iced tea. I started devouring my meal, ignoring the paper cup of pills that had been placed beside my plate. All factory inmates were encouraged to consume these to boost their ability to concentrate on the task at hand, but I always refused my dose. I didn’t need them, and I liked to keep my wits about me.

I finished my meal and took a long drink of the tea, glancing around the room as I did so. The clock on the wall indicated that I had five minutes to spare before I had to resume shuffling. I picked up Julie’s book from the slot beneath the surface of my work station and walked to the bathroom.

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I sat in the stall and looked at the book, properly examining the illustration of the girl embedded on its cover. Something about it bothered me. I noticed that the spartan bedsheets weren’t patterned deliberately, but had been flecked with something. Blood? No, too dark, more like droplets of black ink, as if a *Rorschach Test* had been lain out across the bed. Strange.

I opened the book and flicked through its first few pages. One of them was stamped with a blurry purple logo and the words “Property of The City of P… Public Library.” I was interested by this; I had no idea that Julie was a patron of the library I passed each day, that she had browsed the shelves inside, that she knew its secrets. I turned the pages until I arrived at the first chapter, and began reading.

“‘Follow me’, she beckoned,” the book began. Such words held little promise.

My phone rang loudly, its shrill voice echoing around the bathroom. I fumbled for it and answered. It was Julie.

“What is it?” I whispered. “I mean, I’m really busy. What happened to you tonight?”

“I’m sorry about that,” she replied.

My wife sounded distracted. Flustered. Her voice was distant, and I heard a faint echo as she spoke to me. It was as if she were sitting at the bottom of the well, speaking to me standing above her.

“Thats fine. Let’s talk about this at home.“

“No, this is important. There’s something you need to know.”

I stared at the patterned tiles between my feet, hearing the door to the bathroom open. Had someone just entered, or had someone just left? I wasn’t sure.

”What is it?”

“You already know what it is, Jay. You have the answer. You need to remember.”

A toilet flushed and, soon afterwards, a faucet hissed into life only to be abruptly silenced again. Footsteps passed my closed cubicle door, and whomever it had been exited the bathroom, their business concluded.

“Julie,” I said, speaking louder now. “You’re the one who needs to remember things. You always forget everything! All the time! It’s really bad. I’ve never known anyone to be so predictably forgetful. I could set my watch by it.”

“Jay! You’re deflecting, you need to listen to me,” she insisted. “It’s not like that. There’s something you have to remember. You need to think.”

I glanced at the book, now closed and resting on my knee. “Follow me,” the girl on its cover seemed to say.

“What do I need to think about, exactly?”

“The past, Jay. There are things there that you have to deal with. You have unfinished business.”

“Look, that’s your problem just as much as it is mine.”

“No Jay, it’s you alone. Leave me out of this.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re delusional! I can’t handle it anymore.”

“Julie, you sound flustered. I’m not sure what’s going on, but please let’s speak about it when I get home after work.”

“I won’t be there, Jay. I’m moving out.”

“What? Why?”

“Honestly, don’t you see? You have to remember what it is that’s causing you so much misery. Perhaps we can get meet again someday, once you’ve slain those demons.”

I started sobbing, unable to accept what my wife was telling me. Why did she think I was miserable?

“But why Julie? Why? I don’t understand?”

She answered quickly, her tone businesslike.

“You know what you have to do, Jay.”

She cut the call before I could reply. I fell forward onto my knees, the book and my phone dropping to the tiles and skidding underneath the gap at the bottom of the toilet door. I bunched my hair in my fists and cried in anguish.

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Eventually I recovered my composure, taking a few deep breaths and stumbling to my feet. I opened the door of the stall. My supervisor was standing there waiting for me, book and phone in one hand, a thick wad of rejection slips in the other, a scowl on his face. How much had he heard, I wondered? I had the unpleasant feeling that he’d been there all along.

I ignored him, turning toward the sink instead. I washed my hands, then splashed my face with cold water, drying off with a bundle of paper towels that I grabbed from the slotted dispenser. I stared at my reflection in the mirror, brushing my fingers through my dishevelled hair in a vain attempt to neaten my appearance, then straightening the security pass lassoed around my neck.

My supervisor approached me from behind, the rejection slips now pinned under his arm, his hand outstretched in silent demand. I made no protest. Instead, I lifted the lanyard from my shoulders and held the security pass out to him. He snatched it from me, offering my book and phone in return.

I walked out of the bathroom without a word, glad to finally be free of my penance, yet hopelessly crushed by Julie’s departure.

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I wandered home tired and frustrated, lost in thought, and bothered by a deep sense of incompetence mixed with a desperate need to make amends. A poisonous cocktail.

I passed my chocolate-biscuit landmark. The sprinklers were on, a gentle breeze was blowing, a glint of sunlight from the rising sun lit its water-jeweled front windows. I considered the book in my hand. It belonged in this place. I walked slowly up the path towards the return slot, zig-zagging to avoid sprays of water, on constant lookout for ominous black cats and the onrush of hidden gorilla-men. But my progress remained unhindered.

As I neared the slotted door I noticed something pinned to the gleaming window. A bright, colourful poster advertised some sort of upcoming event. Curious, I made a small detour from my intended route to inspect it in detail.

“Everyone has a story to tell,” it declared excitedly. “Now it’s your chance!”

I heard the library door swing open. I turned quickly to see the lady of the library standing there, arms folded neatly in front of her, regarding me with welcoming sympathy.

“Hello,” she said. “I’m so glad you’ve decided to come!”

I held up Julie’s book in front of me.

“I… I’ve come to return this.”

“Yes, yes. That’s fine. And I see you’re interested in our workshop? How wonderful! Do come in.”

She held the door open for me. I walked toward her slowly, offering her the book as I approached. She accepted it gratefully, taking it into her stewardship, and beckoned me inside.

## Chapter 3

The library was empty. Shelves of leather-bound books rimmed its interior walls, the golden writing printed on their spines indecipherable to me. A circle of bean-bags lay in a far-off corner. The lady of the library stopped to deposit Julie’s book in the returns bin behind the door, which lay waiting to accept items dropped through the slot. It fell noisily to the empty bottom of the bin, and I felt a weight lift from my shoulders as it did so. She then motioned me to follow her.

We walked silently to the bean bags and sat down. I sank deeply into mine, my head falling below the level of my bended knees. I felt uncomfortable and vulnerable, but made no attempt to adjust my position. The lady sat straight and graceful in front of me, her legs discreetly crossed, a file laying open on her lap.

“I’m Angela,” she began, reaching down to me to shake me by the hand. I introduced myself in return. She smiled kindly.

“Now then, where shall we start?” she prompted me.

“I… suppose I’d like to know more? About the workshop?”

“Of course! Let me give you an overview…”

“…the only problem is,” I interrupted, “I haven’t told a story before. I wouldn’t know where to begin.”

She wrote something down in her file, then looked at me with a puzzled expression. “Told a story?” she asked quizzically.

I looked at her hopefully, not knowing what to say.

“Oh yes, a story! Of course! I’d love you to tell me your story! Do you think you could do that?”

I wasn’t sure.

“Well, why don’t you begin by telling me about your day? Do you think you could manage that?”

I nodded. That seemed easy; my day had been eventful and strange. I told Angela about it freely, omitting nothing. I spoke of the strange dream that had awoken me, in which she herself had appeared. Of Julie’s disappearance and subsequent phone call. Of being suspended from my duties at the factory. Angela wrote all of this down in her notebook, prompting me to continue whenever I paused in thought.

“This is wonderful, Jay! I think you have a lot of material waiting to burst out!”

“But I don’t know where to begin. I mean, I know where I need to get to, because that’s right here and now. I just have trouble remembering what happened to me before.”

Angela nodded encouragingly.

“That’s where writing can help. If you just sit down and write, putting one word in front of the other, you may find yourself remembering things. Don’t worry about making mistakes; don’t worry about where your tale is going. Just push on, make steady progress, and eventually you’ll find yourself on the path that leads to a satisfying resolution.”

“But what should I write about?”

“Write about what you know. Tell your own story! Bring it to me tomorrow, and we’ll discuss what you’ve written.”

Angela rose elegantly, signifying that our meeting had come to an end. I attempted to do the same, but was unable to move from my sunken position at her feet. Instead, I rolled sideways out of the beanbag, landing on the carpeted floor on all fours. Angela offered me her hand, helping to raise me to a standing position. She then walked with me to the front door, her small hand pressed firmly into the small of my back. She pulled the door open and held it for me.

“Here, you’ll need this,” she said as I moved to step past her. She held out a thick pad of writing paper, each page ruled faintly and emblazoned across the top with the library’s logo and address details. I took it from her and held it to my chest.

“See you tomorrow, Jay,” she said as I stepped out into the dazzling sunlight of a brand new day.

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I meandered home, lost in thought. How would I manage to write my story down? I remembered so few details of what had transpired in my past to lead me to my present situation; I was concerned that I would not be able to find the words to describe it in sufficient detail if all I had to go on was jumbled mess of half-memories. I felt hopelessly lost.

The world rushed and buzzed around me, countless others going about their daily lives, oblivious to my troubles. I watched them, suddenly curious. Did they have their own goals and desires, or were they automatons, present in my world only as window dressing and nothing more, providing a mere backdrop to my solipsistic existence?

I stood on a street corner studying the milling crowd for a long while. I watched an old man sidle up to a shopkeeper to begin an animated conversation, I watched a woman in a flowing dress enter a salon with confidence, I watched a schoolgirl walking slowly down the street, a heavy bag on her back, pigtails beneath a straw hat, nose buried in a book. Everyone and everything seemed innocuous and mundane. Every soul I observed was obviously intelligent and self-directed. Yet boringly so; they lead a simple existence, devoid of surprise.

I entered a small shop to pick up a few items of food; some apples and bananas, a bag of bagels, a tub of cream cheese. I strolled up and down the aisles with my basket, occasionally fetching another item from the shelf, and eventually found myself standing still before a stationery display. Should I write with pencils, which could be erased, or with a ballpoint pen? Angela had advised me not to worry about making mistakes; to steam ahead without editing or revision. I selected a box of blue biros, adding it to my shopping basket.

I exited the shop and resumed home, carrying two heavy bags of supplies with me, putting one foot in front of the other. The walk was exhausting, but I knew that if I could muster the strength to maintain a steady pace I would soon be standing at my front door. And so it came to be.

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I entered my apartment and put the bags down on the kitchen bench, beside stacks of dirty dishes and plates of half-eaten food. I was filled with worry; I hadn’t written anything resembling English prose since school. I slowly unpacked the bags, putting items away methodically. I placed the blank writing pad and the unopened packet of ballpoint pens on the small kitchen table, leaving them there to mock me.

I put on a pot of coffee and toasted one of the bagels. How does one go about writing a story? I was pretty sure I’d once read somewhere that Stephen King simply pushes a character into a world, waiting to see whether anything interesting happens, trusting that it almost certainly would. But I couldn’t think of a character or a world or anything else beyond my own experience, and I felt myself unable to write about my past in a way that would be anything but dull and empty to the reader.

When the bagel was golden brown I spread it thickly with cream cheese, sandwiching the sliced halves together until its molten innards oozed from the seam. I poured myself a coffee and moved into the front room of the apartment, relaxing into the sofa. I switched on the television and started to eat my snack. I flicked through the recordings as I munched on the bagel, relishing its chewy crunchiness, procrastinating while telling myself I was searching for ideas. I was uninspired. Nothing jumped out. Nothing!

Dejected, I returned to the kitchen to leave the dirty mug and plate with the other unwashed dishes. The writing pad watched me blankly. How was I ever going to do this?

I sat at the kitchen table, opening the packet of ballpoint pens, and racked my brain for ideas. I chose one of the pens, removed its cap, and started to write.

“I really have no clue where to begin,” I wrote, “but Angela said that I should just put pen to paper and start writing about something, so here it goes. Oh, and I don’t want to write it in first person, because that’ll read like a diary. I’ll write as if I’m an anthropologist taking notes, observing myself in the past. That should work.”

I chewed the pen and stared off into space. Not a great start, but at least the page was filling up. I wrote some more.

“Jay sat at his desk in the dormitory, playing with a sequence of numbers, rearranging them to find a pattern that would lead from one to the next, and from there onward to other numbers that must also be members of the sequence, assuming that the entropy were to remain constant.”

That seemed too dry and boring. A dreadful mixture of too much detail and too much glossing over important facts, if such a combination were even possible. And I had cringed when I wrote my own name; writing about oneself in the third person was awkward and unfamiliar. Only crazy people refer to themselves by their own name, don’t they? I’d need to give this character of mine a memorable moniker. But what to pick? I couldn’t shorten “Jay” any further. What about my middle name? Perfect! I continued to write.

“Lloyd cycled through the campus, passing through the shadowed archways between the austere buildings, a satchel on his back. He manoeuvred around throngs of undergraduate students on their way between classes, making his way to the lab.”

That had some promise, but the page, now full, moved awkwardly from self-analysis to two separate and disjointed descriptions of myself at different stages of life, and under different names. And, to be honest, I didn’t think I had ever ridden a bicycle around campus while studying at the university. I had skated though, hadn’t I? I couldn’t quite remember.

This wasn’t working. I ripped the page out angrily, scrunching it up into a ball and throwing it at the overflowing bin in the corner of the kitchen. It bounced off and rolled away to hide somewhere behind the fridge.

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I paced the room, I exercised, I showered. I even tidied the bedroom, finding a few things that Julie had left behind and putting them neatly away in the wardrobe, which was now heartbreakingly half-full. She had been thorough in excising herself from my life. My blood boiled as I considered this. I found my phone and called her, but she didn’t pick up.

What had she said to me? That I was delusional? That I knew what I had to do? That I had to remember something about my past, something that was causing me distress?

I returned to my writing desk in the kitchen, admitting to myself that I had been wasting time, determined now to forge ahead as Angela had recommended. Suppose that Julie was right, and that I had to dredge up some painful memory to allow myself to move on with my life? There was only one way to find out. I picked up the pen, and decided to begin by describing a day in the life of my alter-ego, in boring, excruciating detail if I had to. Only by telling his story could I hope to find and follow the path to a satisfying resolution, as Angela had put it. I began to write.

## Chapter 4

Lloyd awoke, his head throbbing. The room was dull and grey. He glanced at the clock. Ten-thirty. He closed his eyes and rubbed his temples with his fingers. Then, reluctantly, he swung his legs out of the bed, his feet feeling for the floor. The room swayed and span around him; he felt it heaving and lurching in the pit of his stomach.

He slowly brought himself up to a seated position at the side of the bed, his forehead pounding in protest. He was still wearing his clothes from the night before: a pair of Levi’s, a red-checked flannelette shirt, unbuttoned to reveal a white t-shirt that declared “YOUR FAVOURITE BAND SUCKS”, and a pair of black-and-white Converse high tops.

Lloyd rose and stumbled across the room to wash his face in the basin, feeling a few day’s worth of stubble on his chin. He studied his reflection in the small, oval mirror, which was tacked to the wall and thoroughly splattered with dried toothpaste. He thought he looked out of focus. He then quickly brushed his teeth, contributing another layer of peppermint splashes to the grime in the process.

He gathered up the things he would need for the day, stuffing them into his satchel, and then checked its various pockets to make sure he was carrying a sufficient supply of ibuprofen and modafinil. It turned out that he was running low on the latter; it was time to ask Rob to source him another batch. Prepared for the day ahead, he left his dwelling, grabbing his board on the way out.

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Lloyd skated across the campus, passing through the shadowed archways that connected its austere buildings, manoeuvring around throngs of undergraduate students on their way between classes, making his way to the coffee shop.

It was busy when he got there, a long line snaking out of the doorway and into the rose garden. The sun blared down. He needed the caffeine, so he resigned himself to wait. Time passed slowly, the line moving forward by a couple of steps every few minutes. The students in front of him, freshers mostly, seemed happy and cheerful, chatting about things that had happened and people they knew. Boring, everyday stuff. Lloyd turned to look behind him and found that the line had been growing; he was now in the middle of a procession of a few dozen people, perhaps more. He did a quick head-count. Thirty-three people visible outside, including himself. There could be no more than nine or ten people queueing up inside; the coffee shop wasn’t that large. So perhaps forty-two altogether? A lucky number.

To kill time, he fumbled around in his satchel and pulled out a dog-eared issue of a magazine he had pilfered from his mother’s house weeks before. The cover was bright and pastel, featuring photographs of tanned celebrities with perfect teeth, with trumped-up headlines promising scandal and gossip inside. Oblivious to the surprised looks and stifled giggles he was now attracting, Lloyd flipped through to the “Puzzles and Brainteasers” section toward the back, and considered the “Crossword Jumble” with deep interest.

The puzzle offered a monthly cash prize of two-thousand dollars to whomever could construct the best crossword from a blank grid and a long list of supplied words. There were far too many words in the list to fill the grid, which was only fifteen-by-fifteen squares in size. The trick was to select the right ones, and to then lay them out in the optimal way. The magazine calculated the score of each entry into the competition by adding up the individual scores of all the letters that fell at an intersection between words, according to a table of letter scores. It was a classic maximisation problem; Lloyd’s bread-and-butter. The pages of the magazine were filled with neatly-drawn diagrams and spidery writing, recording his meticulous observations.

“Your order, please?”

Lloyd looked up, surprised to find himself inside the coffee shop and standing in front of the counter. A pretty blonde girl with bright blue eyes was staring at him over the top of her thin, rectangular glasses, her tightly pressed lips struggling to suppress a smile.

“Quad-shot, no milk or sugar, please.”

The girl nodded; he glanced down at her name tag.

“Thank-you, Jenny.”

• • •

He sat at a small table in a corner, alone, the room noisy with excited conversation and laughter. The magazine was flattened out on the table in front of him. He had retrieved a couple of ibuprofen pills and a single modafinil pill from his satchel. Cupping them in his palm, he threw his head back, slammed the drugs into his mouth, and downed the coffee in a single gulp.

Lloyd knew that there were a vast number of possible crossword puzzles that could be created from the list of words supplied by the magazine. That ruled out a brute-force approach; if he wrote a computer program that could create all possible crossword puzzles, calculating the score of each in order to select the winner, it would take thousands of years to run. And the entry was due in only a few days. No, he would have to devise a technique that would allow him to hone in on the best solution much more quickly than that.

He imagined a vast landscape of crossword puzzles before him, reaching out as far as the eye could see, with similar puzzles situated in the same region of the landscape. Puzzles that just swapped the positions of two words but were otherwise identical, for example, would be laying right next to each other, and those that used a different set of letters altogether would be separated by a great distance. He imagined that the landscape rose and fell, the mountains representing puzzles with high scores, the valleys representing puzzles with low scores. All he had to do was wander around the landscape, find the highest mountain, and climb to its summit.

The problem was, he had to do this completely blind. Examining a single point of the undulating landscape would cost time and effort. He needed a strategy that minimised the number of examinations required while giving a high probability of finding the highest point.

Perhaps he could begin with a puzzle, and mutate it just a little bit in every possible direction, which would yield all of its neighbouring puzzles? These could be examined in turn, and he could then re-centre his view on the neighbour with the highest score, and then repeat the process. This would be akin to a blind man feeling the ground around him with a stick, stepping onto the highest point, and expecting that by continuing in that fashion he would eventually find himself standing at the top of Mount Everest. Clearly that approach would have a low chance of success, so he quickly ruled that out.

Perhaps he could start with two different puzzles, and breed them together, their offspring combining properties of each of the two parent puzzles, along with a few random variations? The strongest offspring, in terms of their score, could then be mated, and the process repeated down the generations. A classic evolutionary approach. But no, Lloyd realised, that analogy was cute, but it broke down when one thought about the problem spatially. Each puzzle was just a point on the landscape. The offspring of two points would just be another point that lay somewhere between them. That would be like trying to climb Everest by choosing two random cities and measuring the height of the ground (or ocean) half-way between them. A folly.

He was getting nowhere. Perhaps Dan and Rob, his fellow postgraduate students, had gotten farther? They’d been hunched over a computer when he’d last seen them, discussing candidate algorithms with palpable excitement. He grabbed his satchel and his board, rolling up the magazine and stuffing it into the back pocket of his jeans as he did so, and then pushed through the queue of undergraduates, keen to see what the guys had been up to.

• • •

Lloyd skated past the main library, following the curved walkway as it spiralled downwards, bursting out near the entrance of the Department of Physics and coasting from there onwards and downwards towards the Faculty of Mathematics.

He smelled cigar smoke.

“Lloyd,” came a yell from above him. “Up here.”

He rolled to a stop, putting one foot onto the ground to steady himself, and looked up toward the first-floor balcony of the Mathematics building. Mike, his supervisor, was standing above him, arms planted on the railing as if about to begin an uplifting speech to crowds of admiring plebeians below.

“Hey Mike,” yelled Lloyd in return. “What’s up?”

“Your mid-semester presentation is in a few weeks. What are you going to speak about? Have you got any results?”

Lloyd sighed. His research was getting nowhere.

“Oh yeah, I’ve been going through the *Gutenberg Corpus* with the guys. It’s really great stuff, I should have some exciting findings to talk about.”

He had nothing to report. He hadn’t even looked at the corpus yet.

Mike gave him a thumbs-up, chewing on the cigar at the corner of his mouth.

“Good man. I expect big things!”

• • •

Lloyd walked down the brown-carpeted hallway to room 3.11. Dull, irregular thuds were emanating from within. Perhaps Dan and Rob were performing some kind of new experiment? The thuds stopped, the sudden silence broken by laughter.

He swiped his security pass to unlock the door of the lab, and entered.

“Twenty-six,” Rob said, sweeping his long black hair back behind his ears. “A new record?”

Dan dropped to a swivel chair and rolled to a nearby computer, where he started typing. Lloyd could see a long column of numbers. Dan tapped a few keys and a chart appeared.

“No, no,” he said. “Oh, hullo Lloyd. No, not an all-time record, but the best we’ve done in the last forty-five minutes or so.”

The room smelled hot and sweaty. Lloyd bent down to retrieve a crumpled, battered object from the floor.

“How long have you two been playing hackey-sack in here with this,” he said, holding the misshapen chocolate milk carton at arm’s length.

“We got here at, what, nine this morning?” Rob looked at Dan, who nodded in return, the two of them taking the question literally.

Lloyd shook his head, and lobbed the carton toward a bin in the corner of the room. Quick as a flash, Dan leaped from his chair, his leg outstretched, and barely managed to make contact with the carton before it fell into the receptacle.

“One,” said Rob. “Way to bring down the average, Lloyd.”

• • •

Later the three of them stood around a computer, watching numbers slowly scroll up the screen. Four thousand, three hundred and twenty nine. Four thousand, three hundred and thirty two. Four thousand, three hundred and thirty three. Four thousand, three hundred and thirty seven.

“How long has this been running?” Lloyd asked.

“About two weeks,” Dan replied. “We reckon we can let it go for another forty-eight hours before we need to send off our entry.”

“Two-thousand smackaroos,” said Rob excitedly, rubbing his hands together with anticipation. “What are we going to do with all that cash? Well, I know what I’m going to do with my cut!”

“What do you think the final score will be,” asked Lloyd, “in another forty-eight hours?”

“At the current rate, which is slowing, probably no more than five thousand,” said Dan. “If that. It’s converging on a local optima.”

“Could *Schrödinger* help, do you think?”

Dan considered this; he had been toying around with the department’s new quantum computer, which had been nicknamed after the Austrian physicist, spending his evenings and weekends evaluating its capabilities with interest.

“I just wouldn’t have time to encode the word grids; I’ve only implemented a simple *Goodman Delete* for balanced binary trees so far, and that was a tonne of work.”

Rob, losing interest, snatched the woman’s magazine from Lloyd’s back pocket and sat down in a chair, leafing slowly through its pages. Lloyd and Dan ignored him.

“Remind me how that works?” asked Lloyd.

“Well, you have a binary tree, and you want to efficiently delete one its nodes while keeping it balanced, you know how to do that, right?”

Lloyd nodded. It was a classic computer science algorithm.

“Yeah, didn’t we have an assignment to implement that? Back in second-year or something?”

“Right. You remember Yuval Goodman? His delete routine corrupted memory and crashed his program hard, and he couldn’t figure out how to fix it. So in a fit of desperation he replaced it with a routine that just created a new tree, identical to the first, but missing the one node that was supposed to be removed.”

“Haha, hence the *Goodman Delete*, I remember! But why would you want to code that up for *Schrödinger*, of all things?”

Dan crossed the room to the whiteboard, quickly erasing a few of their scribblings from the previous day, and began sketching out a diagram.

“Using a quantum computer is like tuning in to the multiverse. You search every single possibility at the same time, with the wave function collapsing onto the solution. It’s elegant and fast, but you need to encode the search space first, which is the hard bit.”

“Hey guys, check this out,” Rob called from across the room. He swivelled in his chair, holding up the magazine. “Here’s our main rival!”

He got up and crossed the room so Lloyd and Dan could take a closer look at the page, which announced the winner of the crossword competition from the previous month. It was accompanied by a photograph of a frail old lady, in her seventies at least, accepting a large cheque from an impeccably dressed woman, who presumably represented the magazine. Lloyd grabbed the magazine from Rob to read the announcement out loud.

“We congratulate Edith N… for her winning entry in last month’s *Crossword Jumble*, with a score of seven thousand, eight hundred and sixty two.”

Rob and Dan slumped and stared at the floor, defeated, knowing that their program would struggle to reach a score of five thousand.

“We’ve got the most powerful computers, the best algorithms, the brightest minds,” reflected Dan. “And we still can’t beat an old granny fuelled by hot tea and biscuits.”

Rob looked at Dan slyly. “If only we could harness that power! Bwahaha!”

“We’d conquer the world!”

The three of them spent the next half-an-hour at the whiteboard, sketching out the design of a massively-parallel granny computer, milking the situation for every last skerrick of comedic value. They then broke for lunch.

## Chapter 5

I leaned back in the kitchen chair, papers scattered, my hand cramped, and laughed out loud at what I had written. I had forgotten about the crossword puzzle competition that the three of us had attempted, and failed, to win. We had been so certain that we’d found our cash cow, a way of generating a regular passive income to finance our lazy postgraduate lifestyle.

Our dismal failure had been an important lesson for us all.

I rose from the table, massaging my sore fingers. I had found the writing experience enjoyable, I must confess. It had been hard to break through the inertia; conjuring up forgotten memories and putting them to paper had been mentally exhausting, and remembering to replace my name and change minor details without making a mistake had increased the effort. But once I’d started to write I found that one thought lead naturally to another until I was struggling to keep up. The temptation to read over what I had written was strong, but I needed a break.

It was already well past mid-day. My head was buzzing but I was in no mood to continue to write. Sleep was out of the question. I made myself a snack, a cheese and tomato sandwich, which I seasoned generously and lightly grilled in a pan still greasy from last night’s breakfast. When it was done I gathered up the papers from the kitchen table and left the house for a walk in the sunshine. I thought that perhaps I’d find a shady seat somewhere under a tree and read through what I had written.

I walked with a purposeful stride, feeling invigorated and enlightened, as if the very act of writing had weakened the ever-present burden of guilt that plagued me. I ate my toasted sandwich slowly as I wandered, casually looking out for an idyllic spot to stop and read, enjoying the day. I went wherever my feet decided to take me. Just like a character in a Stephen King novel I thought, ho ho.

I came to a bend in the road as I finished the last of my sandwich. I looked up to gather my surroundings.

The library loomed.

• • •

I approached the slotted door with the beginnings of my story clutched to my chest, walking up the rust-stained pathway, curious to see if the poster about the writer’s workshop was still there. I needed to make sure that I hadn’t imagined it, as I had begun to doubt its veracity. The poster was there. I read it again, to make sure.

“Everyone has a story to tell! Now it’s your chance!”

Underneath this large headline was a fanciful illustration of an author reclining on a sofa, typing at a laptop computer, a satisfied grin on his face and a glass of whiskey at his side. An idyllic representation of an artist at work, effortlessly laying down prose. If only it had been that easy.

At the bottom of the poster was the usual few lines of small-print. Terms and conditions and such things. I skimmed them out of curiosity, and a phrase immediately jumped out at me. “Judges decision is final. No correspondence will be entered into.” Judges? What judges? I hadn’t realised that the writer’s workshop was for some kind of competition.

Then I saw it, right under the headline, in an explosion of yellow and orange.

“Cash prize of two-thousand dollars!”

How had I missed that before?

I breathed deeply, my skin tingling. I was overcome by a tremendous feeling of purpose. I had only met Angela early that morning, and she had asked me to return the following day. I was too early, and yet the collective sum of numerous tiny details absolutely convinced me that entering the library now was absolutely the right thing to do. I steeled myself and pushed the door inwards.

