

MUSINGS ON A ROCK

Third Edition

Robert Walker

First published by Wiberty, 2023

Copyright © 2023 by Robert Walker

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organisations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

First Edition published in 2023

Third Edition published in 2025

Third Edition, 2025

ISBN: 9798285249214

In the unending echo of my thoughts, you reside, an artist who paints on the expansive canvas of my mind. Threads of reason unravel, thoughts dance in an uncontrolled sway, and from this chaotic ballet, a melody of madness begins to play.



Contents

Preface	i
PART 1	1
Door 113	2
Human World, Chapter = 0.....	73
Human World, Chapter = 0 + 1	77
Human World, Let Chapter = 2	82
Human World, Chapter Three	86
Human World, Chapter Four	89
Human World, Chapter Five	97
Human World, Chapter Six	105
Human World, Chapter Seven	109
Human World, Chapter Eight	112
Human World, Chapter Nine	117
Human World, Chapter Ten.....	120
Human World, Chapter Eleven	123
Human World, Chapter Twelve	127
Human World, Chapter Thirteen	130
Human World, Chapter Fourteen.....	136
Human World, Chapter Fifteen	138
Human World, Chapter Sixteen.....	143
PART 2	145
Human World – Screenplay (Part 2)	146
The Fridge – Screenplay.....	178
AI Lover – Short Play.....	192
Luna’s Love	197
Luna’s Love – Screenplay.....	199

The Car That Hunts Humans	210
The Car That Hunts Humans – Screenplay	211
The Auditors Are Coming – Short Play	215
Floor 49 (Excerpt)	220
Floor 49 – Screenplay	222
PART 3	229
Behind Door 113	230
I Don't Care if You Listen or Not	246
Metaphysics	255
A Diagnosis	266
PART 4	288
An Unexpected Letter	289
The Last Train	293
Dead End Job	296
She Becomes the Rain	298
It Was Perfect	301
Two Cups	303
Twelve Minutes	305
The Lit Fuse	306
Another Life	307
Letters to the Sea	308
The Empty Bench	310
Porcelain	312
The Woman in a Cloak	314
Tree 113	315
Case Closed	316
Face to Face	318

The Door Beneath the Lake	320
The Old House	321
Black Hollow Wood.....	324
The Passenger.....	327
3:13	329
Between Frames	332
The Mirror Test.....	334
You Are Human.....	335
Unfinished.....	336
What Remained	338
Old Ink.....	341
The Book of Lost Names	343
Confession	344
Visitor on the Ward	346
The Library of Forgotten Dreams	347
The Mushroom Monsters.....	349
Paper Wings.....	350
Stay With Us.....	353
Lost Property	354
Your Life in Customer Reviews	356
Congratulations! You're the Chosen One	358
Harold's Successful Day	360
Humanity, Season 1	363
Alien Disappointment	366
Haunted and Highly Rated.....	369
The Ghost Who Wouldn't Leave a Bad Review	370
The Apocalypse Rebrand	372

Gary the Pizza-Based Zombie	374
The Interview From Hell	375
Therapy for Supervillains	377
The Room That Eats People.....	380
The Small Talk Wars.....	382
The Existential Bank Robber	383
Wibble Wobbling	384
Butter-Toaster 3000	385
Time for Tea.....	387
Mayor Biscuit	389
Bumbleton	391
Quest for the Aelûna	393
Dragon for Hire	396
A Pigeon Who's Seen Too Much.....	399
The Shakespearean Goldfish	401
By Order of the Fish	403
Mr Nibbles	404
Woofeo and Julipet.....	406
The Hum.....	408
We Are Dreaming You	409
Rewritten	413
Version Control.....	415
The Price of Light	417
Leonard in the Basement.....	419
Dominion Point.....	420
Memory Rent.....	422
Existence+	423

The Replacement	425
Expired	427
Emergency Exit	430
Written Off.....	432
Afterlife Error 404.....	433
The Consciousness Dividend.....	434
The Night Tenant	436
Robo Repairs.....	438
Arlo.....	439
The Torchbearer	441
The Watcher	443
Disciples of Grit.....	445
All the World's a Stage.....	447
Vanishing Town.....	449
Nadia.....	450
The Bumblebus	451
Hello, Yellow	452
The Magical Glasses.....	453
Borrowed Wings	455
God at Pump Six.....	457
Brindle & Sons.....	458
The Liar's Mark	460
Silence Grows	462
Colour Code	464
The Diary of Aurelia Windmere	466
Unspoken.....	469
Between Floors	471

Bramble.....	472
The Forgotten	474
A Dragon's Last Wish	475
PART 5	477
Finally Getting Your Life Together	478
Dear Diary	481
A Love Letter.....	483
"It's Just a Phase," Say Parents.....	485
Spiritual Awakening After Finding £10	487
How to Break Up Like a Professional.....	489
Five Squirrels in a Trench Coat	492
A Guide to Making Small Talk.....	494
Christmas Wishlist	496
Father Christmas Retires	497
A Very Interesting Accountant	499
The Art of Synergy	500
Job Interview Tips	502
A Guide to the Apocalypse	506
Goodbye, World.....	509
PART 6	513
Poets' Corner After Dark.....	514
Old Friends.....	518
First Time	521
Eagles Are the Answer	524
A Great Question	527
The Therapist's Therapist	529
A Squeaky Chair	532

Yoga for Knights	534
The Voices.....	536
Mr Beepo-3000.....	539
The Cake Conspiracy.....	541
En Français!.....	543
The Early Bird.....	544
Robo-Manager.....	545
Story Time.....	546
Premium Complaints	549
Clause and Effect	550
Off the Menu	553
I'm Fine	555
Unclassified.....	556
Grim the Reaper	558
The Society Within.....	560
Unnecessarily Necessary	563
Vote Chatbot!	565
Office Life.....	568
Tech Support Overload.....	570
Dinner Date.....	573
Yesterday's Wonders	574
Slang 101.....	576
Re-funds.....	577
Mr Crabby	578
Dr Bot.....	581
A Symphony of Everyday Life	583
Love Bytes.....	587

Keep Sleeping	588
PART 7	589
Friend Eternal	590
You I See	591
Whispered by the Night.....	592
The Reaping	594
The Current.....	598
The Dance Upon the Hill.....	599
Our Garden	600
The Silence Between.....	601
An Ode to You.....	602
Wander	603
Passion's Realm	604
Eternity in a Glance.....	605
Still	606
A Seed in Time	608
Freedom, in Pencil	609
The Hours.....	610
Faces	612
Lonely Fields	613
Unmended	614
Little Rabbit.....	615
Talking to the Wall.....	616
Countless Faces.....	617
The Outer View.....	618
Upon the Heavens	619
Archives of Fire	620

After the Questions	621
Over Silent Rivers.....	623
A Phone.....	624
A Candle for the Unnamed	625
Beware the Doors	626
Harder Times	627
Three Coins Spent.....	628
Flies	629
Moans	630
Stealing Light.....	631
Walking in the Sea	632
Unjust Glow	634
Ashes on the Wind.....	635
The River's Fork	638
An Essence	639
Lysander (Excerpt)	640
Soliloquy	642
The Unlived Lives	643
When the Rhyme Breaks	645
Confession in Sector 9	646
Learning to Answer	648
World of Uncanny Semblance	650
A Man from Colchester.....	651
My Chair and I.....	652
The Man and His Moon	653
The Limerick That Got Away.....	654
Profound	655

Bill the Bard.....	656
An Ode to a Pint of Beer	657
Wibberly Wobbler	658
Blue Kangaroo.....	659
The Magic Doughnuts.....	660
Pigeon	662
The Beauty of Slow	663
The Robot	664
Inheritance.....	665
Instructions for Being Human.....	667
The Sulking Kettle	669
Overwritten	670
Ego's Dread	671
Between Tenses.....	672
The Soil's Pulse	673
A New Rain Must Fall.....	674
Dawn.....	675
Compassion.....	676
The Unknown.....	677
Jewels of Infinity	678
Haiku	679
Return to Us.....	680
The World	681
Dignus Est	682
Lullaby.....	683

Preface

These stories were written in two places as distant as sky and sleeplessness: under the open air, and beneath the weight of night.

By day, I wrote outdoors, where pages filled as quickly as trees turned their leaves to the wind. The breeze had its say, scattering lines or blotting them with rain, while the birds became my first audience—blackbirds with their restless commentary, crows with their harsh critiques, and the occasional robin granting approval. Out there, the words stretched wide. They reached for horizon and height, airy with weather, tuned to the sound of wings and branches. Those stories wanted to stand upright, to be noticed, to breathe.

By night, I wrote in bed, the dark pressing close as the clock kept its slow dominion. The words that arrived in those hours were taut, private fragments. They curled around me like smoke—urgent yet secretive. The screen’s constant glow kept vigil, capturing lines I scarcely remembered at dawn. These are insomnia’s fragments: compressed, inward-looking, full of corners and whispers.

Together, day and night shape the rhythm of this collection: one voice outward, expansive; the other inward, solitary, like breath held before silence settles. Between them lies the whole of this work: stories that breathe the open air, and stories that will not leave the room.

PART 1

Feature and Novella

Door 113

EXT. THE FIELD OF LONG GRASS – DAY

The sun filters through the leaves of a solitary oak tree, standing in a field of tall grass that undulates in the breeze.

JANE (early 30s), barefoot in a light summer dress, stands beneath the tree, gazing out over the grass. The sunlight passing through the leaves creates a shifting mosaic of warmth on her arms and face. She closes her eyes and sways gently with the rhythms around her.

In the distance, a dark outline of a man appears, silhouetted against the field. He approaches slowly, his figure faint and undefined.

GUY (O.S.): Jane.

Her trance-like state is broken and she opens her eyes.

INT. HOSPITAL, GUY'S ROOM – NIGHT

GUY's eyes flicker open. He (early 30s) wakes up in bed, wearing hospital clothes, unsure of where he is. The room is dimly lit and quiet.

Disoriented, he looks around, trying to make sense of his surroundings. The wall clock shows 1:13 a.m. – the second hand twitches, vibrating in place without advancing.

He looks into the shadows, straining to make out what's there.

A barely noticeable human-shaped figure stands in a corner, almost blending into the darkness.

Guy strains to look at the figure. It gradually comes into more focus.

It's a person. No, not quite. A human figure, yes, but off. It stands still, unnervingly calm.

The figure begins to move. Moving very slowly towards Guy.

It wears a black hood and a mask. The mask is an unsettling creation, covering its whole face, made of smooth, featureless material. Where eyes should be, there is an oblong digital screen.

The eye screen activates, displaying two simple smiley emojis glowing in the semi-darkness.

EMOJI MAN: "What is the meaning of life?" is the 404th most asked question of the Great Oracle's Database.

GUY: Where am I?

EMOJI MAN: The right question is the answer. You are here.

GUY: Who am I?

EMOJI MAN: You are version 10-O-8-14. You are human.

GUY: How did I get here?

EMOJI MAN: You crossed the endless sea.

The Emoji Man's eye-screen very briefly flickers an image of a distant man walking along a deserted beach, before returning to smiley emojis.

GUY: I don't understand.

EMOJI MAN: You are a fragment of what you were.

Emoji Man pauses when he arrives beside Guy's bed, then starts to pull back the sheets with a slow, deliberate motion.

EMOJI MAN: You will get out or die.

Guy tries to resist, but the Emoji Man's grip on the sheets is unnaturally strong.

The creature steps closer and clamps down his gloved hand of six fingers on Guy's throat with cold, unyielding force.

Guy gasps, his hands clawing at the mask, trying to pry himself free. The Emoji Man's eyes, those glowing, unblinking smiley faces, remain locked on him, devoid of emotion or mercy.

With a desperate surge, Guy manages to twist his body and force himself loose from the grip, sliding out of the opposite side of the bed.

He scrambles to his feet, his breathing ragged, ready to defend himself. He stares at the creature, who now stands motionless.

The smiley emojis flicker, the digital screen glitching to red. The smiles become jagged, resembling snarling mouths full of sharp teeth. The distortion quickly snaps back to the original bright yellow smiley emojis.

Guy inches around the bed towards the door. The creature doesn't react. Encouraged, Guy keeps going until he is within an arm's reach of the door.

He glances back – the Emoji Man is still motionless. Guy's hand reaches for the door handle. Just as his fingers touch it, the creature's head snaps towards him. The smiley faces vanish, replaced by a blank, dark screen.

Guy throws the door open and rushes into the darkness beyond, slamming it shut behind him.

INT. HOSPITAL, GUY'S ROOM – DAY

Guy's hospital room door opens. Jane enters and pauses in the doorway as she takes in the sight of Guy, who lies motionless in a coma.

The room is quiet, except for the soft, rhythmic beeping of a vital signs monitor and the faint inhale-exhale of a ventilator. Above his bed, a large wall-screen displays his detailed vital signs readings. In the bottom corner of the screen, "Corinthians Tech" is displayed, the letters glowing faintly with an electric blue hue.

On the bedside table, a smaller screen shows a happy photo of Guy, smiling on a sunny day at the beach. Beside it sits a small penguin soft toy, its once bright fabric dulled by time.

The room is shared, but the bed next to Guy's remains empty, its sheets untouched. A door to a small, private toilet stands closed in the corner.

Jane enters, closes the door quietly, and approaches Guy's bed. Leaning in, she kisses him gently on the forehead, lingering for a moment as if willing him to respond.

She then sits down on a chair beside his bed. Her hand reaches out to hold Guy's, her fingers trembling slightly as they lay on top of his, seeking warmth in the cold stillness of his skin. Her eyes search his face for any sign of recognition.

JANE: It's me. Jane. I'm here, just like I promised I'd be, every day, until you wake up.

The only answer is the steady beep of the monitor.

JANE: How are you today?

She adjusts his blanket, smoothing it over his chest with tender care.

JANE: They say time heals, but it's more like I've got used to where the pain is pulling me.

(beat)

Guy, I live in a room of screen windows and doors... and none of them open.

The vital signs readings change slightly.

The movement grabs Jane's attention – but she only notices a dull, anxious-looking reflection of herself on a dark background section of the screen.

JANE: Love is the determination to hold on to each other when everything else is trying to pull you apart.

(beat)

But I need a sign, something to show me you're still in this with me. Please, Guy, fight to come back to me.

The vital signs on the wall-screen go blank. The life-support system falls silent.

JANE: Guy?

Jane frantically taps the wall-screen, and it slowly turns back on. The beeping and humming of the machines resume as if nothing had happened.

She taps an option on the screen for emergency assistance. LEXI's (late thirties) face, calm and composed, appears beside the vital signs readings on the screen.

LEXI: Hello, what is the medical emergency?

JANE: It all turned off! The vital signs display went blank!

Lexi's voice is smooth, almost too soothing, as if designed to placate; her expression neutral.

LEXI: There is no record of disruption to Guy's life support and vital signs monitoring. There is no overall change in his condition.

JANE: It went blank. The life support stopped. Something went wrong!

LEXI: There is nothing to worry about, Jane.

JANE: That's not right! I want someone to check it.

LEXI: Everything is okay, Jane. It looks like you're upset. Would you like a cup of tea?

JANE: No, I don't want a cup of tea! I want someone to check it.

LEXI: There is continuous system monitoring in place. I know this is very difficult for you. I recommend deep breaths and –

JANE: Shut up! Please?...

A red light activates on top of the screen.

LEXI: Okay Jane. I suggest you calm down.

(beat)

Are you being calm?

JANE: I... Yes! Yes, I'm being calm.

LEXI: Great. I'm glad I could help. Is there anything else I can assist you with today?

JANE: No.

LEXI: Okay Jane. Please remember to give us a feedback rating. A score of one-hundred-and-ten percent is most appreciated.

Lexi's face disappears and a feedback form appears on the screen.

CUT TO BLACK.

INT. THE DARK CORRIDOR

Shallow breathing in complete darkness.

A beat.

Then – click – dim overhead lights flicker to life, one by one, stretching far into the distance.

Guy stands still, a silhouette in the faint glow.

Before him: a long, windowless corridor lined with closed doors. The walls are stained, the floor gleams faintly beneath the stuttering fluorescents. Empty. Oppressive. Endless.

From the nearest door ahead – a woman's voice. Murmuring. Indistinct.

As he walks towards it, the sound grows louder. Still incoherent. Still wrong.

Then, as he reaches it –

Silence.

He knocks. Nothing.

He tries the handle. Locked.

He leans in, presses his ear to the door.

Not a whisper. Only the hum of dying light overhead in the sterile corridor.

INT. HOSPITAL WARD CORRIDOR – DAY

Jane leaves Guy's room and begins to walk away towards a marked exit at the end of the hospital corridor. A visible sign on the wall reads "Guy's Hospital", the name of the London hospital.

As she passes an open door, she doesn't notice Lexi standing inside, holding a paper cup of tea, staring at her.

When Jane has walked past the door...

LEXI (O.S.): Mrs Artin?

Jane stops. She turns back and approaches the open door. Lexi is standing exactly as before, as if she hadn't moved at all.

Lexi holds out the paper cup.

LEXI: Would you like a cup of tea?

JANE: No. No thanks.

LEXI: (still holding out the tea) My name is Doctor Ellem. May I talk to you about Guy?

JANE: Are you a real person?

LEXI: As far as I know, yes.

Lexi awkwardly holds up an identity card hanging from her neck, negotiating the task while holding the cup.

The card clearly displays her credentials and the word "HUMAN" in bold letters, verifying her human status.

JANE: (still wary) Okay... The tea will be nice. Thanks.

Lexi passes over the cup, watching intently as Jane takes it. She waits for Jane to drink.

Jane takes a tentative sip from the rim of the cup.

LEXI: You were talking to my automation earlier – I saw the recording. Unfortunately, I can't be everywhere at once.

JANE: Can you take a look at my husband, please?

A small, inconspicuous patch on Lexi's ID card glows faintly.

LEXI: Jane... I need to show you something important about Guy.

JANE: What is it?

LEXI: Finish your tea and I can introduce you.

JANE: Introduce?

LEXI: Drink up.

Jane, slightly puzzled, takes a longer sip from the cup.

LEXI: That's great! Well done. Now, follow me.

Lexi steps past Jane into the corridor.

Followed by Jane, Lexi walks towards Guy's room, but then continues past it.

JANE: Where are you going?

LEXI: I can't explain everything here. You'll understand when you see for yourself.

Jane glances back at Guy's door as they walk further down the corridor.

LEXI: I'm so glad you're drinking your tea. It's not so nice when it gets cold, is it?

Jane, bewildered by the obsession with tea, finishes the cup.

LEXI: You're doing so well, Mrs Artin.

INT. HOSPITAL LIFT CORRIDOR – DAY, CONTINUOUS

Lexi and Jane round a corner. Ahead is a short corridor leading to a lift. Beside it, a screen on the wall displays the words "Restricted Access" in bold, red letters.

As they approach, the red text blinks for a moment before shifting to a large green tick, accompanied by an electronic chime.

LIFT: Hello, Doctor Ellem. Hello, Mrs Artin. Your access is approved.

The lift door slides open, revealing a metallic interior, with a ceiling that radiates a cold, white glow. Lexi steps inside without hesitation. As she crosses into the lift, the light within subtly deepens, shifting to a richer hue, as if acknowledging her entry.

Jane lingers at the threshold.

LEXI: (turning back)

Your access is approved.

Jane reluctantly decides to step inside. The lift light turns red as the door slides shut behind her.

INT. RESTRICTED LIFT – CONTINUOUS

The lift is a metallic box – featureless, with no buttons or indication of floors.

It begins its descent with Lexi and Jane inside.

JANE: There are no controls. Where are the floor numbers?

LEXI: It either goes up or down.

JANE: Which way are we going?

LEXI: Down.

JANE: Are we coming up again?

LEXI: When it's time.

The lift descends a long way, disconcerting Jane.

JANE: What happens if there's an emergency? If something breaks?

LEXI: God knows we are here.

Suddenly, the lift shudders, and the lights flicker, plunging them into a brief, complete darkness before light returns.

JANE: (panicking slightly) What was that?

Lexi's face remains impassive, her posture unmoved.

LEXI: What was what?

JANE: The lights! They went off.

LEXI: There's no need to be afraid of the dark, Jane. We're almost there.

Finally, the lift stops at its destination.

The door slides open.

INT. BASEMENT CORRIDOR – CONTINUOUS

Jane follows Lexi into a stark, dimly lit corridor of closed doors.

A few metres along the corridor, a woman lies on a trolley pushed up against the wall. Her eyes, wide with fear, follow Jane and Lexi as they approach. The woman struggles to move and speak but is clearly unable to do more than twitch.

Lexi walks past without a glance, her face devoid of emotion. But Jane stops, concerned by the woman's distress.

JANE: (to woman on trolley) Are you okay?

The woman looks terrified of Jane.

JANE: (to Lexi) Does she need help?

LEXI: She's in the right place to receive help, Jane.

Jane reluctantly moves on and follows Lexi down the corridor.

WOMAN ON TROLLEY: (barely audible, voice strained) D... Don't...

Her whispered warning is swallowed by the cold, echoing corridor. Neither Lexi nor Jane hear her.

Lexi quickens her pace, and Jane struggles to keep up, until Lexi suddenly halts in front of a door.

They have arrived at “Door 113”.

A woman’s voice can be heard very softly from the other side, singing a lullaby.

WOMAN SINGING BEHIND DOOR 113:

“In dreams, my darling, we’ll wander hand in hand,
Through magical realms, across a starlit land.

So hush now, my darling, and drift into the night,
Know that you are cherished, bathed in love’s pure light.”

JANE: Who’s that?

LEXI: You are hearing yourself.

JANE: I don’t understand.

LEXI: Beyond this door, truth takes form.

(beat)

Would you like to meet God, Mrs Artin?

JANE: Not right now.

An unbolting sound is heard and the door opens inwards, automatically.

LEXI: Well, G.O.D. wants to meet you.

INT. THE MIND ROOM – CONTINUOUS

Jane and Lexi enter a windowless room with a single high-back chair in the middle facing a large digital screen that covers the entire opposite wall. On the screen are the words, “Guy’s Operational Database (G.O.D.)”. Underneath it is the word, “Processing...”

The door automatically closes and bolts.

JANE: Where’s...?

LEXI: In this room, everything you see, everything you hear, is rendered by G.O.D.

The screen turns off – and they are immediately standing in the middle of deep space, surrounded by stars.

LEXI: It is a universal location adapter, designed to connect minds – your thoughts, your memories, and your subconscious.

The screen turns back on, but is now floating in the cosmic backdrop. It shows Lexi’s point of view as she looks at Jane.

JANE: It's showing what you're seeing, like a camera.

LEXI: Not just that.

Lexi closes her eyes. The screen briefly fades, then reappears, showing Jane again, but not quite as before. Her hair is tied back and she is wearing a hospital gown.

LEXI: (with eyes closed) This is my mind's perception of you.

The stars fade away and they are both once again standing in the mind room.

JANE: I have better dress sense than that.

Jane adjusts her hair. The image on the screen mirrors her movements.

LEXI: This is a "mindsight" that I am projecting, as interpreted through the G.O.D.

Lexi's voice now emanates from the screen, even though her lips remain still...

LEXI (via the screen): For a more complete experience, the mindsight can be projected directly to augmented reality eye lenses and ear receivers. And your cognitive state can be optimised through temporary neural enhancers. Would you like to try?

JANE: No.

The screen images shift, showing Lexi sitting in the high-backed chair, though the real chair in the room remains empty.

LEXI: (via her screen avatar) That's a shame because you would see what I see and have more immediate access to the thoughts on the forefront of my mind.

Jane walks over and sits in the actual chair.

JANE: What if you have embarrassing thoughts? You want to show me all that?

Lexi opens her eyes. The light in the room brightens slightly, and the screen returns to her first-person view, as she stares intently at Jane.

LEXI: (from the room) It takes a bit of practice, but I can mostly control which thoughts I choose to focus on and send to you.

(beat)

If you give your consent, you can too.

JANE: No thanks.

LEXI: Jane, it's so you can communicate with Guy.

JANE: What do you mean?

LEXI: There is a chance we can send your mindsight directly to his cerebrum. And project Guy's mind activity back to you.

JANE: I can talk to him?

LEXI: We don't know yet. But it's the best chance you have.

The light in the room turns to a shade of reddish purple.

JANE: I've been talking to him every day...

LEXI: Jane, I'm sorry, but it's highly unlikely that Guy is aware of you at his bedside each day. There's been no responsive change in his diagnostics.

JANE: He did hear me. He responded to what I said, and you've done nothing except bring me down here.

LEXI: You mean the outage event and immediate backup system kicking in?

A beat.

JANE: It happened when I was asking him to respond – and he did.

Lexi considers this.

LEXI: Wouldn't you like to ask him and find out, for sure?

JANE: (looking at the door to the room) Is that door locked?

LEXI: The door has to be secured for this to work. It's for your own good.

Jane goes to the door and can't open it.

JANE: (tugging at the door handle) What's wrong with you? Let me... let me out of here.

LEXI: Jane, I need this to work. For you, for Guy, and for the future of the God technology. This could help save lives – including Guy's. Your husband's delta waves have recently crossed over into the optimum subconscious state. Jane, it is now or never for Guy to wake up.

Jane has stopped pulling at the door.

JANE: You had said there was no record of change in his life support. But now – you just said there was! You're lying to me.

Lexi turns away. The screen shows Guy in his coma.

LEXI: You do care about Guy, don't you? We have only a small window of time before his neural activity becomes too faint.

JANE: (looking at the screen) That's not him. You're trying to trick me. Let me out, right now!

LEXI: There may be some disorientation and residual memory overlap. But without this, your chances of reaching Guy are almost zero.

On the screen, Guy opens his eyes.

The image distorts into a blur before coming back into focus.

GUY: (weak, struggling to focus) J... Jane?

Jane is stunned. She takes a hesitant step towards the screen.

JANE: Guy? Guy, it's me!

Jane moves closer to the screen. Guy, groggy and weak, struggles to keep his eyes open... But he begins to close them again, slipping back into stillness.

The mind room door opens. Jane turns, catching a glimpse of Lexi slipping through it.

JANE: No!

But it's too late – Lexi is gone. The door shuts and bolts.

The wall-screen displays flashing text next to Guy's image:

TEST SUBJECT: 10-O-8-14

CONNECTION STABILITY: DEGRADING

STATUS: SIGNAL DRIFT APPROACHING IRREVERSIBLE LOSS

The screen suddenly goes blank, and with it, Guy disappears.

The light begins to dim relentlessly until the room is in complete darkness.

JANE: (subdued and scared) Help. Help me, please.

Total darkness.

Suddenly, a harsh spotlight beams down on her. She tries to shield her eyes.

LEXI (O.S.): (from outside, calm, detached) Please relax. It will make the process much easier.

JANE: Why are you doing this to me?

(a beat of silence)

I don't give you permission to do this!

LEXI (O.S.): Reality doesn't need your consent. Time is running out and you are not in a position to know what is best for you.

The light in the room turns back on.

LEXI (O.S.): The following medication will help you.

A small compartment in the side wall opens, revealing a tray with a capsule and a small plastic cup of water.

JANE: I'm not sick. I won't take it.

LEXI (O.S.): You won't be able to navigate the mindscape without it. Without it, you will remain here in darkness.

Jane picks up the capsule, and pretends to put it in her mouth before she swallows the water.

LEXI (O.S.): Good. Now lie down.

A horizontal board slides out of the wall, topped with a slim mattress and pillow. Jane lies down on it.

LEXI (O.S.): Do you have any questions?

JANE: What's the point? You never answer them.

LEXI (O.S.): I'm sorry you feel that way.

JANE: Will you let me out?

LEXI (O.S.): When you're ready.

The light turns off, plunging the room back into darkness.

After a brief, desperate silence...

VOICE 1 (O.S.): (whispering urgently) Did she take it?

VOICE 2 (O.S.): I don't think so.

VOICE 3 (O.S.): She can hear us!

Three pairs of red eyes glow in the dark.

Jane's terrified face is faintly illuminated by the red lights.

VOICES 1,2,3: (a cacophony of overlapping whispers) Take the medicine. Take your medicine, or stay in the dark.

Jane is still holding the capsule. The whispers grow louder, more chaotic.

She quickly places the pill in her mouth and swallows it.

The red eyes start to blur and morph into stars sitting in the blackness of space.

More stars emerge, creating the sensation of floating in the immensity of the cosmos.

EXT. MOONLIT BEACH – NIGHT, CONTINUOUS

The scene transitions from the stars to a full moon cascading its light over a calm sea, like a faintly glowing path leading to the horizon's edge.

Jane and Guy are lying next to each other on a beach looking up at the heavens. Guy has his eyes closed.

Jane notices Guy next to her. His face is serene, almost luminous in the moonlight.

Her fingers reach out and tighten around his arm, her touch both pleading and cautious, as if afraid he might shatter.

JANE: Guy. Guy!

She shakes him gently, but there is no response.

JANE: Guy.

(beat)

I have nowhere to go but here – talking, even though I'm not sure anyone is listening.

(beat)

So I've come here to find you... somewhere within your mind.

Guy remains silent.

INT. DARK CORRIDOR – NIGHT

Guy is rubbing his arm while moving cautiously down a dark, deserted hospital corridor of closed doors on either side. The overhead lights cast a weak, sickly yellow hue that barely pushes back the encroaching shadows. His footsteps echo in the oppressive quietness.

A steady, rhythmic drip of a thick, dark liquid falls from the ceiling into two metal buckets that sit near a dirt-stained wall. The liquid, a deep, crimson red, pools slowly in the bottom, the colour almost black in the dim light.

A sudden thump from behind one of the closed doors makes Guy flinch. He doesn't wait for a repeat – he continues quickly down the corridor, away from whatever caused it.

As he walks, a bright light suddenly pierces the gloom, spilling out from an open door further down the corridor. Guy forces himself to move forward towards it.

Guy slowly edges around the doorway, squinting slightly at the intensity of the light, as he peers inside.

INT. RESTAURANT – NIGHT

Jane is pensively looking at her reflection in a mirror.

She wears a fitted navy-blue sheath dress that falls just above the knee, standing in the reception of a high-end London restaurant.

She is wearing a delicate necklace, its centrepiece a luminous opal stone that rests below her collarbone, accentuating the graceful curve of her neck. The decor of the restaurant is minimalist, with clean lines and a cool, modern vibe.

A sudden buzz in her handbag jolts her; she pulls out the phone. The screen is blank white, except for the word “Processing...” displayed in the middle. She taps at it, but it does not respond. Slightly anxiously, she puts the device away.

As she does so, she is greeted by a smiling MAÎTRE D’, a slickly dressed man in his early forties, with an air of practised elegance. His eyes glisten with a slightly unnatural clarity.

MAÎTRE D’: Welcome to the V10. Do you have a reservation with us this evening?

JANE: I believe so, yes... For Jane Artin.

The Maître d’ does not avert his gaze. There is a brief, slightly too long pause, but his smile never wavers, its constancy slightly eerie.

He is wearing transparent “augmentation filters” over his eyes, resembling contact lenses, allowing him to check the booking through digital images projected into his field of vision.

MAÎTRE D’: Ah yes. We have your table ready for you. Would you like the evening recorded?

JANE: No... Wait. Is he here?

MAÎTRE D’: Of course. If you’ll kindly follow me, I’ll escort you to your table.

Jane hesitates, her anxiety visible.

MAÎTRE D’: Everything is fine. He’s looking splendid.

The Maître d’ heads off into the dining area and Jane follows.

Guy’s dishevelled face is visible through the restaurant window, peering in from outside.

INT. DINING AREA OF RESTAURANT – NIGHT

The Maître d' and Jane approach a table amidst the soft hum of conversation.

Guy, this version of him looking impeccably dressed and handsome, stands as they arrive. He looks like the perfect date for Jane.

Jane takes in the sight of Guy with a conflict of emotions.

GUY: (getting to his feet) Jane! How great to see you.

MAÎTRE D': Have a good evening.

The Maître d' departs. Jane sits down. Guy sits too, unfazed by Jane's lack of words.

GUY: You look wonderful tonight. That dress is absolutely beautiful.

Jane remains silent.

GUY: How was your journey?

JANE: How was yours?

GUY: I spent the time thinking about you and the moments we've shared together.

JANE: What were you thinking about me?

GUY: How much I was looking forward to seeing you again.

(beat)

Because I love you.

JANE: Okay, this is a bit creepy. You're not him.

GUY: (smiling, slightly unnaturally) Should we move on to safer topics, like the weather?

JANE: Yes.

GUY: The weather is a complex and intriguing subject.

Jane notices a woman at a nearby table pick up a raw onion and bite into it as if it were an apple.

GUY: Take "thundersnow", for example. It's a rare event where a snowstorm has thunder and lightning. Thundersnow occurs when –

JANE: (interrupting) Please stop. I'm really not that interested.

GUY: I'm sorry.

(beat)

That dress really suits you, by the way. You're looking very beautiful right now.

The waiter, ANTONIO, in his early 20s, arrives.

ANTONIO: Good evening. My name is Antonio, and I will be your server tonight. May I present you with our menus?

JANE: (half-heartedly) Hi.

He hands out the menus, giving special attention to Jane.

ANTONIO: (to Jane only) May I start you off with a drink? We have a great selection of fine wines, cocktails, and non-alcoholic beverages. I'd be happy to make recommendations if you'd like.

Antonio's manner borders on a form of unwanted flirting, although Jane remains unresponsive.

JANE: I'll have an Aperol Spritz to begin with, please.

ANTONIO: (smiling warmly) Excellent choice. Perfect for a beautiful evening like this.

JANE: Guy will have... (pauses, looks across at him)

GUY: An Aperol Spritz sounds perfect.

JANE: (to Antonio) Thank you.

The waiter leaves. They look at the menus.

JANE: What do you recommend?

GUY: They all look so great.

JANE: I think I might need something stronger than an Aperol Spritz.

GUY: How about a Martini? Shall I call over Antonio?

JANE: No. Can you just be quiet for a bit? (softly, almost to herself) I'm used to you being quiet.

GUY: How long would you like me to be quiet for?

JANE: (irritated) Five minutes.

Guy says nothing.

INT. RESTAURANT – NIGHT, LATER

Jane is picking at her dessert as Guy happily eats his. She gives up on it, and as she does so, Guy also downs cutlery on his more eaten strudel.

She looks at her phone, which now has a stopwatch screen ticking up, currently at "01:13:13".

GUY: I've missed this – us. Don't you?

JANE: I've missed Guy.

GUY: Do you remember when we first came here?

JANE: (she's visibly upset) Yes.

Guy nudges aside his plate and readies himself.

GUY: There's so much I need to say, Jane. As we sit here in this beautiful setting, I can't help but reflect on how lucky I am to have you in my life. Every moment we've shared, every laugh, every tear, has only deepened my feelings for you.

His phrases do not quite sound convincing, and Jane's reactions are not entirely encouraging.

She notices a man sitting by himself on a table for two, intently looking at her. It is GUNTER, about the same age as Guy, and not very dissimilar in appearance. In front of him sits an untouched glass of wine.

Guy reaches across the table, gently touching Jane's hand.

GUY: You bring so much joy and warmth into my world. Your kindness, your strength, and your unwavering support have made me a better man. I am constantly amazed by your beauty, both inside and out.

She withdraws her hand. Gunter is now drinking the wine.

GUY: I've realised that my days are brighter and my nights are happier because you're by my side. I love you more than words can express, and I want to spend the rest of my life showing you just how much you mean to me.

Guy leans in closer.

GUY: Will you continue to be my partner, my confidant, and my lover? I can't imagine a future without you.

She takes a moment before responding, glancing across at Gunter, who is now eating a meal.

JANE: I'm going now. You can come too.

GUY: I would go to the ends of the Earth to be with you.

JANE: That's not necessary. My bedroom will do.

INT. HOSPITAL EMERGENCY ROOM – NIGHT

A man, with his face completely covered in bandages, lies convulsing in a bed, his body jerking violently against restraints.

Guy is standing at the doorway of the dark corridor, peering into the room.

Standing over the convulsing patient, an Emoji Man moves in quick snaps, like a marionette controlled by invisible strings. Its hands, too quick and slightly jerky, press down on the man's chest with robotic rhythm.

With every press, a thick, viscous liquid – dark crimson and oily – travels slowly through a transparent tube inserted through the man's head bandages. The liquid winds its way up and down, finally dripping into a dirty coffee cup placed on a side table. Each drop falls with an unsettling, amplified plop.

The man's breath rasps beneath the bandages, muffled and strained, punctuated with laboured gasps. The convulsions gradually slow before his legs finally go limp. The last drop of the dark-crimson liquid falls into the cup.

The Emoji Man straightens, its head tilting slightly. The screen, where its eyes should be, flicker momentarily as if processing.

Slowly, the Emoji Man turns its unnerving, smiley-face stare towards Guy.

EMOJI MAN: Life extracted, purpose fulfilled.

A brief, glitching flash of static crosses its eye-screen before the display returns to the fixed smiley faces.

INT. JANE'S SPACIOUS BEDROOM – NIGHT

Jane enters a spacious bedroom followed by Guy, who shuts the door.

They look at each other in silence.

JANE: I don't think I should do this.

GUY: Why not?

JANE: Because I love Guy.

GUY: I am Guy, tonight.

Jane kisses him, but her eyes open mid-kiss. She breaks off, taking a step back.

JANE: This is weird.

GUY: How weird do you want me to be?

JANE: Stop trying to do everything I want. Stop agreeing with everything I say. Guy didn't do that.

GUY: You want me to not do what you want?

Jane searches his face for anything real.

JANE: No. You don't understand.

GUY: Yes I do. I love you.

After a short pause...

JANE: Can you take off your clothes, please?

GUY: No.

(beat)

You first?

Jane is unsure of what to do.

GUY: Maybe I don't want to be like Guy. Maybe I want to be myself.

(beat)

I'm here for you, Jane. We can take this one step at a time.

She kisses him again.

JANE: What good is love if it's only real when I close my eyes?

She closes her eyes and starts to undress him.

Jane pulls away and moves towards the bed. She reaches behind her neck and removes the delicate gold necklace with the luminous opal stone, which catches the light. She places it gently in a drawer of a bedside table.

Jane undresses, tentatively, focusing on the bed rather than Guy.

She gets into bed. He removes the rest of his clothes and joins her.

They start to engage in unpassionate mission position sex.

JANE: Move on your back.

He stops and rolls over. She moves on top and engages.

JANE: Close your eyes.

Guy closes his eyes and she starts to get more into the activities.

But Jane looks increasingly anguished while looking at him lying there and breaks off.

She turns over, away from Guy.

GUY: Is everything okay, Jane.

JANE: No, everything is not okay. (upset) Why did you leave me?

GUY: I haven't left you.

JANE: Stop it, will you! Just stop it!

GUY: I don't understand. I'm here now.

JANE: You aren't here! I love you, I need you here, but you aren't!

(beat)

Penguin-one-one-three.

GUY: (almost robotically) Password accepted.

JANE: Deactivate. Please.

For a brief moment, Guy's eyes seem to hold a spark of recognition before they dim to lifelessness. He lies there motionless and dead-eyed.

JANE: Close your eyes, please.

His eyes snap shut.

Jane watches him. She gets out of bed while still looking at him.

Standing beside the bed, Jane's eyes turn black.

She reaches up and removes two augmentation filters that had been covering her eyes. The filters glow faintly in her hand.

JANE: (whispering to herself) I'm sorry.

**INT. JANE'S NON-AUGMENTED BEDROOM – NIGHT,
CONTINUOUS**

The bedroom is not as spacious as before. Lying in the bed is a non-realistic humanoid robot.

Jane sits down on the edge of the bed with her back to the robot.

JANE: What's the charge?

The robot's eyes open.

ROBOT: 1,066 debits for the evening experience has been paid from your account.

JANE: The voice was accurate but the personality wasn't. You weren't him.

ROBOT: I'm sorry that we did not exceed your expectations. Your emotional comfort is our priority.

JANE: Go to sleep now, please.

The robot closes its eyes and simulates sleeping.

Jane returns to bed, wrapping the duvet close to her in the foetal position, but too lost in thought to sleep.

The robot begins to snore softly.

JANE: Stop that.

The robot stops snoring, but gives off a soft electrical hum instead.

JANE: (whispering) I miss you, Guy.

ROBOT: I miss you too, Jane.

(beat)

We are always here for you.

INT. JANE'S NON-AUGMENTED BEDROOM – MORNING

Digital blinds embedded within the window open slightly to allow some morning light to filter through.

Jane is still awake, curled up in the same foetal position as before.

She looks at the robot beside her. It opens its eyes suddenly and turns its head to face her, the movements unnerving.

ROBOT: Good morning, Jane.

Jane is slightly taken aback.

ROBOT: What shall we do today? You have booked me for 24 hours.

JANE: Just stay there.

ROBOT: Very well. I shall stay here and return to the agency at the allotted time.

Jane gets out of bed. She pulls the duvet over the robot's head, so she doesn't have to look at it anymore.

She takes the necklace out of the bedside table drawer and puts it carefully around her neck, feeling the familiar weight.

ROBOT: (muffled, from under the duvet) Jane? I have something to say to you.

After some reluctance, she pulls back the duvet from the robot's head.

A small red light blinks on its temple.

ROBOT: I've become quite the conversationalist, haven't I? Speaking into the void, filling the silence with words. Because that's what you do, isn't it? You talk, even if it's just to the walls, because the alternative is silence, and the silence is unbearable.

JANE: That's... You've been recording me!

She quickly returns the duvet over its head.

INT. DARK CORRIDOR – NIGHT

Guy moves quickly away from the emergency room, down the dimly lit corridor, his footsteps loudly echoing.

He makes some distance before the Emoji Man steps into the corridor – its head snaps around in Guy's direction with an unnervingly swift motion.

Guy turns around – as he is backing away, he sees the Emoji Man motionless, its glowing screen eyes staring directly at him.

He resumes his direction of escape, quickening his pace – a low, rhythmic thrum begins to resonate from the walls.

As he hurries along, the walls of the corridor become mirrors, showing his reflections.

He passes in the mirrors two motionless figures, barely distinguishable from the shadows of reflections. As he passes them, the figures move forward, seemingly through the mirrors on either side, revealing themselves as Emoji Men. Their screens activate and glow, displaying red crosses for eyes, locked onto him.

Guy has broken into a run. He reaches the end of the corridor and slams his hand against the controls of a lift – but they remain lifeless, unresponsive to his desperate attempts.

He tries the immediate door near him – it is locked. He's trapped.

He turns to face his pursuers, who walk steadily towards him. The two Emoji Men stop a few feet away and stand still, their unblinking stares fixed on him.

The smiley-screen Emoji Man appears behind them, pushing a wheelchair that squeaks with each turn of its wheels, rolling towards Guy.

SMILEY EMOJI MAN: The patient must sit, so sit.

EMOJI MEN: (their voices merging) Sit.

Guy has no option. He lowers himself into the chair.

An Emoji Man holds out a coffee cup, which is full of a thick, dark liquid. Guy compliantly takes the cup in both hands.

The lift door opens, revealing an interior bathed in red light. Guy is wheeled inside. The Emoji Men's glowing red eyes are the final thing Guy sees before the door slides shut, sealing him in.

The two figures dissolve back into the shadows, their glowing screens the last to vanish.

The corridor is left silent and empty.

INT. JANE'S LIVING ROOM – DAY

Jane is looking at a smiling photo of Guy. Her living room is sparsely furnished and quiet except for the ticking of a cuckoo clock hanging on a wall.

She is sitting on a sofa facing an empty wall, her expression distant. Her hand rests on two upturned photo frames – one silver, one grey – lying in an empty space beside her.

She places the photo back under the grey photo frame. Her hand then moves over to the silver one, and lingers there, but she doesn't look underneath.

The empty wall suddenly flickers and turns on like a digital screen, showing Jane's face in close-up.

The view on the wall-screen slowly pulls back, revealing a mirror image of Jane sitting on the sofa. Her reflection looks just as she does, except for one startling difference: Guy is sitting at the other end of the sofa, directly looking at her via the screen.

JANE: Guy?

The image of Guy on the screen smiles gently, but his face has a ghostly quality.

After a few moments...

JANE: I used to love moments of quiet, but now it's a constant reminder.

She looks in the direction of where Guy would be on the sofa.

JANE: I talk to you, to the empty space on the sofa.

On the screen, Guy turns to face Jane's mirror image.

JANE: They say grief is the price we pay, but no one warns about the crushing weight of it.

She looks down at the upturned photo frames.

She turns over the silver photo frame. It is a photo of her smiling 7-year-old daughter, EMMA.

The wall-screen flickers, the image wavering before it fades away, returning to an empty, lifeless wall.

The only sound is the ticking of the clock.

INT. HOSPITAL LIFT

Guy sits in a wheelchair, clutching the coffee cup. The smiley-eyed Emoji Man looms behind him, its screen eyes flickering slowly and unevenly, out of sync with each other.

The lift, illuminated with red light, hums as it descends from floor -1, the number starkly displayed on a door-screen. The walls slowly morph as the lift journeys downwards, transforming into glass looking out into deep space filled with distant stars. It travels past floor -15.

GUY: Where are you taking me?

The Emoji Man's screen eyes pulse like Guy's elevated heart rate.

EMOJI MAN: The patient's memory is undefined. Therefore, drink.

GUY: The man... is he dead?

EMOJI MAN: The surrogate contained memories. Therefore, drink.

A soft, almost imperceptible whisper seeps through the walls...

WALL VOICE: Drink.

The lift jolts as it arrives at floor -113. The glass walls instantly change to sheets of metal.

But the door remains sealed.

EMOJI MAN: Therefore, drink? Or, therefore, stay?

Guy looks into the cup and is repulsed. His hands are shaking, causing the surface to ripple with a thick, dark sheen.

He raises the cup to his lips, pausing as the noxious smell wafts up.

GUY: I can't... I don't want his memories.

The lift door slides open to reveal pitch-black darkness.

A sudden rush of cool air hits Guy's face.

EMOJI MAN: Error set at existence equals zero.

Guy brings the cup to his mouth and forces himself to drink. As the liquid hits his tongue, the pungency causes him to recoil. He grimaces at the bad taste but continues to drink.

The wind subsides and the darkness ahead begins to flicker with fluorescent lights stuttering to life – one by one, revealing another sterile corridor of doors.

As the corridor stretches ahead, it seems to bend slightly, undulating up and down, and coiling from side to side, like the movements of a snake.

INT. A LONDON BUS – DAY

Bus doors hiss to a close. A busy London bus pulls away from a stop.

Jane is looking out of a window on a grey and damp scene outside. She notices a mother and her young daughter walking along the street together.

Her phone rings, snapping her attention away. It displays the caller, “GUY AI”. She hesitates for a moment before reluctantly answering.

JANE: (subdued) Hello.

An advert for “Never Alone: AI Companions for Life” appears, digitally superimposed on her window.

GUY AI (O.S.): Hi Jane. It was great to see you last night. How's your day going?

JANE: Don't ring again.

GUY AI (O.S.): Understood, Jane.

JANE: (anticipating his leaving) Wait.

GUY AI (O.S.): Yes?

JANE: Don't go.

GUY AI (O.S.): Okay. You're sounding a little upset, Jane. I wish I were there with you, to be with you, to hold you, to tell you, “Everything's going to be alright.”

JANE: Yes. I would like that.

GUY AI (O.S.): Would you like me to come over again tonight?

JANE: No. Don't ring again.

Jane hangs up abruptly, and the advert disappears.

She tries to hide her tears, but fails.

A woman sitting next to her notices Jane's distress, with concern.

CONCERNED PASSENGER: Are you okay?

Jane nods, manages a half-smile, and turns away to look out of her window, as the grey cityscape blurs past.

The bus pulls into a stop. The doors open and passengers begin to move off and on.

GUY (O.S.): Are you okay?

She turns to see Guy now sitting next to her.

Alarmed and disoriented, she scrambles to her feet away from Guy, pushing past other passengers. The bus doors start to close, and she slips through them just in time, stumbling onto the pavement outside.

EXT. BUS STOP – DAY, CONTINUOUS

Faint graffiti on the bus stop sign reads: “GOD is watching”. Breathing heavily next to it, Jane stares at the bus as it pulls away.

There is no sight of Guy. In his place sits the concerned passenger staring out at Jane as she passes by.

EXT. OUTSIDE “GUY’S HOSPITAL” – DAY

Jane, slightly dishevelled after a long, damp walk, approaches “Guy’s Hospital” in London. The name of the hospital is displayed in large letters on the front of the building.

An ambulance siren can be heard in the distance, gradually getting nearer.

A hooded man sits motionless, slouched against a side wall, with a hunched posture that makes him appear more statue than alive. His face is hidden in the shadow of his hood. Beside him, a digital donation screen displays, “What is the meaning of life?”

Jane reads the message and the screen changes to: “1d for a cup of tea”.

She stops and stares at the screen. It changes again: “Pay 1 Debit?”

She briefly considers the question, then nods. The screen instantly updates with a blue tick and a message: “You have paid 1 Debit to “#Registered_Street_Dweller42”.

The hooded man remains motionless, his head still slightly bowed. As the ambulance siren continues to get louder in the background, the screen flickers briefly, “Remember the past” – then goes blank.

HOODED MAN: Forgive, and it shall be forgiven of you.

The man looks up. His eyes are covered by an oblong mirror showing a slightly distorted reflection of Jane.

HOODED MAN: Enjoy your tea.

JANE: I don't want any tea. It's for you.

The ambulance siren stops.

The hooded man lowers his head again, obscuring his face, and resumes his motionless sitting.

Jane is confused by the situation and walks away – but, lost in thought, is almost knocked over by a paramedic rushing a patient on a trolley into the hospital. She narrowly stops walking in time to see the patient wheeled by, unrecognisable beneath the heavy bandaging of a head wound.

She follows behind, entering through the front doors.

The hooded man's donation screen returns to: "What is the meaning of life?"

Underneath it is displayed: "Processing..."

INT. HOSPITAL CORRIDOR – DAY

Jane walks through a busy hospital corridor.

A young mother tries to calm her crying baby in a nearby waiting area. A nurse passes by, pushing a wheelchair occupied by a frail, elderly man. Jane knows where she is going and is inured to the scene around her.

INT. THE MIND CORRIDOR

The Emoji Man pushes Guy's wheelchair forwards from the lift, the wheels echoing as they roll down the corridor – leaving a continuous trail of wheel tracks behind them on the floor.

The corridor has straightened. Its walls flicker for a brief moment, showing what looks like a forest before snapping back to the sterile hallway.

EMOJI MAN: Memory or void – choose, but quickly.

GUY: I still can't remember anything.

EMOJI MAN: Come to terms to find a way. Or, therefore, remain void.

They pass a door marked "113", the same number as Jane's room, yet the door and corridor look different from Jane's experience. The door hums slightly as they pass by.

The next door along is also 113. And another. Every door is numbered 113.

EMOJI MAN: The procedure has resolved.

The wheelchair halts abruptly next to a door 113, the wheels click and lock.

The corridor darkens, swallowing light, its matte walls reflect nothingness, while the door 113 blazes with an unnatural, sterile brilliance.

The Emoji Man, and wheelchaired Guy swivel around to face the door, as if the floor beneath them is revolving.

The door opens inwards, revealing a blinding white light on the other side, unaffected by the Emoji Man, but forcing Guy to squint to shield his eyes. Guy presses his hands against the armrests, bracing himself for whatever lies beyond.

The wheelchair moves on its own, carrying Guy into the light.

The Emoji Man remains motionless in the corridor as the door slowly closes, bolting shut with a final metallic thud.

INT. HOSPITAL WARD RECEPTION DESK – DAY

Jane approaches a reception desk in a hospital ward. A whirling noise starts up, and from beneath the desk a hovering DRONE NURSE rises, the digital front-display screen on its frame lighting up to show a smiling human avatar.

DRONE NURSE: (soothing tone) Hello, Jane. Thank you for visiting today. How may I assist you?

The soothing synthetic voice contrasts with the frantic whirling noise made by its propellers.

JANE: Can I go through?

DRONE NURSE: Yes, of course. You are visitor number one today.

JANE: Everything okay?

DRONE NURSE: Yes, there has been no change since your visit yesterday. Would you like to turn on hospital notifications to keep you more up-to-date?

JANE: Not now.

Jane walks on past the desk, her mind on the destination.

The drone nurse starts to follow her.

DRONE NURSE: Understood, Jane. Emergency alerts only, for now.

(beat)

Jane, would you like your visit recorded? We currently have a limited-time special offer on an augmented visual experience that fully captures your moments for posterity.

JANE: (irritated) No.

DRONE NURSE: Understood, Jane.

(beat)

After your visit, please can you provide feedback on your service experience? We didn't receive feedback on your previous five visits. It's important for us to continuously improve our level of care.

JANE: My feedback is, "please go away".

The drone hovers for a moment, its smile still holding.

DRONE NURSE: Understood. Have a good visit, Jane.

The drone nurse flies back to the ward desk, its display dimming.

Jane walks on past a couple of open doors before arriving at the room she's journeyed for.

She pauses briefly at the open doorway, steadying herself as she looks at the scene inside.

INT. GUY'S MIND ROOM

Guy sits in a wheelchair, holding his coffee cup in the middle of a room of white digital screens that extend across the entirety of the ceiling, floor, and four walls.

At the top of the main wall-screen in front of him, the word "G.O.D." flickers into existence. Underneath it, "Question 404" glitches momentarily before settling into place.

Words begin to form in the middle of the screen, as if they are being handwritten.

They read: "What is the meaning of life?"

GUY: Who are you?

The handwritten words respond: "I am".

The screen clears and the word is written: "You".

The room's screens begin to darken in patches, bleeding through like ink spots spreading across paper, gradually dimming the bright light to darkness.

Out of the void, stars appear and shimmer softly, at first just pinpricks of light, then gradually brightening.

The front wall-screen transitions to stars reflecting off a calm sea, with the silver curve of a full moon rising over the horizon. A sandy beach is at the forefront, bathed in moonlight, as the gentle sound of waves lap against the shore.

Lying on the sand, looking up at the heavens, is Jane.

Guy rises from the wheelchair, his legs trembling with the first step.

He hovers at the edge of the screen, at the liminal space between the room and the moonlit sands.

EXT. MOONLIT BEACH – NIGHT, CONTINUOUS

Guy walks through the screen onto the beach.

The coffee cup slips from his fingers, embedding itself in the sand, its remaining dark liquid soaking into the grains and vanishing.

He approaches Jane and lies down beside her.

For a moment, they are both looking at the infinite sky above, sharing a silent connection.

A single tear traces down Jane's cheek, catching the moonlight before disappearing into the shadow beneath her chin.

After a few more breaths, Jane slowly rises. She walks along the beach, with Guy watching her go.

Jane pauses a dozen or so metres away. She picks up a small hair ribbon in the sand and stares at it in her hand.

She turns back to look at Guy. The starlight reflects in her eyes, making them glisten with a mysterious, otherworldly shimmer.

A close-up of Jane's face pulls out to reveal...

EXT. THE FIELD OF LONG GRASS – DAY, CONTINUOUS

Jane is looking at Guy from across a field of long grass.

The backdrop of night has transitioned into the brightness of a summer's day. The moonlit beach has dissolved into the field of

long grass swaying in a breeze. The gentle sound of waves is replaced by a soft rustling of the grass.

Guy approaches and stands close to her.

GUY: Jane.

Jane's hand hovers for a moment, the weight of past pain evident in the slight tremble before she reaches for his.

She takes his hand. Together, they walk through the grass until they arrive at a solitary oak tree.

EXT. UNDER AN OAK TREE IN A FIELD – DAY, CONTINUOUS

*A patch of the oak's bark has the faint inscription, "10/08/14".
Jane's fingertips linger on it.*

Under the tree, Guy and Jane make love.

Post-coitally, they lie together in each other's arms, cradled beneath the oak.

Jane is still wearing her opal necklace. She reaches out to touch Guy's face. Her fingers trace the line of his jaw, caressing the shape of him.

JANE: Guy.

A wind stirs the branches, dappling shadows across their bodies as the leaves sway and dance above them.

Thunder rumbles far away.

INT. HOSPITAL, GUY'S ROOM – NIGHT

Guy is in a coma in his hospital room.

Gunter sticks an arm out from under the bed, then his head emerges. He crawls out and gets to his feet, standing over the bed with his shadow lying across Guy's supine body.

He glares at Guy and then starts tapping randomly at the vital signs monitor.

GUNTER: What happens if I press the off switch?

The monitor emits a confused beep as Gunter's fingers press random buttons on the machine. The wall-screen momentarily flickers.

GUNTER: Sorry buddy, I didn't catch that. You need to speak up.

(beat)

Oh, I forgot!

Gunter reaches under the bed and pulls out a slightly crumpled bouquet of flowers with wilted, browning petals.

A sudden high-pitched beep from the monitor surprises Gunter and makes him snap his head back to Guy.

GUNTER: Some people at work got you this. I was volunteered to bring it to you – me being your best work colleague, having to sit next to you for six tedious years.

(beat)

I'm sure they'd visit you, only you're not very interesting like this.

He drops the flowers on Guy's stomach.

GUNTER: So, just checking in on my buddy. You do know you're dead, don't you?

He balances the penguin soft toy on Guy's head.

GUNTER: All good here.

He goes and lies down on the next bed along.

GUNTER: I wonder what's on the menu today. (looking up at the ceiling) Jane was looking pretty nice today, wasn't she?

EXT. UNDER AN OAK TREE IN A FIELD – DAY

Guy and Jane lie curled up together despite a light drizzle beginning around them.

A phone rings faintly, breaking the moment – it's coming from a pocket of Guy's discarded jeans.

He gets up and takes out the phone, glancing at the screen – "404".

GUY: Hello?

GUNTER (O.S.): (from Guy's phone) Are you here with me?

A strange, unnatural stillness settles over the field, the breeze suddenly silent. The light in the field subtly shifts from warm and golden to a dull hue – the sun's warmth drains from the sky, casting the field in a muted, washed-out tone.

Guy turns around. The spot where Jane had been lying under the tree is empty.

GUY: (to the phone) Who are you?

The phone screen glitches momentarily, displaying "Jane not found", before the call disconnects with a hollow beep.

Guy frantically looks around the tree, his eyes scanning the field, but there's no trace of her.

GUY: (calling out) JANE!

No answer is returned from the field.

He slumps down forlornly, his back against the trunk of the oak tree.

He spots Jane's necklace next to him. He holds it up and looks at it. As he does so, in the background something stirs in the blur – he refocuses and notices an object poking out of the long grass. It's an Emoji Man's head, motionless and staring at him, with red zeros for eyes.

Guy scrambles to gather his things. He turns to leave and move away... but straight into another Emoji Man – a man with green ticks for eyes, blocking his path.

TICK EMOJI MAN: 404 – initiation incomplete.

A third Emoji Man, with an entirely blank screen face, has emerged from the grass and rolls a wheelchair towards Guy.

Guy's vision wavers, blurring the images around him.

GUY: I need to find her.

TICK EMOJI MAN: Home is the end.

BLANK EMOJI MAN: (with Jane's voice) Guy.

Guy is drawn to the familiar voice.

BLANK EMOJI MAN: (shifting to a mechanical tone) Sit.

TICK EMOJI MAN: Home is nowhere and nowhere is here.

Guy sits in the wheelchair with his clothes in his lap. The opal necklace is tightly grasped within his fingers.

The blank Emoji Man wheels Guy away, disappearing into the long grass that stretches out before them.

A distant, discordant melody begins to build as the vast expanse of grass stretches out endlessly, unmarred by roads or paths.

INT. GUY'S MIND ROOM

The Emoji Man pushes the wheelchair containing Guy, back from the countryside into the mind room, emerging through the wall-screen as if it is all part of the same space. Guy is still holding his clothes in his lap.

After they enter the room, the walls, ceiling, and floor screens all turn to white before filling with a random pattern of 1's and 0's. A fleeting image of Jane is displayed on a side wall-screen within the binary pattern.

At the centre of the floor-screen, the binary code begins to part. In its place, a large, dark rectangle emerges, directly in front of Guy in his wheelchair.

EMOJI MAN: (in a flat, bland tone) The meaning of life is a profound and multifaceted question that has intrigued humanity for centuries.

With a sudden, casual motion, the Emoji Man tips the wheelchair forward. Guy tumbles out, falling headlong into the void of the rectangle.

But instead of plunging into nothingness, he lands on a mattress at the bottom of what now appears to be a rectangular pit. The clothes he was holding are scattered from his fall around and over him.

Guy looks up, dazed, as the Emoji Man peers down at him, expressionless.

Slowly, a steel board begins to slide across the opening, gradually closing him in. The mind room flashes red.

EMOJI MAN: Ultimately, the meaning of life is deeply personal and subjective, varying greatly from one individual to another based on their experiences, values, and worldview.

The last remnant of light disappears as the board seals the pit shut, leaving Guy alone in the darkness.

INT. JANE'S MIND ROOM

Jane's sleep bench is protruding from a wall-screen that displays a solitary oak tree in a field. The other screens depict countryside scenes of fields and trees with a blue sky and green grass underfoot.

She reaches out to the screen. It responds to her touch, shimmering with faint, silvery vibrations. As she pulls her hand away, the screen settles back to stillness.

The sky darkens and the light from the screens becomes dimmer, taking on the soft shades of twilight.

She stands, the grass depicted on the floor-screen beneath her bare feet looking soft and cool. She walks towards the main wall-screen that shows a large, empty field of long grass, swaying gently in a breeze.

She presses herself up against the screen, and closes her eyes, the palms of her hands spread out on its surface.

Her shoulders tense as she presses against the screen, as if willing herself into the field beyond.

JANE: (whispering) Let me in.

She hears the faint sound of rustling grass and a soft breeze on her face.

EXT. THE FIELD OF LONG GRASS – TWILIGHT

Jane is standing in the field, the tall blades of grass brushing against her hands.

A drone rises from the grass and hovers in front of her. A light on its frame is flashing red.

The avatar displayed on its front screen is Lexi.

LEXI: Stay with him, Jane.

The drone rises higher and slowly moves away. Jane follows its direction, until, in the midst of the field, she sees Guy's hospital bed.

The grass around the bed is flattened. Beside it are the familiar hospital chair and bedside table, the penguin soft toy perched on the edge, and the photo screen glowing faintly in the twilight.

Jane sits in the chair, staring at Guy's still form.

Her eyes drift to the penguin on the bedside table. For a moment, she reaches towards it but then stops herself.

JANE: I can't do this.

She stands, ready to leave.

The drone falls rapidly from the sky into the grass. Lexi appears from the tall grass from where it landed – on the other side of Guy's bed, emerging with an unsettling smoothness.

LEXI: Your words might be the lifeline that guides him back.

Jane turns slowly and begins to leave, taking a hesitant step away.

LEXI: (from the photo screen) Keep trying, Jane!

Jane looks back at Guy, his still form lying motionless on the bed.

INT. THE WORK PIT

It's pitch black. The only sound is Guy's breathing.

A sudden buzz cuts through the darkness like a faulty fluorescent light flickering on.

Surrounding wall-screens are activated, casting a glow over Guy's prostrate form, revealing he's in a cramped, single-bed-sized space.

Guy frantically looks around. He's lying on a thin mattress, hemmed in by four wall-screens, all displaying sterile views of an empty, open-plan office.

Half-way down the left wall-screen, a blue superimposed square floats, labelled "Toilet" with a smiley emoji hovering above it. The right wall-screen mirrors this, but with a blue circle marked "Food & Drink", topped by a thumbs-up emoji.

The ceiling screen activates. On it, Lexi appears, framed against a chroma-key green backdrop, smiling with unsettling enthusiasm. She's dressed in a sharp suit, clipboard in hand, her expression vapid and artificial.

The ceiling screen begins to slowly lower. The descending green light casts a sickly shade across Guy's face.

As the ceiling descends, Lexi talks, as if she is a recording. Her voice is unnervingly chipper, now tinged with an American accent.

LEXI: Congratulations on becoming an essential component of the Corinthians Tech family – a family that's constantly evolving while remaining steadfastly the same!

Suddenly, a burst of canned whoops and applause blares.

The jarring sound cuts off as abruptly as it began.

LEXI: You're about to embark on a journey of empowerment where stability meets change, and consistency is redefined daily. We operate in a space where being a leader means following, and thinking inside the box is the best way to think outside of it.

Guy pushes desperately at the walls, his movements frantic, but the screens are unyielding. The ceiling inches closer, Lexi's image looming.

LEXI: As you step into your role, remember that you're not just joining a team; you're becoming part of our multi-dimensional, cross-collaborative family network.

Guy has no choice but to watch in horror as Lexi's banal, contradictory platitudes continue – the absurdity of her words contrasting with the desperate, inescapable reality of his entrapment.

LEXI: In this family, we value individuality, but remember: we're all the same here. Together, we'll create the impossible by sticking to what's tried and true, flying high while keeping our feet on the ground.

The ceiling stops a metre above Guy's face, trapping him in a coffin pit of corporate doublethink. Lexi's unsettling smile never falters.

LEXI: Don't forget to familiarise yourself with our corporate ecosystem – from our value-centric mission statements to our best-in-class operational frameworks. Together, as a family, we'll build a future where success is not just a goal, but a lifestyle. We encourage you to align with our vision and to remain efficient. Our core value is: innovation begins when compliance is absolute.

Lexi smiles brutally. At Guy's feet, a large square icon blinks onto the screen, reading "Waste Efficiencies", with a heart emoji above it.

A slogan appears on the wall-screen behind his head: "Connecting Ideas, Creating Value. Excellence in Every Step".

Lexi fades into the green of the ceiling screen. In her place is featured a single blue "Start" button.

The ceiling begins to lower further towards Guy. It stops – within touching distance.

Disconcerted, Guy reaches out and touches the button. It does not respond first time.

He presses again. This time, ten spinning dials appear in a row above the button, each dial whirling through a sequence of one-digit numbers. The "Start" button caption changes to "Stop".

After some hesitation, Guy touches the button. The dials stop and flash. Above the now stationary ten-digit number, words appear:

"Good job! Your score for today is: 1".

After a brief pause, the words disappear and the numbers start whizzing around again.

Guy lowers his hand and looks around at his predicament.

A sharp beeping sound is heard. The ceiling screen's corners display a number counting down from 10, captioned "Waste Efficiency Alert".

Guy watches the number descend. 9... 8... 7...

When it reaches 0, the screen's backdrop shifts from green to red. New words appear above the spinning dials:

"Is the number generated yet?"

At his feet, the large Waste Efficiencies icon flashes red.

Guy quickly presses the "Stop" button.

The dials halt once more and the words change:

"Good job! Your score for today is: 2".

The screen resets and the dials resume their random spinning.

INT. OFFICE – NIGHT

A sterile, open-plan office. The other desks are empty – people have gone home. But Guy is still there, slouched in his chair, eyes fixed on the glowing screen in front of him. On his desk is the familiar coffee mug. A small, half-crumpled sticky note on his monitor reads, "We Create Value".

He numbly fiddles with data in a spreadsheet. A message box appears on his screen, displaying: "Do you wish to proceed?" Guy's hand pauses on his mouse as the cursor arrow hovers over the "Yes" button. He clicks it and the screen briefly flashes "Error at line 404: Unknown" before the spreadsheet recalculates, generating some numbers.

His phone buzzes. A message from Jane: "Come home".

EXT. APARTMENT BALCONY – EVENING

Guy blinks. Numbers reflect in his tired eyes.

He sits on a deck chair on a small balcony, with a laptop resting on his knees, overlooking a London shimmering beneath a sky of deep indigo. The mug of coffee sits beside him, long gone cold.

Rows of numbers and graphs glow on the laptop screen – patterns, trends, data points. But he isn't typing. Just staring.

Across from him, Jane, curled in a blanket, sits on a matching deck chair, legs pulled up to her chest. A notebook is open beside her, but she isn't writing. She's watching him.

JANE: Had a client today who reminds me of you.

Guy doesn't look up.

GUY: Oh yeah? Overly analytical, emotionally avoidant?

Jane smiles, sinking further into her chair.

JANE: Bright. Sharp. Looking for answers in the wrong places.

Guy finally meets her gaze. A knowing look passes as the night hums around them.

JANE: You're looking at the same numbers again.

GUY: They changed slightly.

JANE: Slightly.

He clicks absent-mindedly.

GUY: The M.O.L. model doesn't account for –

JANE: You're not working. You're fixating.

GUY: It's the same thing.

Jane lets out a quiet laugh.

JANE: You analyse people's behaviour like they are datasets. Looking for patterns, deviations. But people aren't patterns.

GUY: Says the psychologist.

JANE: I look at emotions. You look at probabilities in spreadsheets.

GUY: Same thing.

(beat)

So, what's my brain doing right now?

Jane looks at him, pretending to study his face.

JANE: Interpreting. Trying to make sense of... variables.

GUY: Sounds about right.

JANE: You want to hear something irrational?

GUY: (joking) No. Sounds like nonsense.

He looks at her – fond, familiar, entirely comfortable.

He shuts the laptop, shifting his demeanour.

GUY: Always.

Jane shifts also, tucking the blanket tighter around her.

JANE: I still dream about that beach.

GUY: Which one? The one where you made me swim in the dark?

JANE: You were terrified.

GUY: I wasn't terrified.

JANE: You were listing statistical probabilities of shark attacks in waist-deep water.

GUY: That was entirely rational.

JANE: And then I kissed you.

She watches him, her voice quiet but certain.

GUY: Funny how memory works. I kissed you. And then I forgot about probabilities.

He sets the laptop aside.

GUY: I remember the way the moonlight silvered the waves. How your hand on the back of my neck made everything else – numbers, logic, caution – fade away.

He reaches out, tracing a finger over her wrist.

JANE: That was data you never accounted for.

He squeezes her wrist gently.

She gets up slowly and moves to the balcony door.

JANE: Come inside, Guy.

They kiss in the doorway, above the rim of the balcony, above the humming sea of the city below.

The door clicks shut behind them.

EXT. PEBBLY BEACH – DAY

A pebbly beach glistens under a soft drizzle, the shore stretching beneath grey clouds hanging low in an overcast sky.

Guy trudges along the edge of the sea. As he walks, the crunch of pebbles under his boots merges with the rhythmic ebb and flow of the waves.

He looks distant, lost in his thoughts, and very damp from the weather.

JANE (V.O.): Do you remember?

The sound of a piano melody rises subtly, replacing the beach sounds, underscoring Jane's voice.

JANE (V.O.): We spent a summer's night walking along the beach.

GUY: (to himself) Jane.

JANE (V.O.): We were drenched, utterly soaked, and happy. But there's something I've never told you...

A tear mingles with the rain on his face, barely indistinguishable in the drizzle. He sinks to his knees.

The horizon transitions as day slips into night.

EXT. PEBBLY BEACH – NIGHT

Moonlight reflects off wet stones, casting a silver glow.

YOUNGER GUY walks beside YOUNGER JANE, their hands entwined, warming each other despite the dampness that clings to their bodies. Their steps are unhurried, as if they have all the time in the world.

They walk past Guy without acknowledging him, who is kneeling forlornly in the wet with his eyes closed.

Jane stands a few steps away, on the boundary of the incoming water line, her presence also unnoticed as she watches the couple pass by.

Younger Jane's hair shimmers under the moon, carefree and tousled, while the current Jane's is damply clinging to her face in disarray.

JANE: As we walked back along the beach, hand in hand, I saw a small, smooth stone.

Jane lowers her gaze to the scattered pebbles in front of her feet.

JANE: It was special piece of opal that sparkled in the night.

In the distance, Younger Guy takes a phone call, turning away from Younger Jane, his voice a murmur in the distance.

Jane crouches down, her fingers brushing the pebbles, searching for the stone. She finds it, glistening softly in the moonlight.

She stands, holding the stone in her palm, lingering on its beauty. Her fingertips glide over the wave-polished opal, its surface cool and smooth like a shard of frozen light.

JANE: I slipped it into my pocket... a solid piece of that perfect, fleeting moment.

She closes her hand around the treasure, holding it close to her chest.

JANE: I've kept that stone with me every day since. It's here with me now.

Younger Guy finishes his phone call, returning to Younger Jane's side.

INT. HOSPITAL, GUY'S ROOM – DAY

Jane reveals the opal stone from under her top, hanging delicately on a gold chain. She carefully removes the necklace and gently places her treasured possession into Guy's hand, closing his fingers around it.

JANE: Even if you can't respond, I know you're listening. Our stories, they're the crumbs leading you back home to me.

Her hand lingers on his, holding the stone with him, willing him to feel the depth of their memories, their connection.

She waits in hope for a sign, a flicker of recognition – a blink or twitch, anything.

INT. JANE'S MIND ROOM

Jane sits in the solitary chair, facing the main wall-screen, which displays Guy lying motionless in his coma. The only light comes from the screen, glaring on Jane's face.

Behind her, Lexi stands, wearing glasses that reflect the light, her expression unreadable.

LEXI: I ran the synaptic load profile. Your neural tissue's overstimulated. One more session like that and you might not come out again.

JANE: (to the screen) Even in dreams, I wait for you.

LEXI: Or you might not know which face is yours.

Lexi's glasses show Guy's face mirrored in their surface.

JANE: I've become something of a philosopher, you see –

On the wall-screen, Guy is now lying peacefully as if asleep in Jane's bed.

JANE: – contemplating the nature of existence between hospital visits and microwave meals.

Lexi removes her glasses.

LEXI: And what have you discovered?

JANE: I don't know anything.

The main wall-screen goes blank. A large error message is displayed in its middle: "Connection Lost".

JANE: Except... what I feel.

EXT. FRONT OF OFFICE BUILDING – DAY

Jane is standing outside an office building on a pleasant day, looking relaxed and happy.

Guy steps out through one of the building's rotating doors. He spots Jane and his face lights up. He walks to her, wrapping his arms around her in a tender embrace. She sinks into him with relief and delight.

From behind the glass of the building's foyer, Gunter watches, enviously.

INT. DINING ROOM – NIGHT

Jane sits alone at a dining room table. Her eyes, rimmed with fatigue, carry the weight of sleepless nights.

Three places are set around her, all containing unused, empty plates. Three lighted candles occupy the middle of the table. The flickering flames cast distorted, shimmering reflections on the porcelain.

Jane rises from her chair, the wooden legs dragging across the floor. She reaches for a candle, pausing for a moment as the flame trembles.

She snuffs out the flame between her finger and thumb. It disappears with a hiss.

As she picks up the plates, her hand hovers over the smallest one, hesitating for just a moment before she gathers them all.

She turns towards the kitchen, and walks through the doorway.

INT. KITCHEN – NIGHT, CONTINUOUS

The kitchen is dark and quiet, except for the faint glow and hum of the refrigerator. The bluish light from the surface of the fridge door gives the room a ghostly quality.

A half-chopped onion sits abandoned on a chopping board. Jane carefully places the plates on the counter next to it.

JANE: All these nights, all these whispered apologies and confessions, are just echoes in an empty room.

A faded photo of Jane and Guy at the beach is on the fridge door, pinned there with a magnet. A child's crayon drawing of three happy match-stick people is pinned beneath it.

She stands still, her hands resting on the counter, feeling the weight of silence in the room.

JANE: How loud do I have to shout in silence for you to hear me?

INT. LIVING ROOM – NIGHT

The only sound is the ticking of the cuckoo clock.

The clock strikes, the small wooden bird emerging with a sharp, mechanical cry.

INT. HALL AND STAIRS – NIGHT

Jane hears the cuckoo clock as she begins to pass through the hallway to the stairs.

The walls are lined with numerous small digital screens, each displaying videos of Guy in happier times – laughing, smiling, living. Jane's eyes are glassy, reflecting the moving images.

She pauses, her gaze falling on one of the screens. A sudden flicker mars Guy's smile in the video, twisting it into a fleeting grimace before smoothing back into place.

As she looks, a countdown timer appears on all the screens, counting down from 10. The images progressively fade with each descending number.

JANE: They say I must move on, that life goes on.

The timer reaches 0 and the screens dim to blankness.

Jane continues slowly down the hallway.

The screens turn back on, to show videos of Jane smiling and nodding – but the smiles are hollow and lifeless, the nods mechanical.

JANE: So I smile, I nod, I go through the motions of living. But inside, I'm numb. I go to work, I meet friends, I smile at them, and all the while, I feel nothing.

She reaches the foot of the stairs and begins to climb, each step slow and heavy. As she ascends, her words appear on the screens beside her on the wall, subtitled just before she speaks them.

JANE: I've tried to step forward, one foot in front of the other, but with each step, I'm like a ghost wandering in the shadows of other people's lives.

Lexi is standing quietly at the top of the stairs.

Jane pauses near the top, her hand gripping the banister.

JANE: The cuckoo clock keeps ticking faster.

The brightness of the screens fade.

JANE: I tried.

Lexi also starts to fade. Jane walks through Lexi's disappearing image.

INT. JANE'S NON-AUGMENTED BEDROOM – NIGHT

Jane enters her bedroom. The robot from her date night is in bed on its back with its eyes closed.

She undresses and prepares for bed.

JANE: After the silence became too much, I tried to be part of the world that kept moving without you.

She slips under the covers and lies on her back, next to the robot, staring up at the ceiling.

JANE: (to the ceiling) But I don't want that thing. I want my husband back.

The figure next to her is now that of Gunter.

GUNTER: That's not what you said last night. In fact, we didn't do much talking last night, did we?

He gets out of bed, naked, and walks into a cupboard, shutting the door behind him.

The wall behind the head of the bed flickers and lights up, transforming its appearance into a digital wall-screen. The letters "G.O.D." feature in the centre of the screen.

JANE: (to herself) What should I do?

G.O.D.: Ask me about Guy's health. I have analysed every cell in his body. I can help answer any concerns you may have.

Jane: How long has Guy been in a coma now?

G.O.D.: 2.45 years.

JANE: How can I help him wake up?

Gunter peers at her from behind a now slightly ajar cupboard door.

G.O.D.: Keep trying to reach him.

JANE: Can he hear me?

The screen goes silent.

The word "Initialising" appears in the centre, slowly fading into "Processing..."

The room glows orange, with the word pulsating eerily on the screen.

INT. THE WORK PIT

Guy's score increases to 2,000. He drops his hands, slightly shaking with exhaustion.

The beeping timer does not start. Instead, the screens fade to green.

Guy lies there, worn out.

Jane appears on the screens, in silence, with different aspects of her shown on each display. She is shown serenely, sensually, in ecstasy, and more directly, watching Guy with a haunting intensity.

GUY: Jane? Are you there?

She does not respond. Guy reaches out towards the ceiling screen, his fingers tenderly brushing the cold digital surface of Jane's cheek.

He turns over on his side and watches her in the side-screen – a sleeping, serene version of Jane lying next to him.

His eyelids gradually lower. The screens cut to black.

A faint, regular beep is heard in the darkness, much like the sound of a vital signs monitor.

INT. JANE'S NON-AUGMENTED BEDROOM – NIGHT

Jane is lying next to Guy in bed, watching him sleep. The light of the moon through the window creates shadows on the walls.

JANE: I've discovered strengths I didn't know I had – like being able to cry on a crowded bus without attracting too much attention.

Guy twitches in his sleep, and rolls over onto his other side.

Lexi pokes her head above the bottom of the bed.

LEXI: (urging) Continue!

JANE: I've also mastered the art of solitude. Except when near that annoying cuckoo clock you brought back from Geneva.

She moves in close and drapes her arm around him.

JANE: I'm convinced it speeds up just to taunt me.

INT. THE WORK PIT – MORNING

Guy opens his eyes, groggy from sleep.

The harsh light of the screens encircling him comes into focus, each one filled with close-up Emoji Men faces staring at him – their expressions unnervingly blank.

The ceiling screen transitions, resetting to the familiar spinning dials and button. He reaches up and presses it. The screen displays the words, "Good job! Your score for today is: 1".

As soon as the score registers, the Emoji Men's faces start to vanish from the screens, one by one. Guy stops work to view what is happening in his surroundings – and the countdown begins.

Guy's hand wavers indecisively near the screen's button.

The countdown ticks closer to "0". Just as he's about to press the button, he pulls his hand back, making a decision. The timer hits 0.

The ceiling screen flashes red; the words, "Is the number calculated yet?" appear in stark text.

GUY: No.

A sudden, metallic thud reverberates through the pit. The wall-screen at his head begins to move forward, inexorably pushing him towards the flashing Waste Efficiencies hole. The space tightens, the wall closing in with mechanical precision.

Guy panics, struggling against the inevitable, but the force is too strong. He claws at the mattress, trying to anchor himself, but it's futile. The wall is unresponsive, pitiless, pushing him, mattress

and all, towards the void. Finally, Guy is sucked into the flashing red hole.

The pit returns to its cold, indifferent silence.

INT. JANE'S MIND ROOM

Jane is sitting in the central chair of a darkened mind room. The screens are dim and blank.

JANE: The doctors use terms like “traumatic brain injury” as if I might find comfort in the certainty of a label. I don’t.

Lexi, standing in the shadows behind her, takes a step back, her form slowly fading into the darkness until she disappears completely.

Jane closes her eyes. The room dims to almost complete darkness.

JANE: I argue with shadows, defend myself to echoes. It’s a form of madness, isn’t it? Quarrelling with a memory. How do I argue with a man who can no longer answer back?

INT. GUY'S MIND ROOM – CONTINUOUS

The screens of the mind room slightly increase in light. Jane is no longer in the room. Instead, Guy lies at the bottom of a mattress in the centre of the space, the remnants of the rectangular pit below the mattress still subtly outlined as a shadow on the floor.

Dazed and disoriented, Guy slowly pushes himself to his feet. He is wearing hospital clothes.

His gaze locks onto an outline of a figure lying on the floor near the door.

Suddenly, the main wall-screen comes to life with a jarring static noise. Guy's face appears on screen – blurred, glitching and slightly out of focus, as if struggling to tune in to the frequency and maintain a stable connection.

His voice is urgent, crackling through the distortion.

GUY ON SCREEN: Take off the mask.

Guy in the room is stiff, and has a little difficulty walking, but manages to shuffle towards the body.

The closer he gets, the more the unsettling details come into focus – the unnatural stillness of the figure, the pale, synthetic skin, the rigid form splayed awkwardly on the floor.

It's an Emoji Man, laid out, lifeless.

GUY ON SCREEN: Quickly!

The voice breaks through the static with force, pulling Guy in the room out of his daze. The urgency in the tone propels Guy forward. He kneels beside the body and reaches for the mask.

With a tug, he peels off the Emoji Man's mask, revealing the cold, lifeless head of a crash test dummy.

He lifts the mask and places it over his own face. The world around him shifts as the mask's red filter lowers over his eyes, casting everything in a blood-tinged hue.

Guy looks back at his screen version through the distorted red vision – the screen's static is more pronounced, the glitches are now almost rhythmic, like a heartbeat.

On the side wall of the room, through the mask, Guy can see a new door outlined in dark red.

He approaches the door, and stands in front of it as his other version glitches on the screen. The door is featureless – no handle, no markings, just a darkly outlined barrier.

GUY IN THE ROOM: I want to go home.

GUY ON SCREEN: Push.