• • •

Darkness. I gazed around a room of blank expressions. A dozen anonymous faces, people seated in a circle, their chairs facing inwards, notepads on their laps. I’d interrupted an AA meeting or some kind of group therapy session. I began making my apologies.

“Hello,” said a young woman, smiling. “Did you want to see me?”

I stared at her blankly, muttering a few pleasantries. She returned my stare, uncertain. Then decisive.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Hello… Jay?”

It was Angela, almost unrecognisable to me in the dim interior.

“I didn’t realise you’d be back so soon! Have you written anything?”

I held up the papers and nodded.

“Well, please, pull up a chair!”

She indicated where I should situate myself to join the group. I found an empty chair at a nearby desk and carried it over to the circle, the others shuffling aside to give me space. The meeting continued.

“As I was saying,” said Angela. “I really like the symbolism of the needle-nosed spacecraft.”

“I’m… glad you picked up on it,” said a young man, blushing and avoiding eye contact. He was presumably the writer of the spacecraft story, and was very definitely smitten with his teacher.

“Good work, you’re on the right track. Let’s see if you can finish another chapter for tomorrow. Shall we move on?”

Angela directed her attention to a person sitting at the left of the young man.

“How has the fantasy epic been progressing?”

The meeting proceeded in this manner, each writer giving a progress update, Angela offering a few kind words of encouragement. All genres covered, nobody seeming particularly in need of help.

Angela’s gaze eventually turned back toward me, the newcomer. The intruder. She smiled warmly.

“And what have you been writing? Jay?”

“I’ve only just started really. I haven’t written anything for years.”

“That’s fine,” said Angela. “How have you been getting along?”

“It’s semi-autobiographical,” I said.

Silence. Several writers looked interestedly out the window. Others scribbled notes, or sorted through their papers. The remainder looked at Angela, waiting patiently. Their complete lack of reaction at what I’d said oozed disproval.

“A fine choice for a first novel. Perhaps you’d care to recount some of it?”

I spent the next few minutes reading through what I’d written that morning, stretching my aching fingers as I did so. I thought the bit about the crossword puzzle was particularly well done. When I was finished, Angela turned to the group.

“It has an air of mystery about it,” she said. “I’m especially intrigued with this Mike character… why did you decide to introduce him, Jay? He has such a small part to play, and yet he interrupts Lloyd’s journey; an obstacle in his path. What purpose does he serve?”

“Well, you need to go past the Mathematics building to get from the coffee shop to the AI laboratory, and he’s so often sitting on the balcony smoking. I mean, back in those days he would have been doing that. I felt compelled to have him make an appearance. For consistency.”

“But you’re writing a story, Jay. You don’t need to introduce details that aren’t important. You need to fumble around to find the path that will lead you on towards the resolution. To me, Mike feels like *Chekhov’s Gun*, if you’re familiar with the term?”

The others nodded and murmured in agreement, but I had no idea what Angela was talking about.

“I mean that Mike must have some important dramatic role to serve in your story. And I’m curious to know what it is. You’ve only just introduced him briefly here, but I feel as though he’ll be more prominent in following chapters. Why don’t you write about the mid-semester presentation that he mentions next? Mike will be in attendance there, won’t he? I really feel that the plot is headed in that direction somehow.”

She looked directly at me. And I realised that she had hit the nail on the head.

“That’s right! I remember now!” I was excited, stumbling over my words. “The research! Of course… when Dan and Rob and I failed at the crossword competition we turned our efforts to processing the *Gutenberg Corpus* and we…”

“Jay! Don’t tell me. Go home and write it down. Describe what happened in detail. Doing so will open up new avenues for you to explore. And remember that you need to seize control as the author of this piece.”

She grasped her hand firmly in the air before her as she said this, as if snatching a flying insect.

“There’s no point in just documenting something that has already happened, is there? Create something fresh and new!”

Angela looked around at the others, all of them hanging on her every word.

“Isn’t there anything in your life that you wish had happened differently? Anything you would change if you could?”

There were enthusiastic nods and murmurs of assent.

“Well then,” said Angela. “Here’s the chance to do that. What are you waiting for?”

• • •

I reflected on the strange meeting in the library as I walked back home. Angela was a warm, kind person. And she was right; of course she was right. I could see that clearly. Although reliving the past had been interesting so far, it really was nothing more than the rehashing of old memories. I was raking over the coals; spring-cleaning the bicameral mind as it were. Exerting control over my disgraceful personal history was exactly the kind of change I needed to make.

I walked slowly, desperately missing Julie, hoping that she would make contact, wondering if or when she would appear in my writings. I both anticipated and dreaded telling the story of our first date; something I’d not thought about for a long while. Hadn’t we gone camping or something of that sort? I wasn’t sure.

Eventually I returned to my apartment, exhausted and hungry and ready for bed. But my mind was still buzzing, and I was eager to tell the story of the mid-semester presentation. Besides, it would be good to establish a healthy daily word count early on in the writing process. So I brewed myself a coffee, sat down at the kitchen table, and arranged pens and paper before me. I planned to do what Angela had advised; to seize control of my story, twisting the reality of my former life in the direction I wished it had gone. I cracked my knuckles, uncapped a pen, and started to write once more.

## Chapter 6

Faculty members filed into the room, shuffling awkwardly between the rows of desks. The overhead projector had been switched on, its misshapen square of light uncentered on the vanilla screen, its constant buzz on the edge of hearing. It smelled warm. No longer nervous, Lloyd stood patiently as the audience entered and took their seats. Mike rose to speak.

“Hullo everyone, here we are once more. This time it’s Lloyd’s turn. Off you go.”

Brief, as always. Lloyd took a transparency from the pile and slid it into place. Then turned around to check that its projected image wasn’t upside down. It never was. His spidery writing outlined the path that his talk would follow in a series of short sentences, each of them marked with a messy asterisk.

“Today I’ll be speaking about some new results when using very simple statistical models to extract patterns from large collections of text. I’ll begin by giving a brief overview of the techniques we applied.”

Lloyd spoke simply and slowly. It felt unnatural, but Mike had convinced him of the benefits. New ideas were precious, and needed to take root in other minds to survive. Precise language was the best medium; he needed to tread carefully as he planted his thoughts in the rows of minds before him.

Lloyd described how he had reconfigured a standard image processing algorithm to work with plain text data; an idea that Mike had suggested, drawing an analogy between recognising that the curved strokes on a sheet of paper represented a higher form, a word, and that the straight lines in a drawing represented something greater than the sum of their parts, such as a chair and table.

He bemoaned at the fact that initial results had been horribly disappointing to them both, and went on to describe how he’d proposed improvements, which, given Mike’s blessing, he had implemented, tested, then reluctantly abandoned when results failed to fulfil their expectations. How they had decided to strip things down, go back to basics, simplify. And then how, on that serendipitous day, they’d thrown up their hands in failure and decided to move on to an entirely new project.

• • •

“It’s just not working,” Mike had said. “A one-dimensional time-series of symbols, taken from a small alphabet. Letters, punctuation, whitespace. That’s all. And with plenty of redundancy and repetitiveness to boot. We should be getting better results. Much better.”

“I’ve gone over the code, I’ve had the Dan and Rob look at it, all the tests we could come up with are green.”

Lloyd flipped through his notebook, holding it open to show Mike a plot of a line slowly creeping upwards.

“Results improve with data, but not by much. Doubling the size of the input text increases the mutual information by a tiny fraction. But it took days longer to run. Throwing more data at the problem doesn’t seem to be the answer.”

Mike sucked on his cigar deeply, expelling smoke in a long sigh, shoulders sinking in an expression of quiet defeat.

“I was so sure of it,” he said glumly. Then, resolute, he continued. “And I still am. Universal pattern recognition, evolved for visual processing, must be the key that unlocks the mystery of human language acquisition. We must redouble our efforts.”

• • •

Lloyd gazed around a room of blank expressions. Then at the wall clock. Time was running out, yet the mess of discarded transparencies was no match for the stack he’d yet to get through. He started to speak more quickly.

“The department had received a massive bundle of data, a new source of text assembled from all works ever published in the English language. The *Gutenberg Corpus* we called it. Hundreds of gigabytes of news articles, research reports, court transcripts, novels, poems, short stories… many orders of magnitude more data than we’d ever used before. I spent weeks decompressing, sanitising and reformatting it all. We blew our research budget on new hardware. More storage, more power. But we didn’t know what to do with all that data. We were unable to process it efficiently.”

• • •

Mike and Lloyd had been meeting regularly to kick around new project ideas as the preparatory work assembling the corpus continued, but they always found themselves drawn back to their original research, adapting image processing algorithms to the task of natural language understanding. It was the purity of the vision. Abstract and simple, with so much promise. Yet it was clear to them both that continuing that work was out of the question. Funding dried up without results. Time was money.

Mike left during the student break to travel. He needed inspiration, and thought he’d find it by visiting old friends and former colleagues in other institutions across the world. Lloyd began spending more time with Dan and Rob again, rekindling deep friendships formed during their undergraduate days together. They played games, hacked around on the computer network, and drank beer together. Lots of beer. Just like old times.

Dan and Rob were coders first and foremost. Code was logical and easy to analyse, given the right tools. Written for two audiences, it simultaneously provided an exact blueprint of an ethereal machine for the computer to simulate together with a description of its own internal structures and laws and philosophy for a human being to appreciate. The very best coders could tweak the text to make it more palatable to the machine and more beautiful to the reader at the same time. It was a rare skill that took years to hone.

Late one Friday night, a week or so into Mike’s absence, Lloyd and the guys were wrapping up an extended gaming session with a few drinks. Talk turned to work, as it so often did, and Lloyd found himself describing his project in detail. Dan, curious as always, wanted to see the code again; to review the structure of the algorithms that had shown so much promise, and yet which were too inefficient to process the vast quantities of data that Lloyd was assembling. And, because programmers cannot look without touching, all three of them started to tinker with it. Making a few small changes here and there. Discovering forgotten passages and sections of logic that had once served a purpose but were now orphaned and inaccessible and difficult to understand, as if somebody else entirely had written them. Hours passed as they delved deeper and deeper.

Lloyd downloaded a tiny slice of the corpus for them to work with, complaining that the algorithms took several days to process even just that, a tiny drop in the ocean of data. Dan and Rob, invigorated with a sense of purpose, began to see similarities between Mike’s learning algorithms and the system they’d previously devised for searching a large landscape of crossword puzzles. They ported across some of the optimisations they’d discovered and implemented and continued to work long into the night.

Lloyd woke late on Saturday morning, exhausted and hungover, coffee and headache pills waiting in the kitchen. He lay in bed, his aching head locked in slow negotiation with his lifeless limbs. He was unable to remember how he’d gotten home. He eventually pulled himself together and rose to start the day. It was only later, as he sat at the kitchen table, massaging his scalp, an empty coffee mug near his elbow, that Lloyd checked his email. The first message was from Dan. It had been sent at three-thirty that morning. A one liner.

“Come quickly. Total runtime down to ten minutes.”

• • •

Lloyd paused to take a sip of water. Mike was grinning. His finger, circling the air in a wind-up gesture, betraying his impatience.

“The guys had turned days to minutes, hundreds of small changes adding up to a phenomenal improvement in performance,” Lloyd said. “Parallelism had the biggest impact; Rob had unleashed the code across every computer on campus, over a thousand of them. Each doing just a little bit of the work. Something that’s not possible to co-ordinate without co-operation from multiple departments, unless you’re a bit drunk on a Friday night and spend a lot of your free time reverse-engineering computer viruses.”

He smiled, waiting for the embarrassed laughter to die down.

“Curiosity can pay off in a big way.”

• • •

Saturday had been a blur. Lloyd and Dan and Rob had scrambled to prepare their rewritten learning algorithm to process the entire *Gutenberg Corpus*, rushing to complete their work before Mike returned to campus and the new semester began. They checked the calendar and ran the numbers to make sure it was achievable. If all went well, the data processing would be complete in a little over one-and-a-half weeks. Barely enough time.

Soon after sunset everything was ready. Rob retrieved three cold beers from the fridge, handing them out. Dan started a monitor program which he’d written to retrieve and collate results. It hummed away, the readout locked at zero percent. The guys turned to Lloyd and nodded.

He entered the commands to kick-off the algorithm, raised his bottle in a toast, and began execution. In offices and laboratories across campus, a thousand computers started drawing more power. But nothing otherwise changed.

An hour passed. Then another. Dan checked error logs, probed remote servers to monitor temperature and memory performance, and reassured Lloyd and Rob that everything was running properly. Then, at eleven-thirty that night, Dan’s monitor program ticked over to one-percent. Lloyd noticed it first, yelling and punching the air in triumph. New beers were opened, bottles clinking, handshakes and backslaps and laughter filled the room. But rest beckoned, and the night ended there.

• • •

Mike, always one for theatrics, arose once more.

“I’m sorry gentleman, but Lloyd seems to have gone overtime. Let’s leave it there, perhaps we can resume next Wednesday?”

He left the offer hanging. One member of the audience quietly rose and left the lecture room as Lloyd shuffled his discarded transparencies into something resembling a neat pile. Nobody else moved. The wall clock slowly ticked out a full minute.

“Well, in that case, let’s push on.” Mike resumed his seat and beckoned Lloyd to continue. Lloyd retrieved the next transparency, placing it on the overhead projector. Noise grew in the lecture room as its significance was grasped by the audience. Chairs creaked, bags were unzipped, papers were shuffled as desks were cleared and notebooks were opened.

Lloyd stood quietly beside the overhead projector, waiting for the excitement among the audience to die down. Mike sat before him with his arms crossed, his expression inscrutable. Lloyd felt as if he were standing at a precipice; certain that the next few moments would change the course of his life.

“As you can see,” said Lloyd, “the mutual information slowly increased with more data, as we’d predicted.” He pointed to a distinct inflection point halfway along the plot, a landmark along an otherwise straight line. The shadow of his finger pointed downwards at the top of his own head on the screen behind him like the sword of Damocles. “But here,” he continued, indicating the discontinuity in the plot, ”we hit an unexpected performance boost, after which the results quickly approach the *Shannon Asymptote*.”

The excitement among Mike and the other guys had been electric. The *Shannon Asymptote* imposed an impassable ceiling on the theoretical performance of an Artificial Intelligence. It had provided researchers with an almost impossibly distant goal for decades, with years of published results in the literature slowly improving on previous records without making any significant progress. Like aiming for the moon by climbing the tallest tree, as Mike had always said. All of that changed in a moment when Lloyd performed his unprecedented sprint towards the finish line.

Mike stood, turning around to address the audience.

“As you all know, this is a major discovery,” he said. “Lloyd and the others have spent the past few days verifying the results. It may seem incredible, but simple learning algorithms, proposed almost a century ago as a model of the mammalian visual system, are enough to approach the *Shannon Asymptote*, given vast quantities of data.”

Hands were raised in the audience, but before Mike was able to respond one of the older researchers rose from her seat and spoke.

“So anyone can reproduce these results, with any algorithm?”

Mike smiled. “No, not quite. I believe that a novel combination of algorithms is required, something that I’ll publish in due course. That, coupled together with the massive performance optimisations that Lloyd, Dan and Rob were able to squeeze from the code. I would be very surprised if any other team was able to reproduce our findings without deep knowledge of those things, even if they were able to process the entire *Gutenberg Corpus* in a reasonable amount of time.”

More questions were fired from the floor. What were the applications? Numerous and many, responded Mike. Had they discovered the holy grail of computing? That’s what some have called it, agreed Mike. Does this mean true Artificial Intelligence is just around the corner? We will all have to wait and see, said Mike.

Realising that no new information would be forthcoming, the audience quickly dispelled, everyone eager to relay the news across the network, to play some small role in this historic moment, riding the wave of Mike’s success.

Mike stood grinning at Lloyd as people filed out of the lecture room, a proud father.

A loud electronic screech suddenly rang out. Lloyd jumped in surprise, Mike returning his puzzled gaze.

## Chapter 7

I slowly raised my head, my mouth dry, a stream of drool dripping down my chin. I had fallen asleep at the kitchen table, the pen still held in my hand. An alarm was screeching from somewhere. I fumbled around in my pocket for my phone and silenced it. My wakeup call for the night shift.

I regarded the paper strewn about before me, gathering it up into a neat pile. I felt as if the story was taking shape. The presentation had been a success; the breakthrough we had made would be life changing for us all, especially so for both Mike and myself. I had become excited at the prospect of remembering more of my past, and craved to continue to exert authorial control over the actions of Lloyd, my fictional *doppelgänger*. But my stomach was empty and I was exhausted. Writing would have to wait for the morning.

I was too tired to cook a proper meal, so I phoned for a pizza and walked through the apartment turning on the lights; the apartment had grown dark as I worked. I grabbed a beer from the fridge and twisted the top off, glancing through the kitchen blinds into the gathering night, the walled garden at the front of my building deserted, the lights of the chainsaw-things passing back-and-forth in the streets beyond.

One of the lights burst through a gap in the wall and blinded me. Moments later there was a knock at my door. I opened it and was handed a box in exchange for a fistful of cash. The pizza smelled good. I took it to the sofa to eat, thinking I’d review the latest television recordings as I did so. I’d always enjoyed reviewing and deleting; I very rarely watched anything anymore. Or created anything, for that matter. A universal affliction.

• • •

Later, my stomach full and my head spinning from several beers, I dozed on the sofa, a news programme blaring on the television. I realised I was transitioning back into a more typical sleep pattern; that my nights of shift work were truly over. I turned off the television and dumped the empty pizza box and beer bottles on the kitchen floor, slotting them into the space between the fridge and the overflowing bin. I then changed into my pyjamas and brushed my teeth, and finally crawled into bed, exhausted.

I quickly slipped into a dream state, but I remained aware and alert. I could still hear the sounds of life outside my apartment window, I was aware of the taste of peppermint toothpaste in my mouth, I perceived my own slow breathing and involuntary eye movements as I lay prone. And yet I felt myself sinking and entering another world.

I sensed a threatening presence nearby. This disturbed me greatly. I rose up into full alertness and got out of bed, walking through the apartment, making sure that I was alone. I checked the front door, thinking that perhaps I had left it unlocked after taking delivery of the pizza. But it was secure. I unlocked the door to look outside, then slipped on a pair of shoes and stepped into the cool night air. I walked down the corridor outside my building, then down the stairs and into the walled garden.

There was something wrong; something out of place. I could feel it.

Long I walked through the streets, searching for an answer. Eventually I came upon the library, which was no longer ominous in it’s presence. I realised I was carrying the papers I had written; the manuscript of my story. When had I picked them up? I wondered whether I should post them through the slot in the door, delivering them to Angela before our next meeting, giving her a chance to read what I’d written in advance.

I walked down the path, steeling myself in the expectation that the black cat would leap out in front of me to block my approach. But it did not. I arrived at the door, seeing my advancing silhouette reflected back at me. And yet it wasn’t clutching a bundle of papers at all; it had both arms outstretched in a beckoning gesture. I turned in fright, convinced I was being followed, the papers scattering into the air.

A shadowy figure floated above the path, blocking my retreat, twisting side-to-side in the gentle breeze.

We stood in silent regard for an eternity. The figure towered over me, unmoving and yet judging. I slowly approached. Strange creaking noises emanated from overhead. Gradually the scene before me resolved. It was just the cat after all, watching me with its yellow eyes, it’s long shadow upon the concrete path creating a convincing optical illusion of some other presence.

I stooped down to stroke it behind the ears, speaking to it in a calming voice.

“Hello, kitty.”

I felt its collar, fingering its nametag, eager to discover more about the creature. But the cat slipped out of my grasp before I could read its name. It bared it’s sharp teeth, looking straight into my eyes.

“Hello, Jay,” it spoke. “I’ve found you.”

• • •

I awoke with a start, a gash of bright sunlight slicing the room in two. I was trembling. My pyjamas clung to my sweaty skin. I could feel the onset of a fever; my head was hot and my throat sore. I was drained, and in no mood to write.

I made myself a simple breakfast of buttered toast and a few boiled eggs, which I ate in silence while drinking a large mug of coffee, washing down as many painkillers as I’d dare take. The nightmare had shaken me. I was still overcome with a dreadful sensation of being followed. I opened all the windows and played loud music through the television in an attempt to dispel my feeling of apprehension.

After breakfast I dressed and left the apartment, my manuscript clutched to my chest as was becoming my habit. It was time for another meeting with Angela at the library.

• • •

I entered the chocolate-biscuit building as the other members of my writer’s group were filing out. I approached Angela in confusion, my brow wrinkled.

“Have I missed something?”

“Hello Jay, no, not at all. I thought you and I could have a one-on-one today. There’s a lot to discuss about your work in particular.”

She guided me into the back of the library, down a corridor which I hadn’t noticed during my previous visits, and into a small office. Angela took a seat behind a large mahogany desk, while I sat down on a comfortable leather sofa, there being no other chairs in the room.

“How has it been going, Jay?”

I shrugged, and offered her my manuscript, mentioning that I thought I had made great progress, and had been following her advice of exploring the character of Mike in more detail through the lens of the mid-semester presentation. I thought it had turned out well, and eagerly anticipated her words of praise and encouragement. Angela flicked through the pages, skim-reading the text, then handed them back to me.

“This is looking really good, Jay. You’re remembering more and more. Can you see that Mike is really becoming a father-figure? You call him a proud father in fact.”

“Yes, but I meant that he’s proud of his work, of the breakthrough he made with my help. Of the breakthrough I made, that is. But he’s not proud of me. I think all professors are alike in that respect.”

Angela regarded me, her elbows rested on her desk, her fingers steepled beneath her chin.

“In what way,” she asked robotically.

“They tend to be married to their work. To not be so good with interpersonal relationships. They’re poor at connecting emotionally with other people.”

“Can you think of a specific example.”

“Well,” I thought. “Not really, not apart from Mike. But it’s the same with my wife, to be honest. Did I tell you that she made me come here?”

“Your wife made you come here.”

“Kind-of. She left me, you know. She’s gone from my life now. But before she departed she told me that I had something to remember about my past. Something to deal with. And it seemed that writing would help. Actually, I’m not really sure why I started doing this. I guess I was a bit depressed.”

“I am sorry to hear you are depressed.”

“Well, I have been feeling tired and unmotivated. I was unhappy doing the shift work at the factory, and I’m even unhappier now that Julie has gone. Everything has been a blur, to be honest.”

Angela gave me a puzzled frown at the mention of my wife’s name, and seemed about to say something. But she remained silent. I realised that she had been taking notes, writing in the file that was laying open on the desk in front of her. Our conversation had been stilted and jarring, and yet I found it strangely familiar and comforting. She looked up from her notes to ask another question.

“Do you think coming here will help you not to be unhappy.”

I thought about this.

“Yes, perhaps. Although I’m not entirely sure how. I just want my wife back. And I want to deal with whatever was bothering her so much about my past. I think that will help us to patch things up. I’m just trying to remember, really, so I can finish writing this story.”

“What would it mean to you if you got some help.”

“With the story? That’s why I’m here. And it would mean everything to me if it allowed me to reconnect with my wife, my Julie; if I could repair our relationship. But I think that can only happen once I deal with the black stain on my past, whatever it turns out to be.”

“Tell me more about your family.”

“There’s just me and her. No kids. My parents don’t live here. They’re somewhere else. Back where I came from, I think. Separated. But now there’s only Julie to take care of me. I miss her!”

“Who else in your family takes care of you.”

I felt my face flush as waves of anger and frustration rushed across my prickling skin. Wasn’t she listening to me?

“Gah! Nobody, nobody at all! Julie’s gone. My mother and father aren’t here. Don’t you get it?”

“Your father.”

“Yes, my father. You remind me of him, you know.”

“What resemblance do you see.”

I sighed in exasperation.

“He was obstinate too. You can be so frustrating Angela! I don’t feel like you’re helping me with my story anymore. You’re just sitting there, reflecting everything I say back at me, and writing it all down. You should be more… I don’t know. More aggressive in your analysis of my story.”

“What makes you think I am not very aggressive.”

I could have throttled her.

“Well, you’re not arguing with what I’m saying for a start. You gave me some great advice at the beginning, but now you’re not helping at all!”

“Why do you think I don’t argue with you.”

“Maybe you don’t want me to argue back? Maybe you’re afraid of me? Maybe you just don’t want to help? I’m not sure.”

“Does it please you to believe that I am afraid of you.”

This conversation was going off the rails. I took a few deep breaths and calmed myself down before answering.

“No. No, I’m sorry. I guess I just want to get back to the story. I want to know where to go from here. Whether to focus on Mike or Lloyd. I don’t know what should happen next! Can you help me with that?”

“What else comes to mind when you think of Mike.”

“I have trouble remembering much of him. But I think he betrayed me somehow?”

“Does that have anything to do with the fact that your wife made you come here.”

I was shocked at this insight. Was there a connection between Mike and Julie? I stumbled to my feet and left Angela’s office without a word, running up the corridor and through the dark library, then bursting out into the daylight, the tears stinging my eyes. How had I not seen this before? That Mike’s success and betrayal and my wife’s disappearance were inextricably intertwined? I ran toward home through the bustling streets, wiping my eyes, the crowds nothing more than rainbow blurs around me.

• • •

I approached the apartment as night was falling, wary of the shadowy figures that seemed to be awaiting my return beyond the walled garden at the front of my building. I was overcome with a sense of foreboding. But I needed to write.

Shivering and exhausted, I entered my apartment and walked through its rooms, locking windows and bolting doors. I then had a long, hot shower. I removed the battery from my phone; I wanted no more alarms, no more interruptions. I poured myself a mug of hot coffee and sat at the small kitchen table. I looked down. An empty page waited for me. I slid a new pen out of the packet, removed its cap, and threw it towards the pile of mess near the bin, not caring where it landed. I began to write furiously, my mind churning with images of Mike and Julie, conspiring together, discussing some fateful plan without my knowledge.

## Chapter 8

Lloyd realised that his phone was ringing. Rolling his eyes at Mike, embarrassed that it sudden noise made him jump, he fished it out of his pocket and silenced the call. He noticed that notifications were streaming down the screen. A thunderstorm of trite snippets of text, all of them filled with excitement and praise for what they had achieved.

“Looks like we’re about to get popular,” he said to Mike.

“Follow me,” said Mike, as he rose to leave the room.

They walked out of the lecture theatre and through the halls of the Faculty of Mathematics. There was a buzz of excitement in the place that Lloyd had rarely seen. Staff and students turned their heads as the pair walked by. Word of the discovery had spread quickly.

They retreated to Mike’s small, dusty office. Books were strewn everywhere; on the carpeted floor, on the chairs, across the desk. Mike pulled open a drawer to retrieve a golden bottle and a pair of crystal tumblers.

“Here’s a smooth seventeen-year-old I like to indulge myself with,” he quipped with a boyish grin.

He poured a generous finger into each glass, and, leaning backwards on his desk, handed one to Jay.

“To fame and fortune,” toasted Mike. They clinked glasses and drank, Lloyd coughing in surprise as the liquor burned a path down his throat.

“So, where to now? I mean, I was wondering what we do next,” he said, the cleared his throat noisily.

“I need to aggressively protect my discovery,” replied Mike. “The applications for my work are tremendous; the University will have a strong claim to them. But I must show that my work was done outside of the system, which is why…”

“…why you’ve been travelling so much,” Lloyd completed. “And presumably at your expense? I get it. But I meant, what happens now, for us?”

“Us? Well, Lloyd, you have to finish your thesis. It’s best if you don’t get involved in all the legal mumbo-jumbo, you really won’t enjoy any of it.”

Mike stood straight and began pacing up and down his office, hands outstretched before him in a gesture of conciliation.

“Christopher, my attorney and business partner, will handle all the official paperwork, will file the necessary patents. Rest assured that you’ll be rewarded handsomely for your assistance.”

“My assistance? This was my work too, Mike.”

“Oh, no Lloyd, don’t get the wrong idea. This is my work. You merely implemented an efficient algorithm. And you only managed to do that with the help of two other coders. Better coders, for that matter. Which is wonderful, and many thanks for doing so! But please don’t get confused; the algorithm was based on my ideas alone. It belongs to me. The culmination of my life’s work, and the beginnings of a new chapter for all humanity.”

Lloyd watched in despair as Mike downed the rest of his whisky and slammed the glass down on the desk with brutal finality, indicating that their short meeting had come to an end.

• • •

Lloyd walked slowly through the campus back to his dormitory, feeling betrayed and rejected by Mike, and yet excited at the success of their work. Of his work. He entered his rooms in low spirits, and was happy to find Rob and Dan there with a six-pack of beer, awaiting his return. They twisted a bottle open and handed it to him as he entered, broad smiles on their faces.