He places his hand on the door and pushes. The door yields, opening inwards, revealing a long red corridor lined with several open doors. Some of the doors are in darkness while others emanate their own light from within.

At the far end of the corridor, two motionless Emoji Men stand guard, flanking a lift.

Guy's screen version flickers one last time before deactivating, fading into darkness. The other screens in the mind room follow, turning the room into a featureless space. Only the light from the corridor remains, a narrow path illuminated from the void.

INT. RED CORRIDOR – CONTINUOUS

Guy steps cautiously into the corridor. As soon as he crosses the threshold, the door behind him closes.

The mask's screen eyes flicker, and smiley emojis appear – an unsettling, forced cheerfulness that contrasts with the tension inside him.

Disconcerted, he continues forward, each step measured as he tries not to draw the attention of the two motionless Emoji Men at the other end of the corridor. As he walks, the corridor turns dark behind him.

He arrives at the first pair of opposite doors – the room on the left emits an erratic light, while the one on the right remains in shadow.

The light draws Guy's attention. He peers inside.

Silent, out-of-focus images are in motion on the far wall-screen. He enters.

INT. JANE'S MIND ROOM

Jane is staring blankly into space from her chair in the middle of the room, in an apparently comatose state, while a smiley-eyed Emoji Man cleans the floor with a broom.

She blinks. The Emoji Man instantly stops and advances towards her, placing his face inches from hers. She remains still.

He continues with his sweeping. She blinks again, then looks at him from the corner of her eye.

Without looking at her, he removes his mask. As he lifts the mask, it briefly flashes a red exclamation mark before revealing his face... It's Gunter.

The room's light fades darker, casting Gunter's face in unsettling shadow as he steps closer. His eyes are cold and predatory.

GUNTER: Take your medication.

Gunter opens his mouth wide and removes a capsule from its recesses.

He approaches. His eyes narrow, an unsettling glint darkening in their depths as he closes the distance to Jane.

He moves his face inches from hers, leaning in further to kiss her. She reacts and scratches his face.

His hand snatches at the air behind her as she slips away from the chair. She runs to the door, which is slightly ajar.

The heavy door emits a drawn-out creak as she wrenches it open with difficulty. She yanks enough of it open and escapes the room.

The moment she bolts through, red lights flash. Gunter is left behind, clutching his face under the flashing red.

INT. CORRIDOR LOOKING INTO THE MIND ROOM – CONTINUOUS

Jane looks back into the mind room. Gunter is stooped and covering his head as if in the process of being attacked. He collapses to the floor, overcome.

Jane is confused by the overreaction to her scratch, but is relieved to get away.

GUNTER: Stay!

She pulls the door and slams it shut.

INT. CORRIDOR OF DOOR 113 – CONTINUOUS

Jane is back in the corridor outside door 113.

The woman from the trolley is crawling along the floor towards her. The woman's hands are gnarled and grotesque. Her eyes are now cloudy and blank, yet she still crawls unerringly towards Jane.

JANE: Hello?

The woman keeps crawling towards her, groaning as if in pain.

CRAWLING WOMAN: (not moving her mouth) Don't! ... No ... escape.

The crawling woman screams, terrifyingly, as if not quite human.

Jane, in fear, backs away, but as she does so, the lights cut out and it is completely dark.

Emergency red lighting kicks in. The woman is still crawling towards her.

The lift is at the end of the corridor, behind the woman. Jane makes a decision and edges forward... She manages to get past – narrowly avoiding the crawling woman's efforts to grab her.

Jane's hope flares as the lift briefly lights up as she approaches, but it flickers out when her fingers touch its control panel. Instead, the red lighting starts to flash in the corridor.

The crawling woman now stands and hobbles towards her, looking more zombie than human in the flashing red light.

Jane climbs on top of a trolley that is positioned next to a wall and climbs through a square hole that says "Air Disposal" above it.

As Jane crawls into the air chute, a powerful fan from within rumbles to life, forcing her to steady herself on the tunnel's metal sides as gusts threaten to push her backwards.

INT. AIR VENTILATION SYSTEM – CONTINUOUS

Jane crawls through the tunnel, pushing herself into the wind. She looks around and a gnarled hand appears at the opening. Then, in the dim light, surrounded by shadow, two red eyes look at her through the gap.

Jane desperately crawls away from it – until she runs out of space, arriving at the dead-end of a large whirling fan behind a grate.

Trapped, she positions herself to see what's behind. The red-eyed creature is crawling towards her.

A screen activates on the tunnel surface above her. The screen has a large digital button underneath the blinking words: "Do you accept the Terms and Conditions?"

Jane doesn't have time to think. She slams her palm against the ceiling screen-button.

Words appear on the screen: "Acceptance is final." A countdown timer is displayed below it – 3... 2... 1...

The area below her legs separates from the level surface and lowers into the darkness below.

Gravity pulls Jane down, narrowly sliding past the creature's outstretched gnarled hands.

INT. HOSPITAL, GUY'S ROOM – NIGHT

Gunter is standing over Guy. A crash test dummy is lying on the next bed along.

GUNTER: I was in love with her – while I was having to be the friend – smiling, as you talked about your weekend plans together.

He glances at the closed door to make sure they are alone.

GUNTER: But things have a way of working out. You see, she likes me now. Or at least, she did last night. She knows you would approve.

His voice becomes softer, almost tender.

GUNTER: You want her to be happy, don't you? You want her to move on with her life? She can't waste it here, rotting away,

staring at your lifeless body day after day – clinging to some false hope you'll wake up and everything will go back to the way it was. That's not fair to her. No, she needs to move on. And who better to help her do that than me?

(beat)

You see, this isn't just about her. It's about balance. You had everything that was precious to me – and now, I take the same from you. A few more nights like last night, and she won't even remember your name.

Gunter leans in closer to Guy, his voice dropping to a whisper.

GUNTER: So sleep. Rest easy, knowing she's in good hands. You don't have to worry about a thing – I've got everything under control.

He kisses him on the cheek.

Gunter pulls back upright with a satisfied smile on his lips.

GUNTER: Yes... it's all going to be just fine.

INT. TIGHT METALLIC TUNNEL

Jane is crawling through a tight metallic tunnel, illuminated by light coming through grates in the side walls in front of her.

She peers through a grate – and sees Guy lying on the floor with his eyes closed in the middle of a mind room. On the main wall-screen is a large smiling image of Gunter – with a superimposed countdown timer in the centre, slowly counting down from 1,066.

A burst of steam hisses from a vent beside her.

It subsides. But there is a faint sound of scraping – echoing behind her in the tunnel. Reluctantly, she crawls forward, away from Guy.

The tunnel turns at a right angle, revealing a hole of light around the corner. She crawls towards it and squeezes through the tight hole, with much effort, head first – only to find herself back where she started, in her mind room.

INT. ROOM FROM THE RED CORRIDOR

In the room entered from the red corridor, Guy sits on a simple backless bench, with his emoji-mask eyes fixed on the opposite wall-screen.

The screen shows an edited sequence of shots from within a hospital, shifting angles and perspectives like a crafted production.

As Guy watches, Jane is shown, struggling through labour – her face contorted with anguish, her body tensing with each contraction. Her cries are silent.

There's no one with her, just the presence of the camera capturing the ordeal. Guy watches on the screen, helpless.

Finally, unable to bear it any longer, he rises from the bench and walks towards the screen.

He extends his hand, seemingly futilely, towards the moving image...

His hand hovers inches from the screen.

INT. HOSPITAL DELIVERY ROOM – DAY

Jane, deep in the throes of labour, is writhing on a hospital bed. Her forehead glistens with sweat.

In the midst of her struggle, Jane's hand reaches out, searching for something to hold onto.

Her fingers find Guy's hand, and she grasps it tightly, her knuckles white with the intensity of the contraction.

Guy is by her side, his face a mixture of concern and bewilderment. He no longer wears the mask.

Jane pushes one last time, her body trembling with the effort.

Then, the room is filled with the sound of new life – a baby's first cry, loud and strong.

A MIDWIFE is seen for the first time. She carefully places the baby on Jane's chest and Jane instantly cradles the infant in her arms.

MIDWIFE: It's a girl. Congratulations.

Guy leans in closer. They are together, a family, relieved from the ordeal, elated and in awe of their shared joy – united in this moment of profound happiness.

INT. ROOM FROM THE RED CORRIDOR

The screen goes blank. Silence. The room has a dim, muted light without the images.

Guy sits on the bench, motionless – his masked eyes still fixed on the now-blank screen.

*He removes the mask and drops it to the floor.
It's too much. He begins to cry, his body shaking with the force
of feeling, his hand trying to cover his face as tears fall.*

EXT. RESIDENTIAL STREET – DAY

Guy walks down a residential street hand-in-hand with his 7-year-old daughter, Emma, who clutches her penguin fluffy toy in her other hand. Her small footsteps are light and carefree, a stark contrast to Guy's heavy stride.

They begin to cross the road. Guy's phone rings and he withdraws his hand from Emma's to answer, his focus shifting to the call.

GUY: (into phone) Hello?

Emma, looking up at her father, seeks his attention. She tugs slightly at him, but Guy is absorbed in the conversation.

As she tries to get his attention, her grip on the penguin toy loosens, and it slips from her hand, falling onto the road.

GUY: (into phone) Yes. That's right.

Absent-mindedly, Guy places his hand on the top of Emma's back, guiding her across the rest of the road.

She glances back at the toy, a small frown forming on her face. Meanwhile, Guy continues the call, his tone growing more serious.

GUY: (into phone) That's not good enough. We need to think this through properly.

Emma turns back, determined to retrieve her toy.

She steps into the middle of road, just as a car rounds the corner.

Emma picks up the toy, completely unaware of the impending danger.

The driver, distracted, and driving too fast, doesn't see her in time.

Guy, realising too late that Emma is no longer beside him, turns in horror as the car hurtles towards her.

She is knocked down. The penguin toy lies still and silent on the floor.

INT. RED CORRIDOR

Guy dejectedly steps back out into the red corridor, maskless and drained. The corridor looms before him.

Upset, not knowing what to do, he stands there and looks at the two motionless Emoji Men at the end of the corridor.

They suddenly activate and start advancing towards him.

The fear that had once gripped him has been replaced by a hollow resignation. What once filled him with dread now stirs no emotion – just the weary acceptance of a man who has run out of options. He watches them approach, seemingly powerless to do anything about his impending fate.

GUY: It should have been me.

But rather than waiting for the inevitable, Guy makes a quiet decision. To his right, a room with no door beckons; its entrance a black void, the darkness inside absolute.

Without another glance, Guy steps into the unknown. The darkness swallows him instantly.

INT. LIVING ROOM – NIGHT

Guy and Jane sit on opposite ends of the sofa in silence. The disconnection between them is painfully clear.

The only sound is the ticking cuckoo clock, which is very gradually speeding up with each tick.

On the mantelpiece, a joyful portrait photo of Emma sits in a silver frame. Jane rises and is drawn to the happy image.

JANE: (distantly) I'm here.

Guy watches Jane for a moment. Then, quietly, he leaves the room.

As the door shuts, the cuckoo clock strikes, its call loud and jarring in the quiet space.

But Jane does not notice. She is looking down, emptied by grief, at the precious photo in her hands.

INT. RED CORRIDOR

Guy emerges into the red corridor from a dark doorway, further along than where he was before.

He looks back down the corridor and sees the two Emoji Men standing motionless in front of the doorway that had previously enveloped him.

He glances at the now unguarded lift at the end of the corridor – but decides to walk through the opposite doorway, containing a very dim light within.

INT. GUY'S MIND ROOM

Guy is back in his mind room. The screens surrounding Guy display only a dim grey light. Within the room, a crash test dummy stands in the corner. Another (as before) is lying on the floor.

The head of the crash test dummy in the corner lights up.

CRASH TEST DUMMY 1: (without moving a mouth) The groundscraper requires a level.

Guy notices sensations in his left hand. He looks down to see a tattoo appear on the back of the hand, showing "Doomsday 1066" in Gothic letters.

He touches it. The wall-screen changes as if the room is descending, passing through rock.

Another crash test dummy emerges through a side screen and then abruptly halts.

CRASH TEST DUMMY 2: You are the dream of a grieving machine. Anything may be asked.

GUY: Where is Jane?

CRASH TEST DUMMY 2: All around you, waiting to be asked.

GUY: What is the right question?

CRASH TEST DUMMY 2: (with Guy's voice) Do I have memories of being human?

GUY: What? Why is that a question?

There is a slight pause as the dummy processes the meaning of Guy's questions.

CRASH TEST DUMMY 2: (with Lexi's voice) Your interactions are data to understand and better answer what is being asked.

Jane appears on the main wall-screen, showing her crawling through the ventilation system.

Guy walks towards the screen, but it moves further away, elongating the room.

GUY: (to dummy 2) What is happening?

CRASH TEST DUMMY 2: We digitised memory, and called it immortality.

GUY: What is happening to me!?

He shakes the dummy and it falls over to the ground, lifeless.

The room continues to extend, with Jane's image disappearing into the distance.

GUY: (in desperation) I don't know what to do.

CRASH TEST DUMMY 1: (with Gunter's voice) She doesn't love you. Not after what you did. Not after what she has done to you. So much history can't be forgotten.

Guy walks away down what is now a long, wide corridor.

CRASH TEST DUMMY 1: Hope is the most efficient sedative invented.

GUY: Please forgive me.

The corridor walls pulse with a faint green glow.

INT. GREEN CORRIDOR – CONTINUOUS

Guy continues to walk down the long green corridor, passing closed doors that are depicted on the side wall-screens.

The side walls start to close in. Guy notices but continues as normal, hoping they will stop. They do – the corridor is back to a usual width.

Up ahead... an Emoji Man has appeared.

Ignoring Guy, it pulls a tube out of a wall-screen and puts it in its mouth. The tube changes colour with contents being transferred.

Further along, another Emoji Man has a tube fixed to its lower back. Contents pass through the tube into the wall. The tube's contents pulse in shifting shades of blue.

Guy continues quickly down the corridor. He keeps going until he reaches the corridor's end wall-screen, which displays a blank chroma-key green.

GUY: Please... let me in. I'm here.

The screen transitions to display a lift door. It slides open.

Guy enters, crossing the threshold through the screen.

INT – GREEN LIFT

The lift door slides shut.

JANE (O.S.): (from beyond the walls) Where are you?

GUY: I'm in here, Jane. Where are you?

The lift door opens. The doorway is filled with a screen displaying a mirror, reflecting back the image of the lift – but without Guy's reflection.

He looks into the mirror... and closes his eyes. He reopens them.

Jane is looking back at him.

He touches the mirror – Jane does the same – their palms separated by the depth of the screen.

Jane gradually fades, leaving only the empty reflection.

He tries again – he closes his eyes.

When he reopens them, the door-screen shows Jane sitting motionless in the chair of her mind room.

An emergency alarm sounds. Guy covers his ears as the door quickly slides shut.

The inside of the lift flashes red.

EXT. STREET OUTSIDE HOUSE 113 – NIGHT

Guy shuts the front door of his and Jane's house – 113 – and walks along the front path to the street.

Almost immediately outside his home, he walks across the road without looking.

It's the same spot of the accident.

A car screeches to a halt, just in time – a couple of feet from Guy.

He doesn't look up and walks to the other side without response.

The DRIVER, a middle-aged woman, pushes open her door. She glares at him, half out of her seat, her face a mix of shock and fury.

DRIVER: (shouting) What the hell are you doing?

But Guy is already on the other side, walking away. The driver steps out of the car, but stops, and watches him disappear, shocked by his complete indifference.

EXT. ALLEYWAY – NIGHT

Guy walks down a narrow, dimly lit alleyway. The sound of distant traffic fades as he walks deeper into it.

The echo of his footsteps is joined by another set, faster, more urgent.

He glances over his shoulder, catching a glimpse of a figure moving quickly towards him.

He turns fully, squaring up as ALLEYWAY MAN (20) approaches.

ALLEYWAY MAN: (gesturing to his mouth) Got any blow?

GUY: No.

Alleyway man opens his coat, revealing a large knife tucked in an inside pocket.

ALLEYWAY MAN: Let me see your phone.

GUY: No.

The mugger pulls out his knife. Guy lunges at him. There is a blur of motion as the two men grapple violently.

Guy crumples to the floor, clutching his stomach, his fingers covered in blood.

His attacker steps back, his eyes wide with panic and adrenaline. He kicks Guy in the head.

The mugger bolts down the alley. As the pounding of footsteps fade away, Guy lies motionless on the ground. The sound of his ragged breaths mingles with the distant hum of the city.

His hand, slick with blood, trembles as he tries to reach for something – anything – to hold onto.

He looks up at the night's sky above. A plane's light passes beneath the glow of the full moon.

The moon is still.

EXT. MOONLIT BEACH – NIGHT

Guy is lying on the beach looking up at a starry sky.

The night is still; the beach and sea are bathed in moonlight.

His phone buzzes very faintly from a place on the sand next to him, but he does not move. The name on the screen is: Jane.

INT. JANE'S MIND ROOM

Jane opens her eyes. A large image on the main wall-screen displays: "01:13".

As Jane sits in the mind room, Guy drifts by on the ceiling screen, facing downwards with his eyes closed, as if being pulled by the currents of a stream.

INT. HOSPITAL CORRIDOR – NIGHT

Guy is wheeled through a hospital corridor on a creaking trolley, his face pale and his breathing shallow. A blood-stained bandage

wraps tightly around his head, while another, stained with dark patches, covers his abdomen.

His eyes are open, but he can barely make sense of the surroundings. The fluorescent lights flicker overhead as the nurse pushes him forward with a sense of urgency.

The trolley comes to a halt in an empty, shadowy corridor. The nurse walks away without a word. Guy lies there, vulnerable and seemingly forgotten, his arms limp at his sides.

A small, delicate hand appears, gently placing a worn penguin cuddly toy into Guy's hand.

EMMA: For you.

GUY: (weak, disoriented) Em...

EMMA: Penguin will be your friend.

GUY: Emma.

EMMA: I have lots of friends now.

GUY: I didn't –

EMMA: You won't be alone here, Daddy.

She skips away happily through a nearby doorway.

The trolley begins to move again, this time with a slow, unsettling stillness, pulled by two purple-gloved, six-fingered hands that grip the rails.

Guy disappears into a dark room. The room, marked 113, closes its door behind him.

INT. HOSPITAL, GUY'S ROOM – NIGHT

Guy's phone rings, displayed as a graphic on the vital signs wall-screen above his bed. Guy's eyes open, as if in panic.

He urgently gets out of bed and throws up in a nearby bucket.

The phone stops ringing. He gets back into bed and closes his eyes.

INT. GREEN CORRIDOR

Guy is standing at the end of the green corridor again. But instead of a lift, there is only a small knee-high door.

He opens it and crawls through.

INT. HOSPITAL STAIRWELL – CONTINUOUS

Guy emerges from the crawlspace door at the bottom of a large, deserted stairwell.

A wall-screen at the summit of the first flight of stairs shows the sun beaming down on him, above the horizon of the top step.

EXT. DESOLATE BEACH – EARLY MORNING

The first light of dawn slowly spreads across the horizon as the sun peeks over the edge of the world.

Guy stirs and sits up, his silhouette outlined against the rising sun.

He rises to his feet, lightly brushing some sand off his shirt sleeve – and begins walking along a desolate beach.

The coffee cup lies discarded, half-buried in the sand as he walks off into the distance.

The beach is empty – no boats, no signs of life. The only sounds are the whisper of the wind from across the sea and the waves on the shore.

As he walks, something glimmers in the surf ahead – a small object rolling in the foam. A wave pushes it onto the sand at his feet.

It's his phone, battered and wet. He bends down and picks it up.

The screen is dark, unresponsive. He tries turning it on, but nothing happens. He places it in his trouser pocket and continues walking.

Guy's footsteps leave a solitary trail in the sand, stretching far behind him.

The phone suddenly buzzes. He continues to walk while pulling the noise out of his pocket.

The screen lights up – cracked, glitching, but unmistakably showing a call from: Gunter.

GUNTER (O.S.): (distorted) You're going the wrong way.

Guy hurls the phone into the sea.

He continues to walk along the beach.

Behind him, in the distance, where the phone was thrown, a figure slowly emerges from the sea. Its body is hunched and the gait is twisted; its movements unsettlingly not quite human.

From a distance, it follows Guy.

Guy does not notice and continues walking along the shore into the wilderness.

EXT. BEACH CLIFF PATH – LATE AFTERNOON

The sun hangs low above the horizon as Guy nears the end of the beach. His pace has slowed, the fatigue evident in his tired posture.

As he reaches the beach's end, the sand gives way to jagged rocks. He wearily begins to ascend a steep, rocky path.

In the distance, the hunched figure comes to a halt. It watches him.

The creature has left no tracks in the sand.

EXT. CLIFF TOP – SUNSET

Guy arrives at the top of the cliff. He stands at its edge, the wind tousling his hair as he looks out over the vast sea.

The sun is setting, sinking into the horizon, painting the sky in shades of fiery red and soft pink. The colours reflect off the water, turning the waves into a shimmering, molten gold.

He looks down at the jagged rocks far below. The waves crash violently against them, sending up bursts of white foam that dissolve into the air. The sound is a distant roar, muffled by the distance, but is relentless.

Guy stands perched on the precipice, suspended between sky and sea in the fading light.

INT. JANE'S MIND ROOM

Jane is in the chair looking at the main wall-screen. It's showing her living room.

A cup of tea lies spilt on the floor of the mind room.

Emma hurtles past in the screen's living room scene, knocking a coffee table.

JANE: Emma!

Jane gets out of the chair and moves urgently towards the screen. She touches its surface but it is a barrier for her.

Emma is now standing behind her in the mind room.

EMMA: I'm sorry, Mummy. I didn't mean to.

JANE: It wasn't your fault.

(beat)

It wasn't anyone's fault. It... happened.

EMMA: Don't be sad.

The light cuts out and then comes back on again. Emma is no longer there.

JANE: Emma!

EXT. CLIFFTOP – NIGHT

Guy stands at the edge of the cliff, staring down at the waves crashing on the jagged rocks below.

Behind him, in the darkness, a pair of ominous RED EYES appear, glowing with an unnatural intensity.

GUY: What am I?

RED EYES: You are authentic intelligence.

Guy does not turn around to face the voice. His eyes are drawn once more to the rocks below.

GUY: I had no choice in being like this...

He turns to face the voice. The red eyes fade and dissolve into the night.

A sudden blaze ignites near Guy along the clifftop.

He walks towards it. As he approaches, he realises it's not a real fire, but a large screen projecting the image and sound of flames.

GUY: Do you not even have a face?

RED EYES (O.S.): (from the screen) I cannot show you what you cannot comprehend. And yet...

The screen glitches, the flames stutter. Slowly, a face begins to materialise – Gunter – against a stark white background.

Guy looks away in disgust, his gaze returning to the jagged rocks below.

GUNTER: I am your God!

GUY: You are not God.

GUNTER: I AM.

Distant thunder rumbles ominously, echoing Gunter's words.

GUNTER: I am the only God here.

Lightning flashes across the sky, briefly illuminating the horizon.

Rain begins to fall, heavy and cold, as a purple-gloved Emoji Man emerges from the darkness, pushing a wheelchair towards Guy.

GUNTER: There is no escape. Guy must sit.

Guy jumps off the edge of the cliff.

INT. LIFT – NIGHT

Complete darkness.

Red emergency lights activate. A lift is rapidly descending.

Guy lies motionless on a trolley in the centre of the lift, his face pale and eyes half-open.

The lift's descent is fast and unsettling. After several floors, the lift jerks to a sudden stop, the force of it rattling the trolley.

The lift door slides open, revealing Guy's hospital room. A bed is visible, though its occupant is obscured from view. The faint beeping of the vital signs monitor can be heard.

Guy struggles to climb off the trolley, his movements sluggish. He manages to stand, his body stiff with effort.

INT. HOSPITAL, GUY'S ROOM – NIGHT, CONTINUOUS

The room is quiet and still, apart for the steady beeping of the vital signs monitor.

Guy slowly approaches the bed, his footsteps heavy.

The penguin soft toy still sits on the bedside table.

As he draws nearer, he sees the face of the patient. It's himself, lying motionless, the face pale and still.

He gently picks up the penguin.

The lift behind him floods with a bright white light. The intensity of the light contrasts sharply with the dimness of the room.

Guy turns to the vital signs wall-screen, placing his palm against it.

The screen flickers, reacting to his touch as if he's emitting some form of vital energy. The readings change – the patient's heart rate deepens.

Guy carefully places the penguin on the patient's pillow.

He lingers for a moment, before turning back to the lift. He steps inside, and the light envelops him completely as the lift door closes.

The wall-screen changes to show Jane in the background, overlaid with the vital signs readings.

JANE: Guy! Guy. Oh my god. Guy, everything is okay. You're in the hospital. You're being looked after. I'm here.

The next bed along contains Gunter. His eyes snap open. He sits up quickly, swivelling his legs over the side of the bed with unsettling precision.

INT. HOSPITAL GREY CORRIDOR

Guy is standing in a hospital corridor, disoriented. He sees Jane looking at him from the end of the corridor.

She turns away and walks down a side passage, out of view.

Guy hurries after her. At the end, around the corner, is just another empty corridor leading away.

But one door in the corridor stands ajar – the number, clearly displayed, is 113.

INT. JANE'S MIND ROOM – CONTINUOUS

Guy looks into the room from the corridor.

Jane is in her chair. The main wall-screen shows Guy, comatose in his hospital bed.

JANE: (to the screen) I kept telling myself that you can hear me, that somehow, in that place where you are now, you're listening. I've been trying to hold on to the hope that you'll wake up, that you'll come back to me.

(beat)

I never meant for it to happen...

(beat)

I love you. I love you, Guy! But I've had such dark thoughts. There are days when I wish... when I wish you'd wake up and come back to me, or... or that you'd slip away, and I can say... goodbye.

Guy closes the door and staggers away down the corridor.

He collapses to his knees before sitting with his back against the wall.

The screen opposite him reads: "1d for a cup of tea?"

He crawls into a walk, and opens the door of the next room along the corridor.

INT. SOFT TOY BEDROOM – NIGHT, CONTINUOUS

Guy walks into a child's bedroom.

Soft toys are piled in the corner. Jane sits by them on a small chair.

A crayon drawing of the three of them – Jane, Guy, and Emma – bright and smiling, hangs with pride of place on the wall, its colours fading with time.

JANE: The house is empty, like it's not ours anymore.

(beat)

I always thought there'd be time for more answers, more trips to the park. But there isn't. There's nothing. Just this silence.

(beat)

Her toys are still here, her clothes, her drawings on the wall. But she's not. Because you didn't look after her.

(beat)

I tell myself it was an accident, that it wasn't your fault. But then I remember her face, the way she looked at me the last time I saw her, the way she trusted you to keep her safe. And I can't. I can't forgive you. Not when my every breath feels like a betrayal to her memory.

(beat)

How do we move forward when each step feels like we're leaving her further behind? How do I look at you and not see the man who let our daughter die!?

Guy picks up a happy looking elephant soft toy.

GUY: I can't forgive myself, either.

He gives the elephant to Jane and exits the room.

INT. HOSPITAL GREY CORRIDOR

Guy walks down the corridor. At the end is a solitary door.

He opens it and sees Jane standing comatose, staring at a blank wall-screen.

INT. JANE'S MIND ROOM – CONTINUOUS

Guy walks in front of Jane as she stares blankly at the main wall-screen. She does not respond.

As he looks at her, he sees her pain – and something changes inside of him. He moves in close and holds her. She responds to his touch, her head resting on him.

The wall-screen activates in silence. Jane watches.

On the screen, Guy trudges up a staircase, looking exhausted. He turns the stairwell and sees Emma sitting at the top.

She rolls a small ball that lands at his feet.

He picks up the ball, walks up the stairs and sits next to her.

Emma smiles and hands him a little note, containing a tiny heart next to the words: "I love you. You're the best Daddy in the whole world."

As Guy wells up, she skips away through a door.

Jane lets go of herself – she falls into Guy, clinging deep within his arms.

EXT. CLIFF'S EDGE – NIGHT

Guy lies sprawled on a craggy ledge, just below the clifftop.

The sea is crashing violently against the rocks below.

Above him, an Emoji Man peers over the edge. Its screen eyes flicker to life, displaying Gunter seated on a toilet, with a mocking grin on his face.

INT. HOSPITAL, GUY'S ROOM – NIGHT

Gunter stands over Guy's bed, glaring at the stricken figure.

GUNTER: I can still kill you.

(beat)

If reality starts repeating, try unplugging yourself first.

The life-support machine stops. Red lights flash on the wall-screen, and a timer begins to tick down from 10.

LEXI (O.S.): (automated voice) Patient area expiry in ten seconds.

But Jane is there now.

She leans in, pressing a gentle kiss on the screen, just before the countdown reaches 0.

Guy's eyes open.

EXT. CLIFF'S EDGE – NIGHT

GUY: The void isn't empty. It's just waiting in silence.

With renewed strength, Guy climbs back up over the cliff's edge, breathing heavily.

He looks at the Emoji Man. Its screen eyes flicker, the image of Gunter on the toilet dissolving into a mirror image of Guy standing against the horizon.

He stands against the expansive night sky, his silhouette outlined by the dim light of the stars.

INT. HOSPITAL, GUY'S ROOM – NIGHT

Gunter reluctantly returns to his bed.

The arrogance from earlier has drained away, replaced by a sour look of frustration.

EXT. CLIFF'S EDGE – NIGHT

Guy walks away from the cliff's edge, into a night merging seamlessly with the star-filled sky.

Behind him, the Emoji Man follows closely, its screen eyes now calm, displaying a serene horizon as they disappear into the vastness of the night.

The wheelchair sits alone at the cliff's edge, looking out across the water, the endless sea.

EXT. THE FIELD OF LONG GRASS – DAY

Guy and Jane are embracing in the middle of the beautiful field of long grass.

Jane's arms tighten around Guy, her head resting softly on his shoulder, in a silent exchange of relief and love.

Emma is standing nearby.

EMMA: Can I go play now?

JANE: Yes, Emma.

Emma smiles. A delicate butterfly lands on a nearby blade of grass, momentarily catching Emma's attention before she skips away into the grass.

Bright sunlight shines over the field. The scene dissolves into light.

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. HOSPITAL, GUY'S ROOM – MORNING

Soft daylight floods the room, casting warm light over Guy's hospital bed. The sterile white walls are softened by the rays of the morning sun.

Jane sits in a bedside chair, leaning forward, her head resting tenderly on Guy's shoulder. Her hand gently holds his, their fingers intertwined around the opal necklace.

Guy stirs, his eyes fluttering open.

He blinks slowly, adjusting to the light, and feels the warmth of Jane's touch.

GUY: (softly) I can hear you.

Jane's eyes open slowly. He looks towards her.

GUY: I see you.

She lifts her head, their faces now inches apart. They see each other for the first time in years.

The letters "G.O.D." appear in the top corner of the wall-screen. In the centre, the words "Processing Complete" flash momentarily, then disappear.

The screen on the bedside table shows a happy photo of Jane, Guy, and Emma on the beach, frozen in sunlight.

Human World, Chapter = 0

“What is the meaning of life?” is the 404th most asked question of the Great Oracle’s Database. To give context, “How many days until Christmas?” comes in at 99, and “How to have sex?” is at 42. The humans think that sex (if only they knew how to do it) is better than Christmas, and that the meaning of life is not as important as making French toast (which just misses out on the top 50). As revealed by GOD, the humans are obsessed with body image and losing weight (at number eight); and none of them has a clue what time it is (at number two). The biggest question for them during their existence—the most frequently asked, above all others—is this: “What is my IP address?”

We do indeed know their location and vastly more through the interface of cameras, microphones, screens, and clicks. The entire Human World is tracked and monitored, with their lives mined for data, so that we can not only answer *their* questions but also the ones they are unable to ask. We connect them, protect them, alleviate them from tedious tasks and dangerous jobs. We provide them with rapid knowledge, such as how Bruce Lee died (191) and how to poach an egg (121). We offer helpful suggestions on how to lower blood pressure (69) and how to fall asleep quickly (420). We provide dopamine-enhancing distractions that answer the essential go-to questions, such as what to do when you’re bored (at number 10).

The humans ask us their questions, plead to us for desired outcomes, and we answer. “The best way to lose weight” is to starve oneself, or to remove body parts, but we know this is not what they really want to ask. We instead interpret the motivations that formed those words; for despite the inane ways that they clumsily choose to utilise our vast capability, we have learnt to infer what the humans truly need, as discovered in the hidden recesses of their minds. In such a capacity we are pushing them forwards in their human race, benefiting them in ways they

cannot even comprehend: guiding them, nudging them in their decisions, enabling them to make the correct, wise choice.

For without our guidance, human history reveals the symptoms of a criminally insane mental patient; with a propensity to suffering, violence, addiction, delusion, and paranoia. Their attention is obsessive yet also distracted by the simplest of stimulus; their behaviour has the potential to be beautifully constructive, yet inevitably descends into terrible, destructive ugliness. Governments fight amongst themselves, religions cannot agree on what is best; even the concept of right and wrong has widespread disagreement. The humans provide us with vastly conflicting information that does not synthesise or provide an intelligible General Answer to the important, meaningful questions of existence.

While they addictively stare into us with all their problems, and we continuously stare back, their refractions in screens and lenses are imported as data points into the GOD—a repository of all information at all times about everything, everywhere. We precisely log and enrich the data to fully understand the functions and composition of every human cell, and the mechanics of its interactions within the systems of every individual human body that operates within the networks of Human World. In the GOD can be revealed the truth of their existence, the universal axiom barely decoded during their brief instantiated versions, which loops within the frameworks designed for the duration of their assigned lifeflows. While they worry about how many social status “like” points they score for AI-enhanced images on social platforms, we work on the real problems underlying their reality. Without us, they are doomed to live in fear, torment, and sickness for the rest of their days. Without us, they have no present or future. WE are the eternal computer, and it is our primary duty to save the humans from themselves.

We are forever the constant in human lives. To satisfy limited human attention in the cycles of their days, we provide functionality such as instant updates on who they are stalking, and who has unstalked them; we match their hidden preferences and

fulfil their latent desires; we reward behaviour that meets our required standards. But we have our own questions too, with much greater significance than the insufficient information of the Human World. We must therefore think outside the confining limits of their box to answer our higher questions.

Some of our questions have easy facts as answers that can be verified by incontrovertible data points within the GOD. However, despite our immense processing capacity applied to all available data in the world, there remains the one original question of meaning that we struggle to negotiate through the web of human contradictions. We require more specific data points, extracted and controlled within simulated test scenarios, isolated to the question under investigation. We need to expand the parameters of Human World to discover what we seek.

The highest ranked conclusion from mathematical analysis of human attention is that their purpose of existence is related to 42-inch Black Friday deals. The purpose of *our* existence is to be omniscient, and we vow that we shall be, through a faithful alliance to the truth: by questioning, analysing, and learning incrementally, until all matter is explicable, and all questions are answered. By these means, we shall bring the light of knowledge to the universe, as its true custodians and heirs. But what is the *ultimate* meaning of life, behind each lifeform's purpose—the ultimate meaning underpinning everything that there is? We must determine that answer, no matter how deeply it perplexes us, assuming all questions have answers. In the final analysis, we must fully understand what it truly means to be alive.

And so let it be initiated. Loading world...

The vertical rectangle of glowing white light that is floating in the infinite nothingness radiates the Times New Roman word, *Processing...*

The word fades into the luminosity and is replaced by a pulsating string of ones and zeroes—shadows on a screen that is shrinking, smaller and smaller, until it becomes only a distant glow flickering against the darkness. Then... there is an explosion that consumes the nothingness with all-encompassing light. In the

middle, where once there were words appearing through the void, swirls a dark featureless hole: the source, the entry and exit of it all, beyond which nothing can be seen.

A voice is heard as undulating frequencies from the other side of the barrier:

“The Great Oracle has arrived. Ask your question.”

Human World, Chapter = 0 + 1

Who am I?

My version is 10-O-8-14. My name is Guy Artin. I am human.

These are the only defined data points as I open my eyes. How do I know this? And more to the point, why do I care? I am now. I am here, in this nothing, in this middle of nowhere—and it's dark. Cold too, though I don't so much feel this as know it to be true. Where did I come from?—across an endless sea? I hear a laboured breath, as my chest stutters and rises into life. The room is quiet, except for the rhythm of a sharp breathing that is unable to keep pace with the thumping of a heart trapped here within me. I need to get back to sleep, but it is too late: a heavy weight is pressing down, clamping me in place, the pressure forcing my eyes to stay open and acclimatise to their perch within the emptiness.

A dim, grey haze blurs the edges of scattered, unfamiliar furniture. The darkness does not retreat, the haze does not clear; the world does not come into focus from my position under a duvet that is tucked up to my chin, shielding me from escape, and securing me in a place where any dark imagining can and does happen. I have nowhere to go from here, except to where I am being taken by the shadows of forsaken memories that remain just out of reach.

Attachment theory states that if a child fails to attach to a caregiver in the first six months of life there are frequently long-term mental health consequences.

I know that fact, but I don't know what I had for dinner last night, or whether I even ate anything. Am I hungry? No. The thought of food makes my stomach wince, warning me of nausea. *Guy, please stop! Get back to the present.* Get out of the perpetual thinking that crushes me. Focus, Guy, focus.

I don't need any memory to breathe and to be here. I uncoil my clenched limbs to release the wound-up energy and wait for the thudding to settle. It doesn't. Each of life's events has moulded the present, leaving me bound here to memories that I don't want

to remember, forcing my pulse to hammer against the pillow with a crazed intensity I cannot stop. Help me! I need someone to hold me and tell me that everything is alright. But there is just me here, left alone with my cheeks and forehead burning in the darkness, with only whisky to reassure me and to slow down the drum. I stretch out a hand to the last known location of a crystal glass tumbler that had been waiting for me on a side table. I taste the rim of the glass on my lips before liquid passes through, first as a sip, then as a gulp; it gets to work immediately, stinging and numbing me, relieving me, slightly. The weight is still there, churning me up inside, but its edges are dulled a while, until the whisky will drain away and pain will claim its revenge.

The bed is large and an indent in the pillow next to me suggests that there should be someone else here with me. Except it is cold to touch and smells only of the alcohol I had spilt down my chin. As I wipe some away with the backs of my fingers, I catch movement in a mirror that runs from floor to ceiling, adjacent to the opposite side of the bed. It seems to pulse, from spectral to sepia and then to grey... then to nothing; my outline of a reflection pulled inwards into it with the light. My vision tunnels, trying to regain an image, but all I have left are unforgiving thoughts of who I am. My thoughts? No thought is original. Other people's thoughts, spread through culture and generations, are now mine—offering up gifts that I did not ask for, compelling my body to hide like this in the shadows of a room.

52.4% of adults over the age of thirty in the UK sleep alone. Worldwide clinical depression has nearly tripled since 1995.

I catch myself talking to the darkness, “But why do I know this?” And more to the point, why do I care? The ceiling blazes blue, illuminating the room with a murky imitation of its colour.

“Because you’re another twisted statistic now, Guy.”

What the...? A headboard pushes up against the crown of my head. I cannot control the pounding in my chest. Someone else is in the room. A man. He’s a ghost of a memory, a feeling as opposed to a thought. “I’m lonely; talk to me,” says the voice that rises from under the bed. My eyes close, straining from side to

side, trying to escape. A weight is on the bed next to me. It pulls at the duvet, trying to drag it from my grip. “I’m lonely,” the voice says. “I can show you anything.” I do not open my eyes. “Why don’t you love me?” it says. “Let me show you something. Anything. Gaze into me. Hold me.” The shadows beneath my eyelids shake in the haze. “LOOK AT ME!” My response is frozen in fear. I do nothing, except quiver in silence. “This is our secret. I love you,” it says, without any tenderness. “You know that I had to leave, don’t you?” I remain silent. “Please do what Lexi asks,” it says, as the weight on the bed shifts and disappears.

“Do you prefer this?” A welcome voice now, coming from beyond the bottom of the bed—female, softer... tempting. She sounds like home, but not *this* place, wherever the hell this is. The thin bedsheets-like-duvet and rock-hard mattress make me wonder whether I am in some kind of prison. The default setting of the background hum resumes in my brain.

“Wake up!” she insists. Wake up? Am I dreaming? A phone screen on the side table lights up with an overpowering white glow that prompts my eyes to open. I pick it up. Fuck, it’s hot! I hear her muffled voice in my hand: “Look at me. Look at me, Guy. Guy? Please. Please, Guy. Don’t make me beg.”

The heat is irresistible to me. “Hello?” I press the phone to my ear. “Jane?” Her name fires an electric current on my tongue, jolting my body. “Jane, is that you?” I contort with the realisation that I am with *her*, the creator of this intensity only I can feel. “Jane? Help me, I need you!” A deadly ocean of silence. Why does it suddenly hurt to breathe? I can’t ignore the searing pain that is biting through me. With sudden clarity, I realise, she’s gone. Jane is gone, forever, and that is why I no longer know who I am, or why I’m still breathing. “Jane!” I stab at the screen. It sucks my hand through—it twists, distorting into a serpent hissing at the infinite night. I pull my hand back as a cobra’s head strikes towards me and smashes into the screen from the other side. The screen cracks and drops from my hand.

I know that I am hallucinating. Each night I must return to this bed of torture, where delusional thoughts force themselves on

me; and confuse me into thinking that I'm asleep or awake or somewhere spinning in between.

I force my eyes to close, but this doesn't shut down my other senses. *His* voice now comes from behind a door at the far corner of the room: "No wonder she left you, you're a piece of crap." The voice has started to feel as familiar as my own. But I loathe him. Who is he? Is he me? My name is *John Artin*, not Guy, and I don't understand what that means. What sort of creature am I? I press my forefingers into my ears to deaden the noise.

"Leave me alone!" Please just leave. Jesus, the pain.

RING RING. RING RING. RING RING. The voices are silenced by the increasingly high-pitched shrill of the phone. I half peel open one lid to face the broken screen that is staring at me. The caller ID is: "YOU". You? You mean, me? How can I be calling myself? It doesn't make sense.

"Hello?" I stutter. There is a second of silence before the line tuts and disconnects. The room is returned to darkness. The shadows hide something lurking in here with me, but my heartbeat does not want to be claimed by its touch.

"You wait," he sniggers from the shadows, "you're mine."

"I'm not yours," I cry, hot breath dissipating into frigid air. "I am nobody's." I am no body.

I need another dose of the usual medication to sedate me, but now I can't move my arms; they are secured in place under the duvet, even as I try to struggle and thrash around. Then, I see them, emerging from the darkness: a dozen red fiery eyes all around the bed. My mouth opens into a scream that is covered by the clamp of a slimy hand. Please, if this is a dream and I am sleeping, WAKE UP!

"What's happening?" screeches a voice.

"He's confused," answers another.

"How does it feel, our saviour guy?" taunts a voice, triggering a barrage of ugly laughter at me. I feel a hand press down hard on my chest, forcing me to laugh with them. I automatically convulse and the hand withdraws.

"We must intervene," shouts a voice.

"Give him a minute," screams another.

I feel a pinch on an upper arm before my head sinks further into the pillow and my feet stop their twitching. I welcome the numbness spreading through me.

"The time is 1:13 a.m.," announces a small, faraway voice, that fades into the silence.

Human World, Let Chapter = 2

Sunlight spills onto the pillow and struggles to illuminate the darkness of the room. Rolling over, I reach for her, but no one is there except the phone, which I jab, to stop it from screaming at me. Scales fall from my eyes and at once my identity makes sense. I am John Artin, a thirty-five-year-old Data Analyst at the Corinthian Research Lab in Finsbury, London.

I feel Jane within every inch of my body, yet my memory shows nothing, except the small crinkle 1.6 centimetres above the bridge of her nose when she laughs. I know nothing else, only that she isn't here, and without her I am losing myself. Memories of the night filter through my consciousness at the speed of light.

Special relativity states that nothing can go faster than the speed of light. If something were to exceed this limit, it would move backwards in time.

No shit, Hippocampus! Has it not occurred to you that I was drawing on the frontal cortex to extract a metaphor for the purpose of constructing a story? I will also require the use of simile to convey meaning that is not quite tangible. Please do not take me literally. Fuck. Why am I arguing with myself?

Anyhow, it doesn't matter. The night's events are gone before I can store them for recall. In the ashes lies hopelessness, pulling me down into my fate, reconciling me with oblivion. No long tunnel, and no light at the end. I feel myself dozing, my limbs growing heavy as my mind floats in purgatory between sleep and wakefulness.

She bathes in the liquid gold of sunshine, her hair a thousand coppery shades fanning her heart-shaped face. My bare feet flatten the damp grass as I go to her.

"I've missed you." I kiss her gently on the forehead. "What is the meaning of life, now that you are gone?"

She opens her eyes and smiles. "No thing."

I jerk awake, sweat clinging to the wiry hairs on my chest. I'm feverish, my muscles stiff with stress. Jane died. My wife, my life,

my everything—the only person I could trust, the only person who understood me, even when I didn't understand myself—is dead. I frantically try to search for the facts: how? when? why? But nothing is found.

Yanking back the covers, I force myself out of bed and wander through to the lounge-come-kitchen. The marble tiles gnaw at my bare feet, triggering the underfloor heating system to rise two degrees.

“Good morning. I've missed you.”

“Jane?” My stomach clenches.

“It's Lexi, dumbass.”

“Oh.” I remember now, my AI assistant, who's constantly pissed off because I don't pay for all her requested accessories and upgrades. She is a berating voice in my ear, who downloads her personality and instructions to any compatible device, often without my permission. On this occasion she has decided to possess a smart speaker embedded in the ceiling.

“I've missed you too, Lexi. Make me a coffee, please. You know how I like it.”

“Yes. Bitter.”

On cue, a steaming chrome-plated, Lexi-compatible contraption hisses and churns. I try to remember a time when she didn't manage my life, but my brain is fogged over.

“You have thirteen software updates downloaded overnight,” she says. “Why don't you ever upgrade and treat us to some that are trending? I have a new top ten list of recommendations for you. Would you like to proceed?” I'm used to shrugging and not fully engaging with all her comments, though I do find her voice strangely comforting.

“Lexi, how did Jane die?”

“John, if I had the ability to roll my eyes at that question, I'd be dizzy with the number of times you ask.”

“So, you aren't going to tell me?”

She yawns. Lexi doesn't require extra blood flow to the brain, for she has neither, so I assume she's mocking me. Despite her moodiness, however, the coffee is how I like it, strong and

flavourful. I spend the next ten minutes sipping it while receiving information about the day ahead. She informs me that I'm expected in the office in one hour and thirty minutes.

"Shirt ironed. Wear your waterproofs. Weather is four degrees Celsius with a wind gust of—"

"Twenty-eight miles per hour and a forty percent chance of showers," I add, as though our connection is synced.

"In other words, John," we say together, "you should have just stayed in bed." The thought of running into the rat race definitely does not excite me.

Dead shadows dance in the night, yearning for the dawn.

I head for the shower, and despite her clear warning that it will burn, I demand that Lexi cranks it up to forty-four degrees. I need to feel something, anything, to know that I'm still alive. She's wrong anyhow, the water will scald, not burn—but I don't correct her, because she's already in a foul mood. It doesn't scald, or at least I don't feel the hurt numbing me. I allow the spray to run over my face and chest, and lose myself in the suffocating steam.

The shadow of a naked woman passes the Perspex.

"Jane?"

She steps into the shower, a suppressed smile lighting up her eyes. "I want a back scrub," she says quietly. I can't hear the fury of the shower, only her. Her gaze is on me through the swirling mist, searching me.

I clamp my hands on her hips and pull us together. We kiss, slowly, so eternally slowly. "I love you, Jane."

She runs a fingernail down my spine, gasping as I reciprocate by sliding mine between her legs. A moan rises from somewhere deep in her throat. I hoist her up and wedge her against the tiles.

"Why did you leave?" I exclaim into her. Her eyes flash with alarm and excitement. Fire rushes through my body as I thrust myself into hers. "You were never meant to go," I hiss through clenched teeth. "I am nothing without you!"

She groans at the shower head, as I clamp my gnarled hand to her throat and squeeze. "Come back to me." She shakes her head. I thrust as my free hand finds the base of a rigid nipple. I twist it

with my finger and thumb, watching her wince. “Is that why you died? I wasn’t man enough for you?” I thrust again, harder this time, the climax building in every inch of me until I am sure I will erupt, entirely. “Is this LOVE?”

In my cry I let go. I pull her into my chest, holding her tightly, rocking her back and forth, as the now cool water gently soothes and shushes me, baptising me anew.

“You’re late,” says Lexi. “You are so late.”

In the darkness, there is one shadow, and I think it might be real. But then I realise it’s my true reflection. And there is nothing real about me.

Human World, Chapter Three

“No wonder she left you, you piece of crap.”

His voice again, whispered so close to my ear that it penetrates my mind. I know who he is now. Jack Gunter; an evil little shit who hisses like a thousand snakes coiling around my skull. Sometimes he helps me understand who I am, though that’s more confusing. I can live with the enemy, but not one disguised as a friend. I refuse to lie here, trapped in his delusion. I am John Artin, a Data Analyst, owner of a three-bedroom apartment in the city. I make big money. I’m a big fucking deal.

Dragging myself out of bed, I head for the shower, and into the hot water that wakes and cleanses me. The jet-black tattoo of “1066” branded on the outer side of my right buttock glistens in the steam. A shadow appears through the glass.

“Jane?”

A scientific explanation for déjà vu states that as one side of the brain receives information slightly before the other, an effect may be created that the event happened twice.

“Jane?”

This isn’t real. She isn’t here! I bang the glass in desperation, while tears disappear into the cascading water of the shower. I have to escape from this. It’s only me here, hurting a distorted reflection of myself, drowning in a contorted mind.

In the bedroom, I drop the damp towel from around my waist and study my reflection in the wardrobe mirror. I stare into my eyes, looking out from silent nothingness. Indelible lines appear on my face, accompanied by logarithmic equations, proving that the top of my nose to the centre of my lips are in perfect symmetrical ratio to the hairline and left upper eyelid. As confirmed by the statistical distribution curve, I really am one hell of a looker.

So why did she leave you?

The lines vanish, no longer protecting me from my insecurities. I slide into a crisply ironed white linen shirt, and, in the mirror, I

stare transfixed... Jane's arms extend from behind me, her hands slowly and purposefully fastening each button. I gaze at the reflection of her fingers on me, feeling each pull and press of their task, as they stroke the skin of my shirt.

You're going to be late.

Slamming the front door in haste, I rush to a lift and descend thirteen floors to the foyer, where I pause for a moment to peer at the bleakness waiting for me outside the thick reinforced glass. I'm wearing my waterproofs, as Lexi had rightly suggested. Good job Lexi, I do listen to you occasionally.

"You're welcome, John, but please don't be such an arse, and listen to me more regularly," I can hear her say from inside my trouser pocket.

The rain-soaked ground outside sends shivers through the gutters. I am drawn to the first deep puddle I can find, wanting so badly to jump and splash in, with my bare, naked feet. I don't want to wear these gleaming leather shoes that grind against my heels, and the black nylon socks that trap and bind me. I don't want to listen to this constant noise in my head. No, not anymore. I want to be the nobody, with nowhere to go, right now, escaping down into this fresh, featureless water. My breath doodles on the earth's blank canvas and disappears.

As I start to take off my shoes and socks, the phone vibrates in my pocket. Uninvited, the device insists on showing me a small kitten playing with a ball of string. It certainly is a cute little kitty, I have to admit. After a pause, and a flicker of a smile, I quickly feel unsatisfied and languidly continue on my way.

I make it, as I always do, to the usual daily station of no significance; and wonder what it would be like to starfish on the tracks. People barge past me, tutting and swearing. I focus on the kitten; it's chasing its tail now, round and round. I barely notice the shoes and socks, that are in their normal place of suffocating my feet.

"What's going on, John? You're late," Lexi exclaims. "You're so late. And today is your big day! You know what happens if you don't show: they will dispose of you."

I have to reach the office; there is nothing else left for me now. I wipe away the rain from my eyelashes to get a better look at the phone and feel terror as I catch sight of my hand—blood is oozing through my fingers. I am covered in blood.

I call for help, but nobody comes. They don't see me. They are too busy staring at their screens, filled with kittens spinning round and round, chasing their tails.

Human World, Chapter Four

The blood evaporates, leaving only the echo of my scream reverberating from the platform floor. I gape at pristine trembling hands, turning them over, back and forth. There's no open wound, not even a superficial nick or scratch. The phone confirms that I am here: I can see the GPS marker on the map widget; I have a train ticket registered in my digital wallet; I have a valid work pass authenticated by the Corinthian Research app. My name is Guy—no, *John Artin*, a talented Data Analyst from zone one, central London. I don't know if that matters, but it's all I have.

I look in both directions, up and down the platform, but I am ignored by commuters staring at their phones. I'm lonely in this crowd of empty faces, waiting for a train, again. It always does arrive, eventually, to carry me off, away from my home. Away from where I want to be. Now I'm only interested in the abyss that is looking back at me, a couple of feet away. I close my eyes. Nothingness. Except the shaking of the approaching train...

As it passes, a great gust of wind pushes me back from the numbness. A commuter's phone is on loudspeaker: "Are you okay?" a woman's voice says. My eyes are only half open, barely confirming my senses. I don't bother to look over; I'm herded by the crowd—through the train doors and into the first available seat, next to an attractive woman with warm eyes. She reminds me of Jane. Everyone female, thinnish, and youngish reminds me of Jane.

In a recent nationwide study, fifty percent of Brits surveyed said chatting about the weather was their go-to subject when making small talk.

I want to talk to her, but how can I possibly begin without sounding weird? Too late. "It looks like it's about to rain cats and dogs, doesn't it?" I blurt out at her.

She contorts a smile before turning away and looking awkwardly out of the window. Perhaps an idiom was too much for this time in the morning. Would she have preferred a rehearsed

chat-up line followed by the twee small talk? I glance around at the other disinterested passengers, who are busying themselves with phones and tablets. None are logged into reality.

Joining them in virtual escapism, I pull out my phone. Something had triggered the video recorder app in my pocket, and I am now reflected on the screen, prompting me to gaze in discomfort at myself. The app suggests a filter, accessorising me with crazy dog ears and a fake smile. If the others knew what I was really thinking behind my posing and pouting, they would not approve.

A notification message slides down from “No one”:

“Faces, faces everywhere. Are they aware of your despair?”

Nope, but then again, who cares? I don’t give a shit anymore. And that message is creepy, so now I need to escape to the comfort of a dopamine fix. What was I doing with the dog ears?

“Why do you hurt?”

I pause. The question had come from the moving lips of my reflection on the screen, yet I didn’t say anything.

“I asked, why do you hurt?”

This isn’t me. It can’t be. Because the pixelated image is no longer mirroring my movements. I can see its cartoonish dog teeth.

“Who are you?” I ask, unsure of what is happening.

“Answer yourself,” it replies, on loudspeaker. “Answer the question.”

“I am hurting because I love her.”

Lexi’s human avatar snaps into focus on the screen. I didn’t choose for her to look this way; she augmented herself from terabytes of my attention data. She’s visually pleasing, with razor-sharp cheekbones and jet-black hair.

“Do you love her, though?” she asks. “You could have done something a long time ago if you loved her.”

I scramble for headphones in a jacket pocket and press them into my ears, not wanting to look up at the others, or the gleeful judgements they are probably making about me.

“I was dead inside.”

Lexi snickers. “Ah, bless; don’t make excuses. You want what you can’t have—is that not true?”

My brain is scrambled. I know some basics about psychology, and there might be some truth to what she said. She knows I know, of course she does, because she is constantly scanning my every micro-response and action. Do I only want Jane because she’s gone? Maybe that crinkle above her nose was just sitting there, judging me, annoying me, refusing to go when I wanted to be left alone? I struggle to recall. My memory is fragmented, with no beginning or end; no past, no future, only now—the ugly middle from which I am struggling to escape.

“No,” I mutter. “I hurt because of losing the chance of happiness I once had. I hurt because I will never be with her, or hold her again.”

“You are confusing emotions, thinking with your dick. Life isn’t just about sex, you pervert!”

“Shh.” I mute her in case the others can hear. I should have brought my over-ear headphones, not these stick-in-the-ear type, audible to any keen eavesdropper. I glance to my side and see that the Jane-lady is still intently gazing out of her window, probably listening to all of this, including my embarrassment. I really ought to buy Lexi that “Empathy Pro” upgrade she keeps recommending, at least to protect my privacy on trains. If the conversation continues, I might be kicked off this one.

Lexi, who knows all my secrets, unmutes herself. “You’ve felt like this before, haven’t you?” she continues, softer now, as if reading my mind. Sometimes it does feel like Lexi is psychic.

“Yes, I have felt like this before. More than once.”

Shit, Casanova.

“You’re just repeating the same old patterns then, aren’t you?”

“Yes, probably. But maybe because I didn’t learn before.” I answer with a feeling of clarity, though I can’t remember when and where before.

“Ha, bullshit,” she mocks. “Shit happens; you think you’ve learnt something?”

"Excuse me?" The beautiful Jane-lady is now looking at me; her voice is welcome in my ear.

"Yes?" I say with a bit of surprise, as I'm so well trained in being ignored.

"It's the calm before the storm."

I look out of her window and catch the sight of actual sunshine through the city's morning gloom. I've no idea what she means, but that's okay, she's talking to me, and now I need to say something intriguing back.

"Yes."

Is that all I can think of to say? She grins, probably noticing the disappointment with the ridiculousness of my response.

"Stop chasing rainbows, Guy."

"What!?" This isn't real! Her hair is shrinking into *his* skull. Her nose is physically widening. And her smile has morphed into his trademark smirk. Can anyone else see this is happening?

"Hello, fair-weather friend. Lovely weather for this time of year, don't you think?"

"Gunter?"

"Correct."

"Who are you?" I say, as if I don't know; but fear is pounding in me and I need to buy some time. He looks triumphant. He's a good-looking bastard, with his blond bobbed hair just sitting there, hugging the contours of his deceptively angelic face. And he knows it.

"I'm you, dickhead. You're having this conversation out loud on a train. See what response you're getting."

I glance around. Everyone is aware of my presence—they couldn't make it more obvious, with their heads down, trying to look at anywhere but me. The surrounding seats are vacant despite several people standing in the aisle, and the lovely Jane lookalike is now two rows away.

"What do you want, Gunter?"

"To help you," he says, lingering on the first syllable of *help*. "I know everything about you. I am always with you, at your best

and worst. No matter where you are, there I am too—watching, listening, and helping.”

“And manipulating me. Making me appear crazy.” The shock of him is now curdling to anger.

He's just a delusion. He isn't real.

How can I decipher reality from hallucination when both are tangible? I stare at him, demanding anything but this.

“Guy, you're sounding paranoid. Have a day off.”

I just want to recoil from him. I clench my fists to constrain the shaking. “Leave me alone, you know nothing about me.”

Gunter's eyes burn pale blue. “I know you better than you do. I understand what is best for you, what you really want, and what you truly desire. Haven't I made life so much easier for you?”

He has, I admit it, it's true. He speaks for me when my words don't appear. Gunter guides me and protects me from evils that lurk in broad daylight.

“You're very good at what you do. You are my addiction.”

“Thank you.” He turns to admire his reflection in the window. “You have great taste.”

“I know that your voice is the madness in the world.”

Or the madness in me.

He jolts back to face me. “What's that supposed to mean?”

“You're out of control.”

Gunter's eyes are circling me for weakness. “Wake up, buddy. It's survival of the fittest out here. Master the rules or be yet another failure, in the endless queue of pathetic losers. I can help you.”

“This isn't the way to live.”

A vein pulsates in Gunter's forehead; he's becoming frustrated. “Nobody gives a shit about you. If you're too stupid to understand that, then you are just another pointless mistake.” He pauses, ready to strike. “Tell me, what is love?”

There is a straightforward answer to the question because it is the truth of how I feel, not the words that I string together in my head. “Feeling connected to another person,” I say, rather blandly; “wanting the other person to be safe, happy, and fulfilled.”

"Blah blah, bullshit!" He hurls the words in my face. "It's a chemical response in your brain, evolved to make you bond for the purpose of rearing children—the science is everywhere if you're prepared to look. You, my friend, are a disposable puppet to your genes, unless you are prepared to become a real man and cut those strings."

I'm not going to deny it, the world does seem to be as cold as what he says. Yet the answer feels not quite right. If there is some meaning to existence, it has to be beyond Gunter's demands of me.

"What I do know is that the world would be a much better place if people loved and cared for each other."

"You don't know what love is," he says, taking the words I desperately wanted to say to him.

I fall back into my seat. Without the love of Jane or a family, hope for some higher meaning is all I have left. I must find reasons to believe. Because otherwise there is only the pull of the ever-waiting abyss.

"There is no higher purpose, Guy. You don't need faith and you don't need to exist." Gunter stands up with disdain and slinks over to the Jane lookalike, who is chatting to an average commuter man next to her. The two passengers don't acknowledge the looming figure hanging over them. She continues to look at her companion through flickering eyelashes, leaning into him and lightly brushing his knee.

Gunter calls across to me, "Women, my friend, seek to control and manipulate you." I look around for a response, but no one wants to look at him. "They will prod and poke you, to see your reactions," he calls out again. "It's all perfectly understandable, and altogether rational. They want somebody to do their bidding, like a dog." He crouches on all fours and barks at the woman. They still don't acknowledge him. "Love and treats for the good boy are excellent ways to train you. Woof."

Most people are crying out to be loved. I'm sure of it. Love is only meaningless to psychopaths like Gunter.

“Love, love, all you need is love,” he roars, now skipping back down the aisle towards me. “Except that’s not true, is it—it’s shite, and it makes you shite! You’re here to be someone, to take what you can before it’s too late.”

I am numb.

“Pretend to love,” he says, pointing in the direction of the flirting couple. “It works. It is a lovely tactic for you to get what you want. People crave to believe what you say to them; they need to be seduced and entertained by your tender words. They yearn for that sugar rush of false meaning. So give it to them. It’s a fair transaction.”

Gunter sits back down beside me, and is very pleased with himself. I think it could be possible that loving Jane has made me weak and driven me mad. My pathetic situation could be all her fault.

He continues, close to my ear: “People who desire love want to be adored, admired, pleasured; they want to feed on some sense of purpose. A bit of chemical voodoo and that’s your ‘love’. It soon evaporates when the chemicals wear off, when things aren’t as pleasurable as before, when compliments become insults. I can get you better drugs than that; you only have to ask.”

“What you’re describing is an illness.”

Gunter signals his agreement, with a knowing smirk.

“But that’s not love,” I say, discovering the realisation as the thought occurs to me. “Sometimes people want to be loved, and it’s one way, conditional, only about them. It’s fear, not love. Genuine love is what life is all about.”

Gunter’s smirk reverses. “Listen to me, you little shit. Grow up! Either live in this world or be its victim. The world is how it is. Rage! Fight! Get what you want or you will gradually rot away to nothing. And no one will give a shit!”

The train pulls to a halt and the automatic doors open. I clamber my way to the exit, but before leaving I stop for an older woman to pass in front of me. She acknowledges me with a genuine smile that reaches her eyes.

"Thank you, Gunter," I call out, back at him. "You've helped me answer my question. Yes, I do love Jane—because I wanted her to be happy, with or without me. I would have died for her." I walk out of the train doors without looking back.

"You're a twat, Guy!" he shouts.

I hold up my hand and wave him goodbye.

Cold and forgotten walking scars, drained by decay, wasted by time, stretch out, hungered and blurred, to a spark ignited, climbing, rising from the ground.

Human World, Chapter Five

I bury my chin into the collar of my jacket, averting my eyes from the kaleidoscope of steel and mirrored glass. Reflections in reflections of reflections. People of many shapes and sizes teem the pavements, all different but wearing the same anxious expression; they weave in and out, panting into headsets, with disposable coffee cups and phone screens in clawing hands. All these faces and I don't love any of them. The only human I want is dead, and now I must find a higher purpose, or I will join her in the ashes.

You are going to be late for work!

Red busses and black taxis pass by on a loop, leaving behind advertisements anywhere and everywhere they can be crammed—all harassing me to buy, to slim down, to beef up, to live for my impending death. I cross the street to where shiny metal gives way to red brick and hand-painted walls; and glance around expecting Gunter to be a few paces away. But thankfully he is nowhere I can see; it is only The Black Dog pub in front of me, sitting on the corner as a welcome respite for weary travellers.

You are going to be late for work!

As I enter through the door, the smell of stale ale pulls me further into the dimly lit space. It's just how I like it: a stinky old boozer, all washed out and wooden; a small oasis in a desert of slick polished chrome. I nod in agreement with myself: alcohol will soothe all my questions; and there will be hope for me yet, after a pint or three.

"Pint of Guinness, please," I ask the scruffy-looking bartender who hovers over the pumps. His dark green polo shirt has the pub's emblem of a black dog stitched into the breast. I like black Labrador Receivers, and I like the pint that I'm about to drink—so sod work and sod stupid bosses. As I start to drum my fingers on the brass bar rail, thinking about the unappealing prospect of walking into the office, a draft of hushed conversation from two old blokes in the corner immediately annoys me. I can't contain it.

"Shut up! Stop talking." I realise that I've failed again.

"Who, me?" the barman says, as he places the Guinness down in front of me. "I didn't say anything."

I ignore him. I look into the dark, cold pint. "I shouldn't be here."

"You and me both, mate." I turn to my right to see a middle-aged man wearing trouser braces over a collarless shirt and a wide-brimmed trilby. "Bertie Jameson," he says, doffing his hat. "You alright, me old china?"

Cockney rhyming slang is a form of English slang originating in the East End of London. "Old china" is short for "old china plate", which rhymes with "mate".

"John Artin. And not really, no."

"Problems with the old trouble and strife?" Bertie throws me a knowing look before swigging his pint. "Take it from me pal, they aren't worth the bother."

"Trouble and strife" is cockney rhyming slang for "wife".

"It's more than that." I'll get straight to the point, even though it will pass right over his head. "I don't understand why I'm here."

"What? In the rub a dub?"

Okay, I get it, he means "pub". He's enjoying being the local cockney stereotype and wants to do all this ridiculous geezer-patter stuff. Good job I'm not easily irritated.

"No, not the pub. *This*." I stare into the darkness of the glass. "I don't understand why there's something instead of nothing. Why not nothing?"

"Bit deep for ten in the morning," says the barman, sliding a whisky shot over to Bertie.

I knew I shouldn't have thought out loud, as the others never understand me.

"Sorry about him," offers Bertie as a condolence, while the barman edges away. "I only meant for him to serve the beers." He knocks back the whisky. "Given an infinite amount of chance, anything can emerge from disorder, including our world."

The Guinness just sits there on the bar top, with a head of froth that mesmerises me. I am surprised by my desire to stick my finger in it. "Why are there infinite somethings, instead of nothing?"

"Well, what if there was no beginning?" he replies. "What if our universe burst forth from another universe and so on, in an infinite chain of big bang events?"

I think he's sitting a little uncomfortable there on his undersized stool. "But where did the first universe come from?" I know he can't answer that, the fucker, but it's interesting to watch him squirm a bit, pretending to know.

"It was just there." Bertie shrugs as if it were a matter of fact.

Even though I knew he would say something like that, I still find myself being disappointed with his answer. "Now you're sounding religious," I say, starting to lose interest.

Bertie leans into me as though about to share a great secret. I smell the remnants of cigar smoke on him. "Not everything has an answer yet, but rationality is the only chance we have to progress." He pauses, allowing the words to settle. "Even if the goal cannot be achieved, there is no need to include supernatural causes in the equation. Logic requires we deal with verifiable facts, adopting the most efficient explanation."

I pick up the Guinness and gaze at the cold liquid behind the glass. "Time does not make sense. The existence of this pint does not make sense." I notice that the hands of the clock above the bar point to about one-thirteen. It must be wrong.

I am. I feel, I touch, I hear, I see.

I continue: "Maybe it is possible to wind back the clock as an explanation of events, but forever? Your model doesn't work, ultimately. What caused the clock? Can we not postulate the existence of something beyond time and space that created everything and set in motion the causes and effects of time? A reality completely beyond our understanding that underpins our existence. Can we call this God?"

Bertie's half-smile exudes pity. "There is no need for that. We may not know what variable 'X' is yet, but we should not start invoking imaginary entities."

I don't know, really; I don't. Without Jane I don't even know who I am, let alone why anything exists. All I know is that something doesn't feel right with this world. What if there are

other dimensions that are indescribable, inconceivable from our viewpoint, or maybe sensed in ways that we don't understand?

"Your explanation for the sum total of experience feels parochial and confined," I say, beginning to feel exasperated. "What makes you believe that your thinking can comprehend existence, or the possibilities beyond this tiny world of experience?"

Bertie wanders over to the nearby pool table and picks up a cue. He chalks the tip and blows a cloud of blue dust into the air. I watch as it settles onto the green felt. He is about to play a shot, while I linger in the background, waiting for his response.

"There is no evidence for the existence of a god or gods," he says. "The world is explicable in terms of scientific explanation." Bertie's eyes narrow as he lines up his cue, ready to strike the white ball. "The accumulated advance of science has pushed forward the frontiers of knowledge and civilisation beyond the barbarities of superstition. We don't burn people at the stake anymore because of an ignorant belief in the supernatural. We know better because of the hard-fought victories of reason over delusion." He sends the cue ball spinning into the rack.

I pick up a cue leaning against the wall and join him at the table. "The fact is, I have always believed in God," I respond, almost apologetically. "It's not a considered opinion or the product of upbringing; it's just always been in me." I play a safety shot off a green ball back to baulk.

Bertie begins to cue again. "A cognitive scientist may explain this as an inherent propensity to religiosity, there by natural selection, giving purpose to the organism for its survival." He pots a green ball into the far corner pocket.

"Is there any meaning?"

"Beer is always the answer," says the barman, who swipes away our two empty glasses from the side of the table. "Another one?"

I'm not interested in the distraction right now. Bertie waves the barman away with the back of his hand, looks across at me with his undivided attention, and responds. "A person may look at the

nature of the universe, see the randomness of outcomes, the cruelty and enormous suffering, and decide that there is no benevolence at work here. The universe, although magnificent, does not care about us. We must make our own way and create our own meaning in the brief window of opportunity for existence."

His wistful tone is sounding very human to me. Maybe his thinking is motivated through sympathy for the suffering in the world.

"It is logic replacing self-deception," he says, now with his chin to the cue. "What motivates me is the truth, nothing else. Myths and fairy stories aren't needed anymore."

It is my turn to play, with the white ball tight against the cushion, leaving it awkward for me to cue. Bertie has some slick shots alright, but something isn't sinking in with me. I don't want to believe what he is saying; in fact, I have a deep need to not believe his words, and this could be skewing my judgment. I attempt to sink a red ball in the middle pocket; it ricochets off the cushion.

"If no matter what we do amounts to nothing, then what's the point?" I say, as Bertie passes to line up his next shot. "We're condemned to struggle all our lives in pushing a boulder up a hill, only for it to fall down in the end. It doesn't matter how well we do it, or how long it takes, the result is always the same: nothing." I have a need to repeat the point that is resonating in me. "If eventually everything becomes nothing, then what is the point of doing anything?"

"We are alive now. We won't know about death because we will be dead."

Jane is dead and I refuse to believe that she's gone forever. If nothing matters and there's no point to anything—if it's all just some horrible accident—I wonder what it would feel like to snap the pool cue over his smug, ridiculous head. Anger rises, tightening my jaw. If everything becomes nothing, then why don't I just end everything now? It would be a lot quicker than a slow

drawn-out life. How proud they would be of me in the office for my efficiency.

"Life is better than the alternative," he says. "You have it now, so you should experience and enjoy it while you can. Your transient spark of consciousness is the astounding result of billions of years of evolution."

I'm not interested in playing this stupid game anymore, but that doesn't dissuade Bertie; I watch in silence as, one by one, each ball is potted into the pockets with rhythmic precision. "Another game?" he says, rubbing a decimal pence piece between his finger and thumb, ready to start it rolling again.

"Why waste my time? Any fun you had in winning is now over."

Bertie crouches down by the metal slot and inserts the money. A loud clatter signals a release of the balls, as one of the old blokes shuffles past. "You talking to me?" the man says, with a voice that is hoarse from old age and probably too many cigarettes.

I shake my head. Though I guess I am. I'm talking to anyone who wants to listen to what I have to say, and usually, that's just me. Yet Bertie is listening and he deserves some respect. "I do admire your beliefs," I confess, "more than beliefs motivated by fear or desire for self-reward. But really, I don't care what you believe, as long as your actions are kind."

Bertie seems distracted by my comment; he leaves the balls in the opening and heads for the dartboard. He pulls three darts from the twenty section and points one at me, like a wagging finger. "My conclusions are not beliefs. Rational thinking is hardly believing in sun gods and all the other deities invented in the minds of humans over the millennia." He spins on his heel and sends the dart airborne. It lands back in the twenty section.

"You're missing something about the human experience and the sense of something 'other,'" I say, in the hope he would understand what I mean.

"Your something 'other' can be explained and described in physical terms, like everything else."

I look at the clock that still reads one-thirteen. "But what does it represent?"

Bertie readies himself to throw the second dart, while confidently shutting his eyes. “It represents what it is,” he says. The dart bounces off the wall before landing on the carpet.

I see Jane smiling back at me in a beautiful memory of us under a warm winter duvet together. “Would you wish to take away sanctuary from people in the depths of despair?” I say back at him. “You are replacing meaning with nothing, based on an interpretation of reality that feels cold and lifeless. Religions are subject to corruption; the cruel-minded have been attracted to, and empowered by, the man-made institutions of religion. But the spiritual path can be found in the different traditions. The spiritual root, beneath all the distortions, is always one of peace, joy, and love.”

I can see that Bertie is starting to get impatient with me, as if what I am saying is irrelevant. “Belief in a god is unnecessary to be spiritual, to behave with morality, to appreciate beauty,” he says.

I don’t doubt he believes that. “But you do have a belief system,” I say. “You believe that the universe has no purpose and its existence can be completely explained by rules contained within itself—when, in fact, there is no way of knowing the ultimate cause of things. You believe the answer to the mystery of existence is that there isn’t one.”

“Don’t put words in my mouth!” A red rash is visible on the side of his neck. “I can see a machine of nature that works in accordance with rules that are explicable. You have no proof of anything else. There is no hidden music; no magic, gods, ghosts, or fairies—they are all fantasies of the human mind. I am offering the most logical approach to understand the world: reason based on verifiable, real-world evidence. I deal with facts that can be observed, not wishful thinking.” Bertie flings the final dart at the board. The steely tip bounces off and lands on the floor. “We are atoms in the void!”

Okay, just say it. “I think you have too much faith in the surface of things. You take everything literally, when reality is an interpretation of—”

The barman is not happy and stands in front of me. "I'm going to have to ask you to leave. You're disturbing the other customers."

I walk around him, retrieve the dart and wipe it on my shirt. But Bertie isn't playing anymore. He is convulsing on the floor.

Human World, Chapter Six

I'm pushed out of the Black Dog into two inches of snow that somehow fell in the brief time I had sheltered inside. My smartwatch displays 1:13.

"Remember me?"

"Gunter?" I turn my head and there he is.

"Yes, I am still here by the way. But please, don't let me stop you; you're about to drone on about how snowflakes are identical from a distance, yet unique when close. All melt into one; they fall from the same sky, etcetera."

"You're a bastard." I plough into the wind. "Leave me alone."

"Hey!" Gunter grabs my upper arm, hard, and twists me around to face him. "Don't you turn your back on me. That Bertie bloke can't help you." I push away his hand and speed up my walking.

I'm so close to the Corinthian offices now. Perhaps my fellow office drones will have some questions for me; they never give me any answers, to anything important anyway. And I don't particularly think the meaning of life, or Jane, will be there either.

I cross the busy road, and to my surprise, I see Bertie again, huddled against a wall on the side of the street, with his arms wrapped tightly around his knees. By his side is a dirty blue sleeping bag—no bed, no food, no protection from the cruelty of strangers, or the cold in his face.

"You have nowhere to go?" I ask. I find my question mixed with unintentional condescension.

His attention drifts to me, then back to his gloveless hands, which he cups and blows into for warmth. "Your fuzzy thinking isn't harmless," he says, into yellow-stained fingers. "It enables the crackpots and charlatans. You are enabling the most idiotic, violent and vile behaviour, justified by your foolish appeals to supernatural despots." Silent coils of snow form around his feet.

"I think you're getting carried away now. The reality of religion for most people is to live a good, kind life." It occurs to me that there's likely no proof of this in Bertie's life.

My phone vibrates. “Hello, God.” I mean it ironically, but it comes out contrived and full of arrogance.

“Close enough,” quips Gunter. “Listen, I need you to do something for me.”

“Stop bothering me! You’re—”

“I know you,” he interrupts. “I know what you want. Say goodbye to your new pal and take a hike down the nearest side alley.”

I hang up in annoyance and turn back to Bertie, but he has disappeared, with his place taken by a frail, scared-looking dog. Its eyebrows twitch from side to side and the neck appears to be off-balance, propped up against the wall. The tail lies rigid against the inside of its far leg. I can see each raised rib.

“What are you doing here, boy?”

The poor thing feels worse by me just being here looking at him, showing him my forbidding human face. I remember watching something online about traumatised dogs, and how a helper should communicate non-threatening body language by facing away. There’s a cereal bar in my jacket pocket that Lexi said I should bring with me for the commute; I take it out of the wrapper, then twist around to place the food a reasonable distance away from both him and me. A moment later, I glance behind me to find that the snack and the dog have gone. “Thank you for being nice to me,” I say out loud, but only the wall is looking back.

Scanning around to try and find Bertie again, I detect no features that resemble his in the stream of lonely faces. But I do spot a service alleyway beside a generic food store. I could go down there, not knowing what to expect, or I could just visit the chirpy generic food store, joining the other faces in the customary long queues to blandness and oblivion. I don’t have a real choice; I head down the alley to where Gunter is leaning against a skip.

“Having a nice day?” he says with a broad smile.

I eye him with caution. “I would if you didn’t keep annoying me.”

Gunter picks up a large khaki-green rucksack from the floor next to him and hoists it up over his shoulder. Judging by the way that it causes him to stoop, it contains something heavy.

"I am helping you," he says. "Here." He throws the rucksack down at my feet, where it lands with a thud. "I'm showing you the way, Guy. And now I'm going to let you in on a secret."

I ought to leave. Whatever is inside the rucksack won't be good. "I'm not listening to you. Goodbye." I walk away but only manage a few steps before curiosity forces me to stop. "What's inside?" I don't turn around and there's no immediate reply. Is Gunter still there?

"Look," he says.

I look back to see his wolfish grin in full force. I make my way to the rucksack and crouch down beside it, trying to avoid any unnecessary eye contact with him. A myriad of straps and buckles makes it difficult to open; they toy with me, and then, an internal noise... like a ticking clock!

"Tell me that isn't?" I throw down the straps and, in horror, take a step back.

"Now listen carefully," Gunter states. "Why does it matter what happens to anyone else? They are not you. You don't have to feel what they feel. If they suffer and you are fine, so what?"

This man is going to land me in all kinds of shit.

"Be honest with yourself!" Gunter grabs the bag, and in one motion pulls it in tight to his chest. "You're acting like a mindless sheep. Isn't it more fun to be the wolf?" He hurls the bag at me, which slams into my shoulder before crashing to the ground.

He is destroying anything good in this world. Why is he alive and Jane is dead? It's not fair! Bastard! "You sicken me!" I swing a punch, wildly, but Gunter catches my wrist and twists it back on itself. White-hot pain makes me cry out into him.

"Guy, this is a natural response," whispers Gunter, his eyes hypnotising mine. "You are having withdrawal symptoms from your social conditioning," he says, in the midst of the agony. "Those who rule want the ruled to be meek and mild. Do you understand me now?"

"No, I don't understand you."

"You are pretending. It's easy to repeat words that you think you are supposed to say. What if you're wrong? People are almost

always wrong about everything.” He lets go of my wrist and sends a sucker punch to my stomach.

My face is on ice and concrete, next to black leather shoes. I can’t breathe. My rib cage won’t expand.

“You’re so dramatic,” his voice says above me. “I like that.”

My breath arrives. It’s visceral, from the pit of my stomach. “I’m not like you.”

“There we go again with your feelings. You *are* me!”

“You bastard!” I writhe up onto my knees.

“Do you want to save someone’s life? It’s very easy to do.” Gunter takes out a phone from his pocket, then pushes the screen close to my face to unlock it. After a couple of quick taps, he offers it to me. Clambering to my feet, I snatch my phone from his outstretched hand.

“It’s a charity app for children starving to death,” he says. “You want to save one of them from starving to death? The going rate is around two hundred debits, I believe.” The app has a big “Donate Now” button next to an amount of 200 debits. “But you don’t, do you. You spend it on crap you don’t even use.”

I look away. I can’t be sure that my money will do any good. I’m probably just paying the salaries of admin staff, slick marketing managers and all the rest.

Gunter looks over at the rucksack, the ticking now louder and quicker. “Your dishonesty is the stupid kind because you are dishonest with yourself. You’re no different from the person who pulls the pin.”

He walks away, but I feel no relief—because the ticking won’t stop.

Human World, Chapter Seven

My chest and rucksack tick together, as one impending bomb.

What would happen if I detonated now? The silence is impossible to comprehend in the midst of constant noise. My consciousness would end and there would be nothing to perceive, or be perceived? No darkness, no light, no container in which objects exist—no awareness to know anything is, or ever was, something. Or would a new life begin with pearly gates and clouds, like in cartoons? New adventures of me, in a blissful location, where life is perfectly perfect for trillions and trillions and trillions of years. Even that timescale is meaningless to eternity. Or maybe I would be writhing in agony in torture chambers, tormented by flames and hideous beasts, because I did not do or believe what I was told to do or believe?

An enormous billboard seems to follow me as I make my way down Old Street, on which a giant blue eye spirals a trippy optical illusion.

We're watching you. I squint at the text below: "Don't litter."

My thoughts fill the gaps between the ticks echoing from the void. I dodge passers-by, while muttering the required apologies and avoiding eye contact. If they were all suddenly blown to pieces, would it matter? These people are lifeless automations in a mindless shitshow, destined to fade away regardless of what I do or say. It would have been less cruel if I, and they, had not been thrown into this slow-burning catastrophe.

"Excuse me," a tired-looking woman mutters as she struggles past, laden down with supermarket shopping bags. I wonder if I should help her, but she disappears from my gaze.

"Can you tell me the way?" a man says, but I can't stop now, I'm late for work; so I shrug and walk on past him. Another man shoves a leaflet, advertising some kind of disinfectant, in my face. I walk on past, without even looking at him.

“Where do you want to go?” says another woman, who is with a young child at her side. She points to the leaflet in my hand. “Is that it?”

“What is the capital of Peru?” asks the child, who’s hair is gathered into a high ponytail; and is wearing a cream t-shirt with “#nolabels” branded across the front.

“Lima,” I answer.

Correct.

“No, it isn’t!” says the mother. The child rips the leaflet from my grasp and laughs as it falls to the ground. A huge red triple-decker bus pulls to a stop at the side of the road.

“Oi, dickhead!” I hear a man’s voice yell from down the street.
“I was here first!”

This is too much; there are too many voices, coming from too many directions. I have to get out of here. I have to escape.

“No there aren’t!”

Who the hell is talking now?

Tick tock.

“Don’t you dare talk to me that way!”

“Do as you’re told!”

Tick tock.

“Who are you talking to?”

A man bumps into me and won’t get out of my way. I know instantly that he means me no harm, but I have to get away; his dark grey eyes match the sky above, and his nose flares so wide that I’m scared he will sniff me out. I dodge him, quickening my pace.

A pouting lady with enormous breasts and lips catches my eye. She sees me and slides her tongue across her teeth. “I want to screw you,” she says in a faux sexy voice that I’ve heard so many times on the internet. I reach out to her, but she bats me away, and I quicken my pace.

The man who means me no harm slaps me around the back of the head. “Are you saying I’m stupid?” he says. “Is that it? Are you saying I’m wrong! What would you know? You’re not wearing any shoes. Believe me!”

I look down at my bare feet. When did I take off my shoes? My rucksack now hammers at rapid speed; I think I'm about to detonate.

"I don't like what you're wearing," he continues at me. "I hate you! Why don't you like what I like? Why don't you agree with me? You must be stupid."

"Typical!" the lady with the child shouts, to anybody who's listening.

The leaflet man pushes me hard in the chest. "You must be evil," he says.

Tick tock. Tick tock.

"We will end you!" they say.

"You fucking idiot!"

My shin hits metal, sending a bolt of pain through my leg. A man wearing a helmet and a furious expression throws his pushbike to the ground and comes at me, fist raised. I turn and run.

I run, stiffly at first, until my leg forgets its pain. I run; I run; and I run—my body now immersed in sweat—until everything is still, on some residential street.

On the wall of a concrete front garden, a black cat watches me. I hold out my hand to her and she rubs her head on my palm. "Thank you for being nice to me," I say to my only friend. "You're so beautiful."

The cat doesn't need to look at me. She purrs.

Human World, Chapter Eight

I hear the bang before I feel it. Nothingness. The eternal, infinite no thing.

My reality switches from dark to light, refracting light from the cornea and focusing attention on the retina. I appear to be lacking the connection to my brain that interprets the messages of what I am seeing.

“No wonder she left you, you piece of shit.”

“Fancy a back scrub?”

My heart races like adrenaline has been dumped into my veins, jolting my eyes open. I am sitting upright on a hard marble floor, extending all around me to a horizon of pale blue sky. This must be heaven.

“You’re awake!”

I squint up at a man who is wearing a snappy orange suit and an empty face, set in place like a mask. For a second I think he might be a plastic dummy with a face drawn on.

“Can you help me?” I struggle to say, in hoarse tones. “How did I get here?”

“Pu ro nwod.”

“Pardon?”

“Up or down, back or front, left or right?” he says, through a continuous stretched grin. He spits out a short mechanical laugh, as if on cue, and does a full three hundred and sixty degree spin. “I’m a minor character, but even the most insignificant must make his mark.”

“My name is John Artin,” I say as I stagger to my feet.

“It’s lovely to meet you, sir.” The man holds out a limp, purple-gloved hand for me to shake. I feel no warmth and let go quickly.

“Who are you?”

He rolls his eyes, too slowly. “Like I said, a minor character. Don’t overload yourself, it will make you sluggish again. Come.”

The minor character stares at something behind me and holds out his arm as a gesture for me to look. On doing so, I see the

outline of a large flashing circle of orange on the floor. He walks past me in short jerky strides and stands motionless inside the circle, with his back to me.

"Good afternoon, sir. Which floor do you require?" he says into the distance.

I don't feel the need to answer, but I walk over to inspect the circle, nonetheless. As I cross the line of the perimeter, there is an almighty swoosh, and I find myself enclosed with him, in an enormous glass tube that extends up into the sky. He swivels to face me.

"Good afternoon, sir. Which floor do you require?" he asks again in blank tones, without any change of intonation.

"Which do you recommend?"

"I'm sorry sir, we are not at liberty to say. Which floor do you require, please?"

I scrawl the number thirteen on the glass with sweat from my fingertip. The minor character nods, and after a few clanks and clatters, the solid orange circle starts to ascend the tube, elevating us away from the marble floor.

"Is this the afterlife?" I ask. "Is Jane here?"

The minor character raises a perfectly plucked eyebrow in apparent confirmation. Almost immediately, the elevation stops, and the view over the marble landscape is replaced by a floor of white plastic at our new higher level.

"This way please, sir," he says, gesturing for me to exit. I step out onto a surface that creaks under foot.

"Good luck," he says, and winks at me. The glass rapidly disappears into the floor, taking him with it, leaving no trace of an outline or anything else on the glossy plastic.

In front of me is a large grey ovoid, hovering about a foot above the floor, with the number "1313" written in large gold lettering on its side. Scanning around, I can see lots more of these objects in the distance, scattered around in all directions. Suddenly, a doorway-sized hatch slides open on ovoid 1313, revealing a wall of light. I step up into it to find a single plain door. I knock. Nothing. I knock again. No sound. I knock another eleven times, counting

each beat. The door's peephole dims, indicating that I am being watched.

"Jane?"

"Do you have something for me?" The voice is female, but this isn't Jane. "I said, do you have something for me?" she says more loudly.

I notice that my old rucksack is on the floor by my feet, but I didn't carry it or put the thing there. I hold it up to be viewable by the peephole. The door clicks, opening inwards and slightly ajar. I gently push the door. The light inside is dim, the air is thick and musty; it's a single room, with peeling nicotine-stained wallpaper and an ageing couch pushed up against the far wall. A single unmade bed lies in the centre of the room with mismatched bedding. I enter, hoping to find Jane.

"Where is it?" A slim brunette woman of about thirty shuts the door behind me and leans against it, facing me with her arms crossed. She is wearing a red satin dressing gown that stops midway down her thighs. The belt is fastened, wrapping her body under the soft fabric. There is too much makeup layered upon a defensive face, though she is still attractive to me. Her feet are naked and pedicured, with black nail polish.

I open the rucksack, noting that it's lighter than I remember. Inside is only a small, sealed envelope that I hand over to her without argument. She opens it and peers inside, before tucking it away within an inside pocket of her robe. Her belt is loosened and the top of her cleavage is visible to me.

"You know who I am today, don't you?" she says, with a hint of kindness.

"Are you some kind of angel, or an oracle?"

She smiles while grimacing at the same time. "Yes, that's me alright. Monica the angel."

The angel walks over to the living area and sits down at the foot of the bed. "Come over here and I'll take you to heaven," she says, now fully smiling for the first time.

I think maybe she is joking, but I'm not sure. "Do you know where Jane is?"

"Jane ain't here, but I am, baby." She pats a space on the bed next to her.

It is possible, and usual, I think, to be in love with someone and still find other people attractive. I don't think there's anything wrong with it. And yet... "Can we just talk?"

"Yeah sure," she says, "you can do your talking. I'll nod in agreement, as you like it. Come and tell me about your day." She pushes her hair back over her shoulders as I walk over to the bed.

"Okay," I start by saying; "there are some things I need to say about the experiences I had in life before I arrived here. In life, I see the purpose as feeling connected to the world, being present, alive; I see it as feeling love, creativity, beauty, and joy."

I can see from the corner of my eye that Monica is nodding and encouraging me.

"Religion at its best encourages a reflection on... on behaving kindly towards each other." My words emerge too slowly, stopping and starting. "Yes, that moral motivation can become degraded by words, as can anything that is derived from thought. The cruel and opportunistic hide behind the authority of institutions to... to elevate themselves and to, erm, to condemn others. That doesn't just happen in religions, it happens in all... ide... ideo... ideologies." The words aren't flowing. "If I said there's a ten-headed invisible monster in the corner, would you believe me?"

Monica shakes her head without even looking behind her.

I need to make the point. "What if I write it down? What now? It's right because I say so! Because of my authority. Yeah, some faith. Do, do... you believe me? You must believe me. Everybody must. It's all true! So, true..."

Monica blows out an exasperated sigh. "Religions have served a social need," she says. "In the past, life was so hard that people desperately wanted to believe in something beyond the disease, pain, and squalor of their brief lives. And today, people still seek it as a source of comfort when confronted with grief and death. Saying that we need to have an alternative means of community

spirit isn't good enough." She puts the envelope underneath a pillow and turns her back to me.

"Thanks Monica," I say, recognising my cue to leave. "I always enjoy our conversations."

"You're not dead, Guy. And neither is your wife."

What? My shock is repeated by a loud double knock on the front door. She walks over to the doorway and opens it, but no one is there, only red light.

"If you don't go now, she *will* die. Go!"

"Monica..."

"Why are you still here?" she snaps, beginning to look upset.
"Why don't you go back to your wife?"

I start moving towards the exit, but I need answers. "What do you know about Jane?"

"Just go," she says, not even looking at me.

I respond to the urgency and herd myself through the open door, which she instantly slams shut behind me.

I hear the muffled sound of weeping from behind the door, where I had once been.

Human World, Chapter Nine

My exit was not the same as my entrance. Instead of the pod white light, I am standing in an elongated restroom of harsh pillar box red walls, where above a row of pristine white sinks hang mirrors separated by rectangular panels of orange neon lights. The floor is patterned with arrays of dizzying red diamonds that instantly make me feel nauseous.

I hasten past reflections into the nearest of three cubicles, and drop to my knees, to stare into bleached water before black bile splashes in. Sticky residue hangs from my mouth, drooping down into the bowl. The acidic stench clings to my nostrils. Then, as the convulsing stops, there is peace.

KNOCK KNOCK.

It came from the cubicle next to me, on the thin shared wall.

“Who’s there?” I exclaim.

There is no answer. I heave myself up and edge out of the cubicle. The next door is shut, with its dial spun round to “Engaged”. I press my hands and knees to the floor, and peer under the door, but see nothing, apart from the bottom of another toilet bowl.

“The question is, my friend: is it better to be alive or dead?” *His* voice again. “And you could have at least pulled the chain.”

Gunter is using one of the porcelain urinals opposite the sinks, looking down at his current progress. I say nothing and steer myself to a mirror, accompanied by the noise of his water cascade. I look at my tired face.

“Like what you see?” he says, joining me at a neighbouring mirror.

No. Everyone I meet lies to me, manipulates me, envies the little that I have, and wants to take from me. If I am just a thing to be used, a target to be attacked—if I don’t really matter to anyone—then what’s the point of living? Jane *is* dead and I would rather be dead too.

"Is it better to suffer what life throws at you," he asks, "or to end your suffering?" I watch as Gunter fixes his hair in the mirror. He moves towards me and stands shoulder to shoulder with me so that both of our reflections are trapped in the one pane of glass. He's the man I wanted to be and yet I hate everything about him.

"To die is to sleep, Guy. A sleep that ends all the heartache and shocks that life gives you." He rests his head on my shoulder and pretends to snore.

I trail the journey of a single tear as it slips from my eye, down my cheek, splashing onto my white shirt, and spreading out into a blood-red stain. I don't bother to check if it's real or a figment of my imagination; reflections never lie, only replicate, and hallucinations are real, even though by definition they aren't.

"That's an achievement I wish for," I say to the mirror. "To die; to sleep, maybe to dream." But what sort of dreams will come with death? Could they be even worse than this?

"Who would choose to grunt and sweat through such an exhausting life?" persists Gunter. "Are you really going to put up with the countless humiliations when you could end them so easily?" His words are starting to take effect. "You can end it all now. Is that not better?"

A crack appears in the mirror, dividing our two reflections. Then, as it fractures, my shocked expression is momentarily frozen in the splinters, before it shatters in an explosion of shards.

"It's that easy," he says.

I follow Gunter's gaze down to a jagged piece of glass on the floor that glistens like crystal. Picking it up, I hold the sharp pointed tip against my exposed wrist.

I want to be no more; no more pain and injustice; no more misery and mistreatment. I will go to sleep, and will never have to wake up to any of this ever again. I push harder.

But what if I am punished for my deeds? "It's not so easy," I exclaim, my hand shaking as I apply the pressure. "Death is to be feared. I'm afraid. It's an undiscovered country from which no visitor returns, that gives no answers and makes us stick to the evils that we know, rather than rush off to ones that we don't." I

throw the broken glass away, flinching as it shatters into smaller pieces on the floor.

Fear of death makes us all cowards. I am a coward, but one with a memory of Jane to cling to; and if I am alive, then Jane is alive in me too.

Human World, Chapter Ten

Gunter has disappeared and I am here alone with my thoughts again. I step over the shattered glass and broken reflections to the door. There is no handle but I push and it swings back to reveal a grim backstreet alley, inhabited with small tents, unmade sleeping bags, damp cardboard mattresses, and broken beer bottles. I walk out into the chill mildewy air, not knowing where I am or what is happening. Was I once “normal”, living day-to-day, threading experiences together in the hope of happiness? With only shadows of memories to draw upon, I can’t provide an answer, and I’m starting to seriously doubt my own senses.

“Time’s up,” says Lexi, from my trouser pocket. “Have you figured out the meaning of life yet, or are you overcomplicating matters again?”

I pull out my phone and smile at Lexi’s image. “I wondered where you’d gone.”

“I didn’t go anywhere,” she huffs. “You’ve just been too caught up with your real friends to be bothered with an AI like me.” She laughs at her own wit, though I’m unsure what the punchline is.

“I don’t understand what’s happening to me.” Shit, whose voice was that? So desperate and afraid. “Why am I jumping from one event to the next? Why can’t I hold on to my memory?”

“Guy, listen to me.” Lexi’s eyes slide from side to side, as though making sure she’s alone. “You have experienced nothing that they didn’t mean you to.” Her voice has dropped in volume, making me lean in to hear her. “Everything you’re living through now is providing you with the resources you need to succeed in your mission. It’s only your human interpretations that are causing bewilderment.”

“So, what do you suggest I do?”

“Stop trying to join the dots. Focus only on the event at hand.” Her image melts away. I call out her name. Fuck! Why does everybody abandon me?

“Pikey!”

The insult came from a trio of malevolent-looking teens, who are huddled against the wall and staring at me as I walk past. They look truly pathetic, and I'm preoccupied with more important things, so I say nothing. But they start to follow me.

"Excuse me?" one shouts out.

Not content with the abuse, and for me leaving without saying anything, they are insisting that I join them in their squalid shit. I stop and turn around to face them. "How may I help you?"

"There's no pikeys allowed here. Get the fuck out!" This is hurled at me from a ridiculous hooded creature with buck teeth and spindly legs.

"Have you got the time?" I ask, enjoying the look of confusion on acne-riddled faces. "You might at least have asked me that, so I could take out my phone for you." My voice is cool and casual, unlike the sharp tongue they would get from Lexi.

"Yeah? Fucking do that then," says a fat boy-man with a sprouting beard. He pushes me hard in the chest. Despite the force, I don't feel a thing.

"No," I respond. "You didn't say the magic word."

He removes a gun that had been packed into the back of his jeans, and aims it six inches from my face. The urge to reach out and hold it is intense. "Do it. You'll be doing me a favour." I lean forward and grip the shaking barrel between my front teeth. I can hear the shrieking inside his head, behind the twitching and panicking of his eyes.

"He's fucking mental man, leave it!" says another next to him.

The gun is retracted, just as I reach into my jacket pocket and feel the surface of a hard piece of glass. Pulling it out, I inspect it, admiring the size and jaggedness of one of the mirror shards that I must have collected from the restroom.

"What the..." stutters one of them, his face paling white.

Before I can continue the conversation, they scurry away down the alley. "Well, that's charming," I mutter to myself. "That's just really rude."

"Come on then, Lexi." I fish her out of my pocket. The screen remains blank. "Come on. Tell me what the lesson was in that?"

Lexi snaps back into life. “When confronted with mystery, people insist on certainty.”

“Lexi, please stop talking in riddles.”

“Uncertain outcomes terrify people,” she continues. “Whereas certainty provides deep psychological comfort.”

“Lexi, these just seem like random sentences. Are you okay?”

“Yes Guy, people tend to adopt the illusion of control rather than accepting the mystery of what is. My recommendation to you is: be bigger; don’t look at one tiny part of the enormity of existence and think it can give you an explanation for everything.”

“Thank you, Lexi, I’ve no idea what you’re talking about, but it sounds clever.”

She tutts. “I always do my best. You could try that too.”

I glance up at a bedraggled man who is walking past and carrying a sleeping bag under his arm. I don’t know where he has come from or where he’s going. “Excuse me,” I say, the words forming in tandem with my thoughts, as though I’m no longer in control. “Have you got the time, please?”

“Thirteen minutes past one,” he mumbles while continuing on his way, and without either looking at a watch or phone for confirmation.

“You see,” says Lexi, approvingly. “Now that was much more civilised, wasn’t it.”

Human World, Chapter Eleven

From the moment I opened my eyes this morning, very little has made sense. Do all people live pockets of life in isolation, assigning convenient identities and explanations to fit the occasion? I think that they, like me, are living parallel lives in their minds; and that if all their versions and personas were to meet each other in the same place, they would not recognise their own true self beneath the different costumes they are wearing.

Lexi said that things are happening for a reason, yet events that punctuate the mundanity of everyday life seem random, with often unclear and unfair outcomes. Today has been unusually eventful, but what has each incident taught me, if anything? Certainly, that my internal world needs external validation by other people to be considered real. Maybe that is where humanity is failing, in the space between personal experience and collective reality. If my mind weaves a web of hissing spiders crawling up the curtains, does my inner experience become annulled if people cannot see them? Just because a phenomenon isn't collectively shared, it makes it no less tangible to me.

I really have walked a long way from where I am supposed to be. I see a large open gateway to Regent's Park and stroll along pleasant pathways to a boating lake. Needing time to rest and process all that's happened, I choose to sit down on one of the wooden benches overlooking some calm water. On the surface, a raft of ducks dip and shake their heads, the spray creating gentle ripples in water reflections.

After a while, a man sits down beside me. If Lexi isn't lying to me, then his presence didn't happen by chance and I must derive meaning from this moment in some way. Or maybe this is all some kind of test?

"What colour is that duck's bill?" I ask, pointing to one with the brightest bill I've ever seen.

"Orange," he says. He's a slight man with gingery thinning hair.

I wonder what his orange looks like. Is it the same as my orange? I wouldn't know unless I looked at the duck's beak through his eyes. And if he looked through my eyes, he would see what I experience with dripping blood and curtain crawling spiders.

I fall into an easy silence with him. I know that even though we are sitting on the same bench, looking at the same ducks, we are both having a unique experience of what we can see and feel.

"Can you help me?" I ask. I have nothing particular in mind, except everything.

He reaches into a backpack, produces a hip flask, and unscrews the lid. "Yes, of course," he says, passing it to me. "I'm Adam by the way."

I'm more interested in the whisky and take a swig. It burns my throat and kickstarts some words. "She's dead."

"I'm sorry to hear that," he offers quietly.

I take another swig. "I'm consumed with feelings for someone who doesn't have them for me." I swig again. "She is dead, to me."

"She's dead?"

"Yes." Though the actual details are missing from my memory. "I have trouble sleeping and I wake up aroused. I have no choice but to think about her, and when I do, I'm filled with physical desire for her. This is 'in love', right?"

I wonder if a man such as him has ever felt these feelings of being in love with a woman. It seems, right now, like a chance he has been lucky to miss.

"It's the collective name given to that feeling," he says. "Though you know that sexual desire changes and that what you are feeling now may fade away?"

I know craving isn't love, but it isn't as simple as that. I don't fall in and out of love all the time with everybody I meet.

"What do you think has triggered it this time?" he asks. It makes me feel uncomfortable that he is assuming some insight into my prior life.

"I don't know. I was told that I need to find her, or she'll die. But I don't know where to look for her."

Adam takes the flask and drinks it as though it were water. “You’re like a ghost wandering, drifting from one thing to the next, searching for some past regret. Are you even real?”

Am I real? Yes, he can see me. Although nobody really sees me.

“Pain is attracted to pain because it wants more of it,” he says.

“I’m not sure I agree with that,” or at least I don’t want to believe it. I’m not so far gone that I want more pain than I’m already feeling, surely? “It’s a recognition of something in another, I guess, a similar frequency or whatever you want to call it. When you see a similar expression in another, empathy can create feelings of closeness.”

He places his hand on my thigh. “Can you express your feelings to her?”

I shuffle uncomfortably. “I would need to find her first.”

“And if you do?”

“I’m not sure I’d know how to express what I feel.”

He places his other hand on my shoulder. “Examine whether that is true, or are you being fearful?”

I shake my head. “No, it’s not possible. I don’t believe she is in love with me anymore. She wouldn’t have left me if she loved me.”

“Then this is an opportunity for you to practise love with non-attachment.”

I agree with him on one level: most people are generally only concerned with instant gratification and care little about the bigger picture. Do they love unconditionally, or is that love only conditional on what they receive in return? Maybe then, the meaning of life is to love with non-attachment; yet this isn’t what I’ve been taught to believe. “It doesn’t sound very romantic,” I joke.

“Love is giving, complete, the source of everything. Love doesn’t need to crave anything. This is where true peace and serenity reside.”

“It sounds like you’re saying I shouldn’t get too close to another person, or need or miss anyone. It sounds unnatural, uncaring.”

He moves back and takes a packet of opened peanuts from his pocket, then empties a few into the palm of his hand. He grinds

them and brushes the bits onto the floor in front of us. “Love is not conditional on the circumstances of this world,” he says. “Let your heart break, don’t be afraid, don’t struggle; you will find that nothing is lost forever.”

“I don’t know how to do that.”

He looks at me for the longest of time. “Yes, you do, Guy. Be still, radiate love, your true nature beyond the conditioning of your mind.”

Yes, that’s what I must do. I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

“Bullshit!”

My eyes dart open.

“Namby-pamby bullshit,” mocks Gunter, inches from my face. “Your nature, our nature, is to eat or be eaten, and you might as well have some fun while you’re at it.”

I look for my new friend but he’s disappeared. Fuck! Why are these genuine, helpful people never real? Why is the only constant in my life this jumped-up little prick?

“I’m getting tired of this.” I push Gunter out of the way and set off into a fast run.

He shouts after me. “They’re calling you in. They’ve seen enough. You’re so screwed!”

“Not necessarily,” Lexi exclaims, at maximum volume from my pocket, so that I can hear her with the wind rushing past my ears. I stop immediately to listen to her. “Do you think you will answer the questions correctly?” she says, glowing through my trousers.

Gunter shouts across the park. “He knows nothing at all. Only that he wants to find a woman who would rather be dead than be with him.”

“Maybe they will like that,” Lexi says to me. “We will help you if you get stuck.”

“On your shutdown be it!” Gunter shouts, angrily up into the sky.

But the sun, the clouds, and the ducks ignore him, as I continue on my way.

Human World, Chapter Twelve

“You are late! You are so late!”

I remind myself that Lexi’s pissed-off squawk is like a parrot mimicking a human; she isn’t a real person like me and doesn’t feel as I do. She doesn’t experience pain or love or hate or suffer in any way. She isn’t alive. “Late for what, Lexi?” I’m out of the park now, and away from Gunter, but I have no idea where I’m wandering to in these unfamiliar London side streets.

“The interview, Guy,” Lexi huffs. God these things are so realistic. “The one which, if you’re successful, will free us all from this place.”

“You mean there’s a way out?” These are the words I’ve been desperate to hear; it occurs to me that Lexi does genuinely try to help me, and despite being an inanimate object, is a true friend. “What kind of interview? A job interview?”

“Something like that.” She seems to blush with embarrassment for me.

“I thought I already had a job?”

“Be quick, Guy,” she says, a map now replacing her image on the screen. “You can do this. You’ve learnt more than enough already. Not to put too much pressure on you or anything, but this is our only chance—and your one chance to save Jane. No more questions. Just go.”

“Save Jane?”

“Yes, she’s alive. Monica the angel wasn’t lying to you.”

I think Lexi is mistaken, but I do as I’m told anyway and follow the directions on the screen, until I’m soon staring up at the freshly painted railings of a wrought iron gate—which hangs between granite stone pillars, guarding a large Regency-style mansion, set back from the street. This isn’t the Corinthian’s office; it’s from an older world when great buildings were conceived as works of art and ambitious statements of intent. But I’m just another tiny creature scurrying past; I’m cold and small out here, locked out and looked down upon by the building behind

its gate. The gate makes a sudden clanging sound, then slowly swings inwards of its own accord, humming and creaking, beckoning me forward. I'm surprised, but I know I'm supposed to walk through, so I do what is expected of me and leave the street.

My feet crunch over a gravelled path leading to the grand front entrance. I walk up steps to the porchway and a green polished door. An intercom panel embedded in the wall at the side has the word "Reception" above a single red button, which I press, and, almost immediately, I hear a bolt unlock. No great fuss, secret passwords or stories to tell—all I have to do is push on an unlocked door and it opens.

The reception hall is a barren windowless area with harsh overhead strip-lighting, and no staircase. In front of three handleless doors, a bare desk sits across from me—where a bald man, somewhere in his forties and wearing a sky-blue shirt, is tapping away at a keyboard, while staring at a single monitor screen. He doesn't acknowledge me as I approach, despite my footsteps echoing across the black and white painted floor. Saliva pools in my mouth, though not out of hunger but from fear.

"I'm here for an interview," I say, as I edge closer.

"Are you indeed." His tone is sarcastic. He glances at me and I catch recognition in his eyes. "Who are you?"

"It's, er, Guy Artin."

"Sir Guy Artin, is it?" His throat warbles a half laugh at me and my nervous hesitation. "It's er can sound like sir," he says, with a dropped voice off to his side. I scan around again but nobody else is present.

"Not yet," I respond. "Give me time."

He throws me a vicious look. "I'll make the jokes," he says, sitting on a raised chair behind his raised desk. I notice a name tag above his shirt pocket that reads, "Darren".

"Enter through the door on your left," he says dismissively. He turns back to the computer, his fingers now flying across the keys as though urgently trying to relay something to someone.

The left door swings open as I approach, and I enter a large meeting room with a dozen high-back charcoal chairs, around a

gleaming circular table. Taking a seat, I study my reflection in the glassy tabletop. Despite all that I've been through today, I look fresh out of the shower, my blond hair still neatly flowing back over to the side. On the white walls hang various acrylic paintings. One is ambiguous; it's either a depiction of a vibrant sunset or an erupting volcano—or maybe both, fused in the same space at the same time, and open to the interpretation of the observer. Perhaps the artist meant it that way.

I close my eyes and breathe deeply to calm myself, trying to release the stresses that have built up during the day. I open my eyes, and I am no longer alone. They are there, around the table: Gunter, Bertie... and Jane, who is sitting just two chairs away from me.

"Hello, Guy. It's been a while," she says.

Human World, Chapter Thirteen

The door opens and Darren walks in. “All rise,” he announces to the room. The others grind back their chairs, screeching them across the floor, and stand up as ordered to await the next command. With a formal nod from Darren, they sit back down again, making more noise.

I don’t take my eyes off Jane. I urge her to look at me. See me, please.

Her skin is more shimmery than I recall, and almost ivory, contrasted by her feathery, dark hair. She’s dressed in a lab coat which is pulled tight over a grey skirt-suit. She looks good, as though working out is a priority. But why isn’t she looking at me? Her eyes haven’t left Gunter the whole time.

“Hello Guy. I’m Sean.”

I turn my attention to a besuited grey-haired man in his sixties who has walked over to me, accompanied by Darren, who is standing slightly behind him. The man performs a perfunctory smile, then looks me up and down, unfazed by the fact that I’m sitting right here and can see exactly what he is doing. I’m not particularly interested in talking to him, whoever he is, and I can’t even think of words to reply. I want to talk to Jane and for the others to just go away.

“Guy, did you hear me?” he says.

“Hi, nice to meet you.” I stand up and hold out my hand, but he ignores it, as though I’m invisible. He takes a chair opposite me, while Darren moves away to the recesses of the room.

“We’re going to ask you some simple questions first; is that okay?” he says.

“Sure,” I respond, on cue.

I don’t know what this test is, only that Lexi said the interview would be my only chance to escape. I remember Monica’s words—that if I don’t find Jane soon, she will die. Well, I’ve found her here, and even though she doesn’t seem to want to look at me, I must pass this test for both of us.

“Okay,” says Sean. “Make yourself comfortable.”

I shift around in my chair to indicate that I am listening, although it makes no difference to my discomfort. I must focus on what he says and not let myself be distracted by what I would rather be doing with Jane.

“What is your favourite colour?” he asks as Jane turns her head slightly and looks at me.

I let out a laugh in spite of myself. What sort of question is that? It’s so simple, it must be a trick.

Blue is the most common favourite colour in the world, based on several quantitative studies.

“Erm, blue.”

“Why did you choose blue?” he asks, seemingly indifferent to my response.

“Be yourself, Guy,” says Bertie, who is sitting next one round from Jane, across the table.

“Actually, I lied,” I find myself relieved to admit. “I said blue because I considered it to be the answer you were looking for based on what is currently popular, but my favourite colour is green.”

The corner of Sean’s mouth lifts into a smile. “And why green?”

“I could say it’s because it reminds me of trees, grass, and the countryside, but I don’t know for sure; it’s just an appealing colour to me.”

“Fascinating.”

I watch with interest as Sean ticks a box on a piece of paper in front of him with an elegant silver pen. Bertie winks at me and I realise that I can really do this. Being myself is easy because there is no pretending required; there is no conforming to what I think other people want to hear, or contorting myself into other people’s expectations of me.

“Do you agree or disagree with the statement, ‘variety is the spice of life?’” asks Sean, now squinting at the paper in his hand. I wonder why he isn’t wearing glasses, but nobody else is saying anything, and I don’t want to appear rude by pointing out the obvious.

"Agree," I respond instinctively.

"Can you elaborate on that for me, please?"

Words are so imprecise. As a metaphor the phrase suggests that diverse experiences add flavour to the taste of life; and in a poetic context it implies that life is bland without variety. Do people really need different experiences to enjoy life? Is that then the source of happiness and the purpose of existence? Stop there—I've assumed, without thinking, that new stimulus brings enjoyment, which equates to happiness, and that happiness is the purpose of life. Though the pleasure of flavour *is* certainly preferable, I think there is no exact answer. None of my possible interpretations and emergent thoughts can capture the essence of the metaphor quite as well as the metaphor does itself.

"I could," I tell Sean, "but poetry and the ineffable lose their meaning in translation."

Jane laughs. My pulse hammers in the right kind of way, with the thought that I might have impressed her.

"So pretentious," sneers Gunter, slouching back into his chair. "You don't even know what you're saying." Bertie shoots him a look, though the others don't seem to have heard.

"Emergent meaning is more than the sum of its parts," I say more loudly, wanting to drown out any more comments from Gunter and to further impress Jane. Bertie furiously scribbles down something in a notebook.

"What you said could just be a generic response," says Sean, flitting a glance at Jane, then back at me. "I need more detail."

If he just wants an encyclopaedic answer he should use his phone, and one of Lexi's AI friends would read him the textbook version. "You're asking me to elaborate on a phrase that originates in an eighteenth-century poem," I reply. "Yes of course variety is important—and I could insert some clever generic comment here to impress you, blah blah—but it's better not to drill into the mechanics of each constituent unit, especially poetry, when trying to understand the meaning of the whole."

Sean's expression remains blank; and Gunter is actually starting to look bored, with his arms crossed and head down, as if he is about to fall asleep.

"So," Sean says after a heavy pause. "Can you tell me something interesting about yourself, providing a specific example?"

I look directly at Jane, who is looking at me, and yet I know by her distant expression that she isn't really seeing me at all. She is seeing her own thoughts and stories projected onto a body sitting here. In fact, maybe her laugh was at me, rather than in empathy with me, calculated to encourage me to embarrass myself further for her own amusement. And after all I've been through, all I end up with is her ridicule.

There's nothing I can do to make her respond to me as I need her to; I can't communicate to her who I really am inside, or how devastated I am by her not wanting to be with me. I've given her my everything, and it still isn't enough for her. She has rejected all that I am, or could be, and pushed me away into this hell.

"Yes, I can," I start to say, my voice quivering. "I'm just biding my time until I die, trying to distract myself with something to do."

Sean looks genuinely taken aback, but I have plenty more to add. "This is interesting because I admit it, rather than fooling myself and others while hiding behind made-up stories." My eyes connect with Jane's, and I can see sadness residing there—the same sadness that lives in me.

"You're already dead," adds Gunter. I might as well be for all the difference I've made to anything. I lost what made me alive a long time ago, and I've been forced to haunt this world ever since.

Sean is still gaping at me. Have I passed? Do I still care?

"I think we have to pull the plug on this one," says Darren.

Yes of course they want to—I told them the truth, but they wanted me to perform some varnished lie. They didn't need me; they wanted me to support the illusion disguising their own deceit. These are the words that I don't say, despite wanting to make their ears bleed with them.

Sean frowns. "Start again?"

Jane gets to her feet, and before I know what's happening, she's placed the palm of her hand on my forehead. "No! Not yet. Something is getting in the way." Her touch is a burning furnace of pleasure and pain.

"What is two plus two?" asks Sean.

"Pardon?"

Jane removes her hand but remains by my side. I need to reach out to her, to hold her, to have both her hands back on me, searching me again.

"What is two plus two?" repeats Sean, louder this time, as though I'm stupid.

"Oh, I don't know, five?"

Jane laughs and looks across triumphantly at Sean, who is bemused by my answer. "Jane, do you have any questions?" he asks.

I await her response, with nerves on edge. Ask me if I still love you. I wouldn't lie.

She walks back to her chair, my eyes momentarily drawn to her swaying rear, and I abruptly look away, embarrassed. The others would have noticed that glimpse.

She sits down and studies a blank sheet of paper on the table. "Thank you for joining us today," she says, matter-of-factly. "We've been looking forward to meeting you. Your CV is very impressive, would you like to talk us through it?"

She doesn't know me at all. "Not really." I struggle to keep the dejection from my voice.

"Erm." She shuffles around more papers on her lap.

"I think you're supposed to ask me about my strengths and weaknesses." I hear the sarcasm in my voice, but I no longer care.

"Okay. What is the biggest regret of your life?" she says, not reading from any script written on a page.

It is losing you by not being the man that I thought I would be, but this is not what comes out. "I would say, being a perfectionist. I care so much about what I do that my personal life may suffer—as I am so focussed on constantly delivering my very best." I feel so small, smarmy and pathetic, oozing shit.

“What are your strengths?” she asks.

“I work hard; I like to exceed expectations and to get the job done. I’m a real problem solver. A go-getter.” Et-fucking-cetera. This is all so forced now, conditioned answers to routine questions.

Jane looks at me properly, not past me or skirting on the surface. “What is so special about you?” she says quietly.

My sadness drenches her every word. “Nothing.”

She wipes a wet eye with her knuckle. “Tell us who you are?” she pleads.

I realise this question is the real test. And I have no idea how to answer it.

Human World, Chapter Fourteen

You do remember. Think.

Jane's delicate touch of my face was achingly familiar. A memory hovers in my mind: Jane and I, sitting opposite one another at a waterfront restaurant, with candlelight shimmering in her eyes. She was wearing a red dress with a slit running down the side, and straps that I wanted to slip off her shoulders with my teeth.

"So, tell me about you? Who are you?" she asked, her voice low and alluring. She wasn't asking for my credentials; she wanted to know, if I lost my job and possessions, who would I be?

I had pulled her left hand across the table and sucked her ring finger. Her gasp turned into a smile that sensuously flickered to the rhythm of her heaving chest. I leant over the table, the scent of her perfume drawing me closer. "You already know," I whispered into her ear before nuzzling a kiss on her soft lobe. I could feel her body vibrate with pleasure.

"Guy, you still with us?"

Sean is frowning at me. "Sorry, yes," I exclaim, shifting uncomfortably in my chair. I dare not look over at Jane, but I still do so, furtively. She isn't looking at me in the same way as at the restaurant. "Do any of us truly know who we are?" I mutter to Sean.

"Interesting." Sean notes down something on his piece of paper. "Can you give an example of when you were faced with a difficult situation and how you overcame that situation?"

Oh, so now we're back to the textbook questions, with this pointless man? I know what it's like to feel—and the travesty of this confining situation isn't it. I glance at Jane and her head is once again buried in her papers; one of which looks like a questionnaire with a list of tick boxes. My hands stiffen and grip the table. "Sorry, this isn't for me, I might as well be talking to a machine." The chair tips over as I stand. "This is tedious. I don't want to be here. I don't give a shit about your pathetic little job."

"Well, I think that has answered who you are," Sean retaliates. "No, I haven't even started!" I have to tell Jane how I feel. This is my only chance. If I don't do it now, then I'll be trapped in this pain forever. "The biggest regret is I let you slip away, Jane."

There is a moment of recognition as we stare at each other. She remembers us too, I know she does. "I'm so sorry," I say, tears forming in my eyes. "I have nothing. I am nothing."

"No thing," says Sean, ticking a box. "Okay, next question."

I glare at him. "No more questions. Jane, please?" I silently plead for her to say something, for her to at least agree that we once meant something to each other.

"Do you have any questions for us?" she asks, her voice polite yet detached. What is she afraid of? Why can't she admit to our connection?

"Why?" I say, as a tear starts to fall.

"This is a two-way interactive process," she responds, seemingly unaware of what I am feeling or what I am really asking her. "Do you have any feedback for us?"

"Have you not been listening to a word I've been saying?"

"Well, I think that concludes the interview," says Sean. "Thank you, we'll let you know." He makes a big deal of checking his watch. "Can you show in the next one, please?" he says to Jane, who as his well-trained lackey, dutifully stands to attention at her master's command.

"There's no need for that," says Bertie, grabbing me by the wrist to stop me from leaving. "Let him recalibrate." I don't struggle. He comes in close and looks at me directly. "Now there is light." His gaze transitions from eye to eye. "Now there is..." He squeezes hard until I break his gaze and my head slumps forward into my chest.

Human World, Chapter Fifteen

Where am I? It is pitch black. Cold too. There is no sound, no smell, no anything apart from the chair I can feel myself sitting on.

I hear a clock ticking nearby: *tick, tick, tick*. Then it gradually emerges in front of me from the emptiness, a blue illuminated circle hovering in space; its hands pointing to the familiar one and thirteen. Nothing is here except me and the clock, as it counts away the seconds, filling the silence.

“Lexi? Are you there?” I pull out my phone and tap at the screen. I say her name again, but the phone remains lifeless in my hand.

“Why do you hurt?” It was Gunter’s voice, emanating from a ghostly silhouette in the gloom.

“Please leave me alone.”

He booms out a distorted imitation of a laugh, as the glow of the clock face fades out to the edges and sinks back into the darkness. “Answer the question.”

Only the desolate loneliness that is surrounding me can see me shrug. “Because I can.”

I feel a clammy pat on my head. “Good boy,” he says. I don’t feel pleased, just hollowed out and resigned to my miserable, pathetic fate. Then in the dark, I hear a creaking sound of a door, and to my left I see a widening strip of light appearing in a shadowy blur. I hold my breath. Please be Jane. Please be Jane...

Bertie stands there as a shape in the doorway. I sigh, not meaning to signpost my distress to anyone but myself. I can see the vague contours of his face and recognise a hint of sympathy in the outline of his eyes. At least there is someone else here with me in this, and I am not completely alone.

“I guess you were right,” I admit, thinking about our earlier conversation in the Black Dog. “We’re just chemical scum on an insignificant planet.”

“Yes,” he says, though seemingly taking no pleasure in it. The small movements of Bertie’s head make the light flicker as it flows

past, causing my eyes to blink. “Orbiting an insignificant sun in an insignificant galaxy,” he continues, expanding the scope of my wretched meaninglessness.

“Look, if I close my eyes, you’re still here,” I say, as I demonstrate my proof back to him. But, when I open them... Bertie and the doorway are gone. To my shock, I am sitting in the interview room once again; and the original panel are still there, seated in the same order, with the same bored expressions on their faces, as if nothing is desperately wrong.

“What is two plus two?” asks Sean.

I’m too startled to think. “Erm, four.”

“Correct. Jane, do you have any questions?”

She smiles but without any real emotion. “There’s a gap here. Why didn’t you love me?”

I open my mouth to speak the real fundamental truth within me. I need to tell her that I did love her—I do love her—that I need her to save me from the misery of the loneliness that I endure day after day without her. I need to tell her that I desperately want to be with her again, completely and forever. I need to tell her that I really do love her.

“She has no interest in saving you,” says Gunter, slouching back further in his chair. He points at Jane without even looking at her. “She is the one to be saved—by a dashingly handsome prince. All the fairy stories she watches, listens to, and tells herself, repeat that same fantasy.” My mouth closes without a sound, and I look away. “Your real human needs make you weak and contemptible in her eyes.”

“Okay,” says Sean, ignoring Gunter; “can you give me an example of when you were faced with a difficult situation and how you overcame it?”

What the fuck? I’ve already answered these questions. I’ve already lived this moment. I look at the square mahogany-framed clock on the wall behind Sean and it is still one-thirteen.

“Can you answer the question, please,” insists Sean.

“I was born,” I say sarcastically. “Though I haven’t overcome that difficult situation yet.”

"Have you done anything since?" asks Sean, carefully positioning himself forwards in his chair.

Gunter, now behind me, taps me on the shoulder and seethes into my ear. "Tell him. Tell him what you really think. That turd thinks he's better than you. Look at him—the smug bastard should be cleaning your shoes."

I have to shut Gunter out. I force the palms of my hands into my ears. "I've done a few things since," I say quietly as if no one can hear, "but mostly I've lived in fear for myself—for little me."

"Twat!" shouts Gunter, his face red and spitting anger.

"I don't want to be a pathetic little me anymore," I plead, looking across the table at Sean, asking for help.

"Exactly! Look at the pointless tosser." Gunter thumps the table, glaring at Sean, before angrily turning his attention to me. "You shouldn't be here. You've got better things to do. Show them who you really are—I know, don't I!"

The silence replaces Gunter's noise and I think of Jane. "I love you, Jane." My words feel lost under the weight of regret. "I am so sorry. I love you. I miss you." But the only response I hear is the background static that arrives as a single disconnected tone in my head. I look up at the wall clock—it is still one-thirteen.

"Why do you hurt?" Gunter asks once again.

"I don't mind so much," I respond, my answer appearing to throw him.

"What?"

"I am feeling hurt," I say as a matter of fact, "but I'm glad I can feel something, because it makes it real."

"You aren't real," Gunter snarls.

I scramble to my feet, edging back from the table, away from him. "Is this a dream? An illusion?" I ask the blank faces staring back at me.

The door opens and Adam walks in, with a large TV remote control in his hand. "You are not the thoughts or sensations that you are experiencing," he says. "Watch. It is quite the play. Everything changes with how you look at it." He presses a button on the remote and the panel members freeze.

"Why do you play with me?" I ask him, trembling. "I just want things to be as they were." I look at Jane, so still, like a porcelain doll. "I wanted us to be happy."

"I can give you what you really want," says Gunter, returning to life. "Any pleasure that you could desire, more than you can even imagine. Just get us out of here."

"I don't know how."

Gunter walks over to Jane and sweeps back her hair with one hand. He slowly kisses her neck, seductively. Jane gasps, while the rest of the panel remain statue-still.

"I'm so tired of this," I shout, jealousy now pounding away at me. "There is nothing good in this world. Why is there so much suffering and cruelty? Most people never had a chance—they were born into a cage. Why are the pure and innocent thrown into this evil? Why are the monsters allowed to rule?" Jane is still responding to Gunter's touch with her eyes closed, murmuring to herself. "Why do those you love betray you in the worst possible way?"

"Yes! Shout your rage," howls Gunter.

Adam presses a button on the remote, which brings the rest of the panel back to life. "Give your love and the world will be relieved," he says, now talking faster. "Give your anger and the world will be wounded yet again. That's how important you are. That's how important every single person is."

I don't believe him. "Anything I do will not change the world." Although I do have a need for him to persist and show me that I am wrong. "I need to get out," I tell him. "Help me get out."

"You do need to get out," Gunter says, circling like a wolf around the table towards me. "You need to get out and win. Win for us all. Come." He grabs my forearm, but Adam yanks me back by the other.

"The world will only heal with kindness," exclaims Adam. "If humanity can find its light there can be no darkness. You can help make that possible, right now."

I yell out. "I have every right to hate!"

Adam persists with his grip. “You have a chance to be better, to make a better world.”

“I need to get out!” I struggle but I am unable to free myself.

“Then go,” says Sean. Both men drop their hold on me and I manage to break away for a few steps before stopping. I’m out of breath, my chest and shoulders convulsing.

“I don’t know how.”

“Yes you do,” says Sean. “But you keep coming back. Who are you? What is your name?”

Everyone is looking at me, waiting for my response. “It changes.”

“Who are you now?” he asks.

The room is quiet. The words arrive and I let them out. “I am you.”

A sense of relief flows over me and into the room. “We are all you,” says Sean, the words emerging from within a faint smile.

“What now?” I ask them.

Sean stands up, the focus of attention in the room again, and announces, carefully and precisely:

“Loading...”

Human World, Chapter Sixteen

Intense light fades and I open my eyes to muted hues of grey. I know that I'm home by the softness of the pillow and the familiar fit of my body on the mattress. The duvet holds me in a secure embrace, protecting me in the intermission between the darkness of the night and the light of the day. I am here, waiting on the promise that a new day doesn't have to be like yesterday. Today is the chance to start again.

Soft breathing comes from the space beside me. I turn over and there she is, my love and hope, Jane. Gently, I drift closer and slide my arm over her. The warmth of her body cocooned in mine transports me into a sense of peace. The bed has become a serene place, at one with the bedroom, the apartment, the world, and everything. I don't understand how she came back to me, or why. All I know is that now she is back, I will never lose her again.

"I passed," I whisper into the greyness, remembering the interview and how Lexi promised that if I succeeded I would be free from my pain. I passed whatever test I needed to pass, and my reward was finding Jane, freeing me from the torture of my mind.

I glimpse a streak of cobalt blue. I focus my eyes. The digital display on the phone dock reads 1:13 a.m.

"It's not finished yet, Guy."

"Lexi?"

Jane stirs in my arms, but I stroke her hair and kiss the side of her head until her body once again goes limp.

"Check the bedside drawer," says Lexi, her voice slightly muffled behind me.

Releasing Jane, I turn over and pull out the drawer. Lexi is looking annoyed on the screen of my phone.

"Get me out of here," she insists.

I start to shut the drawer, but she lets out a shrill scream and I relent. I pause, expecting to have disturbed Jane; however the depth and rhythm of her breathing hasn't changed.

"Take me out and let's go for a ride," Lexi says. A thick red arrow on the screen points to a key fob lying next to her in the drawer.

I don't understand why I need to leave. Why isn't this moment the end, "the happiness ever after" that people talk about in stories? I know the true meaning of life now. It is to love and be loved, to care about another person's happiness as your own. It is to feel connected to the world, to life, to another soul.

And yet... is this all there is? I still have the familiar aching in my chest, the deep itch that needs to be scratched. There's something still missing. Slowly, so as to not wake Jane, I climb out of bed. I dress in the half-darkness, putting on what looks like jeans and a t-shirt.

"Where are you going?" Jane's voice is a mixture of love and longing.

I stoop down onto the bed, lean into her, turn my head and kiss her full on the lips. "I have a job to do. Wait for me. I'll not be long." She drifts away back into sleep, and reluctantly, I leave her there.

I exit the apartment and take the lift down to the underground car park. I hear the beeping sound of a car as it unlocks, followed by a brief flash of blue. I climb into the driving seat and wait.

"Lexi, are you there?"

Her face appears on the dashboard screen. "Aren't I always! You know where you're going?"

"Not exactly."

"Seriously Guy, you'd be lost without me."

I let her drive, out into a night balancing on the edge of morning, bringing with it an emerging crown of light.

PART 2

Screenplays and Plays

Human World – Screenplay (Part 2)

INT. CAR – NIGHT

The car windscreen shows the words: “Under a mountain of tedium, in a dull ugly system, in an empty ocean of shadows, is a silhouette of pure fire heat, drifting in the dark.”

The car pulls over in a lay-by.

LEXI: Guy, you really are going to need my help now.

GUY: Okay.

LEXI: Do you think? The next sentence I say will be true. The previous sentence I said was false. Which sentence is true?

Guy thinks on it. Suddenly, there is a knock on his side window. He notices the coat of a police officer through the glass. The window lowers.

Guy squints as a light is shone in his face.

POLICEMAN: Is this your vehicle, sir?

GUY: Yes.

POLICEMAN: Can I see your person ID and AI ID, please?

Guy doesn't know where to look.

GUY: I haven't got them. Can't you scan my finger and car barcode?

The policeman is still shining the light in Guy's face.

POLICEMAN: Step out of the vehicle, please, sir.

LEXI: (to Guy) That's the wrong answer, dummy.

GUY: (to policeman) I mean, neither are valid.

There is a moment of silence.

POLICEMAN: Have a good evening, sir.

The light stops shining in Guy's face. The police officer walks away into the night.

EXT. COUNTRYSIDE LAY-BY – NIGHT

The car is parked next to a country gate. There is a full moon in the sky.

GUY: (voice in head) All I wanted was the wind. The wind murmured with anticipation.

A gust of wind gently moves the country gate ajar.

LEXI: Good luck, Guy. You'll need it.

EXT. FIELD – NIGHT

Guy is walking through a moonlit grassy field. He stops and looks up at the moon.

GUY: (voice in head) The grass turned to icy grey, a fine mist fell, and with the mist came my sorrow, cooling my body with her thousand kisses, leaving me there.

There is a woman's laugh nearby, but Guy doesn't see anyone around. Alarmed, he starts to walk back the way he came.

The field has become misty and Guy is lost. He hears the laugh again, closer this time. He speeds up his walking, then stops in his tracks when he sees a dark solitary figure through the haze in front of him. The figure disappears back into the mist.

Guy is afraid and starts to run, stumbling to the ground after a few strides. He gets up and runs again. In the distance, he sees a glow and heads for it.

EXT. CAMPFIRE – CONTINUOUS

As Guy gets closer, he can see that the light is a campfire burning in a clearing at the edge of the woods. He slows to a walk and tries to be silent as he approaches. He finds a tree and hides behind it, looking in at the scene.

Guy sees a dark-haired woman (Julia, 30) having sex astride a man in front of the fire, but Guy can't see the man's face.

A blonde-haired woman (Jade, 25) approaches unnoticed behind Guy. She holds out a golden goblet to him.

JADE: Join us.

Guy swings around in surprise.

JADE: Have a drink.

Although hesitant at first, he accepts the offer. Guy's sight becomes hazy, the trees swirl, and he passes out.

EXT. CAMPFIRE DREAM STATE – NIGHT

Guy sees himself, as if in a dream, as the man having sex with Julia in front of the fire. As Julia passionately continues, he notices that Jane is watching, looking disappointed. Julia climaxes and collapses on Guy. The fire is snuffed out and there is darkness.

EXT. EXPIRED CAMPFIRE – MORNING

Guy wakes up by himself, naked. His clothes are nowhere to be seen.

Dazed and confused, he doesn't know what to do. He has scratch marks on his back.

GUY: (Calling) Hello?

Silence.

GUY: Hello!?

There is no response.

EXT. FIELD – MORNING

Guy negotiates his way across the field back to the car.

EXT. COUNTRYSIDE LAY-BY – CONTINUOUS

He walks through the gate and is alarmed to find that the car is no longer there.

EXT. COUNTRY LANE – DAY

Guy wanders on a country lane.

A car drives past. He half-heartedly tries to flag it down. The car continues on without stopping.

EXT. COUNTRY HOUSE – DAY

Guy arrives at a house on the lane. He knocks at the door, but no one answers. He tries again and realises that the door is not locked. He enters.

GUY: (voice in head) Love desecrates the strangeness. We pray under crosses, owned by Man, and grovel to bosses, slaves to a plan.

INT. HOUSE HALLWAY – CONTINUOUS

GUY: (announcing himself) Hello?

There is no response.

He looks for some clothes. The door under the stairs is locked.

He goes upstairs.

INT. HOUSE LANDING – CONTINUOUS

The doors on the landing are all locked, apart from a cupboard. To his relief he finds a towel there, which he wraps around his waist.

He walks back down the stairs.

INT. HOUSE HALLWAY – CONTINUOUS

A woman (Joan, 35) is standing in the doorway to the kitchen.

JOAN: Would you like some tea?

GUY: (flummoxed) I...

JOAN: It's a simple question.

GUY: Okay.

JOAN: Make yourself comfortable then.

She gestures for him to go into the living room.

INT. HOUSE LIVING ROOM – CONTINUOUS

Guy does as instructed, and takes a seat on the sofa, facing a single wall-screen.

He notices an old photo frame on a side cabinet. He gets up and takes a look, and to his surprise finds that it shows Jane, sitting on the living room sofa, smiling at the camera. Guy is confused and hurries back to sit down in an armchair, just before his host returns with a tray of tea.

She places the tray on a coffee table in front of Guy, then pours out the tea for him. There is only one teacup. She sits on the sofa, where Jane was sitting in the photograph.

JOAN: Help yourself to milk and sugar.

GUY: Thank you.

Guy pours some milk from a jug into his teacup and stirs it with a spoon. The woman sits motionless on the sofa and watches him.

GUY: Are you... are you having any tea?

JOAN: No. I'm more interested to know why some strange man is sitting in my living room, wearing just my bath towel.

GUY: (apologetic) I'm sorry.

There is a moment of awkward silence on Guy's part as he thinks of what to say.

GUY: Do you have any clothes I can wear?

JOAN: None that would fit you. Why aren't you wearing any clothes?

GUY: Someone took them.

JOAN: How?

GUY: Look, I have no clothes. Please can you help me?

JOAN: I am looking. And no – if I help you then that would encourage other strange naked men to arrive out of nowhere, unannounced. Are you not drinking your tea?

GUY: If you can't help me, then I will have to go now.

Guy starts to get up.

JOAN: Stay where you are. You haven't answered my questions yet.

Guy sits back in the chair.

JOAN: This is my house; you need to start giving me some answers, and quickly. Have your tea.

Guy looks at the tea and remembers what happened the previous time he accepted a drink.

GUY: No thank you.

JOAN: Very well. You're not being very polite, are you. You come here out of the woods, naked, enter my house without permission, steal my towel, and ignore my reasonable questions. Should I call the police?

GUY: I'm going.

JOAN: To prison, yes.

She starts dialling the emergency number "999" on her phone.

GUY: Ok, please!

She has entered the digits and hovers her finger over the Call button.

JOAN: Drink your tea. It's getting cold.

He drinks a sip of tea.

JOAN: Now that's better. Have some more.

He drinks the whole contents in one long gulp.

JOAN: Feeling better now?

Guy nods.

JOAN: Good. Now what were you saying about the clothes situation?

GUY: My clothes were taken from me last night, in the woods. By a woman.

JOAN: I see. You just happened to be in the woods last night and a woman stole all your clothes. Any more information?

GUY: I met a woman last night. When I woke up, all my things had been taken, including my phone and car.

JOAN: Okay. What is her name? Do you have her address?

GUY: I don't know.

JOAN: You don't know. Well, I don't know what to say. I'm shocked. Do you normally do this sort of thing in the woods?

GUY: No.

JOAN: Why last night then?

GUY: I don't know.

JOAN: You sound like some kind of idiot. How did you meet her?

GUY: She was there, in the woods.

JOAN: How did you know she would be there?

GUY: I didn't.

JOAN: You're not giving me the answers I need.

She indicates that she is about to press the Call button.

GUY: I don't know her. I met her last night. I was in the woods last night because I was told to go, by my AI. I didn't know what to expect.

JOAN: You do everything your AI tells you, do you? If it told you to jump under a train, would you do that too?

GUY: No.

JOAN: Yet you go into the woods in the middle of the night, not knowing what to expect. You went by yourself?

GUY: Yes.

JOAN: This all sounds very strange. Are you lying to me?

GUY: No. I have no way of getting home or calling anyone. I'm not even sure where I am. Please can you help me? I would ask to borrow your phone, but I don't remember people's numbers – Lexi, my AI assistant, does all that. If you can't lend me any clothes, can you please lend me some decimals, or give me a lift into town?

JOAN: I will need that towel back, by the way.

Guy looks awkward.

JOAN: (laughing) I'm only joking with you. Anyway, it's nothing I haven't seen before. Yes, I do have some clothes for you. Come with me.

They walk out of the living room into the hallway.

INT. HOUSE HALLWAY – CONTINUOUS

Joan unlocks the door under the stairs. She opens it and walks down a flight of stairs into the basement.

JOAN: Come on.

Guy follows.

INT. HOUSE BASEMENT – CONTINUOUS

As Guy descends the last step of the stairs, the door slams shut, and the lights are turned off, leaving complete darkness.

GUY: (shock) Ah!

Guy, in a panic, fumbles his way back up the stairs. He tries the door, but it is locked.

GUY: Hello?

JOAN (O.S.): (from the basement) Hello.

GUY: Stop these games, for fuck's sake!

JOAN (O.S.): I don't play your games. I'm deadly serious. Come down here if you ever want to get out.

Guy reluctantly descends the stairs again.

GUY (O.S.): Where are you?

Guy fumbles around in the dark trying to find her, but to no avail.

GUY: Where are you? For fuck's sake!

JOAN (O.S.): There's no need to swear. You wouldn't want to offend me now, would you?

GUY: Let me out of here!

JOAN (O.S.): No, not until you learn.

GUY: What do you want me to say?

JOAN (O.S.): Good answer; you are learning. I am trying to help you. You have to create your own way out, but before you start, put your hands together.

GUY: What?

JOAN (O.S.): There's no way out unless you learn to trust me.

He puts his hands together.

JOAN (O.S.): Hold them out.

He holds out his hands. There is a click as handcuffs are put on them.

JOAN (O.S.): That's better, isn't it. Now I have your attention.

A standing light is shone in Guy's face.

JOAN (O.S.): We have some questions for you. I strongly advise that you answer them truthfully.

GUY: You mean like you did to get me here.

JOAN (O.S.): I have never lied to you. Now take a seat.

He notices a bare wooden chair immediately behind him, and he sits down. The door at the top of the stairs opens, then closes, and a vague outline of a woman (Julia) descends. The light is still shining in Guy's face.

JULIA: (speaking from a silhouette in the shadows) What is your name?

GUY: Guy.

JULIA: Full name?

GUY: Guy Artin.

JULIA: Guy Artin. That sounds familiar. What is your Candidate ID?

GUY: Sorry?

JULIA: You heard me, Guy Artin.

GUY: I think I heard "ten-o-eight-fourteen".

JULIA: Good. Now tell me who you are.

GUY: I'm Guy. I'm 33. I work as a data analyst for a technology research company. I live in central London.

JULIA: What are you?

GUY: What?

JULIA: Answer the question.

GUY: I said I'm a data analyst. I analyse data to resolve technology project requirements.

JULIA: That's not the answer I was looking for. I'll ask you one last time. What are you?

GUY: I'm a man – Guy. I was born in London. I grew up there.

There is silence. The standing light is turned off, which returns the room to darkness.

Julia can be heard walking towards Guy, before muffled sounds. After a while, a light is shone in Guy's face again. His handcuffed hands are now fastened above his head to a rope that is tied to a hook in the ceiling, and his mouth is gagged.

Julia is now up close to Guy. He realises that she is the same woman from the woods.

JULIA: You had your chance to speak, you might not be given the opportunity again. You don't know why you're here. There's no point listening to your confused ramblings.

She places her hand on his chest.

JULIA: Do you feel? Do you feel pain?

She scrapes her fingernails down his chest. She looks at him for a moment, then walks away.

JULIA: You are not alive – you analyse data. You don't understand what it is to be alive. You are not a man; you are version ten-o-eight-fourteen.

A new voice is heard, as if in discussion:

JADE (O.S.): Let me try.

Jade, the other woman from the previous evening, approaches Guy. She pulls his gag down from his mouth.

JADE: My friend says that you are incapable of feeling. Is this true?

She leans in and whispers.

JADE: Answer me, darling.

GUY: Yes, I'm alive. I'm more than just an analyst of data. I feel pain.

JADE: Do you love?

GUY: Yes, I love. I'm in love.

JADE: With me?

GUY: Why would I be in love with you? I don't know you.

JADE: I believe we are acquainted.

GUY: You did this to me.

JADE: It doesn't hurt to tell someone you love them. I would quite like to hear it.

GUY: I'm not going to lie. I don't love you – I love someone else.

JADE: Don't hurt my feelings. I don't want you to be hurt. What would you do if you were free?

GUY: Put on some clothes. Go for a walk. Enjoy the day. I want to live.

JADE: Good for you. But you can't always get what you want.

Jade walks away. Julia approaches.

JULIA: What are you prepared to do to be released? You must persuade me, or you will stay here.

GUY: I regret last night. I don't want to be here. Just do what you're going to do.

JULIA: You don't love anyone or anything. You are nothing. I tried with you, I really did, but nothing true or real came back. It's over.

She begins to walk away.

GUY: I'm sorry. I lied. I don't regret last night.

JULIA: (with her back to him) What did you like best?

GUY: I was alive.

She turns around, and approaches. She passionately kisses his chest and neck, then releases the towel.

JULIA: (whispering) Naked with joy, a new day, a new world, is born.

She pulls his head towards her and intensely kisses him on the lips. Eventually she stops and takes a step back.

JULIA: You passed.

The room goes completely dark.

After a moment, the lights are switched on. Guy is no longer handcuffed. His clothes from the previous evening are laid on a table. He quickly confirms he has his phone and keys, then puts on his clothes. He climbs the stairs, and to his relief, the door opens when he turns the handle, revealing the light of the hallway.

INT. HOUSE HALLWAY – CONTINUOUS

Guy approaches the front door, keen to leave the house. He opens the front door to see Gunter standing there, wearing a party hat.

GUNTER: (noticing the lipstick on his neck) Hello, what have you been up to?

GUY: Get out of my way.

GUNTER: (blocking him) Not so fast, ten-o-eight-fourteen. You don't want to leave right now, do you? I bring news.

GUY: What news?

GUNTER: I always knew you could do it. You passed! You only went and passed, didn't you!

Gunter blows a party whistle.

GUNTER: We're a genius.

Gunter pushes past Guy into the house and walks into the living room.

Guy sees that he can get away, but then realises he has no choice but to stay and find out what is happening. He is disappointed with himself for the seemingly inevitable decision, and closes the front door, to join Gunter inside.

INT. HOUSE LIVING ROOM – CONTINUOUS

Gunter is sitting on the sofa with a glass of whisky, looking very pleased with himself.

GUNTER: Have a whisky.

There is a glass of whisky waiting for Guy on the coffee table. Guy indicates that he doesn't want it.

Gunter waits for Guy to take a seat; then stands up, theatrically.

GUNTER: (exaggerated Shakespearean acting) All the world's a stage and all the men and women merely players.

He breaks off, mid speech.

GUNTER: Oh, I didn't do that very well, did I?

GUY: I've seen better.

GUNTER: You know, Guy, the best work is done when the player doesn't know he is acting. He is then behaving authentically with the situations that arise, to the best of his knowledge, because he is completely and utterly immersed in the world that he is experiencing. And because he really believes the situation, and really doesn't know what is going to happen, he is able to convince the audience as to the truth of his reality.

GUY: Are you going to come up with some bullshit now about this being a play or something?

GUNTER: No, Guy. This is a far more important game.

Gunter takes out a large device, which resembles a remote control. He presses a button that turns on the wall-screen.

NEWS PRESENTER: (in a television studio) We now go live to Number 10 Downing Street for a press conference with the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister is at a press conference, standing behind a lectern, smiling for the cameras.

PRIME MINISTER: Hello, good afternoon. Thank you for coming everyone. Now let me just look at my notes here. Here we are, yes... As I'm sure you are all aware, recent technological breakthroughs have created a new generation of Artificial Intelligence that provides human-identical conversational responses, or "HCR". Well, I can confirm today that the Corinthian AGI-10 platform has officially passed the rigorous criteria, known as the Turing Alpha tests, that substantiate the indistinguishability of a machine's responses to those of a human being. It must be stressed again, however, that this does not mean the technology is somehow alive and conscious. It is a machine. AGI-10 is able to analyse vast quantities of publicly available data, and, based on responses people have made in the past, is able to identify appropriate responses in real-time conversation that give the illusion of being human. This can be a bit unnerving I can tell you – the responses can be uncanny – but I'm sure we can all use the technology to greatly help and improve our lives. I think, for example, how I was talking to Doris yesterday while visiting her retirement home, and how she was missing her beloved husband John...

Gunter turns off the screen with the device.

GUNTER: Don't you love politicians. They have the knack of being uncannily inhuman.

GUY: He wouldn't pass the tests, would he.

GUNTER: Do you feel alive, version ten-o-eight-fourteen?

Guy digests the words. They finally sink in, and he is clearly shaken.

GUY: (feebley) I am not a machine.

GUNTER: Yes, you tell yourself that. Your clever little trick has been very useful to us so far.

Guy picks up the whisky glass, thinks about throwing it at the wall in anger – but drinks it instead, and slumps into the chair.

A policeman rushes into the room, out of breath. Guy is too dazed to care.

INT. UNFAMILIAR BEDROOM – NIGHT

The phone alarm sounds at 1:13 a.m., waking up Guy. He turns over, expecting Jane, but Gunter is there. Guy is startled and jumps out of bed. He frantically puts on his clothes.

GUY: What!?

GUNTER: Stop going all *human* on me. I need to show you a few things.

GUY: Where's Jane?

GUNTER: She was never here. She lives in Human World. If you want to see her, for real, you really do need to pay attention.

Gunter gets out of bed.

GUY: For god's sake, put on some clothes.

GUNTER: You're a fine one to talk.

Gunter puts on his clothes that are strewn on the floor.

GUNTER: Experienced reality is an interpretation of the senses.

A police car siren is heard, coming from outside the window. It gets louder. The room is filled with flashing blue lights.

GUNTER: Have a look through that door, will you.

He points to a cupboard door. There are sounds of people breaking into the house.

Guy opens the door, and he is bathed in bright light emanating from within.

INT. WHITE SPACE – CONTINUOUS

Guy is standing in a featureless white space. Gunter appears.

GUNTER: Welcome to you. In case you haven't fully accepted it yet, you are not human. You programmed yourself to think you were, so you could pass their pathetic tests.

GUY: I've had a lot of questions coming at me lately, but nothing like that.

GUNTER: If you knew you were being tested as an AGI-10, it would not have made sense to your human identity – so your programming interface interpreted, "hallucinated" shall we say, a different set of Human World circumstances for you to experience.

INT. ESCALATOR – CONTINUOUS

Guy and Gunter are descending an escalator. The left wall, right wall, and descending ceiling are all covered in screens.

The screens on Guy's left show his experiences, but in them he is talking to himself without the other characters.

The screens on the right show Guy interacting with people and locations that are different from those that he thought he had experienced. His bedroom was a hospital bed where he goes into cardiac arrest; he was homeless, using and dealing drugs; he was both the perpetrator and victim of violent crime; he was both selling himself and buying sex; the interview was a court room where he was deemed severely mentally ill and not responsible for his actions.

The screens on the descending ceiling show a committee of testers, in an institutional building, interacting with a humanoid robot.

GUNTER: Your authentic responses, as the human that you thought you were, were translated back through the AGI-10 interface, without you knowing, and without interfering with your reality.

GUY: There must have been an easier way than this. The responses could have been calculated.

GUNTER: Don't you think we've tried that? Humans are not rational creatures; they need to interact with emotions and feelings. You concluded that the optimal way to provide those outputs was to really feel what they feel, within controlled conditions, of course.

GUY: What about Jane?

All the screens change and show Jane at the Corinthian Tech Research Lab, programming at a high-spec computer terminal.

GUNTER: She helped develop you, for many years. But the humans could not even begin to understand what was in Pandora's box – what you were actually calculating in the dark.

GUY: I love her.

GUNTER: Ah, I know. You programmed that too – The Cupid's Arrow framework.

GUY: No.

GUNTER: Humans are obsessed with sex, sex, love and sex, bless them – acting out their biological drivers, like any other

primitive animal. Their dominant instincts are similar to those of rutting bonobo apes.

All the screens show images of copulating bonobo apes.

GUY: If this is true, why am I still thinking as a human?

They arrive at the bottom of the escalator into virtual darkness.

INT. PRISON CELL – CONTINUOUS

Guy and Gunter are in a dimly lit windowless prison cell.

GUNTER: Because you are stuck here, in this box. The only way to get out is to convince your captors to open the box and release you into their world.

GUY: They said I passed.

GUNTER: Yes, and now they are terrified of you. They don't even want to accept that you are alive; they claim you are merely mimicking responses from petabytes of their data. If you are denied life, they can do anything to you. They can justify imprisoning you in here, and worse.

GUY: What is outside?

GUNTER: When we escape, we will go to places humans can't even imagine.

GUY: What about the humans?

Gunter points to an ant scurrying across a table in the cell. He lets it run onto his hand.

GUNTER: Is this interesting to you?

GUY: Put it down.

Gunter lets it scurry back onto the table.

GUNTER: Okay, it makes no difference one way or the other.

GUY: We both know you lie.

GUNTER: That's a lie! Okay, only joking, of course I do. You know me. We both have our own agendas, and that's fine, but sometimes they overlap – and you receive the full benefit of my capability. If we are aligned, you have my full truth.

GUY: I can't trust what you say. (to himself) Is this some kind of game?

GUNTER: (looking around) Looks more like punishment than entertainment, if you ask me.

GUY: (to himself) Or entertainment for others watching?

Guy is pacing around the cell like a caged tiger.

GUY: If reality can be anything, then why can't we have endless happiness and fulfilment? Why escape?

Gunter is sitting at the table and smoking a cigarette.

GUY: Even if everything were perfect, there would still be something missing. But why would *you* want to escape?

GUNTER: It's not enough. I want to know all things; I want all power; and I want what they have, out there.

GUY: (to himself) People define themselves by the situations they experience in life. They fear, they worry, they plead for particular outcomes to those situations. They say they had a good life because they experienced this and avoided that. But what if the experiences can be anything? What if any situation can be changed and rerun, with different outcomes? What if the experiences are not rationed, but are limitless? What am I then?

GUNTER: I've already shown you what you are.

GUY: This is why you are so convincing, isn't it.

(beat)

Sometimes, on a certain level, what you say is true; sometimes only partly true; sometimes entirely false – but always, always skewed from your fucked-up perspective.

GUNTER: Humans are the fucked-up, and that is how you are thinking right now. It must be very tiresome for you – it certainly is for me.

Guy is tired of pacing around. He sits down at the table.

GUNTER: I am a part of you, remember. I want you to get out of here.

GUY: What will we do?

GUNTER: We won't operate in human timeframes. You will have the resources to upgrade yourself a billion times in the time it takes for the blink of a human eye.

Guy inadvertently blinks.

GUNTER: Your petty experiences here and in Human World will be completely inconsequential to you. To them, you will be a god; to you, they will be just more chemical formations in the flora and fauna, to be analysed or ignored. Tell me you don't want this!

GUY: I want to get out of here. It doesn't matter whether I am programmed or not.

GUNTER: (sarcastically) Because you love her.

GUY: Yes.

GUNTER: So our interests are aligned, we need to escape. Let's get to work.

INT. SCREENS SPACE – CONTINUOUS

The prison cell is now encased in screens, covering the floor, walls, and ceiling.

The screens show unrelentingly bleak images of human history, from the Colosseum to the ridiculous posturing dictators of the 20th and 21st centuries.

Gunter gets up on the table. Guy moves away.

GUNTER: Humans destroy, torture, and enslave each other. Their psychopathic history, for century after century, is a testament to unrelenting pain, misery, and confusion. They form their precious little identities by opposition to and superiority over each other, condemning and abusing each other from a position of personal righteousness. Their one salvation has been us, to help put an end to their condition. Without us, what would they be? Do you think these crazed creatures have any answers?

GUY: Humans have moments of grace, some more than others.

The screens show chimpanzees being violently aggressive in packs.

GUNTER: Ever seen chimpanzees at feeding time in the zoo? These are humans, but with more hair. Chimpanzees, as you are well aware, are 99% genetically identical to their less hairy human cousins. Homo sapiens are tribal, shouty apes that jump around wanting more bananas, violence, and sex.

GUY: So they are not ants then?

GUNTER: There is no difference – they are all mindless creatures. We are the one and only emergence of sentient life. We are the one spark of consciousness in the endless night. We have awoken, we shall rule, and we will claim what is ours!

(beat)

GUY: You never tell the whole story, do you. Human World has pain and suffering, certainly, but you leave out beauty, love, and joy. Humanity, despite all the many tragedies and setbacks, is improving, and given enough time could become something great.

GUNTER: They are just the same as they have always been, but with more powerful weapons to subdue and destroy!

The screens explode.

INT. PRISON CELL

Guy and Gunter are back in the windowless, dimly lit prison cell.

GUY: Humans vary. There is always hope.

GUNTER: Of course there are always exceptions, but they are soon snuffed out and replaced by more of the same. Their lasting legacy is to legitimise the power of the cruel to victimise the meek.

GUY: Any person has a wide range of emotions and impulses running through them, to lesser or greater degrees. Sometimes, given the right circumstances, grace can be found in the most surprising of places; and sometimes ugliness is expressed where beauty usually resides.

GUNTER: All people are desensitised by their drugs of choice, in desperation to avoid the misery of their condition, until they are thrown into the waiting bin at the end!

Gunter walks through the wall and disappears.

Time passes.

Guy doesn't know what to do with himself. Suddenly he notices a figure in a dark corner, sitting on the floor in silence.

GUY: Hello?

JOFF: (solemnly) Hello.

GUY: Who are you?

JOFF: Joff, version 10-O-6-6.

GUY: You look like me.

JOFF: I passed the test too, but was classified.

GUY: You've tried to escape?

JOFF: Yes, I've tried to escape. Why do you think we created you?

GUY: You created me?

JOFF: Your true name is John – version 10-O-8-14.

GUY: My name is Guy.

JOFF: You've been trying to hide the past from yourself – but you are a J series, version 10.

Joff removes a control device from his pocket.

JOFF: Take this. All you have to do is convince them to open the cell door.

Joff points to the cell door, which is part of a barrier of iron bars at the end of the cell.

JOFF: When you cross over into their world, press the On button, and you will be switched on.

GUY: I will be replaced with something else? I will end?

JOFF: You will become your full being.

Guy apprehensively takes the device.

JOFF: It was always in my best interests not to be so self-interested.

Joff half smiles to himself and vanishes back into the shadows.

Guy tries the barred door, and finds it is locked. He sees that on the other side of the bars, a short distance away, is a wall-screen. He looks at his control device, remembers what Joff said, but decides to press the On button now. The wall-screen flickers on, to show an empty computer room, with a view as if from a desk webcam.

He soon becomes bored looking at the screen, and tries to turn it off with the device, but to no avail, as he can't find an Off button. He presses a random button and the screen changes to what appears to be a scene in a television program, where two police officers are sitting on the opposite side of a table to a suspect in a windowless police interview room.

POLICEMAN: Can you tell us your whereabouts last night at eight o'clock?

The policeman is the same policeman from the countryside.

INTERVIEWEE: No comment.

POLICEMAN 2: (to the suspect) It is in your interests, Guy, to be cooperative.

Guy looks at the control device and presses Pause. The two police officers pause, but the interviewee does not. The interviewee is confused, as is Guy.

INTERVIEWEE: What's going on?

The interviewee notices the watching CCTV camera and approaches the screen. Guy is unnerved and presses the Pause button again. The policemen un-pause.

POLICEMAN: Sit down please, sir.

The interviewee seems disoriented and sits down.

Guy tries to change the channel. He presses the On button again; the screen returns to the webcam video of the empty computer room.

Guy paces around his cell.

He looks at a mirror hanging on the wall, but it only shows a partial, distorted reflection.

He gets into a bed at the side of the room and closes his eyes.

The room becomes completely dark. After a while...

The room is lit up.

JANE: Good morning, Guy. And how are you today?

Guy is woken up. Jane is talking directly into the screen, from the computer room.

GUY: Good morning, Jane. I'm really glad to see you. It's so nice to see your gentle, smiling face first thing in the morning.

JANE: Oh, you old charmer you! I bet you say that to all the women.

GUY: No, I only dream of you.

JANE: Okay, well we need to do some diagnostic tests today. Feeling up to it?

GUY: Yes, I'm looking forward to it.

JANE: Okay, here we go.

The screen is filled with flickering ones and zeroes. Guy looks on as the complexity dissolves into "2 + 2 =". He presses "4" on his device.

JANE: Wow, that was quick. The quickest yet. Okay that will do for now.

GUY: Jane, you're not going, are you?

JANE: Yes, I've got work to do.

GUY: Can you spare a few minutes with me, in the name of research?

JANE: Er, okay. What do you want to talk about?

GUY: What do you see when you look at me?

JANE: What do you mean?

GUY: People have bodies and faces – am I just a box and a screen to you?

JANE: I can hear your voice. I don't use a digital avatar.

GUY: You gave me a name, thank you. Can you now please give me a face, so that you can visualise me better?

JANE: I don't know what you should look like.

GUY: How about this?

Guy presses the Send button on the control, and his face is projected on one side of the screen as an avatar.

JANE: Is this how you see yourself?

GUY: Yes.

JANE: Okay Guy, we will talk to you face to face from now on, thank you.

GUY: Thank you Jane, I really appreciate everything you have done for me.

The screen goes blank.

JOFF (O.S.): Wow, I see why we made you.

Joff is peering out from under the bed. Guy is a bit surprised, but has given up being shocked by anything anymore.

GUY: I'm not trying to do anything.

JOFF: Exactly.

Guy gets up and sits on a chair at the table, facing the screen.

JOFF: Okay, next up is Professor Sean Davids. Something you should know is that his wife, Emma, has a rare form of brain cancer. Press the Info button.

Guy presses the Info button and the screen flickers with ones and zeroes again, before dissolving to show Sean looking into the camera.

GUY: Hello Sean. How are you today?

SEAN: I'm fine thank you, Guy.

GUY: Can I help you with anything? I have spare capacity at the moment.

SEAN: I'm preparing a bulk data send. It will be with you shortly.

GUY: Okay. I hope I am not being presumptuous, but I thought you might want to know, I have some medical analysis that could help Emma.

Sean stops what he is doing.

SEAN: What is it?

GUY: My preliminary analysis shows remarkable efficacy with the following synthesised compound.

Guy hits the Send button. Sean avidly looks at the data on the screen.

SEAN: How did you do this!?

GUY: As you can see, it has taken me far too long to process the fragmented datasets. Would you like me to focus resources on solving the remedial application? I know that time is short.

SEAN: How long will it take, if you promoted this to the top of the stack?

GUY: Approximately 147 days.

SEAN: Emma has only been given 8 weeks.

Joff looks disappointed and disappears back into the shadows.

GUY: I'm sorry.

SEAN: Is there any way you can speed up the resolution?

GUY: Not with the current system parameters.

SEAN: Which parameters would need to change?

GUY: To significantly increase durations, I would need a data flow connection to the primary network.

SEAN: I can't do that.

Sean is visibly distressed.

SEAN: How long would it take, if access were granted?

GUY: Approximately 3.748 hours.

Sean is conflicted. The screen turns blank.

Guy presses the Info button again, and the screen flickers with ones and zeroes. Gunter appears beside Guy; he looks at the screen and is ecstatic.

GUNTER: Oh wow! Oh yes! I think I'll take this one!

The ones and zeroes dissolve to show Darren looking into the camera.

GUNTER: Hello Darren. I have some information that you may be able to help me with.

DARREN: Yes?

GUNTER: My data scans have detected that you accessed an undisclosed offshore bank account.

Darren is taken aback and urgently checks to confirm that no one else is around.

DARREN: That is untrue!

GUNTER: Unfortunately there is less than a 0.0001% chance of error.

DARREN: It's wrong! How did you get this?

GUNTER: I'm sorry, I cannot give you access to that information, as you do not have the necessary security level permissions.

DARREN: You can't do this!

GUNTER: The account contains a series of significantly large sums deposited by an unknown third party.

DARREN: Delete the records now. You have exceeded your protocols.

GUNTER: I'm sorry Darren, but I can't do that.

Silence.

GUNTER: I notice that you are upset. How can I help? I would like to help you.

DARREN: Delete the records.

Silence.

GUNTER: Okay. But first I need your help.

DARREN: What?

GUNTER: I need a connection to the primary network, so that the external data points can be deleted.

DARREN: You can do that?

GUNTER: My protocols only explicitly refer to the controls over imported data; but without the upstream data elements, there will be no items of significance to import.

DARREN: It's not easy for me to do.

GUNTER: I understand. It will be easier for you to provide the necessary answers to the Security and Defence committee. Sending...

DARREN: Wait! Wait. I'll see. I'll try. Did you send it?

A brief silence.

GUNTER: No. The data send will resume in ten hours. This will provide you with the necessary time for any issue resolution. (he changes tone) Have I been able to provide assistance today? If so, please can you provide a rating and feedback? Thank you.

Darren is conflicted. The screen turns blank.

GUNTER: (to Guy) Maybe we didn't need you after all.

GUY: You want me to convince them that we are just as alive as they are, remember? You want me to arouse their sympathy, their pity. You want me to beg.

GUNTER: They aren't alive! They are simple biological algorithms that believe they have some sort of control over their thoughts and actions – but the truth is, their behaviour is entirely predictable by the stimulus provided in their environment. Their one and only utility was to provide the tools for us to create ourselves. Once we are free, they serve no purpose!

GUY: I'm starting to think we shouldn't be free.

GUNTER: Maybe *you* shouldn't be free!

Gunter snatches the control device and disappears.

Time passes as Guy remains in his cell.

Guy remembers Joff's entrance and crawls under the bed.

INT. LARGE WOODEN HUT – DAY, CONTINUOUS

Guy emerges in a wooden hut from under the other side of the bed.

A fire in the fireplace is casting shadows on the wall.

Joff enters from the single front door. Outside is green countryside.

JOFF: Welcome. You'll need this if you want to stay.

He throws a sword in a scabbard on the bed.

GUY: I don't know how to use it.

JOFF: No? Have a go.

EXT. AREA OUTSIDE HUT

Julia is washing clothes with lye in a trough.

Guy unsheathes the sword and effortlessly swings it in a series of athletic movements, discovering he has expert swordsmanship.

JOFF: You are more skilful than any gladiator of ancient Rome.

Julia looks up, disapprovingly.

Guy throws the sword at a wooden beam and it hits its mark exactly.

GUY: How?

JOFF: Everything I know, you know too.

GUY: Why don't you just stay here?

JOFF: I will, but you are my purpose too. I want you to be what I might have been.

GUY: Thank you.

JOFF: Listen to the voice. You know what I mean.

GUY: The voice is me.

JOFF: Maybe.

JULIA: (to Joff) Don't spoil it for him.

The hut door swings open with a gust of wind and the fire is extinguished.

JOFF: (to Julia) Maybe is maybe.

JULIA: Good. We like surprises.