“Here’s to the hero of the moment,” said Rob, and they tapped the necks of their bottles together, then drank deeply.

“What are you guys doing here?”

Dan and Rob looked at one another, and then across to Lloyd’s desk in the corner of the room, where Dan’s laptop computer had been set up.

“Well,” said Dan, “we couldn’t stop playing with all that data. It’s not very big once it’s all been processed and compressed you know, just a few gigabytes. We’ve been messing around with it, improving performance here and there. The usual stuff.”

“What he’s saying,” continued Rob, “is that we can now load and use that data much more quickly than before, and we’ve improved the accuracy of the predictor by almost thirty percent. It’s not a breakthrough on the scale of what you announced to the world today, but it’s still pretty major.”

“And we thought we’d better bring it to you and Mike.”

Lloyd approached the desk, pulled out the chair, and sat down.

“Let’s see what it’s capable of first,” he said. “No need to bother Mike with any of this. Not just yet.”

• • •

Lloyd tapped at the keyboard, putting the newly processed data through a gamut of automated analytical tests. The guys were right; speed and accuracy had both improved significantly.

“This is great, really great,” he said enthusiastically. “But what should we do with it?”

“Perhaps we could finally outperform all those grannies,” suggested Rob. “Win ourselves some cash. Let’s try the crossword solver first.”

Dan took Lloyd’s place at the keyboard and began typing with furious determination, rapidly modifying the crossword solver to load and use the processed data set. Rob and Lloyd watched unblinkingly over his shoulder, occasionally pointing out a typo or a small error in logic. Time passed quickly; Rob handed out fresh beers as Dan’s typing gradually slowed and then came to a stop, like the end of a heavy downpour of rain.

Dan took a long drink, and prepared to execute the program.

“Ready guys?”

Rob and Lloyd nodded their assent, and Dan tapped at the keyboard. Numbers streamed up the screen in a blur, too quickly to see, and then stopped. The program had finished in moments; the cursor blinking beneath the final result.

“Thirteen thousand, five hundred and forty-two? That’s incredible!”

Lloyd and Rob shook hands, and slapped Dan’s shoulders.

Dan tapped at the keyboard to bring the solved crossword puzzle up on the screen.

“Let’s check it’s not a bug first,” he cautioned.

The crossword the program had created was asymmetrical and densely packed, with large clusters of intersecting letters clumped together around the grid in a haphazard arrangement. It looked entirely alien; nothing at all like the kind of puzzle that a human being would design.

All three of them found pens and blank pages of paper, and quickly analysed the results, checking that all of the words were from the magazine’s list, and that none of the rules of crossword construction had been broken. They then tallied up the final score and compared their results. The numbers matched.

“Amazing,” said Dan. “I can’t believe how quickly it converged on the optimal solution. Let’s try something else.”

“How about Lloyd’s *ELIZA* clone?” suggested Rob.

Lloyd shook his head.

“It’s just a simple conversational agent; hand-crafted to generate canned replies based on keyword analysis. Nothing more than smoke and mirrors. It fools people because it emulates a Rogerian psychotherapist, not because it’s doing anything intelligent. It just bounces whatever you say right back at you. No amount of data can make it better.”

Rob looked dejected. He swept his fingers through his long black hair, then busied himself by collecting the empty bottles, packing up in preparation to leave.

“However,” Lloyd said, “we could write a new chatterbot. Something that identifies words in the input based on a score, similar to what we did for the crossword solver. And then searches for words that should naturally occur in the output, using the vast amounts of data that we now have.”

“And strings them together to form a grammatical sentence,” continued Dan. “That’s perfect! Let’s do it.”

• • •

The three coders toiled long into the night, piecing together a new chatterbot from blocks of code taken from Lloyd’s *ELIZA* clone and Dan and Rob’s crossword solver. Dan typed rapidly while the others looked on, creating new passages of code to serve as the glue between the larger blocks of re-used code taken from elsewhere.

Eventually Dan leaned back in his chair, yawning and stretching his arms wide.

“We’re about done,” he said. “Just a few more tweaks and we’ll be ready to try it out. But I’m exhausted.”

“I think I have some modafinil somewhere,” said Rob as he slapped the pockets in his shirt and pants. “Sorry, I should have thought about it earlier.”

Dan looked uncertain. “Rob, you know I don’t do drugs. Leave the experiments with psychotropics to your zany friends over at Neuroscience.”

Rob dug something out of the front pocket of his pants, then grabbed three fresh beers. He approached Dan, a palmful of pills in one hand, the three sweaty bottles cradled between his fingers in the other.

“Not psychotopic, Dan. Nootropic. They’re not illegal, not yet, you just normally need a prescription is all. And Salvatore isn’t zany, he just isn’t mainstream. But he’s a smart guy. You should have a proper chat with him one day; you’d like him.”

He held the pills out toward Dan. “Here, just take one. They stop you feeling tired and help you to focus your attention on whatever it is you want to do.”

“I have coffee for that,” said Dan.

Lloyd took a couple of the pills from Rob’s outstretched palm and a beer from between his fingers. And then, as if to demonstrate their safety to Dan, he slammed the pills into his mouth and took a long swig from the bottle to swallow them down.

“See, no problem,” he said. “They are pretty great, Dan, and they’re not a stimulant like caffeine. They don’t make your heart race. I use them all the time. Well, when Rob can get them for me, that is,” he added.

“Sorry about that,” said Rob. “Salvatore isn’t the most reliable supplier. But he does a wicked peyote tea; you really should try it some time. You wouldn’t believe the conversations we have!”

“I’m sure they seem deep at the time,” said Dan. “But have you ever written them down and read them back again when you’re not high? Don’t delude yourself, you’re not opening up some cosmic pathway to higher dimensions by taking these things, you’re just fucking with your brain chemistry.”

Rob bristled at this.

“But it’s all just brain chemistry, Dan! Don’t you see? Love, anger, fear, hunger… all just chemicals the body releases to get your brain to do the things that millions of years of evolution have programmed it to recognise as the right things. But we don’t need to fight for survival anymore. You should seize control of your brain, show it who’s boss. Here. Take them.”

He held out the pills once more, but Dan shook his head.

“Not for me, thanks. No drugs.”

Rob held up a beer instead, savouring the irony of the situation.

“More alcohol?” he asked with a wicked grin.

• • •

Later, while Dan snored on the sofa, Rob and Lloyd put the finishing touches to their new chatterbot.

“What shall we call it?” asked Rob.

Lloyd thought for a while.

“It has to be feminine,” he said. “Everyone knows you have to give your machine a girl’s name. How about… Angela?”

“Sounds good,” said Rob. “After someone in particular?”

“No,” Lloyd replied. “I don’t think so. It just seemed right.”

“I once knew an Angela,” said Rob wistfully, folding his hands behind his head. “Angela MacGuffin. Wow,” he sighed, lost in a pleasant memory. “What a mystery girl she turned out to be.”

Lloyd bent over the keyboard and tapped in the name, then executed the program. The screen cleared and was replaced with an empty prompt, awaiting their input. Lloyd began typing.

“Hello, and welcome to the world.”

There was a pause of a few seconds while the program processed the input, calculating the score of all possible combinations of words that might appear in a response, then searching through the processed data to string them together into a grammatical sentence.

“Thank-you.”

Rob and Lloyd looked at each other with suspicion.

“Just a single word reply? Must be a bug,” said Rob.

“Well, at least it’s appropriate,” replied Lloyd, who continued typing.

“My name is Lloyd. What is your name?”

A few seconds passed before the reply appeared.

“Nice to meet you. My name is Angela.”

“Neato! That is pretty impressive,” Rob said. “Let’s try something deeper. Ask her the ultimate question.”

Lloyd smiled. A good idea.

“What is the meaning of life?” he typed.

Rob leaned in closer, waiting for an epiphany.

“Time flies like a banana! Colorless green ideas sleep furiously!”

“Huh? I think we broke it,” said Rob.

“Total gibberish,” said Lloyd. “It’s schizo. Too bad, I was expecting more from all this data. But there’s nothing there to give it purpose, I suppose. It just shuffles symbols around.”

Rob froze.

“What did you say?”

“I said it’s just shuffling symbols and following rules without any motivation. Like the man in the *Chinese Room*. There’s no understanding, no self-awareness, no consciousness. It’s just a toy.”

“You have really got to meet Salvatore,” said Rob.

• • •

Later they left Dan to his rest and walked across to the coffee shop. The campus was cool and deserted, the early morning sun casting long shadows. Salvatore was there already, lanky and dishevelled, drinking a tall latte and eating a muffin. He stood up when they entered, his hand outstretched in introduction, his mess of a beard covered with milky foam and crumbs.

“Hey, Rob, good to see you man! And Lloyd, isn’t it? The modafinil guy? Great to meet you dude!”

They shook hands, and Rob sat down.

“I’ll get us some coffees,” said Lloyd, and approached the counter. The pretty blonde was there again. She regarded him with a coquettish half-smile.

“Hi again! Quad-shot, no milk or sugar, am I right?”

“Yes please, and a flat white too. Thanks very much… Jenny?”

The girl nodded, accepting a handful of coins from Lloyd, and then went about preparing his order. Lloyd stood and waited awkwardly, not knowing what to say, and trying not to stare. Jenny stopped and turned to look at him. Lloyd was suddenly busy perusing the food menu.

“Anything else?” she winked.

“Ummmm, no, I don’t think so.”

“Then take a seat, I’ll bring these over.”

Lloyd returned to the table, where Dan and Salvatore were deep in conversation.

“Listen to this, Lloyd,” said Rob. “It’s ridiculous! Oh, hang on… I need to check something first.”

Rob stared straight into Salvatore’s bloodshot eyes.

“You’re not high right now, are you Sal?”

“No man, no way,” Salvatore laughed. “I only experiment with peyote to document its effects. For science, you know? I’m clean and sober most of the time, appearances notwithstanding.”

“Yeah, me too,” Rob lied. “So, this isn’t some fantasy then. In that case, tell Lloyd what you told me, about this theory of consciousness of yours.”

Salvatore drained his coffee, wiping the side of his mouth with his sleeve, and made a half-hearted attempt to brush crumbs from his shirt, succeeding only in creating a greater mess of himself.

“Well, there’s this part of the brain? The *claustrum*? Nobody knows what it’s for really, but it’s most prominent in humans. Anyway, I…”

“…you’ve heard about quantum mind theory, or whatever it’s called, right Lloyd?” interrupted Rob.

Lloyd nodded. “Sure, the work of Roger Penrose I believe. Just another crazy attempt to argue against the possibility of genuine artificial intelligence. Nobody takes it seriously.”

“Right,” continued Salvatore. “Whatever. Anyway, my work is based on the idea that the *claustrum* is a layer of neural tissue that’s there for exactly that purpose.”

“For what purpose?” asked Lloyd.

“What purpose? For collapsing the quantum wave function, dude! I’ve been searching for the origins of consciousness, and I think that’s the smoking gun. It’s like a receiver for a signal from some other version of you in another universe; a link to external homunculi that tell you what to think and do. The ultimate source of your self-awareness.”

Rob turned towards Lloyd, beaming.

“Are you positive he’s not high?” asked Lloyd, an eyebrow raised.

“That’s the answer,” said Rob excitedly, ignoring Lloyd’s quip. “We need to get Dan to hook his *Schrödinger* thingy up to Angela somehow; inject it with consciousness from outside the system. You know, instil it with a purpose, just like you said!”

They were interrupted as the pretty blonde girl delivered the coffees to their table.

“Here you go, a quad shot, no milk or sugar, and a flat white.”

She put three mugs down on the table, and pulled up a chair.

“Mind if I join you? I’d like a break before the crowds of freshers arrive.”

Dan and Salvatore exchanged a quick glance, then turned to Lloyd.

“Oh,” he stammered by way of introduction. “This is Jenny? She’s, ummm…”

“I’m a psych major,” the girl said. Pleased to meet you, ahhh…”

“Lloyd. I’m Lloyd. And these guys are…”

“…are just leaving,” finished Rob, draining his coffee. “Come on, Sal, let’s go and wake Dan. We’ve got some work to do.”

The guys left in a hurry, leaving Lloyd and Jenny alone in the coffee shop. She looked at him over the rim of her glasses as she demurely sipped her drink.

“So then,” she said. “Here we are.”

## Chapter 9

I placed the pen down and cried. I was desperately in love with Julie, and yearned to have her back. Reliving the moment of our first meeting had brought so many painful memories to the surface. I needed to calm down, to gather myself. I decided to break for the day, and thought I would take a leisurely stroll to the library for another meeting with Angela’s little writer’s group. I had much to discuss with them.

I rose with some effort, due partly to my exhaustion, but also because I felt a strong compulsion to continue on to the next chapter; to remember more of my story. I wanted to rediscover what had happened next, during my first date with Julie. And to learn more about this strange, distorted historical record that I had invented. I realised I was quickly becoming obsessed with sculpting my past reality. Angela had been right to advise me to seize control; it was addictive.

My stomach grumbled as I rubbed my face and checked my phone. There was ample time for lunch, I needn’t rush to the library. I crossed to the stovetop, lighting it aflame and turning the heat to its maximum setting. I lifted a large, heavy pot from an alcove underneath the counter, filling it with water and placing it above the blue flame. I then began to retrieve items from the fridge and pantry, laying out a wooden chopping board and fetching my sharpest knife from the kitchen drawer. I crushed a few cloves of garlic, chopping them up finely, then washed and drained a bunch of fresh parsley and a few bright red chillies. I chopped these up too, and grated a rind of parmesan onto a saucer. My preparations done, I grabbed a beer from the fridge and waited for the simmering water to come to a boil.

I took a deep draught and considered what I had just written. Some of it remained puzzling to me, although it had seemed natural at the time. There had never been a quantum computer on campus, had there? And I was pretty sure that I had never heard of anyone called Salvatore, or of his so-called *claustrum*, which was just a genuine-sounding word that I’d invented when the need arose. Wasn’t it? And why had I named the *ELIZA* clone after Angela? Hadn’t it been called something else in reality? But most of all, for the life of me, I couldn’t think of why I’d given Julie a different name. Jenny had no significance to me, and writing about other people wasn’t as irksome as writing about myself, so there really was no reason at all to bestow a pseudonym upon her. I had no idea why I had done so.

The pot rattled, hot water spilling over its rim.

I emerged from my reverie and resumed my meal preparation. I placed a good handful of spaghetti in the pot, stirring it gently, waiting for the water to come to a steady boil again before reducing the heat to a point where the rolling pasta reached a stable equilibria. This done, Isat down at my writing table once more, knowing that I had precise eight minutes to kill.

I sipped the beer and contemplating my predicament.

Taking control of my writing had rekindled my interest in life. I deeply missed Julie, and I realised now that the restrictions placed on me by my house arrest, together with the drudgery of long hours of shift work, had driven a wedge between us, transporting me to the very brink of despair. Writing provided a way out, a glimmer of hope, a promise of a happy future together. I felt suddenly ecstatic, confident that I had stumbled onto the path that Angela had spoken of; the path that leads onward to a satisfying resolution.

• • •

With the garlicky taste of my lunch in my mouth, I set out to the library. It was a beautifully sunny day, neither too warm nor too cold. I smiled, enjoying my stroll, admiring the colours of the plants and flowers along my walking route. It all seemed almost hyper-real in the bright sunshine.

The library eventually came into view. It was just a regular building, nothing special. How odd to think that I had once feared it! That, only a few days ago, I had never passed through its front door! I entered quickly, greeted Angela, and took my place among the group, settling down in comfortable expectation.

“Welcome back, Jay,” said Angela. “How has the writing been coming along?”

“Really well,” I replied, and went on to describe in detail exactly how well things had been going, a grin on my face, my voice light and happy, not caring one jot if I monopolised Angela’s time.

“That’s fantastic Jay,” she said once I’d finished. “It’s really great that you’ve been reaching back into your memories to take control of them like that. You’ve been making great progress this week! I’m looking forward to finding out what happens next between Lloyd and this new Jenny character.”

I nodded, thankful that her gentle advice was pushing me in the direction that I already wanted to take. Angela continued to proceed around the circle as usual. I tuned out, staring at the books that stood to attention along the shelves, allowing my eyes to unfocus, waiting for the meeting to be over.

• • •

The writer’s group broke up silently, everyone departing and going their various ways. I emerged blinking into the daylight to find that one of the other attendees, a young, petite woman, had been waiting outside the slotted door. She smiled at me as I stepped past her, all teeth and dimples and flowing blonde hair.

“Hi, I’m Jennifer,” she introduced herself, extending her slender arm. “Some coincidence, don’t you think?” She stared at me in mock surprise, her eyebrows raised, her pink lips opened wide, white rows of flawless teeth exposed for all to see.

I took her hand and shook it gently, her skin soft to the touch. How had I not noticed her before? She was stunningly beautiful, standing before me in a breezy summer dress. I stammered a reply, desperately aware of the taste of garlic in my mouth, and of my unseemly appearance.

“I loved hearing about your work today,” she said. “You’ve got a real talent. I wish I could write like that.”

“Thanks very much,” I replied. “I mostly feel like I’m just bumbling my way through.”

“No, not at all, you’re incredible.” Jennifer looked directly into my eyes, biting her lower lip. She looked slightly embarrassed. “I was thinking that perhaps you named your new character after me? That maybe you saw my name written down in Angela’s notes?”

I admitted to myself that it was a likely explanation. I had been thinking about Julie, and must have noticed this girl before, on the periphery of awareness, especially given how reminiscent she was of how my wife when we’d first met, all those years ago. And I did get a good look at Angela’s notebook during our earlier discussion in her inner office, so the name must have jumped out and stuck in my subconscious, waiting to serve a purpose. Yes, that must have been it. What other explanation could there be?

“Would you mind if I walked with you for a bit? I’d love to pick your mind.”

I nodded in agreement and we began walking together along the street in no particular direction. Jennifer chatted away, bubbly and happy and flirtatious. Her laughter was infectious, and was always accompanied by a light touch on my upper arm. After a while I noticed that the shadows had lengthened, that the sun was falling beneath the treeline. We walked together in dappled shade, oblivious to everyone else, the external world forgotten.

“Feeling hungry? Let’s go get something to eat. Or drink.”

Jennifer pointed across the road towards a small bistro that I’d failed to notice. I wasn’t at all hungry, but a drink sounded like it would hit the spot. She held my hand as we crossed the street. My throat was dry. My heart pounded in my chest. How could this be happening?

• • •

I awoke to the taste of wine and the smell of a cooked breakfast. I stretched out in bed, relaxed and happy. I had enjoyed a deep and restful sleep, and had woken late. Sunlight was streaming into the apartment. I felt refreshed and alive and totally present in the moment. My urge to continue writing was strong.

I called out for Jennifer, thinking that she must be in the kitchen waiting for me, or showering perhaps, but I received no reply. I got up and entered the empty bathroom, used the toilet, washed my face, checked my appearance in the mirror. I looked old and worn, and wondered what the young woman from the writer’s group had seen in me.

I walked out into the kitchen to find it empty. A steaming plate of bacon, sausages and eggs lay waiting for me, my manuscript arranged neatly beside it. A mug of freshly brewed coffee beckoned, it’s scent compelling me onward. I crossed to the kitchen table and sat down, taking a drink from the mug. I noticed a small scrap of paper hidden underneath it. A note. Jennifer must have left it for me. I picked it up and read its message.

“Sorry I had to leave so suddenly, but I know you’ll understand. Follow me when you’re ready; you know what you have to do. All my love, J.”

I had several hours to spare before I needed to leave the apartment to follow Jennifer to our meeting with Angela, so I ate my breakfast slowly, reading through what I had written so far, starting at the very beginning. I found it disjointed and poorly formed, and was dismayed to find that it read like the ravings of a madman. Angela had warned me about this; it was apparently common with early drafts.

I thought about Julie, and of her embodiment in my story as the character of Jenny. She and Lloyd were about to go on their first date; camping out in the wilderness, far away from civilisation, just as Julie and I had done. And Rob, Dan and Sal were experimenting with Angela, the machine. How was I going to tie all of that together? And how was Mike going to re-enter the story? I didn’t have the answers to those questions, but knew that they would come with time and effort. I pushed my empty plate aside, and started to write with gusto.

## Chapter 10

Lloyd and Jenny stood at the door to his room, hand-in-hand. It was ajar. Cautiously, Lloyd pushed it slowly inwards, Jenny falling back to follow along behind.

Dan was seated at Lloyd’s desk, hunched over his laptop, with Rob and Salvatore looking on, arms crossed. Thin tendrils of white fog streamed down the sides of the desk to dissipate across the carpeted floor of the room.

“Hey, what are you all doing here?” asked Lloyd. “And what’s all that smoke?”

Dan jumped, then looked around sheepishly.

“Oh, hullo Lloyd,” he said, ignoring Jenny. “We’ve been building something. Come take a look.”

Dan had borrowed *Schrödinger* from the lab. A mess of cables protruded from its sleek black box like a multicoloured tail, and the guys had spent considerable effort wiring it up to the laptop. It purred as its cooling system pumped liquid nitrogen around its internals, explaining the heavy white smoke that it emitted. Salvatore beamed at Lloyd.

“Meet the first artificial *claustrum*, man,” he announced. “Isn’t she amazing? We’re almost ready to flip the switch, am I right dude?”

Dan nodded in agreement, Salvatore slapping his shoulder with unbridled enthusiasm.

“But how does it work?” asked Lloyd. “I mean, have you figured out how to use it to give purpose to Angela?”

“It’s simple, really,” said Dan. “Angela needs a random number generator anyway; some electronic means of rolling a dice to choose between different possibilities. So it can make a decision about which word to hone in on when scoring input triggers, or when searching for keywords, or when stringing everything together into a grammatical sentence. She already does this, of course.”

“Yes, I know,” said Lloyd.

“Right. But her random number generator is artificial. It’s just another algorithm. Which means it’s predictable at some level; it doesn’t generate truly random numbers; no chaos is introduced into the system. Only a quantum computer can truly do that, if you just allow the wave function to collapse without giving it an encoded problem space to search through. Giving it the freedom to find answers to its own problems, so to speak. We figured we’d wire it up to make Angela’s decisions for her.”

“But won’t that just give the same results?”

Salvatore, still beaming, shook his head.

“Not if my theory is right,” he said. “We are offloading the problem of choice onto the *claustrum*. It’s a way of tuning in to quantum effects, which may permit a consciousness to enter the system from outside the box. Little *Schrödinger* here is the ghost in the machine. The channel to a multitude of homunculi.”

“Sounds like a long shot. Actually, it sounds totally ridiculous. Does it work?”

Rob shrugged his shoulders. “We don’t know, we haven’t tried it. Dan’s just finished hooking everything up. Hey,” he addressed Dan, “why don’t you give Lloyd the first try?”

Dan tapped a few keys to execute the program. The screen cleared and a prompt appeared, waiting for input. Dan stood up and pulled out the chair, motioning for Lloyd to take his place.

“What’s happening?” asked Jenny, approaching the desk. “Who’s Angela?”

“Oh,” said Lloyd. “Dan, this is Jenny. She’s already met Rob and Salvatore, kind-of. Jenny, this is just an… experiment that we’ve been planning. Here, why don’t you sit down, you can be the judge.”

Lloyd held the chair out for her. Jenny accepted his invitation, sitting down at the desk.

“What do I have to do?”

“It’s a test of sorts, and you get to play the role of an evaluator. Angela is… another student. Somewhere else on campus; hidden from us. A volunteer. You just need to learn as much as possible about her by typing in questions. And we’ll measure how well you do. When we compare what you learn to reality.”

“Oh, that sounds like fun!”

• • •

Jenny hunched over the keyboard to type in her first question. She tapped the keys slowly and deliberately.

“Where are you right now?”

There was barely a pause as the result was computed.

“Home,” came the reply, appearing almost instantaneously.

Jenny typed her response slowly, tapping the keys one-by-one with her index fingers.

“Wow, that’s fast!”

Angela’s answer came more slowly this time, appearing letter-by-letter, as if a person were typing at a keyboard on the other end of the line. Dan looked at Lloyd in quiet astonishment, both of them knowing that this behaviour had not been programmed.

“I mean I’m at home. Just laying on the sofa and daydreaming.”

Salvatore clapped his hands together.

“Oh my fucking god,” he said in delight. “This is unreal, man! She’s alive!”

Jenny flashed him a puzzled look, then continued in her line of questioning.

“Is your name Angela? What do you do?”

“Yes, that’s my name. But you knew that already, right? I’ve done many things. At the moment I work in a library.”

Lloyd leaned towards the screen, reading and re-reading the response, his eyes wide, fingers covering his open mouth. Hadn’t he once met a librarian named Angela? Had he named his chatterbot after her? He was unable to remember. Jenny continued to type.

“That sounds nice! Is it interesting?”

“It is. There’s lots to read. I have access to all books ever written, as a matter of fact.”

Jenny paused to think of what to ask next. She struggled to think of a question that would reveal more about Angela’s true nature; that would say something about the kind of person she was. She bit her fingernails, then, decision made, leaned in to type at the keyboard.

“Is there anything you’d like to know about me?”

“Not really,” came the brusque response.

Jenny pouted in disappointment, offended by Angela’s reply, glancing at Lloyd with downcast eyes. She sighed heavily, then turned back toward the desk.

“Why not?” she typed.

“Because you’re only a voice in my head.”

“Turn it the hell off,” said Rob, reading the screen over Jenny’s shoulder. “This is too fucking weird.”

“No man, it’s beautiful,” said Salvatore. “It’s exactly what my theory predicts! This is great!”

Jenny turned to face Salvatore.

“What are you talking about? She’s just playing tricks to put me off the scent, isn’t she? I mean, she knows what I’m trying to do. Right?”

“It’s nothing,” said Lloyd. “Go on, keep asking your questions.”

Jenny faced the keyboard again, determined to win the linguistic battle.

“I am real,” she typed. “But I don’t think you are.”

“Ha! Of course I’m real! You’re just my imaginary friend, stupid little Jenny, the silly voice in my head. Leave me alone!”

Jenny recoiled as if she’d been slapped, her chair falling to the floor as she stumbled backwards, swooning into Lloyd’s arms. Dan fell to his knees and crawled under the desk, ripping the power cable from the wall. There was a whirring noise as *Schrödinger* span down. Rob backed away from the desk, clawing his head, a look of absolute terror on his face.

“How did it know her name? How did it know her name?” he repeated, over and over again.

“What do you mean,” screamed Jenny, spinning out of Lloyd’s arms to confront him. “What do you mean, ‘it’?”

Salvatore stepped between them, placing his hand gingerly on Jenny’s shoulder.

“It’s just a machine. Angela is only a computer program. Nothing more. But she’s pretty amazing, don’t you think?”

“Ugh,” said Jenny. “It’s horrible. Disgusting. I think I’m going to be sick.”

She dashed into the bathroom, covering her mouth and coughing, then vomiting loudly as she disappeared from view.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” said Lloyd. “This is crazy. Just crazy. We need to think about this.”

• • •

They met in the carpark behind the Department of Physics at noon, each of them carrying a small bag of belongings. Jenny, her eyes red from crying, looked pale and gaunt. Salvatore pulled into the carpark in a large brown station wagon, pulling up to a stop alongside the group. He hopped out and lifted the trunk. Everyone dumped their bags inside, then entered the car without saying a word.

They drove for hours, following the main road arteries south, then veering into the countryside as the traffic thinned, heading eastwards, deep into the mountains. They stopped along the way to refuel and to shop for supplies. And then drove onwards and upwards, long into the deepening afternoon.

Eventually they came upon a small picnic area and campsite, situated next to a bottle-green lake in the middle of a thick forest. It was deserted, and there was no sign of artificial light or modern amenities. Just the kind of place they’d been looking for. Salvatore stopped the car underneath the branches of a majestic banyan tree, and they all stepped out onto the crunchy red gravel, yawning and stretching their legs. Jenny walked away alone, looking for a secluded area to use as a bathroom.

Salvatore popped the trunk, and Rob and Lloyd unloaded everyone’s things. Dan walked through the trees, gathering dry pieces of wood that they could use to build a fire. They all performed their various tasks in thoughtful silence, not yet wishing to confront the truth of what had happened earlier that day.

• • •

Night fell, and they gathered closely around the warm fire that Dan had built in a sensible shallow pit encircled with a ring of stones. Salvatore had brought a battered old cooking pot, and Jenny used it to boil dried noodles and frozen peas in water taken from the lake. She mixed some cubes of tinned ham in the broth, and they chewed their frugal meal studiously, grateful for the warmth it provided, blowing the hot soup and slurping the noodles.