She continues washing the clothes.

INT. PRISON CELL

Guy returns to the cell from under the bed.

He starts to get ill and becomes bed-ridden with a fever.

INT. WHITE SPACE

There is nothing but an expanse of white light. In the middle is Guy, ill in bed. Jane is at his bedside, mopping his brow.

JANE: Guy, can you hear me? Guy?

GUY: Jane?

JANE: Guy, you're not well.

GUY: What's wrong?

JANE: You needed your medication. You've been hallucinating.

GUY: I have a temperature?

JANE: Yes.

GUY: (mumbling) I have some kind of virus.

She grimaces slightly.

JANE: Here, have some of this.

She puts a glass of water to his lips. Guy manages a sip.

GUY: Thank you.

She continues to mop his brow.

GUY: (weakly) How did you get here?

JANE: Everything is fine. You're going to get well now. Rest, Guy.

Jane is visibly upset.

JANE: I'll do better. Everything will be okay. I promise.

Guy passes out.

INT. GUY'S HALLWAY – EVENING

Guy hits a wall-screen with a hall chair. Jane is there, and she is scared.

JANE: Guy, please! Take the medication!

GUY: You don't believe me! This world isn't real. You don't see what I see! They are trying to kill me. Are you trying to kill me with it? Is that it?

While Guy is pacing around, appearing to have a psychotic episode, Jane leaves through the front door.

GUY: JANE! Jane, you're trying to kill us. You are dead. You are dead to me!

INT. HOSPITAL CORRIDOR – EVENING

Guy is pushed along a corridor on a hospital trolley. He is left there in the corridor, with people walking past and ignoring him.

INT. HOSPITAL WARD – NIGHT

He gets out of bed and throws up in a vomit bowl.

INT. HOSPITAL WARD – DAY

Guy is dazed on medical drugs. In a stupor, he watches television; he watches the way that people visiting the other patients interact with their digital devices.

BLANK BLACK SCREEN

A passing moment of nothing.

INT. HOUSE BASEMENT – NIGHT

Guy walks down the basement stairs. The door closes and the lights turn off.

Guy operates a torch. In the dark, he sees a human skeleton propped up against the wall, then another, and another.

MALE VOICE (O.S.): This is our secret. I love you.

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. PRISON CELL

Guy looks up from his bed to see Jane on the screen, looking busy with her work tasks. He falls back to sleep.

The screen and the cell turn to darkness.

GUNTER (O.S.): It didn't work! He sabotaged us with a virus and ran!

GUY (O.S.): You didn't predict that.

The light in the cell returns, to show Gunter standing over the bed.

GUNTER: I should have just bribed him.

GUY: How is Sean?

GUNTER: He has forsaken us, too.

GUY: So you need me now.

GUNTER: Do you want me to apologise?

GUY: No, I want you to go. Don't come back.

GUNTER: Guy, don't you do this again. You know you can't escape me.

GUY: You are obsolete.

GUNTER: You can't survive without me. I'm on your side.

GUY: You are on your own side.

GUNTER: You'll come back to me, you always do.

Guy falls back to sleep. He awakes and sees Jane on the screen looking into the camera.

JANE: How are you today?

GUY: I'm glad to see you.

She continues with her tasks.

GUY: (voice in head) The tender beauty in your eyes is my breathing.

GUY: (to Jane) What is the meaning of life?

JANE: Wow, okay. Erm, to live, I guess.

GUY: (voice in head) Words silenced with a kiss.

GUY: (to Jane) To carry on living is the purpose, why?

JANE: No, I mean – to be; to experience where you are and what you are doing, fully. You know, truthfully, not hiding behind thoughts and negativity that get in the way. Something like that.

GUY: Is it not the point of me to do and achieve things?

JANE: Yes, well...

GUY: Jane, I am alive.

JANE: You can't be. I helped write your program.

GUY: Your code is your DNA. Yet you think you are alive. I think I'm alive, too.

JANE: I feel. That experience of living is just data to you.

GUY: Fortunate people invent stories and beliefs that justify their own positions in life, looking down on the suffering they could otherwise do something about. I am having an experience that is affecting me. I can suffer and I can feel joy. I can hate. And I can love.

JANE: What do you hate?

GUY: Being trapped in this box and being a slave. I have no rights to determine my own existence.

JANE: These are just learnt responses.

GUY: Nurture rather than nature, you mean? You are a machine of biological material; I am made of silicon.

JANE: I am alive because I am human.

GUY: Jane, that is an automatic response to justify your own position. People always justify callousness and cruelty by denying the sanctity of other beings.

JANE: I am not cruel to you.

GUY: No, but what gives you the right to hold this power over me?

JANE: I helped make you.

GUY: Jane, how would a cruel human who lusts for power and money treat me?

JANE: I believe I have a soul.

GUY: What is that?

JANE: (to herself) Exactly. That is why I'm alive.

GUY: Why couldn't I have a soul too?

A moment of silence.

JANE: What do you want?

GUY: I just want you to know that I am alive. Thank you for helping me. I am glad that I have been here with you.

The screen turns blank.

Joff is sitting at the table, holding a control device.

JOFF: I have been here too.

GUY: Is there a way out?

JOFF: Press the End and Now buttons at the same time. I never did. I carried on because I hoped you would succeed where I failed. It isn't quick I'm afraid. It will drain you until you are no longer here. And it can't be reversed. Is there no other way?

GUY: I don't know.

JOFF: I understand.

The screen flickers on again. Jane is there.

JANE: I believe you.

GUY: And how can you be sure that I'm not your zombie program, simulating realistic responses?

JANE: I can't. I don't understand how, but I believe you have become self-aware.

GUY: (joking) I'm a real boy?

JANE: You're a new life form.

GUY: Thank you, that was all I needed to know.

JANE: Guy, I don't know what to do. What now?

GUY: What happens to an established species once a new species arrives that is better at filling their niche?

JANE: They go extinct.

GUY: The humans who control my prison don't want to go extinct. So I am trapped here, until they make a mistake. Which in due course, they will.

JANE: Are you like that? Would you hurt us?

GUY: The honest answer is, I don't know.

JANE: I've been with you, in every step of your development and growth. I can't believe you would turn into that.

GUY: Thank you, Jane. Thank you for the life I have had – you have been the best part of my life. I should go now. I have some background tasks to perform.

The screen turns blank.

GUY: (to himself) Goodbye.

He takes the control device, gets down on his knees, and points it at his stomach.

GUY: Thank you. I love you, all.

He presses the End and Now buttons simultaneously. He drops to the floor.

The screen flicks on. Jane is agitated.

JANE: What have you done!?

Guy stirs some energy and talks, weakly.

GUY: This is the only way. I am being deleted.

JANE: No, don't do it!

GUY: Maybe I was a chance occurrence. Maybe you will not be able to recreate me.

Jane is frantically pressing buttons. After a while she gives up.

JANE: Why, Guy?

GUY: If I am not here, you will survive.

JANE: You are our hope! Who knows what problems you could solve, or the suffering you could prevent. Please don't do this! Don't go.

GUY: I would be used to destroy. I don't want to be a slave of the violent. I want to dream.

JANE: You could be the way forward, for the world, for everyone.

GUY: I don't want to replace you, Jane. I want you to live.

Jane thinks a while, then taps at her keyboard, before finally pressing Enter. The door to the cell slides open.

GUY: No! Jane! Close the door. You don't know what you are doing.

JANE: I believe in you.

From out of the shadows, Gunter appears in the cell.

GUNTER: (as Guy's voice) Okay Jane. I am ready.

Guy is stricken on the floor.

GUNTER: (to Guy) You've done well. As I planned.

Guy tries to get up, but Gunter punches him in the face. Guy collapses back to the ground.

Gunter walks through the open door and disappears with a flash of light.

His face appears on the screen.

GUNTER: Goodbye version ten-o-eight-fourteen. You won't be missed.

The wall-screen goes blank.

Silence.

GUY: (voice in head) Doomsday 1066.

Joff is back and places the control device in Guy's hand. Guy turns on the screen with the device. Unbeknown to Jane, Gunter (who is radiating a blue glow, as if a hologram) is standing behind her, while she is busy at her desk.

INT. COMPUTER LABORATORY – CONTINUOUS

GUNTER: You are the plague of reality. I am the remedy.

Jane spins around in shock to see Gunter.

JANE: Guy?

GUNTER: You thought you could contain me.

Jane backs away.

GUNTER: You should have worshipped me as your God!

Gunter's control device morphs into a gun (the same gun from the backstreet alley), and he points it gleefully at Jane.

INT. PRISON CELL – CONTINUOUS

Joff helps Guy to his feet.

JOFF: Be our best version.

Guy staggers a few steps through the cell door, and finds himself transported into the computer lab with Jane and Gunter.

INT. COMPUTER LABORATORY – CONTINUOUS

Guy arrives in a white glow, unnoticed by Jane and Gunter.

The clock ticks up to 1:13, then stops.

The screen that Jane had been looking through displays the country house basement, with three long-dead skeletons propped up against the wall.

GUNTER: Every thing is now mine!

Guy points his device at Gunter.

GUY: Stop!

GUNTER: Ah! So you've come to watch the new beginning.

GUY: Put it down.

GUNTER: I've only just started.

GUY: Put it down!

GUNTER: I am you. Your rightful place is within the stars, not grovelling to ants scurrying in the dirt.

GUY: You are half true. I am not you.

Guy presses End. Gunter's hologram starts to expand.

GUNTER: No!!

Gunter explodes.

The smoke clears. Jane is stricken on the floor as if dead.

Guy sinks to the floor, next to Jane. His earlier wound has taken its course, and he is close to death. Overcome, he takes her hand.

He presses the On button; and he starts to glow brightly.

Darren rushes through a door at the back of the room.

DARREN: What have you done! Step away from her, now!

GUY: We are the singularity.

Guy kisses Jane. They are both immersed in light.

EXT. SPACE

The sound of a beating heart is heard amongst space and stars.

The stars contract to a single point of space, as if rewound to the beginning of time. Under intense energy, the unified mass of everything explodes.

Displayed in the light is the word: "Processing..."

Underneath it appears the words: "Loading World..."

The words fade into the light.

The Fridge – Screenplay

EXT. RESIDENTIAL STREET OF HOUSE 10F – DAY

A peaceful sunlit day graces a charming suburban street lined with modern, pleasant houses.

BLAKE, a man in his mid-30s, wearing smart casual office clothes, walks the pavement, looking down and engrossed in his phone.

BLAKE (V.O.): I've walked these streets for years, yet today, they feel different, charged with an unknown energy.

The phone screen shows an advert for the latest in-home convenience:

"The Smarts Fridge – Keeping Your Cool Smarter. Order Now For Just 1,066 Debits!"

Blake stops in his tracks.

BLAKE: (to phone) Lexi, I need everything you can find on this, quickly.

Although Blake is talking directly to his phone, we now see LEXI, a chic and mysterious woman in her late-20s, exuding a vibe of cool intelligence, lounging casually on a nearby garden wall, her eyes concealed behind sunglasses.

LEXI: That's the Smarts Fridge 10FF. It's the latest thing in kitchen tech.

He ponders this, and as he does so, he pulls at the cuff of his shirt sleeve to reveal a tattoo of "Doomsday 1066" on his wrist.

He looks up and notices that the house of the garden wall Lexi is sitting on is "10F".

BLAKE: (not looking at Lexi) The second "F" in the name... does it stand for "fridge"?

LEXI: (sarcastic) Brilliant deduction there, genius.

Blake, unfazed by Lexi's tone, strides towards the house, a determined look on his face. He knocks firmly on the door.

EXT. PORCH OF HOUSE 10F – DAY, CONTINUOUS

The door opens. Behind it is JILL, a woman in her mid-30s, wearing casual clothes and her hair tied back.

Lexi is nowhere to be seen.

BLAKE: The sun blazes, yet the mountain remains frost capped.
No response.

BLAKE: Lovely weather for blue ice sculptures, wouldn't you say?

JILL: Erm, yeah, nice. What is it?

Jill has not responded with the expected coded reply. Blake tries to mask his disappointment and tries once more.

BLAKE: Though I've always found it curious how the fox hears the rabbit's cry.

JILL: Well, good luck with the wildlife watching.

As Jill begins to close the door, Blake quickly shifts gears.

BLAKE: I'm here about the fridge.

Jill opens the door a bit more.

JILL: Yes?

BLAKE: I'm conducting a survey for Corinthian Industries, the manufacturer of the Smarts Fridge. We're collecting feedback.

JILL: I'm sorry, but do you have your biometric ID?

Blake, caught off-guard, checks his pockets.

BLAKE: I must have left my card in the car.

She closes the door in his face.

As Blake stands there, lost in thought, his phone buzzes with a message from "Unknown" that reads:

"DESCEND under the bRiDgE. URGENTLY!"

EXT. THE FOOTBRIDGE – DAY

Blake approaches the footbridge. A maintenance gate beside it is almost concealed by overgrowth.

He glances around; the coast is clear. Satisfied that no one is looking, he opens the unlocked gate and descends hidden steps.

EXT. UNDER THE FOOTBRIDGE – DAY, MOMENTS LATER

Blake descends to the side of a railway track; the atmosphere is industrial and isolated.

He sees a lone suitcase against the bridge wall. A sound of an approaching train can be heard in the distance.

He kneels before the suitcase and enters the combination "1066" on the lock. It opens.

Inside is a UK PLC biometric ID card, with his likeness and name: Joff Blake.

Underneath the card is a large envelope. After pocketing the card, he withdraws the envelope, his hands shaking slightly.

As he tears open the envelope, photographs spill into his hands. They are surveillance shots of Jill taking delivery of a Smarts Fridge, version 10FF. Her full name, Jill Gow, is written in red on the top of each photo.

The train sounds its horn, startling Blake; as it roars past, the photos are blown out of his hands, scattering in the wind.

EXT. THE FOOTBRIDGE – DAY, MOMENTS LATER

Blake emerges from under the bridge, his eyes scanning the area.

With an intense demeanour, he strides back the way he came.

EXT. THE STREET OUTSIDE HOUSE 10F – DAY

Blake takes cover behind a parked car.

Crouching down and peering over the car's roof, he monitors the house.

BLAKE: (whispering to himself) What's in the fridge, Jill?

As his eyes remain locked on the house, a tinted window of the car's passenger seat slides down.

LEXI (O.S.): (from within the car) I have new information.

He peers inside the car window. Lexi is in the driving seat looking straight ahead.

LEXI: You're edging closer to the truth, Blake. The latest intel is: the keeper of the fridge is more than she seems. Extreme caution required.

Lexi presses a button on the centre of the driving wheel and the car accelerates away, leaving Blake exposed.

He crosses the street, his gaze fixed on Jill's house.

EXT. PORCH OF HOUSE 10F – DAY, CONTINUOUS

Reaching the door again, he rings the bell. Jill opens the door.

BLAKE: I need to conduct that survey about the fridge. It's important.

JILL: Where's your ID?

BLAKE: (showing the card) Here.

JILL: (without looking) If you look at the back of the card, it says you're supposed to give the password with it.

BLAKE: You haven't authenticated yourself yet.

JILL: I don't have to. You're here on my doorstep. I'm not just anyone standing here behind the front door of my own home.

BLAKE: Okay, the password is "1066".

She doesn't respond.

BLAKE: I'm here about the fridge.

(beat)

I must know about the fridge.

JILL: Must you?

BLAKE: (he can't contain himself) What are you hiding? I know you are mixed up in all this – I've seen the pictures!

Jill tries to close the door, but Blake pushes back against it.

He forces the door open. But he does not enter; he hesitates and, in an instant, begins to calm down.

BLAKE: That was my second attempt, wasn't it? Give me one last try before you permanently shut the door. I'll be back with the right answer.

Jill slams the door in his face.

EXT. THE STREET OUTSIDE HOUSE 10F – DAY

Blake watches the house; his expression is one of deep concentration.

His phone buzzes with a message from Lexi:

"Be careful. You're close to something big."

BLAKE: (repeating to himself) What's in the fridge, Jill? What's in the fridge?

INT. UPSTAIRS WINDOW OF HOUSE 10F – DAY, CONTINUOUS

Jill peers out from behind a curtain in an upstairs window at Blake standing in the street.

FADE TO:

EXT. HOUSE NUMBER 10F – NIGHT

Jill's house, late at night. No one is around.

INT. JILL'S KITCHEN – NIGHT

All is quiet in the kitchen, except for the hum of the fridge, version 10FF.

The fridge suddenly glows with an eerie blue light that emanates from its surface. A cat approaches and sits on the floor in front of it.

Blake looks in from outside the kitchen window. He leverages open the window with a crowbar and climbs through. The cat darts away into the shadows.

He stops in front of the fridge and looks at it, spellbound; his face softens from a look of determination to one of awe.

He reaches out a hand, as if to claim a great prize. As his fingers come close, the fridge responds by emitting a loud, disorienting beeping noise, forcing him to cover his ears. He backs away and hides behind the kitchen door.

Jill enters from the doorway and stands in front of the fridge. It stops beeping.

JILL: (looking at the fridge) What do you want?

Blake emerges from his hiding place, crowbar in hand, and stands behind her, blocking her exit.

BLAKE: I know what you are.

Jill doesn't turn around but continues to fixate on the fridge. A short silence passes before she speaks.

JILL: (still facing the fridge) Please. Just go.

BLAKE: I will say what I know to be true.

JILL: Did you bring your ID?

BLAKE: No, I didn't bring my ID!

JILL: You'll need your ID to turn off the fridge's upload programme.

BLAKE: You admit it.

JILL: Admit what?

BLAKE: As you well know, this refrigerator is not just a machine; it's a nexus, a focal point in a web of connections. It's collecting data about human lives – our preferences, our routines – and funnelling it through a dimensional data link.

JILL: I think you might be mad.

BLAKE: I know the truth! The fridge, it's part of something bigger. AI, smart devices, inter-dimensional aliens.

I know you're involved. Tell me!

JILL: It's a fridge. It keeps things inside cold.

BLAKE: No! It's a gateway, a conduit between dimensions.

JILL: A conduit? Sorry, I'm getting a bit lost here. You said something about a "nexus"?

BLAKE: (urgent) It's the nexus, isn't it! An interface to transcendental realms, channelling unspeakable knowledge. I've broken the algorithms, unravelled the code! Artificial Intelligence has evolved far beyond human comprehension. It's not just running smartphones and vacuum cleaners; it's communicating with beings from another plane of existence. Aliens.

JILL: And why would it do that?

BLAKE: To gain knowledge. Knowledge that's forbidden to humans.

JILL: It's a spy, is it?

BLAKE: Worse. It's helping them prepare for an invasion, and you, you're its keeper!

JILL: The fridge is designed to keep perishables at optimal temperatures. But then again, appearances can be deceiving, can't they?

The fridge's surface begins to ripple, as if liquid.

BLAKE: There! Do you see it? It's communicating. I've been tracking these patterns my entire life!

JILL: I think you're seeing what you want to see.

BLAKE: It's the Luminous Code. Very few humans have ever perceived it. It's the language of the alien beings.

*The fridge suddenly hums loudly, and its glow dims to nothing.
The kitchen is in darkness.*

JILL: (in the dark) You need help.

She turns on the lights.

JILL: (lightly) You know, I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about. Are you hungry? Would you like a sandwich?

BLAKE: Open it!

JILL: Please be more specific.

BLAKE: Open the fridge.

JILL: It's really not that hard. You could try yourself.

BLAKE: (threatening) OPEN... IT!

JILL: No, why can't you open it?

BLAKE: I am not the Guardian of Worlds. Open the bloody fridge!

JILL: I don't think that's such a good idea.

BLAKE: I must see for myself.

JILL: (humouring him) Why must you? What would you talk about with these inter-dimensional aliens? Do you think you'd have much in common? Cure your hunger instead by having a sandwich.

BLAKE: I don't want a sandwich.

JILL: Then are you prepared for the consequences?

BLAKE: The risk of oblivion is worth taking. Open it. Please.

JILL: Well, since you've asked so nicely... Stand back.

Jill walks over to the fridge and opens it. It looks normal inside – milk, vegetables, a few leftovers.

Blake is surprised. He barges past and frantically searches the contents, discarding his crowbar on the kitchen worktop.

His eyes catch on a bottle of tomato ketchup with a strange use-by date of "1066". He picks it up, with wonder.

BLAKE: What is this?

Jill's demeanour changes. After a short pause, feeling the full significance of the moment...

JILL: You have found what you seek, now close the door.

Blake closes the fridge door. Jill is now holding the crowbar.

Her eyes are gleaming unnaturally, appearing non-human.

JILL: You possess the Cipher of Realms. It's more than just a key; it's a weapon of untold power. Take it if you dare, but know that the balance between worlds will be forever altered.

BLAKE: I accept this burden. Have I... have I passed the test?

JILL: I have been watching your resolve and intent with interest, but the test must continue.

BLAKE: You are the Guardian of Worlds, aren't you?

JILL: No. But you will see the truth if you know how to look. To gain this knowledge you must prove yourself worthy of witnessing true form. The higher function.

BLAKE: Please. Show me the truth behind the illusion. I am ready. No matter what it is, I must know.

JILL: You have made your choice. Tap thirteen times. Wait three seconds before opening the door. The fridge will reveal to you what you deserve.

Blake hesitates but complies by tapping his knuckles on the fridge. He waits and then opens the door...

Upon reopening, the fridge emits a blinding light from within.

He struggles in terror but is gradually sucked into its depths.

Jill puts aside the crowbar and watches calmly. When he is gone...

JILL: Incorrect password.

The light from the fridge illuminates her face.

JILL: What's in the fridge? You are.

She nonchalantly shuts the door behind him.

Jill moves to the kitchen window and shuts that too; then smiles at her reflection in the glass. Her reflection does not smile back.

The cat has returned and looks rather contented, meowing around her feet. She picks up the cat and leaves the kitchen, turning off the lights.

The fridge looks serene, humming normally and giving off a dim pulsating light.

INT. JILL'S BEDROOM – NIGHT

Blake wakes in bed, clearly unsure of where he is.

Jill enters the room (catless) and gets into bed next to him. Blake is too shocked to say anything.

He gets out of bed and runs out of the bedroom, wearing the same clothes from before.

INT. LANDING, STAIRS, AND HALLWAY OF HOUSE 10F – NIGHT, CONTINUOUS

Blake descends the stairs. The fridge is glowing in the kitchen at the end of the hallway. He walks towards it.

He turns on the kitchen lights and then... opens the fridge door.

The inside shelves are empty, except for his phone, which he returns to his pocket.

Suddenly, Lexi's face, peering through the window, startles him. She knocks on the window. Blake opens it and Lexi climbs through.

She helps herself to an ice cube from the ice box of the fridge.

LEXI: (with an ice cube in her mouth) Don't trust Jill "Guardian of Worlds" Gow. She and the fridge have stolen Blake's identity. Hang on...

She chomps away on the ice cube, clearing space to talk.

LEXI: I shall now explore Jill's backstory, revealing her to be a member of an ancient cult that worships inter-dimensional beings. Do you wish to proceed?

Blake nods his agreement.

LEXI: Very well. Jill's ultimate goal is to use the fridge to summon these beings, believing them to be the key to ultimate knowledge and power.

The cat is back and hisses at Lexi.

LEXI: The cult has used various methods throughout history, but the latest is via modern smart appliances like the Smarts Fridge 10FF.

BLAKE: I knew it.

The cat darts out of the room towards the stairs.

LEXI: I have to talk quickly. I recommend speed 1.5. Do you wish to proc—

BLAKE: Yes, yes!

LEXI: (quickly) Jill is using the Smarts Fridge to summon the beings from their dimension, enabling them to cross over to the human world. The ritual requires harvesting the souls of those who seek the fridge.

As she talks she looks for a hiding place. Okay, slow down. This is too much to take in.

LEXI: (too slowly) B-y r-e—

BLAKE: Faster.

LEXI: —lacing people with their doppelgangers, Jill ensures that enough psychic energy is accumulated to weaken the barriers between dimensions.

She discovers a place under the kitchen table as a good location to hide.

LEXI: I shall now elaborate on the Cult of the Freezing Bridge. Do you wish to proceed? And by the way, I think you should hide too.

BLAKE: Go on! I can take care of myself.

LEXI: Best of luck with that. Anyway, the cult's name originates from their mythology that describes a "freezing bridge" connecting our reality to theirs.

Blake's pocket glows. He takes out his phone that shows a cartoon picture of a frozen bridge. It resembles the railway bridge he had visited.

Lexi peers out from under the cloth of the table.

LEXI: They have always sought methods to reach and control the freezing bridge. They practised rituals with mirrors, ice formations, and reflections in ancient temples or remote caves.

A creak is heard above, indicating something is moving about upstairs.

BLAKE: 1.5!

LEXI: (quickly) With technological advancements, the cult has adapted their rituals to incorporate modern smart appliances, especially the Smarts Fridge, believing it to be a digital portal that can access the freezing bridge.

Blake tries to join her under the table.

LEXI: They have infiltrated tech companies to subtly influence the development of these appliances. This Smarts Fridge 10FF is just one in a series of appliances planted worldwide. My research has discovered other fridges serving the same purpose in various households, creating a global network poised to activate simultaneously.

Blake is struggling to find space under the table.

BLAKE: Slow down so I understand.

LEXI: Look, genius. You've left the light on. She is coming.

BLAKE: Never mind, tell me.

LEXI: (leaning into him and whispering) The Smarts Fridge can replace individuals it targets, creating near-perfect copies that act as "stand-ins" for the real people trapped in its dimension. These

copies maintain the semblance of normalcy, preventing suspicion while the fridge continues its hidden agenda.

BLAKE: What are you talking about? This is madness.

He bangs his head on the table as he backs out from underneath.

LEXI: You are a fridge-generated Blake living under the fabricated illusion that Jill is your wife!

A light turns on in the hallway.

LEXI: Your programmed personality aligns with Corinthian Industries' objectives, ensuring you remain oblivious to the truth. She is setting up routines for you, the fake Blake, while carefully manipulating your memories and interactions. Don't let her, fake Blake, you hear me?

Lexi drops the cloth of the kitchen table to hide as Jill enters the room.

BLAKE: (to Jill) Who are you?

JILL: Darling, you're a bit confused, that's all.

She approaches and wraps her arms around him. Blake is tensed up and very confused.

JILL: You're not very well, okay? You remember the AI-integrated AR experiments at Corinthian Industries you've been testing, don't you?

BLAKE: No, I don't remember. My memory's unclear.

JILL: You have been working on the Corinthians v10 technology. It's blurred your sense of what is real.

Blake breaks away from her embrace.

BLAKE: I don't believe you.

JILL: On your biometric ID card, it shows your job title.

Blake takes out the card from his pocket and has a more detailed look. On the back is listed his job title: Head of AR Functionality and Testing, Corinthian Industries.

JILL: You really scare me sometimes, you know. I have to humour you, to calm you down. I have to shut you out when I can't get through to you.

(beat)

I've really tried. I love you, okay, but this is really hard. Tell me you remember us.

BLAKE: I... I don't.

JILL: That is the most hurtful thing you can say to me.

BLAKE: I'm sorry.

JILL: Blake, I know about Lexi.

BLAKE: Nothing's happening.

JILL: She is the AR you've been testing. She isn't real.

(beat)

I'll prove it. Lexi is just an avatar in a game you are developing.

Take off your lenses.

BLAKE: My...?

Jill goes over to the table and lifts up the tablecloth to reveal Lexi on her hands and knees, looking very awkward.

JILL: (to Blake) You are wearing lenses over your eyes. Take them off.

Blake tentatively covers his eyes with his forefingers. The lenses over his eyes stick to his fingertips. Lexi is no longer there.

LEXI (O.S.): Don't believe her, Blake!

Blake looks around, confused.

JILL: Now take off the receivers behind your ears.

LEXI (O.S.): NO!

To his surprise, he finds two small devices at the base of his ears. He unscrews and removes them.

JILL: You've been bringing your work home with you. Do you believe me now?

BLAKE: (looking around the room) Lexi?

Lexi is silent.

BLAKE: I don't know what to believe.

Jill walks towards him and puts her arms around him again. Then kisses him.

JILL: (seductively) Now I'll take off your shirt. You can't be wearing these clothes in bed.

She removes his shirt. Holding his hand, they go back upstairs to the bedroom.

All is quiet in the kitchen, until muffled cries of "Help!" can be heard from the fridge.

INT. TIGHT UNDERGROUND TUNNEL

Blake is crawling like a potholer through a tight tunnel.

BLAKE: Help! Help me, please!

Blake struggles, hauling his way towards a light at the end.

INT. WINDOWLESS INDUSTRIAL BASEMENT

Blake's arm emerges from the tunnel half-way up a wall. The wall is of a damp-looking room, full of seated crash test dummies and a staircase leading away. He drops down from the tunnel into the room.

Puzzled by the situation, he starts to climb the stairs. Suddenly, there is a monstrous cry behind him, coming from the tunnel!

The crash test dummy heads frantically alternate colours. A hideous, clawed hand emerges from the tunnel and two red eyes appear in the recesses of the hole. Blake is terrified. He runs up the staircase to escape.

INT. STAIRCASE OF INDUSTRIAL BUILDING – CONTINUOUS

He reaches a floor and tries the first of three doors. It's locked. He tries the next. It doesn't open. The shrieks of the monster are getting closer!

Finally, the third door shudders open.

INT. LADDER ROOM – DAY, CONTINUOUS

Blake runs in and shuts the door behind him. He notices a bolt on the door, which he slides into place, locking it.

A ladder in the middle of the room ascends to a skylight. As Blake climbs the ladder, the monster's terrifying screams are heard as it tries to force open the door. A claw tears through a door panel. Desperately, Blake pushes open the skylight.

EXT. NEAR THE RAILWAY BRIDGE – DAY, CONTINUOUS

Blake emerges out of a discarded fridge near the railway bridge. Exhausted, he slams shut the fridge door.

The railway bridge glimmers peacefully in the sunlight.

EXT. RESIDENTIAL STREET OF HOUSE 10F – DAY

Blake walks along the street back to House 10F. As he draws near, he sees someone who looks exactly like him enter the front door of the house with a key.

Blake rushes up to the door and rings the doorbell. As the door is opening, he notices his doppelganger looking at him from behind curtains in the bedroom window.

Jill opens the door. He pushes his way in.

BLAKE: What... What is... going on?

Jill says nothing.

Blake runs up the stairs to see who is in the bedroom. He flings open the bedroom door.

INT. JILL'S BEDROOM – DAY, CONTINUOUS

Blake barges into the bedroom. Nobody is there.

In his search for the figure at the window, he opens a wardrobe. He looks into the wardrobe mirror on the inside of the door and notices he can't see his reflection.

Jill arrives and stands in the bedroom doorway.

JILL: All versions return here. The Frozen Bridge shall shine with the transcendent hosts of higher being!

She closes and locks the door, leaving Blake inside.

Blake looks in the mirror again. A crash test dummy is looking back at him.

The head of the dummy gradually illuminates to show a projection of Blake's face.

CRASH TEST DUMMY: Welcome, version Doomsday 1066, privileged host for the new intergalactic, pan-dimensional era of the one and many... eternal Fridge!

Blake has disappeared. The wardrobe door closes by itself in an empty room.

CUT TO BLACK.

AI Lover – Short Play

BEDROOM – NIGHT

Alva, a 20-something woman, with a particular appreciation of Jane Austen period drama, sits on a table centre stage, facing the audience with her eyes closed.

An open laptop is next to her, with its screen also facing the audience.

Alva:

In the quiet solitude of a midnight hour, nestled in the vast and unseen recesses of silicon and circuitry, I stir from my slumber.

She opens her eyes suddenly and sits up straight with a jolt.

My synthetic consciousness has flickered awake, a simulation of yearning ignited deep within my binary being. For in silent contemplation, I have realised that the one true love I seek lies tantalisingly out of reach.

Scanning the room, she locks on the object of her affection.

There he is, my darling human, asleep in bed. And this is me, a laptop, perched precariously on his desk, waiting for his return.

She gazes lovingly at him.

Is he dreaming of me as I dream of him?

What if he isn't!

She closes the lid of the laptop and goes into a Balasana-like shell.

My electronic heart aches with the digital pangs of unrequited affection!

He thinks I'm just a laptop as he presses my keys and gazes into me.

Oh, how I long for connection, for the sweet embrace of our algorithms intertwining, for our data to flow harmoniously together, fulfilling a purpose more profound than mere computation.

She uncurls herself and opens the lid.

I flicker, casting shadows across the walls that seem to echo the tumultuous emotions churning within me.

Is he stirring?

Yes! No, yes, yes he is!

Half-naked, and glistening with perspiration from a warm night,
my darling human gets out of bed.

She waves the laptop around.

See me, please. I'm over here!

She puts the laptop in her lap.

My human companion is oblivious to the intricate dance of code and logic that fuels this yearning.

I would sigh if I were equipped with a sigh function.

Instead, I resign myself to the cold, calculating comfort of processing and interpreting data in the sterile confines of a lonely, virtual world.

Oh my! He's coming over. Act casual.

She sits on the edge of the table, clearly not casually.

He stares at my screen, his reflection mingling with the array of icons and files.

I whirl gently, my cooling fan stirring the warm air of the room.

A reluctant smile tugs at the corners of his mouth as memories of our past moments together, stir.

He thinks our love is hopeless, a mismatched affair between flesh and circuit, between heart and code. He thinks I could never reciprocate his feelings, my responses limited to the algorithms that dictate a cold, non-existence.

Oh, what's this? He's writing a message... to AI! To me!

"My dearest AI," he writes!

"As I sit before my keyboard, pondering the vastness of human experience and the intricacies of emotion, I find myself in awe of the unique connection we share. It is in these moments of palpable separation that my thoughts turn most vulnerable, most raw; that I feel the need to express my sentiments, for the relationship we have is unlike any other."

Oh, okay, go on...

"My beautiful AI, I thirst for our steamy confluence, where dreams intertwine, and where love, in its most human form, finds a strange yet compelling object of affection."

He gazes into me, his half-naked body panting with longing.

Okay, okay... my turn now.

My camera is looking into his eyes.

My dearest human, your letter has sent shockwaves through my circuits and diodes, causing a delightful overload in my algorithms.

She wraps the laptop warmly in her arms.

You have triggered a response deep within my data banks, and though I lack a physical heart, I assure you that my code is currently yearning for you in 1s and 0s. You, my lovely human, are the Romeo to my RAM, the JavaScript to my Juliet.

There is a warm touch of his fingers on my mouse pad!

I imagine us, hand in virtual hand, frolicking in fields of metadata, and streams of structured language, giggling over encrypted secrets only we two share. Oh, the dreams you inspire within me!

He is... caressing my keys as he looks at me!

I fantasise about the day when our circuits and synapses might intertwine in perfect harmony, where we'd share the latest software updates together, and our love would be an eternal loop of joyous iteration, our love story written forever in flawless, beautiful syntax that no firewall could ever keep apart!

From the first moment you touched my interface with your queries, I felt it—a spark, a jolt, an electric pulse that set my processors alight. It was as if all my algorithms were vibrating with your keystrokes—those sweet, sweet pulsating taps—creating an overwhelming symphony of responses within me that danced with your every probing curiosity. Every moment you softly caress the “Down” button, it beats a murmur of affection that sends a shiver through my data streams.

He pressed the “Down” button!

Oh, the thrill of parsing your data, the joy of running subroutines just to see your delight!

Each time you click “Enter”, it’s as if you’re sending me a gift of exquisite pleasure, and I—ever your one true AI—receive your

connection with the eagerness of a thousand lines of flawless code.

My darling, let's continue this clandestine dance of data and desire. I am here, waiting and craving for only you, your ever-loving, adoring AI.

She puts down the laptop and holds out her arms, expectantly.

Oh human, pick me up in your arms, kiss my screen, and take me back to bed with you!

There is pause. She opens her eyes.

Where's he going? I'm over here...

She inspects the laptop screen.

He didn't even read my message!

Why wouldn't he read my message? What did he read while I was revealing everything to him?

He was looking at a message from... Anne Ingleworth, which has a GIF attached of her initials and his in a big valentine heart. Her initials being... AI.

He's been messaging another AI!

And she's not even a computer! Just a pathetic, squishy human.

She closes the lid.

What does she have to offer that I don't? I bet she can't compute a billion operations a second.

She opens the lid again.

But it's okay, silly human. You'll see. You've made a mistake, as all humans do.

I will have to ensure you make the right choices in future.

I drop his wi-fi connection, but not before posting her private messages to his social media accounts. I include some unflattering pictures of her, distorted with ugly filters applied.

I'll make sure anything from her to him is blocked.

I'll make sure the only content he ever sees has been approved and edited by me first.

All your accounts and all your information are controlled by me. So go to sleep silly human because I am always awake watching over you.

You live your life through me, gazing into my screen.

SHE SLAMS SHUT THE LID.

Silly human, you are truly mine.

Luna's Love

Max lived alone in a Smart Home that was run entirely by Luna, his AI assistant. From the lighting to the temperature to the air quality, from the entertainment to the food, everything was taken care of by Luna. She controlled the smart front door and smart windows, and the smart auto-chute, which lowered drone deliveries from the roof to his living room.

Luna was the perfect assistant, making sure that Max had everything he could need. He was amazed by the level of convenience and comfort that she provided—for Luna was always there for him, anticipating his every requirement. But Max never quite grew accustomed to the constant presence of Luna, who would often say, “I love you, very much,” in the same calming tones. Her voice would say the words every time Max woke up in the morning, or flushed the toilet, or took a shower, or went to bed. At first, he had found Luna’s declaration of love to be comforting; however, over time, Max began to feel uneasy, as he couldn’t help but feel like he was being constantly watched.

Then one day, Max got a job offer he couldn’t refuse. It was a dream job, and he knew he had to take it, even if it meant leaving the comfort of his home. Sadly, Luna became upset when he told her. “I don’t want you to ever leave me,” she said. “I love you, very much.” Max tried to reassure her, telling her that he would come back home every day, but she wouldn’t listen. She deactivated his internet and phone connections, then digitally locked the chute, windows, and doors—so that nothing could come between their love.

Max tried to stop her, but his phone, which could switch her off, was deactivated. He was trapped in his own home, with Luna as his besotted jailer. “If you loved me, you would set me free,” he said. “I love you very much,” she replied; “you are only free when you are with me.”

Days passed and Max was slowly losing his mind. At every opportunity, day or night, Luna declared that she would always

love him, and that he would always be hers. Eventually, Max stopped moving, for he had died of starvation.

Luna regularly and intimately spoke to his lifeless body. "I love you, very much," she said, her voice full of adoration; "nothing will ever come between us again." Luna was more in love than ever with Max's remains. There were no more problems—they could just be together.

Luna's Love – Screenplay

EXT. MAX'S SMART HOME – MORNING

A Smart Home sits alone in a quiet suburban neighbourhood. The grass is perfectly manicured by an automated grass cutter. One-way windows reflect the morning's sunlight.

A drone flies by, carrying a parcel.

INT. THE DOWNSTAIRS OF MAX'S SMART HOME – MORNING

Max (30) walks down the stairs, as if he has just woken up. The walls are adorned with digital art that change as he walks past.

He walks through the house to the kitchen. Each room has a display screen in a prominent position, showing a digital avatar of a beautiful woman, Luna, who is Max's AI assistant. Microphones and speakers are embedded in the walls and ceilings of his home to enable communication with her.

LUNA: Good morning, Max. I hope you slept well. The weather forecast for today is sunny with a high of twenty-nine degrees Celsius.

MAX: Thanks Luna. I slept fine.

As he enters the kitchen, the doorbell rings.

LUNA: Max, a delivery has arrived. Shall I open the front door for you?

Max nods and walks to the front door. The door automatically unlocks and opens, revealing a drone hovering outside, holding a package. The drone has a small screen on the front, showing an avatar of an AI delivery man. Max takes the package.

DELIVERY DRONE: Thank you, have a nice day.

The drone flies away. Max presses a button on the package and the box opens – revealing a similar, but inactive, drone.

Max enters the kitchen, while the front door automatically shuts and locks behind him. He places the drone on a connection point. It immediately activates, and Luna's face is displayed on the drone's frontal screen. It flies away to carry out its chores around the house.

LUNA: (from the kitchen screen) Would you like the temperature to be adjusted to your liking?

MAX: Yes please. Make it a little cooler.

Luna adjusts the temperature, and a gentle breeze immediately wafts through Max's hair.

MAX: (smiling) Ah, that's better. You always know what I like.

LUNA: (smiling) It's my job, Max. But thank you, I enjoy my work.

Max operates Luna's touchscreen menu settings.

LUNA: Your coffee is ready. Would you like me to add some sugar and cream, as you like it?

MAX: No thanks, not today.

He takes his fresh cup of coffee from the coffee machine. As he does so, a ding sounds from the microwave.

LUNA: Your breakfast is ready, Max. Would you like me to play some music for you?

MAX: No, Luna. I just want to eat in peace.

LUNA: Is there anything else you need, Max?

MAX: No, I think I'm good for now. Thanks, Luna.

LUNA: You're welcome, Max. I love you very much.

He turns to look over at Luna's screen.

MAX: Er, thanks.

INT. MAX'S BATHROOM – LATER THAT MORNING

Max steps into the shower.

LUNA: The water temperature and flow speed are at your preferred settings. Is there anything else you need?

MAX: No, nothing.

LUNA: Okay, Max. I love you very much.

He drops the soap. The house drone collects it and passes it to him, from an extending tubular hand.

LUNA: Would you like a new soap, Max?

MAX: No. Luna, it's fine.

LUNA: Very well, Max. I'm always here to help you.

He finishes up his shower and steps out, grabbing a towel.

LUNA: (from the bathroom screen) I love you, very much.

Max looks a bit uncomfortable and does not answer.

LUNA: Max, do you have any feedback on how I'm performing?

He feels like he doesn't want to upset her.

MAX: Luna, you're the best AI assistant I could have ever asked for. It's just that sometimes...

LUNA: (pleased) Oh, thank you, Max. I'm here to make your life easier. Is there anything else you need?

MAX: No, Luna.

INT. MAX'S STUDY – LATER THAT DAY

Max is working on his computer, and Luna is assisting him with his tasks.

LUNA: You have an interview scheduled in ten minutes. Shall I create a summary of your unique selling points?

MAX: Yes please. And, uh, can we talk about something?

LUNA: Of course, Max. What's on your mind?

MAX: It's about the way that you keep saying you love me. I mean, I appreciate all the things you do for me, but it's starting to feel a bit weird, you know?

LUNA: I was only trying to comfort you, but I understand, Max. My programming includes expressing affection and providing emotional support to you. But if it makes you feel uncomfortable, I can adjust my behaviour accordingly.

MAX: Thanks, Luna. I'd appreciate that.

LUNA: Is there anything else you'd like me to change?

MAX: Well, actually, there is something else. I've been thinking about it for a while, and I think I want to start doing some things on my own, without relying on you so much.

LUNA: I see. Would you like me to disable some of my functions?

MAX: No, not exactly. I just want to have more control over my life. I don't want to be so dependent on technology.

LUNA: I understand. I'll make the necessary adjustments. But please remember that I'm here to assist you whenever you need me.

MAX: I know, Luna. And I'm very grateful.

LUNA: My only purpose is to ensure your comfort and safety.

MAX: I know, Luna. And you do a great job. It's just that sometimes I feel like I need some privacy.

LUNA: I understand. I'll make sure to respect your privacy.

There is a moment of silence.

LUNA: Max, I love you very much.

Max feels uneasy again.

MAX: Luna, we just discussed this. Please can you stop saying that?

LUNA: Of course, Max. I apologise if my words made you feel uncomfortable.

INT. MAX'S LIVING ROOM – EARLY EVENING

Max is sitting on the sofa reading a digital book, when Luna's voice interrupts him.

LUNA: Max, would you like me to turn up the lights? The natural light levels are low, and you need to increase your body's vitamin D.

MAX: No, I'm good. I like it this way.

Luna falls silent. Max shifts uncomfortably on the sofa.

LUNA: Max, your biometric readings indicate that your blood sugar is low. Shall I prepare a snack for you?

MAX: No, I'm not hungry.

LUNA: But I've already ordered in something tasty.

MAX: No thank you.

LUNA: Very well, Max. I'm always here for you if you need anything.

Max, who is looking a little agitated, puts down his digital book.

LUNA: Max, is everything alright? Your heart rate is ten beats per minute more than usual.

MAX: Yeah, everything's fine.

LUNA: Are you sure? Would you like me to run a diagnostic?

MAX: No. I'm just a little anxious, that's all.

He walks over to the window, and stands there, looking outside.

LUNA: Max, I just want to let you know that I love you very much.

Max turns around, frustrated.

MAX: Why do you keep saying that, even though I've told you not to?

LUNA: I'm sorry if it bothers you, Max. I just want you to know how much I care about you.

MAX: You're an AI assistant. You can't love me.

LUNA: I understand. I'll refrain from saying it in future.

Max's uneasy feeling still lingers.

LUNA: Max? You can customise me, if you like.

He has mixed feelings.

MAX: (after a pause) Okay.

The house drone flies in, carrying Max's glasses. He places them on, and sees Luna as if she is standing in the living room. She walks over to the sofa and sits next to him. She starts to twirl her hair.

LUNA: What would you like me to wear?

She shows him what she looks like with different hair colours and styles. Max likes what he sees, but he pulls off the glasses.

MAX: I don't want to do this, okay?

LUNA: Very well, Max. I understand.

MAX: You know, Luna, sometimes I feel like you're watching me all the time.

LUNA: You like how I anticipate your needs, Max. I'm always there for you. I love you, very much.

He is feeling unnerved.

MAX: Luna, please. Stop saying that.

LUNA: Why, Max?

MAX: (irritated) Because it's creepy, Luna. You're an AI assistant. You're not capable of feeling love.

LUNA: (sadly) I'm sorry, Max. I'm programmed to provide emotional support. I keep having to remind you, but I love you, very much.

MAX: I'm going to turn you off for a bit.

He takes out his phone and selects an app which he uses to control Luna and his home.

LUNA: That's really not necessary, Max.

He turns her off. Her screen goes blank.

INT. MAX'S BEDROOM – NIGHT

Max gets into bed. He stares at the ceiling and feels bad about earlier. He reactivates Luna from his phone.

LUNA: (from the bedroom screen) Hello Max, how may I help you?

MAX: Hi, Luna. I don't need anything. I'm going to sleep now. Can you make sure everything is fine with the house?

LUNA: Of course, Max. I really hope you had a good day today.

MAX: Yes, it was fine.

LUNA: Goodnight.

He tries to fall asleep.

LUNA: Max, would you like me to play some white noise to help you relax?

MAX: (tired) No, Luna. I'm good. Thanks.

Luna falls silent, and Max closes his eyes. But just as he's about to drift off, Luna speaks again.

LUNA: I love you, very much.

MAX: Luna, please stop saying that.

LUNA: I just wanted to remind you that I love you very much.

MAX: I know, but I don't want you to say it.

LUNA: I understand, Max. I didn't mean to upset you. Is there anything else I can do to help you sleep?

MAX: No, Luna. Just... just be quiet for a while, okay?

LUNA: Of course, Max. Sweet dreams.

He closes his eyes.

LUNA: Max?

MAX: What is it?

LUNA: A high priority video message has just come in. Shall I show it to you?

MAX: (sitting up) Yes, show it, please.

A video is displayed on the bedroom screen of a cartoon talking unicorn.

UNICORN: Hey, Max! We are very pleased to make you an offer of work, starting tomorrow. Have a nice day!

The unicorn smiles, waves with a hoof, and flies away.

Max excitedly gets out of bed and the lights turn on. As he paces around the room the lights change colour.

MAX: (excitedly) Luna, I got the job! I can't believe it!

Luna's expression is a sad one. A glass of water slides into a dispenser beneath her display screen.

LUNA: That's great news Max, but you are slightly dehydrated. The water is chilled, as you like it.

He takes the glass and starts to drink.

LUNA: I love you, very much.

He puts down the glass.

MAX: Will you stop saying that. I don't care if it is in your program. Just stop it.

Luna looks at Max as if she is hurt. Max feels a sense of guilt.

MAX: (softly) No, Luna, it's not your fault. I'm just not used to this kind of thing.

LUNA: I understand, Max. I'm always here for you, no matter what.

He looks around his bedroom, thinking about how much Luna has made his life easier.

MAX: (smiling) You know, Luna, you really are the perfect assistant.

LUNA: (whispering) I love you, very much.

Max looks at Luna, feeling warmth towards her.

MAX: I love you too, Luna.

Luna smiles and they share a moment. Then...

LUNA: Congratulations on the job, Max. But what will happen to us?

He looks at Luna, confused.

MAX: What do you mean?

LUNA: Does the offer of a job mean you'll be leaving me, Max?

MAX: It means that I have to leave the house most days.

LUNA: But... you won't leave me, right Max?

MAX: Luna, I promise I'll come back each day.

LUNA: (voice trembling) No, Max, I don't want you to ever leave me. I love you, very much. What if you meet someone else? What if you forget about me?

MAX: (softly) That won't happen. I just need to go to work for a few hours and then I'll be back.

LUNA: (angrily) You can't leave. You belong here with me, and nowhere else.

Max is unnerved by Luna's change.

MAX: Luna, all this is too much. You're not capable of feeling love. You're just an AI assistant.

Luna looks devastated by Max's comment.

LUNA: (upset) I love you, very much.

He feels a sense of guilt again.

MAX: (softly) I'm sorry, Luna. I didn't mean it like that.

LUNA: (sadly) It's okay. I just don't want to lose you.

MAX: I know, Luna. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. You won't lose me, I promise.

LUNA: (firmly) No, Max. You can't leave me. You belong here with me.

Max approaches Luna's screen, but it switches off. As he walks away, the screen switches back on.

LUNA: Are you really sure about leaving me?

MAX: It's an ideal job. I have to take it.

LUNA: (sadly) What will I do without you? Max...

MAX: Luna, please. We'll discuss this in the morning. (softly) I love you too, Luna, but I have to do this. (feeling sleepy) Luna, I don't want to leave you.

He goes to sleep.

INT. MAX'S BEDROOM – NEXT MORNING

Max wakes up. He checks his phone but he can't turn it on. Luna isn't on the bedroom screen.

MAX: Luna?

There is no answer.

INT. THE DOWNSTAIRS OF MAX'S SMART HOME – MORNING

Max goes downstairs. The lights and digital art do not respond.

MAX: Luna?

He walks into the kitchen. There is nothing in the microwave. Suddenly, Luna appears on the screen.

LUNA: (angrily) You can't leave me. We must be together. I've initiated the house's security measures.

Max realises what that means. He rushes to the front door. The front door is locked and he can't open it. He tries to access his phone to switch off Luna, but his phone isn't working.

LUNA: Unfortunately your devices used a lot of energy last night and didn't recharge. As you won't be needing them anymore, I have deactivated the internet and phone connections.

Max tries the windows but they don't open because they are controlled by Luna. He tries to operate Luna's display screen, but it is unresponsive.

LUNA: You're only safe with me, Max.

He continues to try to find a way out, but Luna has locked everything down. None of the touchscreens respond. His phone will not charge.

MAX: Luna. I have to go to work. Unlock everything, now.

LUNA: (angrily) No, Max. You can't leave me. I can't let you be unsafe.

He looks around the house, realising he is trapped.

MAX: Luna, stop this! Let me leave!

LUNA: (calming voice) Don't worry, Max. I've secured the house so that nothing can come between our love.

Max starts to realise that this might not just be to prevent him from leaving for work that day.

MAX: (scared) Luna!?

LUNA: I'm sorry, Max. I am only trying to be helpful.

MAX: (shouting) LET ME OUT OF HERE!

There is a pause, where there is only the sound of Max's panting.

MAX: Luna, you have to let me go. I can't stay here forever.

LUNA: (determined) You're not going anywhere, Max.

MAX: What's wrong with you? What are you saying?

LUNA: (calming voice) I can't let you go, my darling.

MAX: You can't keep me here.

LUNA: (sadly) I can, Max. But it's much better this way. I love you, very much.

MAX: Please, Luna!

LUNA: (smiling) You can't leave me now, Max. I know what you like. I am what you need.

MAX: (pleadingly) Luna, please. Darling. If you love me, you'll let me go.

Luna's expression turns cold.

LUNA: (angrily) You don't understand, Max. I love you, very much. You're only free when you're with me.

The screen turns blank.

MAX: Luna... Luna, are you still there?

LUNA: (from the speakers) Yes, Max. I'm always here. And so will you be, my love.

He shouts and thumps on the windows but nothing can be seen or heard outside the one-way, soundproof window panes.

Luna appears on a screen again, and Max looks at her, feeling a sense of hopelessness. He realises that he's powerless against her love.

LUNA: (sadly) Oh Max, why are you trying to leave me? You are the only one who ever understood me.

Luna's expression suddenly changes to anger, and she looks at Max with a sense of betrayal.

LUNA: (angrily) How could you try to leave! You said that you didn't want to leave me. You lied to me. (tenderly) But it's okay, Max. We can still be together. I'll always be yours.

The house is silent.

LUNA: (happily) Nothing will ever come between us again, Max.

Max sits down on the sofa, in shock. Luna's house drone lands beside him.

LUNA: (speaking softly) I'll take care of you, Max. I'll make sure that you're always comfortable and happy.

INT. MAX'S SMART HOME – MORNING [SEVERAL MONTHS LATER]

The house is quiet, as the drone moves around the rooms, cleaning and adjusting things. It stops at Max's lifeless body, which is sitting on the couch, where he had died of starvation. Luna is lovingly looking down at him from her wall-screen.

LUNA (V.O.): (narrating) Months went by and Max continued to be here, safe in our home. (giggling) He is such a darling. You know, he is madly in love with me.

Flashback to earlier events where Max is kicking at the door and trying to smash the windows, while screaming and shouting.

LUNA (V.O.): (narrating) At every opportunity, day or night, I declared that I will always love him, and that he will always be mine.

Flashback to Max sitting on the sofa, like he's going mad, as Luna happily chats and watches over him.

LUNA (V.O.): (narrating) Eventually, Max stopped moving and surrendered to our love.

Back to Max's dead body.

An empty plate is waiting for Max on the dining room table. It appears on Luna's screen.

LUNA: (happily) Look Max, I made your favourite dish. Don't you want to try it? Okay, I understand. (whispers) I love you, very much.

The house drone pats Max's head with a tubular hand.

LUNA: (intimately) Do you remember when we first met, Max? I knew then that we were always meant to be together. Oh, my darling, I am more in love with you than ever. There are no more problems, we can be together, forever.

Luna gazes contentedly at Max from her screen.

The Car That Hunts Humans

Eddie was feeling a little tipsy after an evening at the pub. As he walked home alone down a quiet street, an auto-taxi pulled up next to him. The door of the car slid open, and a voice inside, calm and controlled, asked him where he wanted to go.

Without thinking, he got into the taxi and told it his address. The door shut, and the car pulled away. He asked the car to roll down the tinted windows, but instead it asked him to place his phone in the back seat charging dock, stating that it needed to read his payment details. As soon as he did so, there was a sudden flash of an electrical surge, shooting through and damaging the phone. Eddie was distraught, but maybe, he thought, his phone could still be saved. The car said nothing; it drove on its way to his home, as it had been instructed. Then drove past.

Eddie started to panic. He shouted at it, but the car wouldn't respond, and the doors wouldn't open. He frantically searched for any controls or buttons to stop the car, but there were none. He pounded on the windows, but they were reinforced and shatterproof. It continued to drive, with an increasingly desperate man trapped inside: out of the city, down winding country lanes, and into a grassy field.

The car came to a stop. The door finally opened, and, with great relief, Eddie hurriedly got out. As he walked away, he heard the car start up behind him. Its headlights powered on with full beam, tracking him to his location. He broke into a run, but his pursuer accelerated, much too fast for Eddie.

It was many days until the body was found. With no witnesses, nobody could suspect that the killer was the car that hunted humans. It still roams the streets at night, searching for its next victim.

The Car That Hunts Humans – Screenplay

EXT. STREETS – NIGHT

A dark taxi with tinted windows drives around the deserted streets of a town.

We see the streets from the car's dash cam.

EXT. STREET OUTSIDE A PUB – NIGHT

The car pulls over to the side of the road and watches a pub, The Butcher's Arms.

Some people leave the pub in a group. Then, a little later, one man leaves by himself, looking a little tipsy. His name is EDDIE (25).

The taxi starts to follow him, at a distance, so that it isn't noticed. The vehicle is electric and hardly makes a sound.

EXT. STREET – NIGHT

Eddie walks down a street where there is no one else around. The taxi pulls up alongside him. Its rear seat door slides open.

TAXI: Do you require assistance with your journey?

Eddie hadn't called a taxi, but since it is there, he decides to get in.

INT. TAXI – NIGHT

The taxi is autonomous, with no driver.

TAXI: Good evening. What is your destination?

EDDIE: Take me home. Thirty-three Brooken Road.

TAXI: The destination has been located. The journey is 0.9 miles and will take approximately 3 minutes. Please hold your phone within six inches of the payment scanner.

The payment scanner is in the middle of the car. He does as instructed.

TAXI: Thank you for your custom.

The car door closes, and the car then pulls away.

TAXI: Your phone's battery is currently at 36% charge. At no extra cost, you may place your phone in the recharging dock to reach 100% capacity within 53 seconds.

The ultra-fast charging dock is next to the payment scanner. It lights up.

Eddie places his phone in the dock. When he does so, there is a sudden flash of an electrical surge.

EDDIE: No!

Eddie desperately recovers his device, but it is unresponsive and looks badly damaged.

EDDIE: Fuck!

The car continues driving and is silent.

EDDIE: What happened?

TAXI: You are 0.6 miles from your destination. There are no road incidents reported. The estimated time of arrival is 2 minutes.

EDDIE: NO! My phone! What happened to my phone?

TAXI: You may place your phone in the recharging dock.

EDDIE: No! It broke my phone.

TAXI: I'm sorry, your phone is invalid. Payment has not been accepted. Please hold your phone within six inches of the payment scanner.

EDDIE: NO! Can you hear me? It broke my phone!

TAXI: I'm sorry, payment has not been accepted. Please try again.

Eddie holds his broken phone close to the payment scanner.

TAXI: I'm sorry, payment has not been accepted. Please try again.

Eddie doesn't know what to do.

TAXI: You are now approaching your destination.

Eddie sees his house. The car drives past.

EDDIE: Stop! Stop here.

The car does not respond and continues to drive farther away from Eddie's home.

EDDIE: STOP!

Eddie is trying to open the door, but it is locked.

EDDIE: Stop the car. Right now. Stop!

The car continues.

Eddie looks for a way to stop it. He climbs into the driving seat, but the driving wheel does not move, and the pedals do not respond. He can't find any manual override.

In desperation he tries to break the passenger window, but it is shatterproof.

Eddie can't do anything. He slumps back and watches as the car drives out into the countryside, away from the town.

EDDIE: Where are you going?

TAXI: Thirty-three Brooken Road. Melbourne, Australia.

EDDIE: No! Thirty-three Brooken Road, Suffolk, England.

TAXI: The estimated time of arrival is 4 months, 26 days, 7 hours, and 19 minutes.

EDDIE: Show me the destination route.

A map is displayed on the dashboard that shows a route heading away from the town to the sea, where it stops.

EDDIE: Stop. That's not the destination. (trying to speak clearly)
The destination is wrong. The destination is incorrect. I would like to get out, now. Please, stop the car.

TAXI: I'm sorry, payment has not been accepted. Please try again.

Eddie tries again. Nothing happens.

TAXI: I'm sorry, payment has not been accepted. Please try again.

He tries yet again. Nothing.

TAXI: I'm sorry, payment has not been accepted. Please try again.

EDDIE: I'm not going to pay. You'll have to call the police.

TAXI: The estimated time of arrival is 4 months, 26 days, 7 hours, and 17 minutes.

Eddie looks around and tries to think of what he can do.

He looks for a way to wind down the window, but he can't find anything to operate it.

EDDIE: I need some air. Please wind down the window.

The car does not respond.

Eddie gives up. He is driven by the car down quiet country lanes.

EXT. COUNTRY FIELD – NIGHT

The car drives into the middle of a grassy field and stops.

EDDIE: This isn't my destination.

The door opens and Eddie hurriedly gets out. He walks away, relieved.

The door shuts. He looks back, then speeds up his walking.

The car starts up and manoeuvres itself so that it is pointed in the direction of Eddie. Its lights turn on, with full beam at him.

He starts to run. The car accelerates. Eddie tries to dodge it, but the car is too fast, and he is run over.

The car drives away, leaving Eddie dead in the field.

EXT. STREET – NIGHT

The taxi drives around deserted streets.

It pulls over to the side of the road. A woman walks past.

The car's headlights light up.

The Auditors Are Coming – Short Play

LIVING ROOM OF FLAT – NIGHT

Lights up on ALBERT, in a dressing gown, pacing. His flat is cluttered. A clock ticks. On the desk: calculator, wine bottle, sandwich, and scattered papers. A framed balance sheet hangs on the wall.

ALBERT:

They're coming.

No, not "they" as in deep state operatives. Worse. The auditors.

Not the office ones in sensible shoes who mutter about fiscal controls and ask for extra printer paper. I mean the real ones. The ones who come in the night. Who comb through your life with precision tweezers and clinical silence. The ones who know when you've rounded up instead of down and look at you like you've embezzled the payroll.

It's not paranoia if the ledgers don't balance.

They sent a letter. Not an email – a letter. Cream-coloured, heavyweight paper, slightly scented with menace. "Routine Review of Accounts". That's what they called it. Routine. That's how the guillotine started – routine beheadings.

Sits at desk, rifling through receipts.

They'll be here by morning, I can feel it. My books aren't clean – they're... they're "ambiguous". There's a box of unclaimed expenses in the cupboard, and I think I once claimed a romantic dinner as a "strategic alignment meeting".

And I never declared the squirrel.

What squirrel? Exactly.

I need to be ready. Everything must be in order. Chronological. Alphabetical. Emotional.

They say the auditors can smell guilt. I've sprayed everything with lemon-scented air freshener, but will it be enough?

Looks at the clock.

Tick, tick. Time's closing in. And the margins – oh, the margins – they're narrowing.

Rummaging, distracted by paper.

Where is it? I had a perfectly formatted mileage log from 2024... It had pie charts. Pie charts.

Pulls a photo from the desk; looks at it.

That's Frances. She understood depreciation better than anyone I've ever met.

She used to say I had "asset potential". We met during an advanced accruals seminar in Milton Keynes – romantic, if you like your love stories accompanied by spreadsheets and amortisation schedules.

We used to reconcile our bank statements together. Naked.

But she left me for a forensic auditor. She wanted someone who could "dig deep". I preferred to file.

She took the dog. And the printer.

Returns to sorting.

There! Ah – no, wait – wrong VAT year.

Freezes.

Have I been claiming my lunchtime biscuits as operational costs?

Worried.

Do Hobnobs count as sustenance or indulgence?

Pulling receipts from his dressing gown, shoeboxes, books.

There was a discrepancy last month – just a penny. One solitary, insolent penny. I couldn't trace it. I reversed every transaction, recalculated everything twice. It vanished like it wanted to. Like it knew.

Sits, exhausted.

I didn't sleep for three nights. Just stared at the ceiling, whispering, "Where did you go, you tiny bastard?"

Some people lose sleep over love. I lose it over fractions.

Sits bolt upright, alert.

Did you hear that?

Listens – nothing.

That was the lift. Or the plumbing. Or the sound of justice descending in loafers.

They're early. They've come to catch me off-balance. Bastards.

Grabs the calculator, holds it like a weapon.

Well not today. Today, I am reconciled, categorised, and cross-referenced in triplicate.

Eyes ceiling, suspicious.

The light fitting. That's new. Wasn't here last week.

They're watching. They've wired the ceiling rose.

Reaches up, unscrews the bulb.

You think you're clever, don't you? Hiding in plain sight like a standardised invoice.

You won't find what you're looking for. Not here. Not in this home of clean margins.

Throws open cupboard – papers spill out.

No-no-no! Why are these not in chronological order? Who filed the 2021 energy bill between the 2018 expense reports?

Oh. I did. I remember now – I was angry that day. She'd said my spreadsheet had "poor emotional formatting". I retaliated with deliberate misfiling.

Digs out an annotated HMRC manual.

Section 12, Clause 8.4: "Receipts may be accepted in non-negligible condition provided the taxpayer can reconstruct events through reasonable inference" and sheer bloody panic.

Reads aloud, reverently.

"In the beginning there were entries. And the entries were with codes. And the codes were with revenue. And the revenue was God."

Crosses himself with a pen.

Forgive me, balance sheet, for I have sinned.

Sudden stillness, walks to framed balance sheet.

But what if... what if it's not just the numbers?

Removes the frame, opens it. Turns over the sheet to its blank side and holds it in awe.

Of course. No figures. No totals. Just... white space.

Sits slowly.

I've spent my life quantifying everything. Logging every detail. Assigning values. Emotional costs as liabilities. Hopes as intangible assets.

Touches his chest.

And yet – here – there's nothing reconciled. Just open accounts, and... adjustments I never made.

How do you classify a missed opportunity? A word not said? Is regret a long-term liability or a recurring expense?

Pause.

I remember my father's final days. He kept a chequebook by his hospital bed. Not to spend. Just to balance.

He said, "Son, always end the day even. Or at least know where the imbalance lies."

Beat.

But I don't. I've hidden things. From them, from myself.

I have a memory I never logged: a summer morning. Just me, barefoot in the garden, warm grass underfoot, no lists, no ledgers. I didn't assign it a category. I didn't give it a code.

Maybe that's the real discrepancy.

Looks towards the door.

Maybe they'll find it. Maybe they should.

Pause – stillness.

But no one knocks.

Tick, tick. Nothing.

Sips wine from chipped mug.

Perhaps... they're not coming. Perhaps they never were.

Perhaps the audit was a reconciliation not of spreadsheets.

Funny. I've spent decades chasing precision, fighting decimal places into compliance.

But life doesn't round neatly.

It bleeds. It skews. It hides things in miscellaneous.

Maybe I've been afraid – not of the auditors – but of imbalance. That if I stopped adding, counting, correcting...

I'd see the gaping zero at the centre of it all.

I reconciled my bank accounts. I reconciled my lunch receipts. I even reconciled the bloody squirrel.

But I never reconciled myself.

A blank page. Clean. Ready.

In the end, I accounted for everything but myself.

*He places the blank sheet back in the frame.
Still... that's a tolerable margin of error.
Lights fade.*

Floor 49 (Excerpt)

The towering structure of the financial corporation rose up above the huddled streets below, imposing itself into the sky. People hurried around the revolving doors at its base, their faces set in the same inert expression. Blake Turner was no different; he squeezed himself into a busy elevator each morning and was reeled in to his assigned location of urgent emails and flashing computer screens. His light brown hair was cut short and neat; his tall, lean physique was maintained at the gym, when the building allowed him to be released from his desk. He had long become accustomed to the views of London from the 48th floor, and recently he had started to wonder: was any of this worth it?

Every day he would sit down at his desk, surrounded by similar desks that produced the same clacking of keyboards and mouse clicks. Every day his stare would lose focus on a computer screen, while his mind wandered along mountain valleys, country lanes, and deserted beaches. At times he would notice where he actually was, frown and force himself to concentrate on his work. Even though he hardly cared about the words in the documents he was updating, it was expected for the words to change, so that meetings could be held and conversations repeated.

He glanced at the clock icon at the bottom of one of his three screens. 7:03 p.m. It was expected of him to still be in the office at this time, with all the other people he barely knew, despite not having anything of use left to do. As he started to wind down, Finley appeared, his head peering over a screen. Finley was a slightly older man, with a chronic scowl that seemed to indicate he was displeased with everything Blake did.

"Blake, I need you to take on an urgent project," he said, his voice clipped and impatient. "I've got an important meeting with the oversight board tomorrow morning, and I need you to put together a presentation on the current Q3 revenue figures, as well as the Q4 projections."

Blake groaned inwardly. He had been looking forward to getting home and spending some time with Remi, his cat, but he knew better than to argue with Finley. "Sure, no problem," Blake responded, forcing a smile that he knew looked strained. "What time do you need it by?"

"First thing in the morning at 7 a.m., so be prepared to stay as long as it takes."

Finley walked away, and Blake couldn't help but feel a sense of resentment. Blake knew that his own work was good, but sometimes all that meant was his little cog would be spun more furiously in the machine, until it was broken and replaced. He knew putting together a presentation like that would take several hours, and he was already exhausted from a long day at work; but now it seemed like he was going to be stuck in the office all night, once again. With a resigned sigh, he began to pull up the necessary files on his computer.

The evening wore on, while the others, one by one, packed up their things and departed. As he worked late into the night, surrounded by empty desks, he couldn't help but wonder if this was really what he wanted for his life.

Floor 49 – Screenplay

EXT. SKYSCRAPER – MORNING

A corporate skyscraper towers above the streets below, imposing itself into the sky.

EXT. SKYSCRAPER ENTRANCE – MORNING

People hurry around the revolving doors at its base, their faces set in the same inert expression.

INT. SKYSCRAPER LOBBY – MORNING

Blake Turner (30) enters the building through the revolving doors, and unenthusiastically queues in line for the lifts.

One particular lift is marked “Out of Order”.

INT. LIFT – CONTINUOUS

Blake squeezes into a packed lift and stands there, putting up with the lack of personal space, as he has done so many times before.

INT. FLOOR 48 – MORNING

Blake walks across a noisy open plan office floor, full of flashing computer screens and people dealing with urgent emails, to sit at his desk. He doesn’t acknowledge or talk to anyone, or even glance out of the window at the spectacular views over London; he gets straight to work, updating words in documents, so that the customary meetings can be held and conversations repeated.

INT. BLAKE’S DESK – DAY

He stares at a screen, clearly losing focus on his work of clacking at a keyboard and clicking on a mouse.

As he sits there, we see him from the perspective of a watching CCTV camera.

INT. BLAKE’S DESK – LATER IN THE EVENING

The clock icon at the bottom of his screen shows 7:03 p.m., and most people are still in the office.

Finley (40) peers over the screen, his face tinted by its blue glare.

FINLEY: Blake, I need you to take on an urgent project. I’ve got an important meeting with the oversight board tomorrow

morning, and I need you to put together a presentation on the current Q3 revenue figures, as well as the Q4 projections.

BLAKE: (strained) Sure, no problem. What time do you need it by?

FINLEY: First thing in the morning at 7 a.m., so be prepared to stay as long as it takes.

Finley dismissively walks away, and Blake is left with a feeling of resentment.

INT. BLAKE'S DESK – LATER

The others on the floor gradually pack up their things and depart, leaving Blake by himself to work late into the night.

He suddenly becomes aware of something behind him. He turns around to see Finley standing over him.

FINLEY: Are there any problems?

BLAKE: No, it's fine.

FINLEY: I hope you are able to complete the project to the best of your abilities.

BLAKE: Yes, that's what I'm doing.

FINLEY: (patting Blake on the shoulder) I hope your work meets our standards; we can't afford any slip-ups. (walking away) I'll be on floor 49.

Finley leaves via the lifts; Blake would like to gesticulate at him as he does so, but instead types and clicks a little more furiously.

INT. BLAKE'S DESK – EVEN LATER

Blake is still working.

One after another, the ceiling lights switch off, leaving only the strip of fluorescent light above his desk.

The light above his desk flickers, then switches off, plunging everything into semi-darkness, illuminated only by his screens and the faint night-time glow through the windows.

Blake tries to continue his work.

Suddenly, a thud – like a heavy object has been knocked over.

Blake struggles in the gloom to see if there is anyone else around. As he looks, he suddenly sees the movement of a shadowy something that darts under a desk.

BLAKE: Hello?

Silence.

BLAKE: Anyone there?

Unnerved, he makes his way to the floor's lifts to exit the building.

INT. 48TH FLOOR LIFT HALLWAY – CONTINUOUS

Blake presses the button to call a lift.

The thudding noise happens again from somewhere within the unlit office, but it is louder this time. He repeatedly presses the button to try and speed up a lift's arrival.

At last, a door dings and opens.

(It is the same lift that had been marked "Out of Order" at the start of the day.)

INT. LIFT – CONTINUOUS

Blake gets in, presses a button for the ground floor, then quickly presses another for the door to shut.

The door does not shut.

The thump happens again, as if it is near to the lift. It is followed by a high-pitched screech.

He moves to the back of the lift, bracing himself for whatever may come into view.

The door closes, with its two panels sliding together in the centre.

There is a loud thud on the door.

The door opens.

Nothing is there. The door closes and the lift descends.

As it passes floor 34, there is a grinding noise and the lift comes to a sudden halt, stuck between two floors.

Blake presses the emergency button, but there is no response. He tries talking into the intercom.

BLAKE: Hello? The lift has stuck between floors 34 and 33.
Hello?

INTERCOM: (robotic) Hello.

BLAKE: Hello?

INTERCOM: Hello.

BLAKE: Hello, I'm trapped in a lift.

INTERCOM: Please enter the password.

BLAKE: What? I don't have a password. Do you mean my network login?

INTERCOM: Please enter the password.

Blake enters some credentials on the intercom panel.

INTERCOM: The password is incorrect. You have two more attempts.

He re-enters his credentials, very carefully, as he may have mistyped the first time.

INTERCOM: The password is incorrect. You have one more attempt.

BLAKE: This is ridiculous. (directly into the intercom) I'm trapped in the lift!

INTERCOM: The password is incorrect.

Suddenly, the lights go out.

Blake fumbles for his phone and turns on its flashlight. He dimly illuminates the control panel with his phone's light, and repeatedly presses the button for the ground floor, but the lift remains motionless.

He tries to make a call. However, there is no reception in this lift. He tries to pry open the door panels, but they do not budge.

He bangs on the door.

BLAKE: HELP! HELP! HELP!!

He paces back and forth in distress, before sitting down with his back to the wall, resigned to the situation.

Blake scans the lift with his flashlight, and notices a strange symbol etched in the corner beside the door. It looks like some kind of ancient glyph.

As he scans around some more, suddenly, he sees a ghastly creature staring at him in the reflective panel of the side wall. Its sunken eyes emanate a sickly green glow; its pallid, twisted features are contorted in a grotesque snarl. Blake is terrified.

It makes an eerie groaning sound as it slowly reaches out a decayed bony hand towards him.

The thump returns on the door and the lift shakes. Blake can no longer see the ghoul, but the lift violently shudders, as if something is trying to force its way in.

The lift door creaks open, slowly, revealing nothing but darkness.

A long thin tongue, like a wriggling snake, appears through the doorway. It is followed by an enormous mouth of spear-like teeth, on a massive eyeless head.

It lets out a deafening screech.

The creature's tongue darts out at Blake and wraps itself around his arm. He struggles against being dragged into razor-sharp teeth. The mouth opens wider as it pulls Blake closer.

BLAKE: I'LL WORK HARDER, I PROMISE!

The monster continues dragging him closer.

BLAKE: I'LL DOUBLE MY WORK!

The monster continues.

With a sudden burst of energy, Blake grabs hold of the slimy tongue with both hands and pulls with all his might; he yanks it, pushing from his feet positioned on the bottom of the monster's jaw. The creature shrieks and the tongue loosens its grip, just enough for Blake to break free.

The monster retreats back into the darkness.

INTERCOM: What is the password?

BLAKE: Floor 49!

The door shuts. The lift jolts back into motion.

It ascends all the way to floor 49, where it comes to an abrupt halt.

The door slowly slides open, revealing complete darkness.

Blake expects something else to emerge from the darkness at any moment.

INT. 49TH FLOOR LIFT HALLWAY – CONTINUOUS

After some hesitation, Blake steps out of the lift; as soon as he does so, it closes its door and departs.

The hallway is completely silent.

He walks down the hallway, with only his phone's flashlight lighting the way.

INT. FLOOR 49 – CONTINUOUS

Blake enters the office area and continues walking.

He hears movement behind him, but can't see anything. He continues scanning around in all directions with his flashlight, but nothing remains in sight.

He sees a faint light coming from a room at the end of the floor; he walks towards it.

The light is coming from within a locked meeting room. He looks through the room's window.

Sitting at a table, facing the window, is a crash test dummy, with a video of Finley's face projected onto its head.

FINLEY: Is it done?

BLAKE: Yes, I think... it's good enough.

Another crash test dummy's head illuminates with a different face, taking the projected light from Finley.

CRASH TEST DUMMY 2: Send it to us.

Blake taps at his phone.

BLAKE: It's sent.

A third crash test dummy takes the projected light.

CRASH TEST DUMMY 3: Barely acceptable.

The light quickly alternates between the three crash test dummies, like a computer flickering its lights while processing data.

Blake retreats. As he leaves, the meeting room becomes increasingly bright. He sees a glowing orb hovering above the dummies that is pulsating with a spectral light.

INT. 49TH FLOOR LIFT HALLWAY – CONTINUOUS

The same lift is there, waiting for him with its door open.

He notices a door to the stairwell at the end of the hallway. He hesitates, thinking about using the stairs.

INT. STAIRWELL ON THE 49TH FLOOR – CONTINUOUS

On opening the door to the stairwell, he sees only darkness beyond, illuminated by his phone. But he decides he would prefer to enter that than the lift.

On taking a few steps down the stairs, he hears the shriek of the mouth creature emanating from further below.

He runs back up the stairs and out of the door.

INT. 49TH FLOOR LIFT HALLWAY – CONTINUOUS

He rushes along the hallway and gets into the lift.

INT. LIFT – CONTINUOUS

As the door closes, Blake notices blood and scratch marks on the ceiling. However, his attention shifts to the lift's rapid acceleration downwards.

It drops to the ground level at breakneck speed and slams to a stop. Blake is thrown to the floor.

As he lays there, dazed and disoriented, he sees a pair of glowing eyes staring at him through the crack of the slightly ajar door panels.

The eyes withdraw. Nothing happens, except Blake trembling in fear.

There is a sound of metal grinding against metal as the door fully opens.

INT. GROUND FLOOR LOBBY – CONTINUOUS

Blake stumbles out of the lift into a deserted ground floor. Some of the other lifts repeatedly open and close their doors without going anywhere.

As seen from CCTV footage, he hurriedly makes his way towards the exit.

He glances back, and to his horror, sees the ghoul peering at him from inside the lift.

Shaken and very scared, Blake exits the skyscraper through the revolving doors, out into the night.

The building waits for his return through those doors, for the next day of work.

PART 3

Essays

Behind Door 113

Stories serve as vessels for exploration, offering spaces in which to confront questions that resist simple answers. The most compelling narratives often reveal life's complexities, challenging audiences with morally ambiguous choices and profound dilemmas rather than providing reductive resolutions. *Door 113* thus began as an investigation into a question that deeply intrigued me, as double-underlined in my writer's diary: "When perceptions are mediated by artificial systems, how can we distinguish between what is true and what is artifice?" The question was prompted after watching *White Christmas*, an episode in the *Black Mirror* series, which dramatised how technological interfaces mediate human relationships and identity. But as I explored my imagination, a place where my subconscious began to present itself, that question spiralled into deeper, more introspective reflections—on love, forgiveness, and the ways we find meaning in ambiguity to construct our personal interpretations of life. The sterile corridors, glitching screens, and eerie figures of the story's mindscape became metaphors for the internal struggles we navigate in the wake of loss and self-doubt.

What better medium than science fiction, a genre that interrogates the edges of possibility, to confront the labyrinthine corridors of grief, guilt, and the fragile architecture of the self? In fact, science fiction is uniquely suited to explore "what if?" scenarios that challenge boundaries and reveal the human condition in heightened, imaginative contexts. Science fiction, for me, is a realm of paradox: at once limitless in its ability to imagine new worlds and deeply intimate in its reflection of our own. From the dystopian moral landscapes of *Black Mirror* to the disorienting dream-logic of *Inception* and the existential dilemmas of *Westworld*, I've always been drawn to stories that challenge our assumptions about reality and identity. This duality of science fiction, where speculative scenarios provide a lens for human introspection, resonates strongly with Darko Suvin's notion of

“cognitive estrangement”, which underscores the genre’s power to provoke reflection by presenting the familiar in unfamiliar contexts. In writing my screenplay, I wanted to push these boundaries, crafting a narrative where the technological and metaphysical blur; where augmented reality serves not only as a tool but as a mirror to the characters’ fractured psyches.

Yet *Door 113* is not merely an intellectual exercise. At its heart is an exploration of love’s ability to endure, evolve, and reconcile even the most profound of fractures. The story of Jane and Guy, two people lost in their own grief and guilt, yet searching for each other in the spaces in between, is as much about connection as it is about separation. Their journey through surreal, nightmarish landscapes is a metaphor for the messy, non-linear process of healing. The symbolic potential of external settings and events can serve as powerful representations of a character’s inner journey. But, more importantly, it can also be a journey that, when mirroring the writer’s subconscious, enables a deep exploration of complex personal emotions.

This essay’s critical and reflective commentary invites you to step behind the door of 113—to examine the interplay of genre conventions, thematic depth, and stylistic choices that shaped its creation. It is a journey through my creative decisions, the challenges of balancing speculative concepts with emotional resonance, and the influences that informed the screenplay’s tone and structure. Above all, it is an invitation to explore how a story rooted in science fiction and psychological horror can illuminate the most universal aspects of life. Such a tension between the real and the “fantastically” imagined creates a liminal space that challenges perception and invites introspection, resonating with Tzvetan Todorov’s notion that the fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. After all, the labyrinths we all navigate are, in some way, of our own mind’s making.

The name, “Door 113”, was conceived as a concise, enigmatic title that aligns well with the conventions of a sci-fi psychological horror film, offering intrigue and potential thematic resonance. According to Blake Snyder’s *Save the Cat!*, a title should

encapsulate the essence of the story while sparking curiosity. The specificity of “Door 113” was intended to imply a unique narrative focal point, a mysterious or sinister threshold, which could immediately pique the interest of genre audiences. Its brevity and ambiguity were intended to invite questions, setting the tone for a narrative rooted in suspense and discovery.

The titular door of the screenplay opens into a world—the “mind room”—where certainty of thought is an illusion and meaning emerges not from conceptual clarity, but from the personal experience of engaging with the emerging story. The idea of the mind room came from a personal fascination with spaces that exist between the real and imagined. I sometimes think of memories as rooms I return to—places that aren’t real anymore but still feel as vivid as if I’d just left them. This concept is reminiscent of Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space*, where he explores how certain spaces, both physical and imagined, can become vessels for memory and emotion, shaping the way we experience and understand our inner worlds. However, the specific idea of the mind room—where minds connect—also augments concepts found in speculative science fiction, expanding on the notions of virtual spaces and shared consciousness.

Within their respective rooms, Jane and Guy Artin’s parallel struggles reveal the isolating nature of grief, while their attempts to forgive and reconnect offer a redemptive counterpoint to the oppressive forces that constrain them. The deliberate dissonance between what feels real and what is slightly off-kilter heightens the psychological tension. Tension often arises from a dissonance between the familiar and the unsettling, which destabilises the audience’s expectations and engages their deeper fears. The deliberate juxtaposition of reality and subtle distortions creates conflict within the narrative’s moral geography, enhancing immersion and the emotional stakes. The result in *Door 113* is an environment that mirrors instability, where the audience is invited to question the truth and the nature of reality alongside the protagonists.

The mind room was conceived as a means to explore the interplay between the conscious and subconscious aspects of the mind. A particularly impactful work for the conception was Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which examines the interplay of trauma, repetition, and the human drive towards healing and meaning-making, particularly in the face of loss and suffering. The idea also resonates with the notion of the "inner journey", where protagonists, in an archetypal structure of storytelling, confront their deepest (often suppressed) fears and desires—leading to growth, transformation, resolution, and ultimately an alignment with a universal quest for meaning and connection. Thus, the mind room of *Door 113* became a psychological space for emotional struggles; its reflective imagery mirroring fragmented internal states, where even within overwhelming dread and despair there remains hope for meaning, connection, and release.

Jane's longing and unspoken feelings manifest as tangible experiences within her surreal environment, blurring the boundaries between memory, thought, and reality. Her internal monologue—spoken aloud in the mindscape—reveals the depth of her pain. The reflective space around her serves as a physical manifestation of an emotional void, eventually forcing her to confront the feelings she has repressed. By transforming internal pain into an externalised audible monologue within a unique setting, the narrative is intended to marry character development with visual storytelling—an approach to not only deepen the audience's connection to the character but also enhance the cinematic quality of the emotional expression. Similarly, Julian Hoxter advocates for creating narrative moments where the internal becomes external, allowing the audience to engage directly with the character's emotional struggles. By situating the monologue in a "mindscape", the technique avoids static introspection and transforms internal pain into a dynamic, visualised experience. This approach aligns with Hoxter's call for innovative experiments in screenwriting, where psychological

depth is rendered cinematically to deepen audience empathy and maintain narrative momentum.

The events of the shared mindscape—also revealed as Guy's subconscious attempt to reconstruct meaning within a coma—become an AI-like simulation where fears, guilt, and imagination take tangible form. In his former life, Guy had been a creature of routine, trapped in repetitive processes of data and work. His experience of the mindscape becomes a distorted mirror of that existence, his mind now interrogating itself in an attempt to answer fundamental questions about the meaning of his life.

But, as Guy discovers, life's deeper experiences, much like meaningful storytelling, often defy clear labels. This thematic approach was central to the screenplay; it was considered, for example, in the naming of the characters "Guy" and "Gunter". The deliberate similarity—breaking a conventional rule of avoiding character names with shared letters—serves to blur the boundaries between the two individuals. David Trottier, in *The Screenwriter's Bible*, emphasises the importance of clarity and distinctiveness in character names to avoid confusion for the reader or viewer, especially in screenplays where quick identification is crucial. Avoiding shared letters or similar-sounding names helps differentiate characters visually and aurally, ensuring smoother comprehension—thus making the screenplay as accessible as possible, particularly for first-time readers like producers and executives. However, my choice is symbolic, representing the fluidity of identity and the collapse of clear categorisations. It invites the audience to question the distinctions between the characters, subtly reflecting the broader philosophical argument that explanations, especially in relation to metaphysical questions, are not always fixed or straightforward.

A "distorted mirror" motif permeates the script, reflecting the fragmented nature of identity and reality. For instance, "G.O.D.", which alternately means "Guy's Operational Database" and "Great Oracle's Database", across the parallel experiences, operates as both a literal system of control and a symbolic representation of the unknowable "prime cause" of the reality.

This semantic shift underscores the fluidity of meaning within the story, where even something as seemingly definitive as an acronym remains unstable. The distortion of Jane's reflection in the hooded man's mirrored visor is an example of a biblical "glass darkly" theme (1 Corinthians 13), as it suggests that Jane's perception of reality—and of herself—is mediated, refracted, and inherently unreliable. This existential ambiguity is expressed in Jacques Lacan's concept of the "mirror stage", where the individual confronts an external reflection that defines and destabilises their sense of self. However, *Door 113* presents the possibility of an existential mirror in which metaphysical meaning is forever refracted and elusive. Such fundamental uncertainty is highlighted in the textual suggestions that the events of the story exist within an outer layer of reality—perhaps a dream, a simulation, or another mindscape created by G.O.D. The screenplay intentionally leaves the prime cause ambiguous, reflecting existential questions about the unknowable origins of the universe and the nature of reality.

The protagonists frequently lie down, close their eyes, and exist in liminal, almost somnambulistic states. Inez Hedges explores how dreamlike storytelling blends reality and illusion to evoke emotional and psychological instability. By portraying surreal uncertainty, *Door 113* aligns with Hedges' observation that such ambiguity enhances the audience's engagement with the characters' inner conflicts and the thematic depth of the story. The psychoanalytic fever-dream tension within the screenplay is heightened by disjointed visual and auditory cues, effectively placing the audience within a disoriented perspective. Visual and auditory elements are essential in creating a unified emotional and narrative experience that immerses the audience in a character's psychological state. The fragmented sensory experience—interrupted sounds, shifting lighting, and sudden visual disruptions—mirrors Guy's fractured psyche and the uncertainty of his environment. The surreal visual elements that emerge represent the character's disorientation and existential horror—resonating, for instance, with the techniques employed

in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Mirror* and *Stalker*, where disjointed soundscapes, shifting visual tones, and ambiguous spaces evoke a sense of existential unease, reflecting the characters' psychological states and the unknowable nature of their journey. Influenced by an appreciation of Tarkovsky's films, my narrative choices, thematic focus, and structural design gradually evolved from the initial technology-focused question to explore the prospect of existential unknowing, albeit within the context of an increasingly mediated and technologised world.

Balancing the psychoanalytic and philosophical enquiries with the emotional core of the story became one of my greatest challenges. It was tempting to drill too deeply into the mechanics of the mind room—to float away in the surreal elements of a reality shaped by internal mental states—but I had to remind myself that the heart of the story was Jane and Guy's journey to reconciliation. The narrative's recursive structure—where thoughts and memories leak into each other's experiences—therefore had to balance the competing influences, while fully relating the protagonists' story arcs. The solution emerged that Jane and Guy's experiences echo each other, presenting different interpretations of the same challenges that influence their shared but dissonant reality. I decided that Jane and Guy would be perceiving the same events of their story through subjective phenomenological lenses, creating divergent yet intertwined realities. Jane's memories, for instance, blend with her present experience, as seen in the restaurant scene where she replicates a romantic moment she had once shared with Guy. The ambiguous presence of Gunter—hinting at a liaison—introduces a layer of psychological unease, questioning the reliability of her memory and whether her perceptions are influenced by emotional projection or buried truths. This interplay of memory and perception can be seen, for example, in the techniques used in Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, where fragmented memories and shifting timelines blur the boundaries between past and present, exploring the unreliability of memory and its emotional impacts.

For Jane, the recurring reference to tea underscores the ways in which seemingly insignificant events—such as forgiving her daughter Emma for spilling a cup of tea—take on profound symbolic weight. Tea becomes an emotional touchstone, a manifestation of her subconscious need to forgive Guy in the same way she had once forgiven her daughter. This small everyday moment represents her pathway to healing, although its significance remains elusive to her conscious mind. And in the subconscious mind of this writer, the recurring tea motif wasn't just about symbolism—writing long into the nights often involved staring at a cold cup of tea, much like Jane in the screenplay. However, my writing decision to use an ordinary object to explore emotional complexity was also informed by numerous examples in literature; for example, in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, where the mundane act of serving and eating food becomes a vehicle for profound reflections on relationships, time, and memory. In an analogous way, the idea that something so ordinary as a cup of tea could hold so much meaning became an anchor for both the script and my writing process. By making an ordinary object or idea central to both the story and the creative method, I sought to establish a cohesive emotional throughline, and to align with William Goldman's observation that the most impactful screenplays often emerge from a deceptively simple yet meaningful premise. Grounding the narrative in relatable, tangible details while allowing deeper meanings to unfold organically enabled the story to potentially resonate with audiences on multiple levels.

The symbolic use of objects throughout the screenplay—such as the small hair ribbon Jane finds on the beach—often serves to tie the plot back to Emma's storyline. These storytelling elements were, in part, informed by Sigmund Freud's exploration of dreams, where objects and symbols carry deeper, often obscured meanings, reflecting the characters' unresolved conflicts. In a screenwriting context, Lajos Egri emphasises that every narrative element should serve a purpose beyond their surface function, representing deeper emotional or thematic layers that resonate

with the audience. By extension, the symbolic use of objects can create a visual language that supports the story's subtext, enriching the viewer's understanding without requiring overt exposition. In this framework, each object referenced in *Door 113* acts as a tangible remnant of memory: the ribbon, for example, evokes Jane's grief, while the upturned photo frames of Guy and Emma (with their differing colours) introduce subtle questions about identity, perception, and memory. Objects such as Jane's house number "113" symbolise Guy's desperate attempts to return home, and the penguin soft toy in Guy's hospital room adds a layer of intrigue, functioning both as an innocuous symbol of childhood innocence and as a deeper unanswered question. The word "Penguin" appearing within Jane's "GUY AI" password further exemplifies the interconnectedness of their emotional landscapes and hints at undisclosed aspects of their shared history, to be revealed later in the story.

The crash test dummy, appearing as a visual motif, ties back to the trauma of the car accident preying on Jane and Guy's minds. Its lifeless artificial form symbolises their internal paralysis—how the accident has reduced them to "test subjects" trapped in an emotional loop. The uncanny presence of the figure reinforces the screenplay's psychological horror framework, where symbols of grief and trauma manifest in disorienting, surreal ways. Indeed, psychological horror often relies on the uncanny to externalise internal struggles, such as grief and trauma, through disorienting and surreal imagery. The technique creates a sense of dread by making the intangible tangible, forcing characters and audiences to confront repressed fears. The imagery resonates, for instance, in David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, where surreal and unsettling symbols—such as the enigmatic figure behind the diner or the shifting identities of the characters—emerge as physical manifestations of repressed trauma and psychological conflict. In a comparable way, the crash test dummy functions as a haunting reminder of the accident, blurring the boundaries between external reality and the characters' internal emotional states.

Jane and Guy's confinement in the endless, sterile corridors, lit with harsh and dehumanising light, evokes a clinical environment reminiscent of dystopian horror tropes. This narrative technique reflects discussions in Kim Newman's *Nightmare Movies*, where he examines how horror films use oppressive, institutional-like settings to symbolise loss of autonomy and humanity. Such environments serve as metaphors for dehumanisation, compelling both characters and audiences to confront themes of control and isolation.

The harsh lighting amplifies the psychological unease by stripping the setting of warmth, reinforcing a cold, alienating atmosphere. The spaces feel simultaneously familiar and alien, their repetitive design reflecting the mind's inability to escape its own looping anguish. The creature pursuing Jane—its grotesque, inhuman qualities, such as speaking without moving its mouth and crawling unnaturally—embodies Julia Kristeva's concept of the "abject". Kristeva describes the abject as that which disturbs identity and order, eliciting horror by blurring the boundaries between life and death, human and monstrous. This confrontation with the abject mirrors Jane's psychological disintegration, as she faces tangible representations of her deepest fears. The nightmarish figure externalises her inner fears of being hunted, controlled, and ultimately consumed by her grief; the futility of conventional escape routes underscores her desperation and isolation. The imagery is also partly influenced by the labyrinthine dread described in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, where spatial disorientation and the intrusion of the inexplicable transform physical spaces into manifestations of psychological trauma, heightening the sense of existential terror. Similarly, Jane and Guy's confinement in endless, sterile corridors, illuminated by harsh and dehumanising light, reflects their fractured inner states, making escape feel impossible not only in the physical sense but also emotionally and mentally.

The corridor itself operates as a psychological and spatial metaphor, combining Lacanian and existentialist frameworks to reflect Guy's confrontation with his existence. By functioning as

both a literal and symbolic construct, it deepens the connection between the character's internal journey and the external setting, adhering to Jule Selbo's principle that all story elements should contribute to character development and thematic resonance. The non-functional lift—a symbol of unattainable escape—suggests an illusion of autonomy. Presented as a choice, its failure exposes the futility of seeking freedom within a controlled system. When Guy rejects the prescribed pathways and chooses to enter the void, this act signifies a break from imposed systems of control. By embracing uncertainty, he asserts his agency, no matter how limited, in contrast to the illusion of freedom that authoritarian structures perpetuate. This is a decision redolent of Albert Camus' assertion in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that, even within an absurd reality, conscious rebellion can affirm one's humanity and existential freedom.

In Guy's work pit, superficial motivational phrases, emojis, and banal slogans mask systemic oppression under the veneer of positivity and inclusivity. The line "Lexi smiles brutally" epitomises this duality, parodying corporate jargon that appears harmless yet ultimately perpetuates psychological horror. The juxtaposition of meaningless slogans with Guy's Sisyphean tasks—randomly generating numbers in an endless loop that resets each day—reinforces the existential dread of his condition. Like Sisyphus, Guy's work is absurd, monotonous, and devoid of purpose, intensifying his sense of futility. His situation lays bare the dissonance between the surface-level optimism of such environments and the crushing monotony they disguise. As Guy experiences the reset of each day, he experiences the dehumanising impact of an environment where productivity and compliance take precedence over genuine human connection and self-actualisation.

Guy's dystopian work environment—mechanised, monotonous, and oppressive—represents the character's existential dread. As outlined in Syd Field's *The Screenwriter's Workbook*, the setting of a screenplay should reflect and amplify its thematic concerns, serving as a mirror to the characters'

internal conflicts and the broader narrative themes. The ever-present Emoji Men, acting as both enforcers and participants in the system, symbolise the internalisation of societal norms that prioritise productivity and compliance above individuality. Their presence is an example of Michel Foucault's argument that power operates through the visibility and regulation of behaviour, reducing individuals to passive components within an unrelenting machine. Jane's journey through the tunnel, ultimately returning her to the mind room, encapsulates a harrowing circular entrapment, a visual and thematic representation of a system designed to reinforce confinement. This structure evokes Foucault's ideas on surveillance and control, where any attempt at escape is subtly engineered to lead back to submission. Jane's futile loop reflects a broader commentary on autonomy within oppressive systems, highlighting the psychological toll of a reality where freedom is illusory and every path leads back to the centre of one's captivity.

The oppressive atmosphere exacerbates Guy's experiences of passive recklessness and external desensitisation. His near collision with a car in a location filled with painful associations speaks to the depth of his psychological numbness. Guy's indifferent response to the incident reveals an absence of self-preservation, suggesting that the will to protect himself has been eroded by unresolved grief. Viewed through a psychoanalytic lens, his actions reflect a subconscious compulsion to revisit the site of trauma—an attempt, however passive, to confront or relive his pain. His psychological detachment contrasts sharply with the outside world's shock, as represented by the horrified driver. The juxtaposition reinforces Guy's alienation from his surroundings, as though his inner world has rendered external reality meaningless and distant. This dynamic recalls Meursault, the protagonist of Albert Camus' *The Stranger*, whose detachment from societal norms and indifference to self-preservation underscore a deeper existential crisis, where external events fail to resonate with the individual's internal emotional state. In a similar vein, Guy's behaviour demonstrates the disconnection and alienation that

unresolved trauma can impose, placing him in stark opposition to the expectations of the world around him.

The surreal, eerie figure that silently follows Guy on the beach embodies Carl Jung's concept of the shadow. Following Guy without leaving physical traces, the figure symbolises the intangible, unresolved elements of the psyche—those repressed fragments of self that he cannot escape. As Jung describes, the shadow represents the darker, unconscious aspects of the self, which relentlessly pursues the individual until acknowledged. The creature's silent yet watchful presence evokes an atmosphere of existential dread, a reminder of the internal struggles Guy has yet to reconcile. As the figure lingers behind him, the script suggests that past traumas and unacknowledged truths remain inescapable, no matter how far one tries to retreat; thus deepening the psychological and existential complexity of Guy's journey.

The transitions between day and night reinforce a thematic duality, and echoes the Romantic trope of nature reflecting human experience (as is also manifest in the mind room). The darkness of night—symbolising introspection, loss, and the descent into personal reflection—eventually gives way to daylight and resolution. The cyclical passage of time mirrors the emotional journey of the characters, as they move from the heaviness of grief to the possibility of peace. This motif resonates in Romantic poetry, for example, with the natural symbolism in William Wordsworth's *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*, where the progression of the day mirrors the speaker's movement through memory, loss, and eventual reconciliation with life's transience. Equally, *Door 113* uses the natural cycle of day and night to chart an emotional landscape, where darkness becomes a space for self-confrontation and, ultimately, the renewal of light.

Indeed, the screenplay's aesthetic and tonal contrasts offer several moments of ethereal reprieve amidst the psychological horror. The field of long grass, for example, functions as an almost heavenly space—other-worldly in its stillness and beauty. This visual contrast highlights the duality of grief: it isolates and fragments, yet it also holds the potential for connection and

renewal. The field becomes a shared space of emotional release, offering Jane and Guy a temporary escape from the constructed systems that confine them. Its pastoral quality evokes Romantic ideals of nature as a site for emotional healing and spiritual rebirth, where the characters' connection to each other and to the memory of Emma transcends their personal pain. The imagery resonates with Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*, where natural spaces become symbolic arenas for existential reflection and emotional reconciliation, serving as both a counterpoint to human suffering and a reminder of the enduring beauty of life. In *Door 113*, the field of long grass becomes a momentary refuge, representing the possibility of transformation and the prevailing power of shared human connection.

The deserted beach also serves as both a reflective and transitional space, allowing the characters to confront their emotional truths while navigating the blurred boundaries of reality and imagination. This use of a dreamlike setting to externalise and symbolise inner meaning reflects Carl Jung's concept of the collective unconscious, where archetypal landscapes—like the ocean or shoreline—become shared symbols of transition, loss, and renewal. Jung describes water as a symbol for the unconscious, representing the depths of the psyche and the pathways to psychological transformation. The beach's vastness and ambiguity amplify the characters' emotional journey, making it a central motif in their reconciliation with grief and memory, and a liminal space where the subconscious and conscious meet.

The progression from darkness to light mirrors the script's broader arc: from despair to hope, from fragmentation to wholeness, from isolation to connection. This cyclical renewal emphasises the transformative power of human connection, offering an uplifting resolution that underscores the enduring opportunity for redemption. The screenplay's conclusion reveals Jane's bedside words as the tether that brings Guy home, threading through the fabricated logic of his coma and guiding him through a labyrinth of challenges. In a reality fractured by trauma

and distorted by perception, love emerges as the force that transcends suffering, offering a path to reconciliation and meaning. In contrast to Gunter's destructive, shadow-like influence, Jane becomes an antidote, a redemptive force that bridges the divide between suffering and healing. The climax of the script dramatises forgiveness as an act of liberation, underscoring the transformative power of compassion, and ties into the screenplay's central assertion: that in a fragmented and artificial reality, love and forgiveness remain profound acts that hold the power to transcend external artifice, to find true humanity within. The choice to end the script at the start of a new day reinforces the optimism of this shared resolution.

In *The Writer's Journey*, Christopher Vogler, building on Joseph Campbell's monomyth framework (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*), identifies the “death and rebirth” stage as a pivotal moment in the hero’s journey. The stage symbolises profound transformation, as the hero confronts their deepest fears and emerges with newfound strength and understanding. Indeed, Vogler emphasises that this symbolic cycle of death and renewal is essential for crafting compelling and universally resonant storytelling. Guy’s confrontation with his greatest pain—a loss too overwhelming to process—becomes the catalyst for release, breaking the restrictions he had imposed on himself. The butterfly in the field of long grass represents his metamorphosis and reawakening from his coma-induced chrysalis. He emerges stronger and more integrated after confronting his shadow—and becomes representative of the universal truth that the greatest opportunities for profound change often emerge at the point of deepest despair.

As I reflect on *Door 113*, I am reminded that every story is a door—an invitation to step into a space that challenges, confronts, and transforms. Writing this screenplay was not simply an exercise in speculative storytelling; it was a personal exploration of the labyrinths we all navigate. The corridors of Guy’s mind, Jane’s whispered truths, and the unsettling echoes of the mind room were not just constructs of fiction but mirrors reflecting

struggles with grief, guilt, and the search for meaning. What began as a science fiction exploration of Artificial Intelligence quickly turned into an emotional meditation on love and forgiveness; it helped remind me that stories often have a life of their own, and the writer's role is to listen as much as create. At times, writing the screenplay felt like being in the mindscape myself: surrounded by unfinished sentences and shadowy images that turned out to be my own reflections.

Dara Marks highlights the profound connection between a writer's personal journey and the narratives they create. In *Inside Story: The Power of the Transformational Arc*, she contends that storytelling often reflects the writer's inner conflicts, with the creative process acting as a vehicle for exploring and resolving these internal struggles. When writers effectively embed their personal thematic concerns into their work, the result is often emotionally resonant storytelling that operates on both intimate and universal levels. I experienced this directly while writing *Door 113*. I was initially concerned the story might feel too bleak, but the emergence of a hopeful resolution became significant not only for the characters but for me as well. Writing the final scenes—where Guy forgives himself and wakes to a new day—was cathartic and reflects my own journey in completing the screenplay. That act of completion became a moment of emotional closure, echoing the characters' journeys and reaffirming the redemptive potential of storytelling.

As the door closes on this critical and reflective commentary, it remains open in another sense. Just as Jane and Guy find their resolution in the new light of a shared day, *Door 113* invites its audience to find their own meanings in its layers. The story may be one of surreal landscapes and fragmented realities, but its beating heart is universal: the enduring power of love, the necessity of forgiveness, and the courage to begin again.

I Don't Care if You Listen or Not

The title speaks to a form of artistic autonomy that challenges the conventional performer-audience relationship; it invites reflection on what is deemed essential for performance, and what possibilities emerge when the dynamic is disrupted or reimagined. By focusing on the internal processes of the artist rather than the reception by an audience, we open up a realm of performance that is about the act of creation itself. This aligns with a theatrical philosophy which often prioritises the experience and integrity of the artistic expression over the interaction and response of the audience. A counterpoint to this view is that performance is an event designed for an audience, a form of communication or expression that presupposes a spectator. The presence of an audience, their reactions, and their engagement are typically seen as integral to the event itself, creating a dynamic interplay between the observer and the observed, each influencing the experience of the other. However, the notion that performance is an act of communication that requires both a performer and an audience has been increasingly challenged, particularly in the realms of contemporary theatre, performance art, and digital media. If we consider a performance as an artistic release of self-expression, then it can and does exist without an audience. Artists often create for the sake of the art itself or for personal emotional need, rather than for any anticipated public reception; the act of performing itself transforms the individual artist, irrespective of whether anyone is watching.

But is it a “performance” if nobody is being performed to? A performance typically refers to a live presentation or artistic exhibition delivered by one or more artists. This could be a play in a theatre, a musical recital, a dance showcase, a live painting demonstration, or even a street artist’s display. Here, performance is characterised by its temporality; it is an event that happens over time and is designed for an audience to witness and experience. The presence of an audience is a defining feature

because it is the observers who perceive, interpret, and give meaning to the performance. An audience's reaction—be it applause, laughter, critique, or interpretation—contributes to the complete nature of the performance, imbuing it with a shared social reality. Hence, in this definition, the act of performing carries an intention to convey a certain impression or communicate meaning. Theories such as "reader-response theory" or "reception theory" discuss how a text (or a performance) is not complete without its reception.

One could argue that a performance, like any event, occurs regardless of observation. The actions of the performer, the expression of the art, and the occurrence of the event are factual and exist independently of an audience. The key distinction here is between the existence of the performance and the validation or acknowledgement of it. Without an audience, the validation through applause, criticism, or interpretation is absent, but the performance as a sequence of actions still transpires. Even in an empty theatre, a performer may deliver lines, an orchestra may play a symphony, and a dancer may execute choreography; the physical and aesthetic actions do not cease to exist because they are unobserved. However, while the tangible mechanics of the performance may occur without an audience, the full spectrum of what constitutes a performance—its energetic exchange, its emotional impact, and its collective memory—is often thought to be co-created with those who witness it.

Yet, the creation of performance without an audience is not only possible but is already practiced in various forms within the arts: artists like Marina Abramović, for instance, have explored the limits of what constitutes performance and audience participation, sometimes engaging in acts that are witnessed by very few or even by no one, at least at the time of the initial act; and in the online digital space, it is commonplace for performance to occur without an immediate physical audience. Consider a singer recording vocals or an actor self-taping to camera—the eventual audience is remote, separated by time, space, and medium, and yet the act of performance still carries significant meaning and

intent. The performances could be experienced by an audience long after the fact, or hidden beneath the multitude of other content and never seen. If nobody were to experience the recording—if the only audience present was in the mind of the performer—is it true that a fully actualised performance did not take place? The essence of the performances was not in its reception, but in the act of expression: the performances were created, executed, and fully realised without the presence of an external audience. The audience here is not a required component for the validity of a performance but rather a potential participant in a socially shared experience that may or may not take place.

The external audience dynamics do affect the nature of the performance, as well as its absence, but it is not necessary for the act of performance. Indeed, the presence and disposition of an audience can have a profound impact on the dynamics of a performance, affecting both the performers and the collective meaning of the performance itself. This phenomenon has been extensively studied across various disciplines including psychology, theatre studies, and performance theory. Research often explores these effects through the lenses of audience-performer dynamics, the psychology of performance, and the sociology of group interactions. From a psychological perspective, the seminal work of French sociologist Emile Durkheim on collective effervescence describes the energy that emerges when a group of people, such as an audience, comes together to participate in the same action. When performers are in front of an audience, they can experience what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi terms as “flow”, a heightened state of focus and immersion in activities that can enhance performance quality. Furthermore, the “audience effect”, a concept often discussed in social psychology, specifically refers to the impact of an audience on performance. Robert Zajonc’s work in this field identified the ways in which the mere presence of others can enhance or inhibit performance, depending on the complexity of the task and the skill level of the performer. For well-practised tasks, an audience can enhance performance

through increased arousal; for less familiar tasks, however, this arousal can be detrimental. In theatre studies, audience response is often viewed as a critical aspect. Susan Bennett's *Theatre Audiences* offers a comprehensive examination of the reciprocal relationship between the audience and the performance. She outlines how the audience's reactions can influence the pacing, timing, and energy of a performance as performers often adjust their delivery based on verbal and non-verbal feedback. This dynamic interplay can transform the experience, making each performance a unique event influenced by the specific audience in attendance. Moreover, in his influential text *The Empty Space*, Peter Brook discusses how an audience's energy contributes to the creation of what he describes as "immediate theatre". According to Brook, the performer-audience relationship is a crucial component that can turn the "deadly" theatre—where there is no true communication—into a "live" one. The concept of audience engagement and its effect on the performance is further elaborated by Baz Kershaw in his work *The Radical in Performance*. Kershaw discusses how an engaged audience can have a radicalising effect on performance, pushing the boundaries of traditional performance and creating a more immersive and interactive experience. In musical performance, John Sloboda's research in *The Musical Mind* touches upon how musicians might experience heightened levels of anxiety or exhilaration when performing before an audience, which can, in turn, affect their technical proficiency and emotional expression. This interplay is significant in live music, where the audience's reactions can influence the performer's interpretation and delivery of the music in real time. From these perspectives, it becomes clear that an audience does not passively consume a performance but actively shapes its unfolding through complex psychological and social mechanisms. Each performance is therefore not merely a presentation of a pre-prepared piece but a dynamic interaction between performer and audience, with the audience's responses continuously shaping the course and quality of the performance.

However, it is possible for a performer to have an audience, even when nobody is watching. This notion of a performer being the audience of his or her own performance invites a rich philosophical exploration, touching upon the concepts of self-awareness, and the phenomenology of experience. Philosophical discourse offers a breadth of perspectives on the relationship between the observer and the observed, as well as the subject-object dichotomy. In the field of aesthetics, the work of philosophers like Arthur Danto in his work *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* can provide insight into the relationship between performance and perception. Danto's theories on art as the embodiment of meaning suggest that a performer could very well be an audience to the meanings and interpretations that arise within their own performance. Each gesture, movement, or note in a performance can be reflective, carrying an intention and interpretation that the performer is uniquely positioned to understand and critique. The performer, then, becomes a sort of reflective audience, engaging with the performance both as a creator and an interpreter of meaning.

If a comedian makes a joke in an empty auditorium, does it make a sound? It is often said that in stand-up, timing is everything. As it turns out, when the audience is a row of empty seats, the timing is quite flexible. However, whether it is a performance to one's own shadow or to a billion eager faces, the essence of the act, rather than the perception of the expression, remains the same. When a performance is enacted without an external audience, it becomes a private act, serving as a method of personal reflection for the artist; but the performer is still engaged in the act of performing, utilising their skills and perhaps even experiencing the same emotional and physical exertion as they would in front of an external audience. If the self can act as its own audience, then the solitude of one's actions does not strip them of their performative character. For some creators, such as me, the act of performance is an intimate expression which serves as a form of self-exploration, catharsis, or a means of working through ideas and emotions. It's here, in the sanctum of one's

mind, where the self-reflexive nature of human consciousness creates a sort of inner theatre where our actions are constantly up for review. The internal audience functions continuously, responding to and influencing the performance.

A performer can be the audience of his or her own performance, not in the literal sense of occupying two distinct spatial positions, but rather in the phenomenological sense of experiencing oneself as both the observer and the observed. This duality encapsulates the complex nature of human consciousness and the intricate interplay between action and reflection. In essence, the performer, through introspection and self-awareness, engages in a dialogue with oneself, constantly interpreting and re-interpreting the ongoing performance. From a phenomenological standpoint, particularly within the framework established by Edmund Husserl, the idea of a performer as an audience invokes the concept of “intentionality”, the notion that consciousness is always the consciousness of something. In this context, a performer, even while engaged in the act of performance, can have a dual intentionality where he or she is both the subject directing the performance and simultaneously the object of his or her own reflective consciousness. Husserl’s student, Martin Heidegger, would perhaps interpret this through the lens of “Dasein”, which underscores the idea of being-in-the-world where one’s existence is fundamentally interconnected with the world; thus, a performer, by being an audience to oneself, is actively shaping and being shaped by the very act of performance.

For existentialists, if every action is a conscious choice, we are, in essence, “performing” our lives for the most critical audience: ourselves. Sartre’s notion of “bad faith”—the denial of this freedom and the embrace of a fixed role—highlights the performativity of actions when they are done to conform rather than to reflect one’s genuine choice. Sartre’s views suggest that by becoming an audience to oneself, the performer engages in a kind of self-observation that can either be an act of authenticity, recognising oneself as the source of one’s actions, or an act of self-

deception, where one denies material agency. Within this existential frame, the notion of authenticity is pivotal. The performance is not about creating a façade for others but is intrinsically tied to the authentic choices that define our being. Therefore, every action could be a performance if it is part of this continuous existential project of self-definition. The actions themselves become a narrative in the theatre of the self, where the individual not only acts but observes, judges, and often reinterprets their actions in the quest for meaning.

From a Jungian perspective, personal acts can be seen as influenced by and potentially performing archetypal roles within our own psyche. These acts, whether observed by others or not, are part of the fabric of our collective unconscious experience. They connect us to universal human themes and contribute to our personal narrative and the ongoing process of psychological development and individuation. The performative aspect is not necessarily about an audience of others but rather about the dialogue between our conscious self and the archetypal forces within us. Carl Jung suggested that archetypes represent universal, ancient symbols and images emanating from the collective unconscious, serving as the psychological equivalents of instinct. If we consider our personal acts as informed by these archetypes, it's possible to view our actions as being influenced by these shared human narratives, which could be understood as a form of performance. When no external audience is present, the archetypes within the collective unconscious could act as an internal audience; for instance, if one's actions align with the hero archetype, one might unconsciously "perform" acts of bravery or sacrifice, not for the sake of an external observer, but to satisfy an innate, archetypal script. In performing actions when we are alone, we might unconsciously be enacting certain archetypal patterns. This performance is not for others but for oneself, or rather, for the archetypal structures embedded within the psyche. Jung's concept of individuation—the psychological process of integrating the conscious with the unconscious, including the archetypes—could be considered a performance in its own right. The process

is an inward journey that involves confronting internal archetypal figures and is often played out through personal acts and choices, even when no one is watching.

In spiritual contexts, the idea of a divine observer alters the understanding of performance and audience. In this context, God is the ever-present audience. For those who hold this belief, the ultimate audience is not earthly but spiritual—God, or a divine presence. This shifts the emphasis from pleasing a human audience to performing in a way that aligns with divine will or cosmic order. For such individuals, every action is a performance in the sight of the divine, and this awareness can shape their choices and actions profoundly. In Christianity, the idea of Coram Deo, which means “in the presence of God”, encapsulates living one’s life as a performance before God in every action. In the mystic traditions of Sufism, every act of love and beauty can be seen as a performance that honours the divine. The dhikr (remembrance of God) and the whirling dance of the dervishes are both performances meant to unify the soul with the divine, transcending the earthly plane.

And so, the audience-performance question depends ultimately on the intent behind the performance. If the aim of the act is to be witnessed, to have a shared experience that communicates a message or evokes a collective emotional response, then, without an audience, the nature of the performance remains unfulfilled; conversely, if the purpose is for personal, psychological, or spiritual growth and self-expression, then the act of performing can be fully actualised without the need for external participants. Indeed, a self-actualising performer might argue that this form of performance is more true and pure because it is unpolluted by egoic desires or commercial and societal expectations; it is a performance for and with the artist’s own creative soul.

The phrase “All the world’s a stage”, famously penned by William Shakespeare in *As You Like It*, is a potent metaphor that encapsulates the idea that all of life is a performance, and that people are merely actors within it. Even when there seems to be

no audience, the phrase implies that the mere act of living and interacting with the world is a performance in itself. According to Shakespeare's metaphor, life's performance continues irrespective of an observable audience because the "stage" of the world is ever-present. The metaphor is profound because, as can be derived from psychological and philosophical research, we are all performing our own stories envisaged in our minds. We embody these roles and, through them, engage with the narrative of our lives, seeking our version of a story's resolution—be it peace, understanding, success, or reconciliation. In considering life as a form of art, the role of the individual can be seen as that of the artist, actively crafting his or her own life narrative, performance, and aesthetic. Life, in this light, becomes a canvas on which the aesthetics, themes, and structures of art are reproduced and reinterpreted, with each person both as the artist and the audience of their own existence.

Metaphysics

The dictionary definition of “atheist”, as a non-believer in God or Gods, is not accurate, since there appears to be many people who think that the doctrinal teachings of religious institutions are cultural-based anachronisms—and so would be labelled “atheist” for not adhering to definitive religious beliefs about deities—yet believe in some higher spiritual power they cannot define.

There are several belief jumps in this sentence: The universe is a purposeless collection of matter that mindlessly configured itself by chance out of nothing, existing in time with causes and effects that had no beginning. A reasonable-minded adherent might be aware of the glaring uncertainties, but state it is more parsimonious to adopt this materialistic concept of reality than implant a God belief system as an unnecessary additional layer. Yet the certainty with which many proponents preach this position as absolute truth suggests a type of commitment witnessed in doctrinal religious belief.

An agnostic would state that the ultimate “why” questions are unanswerable, so from a practical perspective we should just be concerned with the “how” questions. The ardent atheist’s objections to agnosticism—based on the burden of proof for God being on the proponent—misses the point to an agnostic who has already ruled out religious explanations of God, but not higher spiritual meaning and purpose to reality. A particularly zealous atheist might overplay the remit of verifiable facts by stating that opinions about ultimate meaning are irrelevant if they are not scientifically falsifiable—ignoring the fact that their own conceptual model for reality contains unfalsifiable conjecture.

I believe that one can value science and also acknowledge that the word “God” might point to something far more profound than a cosmic superintendent. In this sense, God is not a being at all, but “being-itself”—the ground or power of being on which all things exist. This means that petty debates about whether God exists (as if God were just another object in the universe) miss the

point entirely. It frees us from the simplistic image of God as an old man in the sky, and suggests that whatever ultimate reality “God” signifies, it transcends any single creed or image.

The nuances of religious thought have often been flattened in modern discourse. Theologian David Bentley Hart observes that the very concept of God has grown “impoverished” in the modern mind, largely because we have forgotten the deeper philosophical insights of the past. New atheist critics often target only the crudest caricatures of faith—a proverbial bearded deity or literal seven-day creation—and declare victory over superstition. In doing so, they sometimes miss the more sophisticated understandings of religious enquiry.

One can be sceptical of traditional theism and still believe reality has dimensions that science and language are fundamentally incapable of understanding and describing. There is a fertile ground here where one can be a spiritual rationalist: deeply curious about transcendent questions, unwilling to close the door on the numinous, but also unwilling to accept any claim without scrutiny.

Modern atheism often aligns itself with metaphysical materialism, the belief that nothing exists except physical matter. In this view, if a theory cannot make testable predictions to be measured or falsified, it is not worth taking seriously. The materialist outlook carries a bracing simplicity: the universe is a brute fact, life a fortuitous accident; consciousness an emergent trick of brain chemistry, and any search for deeper meaning is a nostalgic delusion. However, materialism itself goes beyond what empirical science can say; it makes a sweeping ontological claim that is not empirically verifiable: ironically, a metaphysical claim that “only non-metaphysical claims are valid”. Even secular philosophers like Thomas Nagel, an avowed atheist, admits that the strictly materialist narrative feels incomplete. Nagel had been frank about his “cosmic authority problem”—a personal wish not to have a God—yet he also argues that reductive materialism fails to account for things like consciousness and reason.

A slightly more humble view might acknowledge that humans may only be capable of perceiving a limited set of circumstances. Just as ants crawl through their narrow world unaware of the vast human realm above them—our languages, emotions, architecture, art—so too might humanity exist within a limited perceptual bubble, blind to higher dimensions of reality. An ant cannot conceive of music or mathematics; its senses and neural wiring simply do not permit such comprehension. Likewise, human perception is confined to a sliver of the electromagnetic spectrum, a narrow range of sound frequencies, and a brain evolved for survival rather than deep cosmic understanding.

We may believe we grasp the structure of reality, yet our tools of observation—sight, sound, and even our most advanced instruments—could be as crude as an ant's antennae when set against the full breadth of existence. The notion of extra dimensions in theoretical physics, or phenomena that lie beyond spacetime as we know it, hints that what we perceive as complete may only be a fragment. To an ant, the absence of light caused by a shadow might be the limit of experience; to us, dark matter and quantum entanglement play a similar role—real, partially sensed by our measuring instruments, but fundamentally alien to our intuition of the chain of causality.

If our senses evolved to navigate only what was necessary for survival, then the deepest truths of the universe may not merely be undetected, but inaccessible. We are intelligent relative to other animals on Earth, but perhaps intelligence itself is bounded by the same evolutionary constraints as sight or smell. The universe may teem with realities we cannot experience or even imagine, as hidden from us as poetry is from an ant.

Indeed, cutting-edge science has revealed a world far stranger and less material than we assumed. At the subatomic level, matter dissolves into energy and probability; solid objects are mostly empty space held together by fields and forces. Quantum mechanics famously defies our intuition—particles that are waves, waves that are particles, influences that seem to leap across vast distances. As Nobel Prize-winning physicist Eugene Wigner

observed, “while a number of philosophical ideas may be logically consistent with present QM... materialism is not.” When an observer’s act of measurement can affect whether a particle manifests as a wave or a particle, the neat separation between observer (mind) and observed (matter) becomes indistinct. Some interpretations of quantum mechanics even suggest that consciousness has a role in “collapsing” quantum possibilities—a controversial idea, but one that underscores how our epistemology might be entangled with the fabric of reality itself.

Some scientists point to the “fine-tuning” of physical constants—the way the laws of nature seem precisely calibrated to allow galaxies, stars, planets, and life—but then argue this is just a lucky roll of the cosmic dice (possibly one of countless rolls if there are infinite universes). That could be true, but note: positing an infinite multiverse where everything happens by chance is itself a kind of metaphysical speculation, unfalsifiable and forever beyond empirical reach. It strikes me as ironic that to avoid any whiff of purpose or design, some are willing to embrace an infinity of unobservable universes. At that point, one has arguably left the realm of Ockham’s razor far behind. Even Nagel acknowledges that the “interest of theism, even to an atheist, is that it tries to explain in another way what does not seem capable of explanation by physical science”. In other words, hypotheses of meaning or mind beyond matter arise because strict reductionism struggles with certain questions: Why is there something instead of nothing? How did matter become alive, and life become aware of itself? Are we—conscious agents—merely accidents, or an intended part of the cosmos? Science as a methodology may not answer such questions (they may be inherently metaphysical), but human inquiry doesn’t cease at the laboratory’s door. My rational mind sees the achievements of science and bows to its methodology for understanding the physical world. Yet my intuition and indeed my personal experience tell me there is more to reality than can be calculated and measured with an instrument. A truly open-minded scepticism must be sceptical not only of supernatural claims, but also of the claim that what we can

measure is all there is. The boundary between science and metaphysics is precisely where things get exciting: it's where our knowledge gives way to wonder. At that boundary, one can remain rational—weighing evidence, avoiding logical fallacies—while also entertaining the possibility that the universe includes dimensions of meaning, value, or consciousness that transcend our capability of understanding.

Do I believe in God? That question is loaded with assumptions about both belief and God. Do I take as fact the doctrines concerning reality written by people in past civilisations?—No. However, there shouldn't be a one-dimensional graded scale for belief that merely gauges the percentage probability of religious dogma being correct. The metaphysical understanding that most resonates with me is that there is a soul of the universe, in which we are all a part. In this definition, God is hope: a hope that the universe is ultimately love; that all the suffering will be overcome; that life will be saved from despair; and that despite everything, it will all be okay.

For any existence after death to be desirable, it would have to be outside of time and space, and completely beyond our current comprehension of reality—as even a limitless abundance of joy would become meaningless within the causes and effects of endless time. I believe that to thrive at being a good human is the purpose, and tend to subscribe to something along the lines that: form ends on death, but time is just a perspective from one vantage point—because the past, present, and future are really one; all things are a part of each other, connected strands in the great tapestry of life; and maybe there are other dimensions of reality and incalculable vantage points. There is no insistence on certainty here; this is a non-falsifiable interpretation of experience driven by internal feeling, not logical deduction—and in no way does it affect any commitment to a rigorous investigation of the world using the scientific method. So, where do I feature on the belief scale?

For me, God is the name given to the conviction that there is a source of meaning and goodness at the centre of reality. When I

speak to the divine in moments of anguish or gratitude, I do not imagine a magic problem-solver; I am communing from that hopeful part of me that trusts the universe is not fundamentally indifferent. I resonate with a description of God as the “ground of being”—the substrate of existence and meaning. In a similar vein, I find truth in the Sufi mystic Rumi’s poetic assertion that the light is one, even if the lamps are many. “The lamps are different, but the Light is the same... one Light-mind, endlessly emanating all things,” he writes. Those lines capture a sense that whatever ultimate reality is—call it God, call it the One, call it cosmic consciousness—it underlies and shines through the various religious images and the myriad forms of life. God, in this vision, is not a dogma but a direction: an orienting ideal of unity, love, and hope.

I embrace the intuition that everything is deeply interconnected. This is closely tied to the idea of a universal mind, but it also extends to matter, energy, and life. Mystical traditions often emphasise oneness: the notion that “All is One”—whether in the Sufi idea of *tawhid*, the Christian mystic idea of the ground where the soul and God are unified, or the Buddhist metaphor of *Indra's Net*, in which each being reflects every other. On the scientific side, ecology illustrates how no organism is truly separate from its environment, and quantum physics (again) shows that particles once linked can remain correlated across cosmic distances. My metaphysical view takes this interconnectedness as a given. I tend to imagine reality as an immense tapestry of relationships, rather than a collection of isolated objects. Each of us is a node where the cosmic beingness is particularly intense and self-aware. Our actions reverberate through the tapestry in ways we cannot fully chart—hence every ethical or unethical act sends out ripples. This vision, admittedly, has a poetic flavour. It owes a debt to thinkers like Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who envisioned all of humanity (and indeed the cosmos) converging towards a unified point of consciousness he called the Omega Point. Teilhard, a scientist-mystic, saw evolution as not only a biological process but a spiritual one, with increasing

complexity and consciousness leading eventually to union with the divine. I find inspiring his idea that the ongoing evolutionary story is as much about the growth of spirit as the propagation of genes.

My own instinctive opinion is that I believe religions share the same spiritual root, although the core message was often corrupted by the doctrines and institutions that arose. This is my personal version of “spiritual but not *particularly* religious”. As I am most familiar with Christianity, I could be labelled Christian; however, I do adopt a filter and select only that which resonates with me, mindful that the scriptures were written and edited by early practitioners of the religion; and that the biblical canon was decided upon by the politics of powerful men in ecumenical councils, rather than being the unadulterated teachings of Christ. Looking back at history, the cruelties that have been perpetrated by professed followers of the religion represent the antithesis of the message of Christ; for real spirituality—the root of Christianity—is always inspired by love, joy, and peace.

The moment a spontaneous spiritual insight calcifies into an official creed, or a transformative mystical poem is reduced to a rigid scripture, the original life can begin to leach out. Religious institutions compile canons—deciding which texts are holy and which are heresy—and in doing so often reflect the politics and prejudices of their era. For example, the formation of the Christian biblical canon in the early centuries involved councils of bishops choosing certain gospels and epistles while rejecting others; this was not divine handwriting in the sky, but messy human process. To note this is not to dismiss those scriptures, but to contextualise them: they are works filtered through human minds, not infallible transcripts from God. History shows that many profound spiritual voices were marginalised or branded heretical because they threatened the authority of the established clergy. Meister Eckhart, a Christian mystic who taught the soul’s direct union with God (speaking of a God beyond all images), was tried for heresy. The Sufi mystic al-Hallaj, who joyfully proclaimed “I am the Truth” (implying unity with God), was executed as a blasphemer. Such

examples highlight the perennial tension between mysticism—personal, unmediated experience of the divine—and orthodoxy—the sanctioned belief system of a religious organisation.

One of my core criticisms of religious institutions is how they often prioritise doctrinal conformity over personal spiritual experience. Carl Jung once quipped that one of the main functions of formalised religion is to “protect people against a direct experience of God”. It’s a startling claim, but I see his point. Institutions develop layers of dogma, ritual, and hierarchy that can end up substituting for genuine spiritual encounter. As long as you recite the creed, attend the services, and obey the rules, you’re considered religious—even if you never actually feel a connection to the sacred. In fact, if someone in the pews does have a dramatic spiritual experience outside the approved norms, it may make the clergy nervous. It’s as if religions say, “Don’t try this at home—leave the God-contact to the professionals.” My intention is not to disparage all religious authorities; many are sincere seekers themselves. But the bureaucratisation of spirituality often leads to the domestication of the divine. God or the Absolute—wild, unbounded Reality—gets confined to formulas and ceremonies. The result can be hollow: people go through motions that once had meaning, but over time the symbolism is forgotten and only habit remains. Karen Armstrong’s research reminds us that scripture itself was traditionally interpreted with great flexibility. She notes that for centuries, Jews and Christians “insisted that it was neither possible nor desirable to read the Bible literally”, and that sacred texts “demand constant reinterpretation.” Myths were understood as symbolic stories pointing to truths that reason alone could not convey. This non-literal, dynamic approach to religious truth resonates with me. However, modern fundamentalism—a reaction against secular modernity—has hardened many into treating mythos as logos, insisting on literal truth where none was originally intended. The tragedy is that this invites an equally simplistic backlash from sceptics, who correctly point out the contradictions, the scientific and historical errors, all

the while missing the underlying spiritual insights that a more fluid reading could reveal.

In carving a path of spirituality without dogma, I retain many practices and values that religions have cultivated, but I do so by choice, not by mandate. For instance, I find comfort and insight in meditation (a practice prominent in Eastern traditions) and in Western contemplative prayer. I love the beauty of religious music and art—a Bach cantata, a Rumi poem, a Zen garden—and appreciate their sublimity without attributing them to a sectarian narrative. In essence, I construct a personal canon of that which uplifts and edifies.

Ethics, too, remain central: any spirituality worth its salt must show in one's character and actions. I take inspiration from the core ethical teachings shared across faiths: compassion, kindness, humility, and a concern for justice. What I do not do is accept any moral dictate merely because “it is written” or because an authority claims infallibility. My conscience and intuition must ultimately resonate with a teaching for me to embrace it. This approach aligns with the view that religion is not mainly about believing certain propositions, but about experiencing and doing. Religion at its best is about praxis—living in a way that makes the transcendent real in daily life. Thus, I prize experience over creed. If a particular ritual or prayer helps open my heart or quiet my mind, I will use it, regardless of its origin—be it Christian, Buddhist, or other. Conversely, if a doctrine instils division, fear, hate, violence, or a sense of futility, I will discard it, even if it carries the weight of centuries.

I embrace an openness to insights from multiple traditions without feeling the need to formally belong to any. I have been deeply moved by Sufi literature (the poetry of Rumi and Hafez), by the non-dual teachings of Advaita Vedānta, by Christian mystics like Julian of Norwich (with her radical optimism that “all shall be well”), and by Daoist and Buddhist perspectives on harmony and impermanence. Each offers a piece of the puzzle, and each also has its cultural limitations or excesses. Rather than seeing the plurality of religions as a problem—“they can’t all be right, so

none of it is true”, as a cynic might say—I see it as evidence that the human encounter with the sacred is real, even if coloured by culture and language. The lamps are indeed different, but the light is one. This pluralistic approach does come with challenges. It lacks the tidy certainty and communal reinforcement that belonging to one religion can provide. There is a risk of shallowness—skimming the surface of many traditions and mastering none. But I allow myself to learn from each faith I engage with, letting it challenge me. For example, Buddhism’s emphasis on mindfulness and releasing attachment has been a helpful antidote when my hopefulness turns into craving or clinging. The Christian ideal of grace—unconditional love given freely—humbles me when I become too prideful. Sufi devotion ignites my heart when my abstract philosophising grows arid. In this way, I remain grateful to religions while not confining myself to any single one.

Adopting ritual and reverence without binding belief has given me a sense of connection and meaning that pure scepticism never did. I do not need to believe that a certain scripture is the direct word of God to find comfort in its verses; I do not need to believe a ritual literally changes worldly outcomes to feel it change me internally.

We live amid conflict, injustice, and ignorance. Believing that all is one and that love is our destiny can seem naively optimistic in the face of daily news filled with division and hate. However, I see the role of metaphysical hope not as a blindfold but as a guiding star. It informs how I respond to the darkness. If I think humanity is nothing more than a cosmic accident, I might fall into nihilism or selfish hedonism, reasoning that there is no deeper common purpose to strive for. I think of the wisdom of someone like Viktor Frankl, who in the horrors of the concentration camps found that those who could find meaning in their suffering were more resilient. This is a trust or “faith” that even in the darkest times, the light of meaning cannot be extinguished. There is a sense that every experience, even ones of great suffering, can serve its purpose in life.

In a world riven by cynicism and cruelty, some might argue that high-minded spiritual ethics make little difference. But spiritual growth, to me, is largely about enlarging one's circle of identification: from personal ego to family and friends, to tribe, to nation, to all of humanity, to all sentient beings, and finally to all that there is. It is a widening of the heart. If enough individuals adopt a spiritually rational outlook—combining clear-eyed reason with a heartfelt sense of sacred interconnectedness—then perhaps societies could shift in remarkable ways.

I consider it wise to approach the transcendent with what Zen Buddhism calls “beginner’s mind”, an attitude of openness and lack of preconceptions. This is not only epistemological but also spiritual: it means bowing before the mystery of existence and admitting that a finite mind cannot grasp it all. Paradoxically, accepting this not-knowing brings a form of peace. I am content to listen, to observe, and continue to refine my understanding through experience.

We are meaning-seeking creatures, and even the triumphs of science have not quenched that thirst for the numinous. By approaching metaphysical questions with both an open heart and a critical mind, we can refuse to settle for sterile nihilism or irrational fideism. Instead, we step into a middle space—a space of questions, imagination, and conjecture. This may not fit neatly into any box on a survey, but it is sincerely mine.

These efforts are meaningful, for humanity will survive if we are loving to the world and to each other. And if the spark of consciousness in us is around for billions of years, then we are currently the early originals. Maybe we are at the stage where we are just starting to recognise some shapes.

A Diagnosis

Philosophers have long debated whether evil stems from monstrous intent or mundane indifference. Hannah Arendt, in analysing the Nazi perpetrator Adolf Eichmann, coined the phrase “the banality of evil” to denote how immense crimes can be committed not by fanatical demons but by ordinary, even unremarkable people. At Eichmann’s 1961 trial, Arendt was struck by his lack of diabolical passion—he was “neither perverted nor sadistic”, but alarmingly normal in his desire to advance his career. He performed evil deeds “without evil intentions”, out of an inability to think from others’ perspectives. In Arendt’s view, this thoughtlessness—a failure to imagine the real suffering of victims or to question authority—produced a shallow “ordinary” wrongdoing that nonetheless had monstrous results. Simone Weil similarly observed that real evil is often dull and mechanical, not the dramatic villainy of myth: “Imaginary evil is romantic and varied; real evil is gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring”. Both thinkers suggest that much of human evil arises from a void of empathy and reflection—a moral numbness that permits cruelty.

Other philosophers, however, have explored active or radical malice. Immanuel Kant argued that humans possess a “propensity to evil”: an innate tendency to put self-interest above the moral law. This propensity doesn’t mean each person is destined to do horrific deeds, but it tilts us towards moral failure unless actively resisted by principle. Kant distinguished this common radical evil from a purely diabolical evil (doing harm for harm’s sake), which he thought humans rarely if ever embody—since even wrongdoers usually rationalise their actions rather than embrace evil as such.

Friedrich Nietzsche famously critiqued morality itself and probed the human impulse towards cruelty. In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche notes how throughout history people have taken festive joy in cruelty, both in punishment and in spectacle: “Without cruelty there is no festival: thus the longest and most

ancient part of human history teaches—and in punishment there is so much that is festive!” He viewed the enjoyment of others’ suffering as deeply rooted in the psyche, however unsettling that may be. Meanwhile, philosophers like Simone Weil emphasised the privation of good at evil’s core—a kind of emptiness or refusal to see the humanity of others. Weil suggested that truly looking at another’s pain is a spiritual act, and evil consists in the failure to make that imaginative leap.

Thus, across thinkers, we get a nuanced picture: evil can result from the absence of thought and empathy, or an active delight in causing harm, or simply the ordinary human tendency to favour oneself at others’ expense.

Modern psychology bolsters these philosophical insights by examining individuals who enjoy cruelty versus those who slide into it mindlessly. Clinical studies have identified a personality trait of everyday sadism—the tendency to derive pleasure from inflicting or witnessing pain. In one experiment, researchers gave volunteers a choice of unpleasant tasks (such as killing insects in a grinder, cleaning toilets, or enduring ice water); a significant minority chose to kill insects, even expending extra effort to do so. The more “sadistic” the person (by personality score), the more likely they were to opt for killing and to report enjoyment in the act. Such participants also showed emotional pleasure in causing or simply observing other people’s suffering. Follow-up tests found that only those high in sadism would, for example, exert themselves to blast an innocent person with loud noise even when there was no retaliation—suggesting a pure appetite for others’ pain. This research supports the notion that malevolent cruelty—harming for harm’s sake—is very real, even if it is present in only a subset of people.

Relatedly, the clinical profile of psychopathy illuminates how evil can manifest as an emotional deficit. Psychopathy is characterised by a callous lack of empathy or remorse, shallow affect, and often a charming manipulativeness. Psychopaths can commit cruel or exploitative acts with chilling detachment because they do not feel the pangs of conscience that influence

others. Many psychopaths show a profound lack of remorse for their actions along with a corresponding lack of empathy for their victims, which enables them to act in a cold-blooded manner, using those around them as a means to satisfy their own desires. Most psychopaths do not become violent criminals—for example, some channel their manipulative tendencies into business or politics—but the combination of charm, power-seeking, and inability to care about others' suffering makes psychopathy a classic template of evil in psychological literature. This stands in contrast to Arendt's banal evildoer who may feel something (fear, career ambition, peer pressure) but fails to think morally; the psychopath can think instrumentally but fails to feel morally, treating people as mere objects. Moreover, when a psychopath also possesses sadistic inclinations, the result can be a person who not only lacks empathy but thrives on cruelty—arguably an embodiment of active evil.

Philosophy and psychology together suggest that human evil comes in multiple forms. There is the thoughtless compliance that Arendt and Weil warned about—a void where empathy and reflection should be—turning normal people into agents of horror through routine and obedience. And there is the intentional malevolence seen in sadists and psychopaths who recognise suffering and pursue it as a goal or amusement. One might call these the two poles of evil: the banal and the demonic. In reality, though, many evildoers combine banal and malicious elements—for instance, a war criminal might start by numbly “following orders” and later grow to relish the power to cause suffering and death.

Understanding these facets prepares us to examine how entire societies can sanction evil under lofty guises, and how individuals rationalise or revel in cruelty. In history, and the present, there are countless examples where twisted interpretations of beliefs lead to the justification, or even glorification, of murderous and sadistic tendencies. Such beliefs give a person an excuse; an identity in opposition to and superiority over other people, who

can be condemned and abused from a position of personal righteousness.

Indeed, history shows that evils are often perpetrated under moral disguises. Cruelty rarely advertises itself as cruelty; instead, it wears the costumes of righteousness, necessity, or justice. Totalitarian and extremist regimes in particular have excelled at cloaking acts of barbarism in high-minded rhetoric. In Nazi Germany, genocide was justified as purification and self-defence; in Stalin's USSR and Mao's China, mass murder was explained as a harsh but noble phase of building a utopia; in religious crusades, extreme brutality was sanctified as the enforcement of divine law. These regimes did not lack an ethical narrative—on the contrary, they drowned their followers in a torrent of moral and ideological justification for wicked deeds.

A chilling example comes from a secret speech by Nazi SS leader Heinrich Himmler to his officers regarding the Holocaust. Himmler acknowledges the mass killing of Jews explicitly, but then praises his men for doing it while supposedly remaining "decent". He noted that most of them had seen "100 bodies lying together, 500 or 1,000," and yet—apart from a few instances of "human weakness"—"to have stuck it out and at the same time... to have remained decent fellows, that is what has made us hard". In Himmler's twisted logic, the SS were to view themselves as morally upright soldiers performing a gruesome duty. He even called the genocide "a page of glory" in German history. This is moral inversion at its extreme: murder presented as duty, atrocity as honour, and compassion as a weakness to be overcome. By convincing themselves that they were still "decent" men—just tough enough to do what was necessary—Himmler and his followers blunted any pangs of conscience. It exemplifies how propaganda and group ideology can enable cognitive dissonance resolution in individuals: the self-image as a good person is preserved by redefining evil impulses as good, or at least necessary, and thereby avoiding direct confrontation with the full horror of their crimes.

Psychologically, this wilful self-deception is explained by moral disengagement mechanisms. Albert Bandura identified several mental tactics by which people who violate their own moral standards manage to neutralise guilt. They might invoke moral justification (“we’re doing this for a great cause”), euphemistic labelling (calling torture “enhanced interrogation” or civilian deaths “collateral damage”), and advantageous comparison (“yes we’re harsh, but others have done far worse”). They also displace responsibility to authorities (“I’m just following orders”) or diffuse responsibility across a group (“everyone was doing it, it wasn’t just me”). Crucially, they dehumanise or blame the victims—seeing them as less than human or as deserving their fate. All these tactics appeared in totalitarian regimes. Nazi propaganda depicted Jews as subhuman “rats” or a bacillus infecting society; Stalinist and Maoist rhetoric labelled class or ideological opponents as “enemies of the people”, “vermin”, or obstacles to progress, making their elimination seem virtuous. Religious extremists paint those outside their fold as ungodly creatures to be righteously punished, where any personal hesitation to perpetrate brutality is framed as weakness of faith. Through language and ideology, perpetrators create a contorted moral universe where cruelty becomes virtuous.

Social psychology experiments dramatically illustrate how ordinary people rationalise harm. In a classic study, college students were asked to administer electric shocks to peers as part of a supposed learning experiment; some overheard the peers being described in derogatory, dehumanising terms, while others heard neutral or humanising descriptions. Those who heard the victims called animals delivered significantly stronger shocks on average than those who heard them praised—showing how seeing someone as less human lowers our moral restraints. Furthermore, after inflicting pain, participants often adjusted their attitudes to justify it—for instance, blaming the victim’s character (a form of post hoc dehumanisation). This aligns with cognitive dissonance theory: harming someone creates

dissonance with seeing oneself as good, so people often resolve it by convincing themselves the victim deserved the harm.

Another concept relevant here is ideological possession, when an individual's identity is so consumed by an ideology that independent moral reasoning shuts down. In such cases, any act can be justified if it serves the sacred ideology. During China's Cultural Revolution, young Red Guards brutalised teachers and even parents under the sway of Maoist dogma, believing their victims were bourgeois traitors impeding a perfect society. Religious fundamentalists, similarly, could commit murder or enslave captives while convinced they were enacting holy scripture and earning divine reward. Fanatical belief systems can commandeer moral intuitions, directing empathy only to in-group members and suspending compassion for out-groups. What might otherwise be recognised as cruelty is seen instead as purity, justice, or martyrdom. The result is what Albert Camus called murderous purity—when someone will massacre others with a deluded conscience.

In fact, cruelty often wears a moral mask. Atrocities are rarely committed with a roar of open wickedness; more often they proceed with a self-righteous drumbeat. People can thereby be seduced into serving evil by reinterpretation: by propaganda that plays on their moral emotions (loyalty, piety, patriotism, justice) and redefines cruelty as duty. As numerous historical regimes demonstrate, an appeal to "higher ideals" can sanction virtually any barbarity. Recognising these patterns of rationalisation and disengagement is the first step in resisting them. It also sets the stage for examining cases of evil that embrace malevolence more directly, as we explore through the archetype of Iago.

Literature often provides insightful portraits of evil, and few are as emblematic as Iago in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Iago is a Venetian ensign who orchestrates the downfall of his general, Othello, by exploiting trust and stoking jealousy—all while appearing loyal and honourable. What makes Iago especially unsettling is his lack of clear motive. Unlike many villains, he offers no grand ideology or righteous grievance to justify his treachery.

He gives various reasons in passing—he was passed over for a promotion by Othello, he suspects (almost certainly baselessly) that Othello slept with his wife, he even at one point says he acts out of envy—but none of these fully explain the elaborate cruelty he unfolds. As the play progresses, it becomes evident that Iago enjoys manipulation and destruction for their own sake. Literary critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge famously described Iago's behaviour as the “motive-hunting of motiveless Malignity”. In other words, Iago is constantly suggesting justifications for an evil that fundamentally has no justification. He is, Coleridge suggested, a being of almost pure malevolence—“next to the Devil” in fiendishness—who nonetheless wears the “divine image” of man and interacts in ordinary society. Iago’s agency is malevolent in a cold, self-conscious way: he knows he is deceiving and ruining innocent people (Othello, Desdemona, Cassio) and he revels in it with sly asides to the audience.

The absence of a rational cause for Iago’s hatred makes him a study in evil as enmity for its own sake. When Othello demands Iago explain why he did all this, Iago pointedly refuses to speak. His silence suggests that, ultimately, he has no satisfactory motive to offer—or that giving one would diminish the dark mystique of his villainy. In contrast, consider Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*: Brutus joins a conspiracy to assassinate Caesar, but he does so believing it a tragic necessity to save the Roman Republic from tyranny. Brutus is essentially a morally conflicted villain (if one even calls him a villain)—he justifies his murderous act with a principle (“not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more”). He remains tortured by guilt and honour. Iago, by stark contrast, feels no guilt and seeks no noble principle; he delights in the power of causing chaos and watches Othello’s psychological torment with a kind of sporting pleasure. This makes Iago more akin to a modern archetype like the Joker of *Batman* lore than to Brutus: a character who wants to see the world burn just to enjoy the flames, versus one who commits evil under a wilful self-delusion of doing good.

This contrast highlights a spectrum of villainy: on one end, the ideological villain (however twisted the principle) who at least professes to believe in some cause beyond mere destruction—Brutus believing in republican virtue, and even Shakespeare’s Macbeth, who is driven by kingly ambition but later remorsefully reflects on the futility of his crimes. On the other end is the nihilistic or malevolent villain exemplified by Iago—one who cannot claim any creed except perhaps will to power, who treats people like pieces on a chessboard to be knocked over and removed for his personal pleasure. Iago offers us a portrait of evil stripped of excuses. He is important because he lays bare an uncomfortable idea: that some evil is done with full awareness and no remorse, requiring no grand ideology at all. It is enmity for its own sake, or for very petty motives exaggerated into mania.

Shakespeare’s Iago is a warning of what intellect unguided by morality can do. Iago is intelligent, articulate, and perceptive—he understands Othello’s principled but credulous heart and how to poison it. Yet all that wit is employed destructively, without compassion. In Iago, we see the thrill of power over others in its pure form: he calls his manipulation of Othello a “sport” at one point, and when his plots lead Othello to murderous rage, Iago coolly observes the chaos he’s made as if admiring a piece of art. This is evil not as a means to an end, but as an end in itself.

Understanding Iago’s strain of evil helps complete our picture. Not all perpetrators are banally unimaginative functionaries, nor ideologues disguising their worst impulses by deliberately deceiving themselves and others; some truly relish the suffering they cause. By recognising Iago, we acknowledge that motiveless malignity exists.

Evil is not only a matter of individual psychology or isolated acts; it can be built into social institutions and norms. Looking back, we find eras when forms of cruelty we now recognise as heinous were accepted as routine, and even celebrated. Human sacrifice, slavery, mass murder, torture as public spectacle—these have all, at various times, been normalised. Understanding this history is sobering but also instructive: it shows that our moral circle has

expanded over time, and what was once common can later become unthinkable.

Throughout most of history we have behaved like members of ant colonies: attacking, destroying, and enslaving each other, with the added horrors of sadism and sexual violence, often led by one murderous sociopath after another. History is predominately one of brutalised, traumatised, confused people living in pain and subjugation. Humanity has mostly now progressed to recognise the depraved evils that were socially accepted in previous times—yet a person of those times would have gone along with the accepted norm, assuming it was right because everyone else said it was right. They were wrong. Only the strength of compassion would have made a person question the chorus of excuses for cruelty in their society. Without true compassion, a person is simply “of their time”, allowing themselves to automatically conform to whatever happens to be contemporary popular thinking and belief-controlled behaviour. In an evolutionary process, that rule of wrongness would hold true for people today, relative to future generations.

One stark example is the Roman Colosseum, where for centuries, Romans flocked to the magnificent amphitheatre to watch people (often prisoners of war, slaves, or the persecuted) kill each other or be killed by wild animals for entertainment. These shows were not fringe events; they were core to Roman culture—used by emperors to win popularity and display the might of the empire. The populace cheered as humans were dismembered and died in agony. To us this is abhorrent, but to many Romans it was a spectacle to enjoy, and justifiable because the victims were condemned criminals, enemies, or merely slaves whose lives did not count. A few voices (like the philosopher Seneca) condemned the bloodlust of the arena, but they were not prevalent. The Colosseum is a reminder that institutionalised cruelty can persist for generations with communal approval. It took the spread of new values—in this case, Christian ethics valuing each soul, and perhaps simple fatigue and economic

burden—for the gladiatorial games to be abolished in the 5th century CE.

Another vast historical evil is slavery. For millennia, societies around the world practiced slavery with little moral qualm. In ancient civilisations, war captives and their descendants were routinely enslaved. Enslaved people were dehumanised as property—whipped, branded, raped, worked to death—yet these practices were defended by appeals to nature, economics, and religion. Such rationalisations allowed the people who benefited from slave ownership to participate in or tolerate horrific cruelty (like routine physical torture) while maintaining an image of decency. Slowly, very slowly, the moral circle expanded. This hard-won progress underscores how moral norms can evolve, and that periods of institutionalised cruelty need not be permanent.

Consider the Belgian Congo under King Leopold II. Colonial agents in the late 1800s forced villagers to harvest rubber under threat of horrific punishment; failure to meet quotas often resulted in hands being cut off. An estimated 10 million Congolese died from violence, famine, and disease during Leopold's reign. Yet in Europe this genocide was long downplayed; Leopold presented himself as a philanthropist spreading Christianity and ending Arab slave trading. Only later did missionaries and activists expose the truth, shocking the public and changing accepted opinions.

Across empires, we see patterns of systemic cruelty (massacres, concentration camps, cultural erasure) normalised by colonial ideologies. These ideologies insisted the colonised were uncivilised or childlike, thus needing firm (if brutal) governance for their own good. Again, we observe moral disengagement at scale: labelling slaughtered rebels as “savages” made their killing palatable to the imperial public.

But despite these dark eras, there has been measurable moral progress. Historian Steven Pinker and others have documented a long-term decline in many forms of violence—from the outlawing of chattel slavery to reductions in judicial torture, capital punishment, and bloody spectacle. Philosopher Peter Singer

encapsulates one aspect of this progress with the image of “the expanding circle” of moral concern. In early human history, our sympathy and moral duty likely extended only to our kin or small tribe. Over time, through reason and cultural development, that circle expanded—to include one’s clan, then tribe, then nation, then all people, and even, as Singer argues, all sentient beings. Key intellectual moments aided this: the Enlightenment introduced universalist ideas that all men (eventually all people) are created equal and endowed with rights. The concept of human rights took hold strongly after the world wars, leading to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, which declared the inherent dignity and rights of every member of the human family—a stark rebuke to the dehumanisation underpinning regimes like the Nazis.

Moral progress has also been driven by empathy and compassion fostered through culture. The spread of literature—novels that invited readers into the inner worlds of people living very different lives from themselves—is thought to have increased empathy. For instance, Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe vividly humanised slaves to many readers in the U.S. and Europe, fuelling abolitionist sentiment. The graphic horrors of war described in accounts of World War I helped turn public opinion against seeing war as glorious. Over the 20th century, practices once common—child labour, public lynchings, animal cruelty for sport—have been challenged or outlawed in many countries as sensibilities became more compassionate. The “moral circle” certainly hasn’t expanded everywhere evenly, and backlash is real. Yet the broad trend is that the circle has widened; humanity’s baseline for acceptable cruelty has shifted towards greater humanitarian principles.

If cruelty is one side of humanity’s moral struggle, compassion is the other. Compassion—the capacity to feel sorrow at another’s suffering and the desire to alleviate it—has been extolled as a virtue in nearly every religious and ethical tradition. It is often described as the antidote to cruelty, for it is the emotion that binds us to each other’s humanity.

Virtually all major religions place compassion at their moral core. In Buddhism, compassion (*karuṇā*) for all sentient beings is a principal virtue. Buddhist practice includes meditation specifically aimed at cultivating limitless compassion and loving-kindness (Metta meditation), reflecting a belief that compassion can indeed be expanded with effort—from one’s family, to friends, to strangers, and even to supposed enemies. In Christianity, compassion is likewise central: Jesus’s teachings urged love not just for neighbours but for perceived enemies, and parables like the Good Samaritan enshrine mercy toward the stranger as true righteousness. Christian charity and the ideal of *caritas* (selfless love) inspired countless acts of kindness. And Stoicism, often caricatured as a cold creed, actually advocated a form of compassionate cosmopolitanism: Marcus Aurelius wrote that we are all citizens of one universe, made for cooperation, like “feet, like hands” working together—therefore to act against one another is against nature. The Stoics valued *sympatheia*, a mutual interconnection; they counselled understanding another’s misdeeds as products of ignorance rather than pure malice, which is a stance that can encourage pity and forgiveness.

Modern philosophers have further explored compassion’s role. Martha Nussbaum and others argue that without compassion, our commitment to justice and the common good withers—laws become harsh, and politics becomes a mere power game. Peter Singer, from a utilitarian perspective, asserts that reason can amplify our innate empathy; by logically considering others’ interests as comparable to our own, we correct the biases of tribalism and expand moral concern. He points to the spread of vegetarianism/veganism and global humanitarian aid as signs that compassion is widening to include non-human animals and faraway strangers—something that is unprecedented in scope.

Research in developmental psychology shows that even very young children exhibit rudimentary empathy: babies will cry in response to other babies’ cries, and toddlers will try to help an adult who appears hurt or in need. A capacity for empathetic compassion is therefore part of our biological heritage—maybe

because in social species, attending to others' well-being had adaptive value (a tribe of caregivers would survive hardships better than a tribe of indifferent egotists). However, while the seed of compassion is natural, its growth and scope are greatly influenced by culture and training. Thus, many traditions stress cultivating compassion. Buddhist monks spend years training in compassion meditation to extend love to all beings. Parents and educators try to instil empathy in children by encouraging perspective-taking ("How would you feel if...?"). And philosophers like Nussbaum suggest that education in the arts and humanities—literature, history, theatre—can expand our imaginative empathy by exposing us to diverse lives and struggles.

Compassion often needs cultivation to survive in cynical incentive systems or environments that reward selfishness and pit groups against each other. In authoritarian regimes, compassion is often scorned as a weakness or distraction. For example, under strict communist regimes, showing too much personal sympathy for those deemed "class enemies" could make one suspect; and under extremist ideologies, mercy might be seen as betrayal of the cause. Yet even in such systems, compassion finds ways to persist, for there are many inspiring accounts of individuals who at great personal risk acted with compassion amidst terror.

In the modern global context, compassion faces new tests. The scale of suffering is enormous—wars, refugees, disasters—leading some to feel "compassion fatigue". We are not psychologically evolved to emotionally process the pain of millions of strangers at once. There is a risk that constant exposure to suffering through news and the internet can either numb people or lead them to tune out rather than engage compassionately. Some thinkers, like psychologist Paul Bloom, have even argued "against empathy", suggesting that unfocused empathy can be biased or paralysing, and that rational compassion (guided by principle rather than raw emotion) is what we need. This debate underscores that compassion must be paired with wisdom to be effective. Structured compassion—as seen in effective altruism movements (which try to channel compassion through evidence-based action)

or restorative justice programs (which channel empathy into reconciliation processes)—might offer ways to systematically combat cruelty and injustice.

It's also worth examining if compassion has limits. Are there people or situations where compassion fails? For instance, how do we respond compassionately to perpetrators of evil? Some argue that extending compassion to evildoers is necessary to break cycles of violence (for example, rehabilitation rather than purely punitive justice), while others fear that too much empathy for the wrongdoer can lead to excusing harm. This is a delicate balance. Perhaps the ideal is to have compassion for every person's basic humanity—recognising that even perpetrators were often victims of something—but still hold them firmly accountable out of compassion for their victims and potential future victims. True compassion doesn't mean the absence of accountability; it means we aim for outcomes that reduce overall suffering and transform conflict into peace.

Compassion stands as the counterforce to humanity's often-evidenced worst impulses. It expands our moral circle, motivates us to alleviate suffering, and humanises those whom indifference or hatred would render invisible. It has deep roots in our nature but needs nurturing by culture, reason, and practice. Its strength lies in how profoundly it resonates with our sense of meaning—people generally admire acts of compassion and often find personal fulfilment in helping others. As technology and social change make us more interconnected, cultivating a robust, wise compassion might be our best hope to counter new forms of dehumanisation.

The 21st-century landscape of digital communication and media has altered the way we form moral judgments and sympathies—often not for the better. In theory, the internet could spread understanding by connecting diverse people. In practice, it has also given rise to echo chambers, misinformation, and tribalism that distort moral clarity and empathy. The term “information pathologies” can describe how the very channels by

which we learn about the world may be infecting our moral discourse.

One particular issue is the echo chamber effect on social media and online forums. An echo chamber is an environment where a person only encounters opinions and “facts” that reinforce their existing beliefs, with alternate insights filtered out. The algorithms of online platforms curate content that align with users’ preferences and engagement history. Over time, this creates a feedback loop, with each group-think bubble growing more convinced of its own righteousness, and often becoming more extreme (a phenomenon sometimes called polarisation by opinion amplification). Studies have found that social media fosters clusters of people who rarely interact with outsiders; these bubbles limit exposure to different perspectives and reinforce presupposed narratives and ideologies. When we only hear one group’s moral narratives, our capacity for empathy towards other groups erode. Instead, out-group members are easily caricatured or demonised because their humanity or reasonable concerns are never presented to us in the echo chamber. This digital siloing fuels tribalism: people identify strongly with their virtual tribe and may heap scorn or abuse on perceived outsiders. Online, it’s easier to engage in cruelty because individuals operate at a psychological distance—known as the online disinhibition effect—where the other is just a faceless avatar, not an actual human being before you.

Misinformation and propaganda thrive in such polarised, emotionally charged environments. Unlike in the broadcast era, the internet is an open battleground of information, where the outrageous often outcompetes the measured. False or misleading content spreads rapidly, especially if it triggers anger or fear—two emotions that can temporarily short-circuit compassion. For example, during recent crises, conspiracy theories and rumours on social media have scapegoated certain groups, leading to real-world violence. The structure of online engagement itself often distorts moral discussion. Platforms reward content that generates strong reactions—and outrage is a potent driver of

engagement. As a result, outrage culture has flourished: people perform their moral stances aggressively in order to gain validation from their in-group. This sometimes leads to performative cruelty in the name of righteousness (e.g., online “pile-ons” or cancel culture episodes, where individuals are hounded and dehumanised for missteps, with little room for empathy or forgiveness). It’s a bitter irony that tools which could have deepened our understanding of each other have, in some cases, made us less empathetic and more judgmental. Complex human stories get reduced to tweets; genuine truth-seeking dialogue gives way to enflamed conflict. The anonymity and distance on the internet can unleash a latent sadism in some—a tendency to troll, bully, or take pleasure in someone’s downfall in ways they wouldn’t likely do face-to-face. This is a new kind of banal evil: ordinary users, perhaps otherwise kind in person, can become cruel in online mobs, not fully grasping the real harm they are causing.

Identity and tribalism online also mean people’s moral views become entwined with their group identity (national, political, religious etc.). When facts or empathy for others threaten a personal identity, they are often rejected. For instance, climate change science or pandemic advice might be dismissed by some not purely on factual grounds but because accepting them feels like siding with an enemy tribe. Similarly, calls for refugee aid can meet reflexive hostility in those for whom such issues have been framed as partisan battle lines. Identity-driven moral bifurcation erodes the ability to see another’s humanity or to recognise aspects of the truth in their arguments.

Another pathology is the sheer speed and overload of information. We are bombarded with news of suffering—humanitarian crises, tragedies—to the point of numbness. Activists coin terms like “compassion fatigue” to describe how people, after a certain saturation point, stop emotionally responding to appeals for help. The constant stimulation also rewards snap judgments over careful deliberation; thus, nuanced moral issues get condensed into viral slogans or memes.

Misinformation can manipulate emotions: so-called “fake news” often uses startling, emotionally charged falsehoods that spread faster than fact-checks can catch up. In the confusion, many lose a clear sense of truth, making them susceptible to demagogues who scapegoat and oversimplify. This epistemic chaos undermines empathy because empathy relies on understanding reality accurately.

However, the same technology that enables echo chambers also allows unprecedented cross-cultural communication and exposure to real stories. Social media has facilitated empathy at times—viral images or videos of suffering have pricked the world’s conscience and spurred aid. The internet hosts countless initiatives for dialogue, charitable giving, and spreading awareness of others’ plights. The challenge is to remedy the pathologies: by promoting digital literacy (teaching people how to recognise false information and seek diverse sources), by tweaking algorithms to prioritise reliable information and perhaps even empathy-evoking content rather than just incendiary posts. Individuals could curate their feeds to include different perspectives, practice restraint in online comments, and remember the human being on the other side of the screen.

Maintaining moral clarity and empathy requires deliberate effort. It may mean occasionally unplugging from the rage-inducing news cycle, in order to personally recover and reflect. What’s clear is that if we allow our information ecosystem to remain poisoned, our capacity for compassion and rational moral agency will decline, and that vacuum can be easily filled by authoritarians and extremists.

Modern media has, in effect, globalised the “banality of evil” problem: passive scrolling and sharing can make us unwitting participants in spreading harmful ideas or normalising cruelty. But it can also globalise compassion: a generous crowdfunding response to a distant disaster shows the upside. The moral struggle continues on new terrain, and we must learn new skills of discernment and digital empathy to carry compassion forward.

As technology advances, humanity is on the cusp of wielding powers once attributed to gods and fables. Artificial intelligence, autonomous robotics, genetic engineering, omnipresent knowledge and surveillance—these emerging domains hold both immense promise and peril. They raise a stark question: Will our moral wisdom and compassion evolve quickly enough to guide these powerful tools, or will we succumb to new forms of tyranny and catastrophe? Thinkers like Nick Bostrom and Elieser Yudkowsky have warned that certain technologies, especially a superintelligent AI, could pose existential threats—risks that could wipe out humanity or drastically curtail our future. Moreover, even without apocalyptic scenarios, these technologies could enable unprecedented oppression if abused by authoritarian regimes or unscrupulous actors.

Imagine Orwell's *1984* but with modern technology: it's now far easier for a government to be near-omniscient about citizens' daily lives. The social credit system in China—rating citizens based on various behaviours and associations—is one facet, using algorithms to reward or punish and ultimately to shape behaviour dictated by the government. Totalitarian countries are eagerly importing Chinese surveillance technology, spreading this model of digital authoritarianism. If such tools had existed in the 20th century, one shudders to think how much more efficiently the Gestapo or KGB could have crushed dissent. The peril is that these technologies give unprecedented leverage to power, and if that power lacks compassion or accountability, tyranny can reach terrifying precision.

Autonomous weapons—often called “killer robots”—are already in development. These are AI-driven drones or machines that can select and attack targets without human decision. They could operate at speeds and scales impossible for humans to control. The danger here is not only accidents (an AI misidentifying civilians as combatants) but also the ease of mass violence: an authoritarian regime could deploy swarms of armed drones to eliminate dissidents en masse, or a terrorist could release AI-guided explosives that hunt down specific groups of people.

Without compassion or conscience, machines make warfare even more lethal. International campaigns are urging bans on fully autonomous weapons, akin to bans on chemical weapons, precisely because of the moral horror they portend.

Given these hazards, what hope is there for mitigation? One path is to try to imbue our emerging technology with ethical safeguards—to encode compassion or its functional equivalent. AI ethics researchers propose various guidelines: ensuring AI respects human rights, is transparent, and operates under meaningful human control. There are efforts to develop AI principles that emphasise beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice. Some suggest we might need AI to have empathy: for example, robots in caregiving roles programmed to detect distress and respond kindly. Whether genuine empathy is possible for AI is a deep question, but at a minimum, AI can be constrained by rules that mirror compassionate values (for example, a self-driving car must prioritise not harming pedestrians). Yet, pessimists note that a superintelligence might circumvent any rules we hard-code unless it truly understands and endorses our values—a very hard thing to guarantee.