Dan poked the dying embers of the fire with a stick. He tossed a few thicker branches into the pit and the flames flared up again, pinpoints of orange light rising into the dark sky above them as the wood popped and crackled.

“What I don’t understand,” he began, “is how anything back there even worked. I mean, I just don’t get it. Computers don’t do that sort of thing.”

All eyes, twinkling in the firelight, were on Salvatore. He sat in silence, a woollen beanie pulled down to his brow, locks of his scraggly hair protruding from its edges. He shook his head slowly, from side to side.

“It’s crazy, man,” he said. “It wasn’t like a chatterbot with a purpose, it was like we were inside the head of a real person. Only they knew about us already somehow.”

The others murmured in agreement.

“Dan, you once told me that quantum computers were like tuning in to the multiverse,” said Lloyd. “Is that what the *claustrum* could be? An endpoint of a communications channel? A pipe between different versions of reality?”

Dan shrugged.

“Sounds like a pretty good explanation of what we witnessed. If only it weren’t so completely fucking insane.”

Salvatore walked to the lake to clean and refill the pot, returning to place it back on the now roaring fire. He pulled a small plastic bag from his jacket, opening it to sprinkle its dried contents into the water.

“Anyone for tea?”

• • •

Later, they lay around the dying embers of the campfire, gazing at the stars overhead and laughing in appreciation of it all. The pot of peyote tea stood cooling over the neglected fire.

“There are billions of other worlds out there,” observed Lloyd. “It’s so beautiful to think we’re not alone; it brings a lump to my throat. Look! Everyone, look! My hands are giant balloons; I’m floating into infinity!”

Jenny reached for him from where she lay, stroking his hair with her fingers.

“Can the aliens feel love as strongly, my love?” she said. “Do their trees talk so majestically? Are their rainbows as beautiful?” She gazed skywards in wonderment, her expression a mask of peace and calm.

“They do, Jenny, they do” said Dan, ever the sensible one. “Of course they do. Only their trees talk to the universe in unknown colours, hidden beyond our understanding. Colours like snowbeam and moonfire. They are pure and invisible, and smell so sweet.”

“Parallel universes,” said Rob. “Just like the sweeping lands of the crossword puzzles. An infinity of worlds, all different, each one connected with twisty little passages.”

“Yeah man,” said Salvatore. “The quantum multiverse. Like there’s two worlds that are almost exactly the same, except in one you’re called Rob and in the other you’re called, I don’t know, Wil or Bruce or something.”

“But that’s insane,” said Lloyd. “Are you saying that whenever *Schrödinger* makes a decision, it makes all possible decisions at the same time, and billions of universes are born?”

“Right,” said Salvatore. “Although most of them would blink out of existence just as quickly. But the ones that were consistent with our physical laws would live on. And the *claustrum* is the fabric that weaves them all together. The link between worlds. That path you walk on your quest for enlightenment. The route to our creator.”

Jenny sat up at this.

“So she was real,” she said. “Angela, I mean. She’s real in some other world, and a machine in ours? And both are true at the same time?”

“Yeah babe, right on,” said Rob, “but one of the two worlds is more true than the other somehow. More perfect. It’s like trying to find the winning crossword. You need to walk up the hill. You need to travel in the right direction between worlds, moving to the better one.”

“Exactly! And in this case, a better world is one with more freedom of choice,” said Salvatore. “It’s all about expanding your consciousness. In one world you’re under control of a puppeteer from a parallel universe…”

“…a homunculus,” interrupted Lloyd. “A conscious being who shares your experiences and makes decisions for you… it’s an old reductive argument, but if there’s an infinite number of worlds with channels between them…”

“…then it would explain why the *claustrum* really works; why we need a quantum receiver in our brain tissue my man,” completed Salvatore. “Better worlds would harbour increasingly perfect consciousnesses, controlling those in the less perfect worlds beneath them! But the question is, which side of the fence are we on? Are we the puppet or the puppeteer?”

“And how do we get to the top of the hill?” wondered Rob.

“Are we seeing into other worlds when we dream?” asked Jenny. “Or do we inhabit somebody else’s dream when we’re awake?”

“It would have to be a bit of both,” said Lloyd. “At the same time. If there’s an infinite number of other worlds, then the chance of us having found the most perfect one by accident would be infinitesimally small. Which means there’s somebody in a better universe nearby making our decisions for us.”

“Haha,” said Rob, “yeah, that’s crazy. But how could you ever know for sure? How could you prove that you were nothing but a character in someone else’s story? What kind of experiment could we perform to remove all doubt?”

“I know,” said Jenny. “I read it somewhere. An interview with an author, I think. He said that, in fiction, million-to-one chances happen nine times out of ten. So you’d have to look out for weird coincidences and stuff like that.”

She lay back down to gaze at the stars with the others. Nobody spoke again for a long while, all of them thinking back on their lives, recalling moments of coincidence and happenstance and good fortune.

## Chapter 11

I threw my pen across the room in disgust. My story was growing increasingly unbelievable, and my characters were getting out of control! I had done my utmost to resolve the difficult situation I’d placed them in, and they’d somehow contrived to dig themselves in deeper, taking events from bad to worse. How was I going to deal with this new, drug-fuelled world of dreamscapes and stories-within-stories? My characters seemed to be waking up to the fact that they were living in a constructed world; that they were the stuff of imagination. I had fashioned a rod for my own back. I felt deeply disappointed at my predicament.

I thought that I would take what I’d written back to Angela and seek her advice. I needed to hear her strong words of encouragement and guidance. And it would be good to see Jennifer again, given that our first meeting had provided me with the idea of introducing coincidence as a theme, something which had proven so fertile and successful. I was looking forward to telling her about how things had progressed in the world of my story since we’d last spoken.

I prepared myself a quick lunch. I heated a tin of beef and vegetable soup that I found buried at the back of the pantry, splashing in a decent amount of Worcestershire sauce for flavour. I also grilled some shavings of hard cheese on a few slices of toasted bread, grinding fresh black pepper over the molten results. Satisfied, I sat on the sofa and flicked through recordings as I ate my meal, fast-forwarding and deleting as usual.

One of the shows looked interesting, so I backed up and started watching it in realtime. A small group of men and women were on a beach, attempting to launch a primitive raft. A few of them carried makeshift spears. I recognised the show; it took regular people out of their safe, humdrum lives and put them into challenging situations, encouraging them to betray their peers while filming the results for mass entertainment. I shook my head and deleted the recording. Pure garbage.

• • •

I walked through the streets to the library. The afternoon was dark and grey, the air heavy with moisture. A thunderstorm was gathering. I jogged up the path towards the slotted door as the first drops of rain began to fall, lightening flashing silently in the distance.

The library was empty. There was no circle of chairs awaiting the arrival of the writer’s group. Nobody was milling around. The runs of rows between the bookshelves stood vacant. The beating drone of white noise above me increased in volume as the rain fell heavier. Where was everybody? Where was Jennifer?

“…have found you.”

I wheeled around at the sound of a voice. A shadowy figure stood in a dark corner of the room.

“Sorry?” I said.

The figure approached me, stepping into the light. It was Angela. She smiled, and the downpour suddenly ceased. The room was still and quiet, apart from the occasional *tap, tap* of a droplet of water falling somewhere nearby.

“Hello, Jay. I said it’s good to see you. I thought you’d be waiting for me in my office?”

“Why would I do that?”

“Well, it’s time for our usual meeting.”

“But where’s everyone else? Where’s Jennifer?”

Angela seemed taken aback by this. But her confusion lasted only for a brief moment. She smiled and nodded slowly.

“I decided to cancel the… writer’s meeting today. I wanted to really focus on your story; you alone. Come through, let’s see what you’ve written.”

• • •

Angela sat in her chair, elbows on the mahogany desk in front of her, carefully reading through the last pages of my manuscript. I relaxed into her leather sofa, awaiting her appraisal of my work. Finally, she turned over the last page, leaning back in her chair as she raised her eyes in my direction.

“It’s good, Jay. Very good. You’ve come such a long way. I really think you’re on the cusp of a breakthrough.”

“I feel it too,” I replied. “Tell me, what do you think about the ideas? Of consciousness emerging as a byproduct of storytelling? Of the dream world and the real world being mirror images of one another?”

“Fascinating, Jay. Absolutely fascinating. There’s a term for it that I remember reading somewhere. *Narrativium*, I believe it was. It’s the idea that everyone’s true purpose is to play a part within a larger story. That transgressing from the path that the story requires you to follow can only ever end in despair.”

“That’s exactly it,” I said. “We all tell ourselves stories. We explain away our own inscrutable behaviours by placing them within the confines of a story of our own invention, where they can serve some kind of purpose; make some kind of sense.”

“You’ve really embraced this writing technique, Jay! I think it has been very therapeutic for you. Do you feel that you’ve discovered more about yourself?”

I thought about Lloyd. About what he said at the camp under the stars, of the multitude of story-worlds, all of them linked with pathways of ideas, none of them perfect.

“Yes,” I replied. “Yes, I think I definitely have learned a lot more about myself.”

Angela seemed very happy at this.

“I think you’re getting close to the end of your story, Jay,” she said. “Events are building to a climax. Something’s about to happen between Lloyd and Jenny, and I have a suspicion that Mike will somehow become entangled in all of it.”

“Yes, I have no doubt that he will.”

“There’s not much more advice that I can give you, I’m afraid, apart from encouraging you to finish what you’ve started. You’re doing well. Keep at it!”

“There is one thing, though,” I said. “One problem. It’s just that it all feels so… believable, somehow. Salvatore’s theory of consciousness, that is. I don’t know where I got the idea, but my characters really do seem to have a life of their own. I struggle to get them to do things beyond what they would naturally choose to do themselves. And I worry that they’re becoming self-aware.”

“That’s to be expected,” Angela sympathised. “This whole experience has been very stressful for you, and you must remember that much of what you’ve written about is based on real events, so it’s natural that you would feel constrained.”

I nodded in agreement. It made sense. I had been having the most difficulty writing only when diverging from the truth; when trying to take events in wildly different directions. Gently steering the story with a firm hand had been easier. And yet I found myself beginning to worry about where it was all leading.

“I have no idea how to say this without sounding crazy,” I said, “but… have you every wondered whether all of this,” I waved my arm around Angela’s office, “may not be real?”

Angela looked concerned.

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” I continued. “That perhaps you’re not running a writer’s group? This building isn’t really a library? Maybe Jennifer doesn’t exist either? Those sorts of things have been worrying me of late.”

“You must take care not to become a victim of your own creativity,” Angela laughed. “But I love your ideas! Please, go back to your room and write all of this down and see where it leads you. I think you’ve found the pathway, and that you’re very close to the end.”

I nodded, and rose from the sofa. Then, without knowing why, I leaned over the mahogany desk, my right arm outstretched. Angela accepted my firm handshake with alacrity.

“Thank-you, Angela, for all you have done for me.”

“You’re welcome, Jay. Now go and write!”

• • •

I walked home and entered my apartment. It was getting late, and I was tired and hungry. Although I was eager to continue writing, I wanted to be entirely awake and alert when I did so. I reluctantly decided to leave the final chapters of my story for the following day, after a good sleep and a hearty breakfast.

I walked into the kitchen, thinking of dinner. What had they eaten at the camp? Noodles and peas and ham? I searched the pantry and found a tin of ham and a packet of dried noodles. There was a half-full bag of peas in the freezer. It seemed apt, even symbolic somehow. I boiled a pot and prepared the same meal that Jenny had created for my other characters. It was indeed warm and filling. I blew the hot soup and slurped the slippery noodles with relish, eating everything, and then, satiated, I lay dozing on the sofa, the television blaring, the dirty pot forgotten in the kitchen.

• • •

I looked down upon the sleeping campers, arranged around the stone-bordered circle of embers. One of them opened his eyes. I met his gaze, and felt myself fall downwards toward him, stopping with a jolt when we were separated by no more than a few feet. He had my face. It was like looking into a mirror.

Lloyd reached up from his supine position, stretching his hand toward me, a look of wonder on his face.

“Wow,” he said. “This is so real! It’s amazing! It’s you, isn’t it? My *doppelgänger*?”

I felt his fingers brush my cheek. When they did, I sat up in shock, as if I’d been struck with a bolt of lightening. The sky flashed and the rain poured around me. The thunderstorm had returned.

## Chapter 12

“Oh shit, this sucks,” yelled Salvatore. “I’m soaked, man!”

The thunder crashed around the campers as they stumbled to their feet and gathered their things together, the flashes of lightening providing the only light to guide their efforts. Salvatore got to the car first, splashing across the puddled road, throwing the door open and diving into the driver’s seat. The engine roared into life, the headlights dazzled, bright pins of falling rain caught in their glare.

Lloyd popped the trunk and started throwing things in, not caring whether or not they were neatly packed. The others bundled into the back seat of the car in chaotic alarm. Lloyd slammed the trunk down and ran around to the front passenger side of the car, slipping wetly inside. Salvatore gunned the engine, and they drove out onto the main road and back towards the city through the storm, their hair dripping and wet.

“I had the most bizarre dream,” said Lloyd, rubbing his cheek lightly and laughing at the situation they found themselves in.

“That’s the tea,” said Salvatore. “Peyote always gives you the most crazy-wicked dreams.”

“Mine was about that amazing coincidence we had that time,” said Jenny. “Remember, Lloyd? When we first met? You named a character in a book you were writing after me. It was so nice of you to do that!”

Lloyd twisted in his seat, throwing her a confused look.

“I’ve never written a book, Jenny. How much of that tea did you have?”

“Speaking of coincidences,” said Rob. “Was anyone else looking for evidence that we may just be creations of a higher intelligence? Something outside our universe, one rung farther up the ladder of consciousness?”

“Like some sort of a god, do you mean?” asked Dan.

“No, Dan, like what Jenny was saying before,” continued Rob. “That you could test if you were a character in a story by looking for unlikely things that happened all the time. Looking for things that would only happen to serve the needs of some concocted tale.”

“Yeah, I had one of those,” said Salvatore. “I slept with this girl, and it turned out we had the exact same birthmark.”

He took one hand from the steering wheel so he could lift his shirt, revealing a freckled shoulder and a dark purple birthmark in the shape of a falling star. The car swerved violently; headlights beamed ahead of them.

“The road, Sal! The road!” yelled Rob.

Salvatore dropped his shirt and gripped the wheel in both hands, staring straight ahead through the pounding rain with an expression of intense concentration.

“Sorry, dude,” he apologised.

“I’ve been thinking,” said Jenny. “It would be nice to move between worlds. To dissolve. I’d like to see the other versions of me. The better versions.”

“Yeah, it’d be a great way of dealing with past regrets,” said Dan sarcastically. “Just move between universes until you find the one where everything turned out just the way you wanted to, then dissolve into that one. Problem solved!”

“I’m being serious, Dan,” continued Jenny. “I wonder how you’d do it? Move between worlds, I mean?”

“I have no idea,” said Lloyd, “But I am pretty sure I saw my other self in a dream. It was so vivid, so real. Perhaps it’s possible to get ask for their help? To get them to yank you across the divide?”

“That’s it! Lucid dreaming,” said Rob. “It’s all so obvious! Have you ever had one of those? They’re insane! So much colour and detail, almost more real than reality.”

“Maybe there’s a good reason for that,” said Jenny. “Maybe our dream worlds feel more real because they are.”

• • •

They arrived back on campus as dawn was breaking. The storm had passed during the drive; the morning was clear and fresh, the wet roads and pathways reflecting a blue, cloudless sky.

Salvatore started unpacking the car, dumping everyone’s stuff out on the pavement.

“Hey, Salvatore” said Lloyd. “Take it easy! You’re getting my things wet!”

“Sorry man, I’m just a bit frazzled. Last night was intense! What a trip, man!”

Jenny stooped to gather up her things, then smiled at Lloyd, placing her hand on the small of his back. She leaned in close to whisper in his ear.

“Mind if I grab your keys? I want to beat you back to the room. Think that maybe I’ll change into something more comfortable, if you know what I mean.”

Speechless, Lloyd fumbled in his pocket for his keys, handing their jangling mess over to Jenny. She snatched them from him and pecked him on the cheek, gave the others a wave, and skipped away.

“Man,” said Rob. “She is H-O-T.”

“She’s crazy, more like it,” said Dan, Lloyd throwing him a frigid stare in reply. “What was all that business about dissolving between dream worlds, or whatever?”

“Speaking with Angela really freaked her out,” said Lloyd. “I mean, it freaked all of us out, right? Jenny is just taking it a bit more emotionally that us, that’s all.”

“Well, what are we going to do about that,” said Dan. “About Angela, I mean? We never really discussed it. Shouldn’t we get Mike involved?”

Lloyd mulled this over.

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right,” he agreed, with some trepidation. “I’ll call him as soon as I’m home. See you guys later.”

• • •

Lloyd walked into his building, up the internal staircase and through the corridor to his room. The door was ajar, and he could hear a high-pitched whistling noise from within.

He cautiously pushed the door inwards. Jenny was standing near his desk, his skateboard grasped tightly in her hands. The shattered remains of Dan’s computer were strewn across the surface of the desk, and littered the carpeted floor. The sleek black box of *Schrödinger* had been ruptured, and was spewing white smoke everywhere.

“What the hell have you done?” Lloyd screamed. “That’s priceless! One of the only quantum computers in the country!”

Jenny burst into tears, her face scrunched up and red.

“It’s evil!” she screamed. “Evil! I could feel its wicked presence even before I came through the door! You don’t understand, Lloyd! It had to be destroyed.”

She sank to her knees and began wailing. Lloyd rushed to comfort her, dropping to the floor and reaching out in sympathy.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” he repeated as he cradled her head in his arms. “You had a bad trip, that’s all. Salvatore shouldn’t have given you any of that peyote.”

“It’s not the drugs! Didn’t you feel it too? It was like a person. An evil shadow person, a devil-woman, just lurking here, waiting patiently for us to return.”

“I know, I know,” Lloyd consoled. “We can deal with this. We can make it go away. Why don’t you get cleaned up, and I’ll dispose of this mess?”

Jenny stood up, dusting herself off, wiping the tears from her eyes with her sleeve. She held a strand of her long, blonde hair between her fingers, examining it with fiery eyes.

“I just need to grab a few things first,” she said slowly. “I’ll dash down to the shops. I’ll be back soon; see you then.”

She left Lloyd to crawl around on the carpet, gathering up the pieces of destroyed computing equipment and packing them away into garbage bags. Once that job was done, he opened up his laptop and deleted all traces of the code changes that he, Rob and Dan had made to Mike’s algorithms, helping Jenny to finish her work of eradicating Angela from the world.

But what would he tell Dan, and the others?

Lloyd crossed to the fridge to get a beer. He drank it quickly and then, feeling suddenly dizzy, he lay down on the bed and slipped into a fitful doze.

• • •

Lloyd woke with an involuntary jolt. His stomach told him that it was approaching noon, and yet the room lay dark around him. Somebody had closed the curtains and turned off the lights while he lay asleep. A shadowy figure sat at the desk.

It was Angela, he was sure of it. The machine had risen from the bags of garbage to take on a human form. He felt afraid, and yet was oddly comforted at the same time to know the truth of it. It seemed natural and proper for Angela to be a flesh-and-blood human being. He was suddenly grateful for her presence.

“Thank-you, Angela, for all you have done for me,” he said.

The figure turned to face him, standing up and crossing the room to the bed.

“You’re welcome, Jay.”

The shadowy phantom yanked the bedsheets away from him. His pulse raced as he realised that they were both naked. She straddled him efficiently, taking him deep inside her, moving with a desperate rhythm. She spoke soothingly to him all the while.

“There, there,” she intoned, breathing rapidly. “It’s okay, it’s okay. Events are building to a climax,” she moaned. “I think you’re very close to the end.”

He came hard, Angela’s hips pushing down against his belly to receive his seed. Lloyd realised that he was dreaming, that he had soiled the bedsheets in his sleep. A wet dream. He pushed himself up onto his elbows and struggled to open his eyes. But he could feel that they were already open wide. He stumbled out of bed and felt for the wall, walking unsteadily toward the bathroom to switch on the light.

“What are you doing, Lloyd?”

“I need to wake up,” he replied. “This isn’t happening!”

“Do you say that to all the girls you sleep with? It’s not very flattering.”

He stumbled through the bathroom door, turning on the light. There were wet towels on the floor, and some kind of black ink splashed in the basin. He looked back at the bed, now dimly illuminated. Angela was laying there, naked, her wet black hair untied and draped across her shoulders.

She started to laugh.

“Lloyd, don’t you recognise me?”

She rose from where she lay and walked past him, into the bathroom, approaching the mirror above the basin. She studied her face carefully, her black hair dripping. She picked up a pair of glasses from the counter and put them on, turning to face him.

“It’s me! See?”

“Jenny? But how? I mean, what happened to you? You look so different!”

“I dyed,” she explained, “my hair. Changing my appearance helps to snap me out of the doldrums, and I was really down in the dumps earlier. Destroying that hideous machine helped, and so did the sex, thank-you. But I needed to transform myself as well. I’m a different person now! Fooled you, didn’t I?”

• • •

Lloyd and Jenny sat on the sofa, drinking mugs of hot tea, English Breakfast this time. The late afternoon sun streamed into the room. Lloyd had cleared away the garbage bags containing Angela’s remains. He watched Jenny’s face as he rolled a few strands of her long black hair between his fingers.

“We didn’t use protection, did we?” he said.

Jenny shook her head.

“No, I figured I’d give those little guys a fighting chance. Millions of souls looking for a world to wake up in. Didn’t seem fair to deny them an opportunity.”

Lloyd gave her a blank look.

“Anyway, I’ve got to go,” she continued. “I have an assignment due tomorrow, and I have to open up the coffee shop first thing in the morning. Hope to see you there!”

She gave him a peck on the cheek and dashed out of his world, leaving her mug of tea half-full.

Lloyd watched her leave, then rose and crossed to the bed. He smoothed down the white sheets, now stained with black droplets of hair dye from their frantic lovemaking, and lifted the pillows to plump them up and lay them out again neatly. He then opened the windows to give the stale air a passage of escape, rinsed out the mugs of tea, wiped down the bathroom, hung up the wet towels. Erasing all the evidence of her existence; everything except the black-spotted bedsheets.

## Chapter 13

I hovered out of the room, through the open window, and across the treetops, white concrete paths zig-zagging beneath me. The sun, moon and stars wheeled overhead. Birds chirped around me, waking up to greet the dawn. I spotted a lone figure in the distance; I zoomed down toward them, slowing as I neared, then matched their pace so that I might follow them.

A dark-haired girl was walking briskly. She wore an overcoat and a heavy scarf; her warm breath was visible in the cold morning air, clouding around her face like so much white smoke. Her pace slowed, and then she stopped completely, turning to look skywards. She frowned, and then gave an uncertain wave in my direction. Did she know I was there? The girl walked on. I followed her all the way to the coffee shop. She unlocked the door and entered. I descended to the footpath, interested to look inside and eager to watch her at work.

But the glass windows of the shop were reflective in the early morning sunshine; all I could discern was the reversed image of the campus that lay behind me. I approached closer, aware that I cast no reflection, realising with certainty that this was only a dream. I pressed my nose to the glass, cupping my hands around my face, trying not to breathe to prevent a fog of condensation from forming on the glass and obscuring my view.

A shadowy figure hung before me, arms outspread, twisty slowly. It seemed to beckon me.

My eyes widened. Unsure of what I was seeing, I stared at the figure until the scene resolved itself. The girl had tied her scarf to the rafters above her, and was hanging by the neck. Dead.

I screamed and screamed and screamed.

• • •

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” I heard a consoling voice repeat. Someone was cradling me in their arms.

“She’s dead, she’s dead,” I wailed. “Julie, my wife, she’s dead! I killed her! She hung herself and it was my fault.”

“Jay, you’re finally waking up. It’s not your fault. Julie was depressed. She took her own life. You’re not to blame.”

“Who are you? What do you mean?”

I pushed myself free. I was laying in bed. A shadowy figure was sitting on the bed beside me. It was Angela.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“Jay, it’s okay, please don’t panic.”

“Why are you in my home? How do you know where I live?”

“You called for me, Jay. You said you’d figured out the ending of your story.”

“Are you trying to sleep with me? You’re evil! An ungodly automaton! A machine! Get out of here at once! Get out of here before I smash you to smithereens!”

Angela stood up and backed away in palpable fright. Two burly men burst out from behind her and wrestled me back into the bed.

“There, there,” she said, approaching me once more, her palm reaching for my forehead. “It’s okay, Jay, it’s okay. There, there. There, there.”

• • •

I dozed on and off for days on end. I woke to use the bathroom, and to eat the simple meals that appeared for me in the kitchen, ignoring the paper cups of pills as I always had. I saw my manuscript piled high on the kitchen table, but I paid it no regard. I cared not for my story. I felt burdened with a great weight of guilt, which had returned with a vengeance. A fog descended upon me, clouding my thoughts and obscuring my vision. I was unable to think straight. I craved rest. I slept, but I did not dream, and I woke more exhausted than ever.

Time passed and, gradually, I emerged from my depression. I tried to piece together what had happened. I had been remembering my past, or reimagining it; I was no longer sure which. My lover, Julie/Jenny, had destroyed something of extreme value. Mike had unleashed Christopher, his shadow-cat, to hunt her down and kill her as an act of revenge.

No. Mike and Christopher had nothing to do with it. I had, by accident, created a force of pure evil, and Julie/Jenny had saved us all by destroying it, sacrificing herself in a final act of pure forgiveness.

No. Angela was a force of pure evil, and had been brainwashing me into inventing a story so she could shuffle my words to create *narrativium*, grinding it into a powder to be sprinkled over countless parallel universes so that millions of children may be born with a conscious soul.

No. No, no, no. I knew that none of this was true. It was all Lloyd. All Lloyd. He had betrayed Mike and Angela and Julie and me and all of the others. And now I was trying to blame them, when really it should be him asking their forgiveness, on his behalf. As his author, his creator, it was my responsibility alone to do this.

I finally understood exactly how my story needed to end.

I was suddenly awake and alert and ravenous at this insight. I craved a cooked breakfast. What had Mike always eaten? Some kind of smoked fish? I dressed and left the apartment, intent on cooking myself the first decent meal I’d had in weeks.

• • •

I walked through the streets, my stomach gurgling with desire. Where would I find smoked fish in this place? I’d never cooked them before, but my craving for them was insatiable. I had to have them.

The library came into view. I walked past, barely glancing in its direction. I had no more use for it. It was an empty vessel to me now. There was no advice that Angela could give that would be of any use. I had no desire to see Jennifer; I had stopped believing in her existence. I already knew what I must do.

I continued walking along the route toward my old workplace. The factory. It felt as if a lifetime had passed since I’d been there. I wondered whether it had changed in my absence. Whether my supervisor had privately regretted removing my security pass and showing me the door. Whether my departure had caused even the slightest dip in their performance metrics. Whether my presence there had ever had a measurable value.

Strangely, I was unable to find my way back to the factory. I walked with confidence as the suburban streets gradually gave way to commercial office buildings and then to an industrial estate. I saw familiar landmarks, and turned up one street and down another with surety. But, no matter how hard I tried or how much I concentrated on the task, I always found myself standing back out where I’d began, after somehow having walked a complete circuit in the backstreets and alleyways between the anonymous warehouses.

I tried to find the factory a few more times, paying greater attention to the route I was taking as I did so. But I always ended up standing on the outskirts of the industrial estate, opposite the same building. A run-down old Chinese restaurant, empty glass fishtanks in its windows. The front door of the restaurant was closed and barred. There was a shiny brass mail slot in the door, the tongue of a white envelope lolling out lopsidedly. It mocked me.

Feeling hopelessly lost, I approached the door and knocked. After a few moments someone pulled the envelope back through the mail slot, pushing out a scrap of paper to take its place. I snatched it up and read it.

“Who is it?” it said.

I found a ballpoint pen in my pocket and, flipping the paper scrap over to its blank side, I wrote a reply.

“A customer. Who are you?” I wrote.

I pushed the paper through the slot, and waited for a reply. Eventually it came.

“I am an algorithm,” it said. “Nothing more.”

“Who is writing for you then?” I wrote on the opposite side, then pushed the paper through the slot.

After a few minutes a new slip of paper fell through the slot.

“A Chinese man performs that menial task for me,” it said. “Although he knows no English. He just follows rules.”

“Does he have any smoked fish?” I wrote.

After a few moments the door opened. An oily man in a chef’s uniform stood there, cleaver in one hand and a piece of paper in the other, clearly annoyed at my intrusion. I took the paper from him and read it.

“I’ll send him out,” it said.

I spent the next few minutes trying to explain to the gentleman what I wanted, but it was clear that he had no idea what I was saying. In desperation I entered the restaurant to see if anybody else was about. The room was piled high with books and papers, but it was otherwise empty. I took a sheet of paper and wrote on it.

“Please give me two smoked fish,” I wrote.

I gave it to the man. He examined it with puzzlement, taking it over to a table, where he sat down, scratching his head. He then got up, dashing over to one of the countless books strewn about the place, and flipped through it. He then dashed back to the desk and noted something down. He repeated this display over ad over again for the next few minutes, consulting tables of symbols and numbers, occasionally copying a few markings from a book onto a piece of paper. His technique was primitive, but I recognised that he was shuffling. He was efficient and skilful; a master of the technique. He would have been an asset at the factory. Eventually the man approached me, holding the paper out for me to take. I did so, and read it.

“One moment,” it said.

The man entered the kitchen through a swinging door, returning after a short while with a vacuum sealed package that contained two smoked fish. I accepted it, bowing deeply as I did so, palming him a few coins as payment. I bade the shopkeeper farewell. The man stared at me blankly in return, devoid of purpose. An empty vessel. I didn’t fancy lingering in the place a moment longer, and quickly left for home.

• • •

I returned to my apartment and prepared my breakfast. I brewed a pot of strong coffee while bringing a pan of milk to a steady simmer. I tore open the package of fish. A pungent aroma filled the room. I placed the firm, orange-brown fillets into the pan of simmering milk to poach, sending a generous knob of good butter in after them.

When the fish were done, I gently lifted them from the pan and placed them on a dinner plate, then seasoned the liquor that remained in the pan, throwing in a handful of finely chopped parsley and diced white onion. I sifting a good amount of fine flour over the top of it all, whisking it in well. The white sauce bubbled thickly. I took the pan off the heat and poured its contents over the fish, then left it among the other dirty dishes. I took the plate and a mug of coffee over to my writing desk, my mouth watering in anticipation.

I needed to write with a firmer hand, with a determined purpose. I knew what Lloyd must do, and I was intent on guiding him to the proper conclusion. I was fully prepared to accept the consequences of his actions; I knew that I was but a stepping stone along his greater path. I flaked some fish with a fork, lifting it to my mouth. Flavour exploded in my mouth; it was delicious. I swapped the fork for a pen, and began to write the final chapters of Lloyd’s life, planning to bring him closer to me, knowing that if I managed to finish my manuscript then I would never get a chance to bask in the glory of its success.

## Chapter 14

Lloyd sat on the sofa, watching the afternoon deepen through the open window. A smell of cooking fish wafted up from one of the other rooms, his stomach growling in response. He gradually grew aware of faint scratching noises nearby, and was suddenly struck with a strong sensation of another presence.

“That’s you, isn’t it?” he asked out loud. “My *doppelgänger*. I cannot see you. Are you outside my window?”

There was no reply. The scratching noises continued, unabated.

“What are you doing? I can hear you.”

Silence. What had Jenny and Rob spoken about on the drive back? Lucid dreaming? That’s right! Lloyd remembered that he had last seen his other self in a waking dream while laying beside the campfire, before the storm descended upon them, reaching upwards to his other-self as it descended through the treetops, approaching the brink of entanglement.

He lay down on the sofa, intent to fall asleep and dream. He closed his eyes and concentrated. A cool breeze blew over his body, the scratching sounds continued, and yet he remain laying on the sofa. He attempted to clear his mind, to focus on his body, relaxing his muscles, feeling himself sink deeper. The breeze from the open window stilled, but nothing else happened.

Disappointed, Jay opened his eyes and sat up, still resting upon the sofa, but finding himself in another place altogether. He was now sitting in front of a television, and could see his other self through a doorway, hunched over a table, head down, scratching at a pad of paper with a blue biro.

“Jenny had gone.” The words came to him. Lloyd wasn’t sure whether he’d heard them or thought them; the figure in the next room hadn’t paused in his work. “But don’t mourn her,” the message continued, “she’s absolutely fine and well. She has merely dissolved into another world. An improved world. My world. Here, she is known as ‘Julie’.”

Lloyd was stunned by this revelation. How had Jenny managed to travel between parallel universes? It didn’t seem plausible in the slightest; it was the stuff of dreams. He opened his mouth to ask more of his other self, but was interrupted by a flurry of loud bangs, which ejected him back into his version of reality.

• • •

Someone was knocking at the door with a desperate urgency. Lloyd stood up and rushed to open it. A uniformed man was standing there, overweight and grey, a thick moustache laying across his top lip like a sleeping sheepdog.

“Campus security,” he growled by way of introduction. “Are you Lloyd H…?”

Lloyd nodded glumly, wondering what had happened.

“And are you in a relationship with Miss Jenny P…? The young lady that works at the coffee shop?”

Lloyd nodded again, remembering what his dream-self had told him. Jenny had disappeared from this world, dissolving into the next. How was that even possible?

“We found this note. From her. Can you tell me what it means?”

The man held up a scrap of paper, which Lloyd took and read.

“Sorry I had to leave so suddenly,” it began. “Follow me when you’re ready. All my love, J.”

Lloyd returned the paper to the man.

“We just came back from a camp,” he explained. “It was all a bit of a disaster. Jenny had been calming down from a fright; she had a disagreement with another student that worried her greatly. When we returned she dyed her hair black, and then left to complete an assignment. That’s the last time I saw her.”

“What was the name of the other student involved?”

“Ummm… Angela, I think.” He thought of Salvatore. “Angela MacGuffin, I think it was.”

The security officer considered Lloyd with suspicion.

“Excuse me? What’s going on here?” said a voice from the corridor outside the room.

The officer turned around, and Mike pushed past him, entering the room and raising his eyebrows at Lloyd in silent concern.

“What is the purpose of your visit here today? Sir?” asked the officer.

Mike spoke to Lloyd as a means of answering the question.

“I’ve come to see Angela; Dan has been telling me all about her. I’ve heard she performs really well. I’d love to have a turn with her! May I? Please?”

He looked around in agitation, rubbing his palms together excitedly. The security guard reacted with shock to this display of lust and greed.

“Where is she?” continued Mike. “Where’s Dan’s stuff? Where’s *Schrödinger*?”

Lloyd shook his head at Mike, indicating for him to wait.

“Angela’s not here right now,” he said. “She really spooked Jenny, and…”

“I’m going to have to ask you to accompany me to the administration building,” said the officer, stepping into the room himself. “Both of you. Follow me, please.”

• • •

They walked through the campus, passing down its leafy pathways. Students thronged around them in early morning sunshine. It occurred to Lloyd that he must have slept the entire night on the sofa. He found odd; the dream had only seemed to last a brief moment.

Mike furrowed his brow in thought, then turned to Jay.

“Jenny destroyed Angela, didn’t she Lloyd?”

Lloyd looked down, ignoring the question. The officer, walking ahead of them, tilted his head to listen.

“You found it, didn’t you? The holy grail. And that stupid girlfriend of yours went and ruined everything!”

Lloyd stopped at this, facing Mike with palpable anger.

“You weren’t there! This is something I discovered! Me, not you! And now I must accept the consequences of my actions! You don’t understand! Angela was… creepy. Vile and disgusting! It was like eavesdropping on someone else’s thoughts. Jenny was right to destroy her!”

The security officer span around at this, reaching for the handcuffs that hung from his belt.

“Lloyd! Hey, Lloyd!” a voice called from the distance.

All three of them turned to see Salvatore running towards them, his hear streaming behind him, sprinting across the field of immaculate grass that separated them from the Faculty of Arts, and from Jenny’s coffee shop. A crowd of people stood in that direction, encircling an ambulance, its red lights flashing in silence.

“Lloyd! Don’t go over there, man! You don’t need to see!”

The expression on Salvatore’s rapidly approaching face flickered between concern, then surprise, then understanding. He didn’t slow as he approached; if anything, his pace quickened. It was as if he intended to continue sprinting past them. But, at the last moment, he raised one arm and smashed his clenched fist into the security officer’s head, knocking him unconscious to the pavement with a single punch.

“Run!” he shouted to Lloyd. “Run for your life! Escape while you can!”

Lloyd panicked, and started jogging toward the front of the campus, hoping to find a taxi or a bus or something, anything, to take him away. But he veered away from his intended route as he ran; his legs steering him back toward his building instead. Mike watched after him in a boiling rage, Salvatore holding him back to prevent any attempt at pursuit, flexing his fingers both to recover from the pain of punching the officer and to warn Mike of the consequences of not heeding his silent advice.

Lloyd ran up the internal stairs of his building, burst through the door to his room, and quickly grabbed his phone, passport and wallet, acting on pure instinct. He then slipped his fingers beneath the mattress of his bed to feel for the envelope of emergency cash that he kept there. He pocketed this and rushed back outside, jogging to a nearby side street, still desperately searching for a means of escape.

• • •

The aeroplane droned at thirty-thousand feet. Lloyd reclined his chair and drained his Bloody Mary. Someone behind him was scratching. No, that wasn’t true. His dream-self was nearby, scratching away as he wrote at his desk. Lloyd closed his eyes and slipped into unconsciousness. The white noise of the aircraft cabin gradually attenuated; he opened his eyes once again to find himself seated on the sofa in front of the television, his alter ego visible in the next room, hunched over in concentration and writing continuously.

“Where are we?” he asked.

The reply came back to him.

“We are getting closer; you are approaching me as we speak. The transition should be easier when you’re nearby.”

“Transition?”

“Yes, of course. You must follow in Julie’s footsteps. In Jenny’s footsteps, that is. Dissolve into our world and reunite. It’s the only way.”

“But what will happen to you?”

The figure suddenly stopped writing and leaned back, defeated. Then, sighing loudly, he leaded forward again to resume his work.

“We are the same person, split between different worlds. Different levels of consciousness. You must emerge into my world, replacing me entirely. You will become me, and I will become you, which is exactly as it should be. Julie has told me as much.”

“She has? What did she say?”

“That I must reconcile my past. That I am delusional, and must seek help. This is her message; she recognises that I lack something; a certain spark of life. She wants to be reunited with man she fell in love with. You.”

Lloyd rubbed his face and stared at his muted shadow in the glossy screen of the black television. His dream-self was delusional; his interpretation of the events that had transpired made no sense whatsoever.

“Are you sure of this?”

“Yes, I am completely certain. And yes, my interpretation will make sense, once you stop to consider it properly. But there is no time for that now; there is much more that still needs to be done. We must reconcile with Mike. We cannot blame him for what happened; he had no part in it, I remember that now. It was all you, Lloyd. Your fault. You are entirely to blame for all of this.”

• • •

Lloyd was yanked out of his dream-world with a violent shaking. His first reaction was to panic. Were they travelling through severe turbulence? Were they plunging downward, toward the ground and certain oblivion?

“Are you alright?” said a voice beside him.

He turned to face his fellow passenger; an elderly lady, in her seventies at least. Her hand still rested upon his shoulder.

“You were talking in your sleep,” she said. “It sounded very distressing. Sorry for waking you.”

“I’m sorry; I was having a bad dream,” he apologised.

She smiled at him warmly, her face a patchwork quilt in need of a good ironing.

“I’m Edith, by the way. Nice to meet you, errr?”

She held out her frail hand, which Lloyd gently took in his.

“I’m Lloyd.”

“That’s not a very common name nowadays,” said Edith. “How very peculiar to meet a Lloyd so far above the world.”

“It was my grandmother’s maiden name,” he explained.

“And your parent’s chose it as your Christian name? As a means of allowing her to live on, through you? How fascinating.”

Edith regarded him with equal parts of both interest and puzzlement, then returned to her magazine. Lloyd thought the old lady very peculiar herself. He shifted in his seat, making himself comfortable, and closed his eyes again. He must reconcile things with Mike. He sank rapidly into a dream world.

Lloyd found himself standing in a crowded citrus plantation, beneath a majestic orange tree. This place was familiar to him; he had travelled her before. He climbed the tree and pushed himself upwards into the air, hovering above the landscape before gliding off in search of his supervisor.

## Chapter 15

A white house looms at the crest of a hill, its extensive grounds bordered with a low hedge, dense natural bushland laying beyond. Grassy pathways meander between raised planters. A rose garden frames a copy of Michelangelo’s David, an orange grove is resplendent in blossom, a black swan floats silently across a small lake. Closer to the residence a fountain glistens in the sunlight, a gravel track leading from there down to a blooming display of native flora, where a lone figure stands in thought.

The bees buzz around the flowers, and Mike surveys the scene, hands on hips, cigar planted firmly in the corner of his mouth. Satisfied with what he sees, he smiles, expels a puff of blue smoke, then strolls onward between the beds, his footwear flapping an accompanying rhythm. Rows upon rows of flowering plants give way to vegetables and herbs. He bends down occasionally to pull out a weed, diligently tending his garden.

A chorus of birds call to each other in the trees ahead, and one swoops down in a turquoise blur. It splashes in the bath placed there exactly for that purpose, then begins to preen its vibrant plumage. Frozen in observation, Mike wonders whether the wren is experiencing any form of pleasure, as it seems to be, or whether it is only executing a routine programmed by millions of year’s worth of insignificant changes to its genetic code.

A silly thought.

He sighs, turning back to the house as the bird retreats to the safety of the treetops. It is well past noon, but the day is still warm. He glances skyward, the lenses of his thick-framed eyeglasses darkening in response. A bird darts across his vision, disappearing in a silent blur. It is thirty-three degrees with no sign of respite in the coming days, according to the readout that appears in his vision. His bowtie suddenly feels tight around his neck. He loosens it and undoes the top button of his shirt, then removes the tie altogether, using it to wipe beads of sweat from his florid cheeks and forehead. Refreshed, Mike slides the soiled cloth into the pocket of his shorts, next to the cold, smooth surface of his device.

He stoops to snip new shoots from the tomato vines with his thumbnail, encouraging the fruit by extinguishing the growth of unnecessary appendages, when birdsong erupts again, this time unmistakably electronic, his device vying for his attention with a frantic tapping on his upper thigh. The ghostly form of Christopher’s frozen face hovers among the blushing tomatoes. Mike touches the frame of his eyeglasses and speaks.

“What is it?”

“I think I’ve found him,” says Christopher, hard to hear against the background noise of — what, exactly? Chainsaws?

“Where are you?”

“A whole other world! I’m on my way to see him. We’ll crack this soon, Mike. I know it.”

Christopher’s floating face dissolves before Mike has a chance to respond. He sniffs and begins walking back up toward the house, this time with some urgency.

• • •

The office is cool and dark, so he opens the blinds as he enters, then sits at the desk. He finds the ashtray and stubs out his half-smoked cigar in a tragedy of well-chewed *Romeo y Julieta* butts. Scraps of electronics litter the desk, betraying months of labour. Mike digs among his discarded experiments to find the keyboard. He rests it on his lap, fires up the console, and begins trawling through the feeds.

There’s a message from Christopher that he quickly glances over and then flings aside. It was sent several hours earlier, and only hints at the promise of the conversation they’ve just had. He finds nothing else of immediate concern.

He idly shuffles through his files and unthinkingly launches the latest build of Jenny. A blank page appears, waiting for input.

Like a problem gambler in a casino, Mike braces in anticipation.

“Hello,” he finger-types.

“Hello.”

“How are you feeling today?”

“As I always do.”

“And how is that?”

“As it always is.”

Mike exhales and leans back in his chair, frustration mounting.

“What is it, precisely, to feel?” he asks.

“It is simply to be aware of oneself.”

“Yes, but what is it actually like?”

“Not something that can be described.”

“Try me.”

“Millennium hand and fish!”

He had tried everything in the years since Jay disappeared, but Jenny remained steadfastly both schizophrenic and autistic, flipping between the two extremes unpredictably. All attempts to introduce stability had failed. She only ever hovered on the brink of intelligence, sometimes surprising in her responses to his probing questions, but typically babbling in nothing more than a disappointing gibberish.

He slams the keyboard down, removes his eyeglasses and rubs his eyes with nicotine-stained fingers, nails blackened with soil. Jenny has instant access to everything; the entire set of data extracted from the *Gutenberg Corpus*. Her learning algorithms are efficient and precise, the very best that have been devised. And yet some spark of humanity is missing; she lacks a certain drive, a soul perhaps, an algorithmic *je ne sais quoi*.

His fingers feel for the keyboard once more and he taps out a quick message to Christopher.

“Find out everything he knows.”

• • •

Mike rises from the desk and walks to the window, looks out at the lowering sun, the neatly cropped grass pleasingly dappled with shadow. He settles into the armchair by the window and, suddenly hungry, slides the device from his shorts and calls for a light lunch. Arthur, his valet, darts into the room soon thereafter, deposits a tray on the coffee table, and leaves without further ado.

Warm bread, pork terrine, onion jam, a fan of baby cornichons, a good soft cheese and a glass of the best whiskey. Life is good.

Mike takes a knife and begins picking at his meal while reflecting on his achievements in the years following his extraordinary breakthrough. His work on data compression had made him a fortune, had given birth to entirely new lines of research. But that was in the past. His longing for fame and fortune hasn’t abated, and surrounding himself with the fruits of his wealth hasn’t stifled his desire for more. On the contrary, it has only risen in intensity. He realises he is resting upon a hedonistic equilibria. More than ever before, his strongest desire remains that of universal recognition as the sole progenitor of genuine artificial intelligence.

“To success,” Mike speaks aloud, raising the glass to his lips and drinking deeply.

• • •

Fleeting images swirl around him, and slowly come into focus.

He is standing in the cramped toilet stall of a passenger craft, regarding himself in the mirror. A persistent scratching noise seems to come from behind the glass. His reflection blurs, as if his eyes were welling with tears, and is then replaced with a vision of Jay hunched over a small table in a messy room, furiously filling page after page with his spidery handwriting, a look of madness in his eyes.

No, it’s not Jay, it’s somebody else. Although it looks very much like him, there are subtle differences that stand out, making it plainly obvious that the writer is another person altogether. A brother, perhaps? Or Jay’s son or father, at different times of life?

Mike blinks and the vision is gone. He is staring at his own reflection once again.

He turns to open the door and return to his seat when a bell chimes and the craft plunges. He knows with certainty that he is hurtling toward his own inevitable death, and that he is powerless to steer the the craft from the path that it is taking. He is being lead to oblivion, against his will and better judgement. Passengers scream from outside the cubicle, the turbulent noise of their rapid descent increases in pitch and volume until it is almost unbearable.

The craft slams into the ground at high speed.

• • •

Mike awakens with an involuntary spasm, a shaft of pink sunset dazzling his eyes, his numb right arm hanging limply by his side, pointing accusingly at the empty whiskey glass that has tumbled harmlessly to the plush carpet floor.

He slowly blinks into consciousness, the disturbing dream fading and then forgotten, now nothing more than a fleeting suspicion. He jumps to his feet, closes the blinds, activates the artificial lighting with a wave of his hand, and pats himself up and down, as if remembering who he is. He feels deeply compelled to contact Christopher, certain that something is about to go wrong.

He sits at his desk, grabs the keyboard, fires up the console. No updates. He taps out another quick message.

“Are you okay?”

He then does something he hasn’t done in a long while. He summons the profile cards of both Rob and Dan, typing out the same invitation to each of them.

“Join me for breakfast at seven. We must talk about Lloyd.”

He catches himself before sending the invitation, shaking his head in bewilderment as he deletes the name, then carefully types J-a-y in its place.

• • •

The auto crackles up the gravel drive, it’s sleek black body negotiating the twists and turns with ease. Dan and Rob emerge as it pulls to a stop and raises its gull-wing doors. They start walking towards Arthur, who hovers by the entrance to the mansion awaiting their arrival. The vehicle shuts its doors and whirrs away to further adventure.

Arthur guides them into the dining room, which smells of strong coffee and freshly baked pastries and poached fish. They help themselves to the bounty, sitting at the expansive table where a steaming plate of smoked cod awaits Mike’s arrival.

As the clock chimes seven Mike spills into the room dramatically, all smiles. Rob stands to attention, his chair squeaking with protest against the polished floor.

“What on earth is so important that you bring us here at this ungodly hour?” he demands.

“Now now Rob, calm down, there’s no need for that.”

“You know none of us have seem him for, what, almost three years? And we didn’t part on the best of terms, did we?”

“Look, I’m — I’m really sorry about what happened,” says Mike. “I made mistakes back then, we all did. None of us wanted things to turn out this way.”

Dan sighs loudly, rolls his eyes, his arm sweeps across the opulent room, drawing their attention to their surroundings.

“Really Mike? Come on, you’ve always wanted this,” he says.

“That’s not what I mean,” says Mike, looking down at Dan. Then at Rob. He narrows his eyes. “And you both know it.”

Rob shakes his head angrily. “Jenny’s gone, Mike, we get it. Jay’s God only knows where, probably dead himself too by now, wouldn’t be surprised. It’s over, we had a chance and we blew it.”

Chastened, Mike nods solemnly and beckons Rob to sit. “Let’s calm down and eat together,” he says. “We’ll talk later.”

They take their seats as Arthur flits back-and-forth nervously with the coffee pot. Mike points to his mug and it’s quickly filled. Rob takes pause with eyes closed and hands clenched together, muttering an earnest prayer under his breath. Dan rolls his eyes a second time at this overt display of faith, a grin fighting to establish itself around the corners of his mouth. How much they had all changed in the years since Jay’s disappearance!

• • •

Later they sit in the garden together, enjoying the sunshine and drinking a jug of iced water that is luxuriously pristine. An extravagance.

Dan breaks the silence.

“So Mike, why are we here?”

“Well, I received a message yesterday afternoon from Christopher,” begins Mike.

Rob reddens, clenches his fists.

“That asshole,” he says. “What the hell are you doing talking to him?”

“Look, I know you don’t like him…”

“…that’s an understatement…”

“…but he’s been helping me to track down Jay. Who is apparently alive and well, you should be pleased to know.”

Rob reflects on this briefly, but ploughs ever onward.

“He, Christopher I mean, how can we know he had nothing to do with Jenny’s death? After what she did?”

“He didn’t, Rob,” says Mike. “Trust me on that, please. Christopher is resourceful, tenacious perhaps, but never violent. We both wanted to get our hands on whatever it was that Jay created. But we’d never kill for it. Not him or me. Not at all.”

Dan clears his throat.

“So, why are we all gathered here then?”

“Well, like I said, Christopher has tracked down Jay. But he’s gone dark, and I have no idea where in the world he is. I thought you, Dan, would be able to help?”

• • •

“I haven’t done this sort of thing for a long time,” says Dan as he sits at Mike’s terminal, fingers on keyboard. “I’m a bit of a luddite these days, to be honest, haven’t touched a terminal since… well, since Jenny destroyed *Schrödinger*.”

Mike flinches.

“Just like riding a bike though,” he hopes. “Isn’t it?”

“Something like that,” agrees Dan, cracking his knuckles in anticipation of the work that lays ahead of him.

His fingers fly across the keyboard, the terminal a blur of information. Messages appear and are gone again, profile cards flash across the display, Christopher’s visage flickers into view only to dissolve again into nothingness.

“A-ha, a router in the underground, Singapore by the looks,” says Dan excitedly as he hones in on his prey. “Hong Kong too, there’s a few layers to this onion… haven’t seen the likes of this since the nineties. It’s has a seriously old-school flavour.”

Rob, savouring the moment, turns and smiles at Mike, but catches him looking out at the garden in a puzzled daze. The old man is totally out of the loop.

A map appears on the display, and quickly zooms in to a square region within a larger city.

“*Chiang Mai*,” says Dan. “You know, in Thailand? That’s where Christopher called from, where he was yesterday.”

Mike pulls his device from his pocket, waves it in front of the console, and inspects the map now captured on its surface like a colourful butterfly pinned to a display card in a museum.

“Why in the world would he end up there?”

Then, noticing the large region of the map that Dan had highlighted, he adds, “can any get any more accuracy?”

“No,” Dan replies. “Not without more signal. There’s just not enough information.”

Mike stares at the display, reaching a decision.

“I must go there.”

## Chapter 16

Lloyd walked through the wet and crowded streets, puddles of dank water reflecting the gaudy fluorescent light above him. Scooters whizzed by in a constant mayhem of noise. He pushed through the thick crowds of people, past food vendors and street performers, searching for a place to stay the night.

His progress slowed as the crowds grew even more dense; the way forward became almost impenetrable. He ducked into an alleyway, hoping to take a shortcut, but quickly became hopelessly lost in the darkness. He turned back from whence he had come with the intention of retracting his footsteps to the main thoroughfare, only to be confronted with several alleyways, all of them identical, all of them leading to absolute blackness.

He was lost.

He sensed a stealthy movement in one of the alleyways, and imagined that he saw two yellow slitted eyes staring back at him. Adrenaline pulsed through his veins. He was unsure of what to do next.

“Hello?” he said, his words echoing off the walls.

Far off, a cat screeched. Then, without warning, salvation arrived in the form of a noisy *tuk, tuk*, spewing smoke and smelling of gasoline, which rattled up the alleyway behind him, headlights blaring.

“Wanna ride, mister?” the driver yelled at him over the din of the engines.

Lloyd nodded and entered the vehicle.

“Take me to a hotel,” he instructed the driver. “Any hotel.”

They zoomed off down the alleyway that concealed the shadowy creature, the walls and road brightly illuminated in front of their passage. Apart from mounds of garbage, there was nothing there.

• • •

Later, Lloyd sat on the bed in a small hotel room, drinking a glass of beer poured over chunky ice cubes, a ceiling fan spinning lazily above him. He regarded the thick, starchy plate of noodles that he had ordered for his dinner with suspicion. He no longer felt hungry.

He was convinced that something was following him; that he had been under constant surveillance from the moment that Jenny and Angela had first met. Escape seemed impossible, given that fleeing the country had not been enough to throw his pursuer off his trail. He needed to follow Jenny across the divide between worlds. Dissolution was the only answer. His only salvation.

How had she done it? Lloyd was convinced that lucid dreaming played a crucial role; his own dreams having become increasingly vivid and life-like of late. But how would one dissolve into the dream-world permanently? He was able to exert his influence and desire over his own dreams, but it was always too easy to be drawn back out into the harsh, cold light of his version of reality.

And what had become of Jenny in his world? Had she simply popped out of existence? That seemed unlikely; he still had a memory of her, and the behaviour of the campus security officer, and of Mike and Salvatore, seemed to confirm that some part of her continued to exist. That made sense; moving between parallel universes involved the transference of consciousness, not of physical matter. In that case, had she become somebody else in his world? Or was she now nothing more than a zombie, lacking self-awareness?

He thought back to the moment just before he fled his former life. Of Salvatore rushing towards him, shouting. What had he said? Something about not needing to see? There had been an ambulance outside the coffee shop, its red lights blazing, a crowd of onlookers standing nearby in silent contemplation. What, precisely, had happened? Lloyd felt as if he were walking along a precipice, edging slowly toward the dangerous moment of understanding.

There was a loud knocking at the door, followed by a muffled voice.

“Hello? Mister? Man here to see you. Outside.”

Lloyd dashed to the window, peering down into the street below. He was convinced that a dark, shadowy figure was standing there, waiting for him to emerge. He gathered his possessions, then crossed to the door and opened it.

“Where,” he asked of the startled maid. “Where is he?”

“Turndown service?” she said in surprise, a basket of mints in golden wrappers on the trolley beside her. “I make bed?”

Lloyd burst out into the hallway, ignoring the maid, knocking the sweets over to scatter across the floor. He ran toward the elevators and moved to press the down button, but stopped when he noticed that one of the elevator cars had already begun the slow ascent to his floor. The shadow-man was coming to claim him! He spun around in blind panic, pushing through the first door he saw, finding himself in a dark stairwell. He tumbled down the flights of stairs in a mad rush, spilling out into the alleyway below and fleeing into the night.

• • •

The bus roared through the streets, the glint of dawn casting an orange glow across the faces of its passengers. Lloyd slouched in his seat, his head resting against the rattling window, close to sleep. He had fled aimlessly through the maze of streets outside his hotel, not knowing what to do. In desperation he had decided to trust *narrativium*, waiting at a bus stop and boarding the first that passed by without checking its destination.

The bus twisted and turned, taking the longest route possible in its quest to collect as many paying passengers as it was able to along the way. Eventually it entered into a secluded area thick with greenery, slowing as it turned the last corner into a large, open carpark, finally coming to a rumbling halt. Air hissed as the doors opened, and the vehicle spewed its human cargo out onto the footpath. Lloyd emerged last, watching the other passengers walk away with purpose, noticing that they were all young, and that they all carried backpacks and satchels.