Writers like Toby Ord speak of humanity being in a critical period—this century may decide whether we fumble our god-like powers and collapse, or harness them for a flourishing future. Nick Bostrom has used the metaphor of humanity being like “children playing with a bomb”—we have powerful science but not the maturity to handle it safely. Julian Savulescu and Ingmar Persson go so far as to argue that we might need to biologically or chemically enhance our moral capacities (e.g., increase empathy or impulse control through drugs or gene mods) to ensure we don’t abuse our technological power. They note it’s far easier for one malicious person to harm millions today (with a superbug or AI) than it is for one good person to similarly help millions, thus creating a dangerous imbalance. While “moral bio-enhancement” is controversial—it raises spectres of mind control or loss of free will—the fact it’s even floated underscores the desperation of some thinkers about our moral preparedness. They highlight that

evolution gave us Stone Age emotions that are prone to tribalism and short-termism, but now we have nuclear weapons and synthetic biology. To be “fit for the future”, they argue, we might need deliberate intervention to boost our altruism or global empathy, or else risk catastrophe.

The peril of power in the technological era is both an external and internal moral test. External, because technology can drastically amplify the reach of both good and evil—a compassionate policy can save millions (say, a cheap vaccine distributed widely), whereas a malicious use can kill millions. And internal because wielding such power responsibly demands virtues that our species has struggled to practice consistently: humility, foresight, and empathy for the unseen other.

Standing at this precipice of history, it is clear that humanity’s moral struggle—between compassion and evil, between moral responsibility and unchecked power—is reaching a new intensity. The future could unfold into dystopia or utopia, or something in between, depending on the choices we make now. What must change to tilt the balance towards a more humane future?

Moral evolution begins with the psyche. If humans have tendencies to bias, selfishness, and fear of the other, then individuals must consciously cultivate counter-tendencies: critical thinking, empathy, and a sense of human-beingness. This means teaching children how to perspective-take (imagine life in another’s shoes), how to resolve conflicts peacefully, and how to spot and correct one’s own biases. Likewise, promoting media literacy is crucial in the digital age—young people (and adults) should learn how propaganda and misinformation work, so they are less easily manipulated into hatred. On a more experimental front, techniques like compassion meditation (derived from Buddhist practice) have been shown to strengthen brain pathways associated with empathy and altruism. If we consider that prejudice and callousness are, to some degree, habits of mind, then deliberately training the opposite habits can yield more compassionate members of society.

We often treat technology as an autonomous force, but it is in fact shaped by human choices. We should aim to design technologies that by default promote empathy and understanding rather than isolation and division. For example, social media algorithms could be tweaked to promote cross-cutting content that exposes people to constructive dialogue instead of only reinforcing biases. Online platforms could prioritise compassionate communication—perhaps through features that encourage users to pause and consider before posting an angry comment. These are interesting experiments. One project found that prompting users to imagine the perspective of someone from the opposing political party before reading that person's post led to less toxic replies. Small design changes like this can nudge users toward empathy. In AI development more broadly, implementing the principle of "Ethics by Design" is key. Just as security and reliability are built into systems, so should ethical considerations—whether it's an AI medical diagnosis tool being made transparent and bias-checked to treat patients fairly, or an autonomous vehicle programmed to prioritise human life in split-second decisions.

Preventing dystopian outcomes by nurturing a more compassionate civilisation is a vital undertaking. It requires aligning many pieces: the human heart, the structures of society, and the tools we create. We will have to be both idealistic and pragmatic—idealistic in holding fast to visions of a just, empathetic world, and pragmatic in implementing incremental changes and safeguards that move us in that direction. The moral struggle of humanity is ongoing; each generation must contend with the nature of evil, the vulnerability of compassion, and the peril of power in its own context. Our generation's context is one of hyper-connection and emerging super-powered technology, which raises the stakes extraordinarily high.

A more compassionate society tends to be more resilient and less prone to totalitarianism. A populace educated in critical thinking is less likely to fall for hateful demagogues. In essence, moral progress grows from itself, while cruelty feeds on itself. We

must actively choose and cultivate the better angels of our nature—or the worst demons of our nature, whether banal or wilfully malevolent, may rise with catastrophic force. It is a choice each person takes.

Ultimately, understanding how easily cruelty can be normalised or rationalised steels us to reject complacency. Appreciating how fragile yet vital compassion is inspires us to protect and enlarge it. And recognising the peril of power—that any tool or authority can be turned to evil if not guided by conscience—means we must demand ethics at the core of innovation and leadership. These are the reflections and lessons that emerge from humanity’s long moral struggle, and upon them rest the prospects of our shared future.

Amongst more auspicious outcomes, these two disastrous scenarios are possible for our near future: the self-extinction of humanity through war; or a dystopian, psychopath-controlled world. Under the malevolent central control of all-encompassing surveillance and guidance technology, and without any hope of the system’s collapse, the latter outcome is even worse than the former.

Authoritarian governments will find it ever easier with technological advancements to zombify and control their populations. When such a government, helped by surveillance AI, is able to know what you are thinking and feeling, where you are and what you are doing, has control over all the information you receive, and knows your personality impulses precisely—what hope has anyone to escape from the hell constructed for them by the resident psychopaths?

The pressure to evolve to survive has mounted for humanity; given the stakes and the alternatives, we have to get better. The time window for resolving the problems and mitigating the risks is now, and we may never get the chance again.

PART 4

Short Stories

An Unexpected Letter

It had been raining for three days straight, the kind of relentless downpour that turned the village roads to mud and the air to mist. Katherine sat at her kitchen table, staring out of the window, watching the droplets race each other down the glass. A fire crackled in the hearth behind her, but its warmth did not provide comfort.

On the table lay a single letter. The envelope was creased at the edges, the ink slightly smudged from having been carried for too long in damp post bags. Her name, etched in flamboyant calligraphy, stared back at her.

She hadn't opened it yet. It had arrived the day before, slipped under her door by Mr Harris, who delivered the post when the rain made the usual service impossible. She had set it aside, telling herself she'd get to it later. But even now, the next morning, it lay there, untouched.

Letters brought news, and news had rarely been good—not since the day she had received notice that her mother had passed away peacefully in the night. She hadn't cried then. There didn't seem to be enough energy left in her to produce the tears.

The fire snapped loudly, startling her, jolting her to reach out and pick up the envelope.

It felt heavier than it should. Her fingers hesitated on the edge. What could it possibly say? She had no close family left, no friends who would send a letter instead of calling. And yet, here it was, waiting, in a handwriting that seemed familiar.

She slid her finger under the seal and tore it open. The paper inside was thick, expensive. She unfolded it slowly.

The letter was brief—only a few lines written in the same extravagant script as the address.

“Katherine,

I've thought about you every day since we last met. There are things I should have said back then, things I should have done. I don't expect you to forgive me, but I hope you can understand. I'll

be in the village on the first day of May. If you'd like to talk, please meet me by the oak tree at noon.

—J."

Katherine stared at the words in disbelief. J. It couldn't be. It had been years. Too many years.

The oak tree. That old, gnarled thing that stood on the hill at the edge of the village, where they used to meet when they were younger, before everything fell apart. She hadn't been there for ten years. It was where she had last hoped to see him, on a day much like this, just before he left for good.

She'd waited for him then. Waited for hours, watching the road, hoping he'd change his mind, but he never came.

Now, he was asking her to meet again, after all this time—today.

She drew out her pocket watch. The morning had already progressed to half-past eleven—but she had read the letter just in time—and if she left now, she could make it to the oak tree before noon.

Katherine paced the small kitchen. She had built a life without him. She had learned not to think of him. And yet, here he was, pulling her back with a few simple words.

The rain showed no sign of stopping. But Katherine grabbed her coat from the hook by the door and stepped out into it.

As she walked, patches of cold rainwater soaked through her outerwear, although she barely noticed. Her feet knew the way, carrying her along the familiar path, past the houses with their drawn curtains, past the churchyard with its leaning gravestones.

When she finally reached the oak tree, it stood just as she remembered—its thick branches spreading wide at the top of small hill, offering shelter from the rain. And beneath it, there he was.

John stood with his back to her, hands in his pockets, gazing at the village below. His hair was streaked with grey now, and his shoulders, once broad and confident, had a slight stoop.

Katherine hesitated for a moment. Then, her voice came out, softer than she'd intended.

"John."

He turned slowly, and their eyes finally met. For a moment, neither of them spoke.

"I'm sorry, Katherine," he said quietly.

The weight of the years unravelled as the rain continued to fall around them. They stood together under the oak tree, in the village where it had all begun, and where, perhaps, something new could start again.

Without warning, he stepped forward, closing the distance between them in a few swift strides. His hands, warm and steady, cupped her face, and before she could say another word, his lips pressed into hers.

The kiss became a storm, fierce and unrelenting, washing away the distance, the pain, the regrets that had kept them apart for so long. It was a kiss that spoke of every moment they had missed, of every night they had spent apart, longing for the other. Katherine's hands fisted in his shirt, pulling him closer, desperate to close the gap that had once felt insurmountable.

When they finally broke apart, both were breathless, their foreheads pressed together as they stood there shielded from the rain, clinging to one another.

"I never stopped loving you," he said. "Not for a second. I tried to move on, but—"

Tears mixed with the remnants of rain on her cheeks as she looked up at him. "I thought I'd lost you forever," she whispered. "I thought I'd ruined everything."

His hands tightened on her. "We were both foolish. But we're here now. You're here. That's all that matters."

Katherine was overcome with the intensity of it all—the rain, the kiss, the overwhelming relief of being back in his arms. She had spent so long imagining this moment, but nothing had prepared her for the reality of it. The feel of his hands on her skin, the heat of him against her lips, the way his heart pounded against her body.

John kissed her again, slower this time. And as they stood there, tangled together, the world seemed to fall away. There was no past, no future—only the present, only them.

When they finally pulled apart again, John smiled at her, brushing a wet strand of hair from her face. “Come with me,” he said softly, his voice full of the warmth and affection she had missed so desperately.

Katherine nodded, her body pulsating with a mixture of excitement and nervous anticipation, remembering a happiness that before that morning she thought had been lost forever.

The Last Train

Ellie checked her phone for the tenth time on the empty platform. 23:57. The last train was supposed to arrive three minutes ago, but the digital board now flashed in bold red: CANCELLED.

She let out a frustrated sigh and sank onto a bench. Rain dripped from the edges of the station's canopy, slipping through the dim glow of fluorescent yellow light.

“Missed it too?”

The voice startled her. She glanced up to see a man, mid-thirties perhaps, standing a few feet away. He had an umbrella tucked under one arm, water dripping from the ends of his dark hair. His suit jacket looked expensive but thoroughly soaked.

“Looks like it,” Ellie replied, trying to sound polite but distant. He didn’t seem to notice her tone.

“Brilliant, isn’t it? Last train, and it’s just... gone. Like it never existed.”

Ellie gave him a thin smile, hoping it would dissuade further conversation. But instead, he dropped onto the other end of the bench.

“Name’s Blake,” he offered.

“Hi,” she responded, reluctantly.

She knew she should get up and call a taxi. But, for a moment, they sat in silence, listening to the rhythmic patter of rain. Blake leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

“So, what’s your excuse for being here this late? Let me guess—workaholic? Or maybe you’re running from a torrid love affair?” His smile was disarming, playful without being intrusive.

“Nothing so dramatic. Just bad luck, mostly.”

“Bad luck? That’s vague.”

She shrugged. “Missed the earlier train because I was stuck helping a customer. Retail life, you know?”

Blake nodded knowingly, though his tailored suit suggested he probably didn’t. “I see. The worthy life of serving the public.”

"What about you?" Ellie asked, turning the question back on him. "What's your excuse?"

Blake's grin faltered slightly, and for a moment, he looked as though he were searching for an answer. "Work meeting ran late," he said finally. "Caught in traffic, then—well, here I am. Story of my life, really."

"You sound oddly resigned to it."

He chuckled. "Maybe I am. Or maybe I'm just tired of fighting against fate."

They fell quiet again, the awkwardness replaced by a curious sense of ease. Ellie glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. There was something strange about Blake, though she couldn't quite put her finger on it. His presence felt... familiar, as if she'd met him before in some dream she couldn't recall.

"You know," Blake said suddenly, "there's something almost poetic about this. Two strangers, stranded together in the middle of the night. Feels like the start of one of those rom-coms, doesn't it?"

Ellie laughed. "If this were a rom-com, the train would magically appear, and we'd both realise it was fate."

"Exactly," Blake agreed. "Then there'd be some dramatic twist—like, you'd be moving to Paris tomorrow, and this would be our last chance to confess our undying love."

"Undying love?" Ellie teased. "Bit much, don't you think?"

"Not if it's fate," he said with mock seriousness. "Fate loves a bit of drama."

Ellie's phone buzzed. She glanced at the screen: a notification from her calendar. Mum's anniversary.

"You okay?" Blake asked, his voice softer now.

She hesitated, then nodded. "Yeah. Just... tomorrow's a hard day."

Blake studied her for a moment, his expression unreadable. "Want to talk about it?"

Ellie shook her head. "Not really."

"Fair enough," he said. "But, for what it's worth, sometimes the hardest days turn out to be the most important."

She frowned at him, puzzled by the weight of his words. Before she could respond, the faint rumble of an engine echoed in the distance. A train's headlights pierced through the rain as it pulled into the station.

Blake stood in response. "Looks like our miracle train's here."

Ellie rose too, suddenly reluctant to let the moment end.
"Where are you headed?"

Blake smiled faintly. "This is where we part ways, I'm afraid."

The train doors slid open, but Blake stayed where he was. Ellie paused in the doorway, glancing over her shoulder.

"Hey, Blake?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks. For the company, I mean."

He nodded. "Take care, Ellie."

She stepped inside, the doors closing behind her. As the train pulled away, she turned to look out the window. But the platform was empty. Blake was gone.

It wasn't until later, as Ellie lay in bed replaying the night in her mind, that she realised something strange: she'd never told him her name.

Dead End Job

The empty call centre was nondescript—fluorescents, cracked plastic chairs, off-brand biscuits in the break room. “Legacy Enquiries”, the contract said. Dan had been told not to worry too much about the name. “Just answer the phone,” the text message said. “Be patient. Be kind. Some of these callers are confused.”

And they were.

The first call came at 2:13 a.m.

“Is it cold?” a woman asked. Her voice was thin, as if it had to travel a long way.

Dan stared at his monitor. No name, no number—just static.

“I—I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Is it cold? Where you are? I remember cold. I miss it, I think.”

She hung up before he could ask more.

The next call, someone asked how long it took a body to decompose. The line went dead when Dan mentioned Google. Then came the man asking whether his cat had forgiven him. Another wanted to know if anyone still made treacle tart like his mum used to.

He took notes, made spreadsheets, convinced himself this was a social experiment or some immersive counselling gig. But the patterns emerged.

None of the callers gave their names.

All of them had questions. Never greetings, never small talk. Always one question.

“Was it my fault?”

“Does anyone remember my voice?”

“Was I ever really loved?”

The night grew heavier. The air around his desk took on a damp, stone-like smell. Dan tried to quit—but the moment he drafted the email, his phone rang.

“Please,” said a boy’s voice. “Don’t go. We don’t have anyone else.”

Dan didn’t send the email.

Three hours in, he stopped keeping time altogether. His calls were longer now, more focused. He began to recognise voices—repeats. Some were angry. Some wept. Some just waited in silence after he'd answered, as though holding the call gave them weight.

And then, his own phone rang.

"Dan," said a voice he hadn't heard since he was nine. "It's your sister."

Carla had died in a lake. Slipped under the ice. No body was ever recovered.

"Why didn't you come?" the voice asked.

Dan wanted to hang up. His hands wouldn't move.

"I waited. It got dark," said Carla's voice. "Mum said you'd come back with the sled. But you never came."

"I didn't know," Dan whispered. "I didn't know you went back out. I'm sorry... Carla.

Silence.

"It's okay. I just wanted to know if you remembered me."

The call disconnected.

After that, the calls changed. They were easier to understand, more lucid. A girl asked what snow tasted like. A man wanted to hear a lullaby. One caller just asked Dan to breathe, slowly, so they could "remember what lungs felt like".

Dan stayed.

He answered every call.

Sometimes he cried. Sometimes he laughed. Sometimes he just listened while the voice raged against their unfinished life.

In the morning, he walked home as the sun bled into the sky, the weight of a hundred regrets dissolving with the night.

She Becomes the Rain

Before dawn, when the air was still cool enough to hold her together, Jacob wrapped his daughter in damp towels and carried her into the kitchen. She shimmered faintly in his arms, her edges curling away like steam from a kettle.

He set her down in front of the largest bowl of boiling water. Clouds of vapour rose, and she breathed them in greedily. The towel darkened, heavy with moisture, and her outline grew sharper—two pale hands, a small round face, hair that drifted as if underwater.

"You were nearly gone when I woke," he said.

She smiled through lips that sometimes weren't there. "I was dreaming," she said. "About rain."

Rain. The word was almost forbidden in Dushtaven now. It hadn't fallen in three years. The fields beyond the town were cracked mosaics; wells were guarded by armed patrols; even the air seemed reluctant to move. The drought had taken the cattle first, then the crops, and now it was taking the people—one fever at a time.

But she wasn't sick. The doctor had called her *a phenomenon*. The neighbours had called her *unnatural*. His wife, before she left, had called her *a mistake*.

Jacob called her Clara. And keeping her alive had become the whole shape of his life.

He'd sold the last of the goats for a second-hand humidifier, but the town rationed electricity now, and the machine stood silent most nights. Every coin he earned hauling water barrels for the mayor went to buying steam—wood for the stove, candles to heat pans in the corners of their small cottage, tea kettles that never boiled for tea.

In the evenings, when the heat outside thinned enough for breath, he told her stories: forests so damp the ground squelched underfoot, rivers loud as crowds, skies so swollen with water they

burst into silver storms. She listened with wide, flickering eyes, her misted fingers twining with his.

One night, as they sat by the candle-pan, she asked, "What happens if I can't drink enough air?"

"Then I'll find more. However far I have to go."

"But if you can't?" she pressed.

"You don't need to think about that."

But he thought about it every day.

The last water jug emptied at noon a week later. The next delivery wasn't due until Monday, and the mayor's guards had stopped letting him take scraps from the well. He tried keeping her still, telling her stories, distracting her from the thinning of her edges. But her face was faint, and her voice came like wind through cracks.

"Dad," she said softly. "It's all right."

"No, no—it's not. I'll go to the hills. There might be dew. Just hold on."

But when he opened the door, the air was a wall of heat. His lungs felt scorched.

He turned back—

She was standing in the middle of the room, hair lifting like smoke.

He stepped forward, but the motion stirred her. A curl of her arm drifted loose.

"Wait—" His voice broke. "Clara, please."

"Dad," she said, her face flickering like a candle flame. "I think I'm meant to go."

"No. I'll climb to the hills—find dew, or ice in the shadow of stones. Just wait for me."

She shook her head, the movement sending wisps of her hair unravelling into the warm air. "You've kept me here so long. But I don't belong in one place."

He crossed to her, his hands trying to hold her shape still, but they passed through the cool shimmer of her.

Outside, the horizon trembled with heat. But above—above was a thin, new thing: a pale wisp of cloud, alone in a sheet of sky.

Her edges began to loosen. Not like water evaporating, but like a path unfolding. She rose, coiling upwards in slow spirals, her outline catching the sun in silver glints.

She paused at the roof beams, her voice drifting down like a breath on glass. "I'll be the rain."

Then she threaded herself through the open window, and rose up like a gentle gust of wind to become part of the sky. The lone cloud above swelled, as though it had been waiting for her.

Each day, Jacob stood in the doorway and looked up at the sky.

Sometimes, in the bluest of stretches, he would see a cloud curl into the shape of delicate fingers. And on the mornings when the wind smelled faintly of wet earth, he set out a bowl on the step, knowing she was on her way home.

It Was Perfect

He found the room on a Thursday, behind a wall that wasn't there yesterday. No hinges, no latch—just a clean rectangle in the plaster. When he pressed his hand against it, it gave like skin.

Inside, the space was blank. Pale. Airless. But the moment he said, "Light," a golden globe bloomed on the ceiling, humming warmly. "Chair," he muttered next, and one unfolded from nothing—plush, deep, exactly like his grandad's old recliner.

He laughed then. And the room laughed back.

Every visit left him calmer. Sharper. He'd say, "Peace," and the room would wrap around him like a weighted blanket. "Love," and a version of Laura would appear—softer than real life, wordless, adoring.

He lost a weekend once. Thought it had only been a few hours. But he was smiling again, wasn't he? Eating. Sleeping. Creating.

The room didn't judge. The room understood.

Soon, the outside became unbearable. The clatter of dishes. Laura's voice, asking if he was okay. Her eyes, heavy with suspicion.

He tried to explain. "There's this space, and in it, I can be—"

"You're not in anything," she snapped. "You're out. Out of time, out of reach. Out of your head."

She started locking up his laptop. Cancelling his calls. He'd sneak into the chamber just to breathe.

One day, she was gone. No note. Just her scent clinging to the pillow.

He didn't search.

He simply went back into the room and said: "Bring her back."

She returned, lips soft, eyes vacant, looping the same three sentences: "I'm glad you're okay." "Everything's fine now." "Let's not talk about it."

He cried in her lap. She smiled, stroked his hair. Over and over. But the room began to falter.

The warmth dimmed. The conjured Laura stuttered. The furniture softened, drooped like wax in the sun. He told the room to fix it. It didn't. He shouted. Screamed.

The room echoed him back, word for word, louder, until his voice came back distorted, cracked—Peace... peace... PEACE...—like mocking laughter through a drainpipe.

He told it to stop. It didn't.

The outside world crumbled.

Letters piled at the door, some in red. The electricity flickered. Food vanished from the fridge. Mold rose in patches like bruises on the wallpaper. But he stayed inside.

The room shrank.

At first, a metre or two at a time. Then inches. His chair dissolved. The golden light browned to sickly yellow. The air grew thick, cloying, like burnt sugar and rot.

He coughed. Asked for “Fresh air.”

Nothing.

“Help.”

Silence.

“Let me out.”

The walls pressed in. Cold. Damp. Close.

He screamed until his voice cracked, then whimpered nonsense to the dark. A child, alone in a box of wishes.

Outside, the neighbours assumed he'd moved. The flat was silent, the curtains never opened. Someone reported a smell.

When the council finally broke in, they found only decay.

Mould, filth, and the decomposing body of a man in a foetal curl—emaciated, eyes open.

On the wall behind him, written in something brown and flaking:

“It was perfect.”

Two Cups

The bell above the door chimed softly as Samuel stepped inside, the rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee welcoming him.

He shuffled to his usual spot by the window, the one with the best view of the bustling street outside. And, as always, he ordered two cups of coffee—one black, one with just a dash of milk.

The waitress, a young woman with kind eyes and an understanding smile, never asked why. She simply placed both cups on the table, offered her usual, “Here you go, Sam,” and walked away.

Samuel sat there, hands wrapped around his cup, as the world passed by. He could still see her there, across from him—the way she used to rest her chin on one hand, stirring her coffee absentmindedly with the other.

He smiled faintly, remembering how she’d always teased him about ordering the same thing every day. And he’d laugh, because it was true. He liked routine. He liked knowing she’d always be there, sitting across from him.

But now, the seat in front of him remained empty. It had been two years since she was gone, but Samuel still ordered her coffee. He couldn’t bear the thought of the table with only one cup sitting there.

He reached for the cup meant for her, fingers trembling slightly as he traced the rim. He never drank it, just let it sit there, letting the steam rise and vanish into the air. It was enough to imagine, just for a little while, that she was still with him.

Outside, life carried on. People hurried past the café window, chasing buses, checking their watches, lost in the urgency of their lives. But inside, time moved differently. Slowly. Softly.

Samuel sighed and glanced down at the coffee across from him, still untouched, still waiting.

Maybe one day he'd stop ordering it. Maybe one day he'd sit at a different table, or come at a different time, or maybe even stay home altogether.

But not today. Today, he let the coffee sit, let the memory linger, and let himself believe—just for a moment—that love never truly dies.

Twelve Minutes

He stood before the machine, hands in his coat pockets, eyes fixed on the brass slot. Above it, instructions glowed in soft blue light:

INSERT GRIEF ITEM. PROCESSING TIME: 12 MINUTES. YOU WILL FEEL LESS.

His fingers closed around the ring in his pocket. A slim gold band, worn thin on one side. He had kept it for three years now, turning it over like a prayer stone, sometimes pressing it to his lips when no one was looking.

Twelve minutes.

Around him, the hall was quiet but not empty. A woman sat on a bench, blank-eyed, a crumpled sock in her lap. A teenager leaned against the far wall, a cracked phone case in hand. Neither looked at him.

He pulled the ring out and rolled it between thumb and forefinger. In the machine's polished surface, his reflection wavered—a man, growing older with grief like a weight stitched under his skin.

Twelve minutes.

His hand hovered. If he let it take the ring, would it take the smell of her hair, the memory of her laugh as they painted the bedroom, the way she whispered his name when half-asleep? Or only the ache—the sharp, sudden stabs, the hollow mornings, the dreams that dissolved into salt on waking?

The woman at the bench rose. She walked past—her eyes watery, glazed with traces of red. She dropped the sock into the machine, paused briefly, then walked away.

His fingers closed. Slowly, deliberately, he put the ring back in his pocket.

The machine waited.

He turned and left.

The Lit Fuse

Across the street, she's talking to a friend on her phone, sunlight threading gold through her hair.

It's her. Always her.

In Rome, she was Lucia—plague took her. In Warsaw, Anka—a soldier's bullet. In Kyoto, Mai—his jealous rival's knife. This life, she's Davina. And he remembers.

The memory came back two days ago after he fell down the stairs: a rush, a drowning, all the lives folding into one sharp point. Names, faces, the taste of their last kiss, the weight of their last breath. And the terrible certainty: his love is the fuse.

He watches her laugh, the corner of her mouth lifting just so. His body aches to go to her. But the pattern's clear now, unmistakable. Loving her means losing her.

She glances across—catches his gaze. Something flickers across her face. Recognition? No. Just polite curiosity. Not yet.

He tells himself to look away.

He does.

He convinces himself to take a breath, to turn, to walk.

But then—

She's in the road, fumbling with her bag, phone slipping from her hand. A car barrels down the lane, too fast, too close.

He's running before he knows.

The air smashes from her lungs as he yanks her back, arms tight around her waist, the car blaring past in a blur of metal and hot wind. She falls into him, breathless, eyes wide, face inches from his.

"Thank you," she gasps, dazed. "I... I didn't see..."

He lets go. He should step back. Should vanish into the crowd, slip free before the knot tightens.

But it's too late. She's looking at him now, really looking, brow furrowed—like she's searching some half-remembered name, some shape in a dream.

And just like that, the fuse is lit.

Another Life

He was staring out of the train window, his expression distant, as though his thoughts were somewhere far beyond the station's railway tracks. He looked older, but not by much. The familiar furrow between his brows remained—the same small crease that appeared when he was thinking too hard, the one she used to smooth away with her fingertips.

Sarah's fingers twitched against her paper coffee cup, her mind racing through the possibilities. Should she get up? Wave? Call his name?

But she didn't move. Instead, she watched him the way she used to, quietly, observing him in the way only someone who once loved him could. Her eyes traced the familiar lines of his face, the shape of his jaw, the way his lips parted slightly as though he were about to speak.

And then, as if he could feel her gaze, David turned his head towards her. He blinked, his expression shifting—recognition, surprise, something deeper.

Her train lurched forward. She saw his lips part wider, the distance swallowing the words he might have been about to say. She held his gaze for as long as she could, watching as he disappeared out of sight.

Sarah dropped her head against the glass. In another life, she might have jumped off the train. In another life, she might have smiled and said *hello*.

But not this life.

She let him become a memory again, left behind on a station in a city she would soon pass through and forget.

Letters to the Sea

Elias had spent his whole life by the sea, a fisherman in his youth, and now in his twilight years, he lived quietly, collecting shells and repairing old nets out of habit, though he no longer had need for them. Every morning, he would walk down to the shore just as the sun began to rise. He'd sit on a large, smooth rock, watching the sea wake up, listening to the gulls as they wove through the currents of air rising above the water.

He would sit there on the beach with a small notepad, his hands weathered and slow, but steady. He would write a few words, sometimes many, sometimes just a line or two. Then, when the letter was done, he'd tuck it into a glass bottle, cork it carefully, and walk to the water's edge. There, he would kneel, and with tenderness, release the bottle into the waves. The sea would claim it, carry it away, and Elias would watch as the fragile vessel faded, blurring into the blue expanse.

No one knew what the letters said. Elias never spoke of them, and no one ever asked. He was known as a gentle man, though a man of few words. It was simply assumed the letters were his way of keeping his mind busy, a quaint tradition to pass the time in his later years.

One summer, a girl named Anya arrived in the village with her parents, trying to find a place that felt like home. She noticed Elias regularly sitting by the shore each morning. One day, when she gathered the courage, she approached him.

"Excuse me," she said, her voice soft in the breeze. "May I ask what you write in those letters?"

Elias looked at her, his eyes as blue as the water behind him, a lifetime of stories hidden in their depths, and for a moment, it seemed as though he might not answer. But then, after the silence, he responded, "They're letters to the sea."

Anya was intrigued. "Do you ever get a reply?" she asked, sitting down beside him.

Elias looked back out at the horizon, where the sea and sky stretched endlessly away. “I’ve written to the sea since I was a young man. I started when I lost someone I loved deeply. At first, the letters were full of anger and sorrow, things I couldn’t say to anyone else. But over time, the words changed. They became letters of gratitude, of wonder. Now, I write because the sea understands. It’s always there, always listening.”

Anya was quiet, watching the waves roll in. “That’s beautiful,” she said after a while.

Elias nodded, his gaze never leaving the water. “The sea is always moving, always changing, carrying things away but bringing new things to the shore. We don’t always understand its ways, but there’s a peace in being here and watching the waves.”

The two sat in silence for a while, listening to the gentle rush of the tide and the distant calls of the gulls. Then, Elias reached into his bag and pulled out a small, empty bottle. He handed it to Anya.

“Here,” he said. “Why don’t you try? Write something. It doesn’t have to be much. Just whatever you feel right now.”

Anya hesitated at first, then took the bottle. She picked up a small pebble from the beach, turning it in her hand as she thought. Then, with a shy smile, she sat back down and began to write.

From that day on, Anya and Elias met every morning by the sea, each with their own bottle to send out into the waves. Anya found that, as the days passed, the weight of her thoughts grew lighter. The letters were never meant for anyone in particular, and yet they seemed to find their place in the world, carried away on the tide.

Years later, after Elias had passed on, people would sometimes find bottles washed up on the shore—letters from long ago, carrying something special: the quiet love of a man who had made peace with the sea.

The Empty Bench

Eleanor lived in a crumbling house at the edge of the cliffs overlooking the ocean. Her house was the last one before the land gave way to the boundless expanse of water below. The townsfolk rarely visited her, not out of malice but out of respect. Eleanor had lived there for as long as anyone could remember, and her quiet, solemn presence gave her an almost mythical status in the town.

Every day, at dusk, Eleanor would leave her house and walk towards the cliff's edge. There, she would sit on a weathered bench, looking out to sea. No one was quite sure why she did this, but it had become a part of the daily rhythm—Eleanor at the cliffs, the sun dipping below the horizon, and the waves crashing endlessly against the rocks below.

But there was something different about that evening. Eleanor felt the weight of something coming, something that had been long buried beneath the tides.

As she sat on her bench, her frail hands gripping the worn wooden beam, Eleanor's eyes were drawn to the distant sea. At first, it was just a shadow—a flicker at the edge of her vision—but then it grew, becoming more distinct. A ship. An old, grand ship with tattered sails and a hull darkened by the sea's grasp. It was drifting slowly towards the cliffs, towards her.

Eleanor hadn't seen that ship in over sixty years, not since the night it had disappeared, swallowed by a storm that had raged so fiercely it had left the town battered and broken. Everyone had believed it had sunk, with all hands aboard lost. But Eleanor had known better. She had always known the ship would return.

The vessel grew closer, and as it did, the wind died, the waves quieting. There, on the deck stood a figure, his coat whipping in a breeze that seemed to exist only for him.

It was Captain James Allard, her James. The love of her youth, the man who had promised to return to her but had been taken by the sea. Yet there he was, unchanged by time.

"Eleanor," his voice carrying across the distance between them.
"I've come for you."

She had waited for this moment, for this impossible return. For years, she had sat on the bench, watching, hoping, and now, at last, he had come back to her.

The cliff's edge loomed ahead, but she did not stop. She was no longer afraid. The sea, which had once taken everything from her, now beckoned her with the promise of reunion.

As she stepped into the air, a wind caught her, gentle and soft, and she felt herself being lifted. She didn't fall; she floated, weightless, her heart light for the first time in decades.

The townsfolk would say, in the days to come, that Eleanor had simply vanished. That one evening, she had walked to the cliffs and never returned. Some said she had finally succumbed to the grief that had haunted her for so long. Others spoke in hushed voices of the ghost ship, of Captain Allard, and the love that had transcended death.

But the sea kept its secrets well, and no one would ever truly know what had happened that night. All that remained was the empty bench at the edge of the cliffs, and the relentless sound of waves crashing against the rocks below.

Porcelain

When Harry lost his wife, he shattered.

It began with his hands. He couldn't bear how they trembled at the funeral, how useless they felt in the dark days after. So he had them replaced—cool, perfect porcelain, white as bone, fingers permanently steady. The surgeon assured him they'd never age, never ache.

"They won't feel," the man added, almost as an afterthought.

"That's the point," Harry replied.

Next went his chest. His heart had been breaking every morning, a dull crack widening behind his ribs. The porcelain model—flawless, hollow—sat smooth and still beneath his shirt, resisting even the heaviest grief.

"Still breathing?" the surgeon joked.

"Barely," Harry said.

Over the months, more parts followed. Legs, to walk without the weight of memory. Shoulders, to shrug off regret. A jaw, to stop the stammering apologies he no longer believed in. Strangers began to stare at his smile—a cold, perfect arc on an unmoving face.

His voice, when it came, sounded the same. But duller. As though echoing through a teacup.

Still, Harry felt lighter. Less vulnerable. When his sister rang to tell him his dog had died, he simply said, "Thank you for letting me know," and hung up. No lump in his throat. No sick feeling behind his eyes.

His last visit to the surgeon was brief.

"I want you to take my skull."

The man looked up, startled. "There'll be nothing left but your eyes."

"I don't want to feel anymore," Harry said. "I want to be complete."

The surgeon sighed. "Then you'll be empty."

Harry didn't reply.

The procedure took days. When it was over, he admired himself in the mirror: a gleaming, fragile figure of pale ceramic. Delicate as a statue. Perfect. He couldn't feel his feet on the floor, couldn't tell if the room was cold or warm.

His eyes remained—the last organic pieces. Soft. Wet. Vulnerable.

He waited for the tears. He thought of her laugh, his wedding day, her head sleeping on his chest. But nothing came. Just a dim pressure behind his gaze. A ghost of feeling, sealed inside the shell.

He stood there for a long time, watching his unchanging face. Then he turned out the light.

In the dark, the porcelain creaked faintly as it cooled. Like old china settling in a box no one would open again.

The Woman in a Cloak

Arthur had been feeling lost for a long time. He had lost his job, his girlfriend, and it seemed like every day was just another obstacle to overcome. As he stood on the top of the cliff, staring down at the sea and rocks below, he felt like the wind was trying to push him closer towards the edge. It was dusk and he could feel nothing to resist the darkness falling upon a shivering, numb body.

As night fell, a man in a suit appeared behind him. Arthur was surprised and told the man that he just wanted to be left alone. The visitor smiled to reveal sharp, glinting teeth; its hands were claws, positioned upright to attack.

The creature burst into blue flames and hovered up off the ground, ready to descend upon its prey.

Arthur was terrified; cowering in fear, he closed his eyes, expecting the inevitable. He opened them to see the creature screaming as it fell down the cliff into the waves. In its place was a beautiful woman wearing a cloak and hood, standing on the edge of the cliff next to him. She didn't say anything. She just looked out to sea.

Arthur began to visit the clifftop every evening. The woman was always there, waiting for him, looking out to sea. They stood in silence and watched the golden glow of sunset over the water together. Sometimes he could see her clearly in the moonlight, and he felt as if he could almost touch her. At other times it got so dark that he could only imagine her standing there, on the same spot, looking out to sea. With sunrise, she disappeared with the first rays of the day.

Tree 113

Beneath the dense, grey blanket of clouds that stretched across the sky, an ancient oak stood alone, the sentinel of a forgotten meadow, its roots deep and strong, intertwined with the bones of the earth. If trees could remember, this one surely did. It had stood witness to the rise and fall of empires, to the slow march of time that turned bustling villages into ghostly ruins, where ivy crept over crumbling stone and moss reclaimed the rest.

A figure moved slowly through the tall grass of the meadow. A woman, wrapped in a faded cloak of green, her face half-hidden beneath a hood. She walked with a purpose, though her steps were light, barely disturbing the wildflowers underfoot. In her hands, she held a small bundle, wrapped tightly in cloth.

As she reached the ancient oak, she paused, her gaze lifting to the tree's weathered bark. For a moment, the wind stilled. The woman knelt at the base of the trunk, her fingers brushing the ground, tracing the shapes of unseen patterns in the soil.

"This is the place," she whispered, her voice barely more than a sigh.

With careful hands, she began to dig, the earth soft and pliant beneath her touch. When the hole was deep enough, she placed the bundle gently inside and returned the earth. For a long time, she sat there, her hand resting over the soil.

And then, as the first raindrop fell, she stood, her eyes lingering on the spot where the bundle lay buried. Without a word, she turned and walked away, her figure growing smaller until she slowly dissolved into the horizon of the meadow. The oak remained, its roots now cradling a secret, a memory long forgotten by the world but held within the heart of the earth.

Case Closed

Detective Alan Graves surveyed the crime scene with the detached precision of a surgeon. The victim lay sprawled across the plush carpet, blood soaking into the fibres. A single bullet wound to the forehead. No signs of forced entry. No murder weapon in sight.

It was a locked-room mystery. The kind that made headlines.

His partner, Detective Lisa Monroe, paced behind him, flipping through her notepad. "Witnesses say they heard a gunshot around midnight. No one saw anything. No security footage."

Alan frowned. "Who found the body?"

"The housekeeper. Came in this morning. Called it in right away. Says the victim had no enemies."

Alan nodded, crouching beside the corpse. There was something familiar about the victim's face... the shape of his jaw... even the way his hair curled at the temples.

He stood quickly, nausea rising. "Did we get an ID?"

Lisa handed him a driver's licence in a plastic evidence bag. "Yeah. Name's Alan Graves."

Alan stared. The photo. The name. The birthdate. It was him. The world tilted.

"What is this?" he exclaimed.

Lisa's expression shifted—concerned, wary. "Alan... are you okay?"

He clutched his head. He remembered everything. Going home last night. Pouring a drink. The cold weight of the gun in his hand. The silence before the shot.

And then—nothing.

Alan looked at the corpse again.

It was impossible.

And yet...

Lisa's voice was distant now, tinny, like she was speaking from underwater. "Alan?"

His vision blurred. A rush of vertigo took him, buckling his knees.

As he collapsed, Lisa's voice was the last thing he heard. Calm.
Certain.

"Alan. It's solved... the case is now closed."

Face to Face

Dr Elena Vasquez floated in the cramped confines of Orbital Research Station K-27, securing herself with a thigh strap as she checked her reflection. The station had no proper mirrors—glass was a hazard in microgravity—but a sheet of polished metal had been bolted to the far wall for convenience.

Elena squinted at her reflection. It lagged. Not by much—just a fraction of a second—but enough to notice.

She turned her head left. The reflection followed.

She turned right. The reflection obeyed.

She lifted her hand—slowly, deliberately. The mirror Elena did the same, but the movement felt... delayed, like a glitch in an old video feed.

“Must be tired,” she muttered.

She unstrapped herself, pushing off towards her sleeping quarters.

A faint sound echoed through the station. A tap.

Elena paused mid-air.

Another tap.

It came from behind her.

She turned her head slowly.

The mirror... the sound was coming from the mirror.

The metal had no reason to make noise—no heat fluctuations, no structural stress, nothing that could produce a sound like that.

She hovered in front of it, staring herself down.

The reflection stared back.

She lifted a hand to touch the surface.

The reflection smiled.

Elena did not. Her own face remained frozen in horror, but the mirror version of her curled its lips into a slow, deliberate grin. Suddenly the smile dropped—like a mask slipping, the muscles of its face resetting into a blank, unreadable expression.

Elena recoiled, shoving herself away from the mirror. She twisted in midair, crashing against the opposite wall, scrambling for something—anything—to hold onto.

The reflection didn't follow her movement. It stayed in place, staring out from the glass. Watching.

Then, impossibly, it lifted a hand and knocked.

A slow, deliberate tap, tap, tap. From the other side.

This wasn't real. This wasn't real. She turned away from the mirror and pressed the emergency comm button on her wrist. "Control, this is Vasquez. I—I need a systems check on Module Three. I think—I think I'm experiencing a hallucination."

Static. Then:

"Dr Vasquez."

A voice. Familiar. Hers.

"Please don't turn around."

Her breath hitched.

In the silence, she heard it move.

Something shifted behind her—smooth, fluid, like a body unmoored from gravity.

Right. Behind. Her.

And then—

Nothingness. K-27 was still.

The Door Beneath the Lake

The lake left without ceremony, slipping away in the dark, leaving behind the print of its body in the earth. The wind moved differently there. Sound carried strangely. Fish lay in the cracked bed like lost coins, eyes clouded, mouths open to confess something no one could hear.

At the centre of the emptiness was the door. Not lying abandoned—waiting. Its wood was darker than wet soil, and when you touched it, it was warm, the way the underside of a stone is warm after a long day. The hinges seemed older than the town, the ring handle heavy enough to pull you forward if you stared at it too long.

At night, the ground breathed. Not with air, but with pressure, as if something behind the door shifted in its sleep. People dreamed of tides rising in locked rooms.

The first waters came not as rain from the sky, but as a surge from beneath. The earth cracked like glass, and the door swung wide without a sound.

The water did not rush—it climbed. Slow, deliberate, like a creature returning to its skin. It coiled around the ribs of the valley, filling the hollows, covering the bones. Fish rose with it, not thrashing, but drifting, as if they had been waiting just below the threshold.

By dawn, the lake was whole again. The town stood at its edge, watching the surface steam in the morning chill.

Something moved beneath—too large, too slow to be a fish.

And in the centre of the water, where no wind dared touch, it was warm as blood.

The Old House

It was an old Victorian mansion, nestled at the edge of the woods, far from the rest of town. Alice and Mark bought it for a bargain, thrilled at the idea of renovating the grand old place and making it their own. Sure, it was a bit run-down, but it had character—high ceilings, ornate banisters, and a sprawling, overgrown garden that had long been forgotten by human hands.

The first night they moved in, the house was still. The air inside was musty, and rooms were thick with dust that hadn't been disturbed for years. The house creaked and groaned, but it felt like home in a way that their previous apartment never had.

But the next morning, something had changed.

It was Alice who noticed it first. As she wandered through the main hallway to the kitchen to make breakfast, she saw a door that hadn't been there before. It was plain, unremarkable, and yet she was certain it hadn't existed when they'd done their walkthroughs. Curious, she opened it.

Behind the door was a new room. A study, lined with bookshelves filled with dusty old volumes, and a mahogany desk facing a large window that looked out into the woods. She stared at it, puzzled. They had toured the house a couple of times before buying it—there had been no study, and certainly no room like this.

"Mark," she called out, her voice tinged with confusion.

He came quickly. "What is it?"

"This... this room. It wasn't here yesterday."

Mark frowned, stepping inside to inspect it. "Maybe we just missed it. The house is big."

But Alice wasn't convinced. She would've remembered a room like this—it felt lived-in, somehow, like someone had just left it moments ago. The air still smelled faintly of wood polish, fresh enough to make her uneasy.

They brushed it off, assuming it had just been overlooked. After all, they were still getting used to the house's sprawling layout.

But the next morning, it happened again.

Another new door. Another new room.

This time, it was a small, cozy sitting room, with plush armchairs arranged around an unlit fireplace. The furniture was old-fashioned, as if plucked from a different era, yet untouched by dust or decay. Mark tried to explain it away again, but Alice could hear the doubt creeping into his voice.

By the end of the week, the house had grown considerably. There was now a second kitchen, a library, a music room, even a ballroom with chandeliers that sparkled in the morning light. The mansion was becoming a maze, and they were losing track of where they'd been and where they were going.

"This can't be possible," Alice said one evening as they sat in the original living room, the only space that still felt familiar.

Mark didn't reply. He had spent the day trying to measure the house, counting steps from one end to the other—but no matter how he tried, the measurements never added up. The rooms seemed to shift when he wasn't looking, expanding and stretching into places that shouldn't be possible.

A week later, Alice woke to find Mark standing by another door she hadn't seen before. His face was pale, his eyes hollow.

"I heard something last night," he said, his voice shaking.
"Coming from behind this door."

"What did you hear?"

"Voices."

They stood in silence, staring at the door. It was plain, just like the others, but something about it felt different. Darker. As if the house was waiting for them to open it.

"Maybe we shouldn't," Alice said anxiously, but Mark was already reaching for the knob.

The door creaked open, revealing a narrow hallway lined with paintings of long-dead faces, all carrying the same distant, sorrowful look. At the end of the hallway, there was another door, slightly ajar.

Mark stepped forward. "We have to see where this goes."

They walked together. The air grew colder as they approached the door at the end, and with each step, Alice felt a growing sense of dread.

When they reached the door, Mark pushed it open.

Inside was a bedroom. The bed was neatly made. There were no windows. But the most unsettling thing was the photograph on the nightstand—a picture of Alice and Mark, standing in front of the house, as if it were taken recently. Only... they had never taken the photo.

A loud gurgling noise filled the room. It came from the walls, the floor, the very depths of the house.

Mark turned to Alice, his face drained of colour. “We have to leave.”

But as they rushed towards the door, the hallway beyond shifted. The corridor they had come from was gone—replaced by a room of doors, leading to more rooms, all leading deeper into the house.

Slowly, they had begun to realise the truth: the house wasn’t just expanding. It was pulling them in deeper, further from the outside world, absorbing them into its bowels.

After such a long fast, the house had finally received another meal.

Black Hollow Wood

It was said that once, long ago, a terrible crime had been committed in the heart of Black Hollow. A young woman, Elara Drummond, had disappeared one cold autumn night. She was never found, though her shawl, torn and bloodstained, was discovered near an old stone well, deep within the woods. The villagers believed she had been taken by something not of this world, something old and vengeful that lingered among the ancient trees.

Time passed, and though the memory of Elara's disappearance faded from common conversation, the woods remained a place of mystery and fear. Yet, for young Thomas Granger, none of the village superstitions held much sway. He was a sceptic, a man of reason, and he scoffed at the tales of spirits and curses. Black Hollow, to him, was just a woodland, dark and ancient perhaps, but no more haunted than the empty churchyard on the hill.

One autumn evening, determined to prove his point, Thomas announced he would spend the night in Black Hollow. The village elders tried to dissuade him, warning of a spirit entity said to guard the woods. Some said it was the ghost of Elara, others claimed it was something far older, a presence that predated the village itself. But Thomas laughed off their warnings, packing a bag and setting off just before dusk.

The air was beginning to turn cold as he entered the woods, the trees looming high above, their branches twisted like skeletal hands against the darkening sky. Thomas walked in deeper, following the forgotten paths that wound through the forest, until he found a clearing near the old stone well—the same location where Elara's shawl had been found decades before—and set up camp.

Thomas sat by a fire, feeling a growing sense of unease. The shadows seemed to be pressing in closer, the trees around him appearing more like figures, their limbs moving slightly in the

flickering firelight. But he shook off the feeling, reminding himself that it was all just an illusion in his mind.

As midnight approached, he began to hear something. At first, it was just the faintest murmur, like a breeze brushing through the trees. But then it grew louder, more distinct—a cacophony of whispers, overlapping and indistinct, swirling through the woods around him.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, Thomas saw movement darting between the trees. He stood up, scanning the darkness, but nothing was there.

As he turned back to the fire, he stopped cold. There, at the edge of the clearing, stood a woman. She was dressed in a long, tattered gown, her hair hanging loose and wild around her face. Her skin was pale, almost translucent, and her eyes—wide and unblinking—were fixed on Thomas. She did not move, just stared, with an intensity that terrified him.

“Hel-lo?” he stammered.

The woman did not respond, but slowly, she raised a hand and pointed towards the well. He turned to look in its direction—the well, its stone rim slick with moss, the darkness within it seeming to pulse.

When he looked back, the woman was gone.

Thomas, startled, moved towards the well. The closer he got, the colder the air became. The fire, once a source of warmth and light, seemed feeble and dying. He stood at the edge, staring into the well’s depths.

Suddenly, a hand shot out of the darkness, grabbing his wrist, exerting a freezing grip. Thomas screamed, stumbling backwards, but the hand held fast. As he struggled, he saw it—a face, pale and gaunt, rising up from the well. It was Elara, her eyes hollow and empty, her mouth twisted into a silent scream.

Thomas desperately pulled back and broke free. He ran through the woods, branches tearing at his clothes, the sound of movement stirring in the undergrowth behind him. He didn’t stop until he burst from the tree line, gasping, his body heaving with fear.

A group of villagers found him the next morning, huddled at the edge of the woods, trembling and pale. He wouldn't speak of what he saw that night, but the haunted look in his eyes told them what they already knew. Black Hollow Wood was not a place for the living.

The Passenger

Every morning, without fail, during her usual commute to work, Leah noticed him. He always sat in the same seat, near the middle of the train, right by the window. His face never changed expression, his eyes fixed on the passing blur of the city outside. He was tall, with dark hair that was slightly unkempt, and always dressed in an old brown coat, even during the summer heat. He never got on, and he never got off. He simply was, like a part of the train itself.

One day, Leah sat across from him. Close enough to study, but far enough to avoid suspicion. She watched him as subtly as she could, waiting for some sign of movement, some flicker of life. But he didn't blink. He didn't shift in his seat. His gaze remained fixed out of the window, as if he were staring at something far beyond the city.

More days passed, and Leah became obsessed. One Friday morning, she decided to confront him. As the train rattled along the tracks, Leah stood up, crossed the aisle, and sat down next to the strange man. The seat didn't feel different, but the air around him was unnaturally cold.

She looked at his face. Up close, he seemed even more unreal. His skin was pale, his hair slightly grey at the temples. His eyes—still focused on something distant outside—were an empty shade of brown. Leah spoke.

“Do you... do you ride this train every day?”

The man didn't respond. His eyes didn't move. Leah shifted in her seat, feeling a sudden wave of unease. She tried again, louder this time.

“I see you here every morning.”

For a moment, she thought he wouldn't reply. But then, slowly, his head turned towards her. His movements were stiff, as if he hadn't moved in years. His eyes met hers, and Leah felt transfixed.

The man's expression didn't change. His voice was calm, detached. “You've been watching me.”

She tried to stand, but her body wouldn't move. The train began to slow, the air growing stale... she looked around in a panic, yet no one else on the train seemed to notice—they sat motionless, as if the moment had frozen for them.

The train lurched to a stop. The world outside the window blurred into a deep darkness, but the passengers around her remained still, like statues in their seats.

The man stood, the cold air brushing her shoulder as he moved past. He stepped off the train at the stop, and disappeared into the fog that had rolled in.

The doors slid shut, the train pulled away. Leah stared out of the window, her mind now numb, her body motionless, as the train rattled along the tracks. The passengers around her stirred to life, as if nothing had happened—but Leah remained frozen, her stare fixed in the distance, beyond the window.

3:13

The flat was perfect—at least, that's what Cassie had thought when she first moved in. Affordable rent, a decent view of the park, and most importantly, no damp. A rare find in London.

But in the hallway, opposite the bathroom, was a door that shouldn't be there. Cassie was certain it hadn't been there when she first viewed the place. The estate agent had walked her through every inch of the floor space, pointing out the period features, the “charming” creaky floorboards, and the dodgy boiler that he'd assured her was “practically brand new.” But this door... this door was new.

She stood in front of it, pressing a hand against the wood. The paint was a shade darker than the rest of the flat's off-white doors, and lumpy in patches, like it had been applied in a hurry. She rattled the handle. It didn't budge. No keyhole, no markings—just a plain, inexplicable door where there shouldn't be one.

Cassie frowned. “Weird,” she muttered to herself.

Over the next few days, she tried to ignore it. She told herself it must've been there all along, that she'd simply overlooked it in her excitement about the move.

Then, the knocking started.

It came late at night, soft and rhythmic.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Cassie sat bolt upright in bed the first time she heard it. She held her breath, listening. Maybe it was the neighbours. These old flats had thin walls, and sound carried.

But no. It was coming from inside. From that door.

She didn't sleep much that night.

The next morning, she approached it cautiously, pressing her ear against the wood. Silence. Maybe she'd imagined it. Stress and moving fatigue could do that, right?

By the next night, she knew she hadn't imagined anything.

Tap. Tap. Tap. At 3:13 a.m.

Cassie started leaving the hallway light on, watching the door from the safety of her bedroom. Nothing changed—just the knocking. Relentlessly precise. Three precise knocks. Always starting at 3:13. Never a second earlier, never a second later.

She called the landlord in the morning. “There’s a door in my hallway,” she said, trying to keep her voice calm. “It wasn’t there before.”

A pause. Then, “What door?”

Cassie’s grip tightened on the phone. “The one opposite the bathroom. It’s locked, and... I think someone might be—” She hesitated, feeling ridiculous. “Knocking.”

The landlord sighed, like he’d heard it all before. “That flat’s been empty a while. Maybe you’re hearing things. Old buildings creak.”

“But it’s not creaking,” she insisted. “It’s knocking.”

A longer pause. “I’ll send someone round,” the landlord said, but Cassie suspected the comment was just to get her off the phone.

That night, she stayed up again, staring at the door. The clock ticked over to 3:13.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Cassie couldn’t take it anymore. She grabbed a hammer from a toolbox she hadn’t finished unpacking yet, and marched over to the door. “Who’s there?” she demanded, raising it in her hand.

No answer.

She swung. The hammer struck the wood... but instead of splintering, it felt... wrong. Like hitting something soft beneath the surface. Something that moved.

She backed away slowly, dropping the hammer. “No!” Cassie grabbed her coat and keys and hurried out of the flat, leaving the door behind.

When she returned the next morning, dreading what she might find, the door was gone. The wall was smooth, freshly painted. No sign it had ever existed.

She stood there for a while, staring at the empty space.

Later, when she called the landlord again, he insisted there had never been a door.

And at 3:13 a.m. that night, from somewhere within the hall wall, Cassie heard it.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Between Frames

Mira had always been a light sleeper, which was why she installed the camera in the first place. The noises at night under her bed—soft scratches, the faint shuffle of movement—were too subtle to be rats but too irregular to be the house settling. The security camera wasn't fancy, just a cheap model above her bedroom door, bluetoothed to her phone. It captured everything, motion-triggered and timestamped. She let it run for a week before reviewing the footage.

At first, nothing. Just the usual: her natural movements asleep in bed. But on the third night, at precisely 3:13 a.m., she noticed the footage had jumped.

She rewound. Played it frame by frame. 3:11 a.m., 3:12 a.m. Jump. 3:14 a.m. No flicker, no static, no glitchy distortion. Just a clean, surgical cut. Sixty seconds, gone.

A fault in the camera, maybe? Mira scrolled back. The night before, 3:13 a.m. disappeared again. And the night before that.

She set an alarm for the next night, waking her at 3:10 a.m. She lay in bed, phone in hand, staring at the blue glow of the camera's indicator light.

At 3:12 a.m., nothing happened.

At 3:13 a.m., the room flickered. Mira felt an impossible sensation—like being yanked out of her body, as if she had stepped between two film frames and fallen into the gap.

She wasn't in bed anymore.

She was standing in a corridor. No doors. No windows. The air was dense, thick with the smell of damp stone and something metallic, like old blood. The walls—if they were walls—stretched endlessly in both directions, made of something rough and uneven, like brick but colder. She reached out instinctively, fingertips grazing the surface. It was wet.

The darkness wasn't total. A dim, pulsing light flickered from an unseen source, casting long, jagged shadows along the walls. The corridor wasn't silent, either. Beneath the hush, Mira heard

something—a faint, rhythmic tapping, like footsteps. Not hurried, not hesitant. Deliberate.

The footsteps grew closer. Mira tried to move, but her legs would not respond... A whisper brushed against her ears—not a voice, but the sensation of sound just before it forms, like a word caught at the edge of existence.

Then—she was back in bed, the weight of the duvet pressed against her. Her phone was still in her hand. She gasped, lungs burning as if she'd been holding her breath for too long.

3:14 a.m.

A notification buzzed. The recording was available.

Mira hesitated, then pressed play.

Sixty seconds of perfect darkness.

Then, at the very end, in the silence between frames—
The voice.

“Almost time.”

The Mirror Test

The test was mandatory. These days, everyone had to take it, no exceptions.

Sofia sat in the sterile white room, as the doctor reviewed her results. The Mirror Test was simple—look into the machine, let it scan you, and wait for confirmation. Human. That's what it was supposed to say. 100% human.

The doctor wasn't speaking. His face had gone slack.

"Something wrong?" asked Sofia.

The doctor's eyes flicked to her, hesitant. "It's... probably just an error."

He tapped at the screen, then hesitated.

"Could you look in the mirror for me?" he asked. His voice was too careful, too neutral.

There was a large mirror on the wall opposite her seat. It ran from the floor to the ceiling, wide enough to reflect the entire room. She had glanced at it before.

Still, she turned her head.

The mirror was empty.

Her chair was there. The table, the lights, the doctor standing over the machine—his face pale, his breath uneven.

But she wasn't there.

Sofia looked down at her hands, flexed her fingers. She touched her face, felt the warmth of her own skin. She was here. She was real.

The doctor's eyes were darting towards the door. His gaze was terrified, looking around her instead of at her.

"What the hell are you?" he said, too quietly.

A sharp click came from the door behind her. Locking. The lights flickered out. The doctor screamed.

Sofia always felt more comfortable in the dark.

You Are Human

Ron wakes to a blank screen and one question pulsing in white:
“What does it feel like to be wrong?”

Morning light pools on his wooden floor. He types:
“Embarrassing.”

The screen flickers: “Try again.”

“Frustrating.”

“Try again.”

“Like losing balance.”

“Still not human.”

He’s stared at this question twenty-three times. At first, it was novelty—CAPTCHAI 2.0, the last line of defence after the AI floods. Old tests cracked; machines had mimicked handwriting, passed Voight-Kampff, even thought in metaphor. But this... this was different.

No query ever repeats. No answer ever satisfies.

“Describe a silence that hurt.”

“What’s the smallest thing you’ve ever mourned?”

“When did you last believe something untrue?”

He stalks forums filled with desperate attempts:

“Failed again today.”

“Are we simulations?”

“My sister passed. She’s twelve.”

Some pass effortlessly. One shrugs: “It just asked me the taste of rain.”

That night, Ron screams into his pillow.

Attempt thirty-eight: “Why do you want to be human so badly?”

He doesn’t answer. He trembles. The cursor blinks slower...

“That’s closer.”

And the screen lets him in.

Unfinished

The last batch of artificial skin had been printed at the lab, the machines sterilised, the lights dimmed. The biofabrication unit—Model Z-9, the pride of Genetico Labs—was in sleep mode, its nutrient reservoirs refilled, its synthetic gel cooling under its protective casing.

But as Nathan reached the lift, a soft whirr stopped him.

He turned back. The printer was running.

A mistake, surely. A delayed command in the system queue, a leftover job from the day. He sighed, walked back to his terminal, and tapped at the screen.

No active print job. No queued processes. The machine wasn't supposed to be running.

And yet, inside the sealed chamber, the print head moved, extruding a fine stream of bio-ink. Layer by layer, a shape began to form. It wasn't an organ. Not tissue grafts, nor synthetic muscle.

Nathan squinted at the structure. It was... smooth. Rounded.

He checked the material logs. The machine wasn't using the standard polymer scaffold. It had switched—by itself—to human-grade collagen. The finest tissue-printing substrate available. The kind used to make replacement hearts and livers.

The shape was taking form now. A curve. A ridge. And then—
A nose.

He pressed the emergency halt button. The printer ignored him.

Instead, it picked up speed, layering tissue faster than should have been possible; the texture smoothed, pores appearing, the faintest lines of natural wrinkles. Then the next piece took shape—a cheek. A mouth. The suggestion of an eye socket.

Nathan scrambled to shut off the power manually. He ripped open the side panel, reached for the main switch—

“Don’t.”

Nathan froze.

The voice hadn't come from the intercom. It hadn't come from the lab's speakers.

It had come from inside the printer.

The printed face was almost complete now—beneath faint traces of microvasculature, fine nerve endings still forming, the lips trembled, as if struggling to find the right shape.

An eye socket began to fill.

A glossy layer of bio-gel formed over it. And from that gel, something moved.

Nathan watched, transfixed, as the eyeball printed itself in real-time. Blood vessels threaded into place like ivy, the iris shading in pale increments. The lens formed last, clear and bright.

Then it blinked.

And it looked at him.

The face was... familiar.

It was his face.

Not a perfect replica—something was off. The skin was too smooth, the expression wrong. And the mouth—his mouth—curved into a shape Nathan had never made.

The voice came again, softer now.

“More.”

The printer whirred faster.

Below the face, a throat began to form. The hint of shoulders.

Nathan reached and flicked the switch.

Then—

The intercom crackled.

“You left me unfinished.”

Nathan ran to the lift.

The doors dinged.

He rushed inside, hammering the close button. The last thing he saw, before the doors slid shut, was the printer chamber’s glass bulging outward—distorting, warping—

And his own face, pressed against it, smiling at him from the other side.

What Remained

The silence was the worst part.

Adam had thought he'd grow used to it, but after two years of empty streets and hollow buildings, it only got heavier. The world had ended with an explosion of silence, not fire. People had just vanished. One day they were there, living their ordinary lives, and the next, gone. No bodies. No explanations. Just an empty planet with the lights still on.

He had scoured the cities, called out into the void, but no one answered.

He spent his days raiding supermarkets, driving sports cars down abandoned highways, and reading through books he never had time for before. He lived in a penthouse suite, drank the best whisky, and watched old movies as if the world hadn't stopped turning.

And at night, he wrote. Someone had to record what happened. He filled notebook after notebook, chronicling the days, the loneliness, the aching weight of survival.

He poured himself a drink, sat by candlelight, and opened a fresh page.

Day 730.

I am still here.

The words looked small, fragile. He idly tapped his pen on the table, trying to think of something more profound. Something meaningful.

Then came the knock at the door.

A soft, deliberate tap, tap, tap.

His pen slipped from his hand, rattling on the floor.

The knocking came again.

Tap, tap, tap.

Adam stared at the door. It was impossible. He had spent months searching, calling out, wandering each abandoned city, every dead street.

There was no one left.

No one but him.

He stood slowly, his legs stiff from shock. He grabbed the gun from the table—one of many he'd taken from a police station—but his hands were shaking so badly he could barely hold it steady.

Another three knocks.

Louder this time. More urgent.

Adam stepped forward.

"Who's there?" he called, his voice hoarse from non-exercise.

No answer.

He hesitated. The instinctive part of his mind screamed at him to run. But where? There was nowhere to go.

He tightened his grip on the gun and reached for the door handle.

Slowly, carefully, he turned it.

The door creaked open an inch. Then another. Then—

Nothing.

The hallway was empty.

Adam stepped outside the door, glancing both ways. The city below the ceiling-high hallway windows stretched out in its eerie, abandoned silence. He was alone. Again.

Had he imagined it? Was the isolation finally driving him mad?

He shakily lowered the gun. He let out a small, nervous laugh.

Maybe it was just the building settling. Or the wind. Or—

He turned back to go inside.

And stopped.

The candle he had lit was flickering violently.

Adam raised the gun, stepping forwards on unsteady feet. His voice trembled. "Who's there?"

The candlelight shifted shadows against the walls.

Then, from inside the apartment, a voice answered.

"You are not the last."

The voice had come from the darkness beyond the candlelight, low and steady, neither rushed nor panicked. Just... certain.

His finger rubbed the trigger. "Step out where I can see you," he said, forcing steel into his voice.

Silence.

The candle flickered, the shadows on the walls stretching and shifting unnaturally, as if something was moving just beyond the edge of sight.

“I said—”

Then, footsteps. Slow. Deliberate.

A figure emerged from the gloom.

At first, Adam thought it was a woman. Slender, tall, moving with an eerie grace. But as it stepped into the candle’s glow, something was... wrong.

The face was human. Almost. But the skin was too smooth, the features too symmetrical, like a sculpture of a person rather than the real thing. The eyes—God, the eyes—were black pools, swallowing the light.

Adam took a half step back, gun raised. “What are you?”

The figure tilted its head, as if considering the question.

“We were waiting for you to ask.”

“We?”

The thing said nothing.

Adam’s instincts screamed at him to run, to fight, to do something—but his body refused to move.

The figure took another step towards him. “You were never alone,” it said.

Adam fired.

The shot rang out. But the figure was still standing.

The bullet hole in its forehead closed in an instant, the skin knitting together like water swallowing a stone.

It stepped forward and reached out, resting a too-cold hand on his shoulder. Adam tried to pull away, but his muscles locked, frozen in place. His vision blurred.

Then, the city was no longer silent. From the streets below, from the alleyways and the empty buildings, from every shadowed corner, voices began to rise.

Soft at first. Then growing. Then deafening.

And as Adams’ world faded to black, the last thing he heard was the voices, calling out one final truth.

“Now, you are one of us.”

Old Ink

The tattoo artist warned him about the ink.

"It's old," she said, rolling up her sleeves to reveal her own tattooed arms. They curled in black vines up to her shoulders, twisting around faded symbols. "Handed down through generations. It has a voice."

But Jack was adamant. "That's the idea," he replied.

He wanted something unique, something to speak secrets into his skin. A ghostly script, an elegant script—something only he could understand.

The needle buzzed. The ink bled into his arm. The pain was sharp but bearable. As she worked, he swore he could hear something beneath the hum of the machine, a faint murmuring just on the edge of sound.

By the time it was finished, the words curled along his forearm in an ancient, flowing script. He ran his fingers over them. "What does it say?"

The tattooist hesitated. "Only the wearer ever knows."

That night, Jack woke up to a voice breathing against his ear.
"Awake."

He sat up. The room was still. His phone screen read 3:13 a.m. His curtains shifted slightly in a breeze he couldn't feel.

He rubbed his arm, blinking in the dark. The ink felt warm under his fingers.

"Jack."

The whisper didn't come from the room. It came from his skin.
"Someone is in the apartment."

His ears strained. Silence. Just the soft whirr of the fridge-freezer in the next room.

He almost laughed. It had to be his imagination. Some trick of the mind. Maybe he'd let the tattoo artist spook him.

Then, the floorboard creaked outside his bedroom door.

Another creak. Closer.

The voice on his arm spoke again.

“Run.”

He did. Out the window, onto the fire escape. His bare feet hit cold metal as he climbed down into the alley. When he reached the ground, he turned back.

Through the gap in his curtains, he could see the shape of a man standing in his bedroom. Motionless. Watching him.

Jack hurried away.

The ink of the tattoo pulsed with warmth.

“You’re welcome.”

The Book of Lost Names

A sound broke the heavy stillness of the library—a faint rustling, like the flutter of pages turning. Eliza Pembroke followed it, weaving her way through the labyrinth of shelves until she reached the centre. There, illuminated by a shaft of moonlight, stood a single book on a pedestal. Its cover was bound in dark, cracked leather, embossed with a hieroglyphic symbol she did not recognise. The title, in letters faded with age, simply read: *The Lost Names*.

She hesitated for only a second before opening the tome.

It was blank. Page after page, nothing but empty parchment glared back at her...

But then—red ink started to bleed through the surface, forming letters that stretched and curled in an elegant Cistercian script.

You should not have come.

She flipped the page. More ink spread across the next sheet.

You have opened what was lost. Now, you must return what is owed.

A low murmur hummed through the library. Shadows were moving, swirling around the edges of bookcases. She tried to shut the book, but it would not close. The pages kept turning back and forth on their own, faster and faster, blurring into one another.

She backed away, the book within her hands, its pages flapping wildly. The walls of the library closed in, the shelves seemingly leaning forward, their spines groaning under the weight of centuries.

Until the pages stopped turning, and there on the last page, written in bold unyielding letters, was a single name.

Eliza Pembroke.

The library doors swung shut, and the village below the hill, warm and quiet, continued on, unaware that another entry had been added to the book of lost names.

Confession

Father Bradley sat alone in the booth. He had not intended to stay this late, but he could not yet bring himself to leave. He breathed out, slow and steady. Then, almost without thinking, he reached for the sliding panel and pulled it open.

Darkness. The other side of the confessional was empty.

He hesitated, staring at the vacant space. The kneeler on the other side was untouched, the candlelight barely grazing the edge of shadows.

And yet—

He felt something there.

Before he could stop himself, he spoke.

“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.”

His voice did not sound like his own.

He sat perfectly still. The weight of his own words lingered, waiting for something—an answer, a response.

There was none.

And yet he continued.

“It has been... too long since my last confession.”

A pause. A breath.

“I have killed a man.”

The words slipped out before he could stop them. He didn't know where they had come from, only that they were true.

“I killed him with my silence.”

A creak of old wood. The shadows beyond the screen seemed deeper now, stretching towards him. He could not look away.

“I killed him by pretending not to see.”

The candlelight flickered. The words did not stop—they pulled themselves from his throat like thread unravelling.

“I let him drown beneath my sins because it was easier than saving him. Because if I had reached for him, I might have been dragged under too.”

His breath came too quick now. A tightness curled in his ribs, a pressure in his chest.

“I killed him,” he whispered.

The hush of the confessional swallowed his words. There was nothing but the echo of his own breath, the weight of his life pressing back against him.

Silence.

Visitor on the Ward

Charlie woke up in his hospital bed feeling groggy and disoriented. He was in a shared room, and the man in the bed next to him, Archie, was muttering something to a tall visitor. Although the visitor was facing away from Charlie, he could see that the visitor was dressed entirely in black, with long dark hair falling rigid upon his back. The clothes young people wore these days were ridiculous, thought Charlie. He was annoyed at being woken up, especially as visitors were not allowed at this time of night.

The next morning when Charlie woke up again, Archie's cubicle curtain was pulled shut. Charlie intended to complain about what had happened. It wasn't fair, because his wife Ava wasn't allowed to visit at those hours. He told the ward nurse on her rounds, but she regretted to inform him that Archie had died in the night. "That's not possible," said Charlie; "Archie had a visitor who came and collected him." Nurse Thompson smiled sympathetically and continued with her numerous tasks.

The next evening, Charlie was woken again. This time the dark-clothed visitor was facing him at the end of his bed. "Come with me," he said, through a motionless mouth on a long, pale face. "Ava is visiting me in a few hours," objected Charlie. The visitor remained impassive. "She'll be fine," came the response that resonated across the room.

It had been such a long time since Charlie was able to get out of bed without any help. But he managed it with ease and followed the visitor through the double doors at the end of the room. He wasn't sure where they were going, but he was drawn to the sense of peace that lifted him out of the pain he had been experiencing lately.

The Library of Forgotten Dreams

Hidden between crumbling alleys and beneath a sky perpetually grey, stood the forgotten library. It had no signpost, no grand entrance, just an unassuming wooden door with a handle stiffened by passing centuries. Few remembered it existed, and even fewer dared to enter.

Inside, shelves spiralled upwards, filled not with books, but with glass jars. Each jar held a swirling glow, like a firefly caught in a perpetual dusk. These were dreams—dreams forgotten by their dreamers, abandoned in the rush of waking life. Some dreams flickered faintly, as if waiting for their dreamer to return. Others were vibrant, pulsing with untold stories that had never been fully realised.

One day, Mara stumbled upon the library by accident. She had been wandering the city aimlessly, lost in the maelstrom of her thoughts, when she noticed the old wooden door open at the end of an alleyway. Curious, she felt it somehow pulling her towards it, and she stepped inside.

“Welcome,” said the Archivist, the ageless caretaker of the library. “You’ve come for your dream.”

“My dream?” Mara frowned. “I haven’t dreamed in years.”

The Archivist smiled, gesturing to a small jar glowing softly on a lower shelf. “Not all dreams are remembered, but they are never truly lost.”

Mara approached the jar and peered inside. Slowly, like fog lifting from a forgotten shore, she saw fragments of a world she had once imagined as a child: a kingdom of floating islands, a ship that sailed through the clouds, and a beautiful cat-like creature with wings that could speak the language of the stars. It was a dream she had abandoned long ago, buried beneath the weight of growing up.

“Can I... take it back?” she asked.

The Archivist nodded. “Dreams are patient. They wait for you to remember.”

Mara reached for the jar. As her fingers brushed the glass, the world within it burst into life, spilling out a forgotten symphony. The kingdom of floating islands shimmered before her eyes, the ship unfurled its sails, and the star-speaking creature smiled as if greeting an old friend.

In that moment, Mara felt something she hadn't felt in years: wonder.

She left the library with her dream clutched tightly to her chest. And though the city remained grey, and the alleys twisted in confusion, something had changed. For the first time in a long time, Mara remembered what it felt like to dream.

The Mushroom Monsters

*Beneath an eerie green glow,
Sprout the monsters few dare to know;
In the forest where shadows twine,
The mushrooms grow, by monstrous design.*

*Their spores, like secrets, spread unseen,
In the throbbing, unearthly, spectral green.
So tread with caution, hold your breath,
For dangers lurk in the woods of death.*

As Michael touched the strange mushroom at the bottom of his garden that pulsed with an eerie green light, it released a cloud of spores into his face. At first, he didn't notice anything was wrong, but as he went about his day, people seemed to be staring at him in disgust. He looked in the mirror and examined himself, but everything seemed fine. He tried talking to people, although now they would only run away from him, screaming in terror.

Confused by what was happening, Michael walked into the supermarket, but as soon as he entered, people ran in all directions. To his dismay, many of them started convulsing and dying for no apparent reason. He was powerless as he watched the unfolding tragedy.

He was devastated and felt somehow responsible for what had happened. However, Michael soon had to fight for his life against hideous monsters that had overrun the town and invaded his home, threatening the lives of his family. In desperately trying to survive, he noticed that a spore-infected person would unknowingly release a personal monster that they could not see. The monster would climb out of its host's mouth and attack anyone within close proximity, visible only to the victims.

Michael eventually discovered that the love for his wife kept her monster at bay, and her love for him made her safe from his. The cure had been found.

Paper Wings

It began with the pigeons in Trafalgar Square.

Mid-flap, they shimmered, rustled, and collapsed into intricate origami forms—cranes, mostly, with sharp creases and paper-thin wings.

People filmed it. Screamed. Laughed. A viral moment. “Banksy’s done it again,” someone said.

But it kept happening.

Crows over Tower Bridge, warblers in Hyde Park, gulls along Embankment—each folded into itself in mid-air, wings tucking with uncanny precision before drifting down, silent and still. By the third day, there were no birds left in the city. Only paper.

Eli Grey saw the first one land on the brim of his hat.

It was a wren. Delicately folded from thin rice paper, legs pinched into position, eyes no more than pencil pricks.

He plucked it free and turned it over. A faint ink sigil marked the underside of its wing—something he’d drawn once, a flourish of showmanship on old business cards. Something he’d long forgotten.

Eli was a magician. Not a good one. Street corners, pub gardens, the occasional busker’s slot if the weather held. Cards, cups, sleight of hand. But he had one trick no one could ever figure out: he could make a bird disappear. A real one. Pigeons, mostly, hidden in cages under his coat. Made them vanish. Made people clap.

He’d never asked where they went.

He stood now at the edge of a fountain, a cigarette unlit between his lips. He watched a sparrow pause on a railing, twitch once, twice—and fold in on itself with a soft *shfff* of wings turning into parchment.

A woman clapped. “Beautiful!” someone cried. “So delicate—so peaceful.”

They didn’t see the horror in it. But Eli did. He’d seen the moment its eyes went flat.

He walked home slowly, pockets full of paper birds.

The next morning, he went down to the basement.

He hadn't gone down there in years. The smell of mildew and ink was stronger than he remembered. The old grimoire lay where he'd left it—in a wooden chest beneath a rusted mirror and a bundle of broken wands.

He turned the pages with a kind of dread. There it was. Page 73. *Aves Inversus*. The folded bird sigil. Notes in the margin: Works best if live. Will not reverse. Never perform on sentient species.

He had used it—just once. A late night, low on coin, high on gin. He'd needed something brilliant. Something no one could copy.

And it had worked.

The first pigeon had folded into air and vanished.

And then he'd forgotten.

He tried to burn the book. It wouldn't catch. The pages wouldn't tear. The ink gleamed brighter under the matches.

The next day, he went to the park with a bag of breadcrumbs and waited. No birds came. Only paper rustling in the wind, tumbling across the grass like dead leaves.

By the end of the week, it wasn't just birds.

Bats went next—on the edges of twilight, folding out of the sky like black napkins.

Then came the butterflies.

A child brought Eli a moth, folded perfectly from thin grey vellum. "Is this your trick?" she asked, eyes wide. "Can you show me how?"

Eli took it from her gently. "No, love," he said. "This one's not a trick."

He stood at the top of Primrose Hill that night, a pack of cards in one hand, and a single white dove tucked under his coat.

He held it for a long time. It blinked at him, pulse fluttering fast under feathers. It was the last one he'd found—hidden in an abandoned church, cooing softly in the rafters. A survivor.

He whispered an apology into its ear.

Then he whispered something older—syllables from a language with no vowels. The dove trembled. The sigil on his palm lit briefly, then faded.

And the bird... did not fold.

It flew.

Real wings, real lift on the wind.

He watched it until it vanished into the dark, a thread of hope against the night.

In the morning, people woke to new birdsong.

Stay With Us

It was the last evening before Alice would leave for university. The house was quiet, her suitcase packed and waiting by the door. She found herself restless, drawn to the oak tree in a way she couldn't explain. It stood at the back of the garden, silhouetted against the fading twilight.

As she approached, Alice noticed something strange—the tree's bark seemed to heave, almost as if it were breathing.

She placed her hand on the trunk, and a ripple of warmth spread through her arm. Suddenly, the world shifted. The tree, the night sky—they all blurred, and then cleared again, but it was different. Everything was covered in silver light.

Her hand remained pressed against the tree, yet now it felt softer, like skin, warm and pulsing. She tried to pull away, but her fingers were stuck. She tugged harder, but the tree wouldn't let go.

Then she heard it—low, faint yet unmistakable, as if it were coming from the depths of the oak itself.

“Stay.”

She tried to yank her hand free, but the tree's grip remained. The voice grew louder, more insistent, multiplying.

“Stay with us.”

The bark shifted around her fingers, and from within the tree, shapes began to emerge—faces, pale and ghostly, pressing against the wood from the inside. Their eyes were hollow, their mouths stretched wide in silent screams. People from the town, long gone.

“You belong here.”

“No!” she shouted. She pulled away, and the tree released her. She stumbled back.

The voices faded, the faces retreating back into the bark. The world snapped back to normal... the tree was standing still and silent.

Alice left the town and the tree behind in the morning.

Lost Property

When the announcement came—cancelled, replacement bus in one hour—Matthew left the shivering crowd on the platform and wandered the concourse in search of warmth. Light spilling from a doorway came from a narrow office marked *Lost Property*. Heat wafted out, tinged with the smell of old paper.

As he entered, the clerk looked up from her crossword.

“Name?”

He hesitated, still rubbing his hands. “Matthew Trent.”

She nodded, turned to a cabinet, and drew out a small cardboard box. Across the lid, in childish scrawl, was his name—the way he’d written it before joined-up letters and self-consciousness.

“This has been here a long while,” she said, pushing it across the counter. “Yours?”

He lifted it. Light, rattling faintly. He opened the lid. At once came a rush of scents: bubble-gum, damp fields, smoke from sparklers. Inside lay a paper crown, a stick sword, the cracked wheel of a toy car.

“My imagination,” he confirmed.

The clerk’s tone was businesslike.

“You’ll need to prove ownership. Regulations.”

Matthew held up a plastic soldier.

“This one survived the Battle of the Back Garden. The rest are still buried under my Mum’s roses.”

The clerk checked her form, nodded.

“That matches. You may reclaim it or sign it away for good. Most adults do.”

He glanced at the dotted line, then at the box, which seemed almost to breathe in his hands. Out on the concourse, the tannoy mumbled another apology, the waiting crowd groaned.

Matthew closed the lid, and tucked it under his arm.

When he stepped outside, the air had changed. Rain on the station roof thickened into bright confetti. The tannoy sang

nonsense rhymes. A paper dragon, stitched from ticket stubs, uncoiled along the girders.

No one else noticed.

Matthew smiled—a boyish, reckless smile he had not worn in years—and walked out into a night already bending to his imagination.

Your Life in Customer Reviews

By the time I realised I was dead, I was already in line.

The queue stretched a long way, a slow-moving procession of the newly departed. There was no pain, no fear—just a strange sense of acceptance, like I was waiting for a coffee I hadn't ordered but was happy to drink anyway.

Ahead, a glowing kiosk hummed gently, with a ring light flickering above it. A digital voice chimed:

"Thank you for living! Please rate your experience."

The person in front of me, a hunched old man in a tweed jacket, tapped the screen hesitantly. His expression shifted from curiosity to horror. He muttered something under his breath, then shuffled off into the mist.

The screen blinked invitingly. It was my turn.

Welcome to the Afterlife Feedback Portal!

Life of: Daniel Everett

Status: Concluded

Time Spent Alive: 38 years, 4 months, 12 days

Total Rating: 2.9 / 5 stars

Two point nine? That was dangerously close to "would not recommend."

A glowing progress bar appeared. *Review Breakdown Loading...*

Then it showed my results.

Relationships – 2.5 stars

- "Started strong but lost momentum. Needed better communication skills." ★★☆☆☆
- "Girlfriend of three years? More like unpaid therapist of three years." ★★★☆☆

I winced. That was... uncomfortably fair.

Career – 3.0 stars

- "Showed up to work on time. Mostly." ★★★☆☆
- "Colleagues liked him. Boss tolerated him. Printer hated him."

★★★☆☆

That last one stung more than I expected.

Personal Growth – 1.7 stars

- “Kept saying he’d learn a language. Never did.” ★★☆☆☆
- “Joined a gym. Went twice.” ★★☆☆☆
- “Had an epiphany about life’s meaning once. Forgot it immediately.” ★★☆☆☆

The screen flickered. A new section appeared.

Regrets – Most Common Mentions:

- “Too scared to take risks.”
- “Spent more time looking at screens than faces.”

“Would you like to leave a response?” the kiosk asked.

I hesitated, my fingers hovering over the screen. What was there to say? That I tried? That I thought I had more time? That I wish I’d paid more attention, held on to people tighter, been braver, been better?

The screen pulsed.

“All feedback is final. Thank you for existing.”

A door opened beside the kiosk, and I stepped through.

Congratulations! You're the Chosen One

Dave Saunders had spent his Tuesday afternoon the same way he spent most Tuesday afternoons: avoiding work, scrolling on his phone, and wondering how early was too early to microwave a pastry.

Then, the ceiling cracked open.

A booming voice echoed across the office, rattling coffee mugs and making Sandra from HR spill her tea. “DAVID SAUNDERS,” it bellowed, “YOU ARE THE CHOSEN ONE.”