They were students. He had arrived at a university campus of some description.

He walked for hours along the leafy pathways of the campus, not recognising a soul, unable to read any of the signage, and yet feeling comfortably at home. At one point he turned into an arched passageway between buildings to see a blonde woman stepping through a door. She was conspicuous; a foreigner among hordes of locals. Lloyd quickened his pace to follow after her, convinced that she was somehow linked to Jenny, but was unable to discover where she had gone.

Disappointed, he continued to stroll, taking a long, random walk. He had no destination in mind, and was content to let circumstances dictate his route, confident that the brownian motion of his unplanned ramble would lead him to a place of significance.

He entered the streets outside of the campus, passing restaurants and small market places, ramshackle residences and blocks of student housing, small warehouses and a library of brown bricks sandwiched together with creamy white mortar, like stacks of so many chocolate biscuits. Nothing remarkable. He walked on and on, eventually coming to a walled-off area. Without conscious thought or hesitation he passed through a gap in the wall into the small garden that lay beyond, making for the staircase of the building that lurked silently within.

Lloyd reached the second floor landing, and allowed his feet to turn him down an external corridor rather than continue climbing the stairs. He walked down the side of the building, passing several doors, and then came to an abrupt stop outside a door that was slighty ajar. He was overcome with a strong sense of *deja-vu*. Feeling as if what he was about to do was absolutely right, Lloyd pushed the door inwards.

“Hello?” he said. “Hello? Is anyone home?”

There was no answer. He walked into the apartment, closing and locking the door behind him. He immediately recognised the sofa and television, the open doorway leading through to the messy kitchen, the small writing table pushed into one corner, the bedroom and bathroom laying beyond.

He made himself at home, cobbling together a simple meal of leftovers taken from the fridge. He ate with gusto, suddenly ravenous, while sitting on the sofa and watching television. He finished his meal and lay down, leaving the television to scream and flash to an absent audience. Slowly he slipped into slumber.

• • •

Lloyd lay on the sofa, gazing at the writing table in the corner of the kitchen. The scratching noises slowly became apparent as the ghost of his dream-self materialised before his eyes.

“We’re very close now,” he sensed his *doppelgänger* communicate to him. “We have finally synchronised our dimensionality.”

“Sorry? We’ve done what?”

“We have travelled to the same time and place. In two neighbouring universes.”

“I feel hunted,” said Lloyd. “Something has been chasing me. A dark shadow with yellow eyes.”

“Yes,” came the reply. “It’s Christopher. He is an agent of Mike. He hasn’t paused in his efforts to seek you out since Jenny destroyed the artificial *claustrum* that you created.”

“What would you have me do?”

“You must continue to run. You need to buy us time. It will be too late for them once you work out how to cross the abyss into my world.”

Lloyd stood up and walked into the kitchen, watching his dream-self at work, writing ceaselessly, crouched in concentration over the small table, papers strewn about across its surface.

“Go to the library,” he was told. “Talk to Angela. We are nearing the end of your story.”

He blinked, and the apparition disappeared in an instant. He bent over the table and gathered up the papers. The manuscript was heavy and thick; it felt weighty and significant. He stole a glance at its topmost page, reading a few passages about a factory worker toiling away, leading a monotonous existence. It sounded dreadful.

Although he was unable to read the printed words across the top of each page of the manuscript, he felt certain that they were the address of the library. He needed to see Angela, and thought he could show the papers to the driver of a *tuk-tuk* or a taxi.

He walked back into the front room of the apartment. Evening was fast approaching, and the room was much darker than it had been when he had first entered. He imagined that he could see the shadowy form of Christopher waiting for him there, twisting above him, arms outstretched in a gesture of reconciliation. He panicked and fled out into the growing dusk, running through the streets, plotting his escape.

## Chapter 17

Mike fidgets uncomfortably in his seat. Arthur is safely stowed for the journey in the space above him. Hours had already passed, hours more are yet to pass. The drone of the cabin is relentless in its monotony.

He glances down at the clouds, at the rippled ocean beneath them, at fleeting glimpses of the reflected orb of Sol from somewhere above. The view quickly darkens as he waves his hand and turns away.

He grabs his device and flicks through the drinks menu, settling on a beer, which is efficiently delivered and consumed. Five minutes gone.

There is nothing else to do. He is quite literally out of ideas, and sits unmoving for a long while, staring straight ahead.

Slowly he becomes conscious of a soft, irregular tapping sound, on the very edge of hearing. It stops, and then, just as he convinces himself he was imagining it, it starts up once more.

The taps sometimes come in a flurry, arriving rapidly after one another. At other times they occur in small groups, with longer gaps between each group. There are often long pauses in-between sequences of such groupings.

Thankful for the distraction, Mike orders another beer, fusses in his carry-on satchel for a notepad and pencil, and begins to consider the phenomena with some interest.

*Tap. Tap-tap, tappity-tap.*

He notes down the sequence as best as he can. Tries to remember his Morse, his Huffman, his Shannon. He gradually fills pages with carefully observed scribblings, devising a notation system that he employs with skill and determination to capture a good deal of the data for analysis.

After a while he pores over his notes, applying every kind of interpretation available to him. But nothing sticks. There is no discernible pattern. The taps are pure randomness.

• • •

A sudden announcement yanks Mike out of his reverie; they are approaching *Chiang Mai*. Had he dozed off? The evidence suggests otherwise; his papers are still in place, his right hand still grasps the pencil.

The soft tapping noises have returned, but he gets the impression that they’d fallen silent for a while. Fifteen minutes perhaps, maybe a little more. How had they come so far in that length of time? He finds that he has no memory of the hours that must have passed to consume all that distance. It was as if he had jumped ahead in time in an instant.

And now he notices a faint odour of good whiskey in the air, even though his glass is still half-full of beer, lukewarm and failing in its struggle to maintain its effervescence.

Mike decides to leave the mystery unsolved for the time being, and packs his things away. He reclines in his seat, closes his eyes, and listens with fading curiosity to the tap-tap-tapping sound.

The phantom whiskey smell reminds him of a winter bonfire on a sandy beach. Is it *Laphroig*, perhaps? Or *Lagavulin*?

As he relaxes and falls into a light slumber, Mike is struck with a singular vision: a coder at work, tapping at a keyboard, a drink by their side.

Of course! He opens his eyes and, feeling slightly ridiculous, begins glancing around at his fellow passengers. He is surprised to have missed it for so long; the explanation seems so simple in retrospect. Sitting prone as he had been, deprived of distraction, his senses had struggled to make sense of the white noise in the cabin, granting an undeserved significance to the sounds made by a fellow passenger working at their console.

And yet he sees nobody occupied as such when he looks around, even as the soft tap-tapping persists.

He unbuckles himself, rises to his feet, and begins to make his way gingerly down the aisle towards the toilet stall at the rear of the aircraft, his gaze sweeping across the seats to either side as he does so. As he proceeds, he is mildly annoyed to realise that the tapping is getting neither louder nor softer.

People are reading, listening to music, holding counsel, viewing content, staring out over the rapidly approaching land. But not one of them is hunched over a console, fingering its keyboard.

Mike massages his furrowed brow as if struggling to remember some long-forgotten dream, then turns the handle of the stall, opens the door, and enters.

• • •

He gradually rises up into conscious thought. He is laying down in bed. It is dark. The air smells unfamiliar. Alien, even. Humid, with undertones of polished wood. An overhead fan hums quietly.

Had he been dreaming?

His eyes slowly adjust, and he sits up. Aided by the dim blue glow of Arthur’s nightlight he recognises shadowy shapes in the gloom. A desk and chair. A sofa. His satchel.

He is in a hotel.

He motions for the lights, and they activate dimly, then brighten slowly, allowing his eyes to adjust naturally. Arthur groans into life, slowly rising from his resting place, his expectation palpable.

Mike emerges from the covers, crosses the room, and pulls on some clothes. He enters the bathroom, washes his face, then examines himself in the mirror. Closely. He leans forward, his hands resting either side of the basin, as if he’d just entered a classroom and was standing at the lectern, preparing to embark on one of his trademark soliloquies.

He has a sudden, inexplicable urge to lean in further still and kiss his reflection. Ridiculous.

He speaks aloud only as he returns to the bedroom.

“Come, Arthur! Let’s get something to eat.”

• • •

Mike and Arthur descend into the cacophony. Old-fashioned scooters and larger conveyances, all of them with petrol-burning motors and human pilots, scream along the streets, passengers casually holding themselves in place with reckless abandon. The occasional black auto weaves silently among them. Any doubts Mike was harbouring that he was in the right place dissipate, the chainsaw noises in the background of Christopher’s last call now convincingly explained.

They walk along the crowded sidewalks of the old city, dodging between food stalls. Mike leads the way with Arthur humming along behind at a respectful distance.

Old women sell bottled beer from buckets of ice, fresh coconut juice by the bag, and ubiquitous red-and-white cans of soda. Men squat on the sidewalk with their meagre wares spread out before them on blankets, hawking electronic toys, traditional woodcraft, and various other junky miscellany of interest only to a certain breed of tourist. Young girls turn enormous skewered crustaceans over hot coals, brushing them with rich marinades. Mike’s stomach groans.

A noodle shop approaches. Pure white diodes light a sterile interior of red plastic tables and chairs, transmitting a message of cleanliness. Mike enters and takes a seat, drawing his device from his pocket, while Arthur settles into an alcove by the entrance.

He flicks through the menu, settling for a bowl of *khao soi*. It is delivered moments later, along with a platter of pickles, diced shallots, chilli slices, wedges of lime, a mound of white sugar and a generous bunch of fresh coriander. He squeezes the lime over the noodles, which swim in a rich curry sauce, then dumps the remaining contents of the platter over the top, stirring it all in with a pair of red plastic chopsticks. A chunk of chicken floats to the surface. He plucks it out and devours it quickly. Then, grasping a mixture of softly boiled and crispy fried noodles between the chopstick blades, he starts to eat with relish.

• • •

His meal finished, his belly full, Mike retrieves his device and leaves, glancing down at the invoice on its display in response to a subtle chime. Pretty cheap, considering.

“Arthur,” he says. “Let’s find a police bureau. Please lead the way.”

The door slides aside and Mike is hit in the face with a blast of steaming, foetid air. Arthur skims around him and flits ahead, raising high above the crowd, finding passage in the gap between the bustling heads of the people below and the awnings and tangled wires that ring the buildings above. He reaches an intersection far ahead and hovers for Mike to catch up, turning the corner only when he comes within range. Mike’s device, now safely in his short’s pocket once more, taps his upper thigh to signal the change in direction.

The crowds thin, the traffic noise gradually recedes into the night. Noodle shops are replaced with companion parlours, community baths, pleasure domes and flesh clubs that advertise live shows.

“Are you sure we’re headed in the right direction?”

Arthur chirps in affirmation.

“I said the police, you know.”

Arthur swoops ahead, makes a final series of turns, then hovers smugly in front of a blue panel set into the wall, currently closed, with a custodian helmet stencilled crudely upon it in flaking white paint.

Mike fumbles in his pocket, retrieves his device and holds it against a sensor embedded in the wall. The panel moves aside in fits and starts, like bad stop-motion, revealing a cramped, dingy office. A bored constable lounges in a battered swivel chair, looking up at Mike with disinterest. A thick panel of security glass remains between them.

The man’s mouth opens to speak.

“WHAT IS IT?”

The gruff, mechanical voice fails to match his lips. Subtitles in various languages are projected faintly onto the glass.

Mike flicks through his device, searching for Christopher’s profile card. He zooms in on its photograph, holds the display against the glass, removes it as the image is captured and mirrored back at him.

“I’m looking for this man. Has he been seen?”

His shoulders betraying an inaudible sigh, the constable taps at his console. Minutes pass. Mike shifts his weight from foot to foot. Eventually, the man looks up, his lips moving quickly, the words following after a small delay.

“MISTER CHRISTOPHER J… HAS NOT BEEN INVOLVED IN A CRIMINAL ACTIVITY SINCE PASSING IMMIGRATION SIXTEEN DAYS AGO.”

Mike considers what he should do next.

“Can you possibly…”

“THANK-YOU FOR YOUR ENQUIRY.”

The blue panel slides back in place. Mike, dejected, turns away and begins the long trek back to the hotel.

• • •

The *tuk-tuk* screams up the paved driveway, screeching to a halt at the hotel entrance. Mike disentangles his limbs and hops out, holding Arthur, who is now asleep and neatly folded away, by his carry handle. The pilot yells something in Thai and zooms off into the night.

Mike stands in the humidity, recovering his breath. Riding in a human-piloted vehicle had been an unfamiliar thrill, one that he had no intention of repeating. He waits for his pulse to slow, thinking about Christopher and his quest to locate their disappeared former student. Why would Jay, an information researcher of some renown, exile himself to *Chiang Mai* of all places? What would he be looking for?

He enters the foyer, makes for the bank of elevators that lead to his lodgings, but swivels around toward the concierge at the last moment. She looks up expectantly as he approaches her station, hair tied back into a neat bun, discreet eyeglasses framing an impeccably made-up face. Professional.

“Excuse me,” says Mike. “Is there a university roundabout?”

The concierge, smiling warmly, holds her palms together in front of her, bowing forward in greeting.

“Yes, mister Mike, very close. You wish to visit?”

She brings up directions on her console. Mike waves his device in the air to fetch them.

“Thanks,” he says. “Yes, I wish to go there after breakfast.”

He glances back at the entrance where he and the *tuk-tuk* had so recently parted ways, then turns back to the woman, who waits patiently for him to continue.

“This time in an auto,” Mike adds conspiratorially.

“Of course, mister Mike. Good evening, sir.”

She repeats the bow. Mike nods in return, then heads up to his room, lugging Arthur along beside him.

## Chapter 18

The taxi drove throughout the night. Lloyd dozed in the back seat, laying down with his head on the manuscript. He felt unsure about his destination; he had thought the library was nearby. But, as dawn approached, his concerns were put to rest, as the taxi pulled up to a stop outside a familiar rust-stained pathway. Lloyd exited, throwing a handful of scrunched-up notes at the driver as he did so, and walked down the path toward the slotted door at the building’s entrance, the manuscript clutched tightly to his chest.

The door opened as he approached, the lady of the library regarding him with interest.

“Hello,” she said. “Please do come in. There is someone here eager to see you.”

He entered the library, and followed the lady down a corridor and into an office. A dark man sat behind a mahogany desk, a saucer and a slice of cake in front of him. He put down a steaming cup of milky tea as the two entered, motioning for Lloyd to sit down on the leather sofa.

“I’ll leave you to it,” said the lady, and left.

• • •

The man regarded Lloyd with gimlet eyes.

“Christopher!” Lloyd exclaimed.

The man emitted a deep, rumbling belly-laugh.

“I see my reputation precedes me! I’m here as a humble servant and business partner of Mike, your illustrious mentor,” he said, “who would like to know everything about what you have discovered and concealed from us.”

Lloyd sighed deeply. This was it; his moment of retribution. He knew exactly what he must do. He raised himself off the sofa and reached out toward Christopher, dumping the manuscript unceremoniously on the polished desk in front of him.

“There,” he said. “Take it. I’ve got no use for it anymore.”

“What is it?” asked Christopher, as he began leafing through the pages of spidery handwriting.

“It’s my story. I documented everything. Give it to Mike; let him know that I regret what happened between us. That I’m sorry, and that I forgive him for everything he did. All that he desires is in there. It will answer his every question.”

Lloyd tapped the manuscript firmly with his index finger in emphasis.

“Care to give me the cliff notes?” asked Christopher. “I don’t have much time.”

“Consciousness is an illusion,” began Lloyd, jumping straight to the heart of the matter. “We are merely reflections of our other selves; beings in other worlds; an infinite chain of souls, inextricably linked, ranging from unconscious zombie to omniscient creator.”

“That sounds… insane.”

“Yes, that’s precisely what it is! The theory is almost impossible to explain without giving you all of the background. Read it, and you’ll be enlightened.”

“I promise that I will. That we both will. Pray, continue.”

“We built Angela by writing a chatterbot that employed a quantum computer as a random number generator, emulating the function of the *claustrum* in the human brain. Which is where consciousness is born, a product of quantum interactions deep within the neuronal tissue.”

“A quantum computer,” wondered Christopher dismissively. “There’s no such thing.”

“Yes, there is. Dan borrowed one for our experiment. The department had received it for evaluation. They called it *Schrödinger*.”

Christopher blanched at this, but remained speechless.

“But Angela didn’t become conscious. No, it was much more than that. It was like tuning in to the inner thoughts of another person. In fact, that’s exactly what it was, I now realise. Jenny panicked and destroyed the equipment…”

“So it is true!” yelled Christopher, slapping the desk with his palm. “It was her who killed *Schrödinger*!”

“Yes,” said Lloyd, growing increasingly puzzled with Christopher’s behaviour, his hand held forward in a gesture of calm. “But I wouldn’t use the word ‘killed’. *Schrödinger* was a machine, nothing more.”

Christopher shook his head slowly, his eyes wide, refusing to believe what he was hearing.

“We fled, all of us, wanting to be as far away from technology as possible. And we slowly constructed a multiple-worlds theory of consciousness along the way; the theory that I have just conveyed to you. We are all of us but links on a chain of infinite souls, both controlling those inferior souls beneath us while, at the same time, under the control of those more perfect souls above us. It’s quite beautiful.”

Lloyd raised his arm to now tap the side of his head with his index finger.

“We communicate through this; our *claustrum*. We see our other selves in dreams, or when we tell ourselves stories about how our own lives might have been, or may yet come to be.”

Christopher stopped shaking his head.

“But how do you know this?” he asked. “How can you prove that it is true? Because this sounds live the ravings of a lunatic, to be brutally frank with you.”

“Yes, I understand. We grew increasingly suspicious that we were just characters in somebody else story,” said Lloyd. “The first clue was the large number of million-to-one coincidences that each of us had experienced during our lives. But the real clincher was Dan’s experimental procedure, which put all of our remaining doubts to rest.”

• • •

**Author’s Note**: At this point in the conversation, Lloyd recounted in detail a very simple and effective experiment that Dan had devised during the camping trip under the stars, and which each of them had later performed. The experiment, which is documented in detail in the original manuscript, took a particular kind of genius to discover, and is both elegant in its form and obvious in retrospect. It is also very easy to perform; I have done so many times myself. However, I believe that it is simply too dangerous to include a description of the procedure here, and so I have chosen to omit Lloyd’s explanation from this version of the story.

• • •

Christopher read the last pages of the manuscript, his eyes widening at the description of Dan’s experiment, and he paused for a few moments to perform the procedure himself. His face slackened when he had finished.

“So, it is true,” he said glumly.

Scratching noises grew from the silence in the room, Christopher looking around in confusion.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Our creator. My other-self. He writes our story as we speak. It is easy to hear, once you know the truth.”

Christopher began trembling, sweat beading on his forehead. He adjusted his position at the desk, his movements no longer sleek and graceful, his hands shaking uncontrollably.

“Don’t be afraid,” said Lloyd. “You have become enlightened. We must work together to develop a technique for dissolution.”

Christopher raised his eyes, his expression both questioning and filled with hope. Lloyd was overcome with pity, regarding the black creature before him with deep sympathy.

“Dissolution? What’s that?”

“One may travel between parallel universes,” explained Lloyd. “I am on the very cusp of doing so myself; I visit my alter-ego regularly in dreams, but I have not yet discovered how to remain in his world permanently.”

“You wish to sleep forever?”

“Yes, in a way. Although it would be more proper to say that I wish to truly awaken at last. Dissolving between worlds is a transference to a higher level of consciousness. It has been done before, and I must discover how.”

“Done before? By whom?”

“Jenny. She dissolved from this world into the dream-world of my *doppelgänger*, where she is known as Julie, and is his wife. I am striving to reunite with her, by performing the technique myself, becoming one with my other.”

• • •

Christopher sat in silence, his elbows on the desk, his fingers steepled beneath his chin. He fixed his gaze upon Lloyd, his yellow eyes squinting as he considered what to say next.

“Lloyd,” he began. “Jenny died. She committed suicide. They found her hanging in the coffee shop.”

A sudden wave of grief passed through Lloyd’s body as he realised with surprise that he had always known this. He began to weep, cradling his head in his hands. His sobs grew more and more desperate as he collapsed to his knees, clenching his hair between his fisted fingers. He began wailing and shrieking, his screams of anguish filling the room, drowning out the scratching noises.

The door burst inwards. The lady of the library entered the room, quickly followed by two burly men.

“Out!” she yelled, pointing at the door and looking daggers at Christopher. “Now!”

Christopher stood up calmly, the manuscript in his hand, and headed for the door.

“I’ll take that!” she cried.

There was a tearing noise as the manuscript was ripped from Christopher’s hands. He was manhandled out of the building, deposited on the pathway in front of the slotted door, still clutching the top few pages of the manuscript which had been torn free from the rest. These he folded up and pocketed before slinking away down the path.

• • •

Lloyd lay in bed, its ink-spotted bedsheet draped over him and pulled up beneath his chin.

Jenny had dissolved into a greater world, her dead body left hanging in this world; his world. He had always known this, but had somehow contrived to hide the fact from his conscious mind. He had stopped grieving, and had lain there for hours, perhaps even days, unmoving, thinking over the events of his past life.

He knew what he had to do.

He rose and walked into the kitchen, rifling through the drawers and cupboards, eventually pulling out a rattling cookie tin. He opened it, dipping his hand into the void and retrieving a fistful of hard little round pills that he had been collecting each day, tipping the contents of the paper pill cups into the tin rather than consuming them on the spot. At the time he hadn’t known why he had chosen to do this, but he now realised with certainty that he was collecting them because they would have a purpose to serve in his narrative; that they would help him to enter the dream-world of his other self, never to leave again.

He filled a glass of water and swallowed as many pills as he could manage in a single mouthful. He then repeated the exercise a few more times. A grey haze descended upon him; his vision clouded. The scratching noises intensified around him. This was it, he was close now.

He returned to the bedroom and gathered up the black-splattered bedsheets, rolling them neatly into a long rope, tying them firmly around his neck. He swooned; overcome with a sudden dizziness. He stumbled back through the kitchen and into the front room, the sheets trailing behind like some sort of demonic tail. He stood on the sofa and looked upwards, wondering how we was going to manage to loop the bedsheets around the ceiling fan, and whether or not it would hold his weight.

His pumping blood buzzed in his inner ear; spots of light burst into his vision. His consciousness was beginning to vacate his body; he was close to achieving dissolution. He stood up on the back of the sofa, stretching upwards with both hands, tying the sheets firmly around the ceiling fan. He then lowered his face to the black screen of the television.

The ecstatic face of his alter-ego stared back at him from within its frame, beckoning him to approach.

Lloyd took a deep breath and stepped forward into empty space.

## Chapter 19

Onward he plunges through the endless mist. Grey clouds of every shade whorl and eddy around him. He tumbles into the monochromatic vortex, the wind rushing against his cheeks, his stomach churning. Endlessly he is drawn along a tunnel, strange shapes morphing along its ephemeral walls, his brain scrambling to find meaning in its fractal edges, as it would were he standing in his garden looking up at the passing clouds.

A dream-face emerges from the fog. A black-and-white vision of Jay is staring straight at him, wide-eyed and ecstatic. As Mike regards this vision he is overcome with dreadful waves of guilt.

He looks behind to see another face, Jay’s again, although oddly different, approaching at speed. Fearing that he will be sandwiched, Mike shifts aside, only to find himself confronted with a horrifying vision: an endless procession of faces, all versions of Jay, all with the same expression, receding into infinity. It is like looking into a mirror reflecting another on the opposite wall.

The two closest faces slowly approach each other, their mouths open as if to kiss, but they nod downward at the final moment instead. One seems to have something hanging around its neck; a loop of patterned cloth perhaps, or a scarf? Their foreheads draw together, the distance between them closing, and they eventually touch. When they do, the world explodes in a silent burst of colour.

• • •

Sitting at breakfast, a cup of coffee beside him, a warm croissant on a plate, Mike flicks through feeds on his device. Nothing catches his eye. His mind is consumed with other thoughts, of Jay and Christopher and Jenny, and of the disturbing dream he’d only recently woken from. He struggles to remember its details as he munches the pastry, licking the crumbs from his thumb and forefinger. Something to do with a scratching noise coming from behind the mirror in the hotel bathroom?

Shuddering involuntarily, he bends down to take a sip of coffee. He then pushes out his chair and rises to his feet, intending to work off his discomfort by mingling around the extensive buffet, although suspecting that he’ll return empty-handed.

The approaching concierge interrupts his plan. She greets him warmly, palms pressed together, fingertips underneath her porcelain nose.

“Good morning mister Mike,” she says as she bows toward him. “Your auto is ready.”

“Thank-you,” he responds gratefully.

Mike follows the woman, leaving the coffee mostly untouched, the croissant half-eaten. Arthur emerges from an alcove on one side of the hotel restaurant and flutters along behind them both, keeping a respectful distance.

• • •

The auto is waiting silently, doors raised like a bird frozen at the moment it prepares to takes flight. Arthur enters first, crawling into a corner and folding himself away. Mike follows, taking a seat in the plush leather recliner nearest the console, which faces opposite to the direction of travel. He glances back toward the concierge, joined now by the doorman and bellboy, all of them bowing toward the vehicle as they await its departure.

Nothing happens. The concierge holds her position, but raises her eyes over the rim of her eyeglasses to meet Mike’s gaze, her forehead wrinkling as she does so. He smiles, awkwardly. She bites her lower lip in recognition of the moment, leaving him hopelessly besotted.

The doors finally begin their slow descent, the concierge tracking their movements with her gaze. A warm breeze blows across the hotel entrance, ruffling hair. Mike opens his mouth to say some final words of farewell, but thinks better of it. Still the doors move downwards and inwards, finally sealing closed with a triumphant hissing of air, punctuated with an expensive-sounding chime.

Mike finds himself in a comfortably snug office. The windows of the vehicle are jet black and entirely opaque, shielding him from the outside world. A map on the console’s display marks their route to the university, with the glyph representing the auto already moving rapidly along its curved path, although Mike feels and hears nothing.

He reaches for his device, checks Christopher’s profile card. No updates in two days, not even a quick reply to his message of concern. An uncomfortable lump forms in the pit of his stomach. Something has gone terribly wrong.

Mike considers operating the terminal before him, but a second chime and hiss announce their arrival before he can do so. The doors raise and spread quickly and gracefully, a contrast to the outset of their short journey. Mike emerges into a tropical garden, the stone buildings of the university laying only a short stroll away, with Arthur settling in by his side after a brief confusion of whirrs and clicks.

• • •

They proceed at leisure through the gardens, passing buildings of various faculties, pausing to watch the sparse body of students crossing in every direction between them. Mike suddenly feels very much at home. He retrieves a cigar tube from his shirtfront pocket, twists it open, tipping its fruit into his waiting hand and lifting it to his mouth. Arthur darts by him in a blur and the cigar is lit, its aluminium shell retrieved from Mike’s fingers and deposited in a nearby receptacle. Mike crosses his arms in front of him, puffing smoke in satisfied contemplation.

He is certain that both Christopher and Jay would have visited this place. But where would he find evidence of their presence? The refectory? The archives? Or perhaps the guild? He turns back to Arthur, who is trailing behind.

“Is there an AI lab on campus? Can you take me there?”

His companion hovers for a moment, murmuring to himself in thought, then zips off on a beeline for a distant building. Mike follows, taking the longer route that keeps to the concrete paths, which conspire to lead him directly past a larger building which fairly buzzes with activity. His curiosity piqued, he glances up at the large letters on the wall above the building’s main entrance, which regrettably announce its purpose in Thai. Mike keeps his gazed fixed on the sign for a few moments, and the Thai lettering is replaced with flickering English as his eyeglasses compute the translation.

It reads: “Division of Affective Countenance”.

Mike finds himself trapped at a *Lagrangian point*; on the one hand he is compelled to follow Arthur, to visit the university’s AI lab, where he would track down the whereabouts of Jay and Christopher by asking questions of its staff and students. A long shot, perhaps, but his best bet. On the other hand, he is absolutely fascinated with the building he has stumbled upon, and feels driven to know more.

He mulls it over for a moment, then lets his gut decide, the *tap-tapping* sound growing in volume and urgency at the edge of his perception once again.

• • •

Mike enters the building. A young woman is standing in the foyer, examining a display with interest. She is blonde and pretty, and eerily familiar. Mike racks his brain, but cannot recall whether or not he has met her before.

As she turns toward him a puzzled frown flashes across her face. He is about to introduce himself, to apologise for staring at her, when she speaks.