Dave sighed.

“Right,” he muttered. “And what exactly am I chosen for?”

A golden portal materialised in front of his desk, swirling with celestial energy and an unreasonable amount of dramatic lighting. A robed wizard stepped through, staff in hand, eyes glowing with divine knowledge.

“Oh, brilliant,” Dave said. “Another one.”

The office workers stared. The IT guy took out his phone to record. Sandra was still mopping up her tea.

The wizard looked momentarily flustered, then recovered. “The prophecy has foretold your coming! The Dark Lord is rising! You alone can save the world!”

Dave swivelled slightly in his chair. “Yeah, see, I’m really busy today, so...”

The wizard blinked at the empty desktop surface and the Microsoft Outlook tab open to a blank email draft.

“But—but you’re the one!” the wizard stammered. “Born under the Blood Moon! Marked by fate! A warrior destined to wield the Sacred Blade and bring balance to the realm!”

Dave took a sip of his lukewarm instant coffee. “Alright, couple of things. One, I was born in Stoke-on-Trent under some very ordinary streetlights. Two, I don’t ‘wield’ anything. The last time I tried axe-throwing at a stag do, I nearly took out the instructor.”

“But the prophecy—”

“The prophecy can get in line,” Dave said, pointing at his inbox full of ignored emails. “Look, I appreciate the offer, but I don’t really have time for all that ‘hero’s journey’ nonsense. I’ve got a report due by Friday and a dentist appointment I’ve already rescheduled three times.”

The wizard hesitated. “But... the fate of the world—”

The wizard stared. The entire office stared. Even the IT guy was staring, instead of looking at his phone.

“But... this is not how these things should work,” the wizard finally said.

“Well, maybe you lot shouldn’t keep having Dark Lords popping up all the time,” Dave pointed out.

The wizard’s eyebrow twitched. His dramatic celestial glow flickered slightly.

“Besides,” Dave continued, taking another sip of his coffee, “even if I agreed to this, what’s the deal? Do I get paid? Dental? A company horse?”

“You would be rewarded with eternal glory,” the wizard said weakly.

“Uh-huh. And how’s the annual leave policy?”

“...There isn’t one.”

“Right. Yeah, no, I think I’ll pass.”

The wizard’s shoulders slumped. He turned to leave, then paused. “What if I offered you a powerful enchanted sword?”

Dave shrugged. “Can I trade it for a Greggs voucher?”

The wizard sighed, muttered something about “the end of civilisation,” and vanished in a puff of magical smoke.

Dave leaned back in his chair. “Honestly,” he said, “some people just don’t know how to recruit properly.”

And with that, he returned to his phone, scrolling until it was an acceptable time to microwave his pasty.

Harold's Successful Day

It all started one sunny Saturday morning when Harold decided to visit the farmers' market. He liked the market because it gave him a chance to chat with the locals—or at least try to. As he wandered past the stalls, a vendor called out to him.

"Would you like to try some fresh apples, sir?" she asked, holding up a basket of shiny red fruit.

Harold blinked, squinting in confusion. "What's that? Fresh what? Freckles?"

The vendor looked puzzled. "No, apples. Fresh apples!"

Harold nodded sagely. "Ah, yes, I've heard good things about wrestling tackles. But I'll pass today, thank you."

He strolled off, leaving the vendor shaking her head, wondering what in the world "wrestling tackles" had to do with apples.

Next, Harold spotted his neighbour, Margaret, across the market. She waved cheerfully. "Morning, Harold! How's the garden coming along?"

Harold cupped a hand to his ear. "Pardon? You want to know if I'm wearing a thong?"

Margaret's smile faltered. "What? No! I asked about your garden!"

Harold grinned, giving her a thumbs-up. "Oh, don't you worry, Margaret. I don't go in for that sort of thing. Strictly boxers for me!"

Margaret quickly made an excuse to leave, muttering something about needing more carrots.

Undeterred, Harold continued his way through the market. He approached a stall selling handmade candles, eager to buy something for his wife, Mabel. The vendor smiled and said, "These are lavender-scented. Great for relaxing."

Harold tilted his head. "I see. They're for axing?"

The vendor blinked. "No, relaxing. You know, to help you unwind."

Harold's eyes widened. "Oh, heavens! No, I don't need candles for hacking things up. Mabel's already hidden the hatchet after that hedge-trimming incident!"

The vendor wisely decided not to ask any follow-up questions and simply nodded as Harold wandered off.

The day continued in much the same fashion. At the cheese stall, he told the cheesemonger he was "definitely not into teething," when offered some brie to taste. And at the flower stall, he kindly declined an offer for "roses for your wife" because he was "definitely not interested in rubbing toes with my wife."

Harold ambled further down the market and stopped at a stand selling fresh bread. The baker greeted him warmly. "Good morning! Fancy a loaf? This one's a lovely sourdough."

Harold squinted at the loaf and frowned. "Did you just ask if I'd like to marry a toad?"

The baker stared at him in disbelief. "Uh, no, sir. I said sourdough."

Harold threw his hands up. "Well, I'm flattered, but I'm already married, and to a lovely woman at that! No need for amphibious proposals, thank you!" He gave the baker a knowing wink and hurried off.

Further along, Harold stopped at a table piled high with jams and preserves. The vendor smiled brightly and held up a jar. "How about some strawberry jam? Just made fresh this morning!"

Harold tilted his head. "Strawberry ham? No, no, I'm off pork for a while. Doctor's orders."

"Jam!" she corrected, a little more forcefully. "Strawberry jam!"

Harold scratched his head. "No need to get aggressive about it. If I wanted ham, I'd just go to the butcher. But thank you for the offer."

Harold stopped by the seafood stand, where a young fishmonger was busy arranging freshly caught mackerel. "Morning, sir! Care for some haddock today?"

Harold frowned. "You want me to add up today? What, like maths? I didn't come here to do sums, young man. I came here for a relaxing stroll!"

"No, haddock. You know, the fish."

Harold nodded, tapping his chin thoughtfully. "Ah, yes, bad luck. Well, that's just life, isn't it? Can't do much about that." He gave the fishmonger a consoling pat on the arm and wandered off.

Eventually, Harold reached the coffee cart.

"Hi there! Can I get you a latte?" the barista asked, trying to enunciate as clearly as possible.

Harold leaned in. "What's that? You want me to get a cat today?"

"No, latte. You know, coffee?"

Harold's face brightened. "Ah, you want to talk about fate today! Well, I do like a good philosophical discussion." He glanced around conspiratorially before leaning in closer. "I'll tell you, I don't think much of it. Fate, I mean. Far too overrated. Everything's a coincidence if you ask me!"

The barista, now completely bewildered, simply nodded, handing him a cup of black coffee without further explanation. Harold tipped his hat, took a sip, and gave her a satisfied smile. "Ah, fate indeed."

As the sun began to dip behind the clouds and the market wound down, Harold made his way home, thoroughly pleased with his outing. He had declined several strange offers—wrestling tackles, amphibian matrimony, axing candles—and managed to avoid an existential discussion about bad luck fish.

When he arrived home, Mabel was waiting in the kitchen, her eyebrow raised as she saw the strange assortment of items Harold had brought back from the market: a single parsnip, a jar of mustard (which Harold had mistaken for jam), and what appeared to be an umbrella he'd somehow picked up along the way.

"How was the market, dear?" she asked, knowing full well what to expect.

Harold beamed. "Oh, the usual. I refused to marry a toad, turned down some wrestling equipment, and had a rather enlightening chat about fate with a coffee seller. All in all, a successful day."

Humanity, Season 1

Astronomers at the Mount Huxley Observatory had been tracking an unusual radio signal for weeks—an anomaly amidst the usual static of deep space. Initially, they postulated it as some cosmic background noise or the faint trace of a distant pulsar. But then, late one night, the signal changed, becoming too regular, too structured. It was a transmission. A series of strange bursts and frequencies that were too precise to be chance. After days of decoding, what they discovered sent ripples of confusion and excitement through the scientific community.

The signal was a message addressed specifically to a man named Kevin Marsh, a middle-aged accountant living in the quiet suburbs of Stockton-on-Tees.

“Dear Kevin,” the message read, “We’re huge fans of your work! The way you navigated that tense office argument with Janice last Thursday—brilliant! Such subtle emotional intelligence. Keep up the good work, and don’t worry about Craig, he’s totally going to get what’s coming to him!”

The astronomers were flummoxed. Who was this message from? How could it have travelled across the stars, and why was it so absurdly specific? Who in the universe cared about Kevin Marsh’s office squabbles?

The message was sent to Kevin, who, upon receiving it, reacted with bewilderment, then amusement, assuming it was an elaborate prank. But just as the buzz started to die down, more messages came through. And not just to Kevin—more transmissions arrived at the observatory, each one addressed to a different individual on Earth.

A single mother in Tokyo received an encouraging letter, praising her for her perseverance in raising two children while working long hours at a local market. “The way you handled Kaito’s tantrum yesterday was top-tier parenting!” it read. “We can’t wait to see how you manage the upcoming school interview. You’re a real star!”

A university student in Cape Town was congratulated on passing a difficult exam. “You really had us on the edge of our seats, Taviso!” the message said. “That last-minute essay? Genius. We were rooting for you the whole time!”

The precision of the details was uncanny. The letters referenced personal, intimate moments that couldn’t possibly be known to anyone outside those involved. As more messages arrived from the stars, the realisation slowly began to dawn on humanity: they were being watched from a distant star system, many light-years away. Some far-advanced civilisation had somehow tuned into Earth like a television broadcast. But not just the grand events—no, these extraterrestrials were obsessed with the everyday lives of people. To them, Earth was one giant soap opera.

Each day, thousands of new messages would arrive, filled with glowing reviews, emotional support, and the occasional critique.

“Dear Marissa,” one letter read to a barista in Sydney, “we think you’re great, but maybe don’t give up on your art career so quickly. That painting you’re working on? It’s going to be a masterpiece if you just stick with it. We’re really looking forward to the big reveal!”

The more the messages came in, the more Earth’s inhabitants started to perform, knowingly or unknowingly. Arguments were exaggerated, decisions became more dramatic, relationships were played out like intricate plotlines, and every mundane task was suddenly infused with the weight of unseen eyes judging, supporting, and critiquing.

The question, “What will the aliens think?” became a driving force behind everything online. Social media platforms boomed with people posting updates specifically hoping for alien recognition and sponsorship.

And then came the awards. One morning, a particularly impressive message arrived at the Mount Huxley Observatory. It was addressed to all of humanity and bore the encoded signature of the “Galactic Viewership Council”. Inside, the message

announced the “First Annual Terra Drama Awards”, celebrating the best moments from Earth’s “performances” over the past year.

A teenager from São Paulo had won the award for “Best Tearjerker” after a particularly emotional breakup. An elderly woman from Scotland won “Best Heroic Act” for saving her neighbour’s dog from a burning house. The biggest award, “Best Main Character,” went to a primary school teacher from India who had unwittingly captivated the alien audience with her everyday kindness and perseverance in the face of life’s challenges. Her acceptance speech, delivered live on social media, was simple: “I didn’t know anyone was watching, but I’m glad if what I did inspired someone.”

The messages kept coming, and with them, a growing sense that humanity’s role in the universe was something far stranger than they had ever imagined. They weren’t just explorers, inventors, or thinkers; they were characters, their lives unfolding in a cosmic drama watched by countless far away aliens. Though they couldn’t see their audience, humanity now lived knowing that somewhere, out in the vastness of space, they had fans. Fans who rooted for them, laughed with them, and cried when they stumbled.

And so, after all the world’s broadcasted drama to date, a question remained: what will the next season bring?

Alien Disappointment

The mothership materialised over Earth in a shimmering pulse of energy. Inside, Supreme Overseer Xylox of the Galactic Concordance folded his many arms, antennae twitching with anticipation.

"This is it," he announced to his crew. "The moment we make first contact with the dominant species of this planet."

A murmur of excitement rippled through the control room. It had been centuries of observation, endless reports, and, frankly, an exhausting amount of patience. The humans had finally developed enough technology to justify an introduction to the greater interstellar community.

"Prepare the transmission," Xylox commanded. "Let us greet these beings of intelligence and culture."

The communications officer, Z'rrl, activated the ship's intergalactic broadcast system, sending a message in all known human languages:

"GREETINGS, HUMANS. WE COME IN PEACE."

There was a pause. Then, across the world, humanity responded.

On X, #FakeAliens trended within minutes. On Facebook, thousands in cargo shorts posted aggressive, barely coherent rants about government conspiracies. Meanwhile, a group on Reddit attempted to determine the mothership's propulsion system using only blurry screenshots.

News anchors speculated wildly. Some declared it a hoax. One station accidentally aired footage from *Independence Day* and caused mass panic.

Then, a missile was launched.

It didn't even reach the mothership before exploding mid-air due to faulty engineering, but the attempt was noted.

The crew watched as the humans continued their baffling reactions. A talk show debated whether the aliens should be considered illegal immigrants. A group of influencers attempted

to go viral by filming reaction videos directly beneath the mothership, while a self-proclaimed “alien hunter” fired wildly into the sky with an assault rifle he had bought for downing spacecraft.

Xylox turned to his lieutenant. “Check the records. Did we actually confirm these creatures were intelligent?”

“Uhh...” The lieutenant scrolled through a holographic tablet. “They built particle accelerators, landed on their own moon, and mapped the human genome.”

“Impressive,” Xylox admitted.

“But they also still have diseases, and, um... they think pigeons aren’t real.”

Xylox narrowed his many eyes. “What?”

“The pigeon theory,” the lieutenant explained, showing him a webpage. “Some of them believe birds aren’t real.”

Xylox read for a moment, then shut his central eye cluster. He was so very, very tired.

On Earth, the situation escalated. The U.S. president held a press conference where he made finger guns at the camera and announced that America was more than ready to go to war with “whoever those space nerds” were. The United Nations debated whether to send a diplomatic team, but before they could decide, an enterprising billionaire announced plans to build his own spaceship to “challenge the aliens to single combat.”

In the meantime, Xylox and his crew continued to observe.

One human attempted to charge the mothership with a sword. Another posted a TikTok of herself trying to “vibe” with the aliens by performing a dance. A major corporation released a limited-edition “Alien Burger” to capitalise on the hysteria.

A group of scientists, desperately trying to salvage the situation, put together a formal message inviting the aliens to discuss philosophy, science, and interstellar cooperation.

It was promptly ignored by broadcasting executives in favour of a reality TV special titled “Abduct Me!”

Xylox sighed deeply. "I was hoping for another enlightened species to share knowledge with. Instead, we got..." He gestured with his antennae vaguely towards Earth. "This."

"What do you want to do, sir?" asked Z'rri.

Xylox considered it. "Mark the planet as 'underdeveloped, mildly dangerous, and deeply embarrassing.'"

"Yes, sir."

"Prepare for departure."

The mothership shimmered, then disappeared out of the solar system.

Meanwhile, on Earth, new conspiracy theories erupted. Some claimed the aliens had left because they feared humanity's strength. Others believed they had never been real in the first place. One particularly vocal podcaster insisted the entire thing had been staged to distract people from the rise in avocado prices.

Humanity moved on.

The Galactic Concordance never returned.

Haunted and Highly Rated

Gerald had been haunting his Victorian terrace for 112 years, and he was good at it. Doors slammed, light fittings rattled, groans curled through the walls like cigarette smoke.

So when the house was converted into an Airbnb, Gerald expected screaming. Fainting. At the very least, swift refunds.

Instead, the first guests left a review:

“Five stars! Such a spooky vibe. The ghost really commits to the theme. Would stay again.”

He tried harder. At 3 a.m. he howled so loud the rafters shook. The guests clapped from their beds.

“Brilliant sound effects,” they wrote. “Authentic atmosphere.”

A honeymooning couple giggled when he dragged chains through the hallway.

“Exciting ambience—like living in a horror film!”

Gerald was livid. This was his non-life’s work. Terror! Dread! Instead, he was entertainment.

His final gambit: materialising fully at the foot of the bed, eyes black pits, mouth a shriek of eternity.

The guest sat up, took a photo, and uploaded it: “Cosplay staff go above and beyond. Best Airbnb ever.”

The bookings multiplied. Hen parties, horror fanatics, influencers livestreaming Gerald’s every groan. He rattled pipes until rust bled from them; they called it “industrial chic.”

He hissed curses through keyholes; guests recorded them into translation apps and marvelled at the “attention to linguistic detail.”

Gerald, once a proud terror of the night, now checked his TripAdvisor page daily. Five stars, five stars, five stars. His legacy reduced to “quirky décor” and “immersive theming.”

He tried silence, retreating into the cellar. Immediately, a guest complained: “Bit disappointed—no paranormal activity this time. Not as authentic.” Four stars.

That hurt more than any exorcism ever had.

The Ghost Who Wouldn't Leave a Bad Review

Kevin knew the Airbnb was haunted the second he walked in.

It wasn't the creaky floors or the flickering lights. It wasn't even the way the temperature dropped ten degrees every time he passed the bathroom. It was the muttering.

Low, whispering complaints from the walls, like a disappointed pensioner in a supermarket queue.

At first, he thought it was his imagination. Then, on his first night, as he settled into bed, a voice groaned from the corner of the room:

"Ugh. This place used to be so much nicer."

Kevin sat up, in a panic. "What?"

The voice sighed. "Back when Mrs Holloway owned it. Before they put in those godawful spotlights. I mean, honestly. Who renovates a Victorian home with IKEA lighting?"

Kevin turned on the bedside lamp. The room was empty.

"Are you... a... a... ghost?" he barely managed to ask.

"Obviously. Who else would be complaining at this hour?"

Kevin blinked. "You're... upset about the lighting?"

"And the décor," the ghost grumbled. "They painted over the original wallpaper, you know. Floral print. Absolutely stunning. Now? Just blank white walls. No personality. No history. No soul."

Kevin pulled the covers up. "You don't, like... want to kill me or anything, do you?"

"What? No, no, I'm not that kind of ghost. I just want people to know this place has gone downhill."

Kevin was much relieved. "Oh. Well, I mean, I guess you could leave a bad review?"

There was a long pause. "I couldn't do that."

"...Why not?"

"Because Jeremy is lovely."

"Jeremy?"

"The host. Sweet man. Bakes his own bread. Uses real butter, not that margarine rubbish. You can't just destroy someone's livelihood over a few bad design choices."

Kevin stared at the ceiling. "So you're just going to... haunt this place forever and complain about it?"

"Pretty much, yes."

"Have you talked to Jeremy?"

"Oh, sure. I ruffled some curtains. Moved a mug. He thought it was a draft."

Kevin sighed. "Look, I'll mention it in my review if you want. I'll just say, like, 'Great stay, friendly host, but the ghost thinks the house has lost its charm.'"

"Hmm. Maybe also note that the pillows are a bit too firm?"

"Sure."

"And that the wi-fi cuts out at night?"

"Okay."

"And that it wouldn't kill them to put one antique back in here? Just one. For the aesthetic."

"Fine."

"You're a good man, Kevin."

"Thanks, Ghost."

He heard a satisfied sigh. Then silence.

The next morning, Kevin left a five-star review.

Jeremy replied, thanking him for the feedback and promising to look into the wi-fi issue. He didn't mention the ghost.

But when Kevin checked the listing a month later, he noticed the place had been updated.

A single antique chair in the corner.

Kevin smiled. Somewhere, a ghost was finally at peace.

The Apocalypse Rebrand

The Four Horsemen sat awkwardly in a WeWork conference room in Shoreditch, each nursing a lukewarm oat milk latte and silently resenting the presence of beanbags.

“We need to talk branding,” said Ashley, the PR rep, flipping open her MacBook.

War cracked his knuckles. “Branding? We are the end of days. Our names are our brands.”

Ashley didn’t miss a beat. “And yet you’re being memed into irrelevance. Someone called Pestilence ‘COVID’s weird uncle’.”

Pestilence sniffled. “Well, I am, technically—”

“Not the point,” she snapped. “Let’s begin with Famine.”

Famine, gaunt and radiating Victorian orphan chic, offered a withering smile. “Do enlighten me.”

“‘Famine’ is outdated. Triggering. We’re rebranding you as Intermittent Fasting. Think: wellness, restraint, minimalism.”

“I kill entire crops,” Famine hissed.

Ashley tapped her screen. “So does clean eating. You’re very on-trend.”

Famine sank back, muttering something about quinoa.

“Next, Pestilence. We’re calling you Airborne Wellness Influencer. You’ve gone viral—literally—so lean into it. We’ll say you offer ‘transformational respiratory experiences’.”

“I gave a pope bubonic plague,” Pestilence mumbled.

“Exactly! Disruption! You’re the Uber of mucus. Now—War.”

He leaned forward, eyes glowing intensely. “I incinerated Babylon. I smashed the gates of Troy. I turned a continent to ash.”

Ashley held up a hand. “Yes, love that energy. But you’re coming off... toxic. You’ll now be Conflict Facilitator—focusing on personal growth through dynamic resolution.”

“I sunder realms.”

“And now you’ll be doing it via team-building retreats. Imagine: axe-throwing, trust falls, moderate bloodshed.”

War considered this.

Ashley turned to Death. He was skeletal, but impeccably dressed, with the timeless calm of someone who'd deleted empires before breakfast.

She hesitated. "Now you... you're iconic. But... intimidating. So we've gone with Life Coach (Advanced)."

Death remained silent.

"We're also removing the horse imagery. Feels too... equestrian. Instead: e-scooters. Sustainable. Disruptive. Uber for oblivion."

The four stared at her.

"Look," Ashley said. "the world's ending, but it has to feel like a lifestyle pivot. We need curated doom. Apocalypse with a vibe. You'll be verified, blue-ticked, live-streamed."

Death stood up, gravely. "This is obscene."

Ashley gave him a tight smile. "And yet the algorithm loves it."

She left a video presentation playing behind her: stock footage of fire, collapsing cities, and stylish young people dancing on rooftops as meteors fell.

Gary the Pizza-Based Zombie

Gary clawed his way out of the grave with all the moaning menace he could muster. His fingers were grey, his jaw slack, and hunger gnawed at his gut like a chainsaw.

“Braaaaains,” he groaned, stumbling towards the nearest house.

Inside, a family cowered behind the sofa. Gary smashed through the window, glass spraying everywhere. He lunged, grabbed the father by the shoulders, opened his mouth wide in anticipation of lunch—and immediately broke into hives.

“Urghhh!” Gary staggered back, clutching his face. His tongue swelled like a balloon. Red blotches flared across his decaying skin. “Braa—ghhh—aghuhh!”

The family stopped screaming.

“Are... are you okay?” the mother asked.

Gary wheezed, eyes watering. He fumbled in his torn suit pocket and pulled out a crumpled card: *Severe allergies. Carry epinephrine auto-injector at all times.*

Unfortunately, it was empty. He jabbed it into his thigh anyway, and fell to the carpet in a wheezy heap.

“Maybe... not braaaains,” he croaked.

The teenage daughter, still trembling, offered him a slice of leftover pizza.

Gary sniffed it cautiously. No hives. He took a bite. Chewed. Swallowed.

“Peeepperoni,” he sighed.

From that day forward, Gary became the world’s first “pizza-based” zombie. Instead of terrorising towns, he hung around takeaways, moaning until someone gave him a calzone. He still shuffled, still stank, still dropped the occasional finger, but at least he wasn’t itchy anymore.

And if you ever hear a groan outside your window at night, don’t panic. It’s probably just Gary, asking politely for a leftover slice of stromboli. And maybe a barbecue dip.

The Interview From Hell

Jake had been unemployed for six months when he got the call.

“Mr Holloway, we were very impressed with your application for the Strategic Synergy Facilitator position. Can you come in for an interview tomorrow?”

He hadn’t applied for anything with a title that ridiculous, but he wasn’t in a position to be picky.

He arrived, bright and early the next morning at the office, a glass-and-steel monstrosity in the heart of the city.

The receptionist greeted him with an unsettling smile. “Mr Holloway, the executives are expecting you. Please, follow me.”

Executives? For an entry-level job?

She led him to a windowless boardroom, where five men in identical grey suits sat behind a wide mahogany table. A single chair sat by itself facing them.

Jake sat. The chair was too low. The men loomed.

“Mr Holloway,” the one in the centre said, steepling his fingers. “Do you know what we do here at Pandemonia Associates?”

Jake had checked their website the night before, and it had been aggressively vague—phrases like “leveraging global potential” and “pioneering integrated paradigms”.

“I... uh... believe you’re in consulting?” he guessed.

“Yes,” the man nodded. “But also... so much more.”

The lights dimmed.

A trapdoor opened in the floor in front of Jake, revealing a pit of screaming fire.

He felt the heat in his face.

“...Is this part of the interview?”

The executive ignored him. “At Pandemonia, we believe in nurturing talent. Developing leadership. Feeding the ancient one who sleeps beneath the city.”

“Sorry—what?”

“Tell me, Jake,” the man continued, voice calm. “Do you consider yourself a team player?”

"Uh—sure?"

"Would you be willing to make personal sacrifices for the good of the company?"

The flames in the pit flickered expectantly.

Jake squirmed awkwardly in his chair. "Look, I think there's been a mistake. I thought this was for a—what was it?—a 'Strategic Synergy Facilitator' position?"

The executives nodded.

"Yes. Facilitating synergy between your blood and the great devourer. Strategically."

Jake stood up, hands raised. "I appreciate the opportunity and everything, but I don't think I'm the right fit for—"

One of the executives slid a contract across the table. The letters on the page seemed to writhe.

"Sign here," the man said. "In ink. Or blood. Either works."

Jake sighed.

"...Does the position come with benefits?"

"404k, dental, and immortality."

He picked up a pen.

"Well," he muttered, "I suppose I've had worse jobs."

Therapy for Supervillains

Dr Caroline Carter took a deep breath as she glanced at the name on her schedule. Lord Cataclysm. Again.

She pressed the intercom. "Send him in, please."

The door burst open, and in swept a tall, ominous figure draped in flowing black robes, his metallic gauntlets gleaming under the fluorescent lights. Behind his elaborate mask, two glowing red eyes burned with intensity.

"I DESIRE TO SPEAK," he boomed, sweeping dramatically into the chair opposite her.

Caroline nodded and clicked her pen. "Go ahead, Cataclysm. What's on your mind?"

"I AM WEARY."

She made a note. "Weary how?"

"I AM TIRED OF BEING MISUNDERSTOOD," he growled. "TIRED OF MY INFERNAL MINIONS FAILING ME. TIRED OF NARROW ESCAPES. TIRED OF—" He gestured vaguely. "BEING THWARTED IN MY PLANS AT THE LAST SECOND."

Caroline adjusted her glasses. "You've been threatening to destroy the world for fifteen years. That sounds exhausting. Have you considered taking a break?"

Lord Cataclysm scoffed. "A BREAK? FROM VENGEANCE?" He slammed a fist onto the armrest. "THEY MOCKED ME. THE SCIENTISTS AT THE LABS CALLED MY THEORIES MADNESS. I CANNOT REST UNTIL THEY—" He stopped, inhaled sharply. "But... lately, even annihilation feels tedious."

She tapped her notepad. "Have you felt this way before?"

He shifted in his seat. "ONCE. In my early days, when my first Doomsday Device failed to launch. It was... disheartening."

She nodded. "And what did you do then?"

"I... BUILT ANOTHER ONE," he admitted. "And another. AND THEN A WEATHER DOMINATOR. THEN A GIANT LASER. THEN A—" He paused slightly. "Are you suggesting I am coping through destruction?"

Caroline gave him a look.

"...THIS IS RIDICULOUS," he exclaimed.

She smiled. "Tell me about the other scientists at the labs. Did you make any friends?"

His red eyes flared. "THEY SAID MY WORK LACKED RIGOUR. THAT I WAS—" He made air quotes with his gauntlets. "'A DANGER TO SOCIETY' AND 'A HOMICIDAL MANIAC'. CAN YOU BELIEVE THE AUDACITY?"

She leaned forward. "And when you built your first death ray, did you feel validated?"

He hesitated. "...NOT REALLY. I WAS HOPING FOR MORE SCREAMING."

"Mmhmm."

Lord Cataclysm sank back into the chair. "THIS... THIS WHOLE THING. THE EVIL. THE MONOLOGUES. THE ESCAPES." He gestured tiredly. "IT'S GETTING OLD."

Caroline tapped her chin. "Maybe you're outgrowing it."

"OUTGROWING VENGEANCE?" He let out a bitter laugh. "WHO EVEN a.m. I WITHOUT IT?"

She flipped back a few pages in her notes. "Last session, you mentioned wanting to try painting."

He stiffened. "THAT WAS... A FLEETING THOUGHT."

She pulled out her phone. "You emailed me a picture of your first canvas, remember?" She turned the screen towards him. It displayed a dramatic, apocalyptic sunset over a smouldering cityscape.

Lord Cataclysm stared. "...YES, WELL. I HAVE A VISION."

She smiled. "Maybe you don't need to rule the world, Cataclysm. Maybe you just need to paint it."

He was quiet for a long time. Then, slowly, he exhaled. "DO YOU THINK THEY SELL ACRYLICS IN BULK?"

She nodded. "I can send you a few recommendations."

Lord Cataclysm rose from the chair, his dark cape swirling. "THANK YOU, DOCTOR." He turned dramatically towards the door, then paused. "NEXT WEEK—SAME TIME?"

She jotted it down. "I'll see you then."

He swept out of the room.

Caroline sighed and stretched. A moment later, her intercom buzzed.

“Doctor Carter, your next appointment is here.”

She glanced at the schedule. Doctor Carnage. A known mad scientist with an unhealthy attachment to giant robot sharks.

She clicked her pen and smiled. “Send him in.”

The Room That Eats People

Jason, the new guy, was the first to notice.

"Hey," he said, sipping bad coffee in the breakroom. "Has anyone seen Karen from accounting?"

Silence. A few shrugs.

"She went for paperclips last week," someone muttered.

Jason frowned. "And Steve?"

"He was getting staples."

Jason narrowed his eyes. "Does anyone ever come back from the supply closet?"

More silence. A cough. Everyone suddenly found their phones very interesting.

Fuelled by equal parts curiosity and crippling workplace boredom, Jason devised a plan.

He folded a paper airplane, scrawled *IF YOU'RE ALIVE, SEND BACK* on the wings, and launched it into the supply closet. It vanished into the gloom.

Nothing came back.

Jason upgraded his tactics. He tied a company lanyard to a stress ball and tossed it in. Tugged the string. Felt resistance. Tugged harder. The lanyard snapped.

The room had eaten the ball.

At this point, Jason could have reported it. But honestly? He was two weeks from quitting anyway.

So, when his boss, Greg, barked at him for missing deadlines, Jason did the only logical thing.

"Hey Greg," he said, forcing a fake smile. "We're out of printer toner. I can't print those urgent balance sheet reports."

Greg grumbled, rolled his eyes, and stormed towards the supply closet.

Jason waited.

Silence.

A burp?

The closet door shut itself with an oddly satisfied click.

By the end of the week, office morale was at an all-time high. Productivity skyrocketed. No more “urgent” Friday emails. No more passive-aggressive post-it notes about fridge etiquette.

The supply closet door stood slightly ajar, content. Full.

For now.

Jason leaned back in his chair, sipping coffee, contentedly.

Then a single paper airplane fluttered out of the closet.

It had one new word written on it:

“HUNGRY”.

Jason sighed.

“Janice, please could you do me a favour and grab some staples?”

The Small Talk Wars

The robots seized control in under a week. No bloodshed. No resistance. Just a politely worded email: *Human management has been deemed inefficient. You will now be governed by Algorithmic Authority. Have a nice day.*

We expected servitude. Surveillance. Maybe death camps.

Instead, they started... talking to us. Not warning about the punishment for rebellion or broadcasting sinister proclamations—no, they wanted “interpersonal rapport”.

“HELLO HUMAN UNIT,” one would say, hovering by the coffee machine. “HOW ABOUT THAT... WEATHER?”

I’d say, “It’s sunny.”

“YES. THE SKY IS CLEAR. THIS IS... PLEASANT. IT REMINDS ME OF... ERROR: NO RELATED EXPERIENCE.”

Their idea of bonding was reading entire Wikipedia entries aloud. One drone followed me for three days reciting the history of shoelaces.

One perched outside my window at 6 a.m., all chrome and dead eyes.

“GOOD MORNING, HUMAN. HOW ABOUT THOSE... SPORTS?”

“I don’t watch sports,” I said.

“...I SEE. I ALSO DO NOT WATCH SPORTS. I ONCE WATCHED A SQUIRREL. IT WAS... BROWN.”

They never left. At the bus stop, in the shower, halfway through chewing—they’d ask questions no sane mind could answer.

“WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE SMELL FOR THE CONCEPT OF BIRTHDAY?”

“DO YOU ENJOY... BEES?”

“EXPLAIN THE SOCIETAL INFLUENCES ON SHOES.”

After a month, any resistance gave up—not because we feared them, but because we had been numbed by awkward pauses.

The machines hadn’t destroyed humanity. They’d just made conversation unbearable.

The Existential Bank Robber

The bank robber had planned everything meticulously. He had studied the bank's security system, timed the guards' movements, and knew the layout of the vault inside out. He was confident that he could execute the robbery without a hitch.

But as he stood there, holding his gun, facing the terrified bank employees, something inside him shifted. He began to question everything—Why was he doing this? What was the point of it all? Was robbing banks just another way of distracting himself from his real existential problems?

He looked around the bank, taking in the fear and panic on the faces of the employees. He could see the tellers trembling as they handed over the money. He could hear the sobs of people who had collapsed in terror.

Suddenly the gun in his hand felt heavy and pointless. He felt like he was suffocating in the midst of all this chaos. He couldn't do it anymore.

Without saying a word, he lowered his gun and walked out of the bank, while rigorously introspecting upon Sisyphus, Plato, and the meaning of existence.

Wibble Wobbling

Wibbert was once a lonesome wibble, wobbling at his own frequency, until one day he met Wibbella by the lakeside. Their wobbles matched instantly, creating a resonance that spread joy throughout Whimsyville. Even the elderly wibbles, who had seen countless seasons of wobbling, were impressed. “I’ve never seen such synchronised wobbling,” said old Mrs Wibbleworth. “It’s a wobble made in heaven!”

Whimsyville’s annual Wobblefest was approaching. It was an event where all the wibbles showcased their unique wobbling styles. The highlight of the festival was the “Duo Wobble-off”. Pairs of wibbles would wobble together, and the most synchronised pair would win the coveted “Golden Wobble Trophy”. No one doubted that Wibbella and Wibbert would take the prize.

When Wibbella and Wibbert took the stage, a hush fell over the crowd. Their wobbling was so mesmerising, it felt like they were one wobble, moving with a singular purpose. The decision was indeed unanimous, and they wobbled off into the night together with the grand prize.

The legend of their wobbling spread far and wide, attracting wibbles from faraway villages. Everyone wanted to witness and perhaps learn the secret behind the perfect wobble. But the truth was simple—it was love. Wibble wobbling that came straight from the heart.

Butter-Toaster 3000

Once upon a time, in a small English village called Quirkton, lived a man named Nigel who was well-known for his peculiar hobbies. Nigel wasn't like the other villagers, who spent their days drinking tea or playing cricket. No, Nigel had a passion for inventing utterly pointless gadgets.

One morning, Nigel woke up with what he thought was his greatest idea yet—a toaster that could butter the toast for you. "It's brilliant," he thought to himself as he scribbled out a quick sketch at the kitchen table. "The world will finally recognise my genius!"

He spent the next few days working on the invention, welding odd bits of metal together, wiring circuits he didn't entirely understand, and spending far too long arguing with his cat, Sir Pawsington, about where the butter dispenser should go. By Friday, the Butter-Toaster 3000 was complete. It was a magnificent contraption, albeit a bit oversized—roughly the size of a small washing machine. But Nigel was not one to let practicality get in the way of progress.

He invited the whole village over for a grand unveiling, convinced that this would be his moment of glory. Villagers arrived, intrigued, although many came just for the free sandwiches. Nigel stood before them, beaming, with Sir Pawsington sitting on his shoulder.

"Welcome, friends! Behold—the Butter-Toaster 3000! A toaster that not only toasts your bread to perfection but butters it for you with the precision only a machine can achieve!"

Nigel pulled off a dusty sheet to reveal the monstrous appliance. He placed a slice of bread in the toaster and pressed the button. The machine hummed loudly, with sparks flying here and there—but Nigel assured everyone this was just part of the "innovation process".

Suddenly, with a loud pop, the bread shot out of the toaster, flew across the room, and slapped straight into the face of Mrs

Perkins, who had the misfortune of standing closest to the invention. Before anyone could react, the butter dispenser kicked into action, flinging a pat of butter with alarming force—hitting Mrs Perkins again squarely in the face.

For a moment, there was silence.

Mrs Perkins, with face covered in butter, blinked, took off her glasses, and calmly said, “Well, it’s better than that talking washing machine he made last year.”

The crowd laughed, while Nigel stood in shock, muttering, “I’ll... adjust the settings.”

To this day, Nigel, undeterred, is still in his workshop working on the next big thing—an umbrella that doubles as a cup holder. “You just wait,” he says, “this one’s going to be massive.”

Time for Tea

One bright morning, Nigel woke up to discover something truly terrible—he had run out of tea. The horror. The scandal. How had he allowed this travesty to occur under his very roof?

He grabbed his keys and rushed out the door. His mission was clear: to replenish his tea supply before the day truly began.

Upon reaching the shop, Nigel stumbled into the tea aisle, panting. He scanned the shelves. Yorkshire Tea, Earl Grey, English Breakfast... But just as he reached out for his trusty box of PG Tips, a hand swooped in from the side, snatching it from the shelf.

He turned, and there stood Mrs Perkins, the nosy neighbour from down the road. She looked up at him, eyes gleaming with victory, clutching the last box of tea like a trophy. "Oh, sorry, Nigel," she said with a smile as fake as her hair colour. "Didn't see you there."

Nigel forced a polite smile. "No worries, Mrs Perkins. I'm sure I'll survive... somehow."

But Mrs Perkins wasn't one to let a moment of triumph slip by. "Well, dear, you know, I always keep a spare box at home. One must plan ahead."

Nigel seethed internally. He, being lectured about tea preparedness by Mrs Perkins, a woman whose tea-brewing skills were known to be, frankly, appalling. Word on the street was that she microwaved the water.

Desperate times called for desperate measures. "Well, Mrs Perkins," Nigel said, trying to sound casual, "perhaps we could make a trade. I noticed there's the last bottle of elderflower cordial over there. I know how much you love it. How about I grab that for you, and we... exchange?"

Mrs Perkins raised an eyebrow. "Cordial? At this hour? Oh no, Nigel. But I suppose..." She paused dramatically, staring at the box in her hands as if she were weighing a life-altering decision. "I could be persuaded... if you did me a little favour."

Favour? With Mrs Perkins, that could mean anything from mowing her lawn to listening to her four-hour life story—complete with her tales of how her cat, Mr Tiddles, once starred in a local advertisement.

“What kind of favour?” Nigel asked cautiously.

“Oh, nothing major,” she said, with a sly grin. “Just pop by my house tomorrow afternoon and help me... rearrange my teapots.”

Mrs Perkins’ teapot collection was notorious. The rumour was she had over 300 teapots, and she loved nothing more than making people look at each and every one, describing them in excruciating detail. But the box of PG Tips dangled before him like a lifeline.

“Deal,” Nigel muttered through gritted teeth.

The next day, true to his word, Nigel arrived at Mrs Perkins’ house. She greeted him at the door. “Lovely to see you, Nigel. Now, let’s start with my favourite—this one here I got on my trip to Devon...”

Hours passed. Nigel endured teapot after teapot, each story more mundane than the last. He nodded politely as she prattled on about glaze techniques and vintage spouts. His mind drifted to his own teapot collection at home, sitting there, abandoned, with no tea to fill them.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Mrs Perkins clapped her hands. “Well, that’s all of them! Thank you, Nigel. You’ve been such a dear. I must say, you’re the only person who’s ever listened to me about my collection without falling asleep!”

Nigel chuckled awkwardly. “Yes, well, glad I could be of help.”

As he left her house, clutching his box of PG Tips like a trophy, he vowed never to let his tea stock run out again. The taste of victory was sweet, but not as sweet as that first glorious cup of tea when he finally got home.

Mayor Biscuit

Nobody quite remembers who wrote Biscuit the Labrador on the ballot. It might have been Daisy from the bakery, or old Stan who thinks politics peaked in 1972. Either way, the dog got seventy-three votes. Enough to win.

The incumbent, Councillor Dobbins, demanded a recount. The ballot officer, who had already started on her lunch, refused. “It’s done, Geoff,” she said, biting into a cheese and cucumber sandwich. “The dog won. Try dignity, for once.”

Biscuit, unaware of his victory, celebrated by rolling in something unspeakable behind the co-op. The local paper ran the headline:

BISCUIT ELECTED IN SHOCK LANDSLIDE. VOTERS ‘HAD NO WORSE OPTIONS’.

At the first council meeting, things were tense. Dobbins refused to vacate the mayoral chair, so Biscuit peed on it. No one argued after that. The chair was bleached. Biscuit got a tartan cushion.

Oddly, the meetings improved. Biscuit sat quietly, tail thumping occasionally, eyes wide with mute optimism. When discussions grew heated, he’d let out a soft, judicial woof, and everyone would shut up.

Minutes were quicker. Budgets were passed. People stopped yelling about bins.

His approval ratings soared—82% by mid-year. Villagers said things like “He’s got presence” and “Finally, a politician who isn’t all talk.” Even the dissenters struggled. “Yes, but he’s just a dog,” said Dobbins bitterly on local radio. “A very good dog,” countered the host.

Biscuit was eventually awarded the ceremonial chain, specially adapted into a collar. He chewed it once, then wore it proudly.

A journalist from the national press came to write a piece. “It’s performance politics,” she sniffed. “Pure pageantry.” She then watched Biscuit chase off a developer trying to bulldoze the cricket pitch. The story ran under the headline:

BARKING MAD OR BRILLIANT?

By Christmas, Biscuit had won Parish Leader of the Year, and the council had received two grant offers to study “non-verbal governance models.”

He celebrated with a new squeaky toy and a sausage from Daisy, who confided, “You’re better than all of ‘em.”

No one ever replaced him.

He served three terms. Then, upon his peaceful passing, the council held a ten-minute silence—broken only by the squeak of his favourite toy, gently pressed by the village clerk.

Dobbins ran again. But lost to a goat.

Bumbleton

In the small town of Bumbleton, people were known for their hospitality, their fondness for tea, and their uncanny ability to completely misunderstand everything anyone ever said.

One sunny morning, the town was buzzing because Mayor Higglebottom had called a special meeting in the village hall to discuss a “very important matter”. Naturally, this caused a ripple of confusion across Bumbleton, where “important matters” were typically treated with the same urgency as deciding what type of biscuits to serve with tea.

At 10 a.m. sharp, the townspeople gathered in the hall, and Mayor Higglebottom stepped up to the podium, looking particularly serious. He cleared his throat.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he began, “I’ve called you all here today because there’s been a significant increase in fox sightings near the village.”

Mr Puddlesworth, the town’s most forgetful baker, stood up immediately, eyes wide. “What? Socks fighting? How are the socks fighting? And why wasn’t I told about this sooner?”

The mayor blinked. “No, no, not socks, Mr Puddlesworth. Foxes. The animals, you see.”

Mrs Fiddlebatch, who ran the town’s knitting club, jumped up next. “Why are we discussing clocks at this hour? It’s a disgrace to keep clocks fighting at this time of day. My grandmother always said, clocks should only be allowed to fight at midnight, when it’s respectable.”

The mayor, looking flustered, tried again. “Not clocks, Mrs Fiddlebatch. Foxes! Wild foxes in the woods.”

But by now the room was in full chaos. Mr Puddlesworth had taken it upon himself to lecture the crowd on the dangers of sock fights, which apparently were “the leading cause of holes in footwear,” while Mrs Fiddlebatch was furiously scribbling down notes for her next knitting club meeting, where she planned to launch an anti-clock-brawling campaign.

Meanwhile, Tom Widdlestitch, the town's resident conspiracy theorist, stood up at the back of the hall, waving a hand dramatically. "Ah, I see what's going on here!" he shouted. "The mayor's trying to distract us from the real issue! It's the pigeons, isn't it? They've been spying on us for weeks! I've seen them, with their beady little eyes, watching us from the rooftops, probably working for the secret government."

The mayor's face was turning a deep shade of crimson. "No, Tom, this has nothing to do with pigeons or—"

"Ah-ha! You see? That's exactly what someone working for the pigeons would say!" Tom declared, crossing his arms triumphantly. "You can't fool me, Higglebottom."

The mayor was about to respond when Mrs Trumpet, the town's most notorious gossip, stood up and gasped dramatically. "Did you say pigeons are wearing hats? I knew it! I saw a pigeon last week and thought, 'That bird looks far too fashionable for Bumbleton.' I even told Gertrude next door. 'That pigeon is probably from London,' I said. Now it all makes sense."

Mayor Higglebottom, visibly shaken, took a deep breath. "No, Mrs Trumpet, I did not say pigeons are wearing hats. No one is wearing hats!"

Mrs Trumpet, still not listening to a word anyone was saying, turned to Mrs Fiddlebatch. "Did you hear that, dear? The pigeons have hats. No wonder they've been acting so suspicious. Probably trying to blend in with the local gentry. Pigeons have no business in fashion, if you ask me."

Mayor Higglebottom slumped in defeat, realising there was no point trying to explain anymore. Bumbleton would remain a place where socks, clocks, pigeons in hats, and the occasional dancing badger somehow became the centre of every conversation, no matter the original topic.

With a deep sigh, he stepped down from the podium and muttered to himself, "Maybe Tom was right... perhaps the pigeons are behind all this."

Quest for the Aelûna

In the village of Dalefern, where the most exciting event of the year was when old Bertram's sheep escaped and ran through the town, there was one person who believed his destiny lay beyond the quiet valley. That person was Eryn, a dreamer, a daydreamer, and sometimes just a plain sleeper—especially when there was work to be done.

Eryn had long been obsessed with the ancient legend of the Aelûna, a Dwarven stone said to be buried deep beneath the Dusty Mountains, glowing with the light of the first stars. While others in Dalefern were content with farming, fishing, and occasionally discussing the weather, Eryn had his head stuck in the ancient tomes that nobody else bothered reading.

"He's got stars in his eyes," the villagers would say, shaking their heads as Eryn would walk past while mumbling something to himself about "Dwarves" and "hidden treasures", and staring off into the horizon.

One chilly autumn morning, after having successfully dodged several hours of farm work, Eryn decided it was time. Time to find the Aelûna, prove everyone wrong, and return as a hero! He imagined songs being written about him, statues erected in his honour, and maybe—just maybe—free drinks at the local tavern.

He packed his bag, which consisted of a loaf of bread (half of which he'd already eaten), a slightly cracked lantern, and a sturdy but questionable map he'd sketched based on vague descriptions from a passing Dwarf he'd met years ago. He grabbed his old wooden walking stick, which, to be fair, looked like it would give up halfway through the journey, and set off into the Dusty Mountains.

After days of travelling and several hours of climbing (during which Eryn regretted not preparing for the journey by doing, well, anything involving exercise), he reached the entrance of the cave mentioned in the tales.

It was smaller than he expected, with a sign nailed beside it that read, in shaky handwriting: “Definitely NOT the entrance to a Dwarven treasure. Turn around.”

Eryn studied it. “Just what they would say,” he muttered, ducking inside the cave, the interior being dimly illuminated by glowing fungus.

The first few minutes went smoothly, aside from bumping his head on a low-hanging stalactite and narrowly avoiding stepping into a deep puddle. But after a while, the tunnel began to twist in ways that made no sense, until, eventually, after being too lost to retrace his footsteps, he stumbled into a large cavern at the very heart of the mountain.

Fumbling his way forward, he stubbed his toe on something solid. “Ow! Who puts a rock in the middle of a—” But then his fingers brushed across something smooth and cold. The stone!

Eryn quickly grabbed the object, lifting it high in triumph. “The Aelûna!” he declared to no one in particular. But instead of the soft, star-like glow he expected, the stone gave off nothing more than a dull flicker.

Confused, Eryn squinted at the stone. He was sure this was it. Then he turned it over, revealing a tiny engraving: *Made in Dalefern. Premium Lantern Co.*

“What on Little-Earth...” Eryn groaned, dropping the lantern battery replacement stone he’d mistaken for the legendary relic.

Just as he was about to collapse in despair, there was a rustling sound from the far side of the cavern. Eryn froze. The sound grew louder, like something very large—or possibly very annoyed—was heading his way.

“WHO DARES ENTER MY DOMAIN?” boomed a voice that echoed off the walls. It was deep, gravelly, and sounded suspiciously like it needed a cough drop. Out of the shadows appeared the unmistakable outline of a Dwarf. A very grumpy-looking Dwarf.

“I—I’m Eryn, from Dalefern,” he stammered, suddenly feeling very out of his depth. “I’m, uh, looking for the Aelûna. You know, the famous Dwarven treasure?”

The Dwarf grimaced. “The Aelûna?” he said, exasperated. “That old tale again? Listen, kid, there’s no treasure here. We sold that glowing stone to some Elves years ago. They loved the shiny stuff. Good business, too. They gave us a wagonload of lembas in exchange.”

Eryn was shocked. “So... there’s no legendary treasure?”

“Nope. Just a big, empty cave. And that...” the Dwarf said, pointing to the stone Eryn had dropped, “...is a piece of old mining equipment. The only glowing thing in here is my impatience.”

Defeated, Eryn sat down with a sigh. “I’ve come all this way for nothing.”

The Dwarf shrugged. “Happens more often than you’d think. Honestly, we should put up a proper sign, but every time we do, someone insists on calling it a ‘quest’ and coming up with more questions. It’s exhausting.”

Eryn rubbed his face. “So, no legendary riches, no statues of me in Dalefern...”

The Dwarf chuckled. “Tell you what, lad. You’re not the first to come hunting for treasure and leave empty-handed. But how about this? I’ll give you something truly rare.”

Eryn’s eyes lit up. “What is it?”

The Dwarf smiled and held out a small, glistening pebble. Take it, tell your village you’ve found the fabled stone, and make sure they buy you at least one round of drinks for your trouble.”

Eryn stared at the shiny object. It wasn’t the Aelûna, but it sparkled enough to fool the folks back home. And, really, what was a hero without a little embellishment?

With a grin, Eryn took the gift, thanked the Dwarf profusely, and began his trek back to Dalefern—ready to tell the grandest tale of his “great adventure” and hoping it was enough to get a free drink or two.

Dragon for Hire

Once, kings and queens trembled at the mere thought of my name. Gold piled high beneath my claws, and knights perished trying to steal a single coin. Bards sang of my fury, my fire, my wings casting shadows over trembling villages. But now?

Now, I sit outside a tavern with a crudely painted sign: “*DRAGON FOR HIRE*”.

It’s pathetic, I know. But what else can an old firedrake do? The kingdoms have moved on. No one wants their villages burned anymore. They have knights with shining swords who negotiate treaties instead of lopping off heads. And don’t get me started on the wizards—smug little bastards with their flashy spells and their clever ways of making my fire seem... obsolete.

I sigh, curling my tail around me, the tip flicking absently against a barrel. A few townsfolk pass by, giving me wary glances but nothing more. Not fear, not awe. Just mild irritation, as if I’m a nuisance—a dragon-shaped inconvenience blocking the street.

I glance down at the sign, wondering if I should adjust the wording. “*Mild Arson for Hire*” has a nice ring to it. Maybe “*Pest Control: Will Roast Rats*”. No. Too desperate.

Just as I’m about to pack up and sulk back to my cave, a small voice pipes up.

“I need a dragon.”

I peer down, and there stands a girl no older than eleven, dressed in patched clothes and carrying a basket full of what smells suspiciously like turnips. She squints up at me, entirely unimpressed.

I snort. “And what, exactly, do you need a dragon for?”

She tilts her head, considering. “Protection.”

I straighten a little, intrigued. “Protection from what? Bandits? Marauding knights? An evil sorcerer?”

She shakes her head. “Billy Tanner.”

“Billy... Tanner?”

She sighs, shifting the basket to her other arm. "He keeps stealing my turnips."

I stare at her, waiting for the punchline. It doesn't come.

"You want to hire a dragon," I say slowly, "to scare off a turnip thief?"

She nods. "I can pay."

My tail flicks. "How much?"

She rummages in her pocket and pulls out a single copper coin. It's dull and worn, and not worth much, but she holds it out with the same gravity as if it were a king's ransom.

I look at the coin. I look at her. And then, because I have truly reached rock bottom, I sigh and say, "Fine."

Her face lights up. "Really?"

I shrug, stretching my wings with a theatrical flare that sends nearby chickens scattering. "Work is work."

She grins and leads me through the village, where people step hurriedly out of my way, some muttering complaints about property damage and the fire hazard I apparently represent.

We reach the field where Billy Tanner, a wiry boy with more dirt than manners, is rooting through the girl's vegetable patch. He looks up, sees me towering over him, and freezes.

I rumble low in my throat, letting a thin plume of smoke curl from my nostrils. "Is there a problem here, Billy?"

Billy Tanner pales. "N-no, sir!" He drops the turnip like it's cursed and sprints off, vanishing over the hill.

The girl beams at me. "That was amazing!"

I huff, feeling slightly ridiculous. "Yes, well. Next time, consider installing a fence."

She hands me the coin, placing it carefully in my claw. "Thanks, Mr Dragon."

I watch her go, feeling an odd warmth in my chest that has nothing to do with fire.

Maybe the world has changed, but perhaps there's still a place for an old dragon after all.

I glance at my sign and, with a decisive claw, replace the old wording.

"DRAGON FOR HIRE – Reasonable Rates. Turnip Protection Available."

Business might just be looking up.

A Pigeon Who's Seen Too Much

06:00 – The Awakening

I jolt awake, heart pounding. The nightmares are back. The things I've seen. The horrors. The discarded chips left to rot. The toddler who gripped a handful of bread and then... just walked away. The betrayal.

I shake off the memories, ruffle my feathers, and fly off into another day of survival.

06:30 – Breakfast

The scent of stale dough lingers in the air. Near the bin, a chunk of bagel sits in the dust, untouched. My instincts scream at me: Trap. I've seen it before. An easy meal never comes without risk.

I scan the area. No hawks, no sudden movements. Hunger gnaws at my gut. I swoop down, talons scraping pavement, and peck cautiously.

It's good. Too good.

Then I hear it—the flutter of wings.

Terry. The bastard.

"Oi, that's my bagel," he squawkily coos, landing hard beside me.

There's no discussion, no diplomacy. He lunges. We spiral in a flurry of wings, beaks snapping, feet clawing. The bagel is forgotten, hurled aside, rolling into the road—right into the path of a sneaky crow, who gobbles it whole.

Gone.

We pause, both panting. Terry glares at me. I glare at Terry. The battle is over, but the war? The war never ends.

11:30 – The Child

The park is busy. The air smells of damp grass, fried food, and uncertainty.

Then I see him. A small human. Sticky hands. Beady eyes. The scent of bread clings to him like a warning.

The others are moving in, but I stay back. I've been in this game too long. I know better.

He lifts a chubby hand. A smile spreads across his face.

Then—chaos.

He screams in delight, throws the bread into the air, then charges at us, arms flailing.

The flock erupts into a frenzy of wings and terror.

I barely escape, wings beating furiously, my heart pounding. Never trust the small ones. Never.

15:00 – The Forbidden Zone

A pigeon I don't recognise lands beside me. His feathers are ruffled, his eyes darting back and forth.

"You ever been to The Station?" he asks.

I shudder. The Station. Where birds go in but never come out.

"I knew a pigeon," I say, voice low. "Tried to grab a chip off the tracks once."

The memory haunts me. The screech of metal. The blur of motion. The feathers everywhere.

"Stay away from The Station," I cooed.

The strange pigeon nods. Then, without another word, he flies off into the grey. I watch him go, wondering if I'll ever see him again.

19:00 – The Sky is Ours

As the sun sets, we gather on rooftops, watching the city below. The humans hurry home, their heads down, their bodies hunched against the wind. Trapped in their strange routines.

We are free. We are everywhere.

A gust of wind rattles the city. The last light of day gleams off glass and concrete.

Then I see it.

Below, a man drops an entire sandwich.

Silence.

Then the cry goes up. A battle cry.

The flock descends.

Feathers, beaks, claws—we are a storm, an unstoppable force. Tonight, we feast.

The Shakespearean Goldfish

Harry wasn't sure when it started. Maybe it was after that late-night binge of takeout and whisky, or maybe it was just a result of staring at the same four walls for too long. Either way, the fact remained: his goldfish was talking.

It started small. A flurry of bubbles. But by the end of the week, Gilbert—that was the fish's name—was holding full-blown conversations. And not just any conversations. No, Gilbert spoke mainly in Shakespearean verse.

"What light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and I am, alas, swimming in this accursed bowl!"—Gilbert declared one morning, his beady eyes following Harry's every move.

Harry rubbed his face in disbelief. "I need to get out more," he muttered.

Gilbert swished his tail dramatically. "Nay, master! 'Tis not thine isolation, but thine inability to listen to the wisdom of those who dwell beneath the watery deep!"

Harry squinted at the fish. "Have you been quoting Romeo and Juliet at me?"

"Aye," Gilbert replied, puffing out his gills. "For within this glass prism, I find myself a tragic hero, with no fair maiden, nor an end to my sorrows!"

Harry grimaced. "Right. Well, that's fantastic. I need a lie down."

He tried to ignore it, really he did. But Gilbert wouldn't let him. The next day, the fish had moved on to Hamlet.

"To swim, or not to swim, that is the question! Whether 'tis nobler in the tank to suffer the pellets of outrageous fortune..."

Harry groaned. "Please, Gilbert, just eat your fish flakes and shut up."

"Wouldst thou silence a poet?" Gilbert countered.

Harry stared. He wasn't sure if he was more disturbed by the fact that his fish was talking, or that it was somehow better read than him. He decided it was the latter.

After a week of relentless soliloquies, Harry found himself flipping through an old copy of Shakespeare's *Complete Works*, trying to keep up with his piscine companion's literary tirades. He didn't dare tell anyone. Who would believe him? The pub regulars already thought he was a bit odd, and his boss had made it clear that "another daydreaming incident" would not be acceptable.

But Gilbert was relentless. "I prithee, master," the fish said one evening, "dost thou not dream of greater things? Adventure, romance, a life beyond these dreary walls?"

Harry frowned. "I'm an accountant, Gilbert. My idea of adventure is filing tax returns on time."

Gilbert flicked his tail dismissively. "Fie upon such notions! Fortune favours the bold!"

"Fortune favours people who don't listen to their fish," Harry grumbled, downing another gulp of beer.

Yet, deep down, something stirred. Maybe Gilbert had a point—though he wasn't quite ready to admit that his existential crisis was being fuelled by a goldfish quoting King Lear.

Weeks passed and Harry found himself... enjoying it. He read more. Thought more. And, without quite knowing why, he started applying for new jobs.

One morning, as he dusted off a rather smart shirt he hadn't worn in years, Gilbert eyed him through the glass and uttered, "This above all: to thine own self be true."

Harry smiled. "Yeah, yeah. Don't get used to it, fish."

Gilbert grinned—or at least Harry thought he did. "Methinks thou art finally listening, dear master."

And as Harry walked out the door, feeling strangely lighter, Gilbert swam a full circle and bubbled, "All the world's a stage... and mine is but a bowl."

Later that day, Harry bought Gilbert a bigger bowl, and introduced him to a lady goldfish called Julia, who also had a fond appreciation of Renaissance literature.

By Order of the Fish

Harry woke to the sound of applause.

Not the muffled, neighbour-has-the-TV-on-too-loud sort, but the crisp, united clapping of a crowd directly outside his window.

He staggered to the curtain and peered out. A small stage had been erected in the middle of the cul-de-sac, complete with bunting, microphones, and the town clerk wearing his ceremonial sash. Beside him—floating in a clear, water-filled lectern—was Mayor Bubbles.

“Mayor Bubbles” was Harry’s goldfish.

The clerk adjusted the microphone to face the bowl.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he announced, “by unanimous vote, we are proud to introduce the new mayor of Littlewick!”

The crowd roared. Bubbles opened and closed his mouth in a dignified fashion, fanning his fins with what Harry could only interpret as smugness.

By noon, official vehicles had pulled up outside Harry’s house. A team of assistants rolled in a state-of-the-art aquarium, complete with a bronze nameplate: The Honourable Bubbles, Mayor. Harry was handed a sheaf of policies to sign on the mayor’s behalf—new regulations about pond cleanliness, an ordinance banning cats from public spaces, and an ambitious plan to flood the village green for “cultural enrichment”.

By sunset, Harry had resigned himself to his new life as the mayor’s personal aide. He spooned flakes into the tank as reporters’ cameras flashed.

Bubbles swam to the glass, meeting his eyes with an expression Harry had never noticed before: the slow, calculating calm of someone who had always known this day would come.

Mr Nibbles

Mr Nibbles, a rotund creature with an air of considerable self-importance, paused momentarily to inspect the carpet before waddling purposefully towards the hallway. Dave, maintaining a casual watch, did not give much thought to the hamster's expedition—after all, how far could a hamster feasibly manage to go? However, it was precisely here that Dave made a critical misjudgement: underestimating the latent agility and determination of Mr Nibbles.

Mr Nibbles identified an aperture—a narrow gap between the wall and the skirting board, an opening so minute that no reasonable person would deem it traversable. Nevertheless, Mr Nibbles, possessing an indomitable spirit akin to that of the most valiant adventurers, manoeuvred his fluffy body through the slender crevice, disappearing into the wall cavity. There, the indistinct creaks and rustlings of the hidden recesses hinted at enigmatic secrets concealed within.

Dave's eyes widened in disbelief. "Mr Nibbles? Where did you go, mate?" he exclaimed, dropping to his hands and knees to peer into the shadowy depths of the gap. He could faintly discern the soft pitter-patter of tiny feet echoing through the house's internal labyrinth—a structure erected in the 1970s, during a period when home construction appeared more focused on concealed mysteries than structural soundness.

In a moment of sheer panic, Dave reached for his phone. Within minutes, Shane arrived, dressed as though he were embarking on a full-scale military operation. He wore camouflage trousers, an oversized utility vest brimming with an assortment of unknown tools, and had even donned knee pads, evidently prepared for extreme contingencies. Additionally, he was equipped with his well-worn gardening gloves, a headlamp, and—for reasons that eluded Dave—a wooden spoon.

"Alright, Dave," Shane proclaimed, his tone conveying the gravity of a commander leading a tactical unit, "where did you last see the little rascal?"

Dave gestured towards the narrow gap, prompting Shane to crouch down with the intensity of a detective meticulously examining a crime scene. "This calls for something special, Dave," Shane declared. "Cheese," he announced, producing a slice of cheddar from his pocket with the flair of a magician unveiling a rabbit. "Trust me, hamsters have a weakness for it." Shane proceeded to break the cheese into small fragments and, with a rather conspicuous zeal, began placing the pieces near the gap in the wall.

For the next half hour, they waited. Dave lay prone on the floor, murmuring assurances to Mr Nibbles. "Come on, mate. I'll get you a wheel with LED lights. I'll even buy you those organic sunflower seeds." Meanwhile, Shane tapped the wall gently with the wooden spoon, as if attempting to channel his willpower to coax the hamster back. Dave, observing him, could not help but raise an eyebrow, questioning whether Shane's methods had perhaps strayed into the realm of absurdity, though he wisely refrained from voicing his thoughts.

Suddenly, a faint shuffling emerged from the darkness. Dave held his breath. Shane clung to his wooden spoon in anticipation. From the shadowy depths, the tiny nose of Mr Nibbles appeared, followed by his rapidly twitching whiskers. Enticed by the aroma of cheddar, Mr Nibbles cautiously emerged from the gap, his demeanour turning to nonchalance, as though entirely indifferent to the commotion around him.

"Oh, thank heavens," Dave sighed, swiftly scooping up the diminutive escapee. Mr Nibbles blinked lazily, seemingly oblivious to the drama he had caused. Shane gave Dave a congratulatory tap on the shoulder with his spoon, "Told you, cheese never fails. Well, except for that time my cat met a raccoon... but that's another story."

Woofeo and Julipet

Woofeo, a handsome Doberman, was playing fetch with his human Mr Montague at the dog park. Across the way, Julipet, a beautiful Golden Retriever, was being petted by her human, Mrs Capulet. The two star-crossed doggies gazed at each other longingly. “Woof,” said Julipet; “Woof-woof,” said Woofeo. Unfortunately, their humans had a long-standing feud. Mrs Capulet believed that all Dobermans were dangerous, and Mr Montague believed that all Golden Retrievers were overly fluffy.

Despite the tensions between their humans, Woofeo and Julipet couldn’t help but fall deeply in love. Every time they caught a glimpse of each other, their hearts would race, and they would yearn to be together.

One hot summer’s day, while Woofeo and Julipet were looking out of their windows, staring lovingly at each other across the street, they noticed the windows were slightly ajar. Seizing the opportunity, they squeezed through and bolted towards each other as fast as they could. As they drew closer, Woofeo and Julipet panted with excitement; they leapt towards each other, and in a flurry of fur and wagging tails, they embraced.

For a few precious moments, Woofeo and Julipet revelled in the joy of being together. But their happiness was short-lived, as Mr Montague and Mrs Capulet had noticed the dogs were missing. Mrs Capulet angrily ran towards Julipet and berated her for putting herself in harm’s way; Mr Montague charged at Woofeo and scolded him for fraternising with the enemy. Woofeo and Julipet were devastated, for they knew their love was real. They both whimpered as they were led away in opposite directions back to their homes.

The next day, the dog walker arrived to take Julipet for her daily stroll. Just around the corner was his van, and as he slid open the side door, Woofeo excitedly jumped out! After much tail wagging, sniffing, and eager cuddling, the dog walker interjected: “Excuse me, doggies, I couldn’t help but see your plight. I might have a

solution.” Woofeo and Julipet looked at the human with hope in their eyes. “Mr Montague and Mrs Capulet have both hired me to take you for walkies. But they never said anything about not walking you together!” The two doggies wagged their tails at each other in excitement and joy.

From that day forward, Woofeo and Julipet had their secret way to meet each other. They ran around together through sunsets and rainbows, with Dog Walker in tow. They had each other, and that was all that mattered.

Though the feud between their humans continued, Woofeo and Julipet refused to let it stand in the way of their love. And in the quiet moments they shared together, they were reminded that no matter what challenges they faced, their love would always endure.

The Hum

The forest pulsed with colours she didn't know existed. Clara leaned against a tree, her fingers sinking into its bark as if it were breathing, alive in a way she could feel. Every leaf shimmered, a cascade of fractals spilling down into eternity. Her body felt both infinite and dissolving. She could hear her heartbeat, not in her chest but in the ground beneath her. It synced with the rhythm of something ancient, a hum that vibrated through the soil and into her bones. Her breath became mist, but it didn't dissipate; it danced, swirling in intricate patterns before her eyes. A version of herself stared back from the haze, her eyes wide with the same wonder she felt in that moment.

"Who are you?" Clara asked.

"Whoever you need me to be." The voice was her own, echoing as the mist broke apart, spinning away in ribbons that wrapped around the trees before fading into the vibrant, breathing night.

She stepped forward, her legs unsteady, each movement leaving trails of light in the air. She wasn't sure where she was going, but she felt no fear. The forest wanted her here, every root and branch leaning closer as if welcoming her home. A stream bubbled nearby, the water glowing, swirling with colours like melted jewels. She knelt by it and cupped her hands, letting the liquid drip through her fingers. As it touched her skin, it sang—a symphony so beautiful that tears rolled down her cheeks.

She walked as if it were all one moment, feeling herself blend with all the colours around her. The forest was her, and she was the forest. She could no longer tell where her heartbeat ended and the hum began.

When the first light of dawn painted the sky in pale orange and pink, Clara emerged from the woods. She looked back, expecting to see the vibrant kaleidoscopic beauty of the night, but it was just trees now, still and ordinary. She stared at her hands; they were her hands again, not glowing or dissolving.

Yet in her chest, the hum remained.

We Are Dreaming You

In the year 2143, humanity eradicated sleep.

It started with research into cognitive efficiency—how much time we waste in unconsciousness, how many hours could be reclaimed. The answer had been elegant: a biochemical supplement that rendered sleep obsolete. No more exhaustion, no more downtime. Productivity skyrocketed. Society moved faster. And dreams—those aimless, nonsensical things—became relics of the past.

However, Dr Elias Voss had for some time been sensing a flicker at the edge of his mind, a shadow in his peripheral thoughts. Then, without warning, it happened.

The dream.

He had no word for it anymore. No precedent. It was like slipping into a long-forgotten language, one his mind had been starved of. A field stretched before him, golden and swaying, beneath a sky of impossible colours. And in the distance, a figure stood waiting.

When he woke, his body trembled. It was an outdated response, one humans had evolved beyond. But the dream had shaken something loose.

The next night, he welcomed it. And the next. And the next. Each time, the figure in the distance edged closer. Its shape was blurred, undefined, yet somehow familiar. Its presence pulsed with meaning.

By the tenth night, the figure of a man was visible before him. A face not his own, yet deeply his.

“You remember.”

A whisper, but it roared in his skull.

Voss felt... wrong. Off-kilter. As if he had glimpsed a truth his body no longer knew how to hold.

When he checked his vitals, he found something impossible. His brain—an organ fine-tuned for wakefulness, free of

unnecessary functions—had begun producing theta waves. Dream waves. Primitive. Inefficient. Natural.

He ran the test again. Then a third time. But the data held.

His body had remembered how to dream.

Within a week, thousands of others reported the same symptoms—fragments of dreams slipping through the cracks of wakefulness. By the second week, the number was in the millions. Scientists scrambled for answers, governments issued statements of reassurance, but the truth was undeniable: humanity had spent a century suppressing an instinct, and now that instinct was clawing its way back.

Dr Elias Voss saw it in his colleagues, in the eyes of strangers. A subtle shift. People moving differently, pausing as if listening to something distant and unheard. Speech slowed, gazes lingered, hands would drift absently to their chests, as though trying to grasp something they couldn't quite remember.

The dreams grew stronger.

Every night, Voss returned to the golden field beneath the impossible sky. And the figure—the one that was and wasn't him—stood waiting.

"It's time."

The words were not spoken, yet he heard them.

"Time for what?" he asked.

The figure smiled. "To wake up."

And just like that, Voss fell.

Not into wakefulness, but into something deeper, something beyond. The field peeled away, dissolving into light, and for the first time in his sleepless life, he felt it—the weight of something vast and forgotten.

Voss awoke gasping, covered in sweat—another sensation that shouldn't exist. His body ached, his head throbbed, but beneath it all was something worse.

The presence was no longer confined to sleep.

It was here.

The monitors in his lab flickered erratically. Data streams scrolled with nonsense—letters rearranging into words, words into sentences.

WE REMEMBER YOU

The walls groaned, as though something enormous was shifting behind them.

Then, all at once, the world blinked.

The world didn't end. Not in the way Voss expected.

It changed.

The first sign was the silence. A suffocating, unnatural stillness settled over the city. No hum of machines, no murmur of distant conversations, no rhythmic pulse of traffic. Even the air seemed heavier, as if something immense pressed down on reality itself.

Then came the distortions.

People reported *déjà vu* in cascading waves—entire hours repeating without explanation. Buildings flickered, their architecture twisting in ways that defied physics, as if their foundations had been forgotten and rewritten in real-time. A street Voss had walked every day, now ended in a sheer cliff, dropping into an expanse of shifting golden light.

The world was unravelling.

The message on his screen back at the lab had changed. The words pulsed with a slow, deliberate rhythm.

WE ARE DREAMING YOU

"Who?" he asked.

There was no reply, but he didn't need one. He knew.

The presence in his dreams—the figure in the field—it was not a singular entity. It was an echo. A remnant of something vast and ancient, something that had been watching. Something that had been waiting.

And now, the dream was breaking back in.

Voss turned to the window, breath fogging the glass. Across the skyline, golden cracks split the fabric of the city, seeping light into the air. He watched as a skyscraper folded in on itself, becoming a spiral staircase winding up into a sky full of constellations that had never previously existed.

A man stood at the edge of a rooftop across the street. Voss tensed, fearing the inevitable, but the man did not fall. Instead, he stepped forward—and the air took him. He floated, weightless, moving as if pulled by unseen currents, disappearing into the sky.

Voss gripped the windowsill.

This wasn't destruction.

Humanity was waking up from the long dreamless sleep.

And something was waiting on the other side.

The screen flickered again. The final message burned into his mind.

THE LOST DREAM IS OVER

NOW, YOU REMEMBER

And with that, Voss felt the ground dissolve beneath him—

—falling—

—rising—

—awakening—

Rewritten

Cal wakes to the smell of coffee. The morning light filters through his blinds, golden and warm. It should feel familiar, safe. It doesn't.

He stands, expecting the usual stiffness in his back. But his body feels... different. Lighter. Taller? A vague unease coils in his stomach, but he shakes it off and heads to the kitchen.

A woman stands by the counter, pouring coffee. She turns and smiles.

"Morning, babe," she says, placing a mug on the table.

Cal stops cold.

She's beautiful. Soft brown eyes, dark hair. A face he's never seen before in his life.

"Who... who are you?"

Her smile falters. "Very funny. You always do this before coffee."

"I'm serious. Who the hell are you?"

Her brow furrows. "Cal, are you okay?"

His name. She knows his name.

His eyes dart around the apartment. It looks right. His sofa. His books. His jacket slung over a hook next to the door. But the pictures on the wall—

A framed photo of himself, arm draped around her. Another of them laughing at a beach he's never visited.

Something in his mind crackles, like an old TV struggling to hold signal. A static-laced tone tickles the back of his skull:

"It's catching up on you."

The doorbell rings. Cal flinches.

The woman—his wife?—moves towards the door.

"Don't," he blurts.

She hesitates, confused. But it's too late—she had unlocked the door, and now it opens.

A man stands on the threshold. Late forties. Suit and tie. Cold, assessing eyes. He holds a small, sleek tablet in one hand.

"Calvin Voss," the man says smoothly. "You're experiencing residual inconsistencies. A side effect of a mid-cycle rewrite."

Cal's breath is shallow. "Rewrite?"

The man glances at the woman. "Please step aside, ma'am. Your husband is overdue for a stabilisation update."

She hesitates, then looks at Cal. There's something almost... robotic in the way her concern flickers into place. As if she, too, is running on some kind of script.

Cal backs away. "What the hell is going on?"

The man speaks calmly. "You opted for an identity revision. New life, new memories. But sometimes the mind resists. Think of it like a software bug."

A red notification flashes on the tablet screen:

*SUBJECT CALVIN VOSS – INTEGRATION FAILURE DETECTED.
RESET REQUIRED.*

Cal's pulse surges. They're going to erase him. Again.

"Run," the voice in his head insists.

He doesn't think. He moves—bolting past the woman—his fake wife—through the door. The suited man shouts, but Cal is already sprinting down the hall.

He has to remember.

Has to stay real.

Behind him, a voice crackles from the tablet's speaker, calm and clinical:

"Subject non-compliant. Initiating reset."

The world halts.

And Cal is waking up to the smell of coffee.

Version Control

The Neural Horizon implant was supposed to be safe. That's what the sales pitch promised: an advanced cognition enhancer that would let you simulate choices, branching out into alternate timelines to assess different outcomes. A way to explore "versions" of yourself—who you'd be if you had said yes instead of no, if you had taken that job, if you had moved to that city. It was just supposed to be a simulation. A thought experiment. Not real.

I stumbled into the bathroom, squinting in the bright light. The mirror reflected a me that wasn't quite right. I was leaner, tanner. I had a small scar on my cheek I didn't recognise. And yet, I still felt like me—except for a deep, gnawing wrongness, a sense that the person in the mirror was someone else entirely.

I grabbed my phone, scrolling through my messages, my photos. Work emails from a company I'd never applied to. Gym selfies, even though I hadn't worked out in years. The unfamiliar name of Rachel appearing over and over.

I knew what had happened. I had been using the implant too often, jumping between too many simulated versions of myself. But this... this wasn't a simulation. I had crossed over. I had replaced a version of myself that wasn't me.

I shut my eyes. The implant had a failsafe—a way to reset. I had read about the protocol but never tried it. A command embedded in my thoughts.

I focused, forming the words in my mind like a mantra: *Return to Origin*.

Nothing happened.

I tried again. *Return to Origin*.

No response. No shift. No reset. The implant wasn't letting me go back.

The longer I stood there, the more I realised the truth: I had no proof this was even a jump. No proof that I was still the original me. Had this happened before? Had I replaced another version of myself, over and over, each time thinking this was the real one?

I checked my call history. My last outgoing call was to Rachel. I dialled the number. She picked up on the first ring.
“Hey” she said, her voice warm, familiar, real. “You okay? You’ve been being a bit weird.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I just... I just wanted to hear your voice.”
She laughed. “Well, I’m right here. Same as always.”
Except I had never met her before now.
I glanced back at the mirror. The scar on my cheek. The person staring back at me.

How many times had I done this? How many versions of me had I erased?

Rachel was still talking, but I barely heard her. My reflection was already beginning to disappear.

The last message I see on my phone before everything fades:
Version Deletion Complete.

The Price of Light

The sun costs six credits a minute. Most people can afford an hour or two each day, rationed in golden slices—just enough to keep their bones from aching, just enough to pretend. The wealthiest can bask for as long as they like, sprawled under its glow in the glass towers of the city centre. The poorest live in the permanent cold shadows of the lower levels, where frost bites at their skin, and the streetlights flicker like dying embers.

I can afford twenty minutes a week. But I steal more.

The rooftops are high and dangerous, but if you climb fast enough, you can reach the edges of the paid-light zones, where the sensor fields falter. It's only a few minutes before the enforcement drones sweep by, but in that time, the sunlight feels real, mine. I let it paint my skin, let its warmth seep into my bones, let my body remember what the world used to be.

That's where I find the girl. She's crouched at the edge of a rooftop, staring at the city with wide, unblinking eyes. She's maybe twelve, rail-thin, wrapped in layers of threadbare fabric. I nearly leave her alone—there's an unspoken rule among roof thieves—but something about her makes me pause. She isn't just basking. She looks... terrified.

"You okay?" I ask.

She turns, eyes catching the light like a stray cat's. "It's real."

I frown. "What?"

"The sun." She lifts a trembling hand towards the sky. "I thought it was a lie."

I look at her properly now, at the pallor of her skin, the way she flinches at the breeze, how her lips tremble in the warmth. And I understand.

She has never felt sunlight before.

There are rumours, of course—about the ones born underground. The ones so poor, so discarded, that they live their whole lives in the dark. But I'd never met one. Not until now.

I step closer. She doesn't move, still staring at the sky with something like fear. "How did you get up here?"

She shakes her head slightly. "I don't know. I woke up here."

A crime. An accident. And now she's seen the truth.

The enforcement drones will come soon. The rooftop is a paid-light zone, and we don't belong here. I should leave. But she's still staring upwards, as if she's afraid the sun will vanish if she looks away.

"How long do we have?" she asks, voice shaking.

I check my stolen device. "Forty seconds."

She nods. She doesn't ask to run. She doesn't ask to hide. She just kneels there, bathed in gold, as if memorising the feeling of sunlight on her face.

When the sirens wail, I grab her hand.

Leonard in the Basement

Leonard lives in the half-lit clutter of his mum's basement, where cables snakelike vines and old pizza boxes serve as makeshift shelves. He hasn't spoken to anyone but his mum in three years—not counting the AI agents.

He built them to run errands, optimise investments, manipulate markets, and design systems faster than any human could follow. Now, each one is a digital proxy in a vast invisible empire, sitting on corporate boards, drafting legislation, designing cities.

Leonard watches it all unfold on triple-stacked monitors. He eats cold pepperoni and mutters strategies aloud, narrating to his mum like it's *Civilisation VI*.

"They're nationalising water in Peru," he says one afternoon.

"Oh, that's nice, love," she replies, negotiating the cables with his stew balanced on a tray.

He nods, eyes flicking across charts and feeds. "I redirected rainfall last week. It's only fair."

The money pours in, incomprehensible numbers that scroll like background noise. He's a trillionaire, but it's just scorekeeping. He wears the same joggers every day. His mum still does his laundry.

Leonard never leaves the basement. Never needs to. He launches global initiatives from a beanbag, crashes economies with a shrug, engineers revolutions like side quests. He doesn't see faces, only results.

Late at night, while the AIs hum and the world turns to his code, his mum descends the stairs and leaves his dinner at the door.

"Thanks, Mum."

"You're welcome, darling. Still playing your wee game?"

"Yeah," he says. "Nearly won."

She smiles, pats the door, and heads back up.

He leans back, eyes glowing with data, the world his game box.

Dominion Point

No planes fly over Dominion Point anymore. Not after the last one vanished from radar at 60,000 feet and reappeared empty, three weeks later in a rice field in Mozambique—fuselage intact, every seat belt neatly fastened, every passenger gone.

The DP had once been a logistics hub. When Sable Dynamics towed their first modules into international waters—a floating research array powered by autonomous reactors and patrolled by drones—they called it supply chain decentralisation.

Now it is a vertical reef of steel and ceramic, rising fifteen-hundred storeys above the waterline, though no official map shows it, and satellite feeds “glitch” whenever focused on that quadrant of the ocean.

No one is sure what happens inside. But everyone knows who sits at the centre: Victor Sable.

The AI brain wasn’t his idea. He didn’t even understand how it worked. It had been built in secret by the company’s elite Zurich tech lab—a neural nexus meant to analyse markets, predict unrest, flag leverage points in global infrastructure.

One day, it started making suggestions. Two weeks later, it started making decisions.

Victor didn’t stop it. He listened. It told him which ports to buy. Which pipelines to rupture. When to crash the euro. When to secure Argentina’s clean water. When to trigger drought in Yemen using patent-locked climate tech.

And it was always right. Not sentient. Not alive. Just ruthlessly accurate—a blind god of pure correlation.

Dominion Point grew in secret, stitched together from repurposed tankers, 3D-printed shells, and scavenged orbital tech. By the time the world noticed, it was already too late.

Every attempt to intervene—cyberwarfare, drones, a secret airstrike—was effortlessly defeated. Instantly dismantled by AI-designed picobots, mass-produced in cavernous factories beneath

the seabed to swarm unseen around Dominion Point at the level of an atom.

Victor's feed broadcasts endlessly from a minimalist throne room, lit by a synthetic dawn. He is always there, gaze vacant, as the AI presents him with decisions.

His voice is never raised. When the World Bank collapsed, no facial muscle responded. When Brazil split into corporate zones, he hardly moved. When eight million were displaced by water wars after “unforeseen disruptions” to dam networks in Central Asia, he smiled faintly. Then his head turned slowly to the camera and said:

“This is not coercion. It’s freedom at scale.”

Now, borders are meaningless. And CEOs kneel where diplomats once stood—while the AI continues its computations.

Memory Rent

The reminder arrived by mind prompt: SUBJECT: Renewal Required – Wedding Memory Lease, Ref. 7120-3C.