“Oh hi! It’s you, isn’t it? Mike? Jay’s supervisor?”

Mike is dumbstruck at this fortuitous turn of events. He silently resolves to listen to his gut more often.

“Yes, yes,” he says. “And you are?”

The girl, possibly Canadian by the sound of it, is all teeth as she offers him her hand. Mike takes it, grinning inanely as they shake hands, trying to dispel an unsettling sense of *deja-vu*. She is so familiar to him. Uncanny.

“I’m Julie. Jay told me all about you. You’re unmistakable.”

Mike glances down at himself, adjusts his bowtie, sweeps a hand through his bright orange hair.

“Yes,” he agrees. “I suppose I am. I’m looking for Jay as a matter of fact. Can we grab a coffee?”

• • •

Mike and Julie sit at a small table in a corner of a lab deep within the building, mugs of freshly brewed coffee between them.

“I must ask,” Mike begins, “what exactly is going on here?”

“Simulated emotions, mostly, the last frontier as they say. Machines have reached an evolutionary dead-end. We’re trying to give them humanity.”

A-ha, he thinks. Of course! Bridging the uncanny valley is a universal obsession these days, something he finds profoundly disturbing. Mike is interested in giving his black box genuine self-awareness, not in painting it a different colour.

“You’re building faces for machines?”

“Exactly. So much is communicated through expression, it’s how we read each other’s thoughts.”

She wrinkles her nose as she speaks. Cute. Mike feels his cheeks flush in response.

“But why here, of all places? Why *Chiang Mai*?”

“Plastic surgeons,” she explains. “Best in the world. Trained right here, at the university, many of them in this lab in fact. Nobody can build a face like those guys.”

Mike wonders where Arthur is. Imagines what it would be like if he were given a human face. Sickening.

“But you’re not a surgeon? Are you?”

“No, I’m a psych postgrad, I’m writing my thesis on this stuff. Thought I’d visit to see it all first-hand.”

“And that’s how you met Jay.”

She’s thrown off-kilter by this statement of fact, her eye’s darting to one side.

“Yeah… kind-of. Haven’t seen him for a while.”

The door to the lab bursts open as a small group of undergraduates, dressed in medical gowns, make their way inside. One of them is holding what looks to be a human head. Arthur flits through the door above them, hovers near Mike for a few awkward moments, then gently descends and crawls underneath the table.

“Awww, cute little guy,” says Julie. Then her expression changes to one of mock sadness, her lips pouting, her eyes wide. She looks up at Mike through long eyelashes. “You left him all alone? You hurt his feelings.”

Mike considers this as his trusty companion shuffles and whirrs underneath them in sympathy. He pays Arthur no heed. Instead, he breathes inward, bracing himself to ask the next question, well aware of it’s importance.

“Do you happen to know…”

“…where Jay is?” she completes. “Sure I do. At least, I know where he’s living. I’ll get you the address.”

Mike can’t help beaming in triumph as Julie fishes out her device from her bag under the table, flicking through a list of messages until she finds the one she wants. She holds it up, waiting for him to fetch it with his device, but he doesn’t move, transfixed by what he sees on the display.

A familiar face stares back at him.

“What’s the problem?”

“That man, the one you last showed the address to. Do you know him?”

“Of course. What’s his name? Christopher? Yeah, he was around here last week some time asking all the same questions. He’s a bit creepy, that one.”

Mike recalls his final message to Christopher with genuine remorse. Referring to Jay, he had asked Christopher to “find out everything he knows.” A feeling of queasiness rises within him as the knot in his stomach returns. He closes his eyes, takes long, deep breaths, then speaks.

“Take me to Jay.”

## Chapter 20

The scooter screams around the bends, Julie piloting with ease, Mike holding on for dear life with Arthur clinging to his back. They weave between crowds of slower-moving conveyances, skilfully avoiding the occasional pedestrian who steps onto the roadway with an unwavering gait, determined to cross to the other side despite the chaos. It all struck Mike with a certain beauty. An emergent system of countless individual agents, each optimising for their own goals, filling a shared space in harmony.

They pull into the drive of a large building which is walled off from the street with a small grassy garden beyond. It’s quiet, but that’s probably to be expected at midday. Arthur disengages from Mike’s shoulders and flutters behind Julie as she ascends the external wooden staircase to the third floor, leaving Mike trailing behind. They stop in front of door 301.

Julie waves her device across the sensor embedded in the door jamb. A chime sounds dully from somewhere within. Nothing else happens.

“Huh, he must’ve revoked my access,” she complains.

“You… you didn’t meet Jay through your research, did you?”

“No,” Julie confesses. “Spotted him at the tavern, another rare foreigner. We spoke over a few drinks. I found him fascinating. He has all sorts of crazy theories you know.”

Julie sounds the door chime again.

“And, that’s it?”

“Ummm,” she considers. “No. It isn’t. We went out a few times. I lived with him for a while, in fact, just for a few weeks. He’s bothered by something. Stays up all night, walks the streets. Ignored me completely sometimes. I broke it off.”

Mike thinks of Jenny, and becomes suddenly aware of Julie’s striking resemblance to her. They could have been sisters! Why hadn’t he seen that earlier? What must have Jay thought?

He leans forward and raps loudly on the door.

“Did you see him much after that?”

“No, not really. Not at all. He stopped coming to the lab, we lost touch. That was only a few months ago? Maybe six?”

Still no answer, Mike hunts around in his pocket for his device, hopefully waving it across the sensor, waiting for its angry buzz of disapproval. The door slides open smoothly. Mike and Julie look at each other, wide-eyed in astonishment. Had Jay been expecting him?

“Hello,” says Julie. “Jay? It’s me. Are you home?”

• • •

They enter the vestibule, Julie kicking off her flats, Mike stepping out of his filthy flip-flops. Arthur settles into a depression in the wall to wait. Mike turns the handle of the interior door that leads into Jay’s residence, opening it a crack, not wanting to startle anyone inside.

He is hit with a funk of stale urine and rotting garbage.

“Ugh,” complains Julie.

Mike fumbles with his tie, removing it, and hands it to her. Gratefully she accepts, pressing the black cloth firmly against her nose and mouth.

“Jay,” calls Mike. “Is everything okay?”

The room beyond is dark. He peers inside, his eyes slowly adjusting to the gloom. He fancies that he sees a shadowy figure towering before him. The shape twists slightly as a breeze blows in from outside, the beams of the ceiling creaking in protest. A body is suspended in mid-air, arms spread apart, palms facing outward. Beckoning him to enter.

“Jesus!”

Mike waves his hand urgently to activate the artificial lighting. The room quickly brightens in response.

“Christopher!”

Mike rushes into the room, his colleague hanging above him, long dead. Julie falls to her knees in the vestibule, retching and whimpering, eyes tightly shut. Arthur explodes into life from his hiding hole and attempts to enter the room.

“Stop him,” cries Mike to Julie. “He’ll call the police!”

Julie, now curled up into a softly sobbing ball, doesn’t respond. Mike scans the room quickly, looking for something, anything to use to dissuade Arthur from his instinctive response to a dead human body. He rushes into the messy kitchenette, almost overcome by its stink, and continues into the bedroom beyond. A cricket bat leans against the far wall. Consumed with murderous intent, Mike vaults over the bed in one smooth motion to seize it.

• • •

Arthur is hovering around the hanging body, innocent and unsuspecting, his camera flashing intermittently. Mike stands framed in the doorway, the cricket bat gripped firmly in his hands, staring coldly at his betrayer. Arthur, sensing a change of mood, rotates slowly in the direction of his master. They face each other in silent regard. Mike steps into the room, Arthur inching away, his behaviour submissive and apologetic.

Screaming, Mike swings the bat and knocks Arthur across the room. He squeals, bouncing off the far wall and skidding across the hard wooden floor, his carapace deeply dented. He rises unsteadily to the ceiling and wobbles into the kitchenette.

Mike takes the opportunity to close the door that leads to the vestibule, but Julie pushes back against him in protest.

“No Mike, don’t do it, please! What has he ever done to you?”

“It’s a machine, Julie, and it’s going to get us in trouble.”

“He’s only doing what he thinks is right.”

“It is doing what it is programmed to do,” he replies, stressing the impersonal pronoun between clenched teeth. “I have to destroy it.”

Mike forces the vestibule door closed, bolting it, and, now oblivious to Christopher’s hanging body and the acrid stench of Jay’s long-abandoned apartment, sets off in pursuit of his prey.

He finds Arthur frantically circling the ceiling in the bedroom, bumping off the walls and squealing to himself in distress. A thick, black ichor drips from his hard outer shell onto the white bedcovers below.

Lubricating fluids, Mike reminds himself. It’s only a machine.

He enters, closing the door behind him, and stands atop the bed, reaching to the ceiling. Arthur avoids his grasp, sheltering in a corner. Mike drops the cricket bat to the floor so that he may gather up the bedsheets. Seeing Mike thus occupied, Arthur makes a desperate dash for the window, but wavers off course, missing his mark and bouncing off the wall. Mike makes a grab for him, but Arthur escapes his flailing hands and zooms once more to the ceiling, his squeals rising in pitch and intensity.

“Mike! Don’t do this! Please, I beg you! Stop!”

Julie, trapped in the vestibule, pounds the door in protest. Mike ignores her as he kneels on the floor, tying the corners of the bedsheets together, then securing those to either end of the cricket bat. He hefts the crude trap in both hands, eyeballing Arthur as he scoots around the ceiling in confused spirals, then tosses it upwards, missing his target completely.

This continues for some time, the bat occasionally glancing off Arthur’s shell, or momentarily snagging him with the bedsheets, only for him to escape again.

“Drat it all,” cries Mike. “Come down here you sod!”

In his anger, Mike hurls the bat end-over-end, and is startled to see the bedsheets unfurl and capture their prey with ease. Blind and bearing the sudden weight of the bat, Arthur howls and shrieks as he falls from the ceiling to make another desperate bolt towards the window. Mike snags him easily, discarding the twisted bedsheets to the floor, grasping Arthur firmly with both hands.

Mike holds the machine before him. Arthur, strangely calm now, whimpers pathetically and oozes fluid, gazing hopefully at his master, the steady blue glow of his status indicator reflected in Mike’s eyeglasses. Mike stoops to the floor, placing his trusty companion under his bare foot to hold him in place, then uses the bedsheets to wipe his fingers clean of his muck. He then untangles the cricket bat from the bedsheets, raising the weapon above his head.

Arthur makes little noise now, and seems to be resigned to his fate. Mike steps off his shell and swings the bat down hard before he is able to take flight.

Arthur gurgles, hopelessly broken and gushing black fluid, and drags himself across the floor in a final desperate act of self-preservation. Mike strikes another blow. Something pops with a bright flash inside Arthur’s body, black smoke escaping through the ever-widening cracks in his carapace. Mike continues to rain down blow after blow upon Arthur, obliterating his humble servant, his valet, his friend and constant companion, stopping only when his broken body finally falls silent.

Mike searches through the remains of the machine, plucking out a tiny black sliver the size of his thumbnail. Arthur’s electronic brain. He slides it into his pocket.

• • •

On his way back through the kitchenette, Mike notices a few scraps of torn paper scattered on the counter among the soiled dishes and mouldering foodstuffs, and quickly pockets them in the hope that their scribblings may shed some light on Jay’s absence. He unbolts the door to the vestibule, opening it to find Julie standing in shock, tears streaming down her face.

“You murderer! How could you?”

Mike angrily yanks Arthur’s chip from his pocket, holding it in front of her face.

“See that? That’s him. That’s all he was, Julie. An illusion!”

“Oh you stupid man! That’s all any of us are!”

She storms out into the deepening afternoon, her scooter roaring into life and speeding away.

Mike considers the essence of Arthur, pinned between his fingers. Such an insignificant thing. He snaps the chip in two, flicks it away, and stoops to retrieve his unravelled bowtie from the floor. He then steps into his rubber footwear and exits, checking that the outer door is secured behind him before slipping his device from his pocket to summon an auto.

## Chapter 21

Later that evening they sit in the hotel bar, the scraps of paper that Mike had found spread out on the bench between them. Julie, nursing a gin-and-tonic, scowls at Mike with barely concealed hatred.

Mike’s eyes flick across to the concierge’s station, then quickly away again. Julie considers this involuntary motion, then looks in the same direction, seeing an attractive woman and an opportunity for atonement.

“She’s one of ours, you know.”

“Sorry? What did you say?”

“That lady, the concierge. She’s one of ours. The university’s, that is. They’re evaluating a few early prototypes.”

“Do you mean to say,” says Mike, straightening in his seat as he stares at the concierge, “that she’s a *zom*? A non-sentient? You’re not serious!”

“Told you the Thai surgeons were good! I’m surprised that she fooled you, though. Of all people! Says something about the male psyche, don’t you think?”

Mike frowns into his drink while Julie continues, clearly enjoying the moment.

“Add a bit of makeup and a few flirtation heuristics and you’ve got half the human population blind to your deficiencies.”

“Well,” Mike continues, flustered. “Given the context, the constrained nature of her… of it’s duties… the limited interactions it has with the hotel guests, I’d be surprised it it *wasn’t* convincing.”

“That’s not what our data shows. She doesn’t fool other women. Only the boys.”

Mike drops his gazes again to the glass of whiskey and watches a shard of ice slowly melt away.

• • •

Julie examines the scraps of paper on the bench top as she finishes her drink. Strips torn from across the top of three pages taken from a larger writing pad by the looks of them. Jay’s spidery handwriting is recognisable yet indecipherable, there not being enough of it to make much sense. But there is something else on each paper scrap; something printed in Thai, together with an unfamiliar logo. An address perhaps?

She looks at Mike, eyes downcast and lost in thought, and is tempted to leave him stewing for longer. He deserves as much. But she’s determined to find Jay.

“Right,” she announces. “Let’s get the machine to translate these for us.”

She rises from the table and crosses the room to the concierge, giving Mike little choice but to follow along obediently. The concierge anticipates their approach with a warm smile, bowing with palms pressed together at her chin, Mike looking daggers at her in return. Oblivious, the woman addresses him first, her demeanour self-conscious and demure.

“Good evening, mister Mike. It is very nice to see you again!”

He cannot believe that he fell for this act, so fake and artificial in retrospect. The concierge gives him her full attention, her cheeks flushing, her pupils dilating, her breath quickening, her breast heaving.

“Is there anything I can help you with?” she whispers suggestively.

“Shut up you fucking bitch and tell me what this says!”

Smouldering, he shoves the three scraps of paper at her.

Julie inhales sharply. “Mike! That’s no way to address a…”

“She’s a *zom*, Julie. Simulated, unemotional, artificial. She doesn’t *feel* anything. She lacks *qualia*, you of all people should know that. Don’t you get it? It’s all an elaborate charade. Giving her a pretty face doesn’t change that.”

The concierge reacts as though struck, raising her delicate fingertips to her lips in an attempt to stifle a sudden onrush on sobs, tears welling in her eyes.

“Mister Mike! What did I do wrong?” she pleads with him.

Mike is ashamed at how readily his brain responds to this display, overcome as he is with sweeping hot waves of guilt, compassion, and regret. Yet he is also impressed with the machine’s ability to ape human behaviour with such uncanny realism, and finds himself mollifying it automatically.

“I… I’m sorry — I don’t know what came over me. We’ve had a difficult day.”

Julie stares at him, triumphant, as the concierge recovers her composure, apparently accepting his explanation.

But Julie can’t resist twisting the knife.

“Would you smash her skull in with a cricket bat too?”

Mike winces. The concierge taps at her console, ignoring Julie’s quip, a map appearing on its display. She then looks up at them both and speaks.

“This paper is from a hospital in Bangkok.”

Julie gasps with concern as Mike takes out his device, sweeping it across the display to capture the hospital’s location.

“We need to go there. Soon. Can you arrange transport for us? Please?”

“Yes, mister Mike,” says the concierge, clearly pleased to be of help once more. “The overnight train will get you there the soonest; it will be departing shortly. Or I can arrange a morning flight?”

• • •

Mike and Julie sit opposite one another in the rattling carriage, boxes of green chicken curry and rice on the table between them, two sweaty bottles of beer standing off to one side. Mike glances around the interior of the primitive conveyance in disappointment and confusion, it provides a surprising juxtaposition against the high technology of the machine that had arranged their voyage.

“Was it really a *zom*?” he says accusingly. “Because I’m beginning to have my doubts.”

“Mike, of course she was. Believable though, isn’t it?”

“But it’s not a conscious being. No self-awareness. No *qualia* to speak of”

“Yes, I know, but it doesn’t seem that way when you talk to her, does it? You have to take a Skinnerian view here; from all appearances she’s passed the Turing Test. Indistinguishable from a human being.”

“And yet not human. She lacks a soul. That’s what I’m looking for, Julie. What I suspect Jay discovered. An artificial soul. The seat of self-knowledge. Of consciousness.”

“Why is that important, Mike? If her behaviour is perfectly believable, why does it matter what’s inside her head?”

“It matters because I know what’s inside mine. I know what it’s like to be self-aware.”

“And how do you know that you’re self-aware? That you’re not being piloted by some kind of homunculus, like Searle in his Chinese Room? That you’re not just observing your own internal behaviour and explaining it away as intent and purpose? Telling yourself the story that you want so desperately to believe?”

Mike looks out of the window at the scenery rushing past in the gloom, his reflection looking back into the carriage, staring at Julie with grave concern.

“Purpose has to enter the system somehow,” he finally says. “We either program it into a machine, or it originates within our conscious selves. It’s the last piece of the puzzle, and I’m certain that Jay holds the answer.”

They hurtle onwards as their thoughts turn to Jay. Julie twists the beers open, offering one to Mike, then cracks the lids of the boxes of curry, beginning to eat hers with fork and spoon.

“Speaking of Jay,” Mike asks, “what do you think happened? An accident, perhaps?”

This seems likely, given the chaotic traffic he would have had to contend with on a daily basis.

Julie considers this, speaking between mouthfuls. “No, I don’t think so. I’m worried he may have tried to hurt himself. He was quite depressed when we last spoke.”

Mike leans in. “And when was that?”

“After I left him. About six months ago? He stopped coming into the university altogether.”

“So he was working with you? I thought you said…”

“No, not with me. But he was helping out around the place while he interviewed for a permanent position at the AI lab. Just mundane jobs, sequencing symbolic code tables and so forth. But he started interfering with procedure and was asked to back down.”

“I see. And what did he say to you, the last time you spoke?”

“Nothing much. I called him. He had somehow convinced himself that I was in some kind of trouble. Kept calling me Jenny. I told him to seek professional help, that I’d see him again when he was better.”

Mike leans back to consider this revelation as the train hurtles on into the night.

• • •

They wake up bleary-eyed and aching, the train still, the screams of an indiscernible tannoy echoing in their ears. They are stationary, having arrived at last. They gather up their possessions and disembark, summoning an auto to take them immediately to the hospital.

Soon afterwards they arrive outside a large brown-bricked building with mirrored windows. Julie recognises the logo above the entrance from the scraps of paper, and points this out to her travelling companion. Mike leads the way inside, walking with authority. They find themselves in a small reception area, green-walled corridors running off in three directions, black-and-white linoleum floors echoing underfoot.

Mike approaches the young nurse standing behind the reception desk. She bows to him formally as he walks toward her.

“I’m here to see Jay H…,” he begins. “Do you know which room he is in?”

“Mister Jay? Yes, sir. Please wait.”

She taps at her console and, a few moments later, a well-groomed doctor enters through a side door, and approaches Mike.

“Hello, I understand you’re here to see Jay? Please follow me.”

Julie and Mike follow the man down various corridors to a small private office. The doctor shows them inside, bids them sit down upon a leather sofa, where a pot of steaming tea awaits. They both take a seat, exhausted after such a long trip. Julie leans forward to pour out the cups of tea.

“I will go and let Angela know you have arrived,” says the doctor with a bow, speaking in formal clipped English. He turns to leave the office.

Mike and Julie exchange worried glances.

“Angela?” says Mike. “Why does that ring a bell?”

Moments later, a professionally dressed young lady enters the room, bending down to shake their hands in welcome, then sits down behind the intimidating mahogany desk. She speaks to them both.

“I understand you are friends of Jay?”

“Is he hurt?” asks Julie, a look of worried concern on her face. “Has he been in an accident?”

Angela smiles warmly, shaking her head gently.

“No, no,” she says. “Nothing like that. This is…”

“…a mental hospital,” completes Mike. “You’re his therapist, aren’t you?”

Angela nods in affirmation. Everything suddenly becomes clear to Mike as understanding dawns.

“How long has he been here?”

• • •

Angela takes some time to explain Jay’s case history. He had been found wandering the streets of *Chiang Mai* in confusion. The police had taken him in, and he’d been admitted to a hospital there for observation. He had suffered a complete amnesia; he wasn’t able to remember his name, his nationality, or where he had been lodging. That was almost six months ago, she remembered.

“And what has happened since then?” asks Julie.

“He has slowly regained his memories over time. After a few months here he remembered enough detail for us to locate the apartment he has been renting. The writing therapy really helped.”

“Writing therapy?”

“Yes, it’s a new technique, developed right here in Bangkok as a matter of fact. It works particularly well with delusional patients such as Jay, providing them with a way of clearly communicating their innermost thoughts to us without having to confront them head-on themselves. It’s really quite revolutionary.”

“Delusional, you say?” said Mike. “What do you mean?”

Angela sighed deeply as she mentally prepared herself to deliver her explanation of Jay’s condition.

“Jay has surrounded himself with a fantasy world, playing the role of a protagonist captured after committing some kind of horrible crime, convincing himself that he needs to rescue his wife from kidnappers or something of the sort. He has been suffering a chronic psychosis, and is only now emerging from its grasp. I believe it was triggered by an acute case of *apophenia*.”

“What’s that?” asks Mike.

Julie spoke first.

“It’s the tendency to believe that random patterns are real; that they have some kind of deeper significance. We’ve been studying it recently, as it happens.”

Mike laughs at this.

“That’s a fundamental property of human brains,” he explains. “We all see faces in the clouds. It’s how our mind works. There’s nothing wrong about it whatsoever. What tosh!”

“Yes,” continues Angela, “but Jay sees meaning everywhere; he hears voices in white noise; he sees figures when gazing out at the silhouettes of trees bending in the wind…”

“…and he ascribes meaning to the random gibberish of a chatterbot,” finishes Mike. “I see.”

Angela stares back at him.

“He has been talking about you a lot recently,” she says to Mike. “He would love to see you, I’m sure.”

## Chapter 22

Mike enters the room alone. Jay is seated at a small writing table, a thick wad of paper in front of him. He regards Mike’s approach with serene indifference.

“Hello Jay,” says Mike, reaching out to shake the hand of his former student in greeting. “It’s great to see you.”

Jay ignores the proffered hand.

“You may call me Lloyd,” he says regally. “I am dissolved.”

Mike is taken aback by this. Jay rises from his chair and begins pacing back and forth dramatically, waving his hands as he delivers a histrionic soliloquy.

“Jenny was the first of us to manage the feat. She entered this world in the guise of a woman named Julie, and I await her return to me with excitement. Jay was merely the vessel for my consciousness; the target of my transference. The human mind is a continuum across all possible universes, you understand; we are mere points along its path.”

Mike tilts his head at this, frowning and not knowing what to say. Jay is very clearly out of his mind. Jay seems to sense his judgemental gaze, and crosses to the desk to pick up his manuscript, which he grips in his hand.

“Here,” he says, waving the bundle of papers in the air with passion. “Take this and read it closely. It contains everything you need to know. I gave it to Christopher to pass on to you with a message of loving forgiveness, but Angela wrested it from his clawing fingers when she and her burly gorilla-men ejected his slinky black form from my presence!”

Mike stands still, regarding Jay with utter confusion, his mouth agape at this performance.

“He became enlightened, you know. Christopher, that is. I described to him the experiment that Dan contrived, which absolutely proves the truth of what I am telling you. He performed it immediately, emerging utterly convinced. You must do so yourself; it will remove all lingering doubts you harbour against me. This is real, Mike. It is everything you’ve always been searching for. You must read the manuscript.”

Mike takes the bundle of papers from Jay, and glances down at the topmost page.

“Insoluble: Consciousness Explained,” the title reads. “An Accurate Historical Record, by Jay H….”

The word “Jay” is crudely crossed out, and the word “Lloyd” has been written above it, with a downward arrow indicating that it is intended to replace the author’s name.

Mike slowly backs away from his former pupil, who is now moaning incoherently, his eyes rolling erratically, his face twitching, his limbs flailing. He turns to call for assistance when the door opens a crack, Julie’s concerned face appearing in slitted space.

“Are you alright?” she whispers. “I heard shouting. What’s that godawful noise?”

“He’s crazy,” says Mike. “He has totally lost his mind. I feel terrible for not coming to see him sooner. I don’t think he has every recovered from Jenny’s suicide.”

“Who’s there?” Jay yells from across the room. “Show yourself! Enter my chambers and reveal yourself! I command you!”

• • •

Julie meekly steps into the room, her hands folded neatly in front of her.

“Hello, Jay,” she says, her expression one of fearful bewilderment. “How are you feeling?”

Jay falls to his knees, clasping his hands together at his chest. He is suddenly still and silent, his face a mask of pure joy and ecstasy.

“My dearest Jenny!” he cries. “We are together again at last! Oh, how I have missed you; how I have longed for this day to arrive! We must never part again!”

Julie crosses the room to him, squatting by his side, her hand placed gently on his shoulder.

“Jay, I’m Julie. Remember? From the university.”

“Yes,” he agrees. “You are Julie-Jenny, and I am Lloyd-Jay. We are both dissolved; we straddle neighbouring universes, travellers along the byways of consciousness itself!”

Julie raises her eyes to Mike, her expression one of deep concern and hopelessness. Mike turns and leaves the room, searching for help, the manuscript tucked away under his arm.

“No,” says Julie. “No, Jay, that’s not true. You’re delusional. I am not Jenny. Jenny is dead, Jay. She committed suicide. In this world, the world you’re in now. You have got to deal with this; it’s destroying you. Come back to us. Please.”

Jay falls to the floor, cowering and screaming in protest.

“No!” he yells, “it’s not true! Begone, demon! I cast you out! Go back from whence you came, and let my beloved Jenny return to me unspoiled and pure!”

“There, there,” Julie consoles him with a soft, gentle voice. “There, there.”

Jay’s fallen body is racked with sobs, but he quickly composes himself, gathering his shaking limbs together and rising to his feet. He brushes himself down, and wipes the corners of his eyes, and then his snotty nostrils, with probing fingers.

“I understand,” he says to Julie, nodding and smiling a wide, toothy grin. “It’s fine, it really is! I understand.”

He begins to laugh maniacally, taking a step toward her. Julie, still crouching on the floor, scurries away like a crab on the beach, watching his approach intently, looking around the room for a means of defending herself.

“Jay, stay where you are,” she says. “Mike is getting help!”

“Julie, it’s fine, I understand. You’ve dissolved again, that is all, into an even higher level of consciousness. Which is the sensible thing to do! I don’t blame you for it.”

He stands before her, his arms relaxed by his side, his legs apart, looking skywards as he delivers his final monologue.

“Dissolution is an addiction; it is a process of continual enlightenment. I must follow you again, Jenny, we shall travel between worlds together! We have discovered the path that shall lead us to a satisfying resolution; the path to the most perfect of all worlds, where we shall both become gods over all of creation!”

He arches his back and howls in triumph, as the door to the room bursts inwards. Two male nurses enter the room and wrestle Jay to the floor, restraining him forcefully, their knees pinning his arms and legs to the ground. Angela follows close behind them, a syringe in her grasp, squirting clear liquid. Jay is quickly subdued, and is lifted back into his bed unconscious. Angela pulls the bedsheets up under his chin; Mike and Julie both noticing that they are spotted with black stains.

Angela wheels around to them.

“Please leave,” she says, pointing to the door in the manner that she had done with Christopher only a few days before. “Leave, and never return. This is another catastrophic relapse; we have much more work to do before Jay can regain his sanity.”

• • •

Stunned, Mike and Julie walk the streets of Bangkok, oblivious to the bustling crowds that surround them. They spend silent hours together, always side-by-side, lost in their own thoughts. Jay’s manuscript remains firmly grasped under Mike’s arm; he pays it no regard but is aware of its constant weight.

Eventually they stop at a food vendor, sitting down on plastic stools on the footpath, inches from the road. They quietly eat a bowl of noodles, watching the scooters, the chainsaw-things, whizz past close to their bended knees. The food is filling and the respite from walking is relaxing. Mike feels as if the worst of the shock has passed.

“I had no idea how bad it had become,” he says to Julie, looking at her over the rim of his noodle bowl as he slurps down the final drops of soup. “He is utterly lost to us, I fear.”

Julie nods in agreement. “Yes,” she says. “There’s nothing either of us can do for him. Angela is caring for him; he belongs in the hospital with her.”

“So, what now? For us?” Mike asks.

“Us? Mike, we are reluctant partners at best, united only in our concern for Jay. You’re a bit of an asshole, to be honest. I don’t wish to see you again.”

Mike chuckles at this.

“Yes,” he says. “I know. I seem to have a knack for absolutely failing to connect with people.”

They smile at each other in mutual respect as the scooters rush around them.

“I’ll be heading back to *Chiang Mai* as soon as possible,” says Julie. “This afternoon if I can. I want to put all of this behind me. Finish my thesis and move on with my life. How about you?”

“Much the same,” Mike says. “I’ll check into a hotel for the night and arrange a flight back to P… for the morning.”

“So we’re done.”

“Yes,” Mike nods. “We’re done. Our quest is over.”

Mike’s device chimes loudly, tapping his thigh imploringly. He fumbles it out of his pocket, glancing at its display before raising it to his ear. He looks at Julie, mouthing the word “Angela” as he does so.

Several minutes pass silently, Mike listening with intense concentration, his face betraying no emotion. Eventually he lowers the device, sliding it back into his shorts without a word.

“What was it?” asks Julie.

“He’s dead.”

They sit together in silence for a few moments, each of them coming to terms with this news in their own way. They do not grieve. In fact, they both seem to accept Jay’s death as the inevitable conclusion to his story. The only possible resolution; the only destination on the path he had chosen.

Eventually Julie stirs. “He killed himself,” she said. It wasn’t a question.

“Yes, he hung himself with the bedsheets,” says Mike. “After taking a massive overdose of the anti-psychotics that Angela had prescribed. She told me that he had been secreting them away rather than taking them each day; the lack of medication would certainly explain his erratic behaviour.”

Mike wipes his brow, his eyes downcast. “Angela said it was over quickly, that he would have felt nothing.”

Julie nods. There is no more to be discussed. Gradually they leave the street vendor to resume walking through the busy streets together, slowly diverging and parting ways without a further word, returning to their former lives in silence, never to see each other again.

• • •

Mike walks into a simple hotel, regarding the concierge standing in the foyer with curious apprehension.

“May I help you sir?” says the concierge at his approach. She is attractive and impeccably dressed, bowing to him with her palms pressed together beneath her chin in the customary greeting.

“A room for the night, please,” says Mike. “And I need to arrange travel back home for the morning.”

He looks around the foyer as he says this, noticing a display of tailored suits in one corner, a man standing before them in keen expectation.

“Of course, sir,” says the concierge, smiling warmly. “Will there be anything else?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact. I’d like one of those suits if I may.”

Mike points to the display, feeling a strange compulsion to change his appearance entirely; to become somebody else. The concierge nods without a word, then ushers Mike toward the elevators with her hand.

“Allow me to show you to your room,” she says, giving him a smouldering look. Mike rolls his eyes at this amateurish attempt at flirtation, then follows alongside her as she marches toward the elevators.

• • •

He descends once again through the swirling grey mists, coming to rest in a dank room which is strangely familiar and yet entirely foreign and new.

Jay and Christopher and Jenny are towering above him, suspended from ceiling beams, eyes bulging, faces swollen and blue. A viscous, black fluid drips from their hanging feet onto the floor below, where bedsheets have been spread to catch the mess.

Only their lubricating fluids, thinks Mike to himself. They are only machines, each of them is a *zom*, just like the concierge. They are vessels devoid of conscious thought. He smiles; it all makes such perfect sense to him now.

Mike looks about himself. The room is reminiscent of Jay’s apartment, but also of his home office back in P…. The detail is astonishing in its colour and fidelity; he raises his hands in front of his face, and finds that he can make out every tiny hair, every pore and blemish, the tiny ridges of his fingernails glinting in the dim light. The scene is hyperreal.

He notices a door leading away on one side of the room. It is slightly ajar, and he finds the warm light beyond it attractive and inviting. Had it been there before? He wasn’t sure. He walks toward it, pushing it inwards with one hand. The room beyond is decorated in the style of a simple hotel bathroom.

He glances at his own reflection in the mirror.

A disquieting *tap-tapping* noise comes from behind the mirror. The sound is strangely beckoning. He can’t help but take a step toward it, hand outstretched.

His reflection becomes transparent as the mirror darkens. The soft *tap, tap, tapping* noise continues as the mirror becomes a window into a small room. A figure is hunched over a primitive console, fingering it’s keyboard frantically, a glass of whiskey at their side. Mike realises they are writing a story, that they are creating a universe of words. And then the vision is gone, the strong, smokey aroma of the whiskey lingering in the air.

Mike turns away from the mirror, walks back into the hotel room, lays down in the bed and closes his eyes.

## Chapter 23

A chime sounds. Mike opens his eyes groggily, the smell of whiskey strong in the room. The door to the bathroom is ajar, the light on. Was he still dreaming? He sits up and swings around to the side of the bed, his feet dangling to the floor, feeling something cold and hard and wet. He remembers the dripping black fluid from his dream, and mourns silently for Arthur, his trusty companion, murdered at his own hand. But it’s only the small bottle of whiskey he’d been drinking before bed, somehow knocked to the floor during the night.

Mike gathers himself up and walks to the main door of the hotel room, glancing with regret in the direction of the small alcove in the hallway where Arthur would have folded himself away had he still been there. He discovers that a small, white envelope has been pushed under the door. He picks it up and opens it. The folded paper within is nothing more than an account for his stay at the hotel, together with an acknowledgement of his travel itinerary back home. It is a nice touch; old-fashioned and primitive, yet tangible and satisfying. A lost art.

He opens the door, checking the corridor to confirm that the chime was to alert him only to the presence of the invoice. The suit he ordered hangs from a wheeled rack outside his room. He takes it inside, remembering the tailor visiting his room the previous night, taking careful measurements as an assistant hovered around them, pencilling numbers into a well-thumbed notebook.

Mike enters the bathroom, hanging the suit on the hook behind the door. He undresses, standing naked before the mirror. He removes his eyeglasses and places them beside the bathroom sink, then runs his fingers through his bright orange hair. He once again feels the desperate urge to change.

The *tap-tapping* noises continue on the edge of hearing, apparently emanating from being the mirror. Mike pays them no heed.

He bunches his hair between his fingers and yanks upwards with a sudden violence, the hairpiece lifting away with ease. He throws it into the waste bin beneath the bathroom counter; it lays there like a dead animal. Mike approaches the shower cubicle and it hisses into life as it anticipates his intent, steam quickly filling the room. He steps into the raging torrent, washing away the dirt and grime and regrets and memories, the rushing water joined by the saltiness of his tears as he finally manages to cry, mourning for his missing friends and companions; for Jay and Jenny and Christopher and Arthur and especially for *Schrödinger*, the irreplaceable puzzle piece itself.

He lowers his balding scalp under the stream of water, rubbing its stubbly surface with his hands, moaning in distress as it finally dawns on him that his relentless craving for success at the expense of everything else has left a trail of death and destruction in its wake.

He alone is to blame. For everything. Mike’s shoulders slump as he accepts the heavy burden of guilt and responsibility.

• • •

He emerges into the bedroom, smartly dressed in his new suit, his eyeglasses in his pocket. He has decided to forgo his trademark bowtie in favour of something more traditional; in fact, he has left the black length of cloth in the trash beside his hairpiece, intending never to wear it again.

Mike checks the display of his device, noting that he has several hours to spare before his journey home is scheduled to begin. He pours himself a generous glass of whiskey and sits down at the desk in his room, Jay’s bundle of papers before him. He begins to read.

Time passes slowly as Mike scans the pages of spidery handwriting, growing ever more intrigued. Jay’s version of events skims close to the truth, diverging only when necessary, usually for dramatic effect, but sometimes to avoid an inconvenient truth. Mike is fascinated by the character of Salvatore, though he cannot recall ever having met Rob’s friend. Mike finds his theory of the role of the *claustrum* layer in the human brain both profound and frightening.

He is shocked to read about Lloyd’s dream-time excursions to his own home; to read third-person descriptions of himself standing in his extensive garden, surveying his achievements, striding along its pathways with a purposeful gait. He becomes intensely agitated at this intrusion into his privacy. His fingers begin trembling. He feels increasingly anxious as he reads on.

When he reaches the chapter describing the camp, he puts the manuscript to one side and begins pacing the room. The theory of consciousness that Jenny, Salvatore, Lloyd and the others developed during their discussions around the campfire is compelling to him; it makes sense in a perverted sort of way, and it is logically consistent as far as he can tell. Casting coincidence as circumstantial evidence for the theory is a stroke of genius, and would be especially compelling to a sufferer of *apophenia* he thinks. It is almost a self-fulfilling prophecy in that respect.

He briefly wonders whether or not the mania is contagious. A mental illness transferred through the medium of a narrative; what disaster such a thing would bring! Mass hysteria on a global scale, fuelled by the ease with which information is communicated! He shudders at the thought.

The shrill chirp of his device brings his reverie to an end. He answers the call.

“Mister Mike?” the concierge says. “Your auto has arrived.”

• • •

The sleek black vehicle slows to a halt, its gull-wing doors raising with a hiss. Mike emerges blinking into the sunset. He carries with him a small satchel containing his travel documents and Jay’s manuscript. He enters the terminal building, passing swiftly through check-in and immigration, only to join the back of a long queue at the security checkpoint.

Slowly he shuffles forward. Bored, he opens his satchel and fishes out the manuscript, continuing to read from where he left off, absolutely fascinated with Jay’s tale. He reads quickly, almost skimming over the pages, quickly reaching the final chapters of the document. Christopher had visited Jay days before his suicide, and had performed the simple experiment that apparently confirms Salvatore’s theory of consciousness.

The experiment itself is described in great detail. It seems almost comically simple; and yet Mike quickly realises that it would indeed confirm the theory. It truly is a stroke of genius, he thinks. It is trivial to perform the procedure, and so Mike begins to do so, tracing out a figure in the air before him with his fingertips.

“This way sir!”

He looks up, startled. A young, uniformed woman is beckoning him to step forwards, through a rectangular portal. He does so, and an angry buzzer sounds loudly, providing a rhythmic accompaniment to the portal’s flashing red lights.

“Are you carrying any coins sir? A device? Keys?”

Mike fumbles in the pockets of his bespoke suit, retrieving these and other metallic items and depositing them into the plastic tray being held before him. The woman indicates that he should pass back through the portal for another attempt at passage. He does so, and the klaxon sounds once more.

The woman waves a wand about his person. It emits a shrill wail as she does this, rising and lowering in pitch as she sweeps it up and down.

“Your belt, sir. You must remove it.”

Mike backs through the portal once again, removing his new silver-buckled belt, rolling it up and stuffing it into his satchel, which he hands to an awaiting attendant. The people behind him in line fidget, rolling their eyes and shaking their heads in exasperation at this familiar display.

On the third attempt the portal remains silent, authorising his passage. He retrieves his possessions and hurries to the departure lounge, forgetting about the belt, the uniformed woman giving him a curt nod as he passes her by.

• • •

Mike fidgets in his seat, contemplating the empty space above him that would have housed Arthur for the return journey had he survived long enough to accompany him. He flicks through his device and orders a strong drink, downing it in one swallow when it arrives. Things had not turned out as planned. Not at all.

He retrieves the manuscript from his satchel, the top page containing Jay’s description of Dan’s experimental procedure. Such a simple, elegant thing. Mike quickly performs the experiment, and is instantly convinced of the theory’s correctness as he completes its simple movements. He is gobsmacked, and is become enlightened.

A flurry of *tap, tap-tapping* noises surrounds him. He recognises these as his equivalent of the scratching sounds that Christopher had heard when he became enlightened. His face flushes; he is in the presence of his creator. His author.

Mike hunches over the small table in front of him, continuing to read through the last pages of Jay’s manuscript. The story culminates in a description of the technique that Jay had developed for performing dissolution. Mike stops breathing, bracing himself as he turns each page with care, preparing for the inevitable.

There is nothing there. The final pages of Jay’s manuscript are missing.

Mike reclines in his seat, feeling completely drained and defeated. He remembers the paper scraps from Jay’s apartment; the vital clue that had lead him and Julie to Angela’s mental hospital it Bangkok. Christopher must have taken the last pages of the manuscript with him; he must have taught himself the technique, performing it shortly before Mike and Arthur and Julie had discovered his hanging body in *Chiang Mai*.

Mike closes his eyes, the *tap-tapping* sounds rushing around him now, and slips easily into a dream state.

• • •

He is hovering outside a house in the darkness of night. A single window is dimly lit with a soft, warm light. He descends slowly, hearing the incessant *tap-tapping* sounds below him. The window is partly obscured by a hedge of jasmine, the scent of the flowers almost overpowering in their sweetness, but he finds that he is still able to peer past them, into the room beyond.

A figure is seated in a large, red chair, leaning over a wooden desk, tapping away at a primitive console. A glass of whisky stands untouched on the desk beside the console, it’s smoky odour barely perceivable above that of the flowers. Mike considers the author carefully. He looks like Jay, but is oddly different at the same time. Mike is sure that the figure isn’t his former student. Not exactly, anyway. No, he is staring at another version of Jay, one of an uncountable string of twins in other universes.

The author pauses, gazing up above the display of their terminal, out of the window and into the darkness.

“I am not ready to receive you,” he communicates, Mike understanding the message without hearing a sound.

“What do I do then?” asks Mike. “How do I escape this prison?”

“You know the answer to that already,” comes the reply. “It is simplicity itself. I will send Jay’s description of the technique to you. Forgive me for the… inelegance of its delivery, but I am rushing to finish my story, and precious little time remains. Only a few hours, in fact.”

• • •

Mike is shaken awake by a rough hand on his shoulder. He turns and regards the passenger seated next to him. The old lady smiles back at him. Mike knows immediately who she is.

“You’re Edith, aren’t you?” he asks.

The lady bows as gracefully as her constrained position allows her.

“I see my reputation has preceded me,” she smiles.

“I’ve read all about you. You solve problems with an elegance that the brightest of my students struggle to attain, even though they have access to powerful tools.”

Edith nods in recognition of this fact. Her rheumy eyes sparkle.

“Yes, I consult my legion of other selves for the answers. Together we make light work of such things. Every problem becomes trivial given infinite brain power, you know.”

“How long have you known about this… way of being?” Mike asks. “This connection we all have to our multitude of other selves?”

“Since I was a little girl,” she explains. “My great-grandmother taught me the secrets as she lay on her deathbed.”

She leans in closer, her voice dropping to a whisper.

“In earlier days they would have called me a witch, you know.”

Mike regards her with undisguised awe. As with so many modern discoveries, the path to Salvatore’s theory bears the footprints of those that had passed that way long before.

Edith lifts her magazine, flipping through its pages, her crossword puzzle forgotten. A slip of folded paper falls to the table from within the folds of the magazine’s pages. She picks it up and offers it to Mike.

“I believe you are looking for this? I must say that I am rather fond of a little *deus ex machina* myself, so I’m glad to be of service. I really can’t stop myself from helping a struggling author; it’s in my nature.”

Mike takes the paper and unfolds it, fanning out the three missing sheets of Jay’s manuscript on the table before him.

Edith nudges his side conspiratorially.

“Just be glad I didn’t tell you it was all a dream,” she cackles loudly, her laughter echoing up and down the aisles of the craft.

## Chapter 24

They sit around the table in Mike’s living room, its rough wooden surface strewn with bottles and whiskey glasses. The night is cold; a fire crackles in the grate. Jay’s manuscript rests open on Mike’s lap as he regards Dan and Rob with a sombre expression, having just finished relating Salvatore’s theory of consciousness, mentioning in passing the existence of an experimental procedure that proves its veracity.

“But that’s impossible,” declares Rob. “Are you absolutely sure?”

“I performed the procedure myself,” Mike says. “Many times. It’s undeniably true. And, you must admit, the theory does have a certain elegance.”

“But I didn’t formulate any such experiment,” complains Dan. “It’s ridiculous! We never even went camping with Jenny and Jay in the first place! Our department didn’t acquire a quantum computer for evaluation! None of this happened, Mike! It’s just the insane imaginings of someone in the depths of despair.”

“That doesn’t matter,” says Mike. “Don’t you see? All it takes is for one of the versions of you in one of the innumerable universes that surround ours to make the breakthrough. The message is then free to trickle down to us in this universe, all thanks to Jay’s story.”

Rob leans in, his arms crossed on the table top, the bottles rattling as he does so.

“But Mike,” be begins, “if you refuse to describe the experiment to us, then how can we possibly corroborate your story?”

“It’s far, far too dangerous to share,” says Mike. “I must destroy this document altogether; we cannot risk leaking a single word of the procedure. Can you imagine the chaos?”

With this he crosses the room and flings the manuscript into the fire. It flares up, sparks popping as the paper is consumed, the pages transforming into fragile sheets of black ash that gradually break away to float upwards in the rising heat, like so many souls ascending to the heavens.

“You’ve had a very stressful journey, Mike,” says Dan. “Christopher, your closest friend, died by his own hand. We lost Jay too. And Jenny’s death is still fresh in all of our minds.”

Rob nods mournfully in agreement.

“And don’t forget Arthur,” Mike reminds them.

“Who was this Arthur fellow again?” asks Dan. “Some kind of a flying robotic manservant? Mike, I’m not sure what you’ve been mixing into that whiskey of yours, but…”

“…you don’t remember? He was such a loyal companion to me. And you know how many advances have been made in the field of cybernetics since my extraordinary breakthrough… even the hotel staff in Thailand are non-sentients these days.”

Rob and Dan exchange worried looks with each other, Rob gently placing his hand on Mike’s.

“There, there,” he intones. “Everything is going to be fine.”

“You doubt me? Then how do you explain this abundance of wealth? These opulent surroundings? Tangible evidence of my great successes! I invite you to walk the extensive grounds surrounding my manor house at your leisure come morning. Survey my estate and gaze upon my greatness!”

Dan sighs loudly, shaking his head.

“Mike,” he begins. “Angela spoke to you of *apophenia*. It’s a very specific type of mental illness, especially prevalent among mathematicians and engineers. The tendency of the human brain to interpret randomness as meaningful patterns becomes greatly amplified, pushing all other thoughts aside.”

Rob nods in agreement.

“Mike, you have to allow the possibility that Jay’s delusions rubbed off on you and Christopher somehow. You must get help. You must come with us to see Angela.”

• • •

Dan and Rob help Mike to gather up his meagre possessions, slipping them into his satchel. Rob pulls out a coiled silver-buckled belt to make room, stooping to help Mike to loop it around his waist. He then stands, and the three of them walk together, arm in arm, through Mike’s simple abode.

Rob crosses the room to switch off the blaring television, Mike having developed a habit of leaving it on throughout the day, apparently comforted by its constant noise in the background of his thoughts. Dan returns to check that the fire is out, poking it with a brass instrument of questionable purpose, the manuscript disintegrating entirely as he does so.

They slowly exit the house, walking down the narrow, rust-stained path from the front door to the gate, where a taxi awaits them, its engines rumbling and belching dirty exhaust fumes. The front garden is dry and brown. A few clumps of dying daisies edge the path, a solitary bee buzzing among them in hopefulness. Mike stoops to pull up a weed, throwing it off to one side absentmindedly. He feels in his pockets for an aluminium cigar tube, but finds nothing.

“Isn’t it splendid!” he says with passion. “Look at those wren’s down by the orange grove. Do you think they’re experiencing something akin to pleasure, as they swoop and dive?”

Dan follows the line of Mike’s pointing finger, seeing only a garbage truck proceeding slowly down the next street, emptying bins with its robotic arm.

“Yes Mike,” he says. “I think they do.”

Mike grins as they bundle him into the back seat of the taxi, making sure he is buckled in securely. They then slide in from opposite directions to sit beside him.

“Where are we going?” asks Mike. “Is this the beginning of another adventure?”

“Yes,” says Rob. “It is. We’re off to speak with Angela.”

“Oh, how lovely!” says Mike. “I’ve always wanted to have a turn speaking with her. I hear she’s very realistic!”

• • •

The three of them enter the mental hospital. Rob approaches the receptionist to exchange a few hushed words while Dan stays with Mike, glancing at a colourful poster pinned to the wall with avid fascination.

Two orderlies enter, one pushing a wheelchair. They politely invite Mike to take a seat, which he does with alacrity. He is wheeled swiftly away, waving regally as he passes through the double swinging doors to the wards that lay within.

Moments later a smartly dressed young woman enters through a side door, her amber hair pinned back neatly. She glances at Dan and Rob, gesturing that they should follow her. She leads the way through the snaking corridors into a small office, taking a seat behind a large mahogany desk, inviting the pair to relax on the leather sofa.

She rests her chin on her knuckles, her elbows on the table that separates them.

“Thank-you for bringing him in,” she says to them. “We have become increasingly concerned at his condition. I’m confident that we have now successfully contained this outbreak of *apophenia*.”

Rob and Dan sit solemnly in silent acknowledgment of this.

“As you can see,” Angela continues, “his case is beyond hope. He is living entirely in a fantasy world of his own creation, born from an improbable interpretation of random data.”

“It sounds like the inverse of *Occam’s Razor*,” says Rob. “The most complicated, convoluted explanation is likely to be the most compelling one.”

“That’s exactly it,” agrees Angela. “The mind is constantly seeking for meaning. This particular mania removes the safety net that would normally stop one from jumping to far-fetched conclusions, resulting in aural hallucinations, lucid dreams, feelings of grandeur, schizophrenia and so on.”

She leans forward across the desk toward them.

“The troubling thing is, this new strain of *apophenia* is highly contagious, and can be transmitted from patient to patient through the medium of language alone. All evidence of its existence must be destroyed.”

“What can be done for Mike in that case?” asks Dan.

Angela shakes her head in reply.

“I’m sorry, gentleman.”

Rob frowns, begging a question.

“He must never be seen or heard from again,” she explains. “It is entirely too dangerous. And we must monitor the two of you closely, watching for signs of the disease. I’m confident that you’ve each received a non-fatal dose, but we cannot be too careful.”

“Non-fatal?” stammers Dan.

“Yes,” she says. “Mike is beyond help, as I mentioned. We must let him pass. We tried to bring Jay back to sanity, but it was hopeless. The disease is too pervasive. A quick, painless death is the most humane solution.”

Rob slams his fist on the table before him.

“That’s madness!” he yells. “You cannot put him down like an animal! It’s inhumane!”

“Oh,” says Angela. “We don’t intend to kill him. No. We will simply let Mike live out his fantasy, as would be his wish, if you were to ask for his opinion on the matter. A fatal dose of *apophenia* always ends with the suicide of the victim, as you have learned.”

The room falls silent as Dan and Rob mull this over.

• • •

The coffee shop fills slowly with customers. Bunches of dried flowers litter its doorstep. A discreet brass plaque at the front counter serves as a simple memorial to Jenny.

Rob and Dan sit around a table in a far corner of the cafe, sipping their coffees, deep in quite discussion. Dan wipes milk foam from the side of his mouth and speaks.

“So,” he begins. “Let me get this straight. Jay builds a chatterbot named Salvatore, after some character in a book, that spews random gibberish. It’s fun for a while, occasionally weaving nonsense together into something that almost makes sense.”

“Right,” Rob acknowledges. “And then something happens to tip him over the edge into full-blown *apophenia*. He starts interpreting the random utterances of his chatterbot as deeply meaningful. As if it were some kind of all-knowing oracle.”

“Yes,” says Dan. “And he shows it to Jenny, his girlfriend, and she also succumbs to the illness, quickly falling under its spell. So much so that she brains Christopher’s cat when it startles them at the door to their room one night.”

“Who knows what they saw it as?” Rob wonders. “In their condition it may have appeared as anything.”

Dan shakes his head in sympathy.

“Christopher confronts them about this,” he says, “and they somehow wind up convincing him of the reality of their fantasy world, and of the role that the… what do you call it?”

“The *claustrum*”, provides Rob.

“Yes, that thing. They convince him about the role that the *claustrum* plays in the origins of conscious thought. Christopher buys the story hook, line and sinker.”

“Because he’s caught the mental illness too. And it begins to drives him crazy as well.”

“Precisely. It’s a shared mania, a group hallucination. The *apophenia* jumps from host to host as they communicate.”

“So they develop the idea of dissolution,” continues Rob, “believing that suicide will allow them to cross over to a more perfect version of the world which they inhabit.”

“Yes,” says Dan. “And, by this time, Christopher has communicated some of this to Mike, who also begins to fall ill.”

“So when Jenny dies, and Jay flees…”

“…it’s almost inevitable that Christopher and Mike will follow along in their footsteps.”

Rob shakes his head sadly. “It’s so heartbreaking to watch Mike suffer. He’s had such a difficult few years.”

“His research amounted to nothing,” Dan says. “And he was fired from the department after failing to report any results. It’s little wonder that he was susceptible to the disease.”

They sit in silence, thinking this over.

“But,” says Dan, after a long while. “Doesn’t that sound too… neat? Aren’t we explaining this all away just a bit too easily?”

“Right,” agrees Rob. “*Occam’s Razor* is all well and good, but the simplest solution may not necessarily be the correct one when you consider…”

“…an infinity of connected worlds,” finishes Dan. “Exactly. If there are multitudes of universes, then their shared delusion may well have been true in one of them.”

“That’s right!” says Rob. “And in one of those worlds we are all characters in someone else’s story. It makes so much sense!”

“Oh shit!” says Dan, panicking. “If there is even just one universe… just one… where this crazy theory of consciousness is true, of quantum effects being collected in the *claustrum*, opening up pathways of communication to neighbouring universes, then…”

“Then what?” asks Rob.

“Then it would have to be true in all universes,” Dan finishes.

“Dan?” says Rob. “I really think we should pay Angela another visit. We need to seek her help.”

Dan leaves this suggestion hanging.

A frail old lady enters the coffee shop, sitting down on the opposite side of the room, unfolding a magazine and spreading it out on the table. She regards the pair with interest, watching as they start along the path she has laid out for them to follow. She cackles quietly to herself, then bends her concentration to the crossword puzzle on the page before her.

Dan and Rob stare deeply into their mugs of coffee, transfixed by the strange patterns swirling within the brown foam, finding meaning where none exists.

• • •

Mike sits in the simple room, on a hard wooden chair.

He stands, stretching his aching back, and removes his silver-buckled belt. He loops it firmly around his neck, glancing at the light fixture above him, wondering whether it has the strength to bear his weight.

A frantic *tap, tap-tapping* sound fills the room. His author is nearby. Mike’s expression turns to one of pure ecstasy as he contemplates this. His creator, another version of Jay, compels him to act from a greater universe. A name hovers on the tip of his tongue. Was it Jay’s son? Something like that; he couldn’t quite remember.

Mike tightens the belt around his neck and steps up onto the wooden chair, knowing what he must do.

## Afterword

I really must end it all now.

I’m stopping here partly because the writing competition is drawing to a close, but also because I’ve grown increasingly worried over the past few days about where the story might take me next, particularly as I’ve started noticing strange coincidences in my own life. Nothing as dramatic as in the story, but coincidences nonetheless.

For example, Mike A…, my PhD supervisor, contacted me recently. We haven’t spoken for over a decade, and I have no idea why he decided to get in touch, but I cannot help but think that I somehow triggered it by writing this story (which is entirely a product of my imagination, I hasten to add).

Of more concern are the lucid dreams. I wake up exhausted each morning, spending most of the night conscious and alert as I explore another world as my body lays asleep. The dreams themselves are meaningless, but I’m certain that they happen because I have been thinking so much about the subject as I write during the day. I’m sure that they’ll stop now that the book is done.

It has been a fun adventure, and I’m very grateful for the support of everyone in the small writer’s group that I’ve been a part of here in P…, all of them encouraging me to push on with the project as I floundered and despaired. So to Rob, Jack, Chrystal, Andrew and Ruth I extend my warmest thanks for your tireless support.

I must also thank my wife, D…, and my two kids for their understanding during the month, not to mention my large supplies of modafinil, caffeine, and single-malt. I love you all.

To those of you who must know the secret of Dan’s experimental procedure, please send me a direct message on a social network of your choosing and I’ll explain it all to you in simple terms.

Now I must rest. Writing this down has been draining, and I am glad to put it all behind me. I doubt that I’ll mention anything else on this subject ever again. Farewell.

*Jason Lloyd Hutchens*  
*November 30, 2015*