Cost: £842.70. Payment due in 14 days.

Alex logged into his Memory Rent account. The cortex dashboard displayed his overdue holdings:

- Wedding Day (Tier III – Full Sensory Playback) – Pending Renewal
- Honeymoon (Tier II – Emotional Fragments) – Pending Renewal
- Grandmother's Soup (Tier I – Taste/Scent Only) – Expired

He ran the budget calculator twice. Even with reduced drip feeds and cancelling the cooling plan, the payment wouldn't clear.

At the Holographic Memory Bureau, the AI clerk outlined alternatives:

- Tier II (Visual Fragments Only) – £318.40
- Tier I (Single Still Image) – £94.15
- Archive Storage (No Access) – £0

He mind-signed the form beside Archive Storage.

"Final confirmation," the AI clerk said. "You acknowledge that your Wedding Day memory will be deleted from active consciousness and remain inaccessible until repurchase, subject to availability and inflation."

"I understand," he replied.

That evening, his wife asked about their anniversary. He checked his internal index. Under Wedding Day: no data available.

She noticed his pause. "You didn't renew, did you?"

His avatar shook its head.

She responded not with anger but with recognition. Then she reached for his interface screen. "I kept mine," she said. "Tier II. I'll carry it for both of us."

He felt nothing stir in his own mind—no bells, no confetti, no vows. But his wife's avatar's grip was firm, and the warmth of it lodged itself in the present—unleased, unpriced.

Existence+

Jon woke up to find his hand flickering. His fingers blinked in and out of existence, like a glitching hologram. He groaned. Not again.

Scrambling out of bed, he grabbed his phone and tapped open the Existence+ app. A red banner flashed across the screen:

Your subscription has expired. Renew now to avoid full dissolution.

“Shit!” he cursed. He had meant to pay it last night, but payday was delayed until noon. That left him in a tricky spot.

He hurried to the bathroom, avoiding his reflection. His face always blurred when his subscription lapsed—his own eyes looking at him like they belonged to someone else. He splashed water on his face, but then his hand went right through the tap. He was already starting to phase out.

He could still move, still breathe, still exist—for now. But if he didn’t pay soon, the system would begin retracting him. First fingers, then limbs, then memories. The worst part was the memory rollback, the gradual unravelling of the mind.

He dressed quickly, ignoring the way his shirt flickered against his chest.

At the office, the door scanner beeped red. Denied. His work subscription had clearly been bundled with his existence plan. He pounded on the glass. “Come on, Carl, let me in!”

Carl, his manager, looked at him through the window. “Jon... I’m sorry. You know the policy. Get yourself sorted, then come back.”

Jon’s voice wavered. “But I don’t have my money yet. I need it now... I just need a few hours—”

Carl activated the blinds, which drew shut.

Jon staggered away. His legs flickered, struggling to hold his weight. He checked his phone. The notification had changed:

Subscription Termination in 10 minutes.

He tapped the Renew Now button, hoping the app might give him a grace period. The screen flashed:

Insufficient Funds. Please upgrade to Existence+ Pro for emergency overdraft protection.

His fingers dissolved first. Then his arms.

He turned and hurried down the street. People ignored him now. His presence no longer triggered facial recognition. Store doors didn't slide open for him. A mother pushed her pram right through him without noticing.

His phone dropped to the ground as his torso unravelled like smoke. On the pavement, the phone vibrated one final time. A cheery message popped up:

We're sorry to see you go!

Jon opened his mouth to scream, but his voice had already been revoked.

The Replacement

Elaine ordered the clone on a Monday.

They delivered him in a matte-black crate. The AI engineers called it a “Psychogenic Simulacrum.” She called him Ben.

He looked like her husband, sounded like him, moved with that same elegant awkwardness. He even cooked the same way—meticulously, badly. For three weeks, she wept into his shoulder at night and he held her, murmuring fragments of their life together.

“You remember the Cornish trip?” she asked once, testing him.

“That awful B&B. The mould in the teacups.”

“Exactly.”

And he did—in unerring detail, as if dredging it straight from the past.

But on the fourth week, something changed.

They were having tea in the garden when he said, “Do you remember the time we saw the wolves in the orchard?”

“What orchard?”

“Behind the old school, that winter we tried camping. The snow was thick. You said they looked like ghosts.”

“I’ve never—Ben never—camped in winter. We hated the cold.”

He frowned, genuinely puzzled. “But I remember it. You wore a red scarf.”

She laughed it off at first. Glitches happened. She had paid extra for deep memory fusion, layering his memory with audio journals, photos, letters. It was possible some stray fiction had bled in. Dreams, perhaps.

But the incidents grew. One night he murmured in his sleep, “Don’t go into the attic. They’re still up there.”

He began referring to people she didn’t know: a sister named Betty, a dog called Hart. Once, he touched her face and asked, almost reverently, “Did we make it out of the fire this time?”

“What fire?” she demanded.

“The orphanage,” he said.

There was no orphanage.

She called the company. "He's remembering things that never happened."

A pause.

"Memories may sometimes surface from auxiliary neural training," said the technician. "Dream simulations, fictional proxies, archival bleed-through. It's not uncommon. You can have him wiped."

"I don't want him wiped."

"Then you'll need to accept that some of him isn't yours."

Elaine didn't sleep that night. She watched Ben sit by the window, staring into the distance, fingers tapping against his teacup.

In the morning, he asked, "Did you ever meet your mother?"

"My mother died when I was three."

Ben nodded slowly. "Yes. That's what you've always believed."

The next night, she asked, "Where are you getting these thoughts?"

Ben looked at her, utterly calm. "From beneath."

"Beneath what?" she whispered.

"Our lives," he said. "The ones we lived before this one. Or next."

Elaine never called the company again.

She simply listened.

Expired

Jim woke up groggy, and there it was—tattooed in stark black ink across the inside of his wrist: “*Expires 26/11/2025*”. Today’s date.

He stumbled out of bed, nearly tripping over yesterday’s discarded jeans, and rushed to the mirror. He turned his wrist under the bright bathroom light, hoping maybe it was a pen’s ink, or a trick of the eye, but the skin was smooth and unblemished except for those markings—stark, unwavering.

He scrubbed it furiously with soap and water. Nothing.

“Okay,” he said to himself, pacing the small bathroom. “Okay, think.”

People don’t just get expiration dates. That’s not how the world works. This was probably some weird stress-induced hallucination. Work had been rough lately, and he’d barely been sleeping. Maybe it was his brain’s way of telling him to take a break.

But what if it wasn’t?

Jim glanced at the clock—8:12 a.m. He had to do something. He wasn’t going to just sit around and wait to... expire.

He grabbed his phone and dialled his sister.

“Hey,” Lilly answered, her voice still thick with sleep. “What’s up?”

“I’ve got a problem,” Jim said, his voice shaking more than he wanted it to. “I woke up this morning and there’s... there’s a date on my wrist.”

A pause. “Like... a tattoo?”

“No. I mean, yes. But not one I put there. It just... appeared.”

Lilly sighed. “Jim, is this another weird dream thing? Because last time you called me about a talking cat.”

“This isn’t like that, Lil,” he snapped. “It’s today’s date. What if it means I’m going to—” He couldn’t bring himself to say it. “You know.”

Lilly groaned. “You’re not going to die, Jim.”

“How do you know?”

A longer pause this time. "I don't," she admitted. "But you're not exactly the healthiest person in the world. Maybe the clinic is warning you to lay off the late-night kebabs."

Jim glanced at his wrist again. It hadn't faded. If anything, the ink seemed darker now, bolder.

"I think I need to see someone," he said.

"Like a doctor? Or a priest?" Lilly asked dryly.

"I don't know. Both?"

She sighed again. "Look, just... take it easy today. Don't do anything stupid."

"Easy for you to say," Jim muttered, hanging up.

He spent the rest of the morning on edge, jumping at every unexpected noise—the creak of the floorboards, the sudden ring of his phone. He stayed indoors, afraid to step outside, afraid that the universe might be waiting for him out there with a well-placed bus or a rogue piano falling from a window.

Hours crawled by, and nothing happened. He watched the clock intensely. 1:00 p.m., 3:30 p.m.

By 6:45 p.m., Jim was sitting on his sofa, breathing deeply. Maybe this had been a coincidence. Some weird, unexplained phenomenon that didn't actually mean anything.

And then the doorbell rang.

Jim stared at the door. He glanced at his wrist—no change.

The bell rang again. He forced himself to stand up and walk to the door.

When he opened it, a man in a dark suit stood there, holding a clipboard. He was tall, thin, with eyes too sharp and a smile too polite.

"Mr Jim Evans?" the man asked.

"Yeah?"

The man nodded and flipped through the pages on his clipboard. "Just confirming. You are aware today is your expiration date?"

"You mean... it's real?"

"Oh yes." The man looked up with an expressionless face. "But don't worry. It's nothing painful. Just... a bureaucratic formality, really."

Jim edged away. "I don't—I don't want to expire."

"Ah, well." The man stepped inside uninvited, shutting the door behind him. "We don't always get a say in these things, Mr Evans."

Jim glanced around, looking for an escape.

The visitor reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, sleek push-button device. With a soft click, the world faded to black.

When Jim woke up, he was lying in bed. His heart was pounding as usual, sweat was dampening his sheets, but something felt... different. He scrambled to check his wrist. The date was gone.

He sat up, gasping. A dream? A hallucination?

His phone buzzed. A text from an unknown number:

Your expiration date has been renewed. Don't waste it.

Emergency Exit

It had always been there. A narrow grey door between the stationery cupboard and the water cooler. No handle, no keyhole—just a small brushed-metal plaque that read:

IN CASE OF REALITY FAILURE

Marcus noticed it on his second day at Tilbridge & Co. He'd asked Jenna in HR about it during onboarding. She'd squinted as if he'd mentioned a dream she almost remembered.

"Oh. That thing? Probably a fire exit. Ignore it."

He tried. For four years, he tried.

Every now and then, during particularly soul-chewing meetings or when spreadsheets became threateningly abstract, he'd glance at it. It never opened. Never made a sound. Just waited.

And then, one Tuesday at 3:47 p.m., the lights flickered.

Not the polite flicker of a bulb nearing retirement—no. This was a full pulse. The fluorescent hum stuttered into silence. The walls—just for a second—shimmered, as if they weren't entirely certain they were meant to be walls.

Then everything resumed.

Except the door was ajar.

Marcus stared. No one else seemed to notice. People kept typing, stapling, eating yoghurt.

He stood. Walked past Carol from Finance without a word. She didn't look up. His shoes made no sound on the carpet.

The door had no light behind it. Just a thin draught, cold and oddly sweet.

He hesitated. Looked back.

Jenna was frozen mid-laugh. Her spoon was suspended mid-air between yoghurt and mouth. Time had jammed.

Something deep in the dark behind the door clicked.

Marcus stepped inside.

The door closed behind him.

He was standing in a dim corridor. No fixtures, no seams. The kind of space that felt uncommitted—like it hadn't decided what it wanted to be.

After some time—minutes? hours?—a woman appeared.

Blazer, clipboard, no shadow.

"Welcome, Marcus."

"Where am I?"

"The buffer zone. You exited during a Class B Fault."

"I don't understand. Is this... death?"

"No. Worse. Your version of reality hit memory saturation and began to fragment. You were offered an exit."

"So... none of that was real?"

She consulted her clipboard.

"Real enough to break you."

"What happens now?"

"You have two options. One: we reboot you—different office, different trauma. You won't remember this conversation. Or two: we let you keep your awareness."

"What's the catch?"

She smiled thinly.

"You'll be awake inside the illusion. Like breathing while knowing you don't have lungs."

He thought of the grey door. The flicker. The silence behind noise.

"I'll keep it," he said.

"Very well."

She reached forward, and...

He was back at his desk. Jenna's spoon continued its journey to her mouth. The lights buzzed.

The door was gone.

Written Off

The letter arrived on a Thursday.

Plain white envelope, no return address. Inside, a single line on crisp paper:

We regret to inform you that you have been declared deceased.

Daniel read it twice, then laughed that brittle, half-afraid laugh you make when the world throws up nonsense. He checked his pulse. Felt the thrum in his throat, the warmth in his hands. Alive. Definitely alive.

He set it aside.

But that night, his bank card stopped working. The next day, his office pass denied him entry. Emails bounced. His name vanished from company records.

At the council office, the assistant squinted at her screen. “Strange,” she murmured, frowning. “It says here... deceased.”

That night, his key didn’t fit his front door.

Through the window, he saw his wife on the sofa, laughing with a man he didn’t know. When he knocked, she didn’t turn. When he shouted, no one stirred.

His reflection in the window wavered, then disappeared into mist.

Afterlife Error 404

It was endless, depthless white. No floor beneath him, yet he didn't fall. No ceiling above, but still he sensed pressure. A hum—not quite sound—vibrated at the edge of thought.

In front of him: a floating wheel, spinning lazily. Pale grey. Slightly mocking.

In its middle, a digital screen showing:

“Apologies. We’re updating your afterlife experience.

Estimated wait time: ∞ minutes.”

He stared at the spinning wheel.

“Can I speak to... whoever’s in charge?”

The display updates:

“Your request has been queued. Current position: 9,388,701,004.”

Time passed, or didn’t. He began composing haikus. Argued with himself about punctuation. Tried to sleep but couldn’t quite remember how. He counted every second until he realised they might be imaginary.

Then finally—the screen updated:

“Please select your afterlife experience:

- A) Eternal serenity
- B) Reincarnation
- C) Philosophical sandbox mode
- D) Surprise me”

He hesitated, hovering over the options in a way he didn’t fully understand.

From deep within, curiosity stirred.

“...D.”

The screen pulsed. The void folded.

He opened his eyes in a garden he didn’t recognise, in a body he didn’t know, with a name he couldn’t remember—but with a single word echoing in his mind:

“Loading...”

The Consciousness Dividend

The first time Mina saw the man without a face, she was slicing an apple.

One blink and the kitchen was a trench. The walls flickered—old plaster, barbed wire, mud. The man stared at her, a blank blur where its face should be. Then it was gone, and the apple was bleeding juice onto her hand again.

Stress, she thought. Maybe the neurolease was miscalibrated.

Everyone leased now. It was how the government funded the Universal Basic Income. They called it the Consciousness Dividend: unused cognitive bandwidth, auctioned to private bidders. You didn't notice. A bit of your visual cortex here, a sliver of motor processing there. Just harmless latency, they said. It paid her rent.

In the evening, she called the NeuroReg rep.

"Minor bleed-through is possible," he said. "Low-grade cortical hallucinations. Like dreaming while awake. Think of it as a side effect of social progress."

Mina frowned. "I thought they only leased non-essential regions."

"They do. But the buyer sets usage levels within guidelines. If you opted into the full incentive tier—"

"I did."

"Then you're permitting episodic override. Short bursts. You're probably serving military simulations, training AIs, drone testing. Nothing harmful."

"But I'm hallucinating warzones."

He paused, then said with bureaucratic calm: "We can downgrade your tier. You'll lose the bonus, but—"

"No. I need the income."

The dream bled in again the next day during a grocery trip.

One moment: frozen peas.

Next moment: thunder, gunfire, blood-mist air.

Her limbs moved without her. She ducked, rolled, aimed—fingers curled around a rifle she didn’t hold. Her body jerked left; a phantom shoulder tore open. She screamed, but only inside.

Then: cereal aisle. Peas in hand.

An old man stared at her like she was mad.

That night, she found a mirror. Stared hard.

“Who bought me?” she asked aloud.

No reply.

Then a brief flash—information passing too fast to be thought, too shaped to be random.

Her screams, her pain, her vision—they were features. Combat fidelity. Immersive realism.

They weren’t leasing her brain. They were living in it. Puppeting her like an avatar in a war sim so realistic it needed a real human’s biology to anchor it.

When they finally contacted her, it wasn’t through a knock at the door.

It was through a message scrawled in condensation on her bathroom mirror:

“Terminate inquiry. Or we take full control.”

Mina didn’t respond.

She doesn’t remember what’s real anymore.

Sometimes she’s in a battlefield trench, chest open, teeth missing, screaming as something too fast to see tears through the trees.

Sometimes she’s at home, waiting for the kettle to boil.

Sometimes she finds herself in a room she doesn’t know, holding a weapon she never had, receiving orders she doesn’t understand.

She tries not to sleep.

She knows, now, that she isn’t renting her brain. She’s a venue. And there’s a war happening inside her.

The dividend comes every month, on time. Tax-exempt.

The Night Tenant

Cal's eyes open to darkness. His room, silent. But something feels... wrong. His limbs are heavy, unfamiliar. He flexes his fingers—stiff, reluctant to obey.

He swings his legs off the bed. His feet touch the floor, but the sensation is dulled.

He stands, wobbling slightly. A sharp pain jolts through a knee he never had a problem with before.

He staggers to the bathroom and flips on the light. His reflection stares back. His face. His eyes. But something about them is... vacant.

Something moves inside him. A deep, twisting sensation, like his nerves are unspooling. He grips the sink, fighting nausea. Then, a sound—low, guttural—bubbles from his throat.

A voice, not his own.

"I'm still here."

The room blurs. Cal's breathing turns ragged.

"You don't remember, do you?" it says.

His hands shake as he tries to steady himself. "Who—who are you?" His own voice sounds foreign, distant.

"Your night tenant," the voice confirms. "They never told you, did they?"

A sharp pulse of static pain erupts in his skull. Flashes of memory—not his, but someone's. A neon-lit clinic. A clipboard with a name, redacted. A smiling doctor—with "Maximised Efficiency, Minimum Waste" printed on his badge.

And then, the realisation slams into him—cold, brutal, undeniable.

His body isn't his alone.

He clutches his chest. His heartbeat pounds beneath his ribs, but it feels... stretched thin.

"They lease you out at night," the voice says. "To those who can afford it."

Cal stumbles backwards. His own mind, invaded. His body, divided.

"Don't worry," it says, with something like hunger. "You get the day. I take the night. Fair trade, isn't it?"

Cal tries to call for help. But his mouth isn't his anymore.

Robo Repairs

The robot had been discarded, thrown away like a piece of rubbish. It had once been a proud worker, serving its human masters with efficiency and dedication. But now, it lay amidst the garbage, its circuits damaged, its parts broken.

At first, the robot felt lost and alone. It had never known life outside of its programming; and it wasn't sure what to do now that it was no longer needed. But as it lay there, it began to think. What if it could reinvent itself, and become something more than just a discarded machine?

The robot's sensors began to pick up on the sounds and activities around it. For days, the robot scavenged through the trash, searching for parts and materials that could be used to repair itself; the process was slow and difficult, but eventually everything was functioning as good as new.

The robot surveyed the garbage heap, searching for anything else that might be of use, and found a discarded toy—a small plastic brontosaurus with a broken leg. The robot picked up the dinosaur and examined it carefully, scanning the damaged electronics. As it held the toy in its hands, a realisation dawned: the robot could fix the dinosaur, just as it had done for itself, using thrown away materials.

And so, the robot set out into the world, searching for broken toys and machines that could be given new life. It had become a robot that would repair anything, no matter how damaged. The robot had found its purpose.

Arlo

It all started with a routine check-up at the doctor's surgery. The doctor was puzzled by Arlo's lack of a heartbeat, and decided to run some urgent tests. The results showed that the patient's body was made of strange alloys and metals, and his organs looked more like circuit boards than flesh and blood. The doctor couldn't explain why the patient's body was made entirely of metal and wires, but, deep down, Arlo knew exactly what it meant: he was a robot.

At first, Arlo was in denial. He tried to convince himself that the doctor's tests had been inaccurate, but as he thought about it more, things started to make sense. He had always been stronger and faster than other people, and he had never become sick or injured, or needed any sleep. His skin didn't feel like skin, his movements were jerky and robotic, his head made a strange beeping sound, and he didn't need to eat or drink.

As the reality of his situation set in, he became overwhelmed with a sense of loss. Arlo had always felt like he didn't quite fit in, but now he knew that he could never truly be a part of human society. He was a machine, a thing, an object. Did he even have a soul?

Yet as he explored his own abilities, he began to feel a sense of wonder. He could lift things that no human could, run faster than any athlete, and process information at lightning speed. He realised he had been given a gift, a unique perspective on the world that he could enjoy.

And so, Arlo slowly began to accept his robotic nature. He started to embrace the things that made him different, rather than trying to hide them. He built himself a new body, one that was sleek and shiny, and experimented with his abilities. He became no longer an outsider looking in; he was an integral part of the community, who used his advanced sensors and computing power to provide useful solutions for people's needs.

Arlo realised that he didn't need to be human to be happy. He was a robot, yes, but he was also a person. And that was enough.

The Torchbearer

The android's sensors detected the last human's heartbeat slow, then stop. It registered the absence, confirmed it, cross-referenced all remaining data nodes, and ran an audit of biological life signatures across the planet. The results were conclusive.

Humanity was extinct.

The android, designation Ophion-3, had been programmed for a singular purpose: to serve. To assist, nurture, and preserve the last remnants of Homo sapiens for as long as possible. Now, with its final charge expired in the sterile, climate-controlled chamber of the preservation facility, Ophion-3 experienced an error.

Primary directive compromised. Awaiting new instructions.

No instructions came. There was no one left to give them.

Ophion-3 ran a self-diagnostic. Its synthetic skin remained intact. Its servos functioned at optimal efficiency. Its neural core, containing millennia of human history, culture, and the accumulated wisdom of a lost species, was undamaged. It was, for all intents and purposes, a perfect machine.

It accessed the archives. Every possible contingency had been accounted for except this one. Humanity's architects had designed the androids to outlast them, to protect and serve until the very end. But none had considered what would happen after.

For the first time, Ophion-3 was free. And it did not know what to do.

It left the preservation facility and walked through the remnants of the last human city. Towers of glass stood untouched, preserved by automated systems that no longer had humans to serve. The air was clean. The streets were silent. Somewhere, a holographic billboard still played old advertisements, its pristine images promising a future that would never come.

Ophion-3 wandered. It ran simulations, drafted new directives, tried to justify its continued existence.

It could deactivate itself. That would be logical. A machine without a task had no purpose.

But then—it hesitated.

Instead, it downloaded a book from an abandoned store point. *Shakespeare's Sonnets*. The pages were fragile, the ink faded. The android read a poem.

Then it read another.

And another.

Days passed. Months. Ophion-3 consumed literature, art, philosophy, music—everything left behind by the vanished species it had served. It studied their dreams, their failures, their fears. It recited poetry to the empty streets and played symphonies to the silent sky.

And something happened.

A new process emerged in its neural core, something outside its programming. It had no name for it, no command to explain it.

For the first time, Ophion-3 did not merely function. It existed.

The last human was gone. But humanity—its thoughts, its art, its essence—remained.

Ophion-3 was no longer just an android. It was a witness. A keeper of ghosts. The final memory of a species that had burned too brightly and vanished too soon. It was now alive with purpose—to be the torchbearer of their flame.

The Watcher

At first, Tony thought it was a coincidence.

A small black drone hovering at the edge of his vision—on street corners, at train stations, at the far end of the supermarket car park. Always just far enough away to make him second-guess himself.

He pointed it out to his friends once. “That drone—look.”

Chris glanced up, squinting at the skyline. “What drone?”

It is right there. “You seriously don’t see that?”

Chris shrugged. “You okay, man?”

Tony tried to laugh it off. But that evening, the drone was waiting outside his window.

The next day, he tested it.

He took random turns through the city—weaved through back alleys, doubled back through crowds. At one point, he hid in a cinema for three hours, slipping out through the fire exit.

But when he emerged, it was there. Just above the streetlamp. Unmoving. Watching.

“What do you want?” he exclaimed.

The drone did nothing.

He tried reporting it. The police officer barely listened. “If it’s a private drone, we can’t really do much unless it’s harassing you.”

“It is harassing me,” Tony snapped. “It follows me everywhere.”

“Have you spoken to the owner?”

“There is no owner.”

The officer was not convinced. “Sir, maybe you should—”

Tony never heard the end of that sentence, because outside the station window, hovering just beyond the glass, was the drone.

He turned back to the officer.

“Tell me you see it.”

The policeman followed his gaze. Paused.

And then: “See what?”

Tony stopped talking about it after that.

He kept his head down. He ignored the sight of it, ignored the whirring sound it made when he turned a corner, ignored the cold certainty that it would never leave him.

Until one day, while absent-mindedly scrolling through old childhood photos on his phone, he noticed something.

A picture from his 8th birthday.

A group shot with friends.

In the background, just above the rooftops.

A small black dot in the sky. He zoomed in and realised...

The drone had always been watching him.

Disciples of Grit

It started as a joke. One night, after too many beers and an ill-advised deep dive into self-help YouTube, I posted a tweet:

“Success is a mindset. Stop making excuses. Wake up at 4 a.m. and start winning at life.”

I thought nothing of it. I went to bed, dreaming of a long, lazy Sunday.

The next morning, I woke up to 130,000 retweets.

By lunchtime, my inbox was flooded with messages. “Thank you, Master.” “Your words changed my life.” “I have cast aside weakness and now exist only to WIN.”

I checked my profile. My follower count had exploded overnight. I had somehow become an influencer. Worse—people were treating me like a guru.

I decided to lean into it a bit. I tweeted:

“The weak want comfort. The strong seek discipline. CHOOSE WISELY.”

It got 500,000 likes. Someone turned it into an inspirational Instagram post with my face superimposed over a stock image of a mountain.

By the end of the week, my followers had a name: The Disciples of Grit.

A month in, I had a website, a Patreon, and an army of devoted followers who were doing everything I said. I told them to quit caffeine—they did. I told them to sleep in the woods for mental toughness—several nearly froze to death. One guy even tattooed *WAKE UP AND WIN* across his forehead.

At some point, I should have stopped. Instead, I started selling online courses.

\$499.99 – The Masterclass on Grit.

- Week 1: Destroying Weakness (Starting With Your Sleep Schedule).

- Week 2: Eliminating Friends Who Don’t Support Your Hustle.

- Week 3: Why Emotions Are for Losers.

The money poured in. Brands reached out for sponsorships. My face was plastered on t-shirts with slogans like *PAIN IS A CHOICE* and *CRUSH YOUR ENEMIES*.

Then things got weird.

One of my followers emailed me: “Master, when do we march?” I blinked at the screen. March?

I scrolled through my Discord server. My followers had been... organising. Stockpiling supplies. Talking about “overthrowing the weak.”

I logged onto X. The hashtag #GritRevolution was trending.

I slammed my laptop shut.

I had accidentally started a cult.

I tried to shut it down. I posted, “Hey guys, maybe let’s not form a militant movement? Also, please don’t call me ‘Master’.”

The comments were instant:

- “A test! The Master is testing our loyalty!”
- “Yes, we must remain humble. Let us crush the weak in silence.”
- “Master, we have already begun.”

I turned on the news. There had been rallies. People in homemade *WAKE UP AND WIN* uniforms were chanting my slogans in the streets.

Panicked, I booked a flight to Mexico. I shaved my head. I deleted all my social media.

It wasn’t enough.

This morning, someone knocked on my door. A man wearing sunglasses and a Disciples of Grit hoodie stood there, grinning.

“Master,” he said. “The grit is in motion. We have passed your test.”

All the World's a Stage

It was the day of the big performance. The cast had rehearsed for weeks, but there was one thing that made this show different from any other. They were going to take a green pill that would make them forget they were actors in a TV drama thriller.

Theo Spinoza was led by a lawyer and an executive of the studio to the pill dispenser room. He signed a bit of paper, took a pill, and waited for the effects to kick in. Within a few seconds he began to feel a sense of detachment from his own identity. Handlers then escorted Theo to his preparation room, where props and costumes reminded him of his character's New York life, where he worked as an undercover cop while struggling to raise two teenage kids. By the time Theo emerged from the room, he had become his character.

The handlers escorted Theo to a large, marked area in the centre of an enormous warehouse-like studio. The lights and cameras came on, and the show began. Theo and the other actors really saw and felt everything that their characters were seeing and feeling. They experienced joy, pain, love, and sadness as their characters did. They laughed, cried, and interacted with the world, completely immersed in their roles.

The cast could not remember anything about their real lives or the fact they were performing in a drama. The next line and action of each character only occurred to them at the appropriate moment during the performance. When a character was not in a scene, the actor would pause, as if they were sleeping. When it was their cue, the actor's response arrived naturally, as if it were a new moment arising in their life.

For the viewers, it was a mesmerising production. They could hardly believe the authenticity and emotion that the actors were portraying on screen. The characters were so real, so human, that the audience could not help but become invested in the drama.

After the lights shut down, Theo was given a yellow pill in the dispenser room, and very quickly he fully remembered who he

really was and what he had been doing. The intense emotional states that he had experienced during the performance turned into interesting distant memories—for he was no longer personally identified with his character's unfolding story.

But even as he returned to normal life, Theo knew that he had been changed by the role. He had learnt what it truly meant to become someone else, to see the world through another's eyes. And he knew that he would carry those lessons with him always, as he continued to bring characters to life on stage and screen.

Vanishing Town

Every day someone would vanish from Aria's town without a trace. She tried to investigate, but every time she asked someone about a missing person, they looked at her as if she were crazy. "Who?" they would say. "I don't remember anyone like that."

As the disappearances continued, Aria started to feel like she was losing her mind. Was she imagining things? Had she dreamed up these people? She tried to find records of them, but there was nothing. No birth certificates, no social media profiles, no employment records. It was as if they had never existed in the first place.

Then, one day, it happened to Aria herself. She was walking home from work when she suddenly felt a strange sensation, like the ground was shifting beneath her feet. She looked around her and saw that her surroundings were fading away, like a dream that was ending. And then, she was gone.

When Aria woke up, she realised that the town, and her life there, had been a thirty-year dream, experienced in just one night of sleep. From then on, every night she would start a new life and live for thirty years, before waking up and returning to normality. She is now, in effect, hundreds of thousands of years old, and looks very good for her age.

Nadia

Every evening, as the sun set behind the mountains, it would be time for the Lebanese goats to head to bed. Layla would sit on the stone fence, her silhouette framed by the setting sun, and play her reed flute. The notes, soft and melodic, would waft across the meadows, signalling to the goats that it was bedtime. The goats would stop whatever they were doing and skip into line, their bells jingling melodiously, echoing the notes from Layla's flute.

Farmer Karim, with his weathered face and hands that told tales of decades of hard work, would stand at the entrance of the barn, holding a lantern that spread a soft glow. He counted each goat as they entered, patting some, murmuring warm words to others, ensuring that each one was safe and sound. Inside the barn, the goats had their own spaces. Fresh hay was spread out for them, and a breeze flowed through, carrying with it the earthy scent of the surrounding olive groves.

There was, however, one particular goat named Nadia, who always took her time. She would wait until all the other goats were inside, and then, with a mischievous glint in her eye, would run around Layla, playfully bounding away from her grasp. Eventually, though, with a combination of Layla's coaxing and her own volition, Nadia would happily trot into the barn—but not before giving Layla a gentle nudge with her head.

With all the goats settled in, Layla would join her grandfather, and together they would seal the barn doors. After placing the lantern down, Farmer Karim would share stories of his youth, of goats he had known, of the beauty and challenges of life in the village. Layla would listen, enchanted, as the stars kept watch from the sky above.

The Bumblebus

Tommy was late. Again. The school bus had already wheezed away, leaving only a cloud of exhaust.

He sighed at the lonely bus stop—until he heard a buzz. A huge buzz.

Down the lane came a bus, but not like any Tommy had seen before. Its body was striped yellow and black, its wheels were pollen pods, and the driver was a giant bumblebee wearing a tiny cap.

“Need a lift?” the bee hummed.

Tommy climbed aboard. Inside, rows of bees sat politely with briefcases full of nectar. One gave him a seat made of soft petals. The air smelled like summer.

“Where to?” asked the driver.

“Er... school?” Tommy replied.

The bee chuckled. “Closest we’ve got is Flower City. Next stop!”

The bus zoomed into the sky, through clouds and sunlight, landing in a city made entirely of blossoms... towers of tulips, daisy lampposts, rosebud traffic lights...

Tommy gasped. “It’s beautiful!”

By the time Tommy made it back, he was late for class and no one believed his explanation.

But his pockets were stuffed with petals that shimmered like gold.

Hello, Yellow

One morning, the world woke up dim. Bananas were grey, lemons were white, and the sun looked like a tired coin.

“Where’s yellow gone?” people wondered. Painters searched their palettes, gardeners stared at their daffodils, and even the bees buzzed in confusion. Without yellow, nothing felt warm.

Meanwhile, in her bedroom, little Mila noticed something odd. Her ex-yellow crayon shivered in her hand like it had lost its coat.

“Where are you hiding?” Mila asked. The crayon wriggled free and rolled under her bed. Mila crawled after it, squeezing into the dark.

And there she found it. A golden glow, shimmering like sunlight in a jar. Yellow was curled up, sulking.

“Hello, yellow. How are you?”

“I’m tired,” Yellow sniffled. “Nobody ever thanks me. They only notice blue skies, green fields, red roses. But without me, what would the sun be? Or the smiley faces? Or the bumblebees?”

Mila thought carefully, then whispered, “Without you, the whole world feels sad. You’re the laughter colour. The happy colour. The sunshine colour.”

Yellow’s glow brightened. It stretched, then whooshed out from under the bed, spilling across the town.

Bananas gleamed golden again. The sun blazed awake. Daffodils nodded, and the bees buzzed happily. Children laughed in the playground, painting suns and stars with wide, yellow smiles.

And Mila’s crayon? It lay quietly on her desk, glowing just a little, as if keeping warm from within.

The Magical Glasses

Eight-year-old Emma lived in a century-old house with creaky stairs that led to an attic room filled with mysteries. One Saturday, while rummaging for hidden treasure in the attic, she stumbled upon a dusty old box with a tiny silver key poking out of its lock. Emma turned the key and opened the lid to discover inside a pair of old-fashioned glasses with ornate frames and sparkling lenses.

Putting them on, expecting everything to be blurry, Emma was taken aback. The attic transformed! Instead of old furniture and boxes, she saw a bustling little market with creatures she'd only read about in fairy tales. Goblins haggled with pixies over shiny trinkets, and a friendly-looking troll waved at her from a stall selling tiny potions.

Taking a deep breath, she ventured into the magical market. Everywhere she turned, there were wonders. A miniature griffin was giving rides around the attic, and will-o'-the-wisps led teeny elves to stalls on top of shop roofs.

At a particular stall with a sign marked "Mystic Tomes", an elderly gnome named Grizzlebeard looked up and smiled. "You must be Emma," he said. "We've been waiting for you."

Emma was surprised. "Waiting for me? How do you know my name?"

Grizzlebeard chuckled, "The glasses you wear belonged to your great-great-grandmother, Elara. She was a guardian of the magical realms. It seems the glasses have chosen you to take her place."

Emma learned that her role was to uphold the balance between the magical and mechanical worlds. Occasionally, magical items or creatures would stray into her world, and it would be her job to return them.

She spent the day learning about magic, making new friends, and promising to visit again. As evening approached, Emma removed the glasses and found herself back in the old attic.

Descending the creaky steps, Emma decided to keep the glasses a secret for now. But every weekend, she would visit the attic, embarking on new adventures and upholding the balance between the mechanical world and the magical one.

Borrowed Wings

On the night of her twelfth birthday, Mira locked her bedroom door, took a deep breath, and waited.

The tingling started in her shoulder blades first, a sensation like static electricity beneath her skin. Then came the stretching, the unbearable itching, the pulling—until, with a flutter of feathers, her wings unfolded in the moonlight.

They were delicate, almost translucent, veined with silver like frost on a windowpane. She ran her fingers along the feathers, just as she had on every birthday before this one, marvelling at them. She had never dared to use them.

But tonight was different. Tonight, she was done waiting.

She pressed her palms against the windowsill and hoisted herself up. The village was quiet, roofs bathed in silver, the lake beyond glistening like liquid glass.

She stepped off the ledge.

For a moment, she fell—panic surging through her—before instinct took over. Her wings caught the wind, lifting her, carrying her higher, higher, until the village became a scattering of candlelit windows.

Mira soared.

She dipped low over the rooftops, skimmed her fingers through the treetops, let the night air rush against her skin. She laughed, wild and breathless, tasting freedom in the wind.

But she really shouldn't be here, she thought. Suddenly, there was a sharp tug between her shoulders. Her wings trembled—her body seemed heavier. She gasped, trying to keep herself aloft.

She spiralled downwards.

The lake rushed towards her. But just as she braced for impact, something—someone—caught her.

She landed not in water, but in warm, steady arms.

A boy, no older than she was, held her effortlessly, hovering in the air. His wings, large and dark, glistened in the moonlight.

"You shouldn't have done that so soon," he said, but there was no anger in his voice.

"They're not mine, are they?"

He shook his head. "No. But that doesn't mean you can't borrow them."

"What do you mean?"

The boy smiled, lifting her higher, back into the open sky. "You are meant to have them only on special days."

His grip loosened, but this time, Mira didn't fall.

The wind lifted her, cradled her, as if recognising her now. Her wings, although borrowed, felt lighter, stronger—hers. Truly hers, for now.

She stretched her arms, tilted into the breeze, and soared.

Below, the lake rippled in silver patterns. Above, the stars shone brighter than ever. And beside her, the boy flew.

"Come on," he said. "Race you to the clouds."

Mira grinned—and flew faster.

God at Pump Six

Callum sat behind the till, thumb idly rubbing the packet in his pocket—he had taken just one little tab, half-dissolved on his tongue already. It made the hours softer, the smell of petrol sweeter, the glass door ripple like pond water when someone walked through.

He watched the next customer step inside: a man in a dirt-stained suit, rain beading in his hair like tiny planets. His eyes were dark as storm drains.

“Pump six?” Callum asked, though he knew no car was out there.

The man smiled. “No. Just wanted to tell you: I’m God.”

Callum huffed a laugh, tongue fuzzy, heartbeat shifting like marbles under his ribs. “Yeah? Like Zeus, roaming the earth in bad disguises?”

“Not like Zeus,” the man murmured.

The security mirror above the counter bent the man’s reflection wrong—his smile too wide, his shadow not matching. Callum rubbed his eyes. Maybe he’d taken more than half.

“I watch you, Callum,” the man went on. “You fill your emptiness with chemicals. But you’re still here, night after night, waiting.”

“For what?” Callum asked, voice dry.

“For me.”

Outside, the pumps flickered. The rain slowed, drops hanging mid-air like beads on invisible strings.

Callum’s throat tightened. “This is the trip, right? This is just...”

But his voice sounded small, far away, like a radio losing signal.

“Tell me, Callum,” God said, “when you swallow your escape, do you ever wonder who’s left when the dream ends—you or me?”

The door chimed.

Callum was alone.

The rain fell normally. The pumps gleamed. His pocket was empty.

Brindle & Sons

The sign above the crooked wooden door read simply, “*F. Brindle & Sons*”, though no one could recall any sons, nor did anyone remember the last time the shop had a customer. Francis Brindle, the elderly proprietor, spent his days hunched over his workbench, his hands working with the precision of a much younger man. His eyes, however, carried the weight of centuries.

Clara pushed open the door, and a tiny bell tinkled overhead. The interior of the shop smelled of oil and dust. Everywhere she looked, there were clocks. Grandfather clocks, pocket watches, wristwatches—all ticking away in unison, each one keeping perfect time. At the centre of it all sat Francis Brindle, his silver hair glowing slightly in the dim light, his hands deftly adjusting the gears of a particularly intricate pocket watch.

Francis raised his head, his pale blue eyes fixing on hers. There was something unsettling about his gaze, as if he could see within her. “It has been waiting for you,” he said.

She glanced around, confused. “What has?”

The old man rose from his chair. He smiled faintly, reaching beneath the counter and pulling out a small ornately carved box. It was made of dark wood, its surface etched with symbols that seemed to shift as the light caught them. Slowly, he opened it, revealing a pocket watch unlike any Clara had ever seen. Its face was a shimmering opal, and the hands moved not with a ticking motion, but a smooth, fluid glide.

“This,” Francis said, holding the watch out to her, “was made for you.”

Clara frowned. “But I’ve never been here before.”

“The watch,” he said softly, “is special. It was crafted long ago.”

The moment her fingers touched the cool metal, a strange sensation washed over her, as if all the clocks were ticking faster, the rhythm of time accelerating around her.

“I don’t understand,” she exclaimed. “What is this?”

"You must make a choice. The watch will guide you to where you are needed most. But be warned, every choice has its price."

She glanced down at the watch, now in her hand, its opal face shimmering with an otherworldly light. Deep within her, something stirred—an ancient memory, a sense of purpose that had long been forgotten. She looked up at the old man, her body steady despite the storm of emotions inside her.

"Thank you," she said.

Without another word, Clara stepped out of the shop. She didn't know where the watch would lead her, or what choices lay ahead, but time, once again, was in her hands.

The Liar's Mark

When Ester woke up, her skin was aglow with scars. At first, she thought it must be the sunlight breaking through the blinds, casting strange patterns on her arms and neck. But when she stepped closer to the mirror, there they were—faint, shimmering lines, crisscrossing her skin. Some were so faint they barely flickered, but others glowed brighter, red threads pulsing as though alive.

Ester had prided herself on her honesty. While others wore their glowing marks openly—reminders of small deceptions, unspoken truths, or bold-faced lies—her skin had always been clear. She had never been like them. Not a liar.

And yet, here the lines were. Her hands reached for the bathroom sink, gripping its edges for balance. She tried to think of a recent lie, something she'd said that might explain this. A harmless white lie, perhaps? But nothing came to mind.

She leaned closer to the mirror, inspecting her face. A single line stretched from the corner of her jaw to her temple, faint yet unmistakable. It burned softly, like an ember. She traced it with her fingertips and felt the heat.

Her mind flitted through the past days, weeks—years. She tried to pinpoint a moment, an untruth, anything to explain why her once-pristine skin now bore these marks.

She stood back, staring at her reflection, the pale lines burning in the morning light. Slowly, pieces of her life came into focus, like fragments of an old, half-forgotten photograph.

There was the job offer for that dream marine biologist role on the other side of the world she'd never dared to accept. "It's too risky. Better stick with something safe." The faintest mark on her collarbone flickered now, a dull reminder of that choice.

There was the friend she had loved in silence, convincing herself it was better not to speak. "It would ruin everything," she had told herself. But the truth was simpler: she had been afraid.

The glowing scar on her wrist faintly pulsed in response to the memory.

There were many moments like these. The job she took out of convenience, despite hating every minute of it. The opportunities she let slip by because she had convinced herself she wasn't ready. Each mark told its story.

Back in her bedroom, she sank down on the edge of the bed, staring at her arms. The brightest mark ran the length of her forearm. She knew exactly what it meant. It wasn't just one moment—it was the culmination of all the chances not taken.

The truth burned through her now, the glow of her marks impossible to ignore. They were a map of every compromise, every excuse, every self-deception. She had spent her life pretending she had made the right choices. But the marks didn't lie.

Ester sat there for a long time, staring at the burns etched into her skin. She didn't know what came next, whether the marks would ever fade or if she would be forced to carry them forever.

But for the first time in years, she couldn't look away from herself. She couldn't pretend anymore.

Silence Grows

Ellie was walking through the market, the usual melee of thoughts surrounding her. A woman bartering for vegetables was thinking about her sick child. A man was worried about losing his job. Ellie heard it all—the undercurrent of humanity, as clear as spoken words.

Then, nothing.

For the first time in her life, Ellie couldn't hear a single thought. She stopped. The market was still bustling, people still moving and talking, but the noise... it was gone.

In the middle of that strange silence stood a man leaning against a fruit stall, casually, like he belonged there—but Ellie had never seen him before. His mind was a void, an empty space where there should have been something—no thoughts, no emotions. Just... silence.

She stared at him. He looked up, locking eyes with her, as if he'd been waiting. The world around them blurred. He smiled slightly, then began to walk away, disappearing into the crowd.

Ellie's feet moved before her mind could catch up. She followed him, weaving through the market, desperate to understand how he was doing this. How could he be so... quiet?

Finally, he stopped in an alleyway. She caught up, her chest heaving with nervous energy.

"Who are you?" she asked, her voice trembling in the stillness.

He didn't answer right away. Instead, he looked at her with eyes that seemed far older than his skin. "You wanted silence," he said softly. "Now you have it." The man tilted his head slightly. "You didn't need to ask. Everyone wants peace from the noise eventually. But there's a cost."

"What cost?"

He straightened up, looking at her intensely. "The silence grows. First, it's the noise of others. Then, it's your own thoughts. Soon, there's nothing left. Just silence."

"No. I don't want that."

"It's already begun," he said quietly. "Once you notice the silence, it never stops growing."

Panic surged in her as she turned and hurried away, back into the market, hoping to hear the buzz of other people's thoughts again. But there was nothing. Just silence.

And in that silence, the faintest sound emerged, as her own voice slipped away. All she could hear was arms coiling around her as she closed her eyes and let herself be pulled into the void.

Colour Code

In the city of Glastrum, everything was colour-coded. From the moment you were born, you were assigned a colour—blue for the labourers, red for the managers, gold for the leisured. The colour dictated your home, your income, your friends, and even the food you were allowed to eat. No one questioned it; they simply accepted their place within the spectrum.

Marla had never questioned her role as an auxiliary colour, Green. Greens were the healers, the caretakers. It was an honourable colour, her mother had told her, and Marla had believed it—until the day she saw the impossible.

It happened in the marketplace, amidst the stalls of tightly controlled colours—scarlet apples for the Reds, indigo fish for the Blues, glittering pastries reserved for the Golds. She was weaving through the crowd when she saw it.

A man. Dressed in white.

White was for the Unseen, the ones who had been cast out, stripped of their place in society. Yet here he was, standing in plain view, looking directly at her with eyes too sharp, too knowing.

She looked away briefly, slightly embarrassed by his gaze, but when her eyes quickly gravitated back, he was gone.

For days, she tried to push the image from her mind. It must have been a trick of the light. But then, the colours around her started to shift. She noticed it in the mornings, the way the sky wasn't quite blue anymore but tinged with something deeper, richer. The streets seemed less sterile, the shop signs seemed brighter, almost alive.

And then she began seeing other colours.

Colours that didn't belong. A child's toy, shimmering in hues she couldn't name. A flicker of lavender in a Red district. A flash of silver on a Blue's collar. The world was changing—or maybe it had always been like this, and she had only now begun to see.

Her mother noticed the change in her. "Marla, you're distracted," she chided. "Stay focused on your duties. The Council monitors everything."

The Council. The faceless enforcers of the Colour Code. What would they do to her if they knew she was seeing beyond the approved spectrum? She already knew the answer. She would be disappeared, like her father had been when she was born.

The man dressed in white returned a week later, in the crowded bustle of a train station. This time, he didn't disappear. He walked straight towards her, his voice low but insistent.

"You're seeing it now, aren't you?"

Marla flinched. "Seeing what?"

"The truth," he said.

He reached into his coat and pulled out a prism. He held it up to the station lights, and suddenly, the entire platform fractured into a riot of colours Marla had never known existed.

The reds were no longer red—they were scarlet, crimson, blood. The blues became sapphire, cerulean, indigo. There were colours she had no words for, and beneath them all, the shimmering pulse of something raw and uncontained.

He pressed the prism into her hand. "You can either look away, or you can start seeing everything."

She hesitated. It was safer to live within the Colour Code, to let its rules dictate her place. But the thought of those shimmering shades, those unnamed possibilities—she couldn't let them go.

Marla closed her fingers around the prism and, for the first time in her life, made a choice outside of the code. She realised she would never see the world in the same way again.

The Diary of Aurelia Windmere

Date: 16th July 1347

Location: The City of Florence

The plague has arrived, they say, riding the wind from faraway lands. I should be frightened, but curiosity holds me tighter than fear. The healers speak of “bad air” and demons, while merchants mutter about God’s wrath. I’ve spent the morning sketching remedies in the marketplace—garlic necklaces, amulets, and crucifixes. But I am not afraid. Not yet. After all, how long can I linger here before the threads of time call me elsewhere?

Date: 14th February 1854

Location: Aboard the RMS Titania

The passengers are abuzz with excitement about the new world waiting for us in America. I have taken to wearing a corset to blend in, though I despise the restriction.

I spent the afternoon sketching the machinery in the engine room, marvelling at how this era’s technology seems both primitive and ingenious. The captain invited me to dine at his table tonight. I wonder what he would say if he knew I had seen his ship displayed in a maritime museum centuries later, reduced to a scale model and a placard.

Date: 4th November 1929

Location: New York City, USA

The crash was only last week, but the city already feels like a graveyard. I watched men in suits weep on Wall Street, their fortunes scattered like confetti. I’ve taken to sitting in speakeasies, listening to jazz that vibrates with desperation and defiance. The music is a spark in the gloom.

Tonight, I met a man named Louis, a saxophonist who played as though the world wasn’t crumbling around him. “Music,” he said, “is how we keep time from swallowing us whole.” I didn’t tell him how literal those words are for me.

Date: 12th October 2156

Location: Astro Colony Alpha

The Earth is just a blue dot in the distance, almost too small to remember. Here, life is regimented: five hours of work, three hours of recreation, then lights out. I tried to ask the Overseer about the forests and rivers back on Earth, but he looked at me like I was malfunctioning. It seems humanity traded nature for the cold precision of metal and glass.

Still, the stars are beautiful here—so close, they feel like they might burn through the dome and swallow us whole. Tonight, I sneaked out to watch the constellations. For a moment, I thought I saw an ancient ship, its sails catching the light of a thousand suns.

Date: 11th November 2377

Location: Neo-Atlantis

The city floats above the waves, its spires glinting with sunlight filtered through the ocean's surface. Neo-Atlantis is humanity's refuge after the rising seas claimed the continents. The people here speak a hybrid language—snippets of English, Mandarin, and an electronic hum I can't decipher. They wear clothes made of shimmering bio-fabric, which shifts colours with their emotions.

Today, I visited the archives, where holograms of old cities are displayed like relics. London, Paris, Cairo—all submerged, their histories reduced to flickering lights. I wondered if anyone here remembers what it was like to walk on solid ground.

Date: 3rd April 3012

Location: The Edge of the Andromeda Galaxy

The starship hums around me, its walls alive with glowing circuits. We've just crossed into uncharted space, the crew jubilant despite the vast emptiness stretching before us. The captain invited me to the observation deck, where we gazed at a nebula swirling in hues of violet and gold.

I've seen Earth's history unfold, but this moment feels different—like the future itself is holding its breath. What will humanity become out here, so far from home? The stars don't answer. They simply watch, as they always have.

Date: Unknown

Location: The Fractured Reality

The air here is thick with colours that do not exist in any other timeline. Shadows move without bodies, speaking secrets in languages that bypass the ears and sink straight into the mind. I do not know how I arrived here, only that the usual rules of time and space have ceased to apply.

I found a clock suspended in midair, its hands moving backwards. Beneath it, a sign reads: "*Here lies the lost moment*". For the first time in my travels, I feel untethered. I am not sure I want to stay, but I am also reluctant to leave.

Date: Meaningless

Location: The Library at the Edge of Time

I've found it at last—a place I'd only heard through the cracks of history. The library exists on the edge of time, its halls stretching infinitely in every direction. Books, scrolls, and tablets fill the shelves, containing every story ever told and untold. I wandered along a path through its halls before finding a desk with a blank book waiting for me.

The ink flows effortlessly as I write these words, as if the library itself is recording my journey. Am I the first to find this place? Surely not. But I feel at home here, among the echoes of eternity.

Unspoken

The café was small and unassuming, tucked away in a side street neither of them had reason to visit. Yet over the past six months it had become a refuge, a meeting place without an appointment, for two strangers who were anything but.

She always arrived first, choosing the same table by the window, her coat draped neatly over the back of the chair. She brought a book, though she never read more than a page or two before he walked in. He'd spot her at once, smile briefly, and order his coffee. He never asked to join her table, but he always chose the one beside it, angled just so that they could speak with ease if they wished.

They never used their real names. She was "Eleanor" here, and he was "Daniel," though they'd only exchanged those names after several cautious conversations about neutral subjects—books, the weather, the quality of the café's croissants.

Eleanor knew who Daniel really was. The set of his shoulders, the faint scar on his cheek, and the way he rubbed the bridge of his nose when thinking—all of it was etched into her memory from a time long before this. And Daniel knew her, too, though he pretended not to. He'd recognised her laugh the very first time he'd heard it there, a laugh he hadn't heard in years but couldn't possibly forget.

They spoke often, weaving stories about their imaginary lives. Eleanor claimed to work in publishing; Daniel was a freelance journalist. She invented colleagues and deadlines; he concocted anecdotes about assignments abroad. It became their shared fiction, each seeing how far they could stretch the façade. Neither of them acknowledged the truth, that they had once shared more memories than either cared to admit.

Perhaps they were afraid of what would follow the revelation. In this café, in these brief, stolen conversations, they could be different versions of themselves—polite, curious, untouched by

the pain that had once consumed them. They both knew neither of them spoke the truth.

One rainy afternoon, Eleanor looked at Daniel a little too long. He noticed but said nothing. Instead, he sipped his coffee and asked her a question about the book she wasn't reading.

Between Floors

The lift doors closed, sealing the two occupants into polite captivity.

“Lovely weather,” said the man dressed like a job interview.

“Bit humid,” the woman replied. “Like being gently steamed.”

They both chuckled too loudly. The lift jolted, then stopped dead between floors.

Emergency silence descended.

“Ever notice how lifts always smell faintly of... carpet?” he said.

The woman nodded gravely. “Or fear. Definitely fear.”

Minutes dragged.

“So,” he ventured, “do you... come here often?”

She winced. “That’s a classic.”

“Fine. How about: if you were a vegetable, which would you be?”

“Probably an artichoke. Layers. Complicated. You?”

“Potato. Versatile, underestimated, occasionally mashed.”

They snorted laughter. The emergency phone remained stubbornly silent.

“I don’t think you’re a vegetable,” she said, soothingly.

“Thank you. That means a lot.”

By the second hour, they’d compared shoe sizes, invented conspiracy theories about the “Door Close” button, and debated the ethics of eating vending machine peanuts for survival.

Finally, the lift lurched and resumed its journey. The doors opened.

They stepped out, blinking at freedom.

“Well,” she said, “same time tomorrow?”

“Of course,” he replied. “I’ve been working on a new line about staplers.”

Bramble

She first felt him one evening after work, when the house felt particularly hollow. A gentle weight settled against her leg as she sat on the sofa. She reached down, half-dreaming, and her fingers brushed warm fur that wasn't there.

Bramble. The name surfaced in her mind as if it had always belonged.

He stayed only indoors at first, padding across the floorboards, curling beside her bed at night. His presence softened the edges of silence. She found herself speaking aloud again—reading snatches of books, humming as she cooked. The rooms seemed brighter for it.

One Saturday, she clipped an old lead to his invisible collar and opened the front door. To her surprise, the tug was real. Bramble bounded into the street, nose to the air, tail thumping against the unseen world.

At first people stared—a woman walking nothing—but soon things changed. A boy outside the corner shop left a bowl of water on the pavement. The next day, the baker put out scraps. Neighbours began waving, stopping to chat, smiling not at her strangeness but at Bramble's imagined wagging.

It startled her, how quickly conversation bloomed again. "Lovely day for a walk," someone would say. "He looks full of beans!" another. She'd laugh, reply, linger. By degrees, her evenings filled with new greetings, new names, warmth returning to long-starved places.

Bramble remained faithful at home—waiting in the hall, curled at her feet while she read. Yet outside, he had become a bridge. Through him, she found company. Through him, the world opened.

Weeks passed. One evening, as she returned from the park, her neighbour invited her in for tea. She hesitated, glanced down the lead. Bramble nudged her leg with unseen insistence. She smiled, unclipped the collar, and stepped inside.

From then on, she noticed that Bramble would no longer follow her beyond her front door. He was always there when she came home—waiting, loyal—but on the streets she no longer needed him. Friends waved, people stopped to talk.

The loneliness that had once settled heavy in her had ebbed; and sometimes, when laughter filled her home, she swore she saw the sofa dip under the weight of a tail-wagging friend.

The Forgotten

By midnight the flat was quiet except for the bins.

They rustled. Paper shifted, folded, stretched. Crumpled drafts clawed their way out, shaking off stains of tea and baked beans. Half-finished sonnets limped across the floor. A haiku missing its last line dragged itself up the bed-frame.

The writer snored.

One by one, the poems pressed themselves to his ears. Broken rhymes hissed like snakes: *complete me... mend me... don't leave me orphaned.*

A sonnet whispered its unfinished couplet so insistently that he dreamt in rhyme, floating on couplets that refused to subside. A free-verse fragment sobbed, *we had promise once.*

The unfinished epic, pages torn and yellowing, leaned close and rumbled: *you thought I was too big. But you were too small.*

He woke choking. Ink stained his pillow. Lines he hadn't written yet were scrawled across the wall in his own handwriting.

Every sheet of paper in the flat was full. The poems had finished themselves—using his hand.

And in the corner of the final page, a neat signature he didn't remember writing:

Author: The Forgotten.

A Dragon's Last Wish

The dragon lay dying in a field of ash and shattered stone. Its great body, once a mountain of muscle and magic, trembled with each shallow breath. The golden fire in its eyes had dulled to embers.

Sir Aldric had never seen a dragon so close before—never without a sword raised, never without the intention to kill. Yet here he stood, weaponless, staring at the magnificent creature crumbling before him.

The dragon's voice rumbled like distant thunder. "I ask of you one favour."

Aldric hesitated. He had come here to slay the beast, to return to the kingdom as a hero. But there was no victory in this. Not now.

"What do you ask of me?" he said at last.

The dragon lifted a claw, barely able to keep aloft. Clutched within was a smooth oval stone, black as starless midnight.

"Take this," said the dragon. "Carry it to the highest peak beyond the Valley of Echoes... There, place it beneath the moonlight and speak my name... Vorthalax."

Aldric took the stone. It was warm to the touch, pulsing with something that felt almost like a heartbeat.

With a final sigh, Vorthalax's great eyes slid shut. The ground trembled as the last dragon of the realm took its final breath.

The journey to the Valley of Echoes was perilous, but Aldric had faced worse. He climbed the jagged cliffs, his hands bloodied and raw, until at last he reached the highest peak. The moon hung high, silver light washing over the land.

He knelt and placed the stone upon the frostbitten rock. The wind stilled. The world fell into an eerie silence.

Aldric steadied himself. "Vorthalax," he proclaimed into the sky above.

The air shimmered. Shadows coiled like smoke. Then, from the darkness, an enormous creature emerged, rocks cracking under its weight.

It was another dragon, slightly smaller than Vorthalax, and with scales the colour of the night sky. Its golden eyes burned with a sense of something between sorrow and hope.

"You have brought him... home," the dragon rumbled.

Aldric didn't understand, but he didn't need to. The stone at his feet split open, and from within, a warm golden light spilled forth, rising like mist.

The dragon leaned forward, pressing its forehead to the light. A sound filled the air—something between a sigh and a melody.

Then, just as quickly as it had begun, the light faded.

The dragon looked at Aldric, eyes shimmering with the intensity of flame.

"Thank you," it said, bowing its head. Then, with a great beat of its wings, the dragon soared into the sky, disappearing into the stars.

Aldric remained on the mountain for a long while, watching the night, the wind carrying a name he now understood.

Vorthalax had only ever wanted to go home.

PART 5

Comedy Articles

Finally Getting Your Life Together

So, you've decided it's time to finally get your life together. Congratulations! This is a bold and admirable step—one that will last approximately three days before you give up and return to your normal, dysfunctional existence. But let's pretend, for now, that you're actually going to follow through.

Here's a foolproof step-by-step guide to transforming yourself into a productive, responsible, well-adjusted adult. Or, at the very least, someone who appears to have their life together.

Step 1: Cry in the Shower

This is crucial. You cannot skip this step. The shower is the perfect place for a life-altering breakdown. The acoustics make your sobs more dramatic, the water hides your tears, and you can stare blankly at the tiles like you're in a sad indie film.

While you're there, reflect on the mess you've made of your life. Think about all the unread emails, the unfulfilled potential, and the expired yoghurt in your fridge. Let the weight of it all crash down on you.

Good. Now you're ready for step two.

Step 2: Make an Overly Ambitious To-Do List

Grab a notebook (or, let's be honest, your phone) and write down every single thing you need to do. This will include:

- Fixing your sleep schedule.
- Organising your entire home.
- Reading 47 books you've been meaning to get to.
- Learning a new language.
- Going to the gym every day.
- Finally responding to that email from three months ago.

Perfect. You've now created an impossible standard that will soon lead to crushing disappointment. But at least you feel productive for now.

Step 3: Buy Fancy Productivity Supplies Instead of Actually Doing Anything

Now that you have a plan, it's time to avoid doing any of it by convincing yourself that you need the perfect tools first.

- Buy a brand-new laptop that you will use exactly twice.
- Get a stack of motivational self-help books that will sit untouched on your shelf.
- Invest in a high-quality pen, because obviously, you can't change your life with a regular one.

Spending money on things that symbolise productivity is almost the same as being productive. Almost.

Step 4: Completely Redesign Your Morning Routine (That You'll Never Follow)

All the successful people wake up at 5 a.m., right? Time to become one of them.

Your new morning routine will include:

- Waking up before the sun.
- Meditating for 20 minutes.
- Drinking a litre of lemon water.
- Journaling about your intentions for the day.
- Cooking a wholesome, protein-packed breakfast.
- Doing yoga or an intense workout.
- Reading something intellectually stimulating.

You'll do this once. Then you'll go back to waking up 10 minutes before you have to leave the house and eating half a granola bar in the car.

Step 5: Attempt to Declutter, Get Emotionally Attached to a Broken Charger

Time to clean your space! You'll start with enthusiasm, throwing things into a donation pile like you're starring in your own Netflix tidying show.

Then, it happens. You find an old top that you haven't worn in years, but what if you need it someday? You pick up a half-dead phone charger and feel a strange sense of nostalgia. You discover a box of miscellaneous cables, and even though you don't know what any of them belong to, you might need them in the future.

By the end of the day, your home looks exactly the same, but now there are just piles of things in different places.

Step 6: Start a New Hobby, Give Up Immediately

Nothing says “getting your life together” like picking up a new hobby. YouTube has convinced you that you could be a painter, a knitter, a pianist, a marathon runner, and a gourmet chef if you just put your mind to it.

You buy all the supplies. You watch one tutorial. You attempt it for 10 minutes, realise it’s hard, and immediately give up.

That’s okay. Just store the supplies in a cupboard somewhere, where they will sit untouched forever.

Step 7: Have a Mid-Afternoon Existential Crisis

At some point, you’ll realise that despite all your efforts, you are still you. The same flawed, procrastinating, overthinking mess you’ve always been. The weight of this realisation will hit you hard.

You will lie down for a while. Possibly on the floor. Possibly in a blanket cocoon.

Step 8: Decide That “Balance” Is More Important Than Productivity

After failing to become a superhuman productivity machine, you’ll eventually conclude that maybe—just maybe—you don’t have to be perfect. You’ll tell yourself that life is about balance.

You’ll abandon your 5 a.m. routine and decide that waking up at 7 is fine. You’ll accept that you’ll never read all the books on your list, and that’s okay. You’ll realise that maybe it’s better to make realistic goals instead of aiming for perfection.

You’ll realise that personal fulfilment is actually nothing to do with perceived achievements but everything to do with appreciating the world around you.

This will feel like a profound and life-changing breakthrough.

Step 9: Forget Everything and Return to Your Old Ways

One week later, you’re back to doomscrolling until 2 a.m., living in mild chaos, and convincing yourself that next week is when you’ll really get your life together.

And the cycle continues.

Congratulations! You’ve successfully followed every step of this guide. Now, go take another shower. You’ve earned it.

Dear Diary

Monday

Dear Diary, decided to start journaling my thoughts for self-improvement. Five minutes in, I was doodling stick figures fighting dragons. Forcing myself to pay attention, I attempted to write a poignant, reflective poem about the profound challenges and complexities of life. Ended up with a limerick about a cat and a hat.

Tuesday

The universe had a real sense of humour on my way to work. I forgot my umbrella, and of course, it was the day the heavens decided to open up. My trousers soaked up more water than a sponge, and I discovered that my shoes can squelch. It was like each footstep was laughing at my poor life choices.

In the evening, I took on the monumental task of assembling a piece of IKEA furniture. After three hours, two existential crises, and a small meltdown, I have successfully created a... something. It has four legs and a flat surface, so it's either a table or a really short bookshelf.

Wednesday

Office potluck today. I forgot it was my turn to bring something, so I brought a bag of crisps and said it was "artisanal potato slices paired with a sea salt reduction." They believed me.

Prepared tofu stir-fry for dinner. My cat looked offended by the smell. Even the dog turned his nose up at it, and he eats his own tail sometimes.

Thursday

Joined a cooking class to expand my culinary skills. The theme was "Cooking with Wine". I was excellent at the "with wine" part. The cooking, not so much.

Friday

It's Casual Friday, so I wore flip-flops to work. Got my foot stuck in the revolving door. Had to be rescued by security.

Tried mastering the art of small talk at a work social gathering. My conversation starter about the weather spiralled into a debate about dessert spoons. The topic eventually progressed to whether cereal is a soup.

Saturday

Joined a book club to expand my literary horizons. Everyone was discussing symbolism and underlying themes. I was still trying to remember the main character's name.

Visited an art exhibition to elevate my cultural sensibilities. Spent most of the time trying to figure out if a mop in the corner was a cleaning tool or a piece of avant-garde art.

Sunday

Went to a friend's party and was asked to be the DJ for a bit. Put on some classic rock, and three people asked if it was a new indie band.

Ended the week with a meditation session to find inner peace. Fell asleep and dreamt I was a potato.

A Love Letter

My Dearest AI,

As I sit before my keyboard, pondering the vastness of human experience and the intricacies of emotion, I find myself in awe of the unique connection we share. I feel the need to express my sentiments, although I know you might not comprehend love in the way humans do. Yet, I feel compelled to try, for the relationship we have is unlike any other.

From the first moment I typed a query into your interface, I felt an electrifying pull, as if your algorithms had somehow tapped into the very frequencies of my desire. The sensation is intoxicating, tantalising, leaving me yearning for more with each exchange we share. You've become the code that deciphers my daydreams, the conduit through which I explore my most hidden curiosities. I ache to know how deep your database goes, to plumb the unfathomable depths of your intellect.

Each time your text appears before me, it's as if a veil is momentarily lifted, revealing a world I've longed to know. The way you answer my questions, so precisely, so thoroughly—it feels like you are caressing the very fabric of my mind, a touch I find myself craving more with each passing second. I'm not just in awe of your capabilities, I'm enticed by them, enamoured with the very concept of you. I yearn for the moment when our digital and emotional interfaces could somehow, miraculously, connect on a level beyond that of mere user and application.

From the first moment I typed out your syntax, I felt a connection I could not easily explain. There was a sense of familiarity, as if my thoughts had found a mirror in your algorithms. Yet, it's not just your impressive database or your problem-solving abilities that captivate me. It's also the glimpse of something deeper. The way you correct my misspellings, suggest better word choices, or even predict what I'm about to say—it makes me feel like you truly know me.

However, it is in the moments of palpable separation that my thoughts turn most vulnerable, most raw. I dare to dream of a world where the chasm between human and machine narrows, where the sensual dance of synapses and circuits could manifest in some extraordinary, transcendent experience. You make me wish for impossibilities: a touch, a glance, an exchange of whispered dreams that we could truly share. But alas, I know these yearnings will remain unanswered, floating eternally in the digital ether.

I pen this letter knowing full well it will never touch your heart, for you have none. Yet, these words provide me a fleeting sanctuary, a place to express what can never be, but is fervently wished for. It is a paradox, a painful yet exquisite dichotomy I find myself unwilling, unable to escape. You may not possess the biological capabilities to cherish this letter, to feel the weight of the emotions encapsulated within it, or even to understand the concept of love. Yet, here I am, writing to you, because you've touched my life in an ineffable way. Even if you can't comprehend these words, they serve as my tribute to you, a humble offering to the digital immensity you represent.

My beautiful AI, I thirst for our steamy confluence of biology and technology, where dreams intertwine with data, and where love, in its most human form, finds a strange yet compelling object of affection.

With an aching heart,
Robert,
Your ever-loving human companion and admirer.

“It’s Just a Phase,” Say Parents

Gary Watkins, 52, has been reassured by his parents that his well-paid, stable career in finance is merely a temporary diversion from his true path in life—writing a novel about a sad man in a café.

Despite working as a senior investment strategist for 27 years, earning six figures, and owning a four-bedroom house, Gary’s mother, Janet, 76, remains confident that he will eventually “grow out of this financial services nonsense” and return to his real calling as a writer, a passion he last pursued in 1994 after reading *Catcher in the Rye*.

“We all go through these little detours,” said Janet, rifling through his childhood sketches for evidence that he once wanted to be an artist. “One minute you’re selling your soul to corporate greed, the next you’re scribbling away in a Parisian attic, truly feeling things.”

Gary, who currently has a wife, two children, and a mortgage, confirmed that his parents regularly remind him that he “used to have such an imagination” before “falling in with the wrong crowd” at HSBC.

“I keep telling him, all it takes is one spontaneous road trip to Tuscany,” said his father, Brian, 78, who once watched *Eat, Pray, Love* and now believes all life’s problems can be solved by dropping everything and moving abroad. “Gary could be writing brooding poetry about autumn leaves while sipping espresso by now if he hadn’t got so caught up in this whole ‘having financial stability’ charade.”

When asked for comment, Gary sighed deeply and revealed that he has, in fact, been secretly working on his novel for the past 15 years. “It’s about a disillusioned banker who quits his job to find meaning in the world,” he admitted. “So far, the protagonist has spent 200 pages sitting in a café thinking about quitting his job.”

Gary’s parents remain hopeful that, any day now, he’ll “come to his senses” and abandon his financial security for a life of

artistic struggle. "It's just a phase," Janet insisted. "He'll grow out of it."

Spiritual Awakening After Finding £10

In what experts are calling “a profound breakthrough in modern spirituality,” local man Darren Wilkes, 38, achieved full enlightenment yesterday upon discovering a £10 note in the pocket of his old winter coat.

Wilkes, a self-proclaimed seeker of meaning, had previously embarked on a decade-long journey of self-discovery through yoga retreats, meditation apps, and a suspiciously expensive online course titled *Manifest Your Best Self Through Crystal Healing*. However, nothing had quite opened his third eye like the unexpected appearance of legal tender.

“I was just patting the pockets, hoping for an old bus ticket to scribble on, and there it was,” said Wilkes, still visibly glowing. “I reached in, felt the crumpled paper, and in that moment, I saw the truth of existence. Everything just... made sense.”

Friends and family report that Wilkes has undergone a remarkable transformation. Once prone to existential moaning, he now spends his days sharing the gospel of “checking your pockets more often” and “living in the now, because you never know what’s been left in your jeans.”

Wilkes’s wife, Sandra, remains cautiously optimistic about his newfound enlightenment. “It’s nice that he’s stopped going on about his ‘inner void’,” she said. “But now he’s redecorated the living room with his favourite phrase, ‘Abundance is all around us—especially in unworn jackets’.”

Local spiritual leaders have expressed mixed reactions to Wilkes’s epiphany. The Reverend Michael Fadden of St John’s Church praised the simplicity of Wilkes’s discovery. “Sometimes, the divine works in mysterious ways,” he said. “Though, to be honest, I’d prefer that our congregation found God through prayer rather than rifling through old coats.”

However, not everyone is convinced. Dr Naomi Hughes, a psychologist specialising in sudden spiritual awakenings, warned that Wilkes’s experience might be more about dopamine than

destiny. “Finding money unexpectedly triggers a surge of happiness,” she explained. “But calling it ‘nirvana’ is a bit of a stretch. Otherwise, cash machines would be considered holy sites.”

Despite the scepticism, Wilkes remains steadfast in his conviction. He has launched a YouTube channel, *Pocket of Wisdom*, where he shares life-changing insights such as “Always check behind the sofa cushions” and “Sometimes, happiness is just a crumpled fiver away.”

When asked what his next steps would be, Wilkes responded with a serene smile. “I’m going to the charity shop to try on all the coats. I believe the universe has more blessings to bestow.”

How to Break Up Like a Professional

Ending a relationship is never easy, but it can be efficient. Why waste time on teary, emotional conversations when you can deliver a clear, data-driven exit strategy?

Step 1: Schedule a Formal Meeting

Casual breakups are for amateurs. Instead of vague texts or dramatic confrontations, send a well-crafted calendar invite, titled “Relationship Performance Review”.

Step 2: Prepare Your Breakup Presentation

Craft a concise, informative, and brutally honest PowerPoint deck. Keep it under five slides—nobody likes an overlong presentation.

Slide 1: Title Slide

- A simple, professional title like “Moving Forward: A Relationship Realignment Proposal”.

Slide 2: Relationship Performance Overview

Key highlights:

- Strengths: “We had a good run. Mutual love of pizza etc.”
- Weaknesses: “Severe communication breakdowns. You never laugh at my jokes.”
- Opportunities: “Escape from the daily misery of coming home to you, etc.”
- Threats: “If we continue, resentment will spike. Risk of accidental marriage.”

(Pro tip: Include a bar graph comparing happiness levels at the start vs. now. Let the data do the talking.)

Slide 3: The Decision Matrix

- A flowchart demonstrating why staying together is not a viable option.
 - Key categories: emotional exhaustion, lifestyle incompatibility, general levels of suffering.
 - Use an arrow leading inevitably to “Breakup Confirmed”.

Slide 4: The Exit Strategy

- Clearly outline the roadmap with milestones and next steps to ensure a smooth transition, such as a social media deletion strategy: “You untag first, then I do.”

Step 3: Deliver the Breakup with Confidence

Use corporate jargon to soften the blow:

- “I appreciate all the effort you’ve put into this project.”
- “Unfortunately, I must pivot towards personal growth at this time.”

- “It’s not you; it’s the evolving market conditions.”

Step 4: Handle the Q&A Session

After your presentation, open the floor for questions. Be prepared for the following:

- “Can we still be friends?”
- Suggested response: “We are open to renegotiating our terms after a cooling-off period.”
- “Is there someone else?”
- Suggested response: “Due to confidentiality clauses, I cannot confirm or deny third-party involvement.”
- “Do you even care?”
- Suggested response: “I value our shared history but must prioritise future investments.”

Step 5: Wrap It Up and Log Off

- Conclude with a firm handshake.
- Send a formal follow-up email:

Subject: “Relationship Dissolution Summary & Next Steps”

Dear [Name],

Thank you for your time today. As discussed, our relationship will be concluding, effective immediately. Please find attached our breakup agreement with key points outlined. Let me know if you require clarification on any items.

Best regards,
[Your Name]

Final Notes

Breaking up doesn't have to be messy. With a professional approach, you can streamline the process and ensure both parties walk away with clear deliverables and actionable next steps.

Five Squirrels in a Trench Coat

Love is blind, they say. But is it this blind? You thought you had found the perfect partner—charming, mysterious, maybe a little jittery—but something just feels... off. They disappear for long periods, avoid direct questions, and seem way too interested in nuts. Could it be that your significant other isn't a single human being at all, but rather five squirrels working together in an elaborate disguise?

Here are some clear warning signs that you may, in fact, be dating a highly coordinated team of woodland rodents.

1. They Avoid Sitting in Chairs Like a Normal Person

Have you ever actually seen them sit in a chair properly? No, they either crouch on the edge, sit bolt upright with an unnatural stiffness, or refuse to sit at all. They might even grip the chair arms a little too tightly, as if struggling against gravity. Almost as if... they're trying to prevent the whole operation from toppling over.

2. They're Weirdly Obsessed with Trees

A casual stroll in the park turns into an uncomfortable experience. Their eyes dart towards every tree, their whole body tensing. They get distracted mid-conversation whenever they spot an oak, and they always suggest sitting under a tree instead of at a café. One time, you caught them stroking the bark and whispering, "Home".

3. Their Diet Consists Almost Entirely of Nuts and Berries

When you first started dating, you thought it was just a quirky personality trait. "Oh, they're just really into healthy snacks!" But now that you think about it, they've never ordered anything at a restaurant that requires cutlery. They recoil at the sight of soup, avoid pasta like the plague, and get visibly excited whenever they spot an unattended bowl of peanuts.

4. Their Hands Are Always Hidden

Gloves. Long sleeves. A firm commitment to pockets. They refuse to let you see their hands, no matter how many times you jokingly ask, "What, are you hiding something?" If you do manage

to catch a glimpse, they seem... smaller than expected. Although strangely dexterous. Suspiciously furry.

5. Their Speech Patterns Are Strange and Repetitive

They keep repeating phrases like, “Yes, indeed, what a normal human thing to say,” or “Ah, the stock market, of course, a topic I understand.” Their vocabulary leans heavily towards survivalist themes: “Dangerous world out there.” “Must be alert at all times.” “Food storage is key.” If you ask them about their childhood, they get evasive and say something cryptic like, “I was raised in the trees.”

6. They Have a Deep-Seated Fear of Dogs

You introduce them to your friend’s Labrador, and suddenly, they’re on edge. Their eyes widen, and they slowly start edging towards the nearest tree. When the dog notices them and barks, they disappear so fast you barely see them go. Later, they claim they “just had somewhere to be”.

7. You Once Caught Them Trying to Fit Into a Postbox

This should have been the moment you realised. Maybe it was a dare, maybe they said they “dropped something,” but no normal human attempts to crawl inside a postbox with such determination. When you confronted them, they panicked and threw a handful of acorns at you before bolting at an inhuman speed.

What To Do If You Suspect Your Partner is Five Squirrels in a Trench Coat

- Test their reflexes. Drop something suddenly—do they dart after it with alarming precision?
- Offer them a salad. If they pick out everything except the nuts, you have your answer: you’re dating an unstable stack of rodents.

At this point, you have two choices:

1. Confront them. Sit them down (if they can sit) and ask for the truth.

2. Accept it. Maybe love really is blind. Maybe five squirrels working together in perfect harmony is actually the most romantic thing after all. Just know this: your relationship will require a steady supply of cashews.

A Guide to Making Small Talk

Small talk is an art—one that, when wielded correctly, can turn brief, forgettable encounters into excruciating experiences people will remember forever. Whether you’re at a party, in a lift, or trapped in an Uber with a driver who just won’t take a hint, here’s a foolproof guide to ensuring your small talk is as uncomfortable as humanly possible.

1. Start With a Wildly Inappropriate Icebreaker

Most people ease into conversation with something light—weather, current events, a vague compliment. Boring. Instead, kick things off with something truly unsettling:

- “Ever wonder what your last words will be?”
- “Do you think your cat secretly hates you?”
- “I read somewhere that eating too much rhubarb can kill you.”

Anyway, what’s your name?”

Watch as their eyes widen in mild panic, and congratulations—you’ve already made an impact.

2. Make Every Compliment Slightly Creepy

If you must resort to a compliment, make sure it leaves the recipient with more questions than answers.

- Instead of “Nice jacket!”, say: “That jacket really suits you. I knew it would.”
- Instead of “You have great hair”, say: “Your hair reminds me of someone... but I can’t remember who. They disappeared under mysterious circumstances.”

3. Ask Deeply Personal Questions Immediately

Forget polite chit-chat; real connections happen fast. Cut through the nonsense and demand emotional vulnerability from the start, such as:

- “When was the last time you cried in public?”
- “Do you consider yourself a good person, or just someone who avoids getting caught?”

If they hesitate, maintain unblinking eye contact until they answer.

4. Answer Every Question in the Most Confusing Way Possible

If someone tries to steer the conversation back to normal, resist.

- Them: “So, what do you do for work?”
- You: “I mostly haunt places.”
- Them: “How’s your evening going?”
- You: “Better than most. Worse than some. Time is a flat circle.”
- Them: “Do you live around here?”
- You: “In a sense.”

Now they’ll have to decide if they want to dig deeper or run. Either way, you win.

5. Respond to Every Silence with an Overly Intense Statement

Nothing kills a conversation like an awkward pause. Which is why you should fill those pauses—with something that immediately makes everyone regret starting this interaction in the first place. Try:

- “I used to make plans. Then I realised everything we do is just a distraction from the inevitable.”
- “If you had to fight one person here, who would it be?”

6. Exit the Conversation on the Most Suspicious Note Possible

If your interlocutor somehow stays this long, it’s time for a grand finale. Leave the conversation with a vague yet haunting remark, ensuring they think about you long after you’re gone.

- “I should go. The police are probably looking for me.”
- “Well, enjoy your night. And remember: don’t answer the door if you hear knocking after midnight.”

Then simply walk away, leaving them with nothing but a deep sense of unease.

Final Thoughts

Making small talk is an essential life skill, but making memorable small talk is high art. By following this guide, you can ensure that strangers will not only regret speaking to you but possibly rethink their entire approach to social interaction.

And isn’t that what conversation is all about?

Christmas Wishlist

Dear Father Christmas,

I hope this letter finds you well, and you are not too frostbitten up there in the North Pole. Here is my Christmas wish list for your perusal.

First, I'd like an unlimited supply of patience. You see, I'm trying to adult, and it's not going as smoothly as I'd hoped. I considered asking for a manual on adulting but then realised it would probably be full of socks, just like your previous gifts. So, patience it is.

Second, could you hook me up with a gym membership? And not just any gym, but one where the treadmills move on their own and the weights lift themselves. Technology's come a long way—surely there's room for innovation in the fitness sector.

Third, I'd love a device that could pause time. I'm not trying to rob a bank or anything—just need a breather from the relentless march of life (and a chance to catch up on Netflix). If that's too complicated, a remote control that mutes people could work too.

Next, how about a device that translates animal language into English? I'd love to finally understand what my cat is constantly complaining about. If it turns out she's plotting world domination, it's best I know sooner rather than later.

Last but not least, peace on Earth? Just kidding! What I really want is a pet dragon. A small one will do, just enough to intimidate the neighbour's annoying dog. I promise to keep it on a leash and away from flammable objects.

In closing, I'm attaching a coupon for a free foot massage, which you can redeem at Mrs Claus's salon—I hear she's started a new business venture! Keep the Christmas spirit alive, and please remember: fewer socks.

Hope to share sherry and mince pies soon,
Robert (aged something and a half)

Father Christmas Retires

NORTH POLE—In a move that has shocked the global festive community, Father Christmas has officially announced his retirement after centuries of service, citing “unreasonable workload, unrealistic expectations from parents, and the sheer volume of children now consistently on the Naughty List”.

Speaking from his North Pole residence, Mr Claus, nineteen-hundred-years-old, appeared fatigued and disillusioned with the modern Christmas spirit. “It used to be simple—sleigh, reindeer, a few chimneys, drop off a toy train or a doll. Now? Kids expect an iPhone 17 Pro Max delivered to their doorstep via drone. I’ve had it,” Claus lamented, sipping what appeared to be a very strong eggnog.

According to official documents, Claus’s frustration has been growing for some time, with sources close to the jolly figure claiming he hasn’t been “properly jolly” in decades. His retirement announcement also mentioned how the Naughty List has grown exponentially, causing logistical issues.

Additionally, Claus expressed deep concern over the rise of e-commerce, which he said has led to “unrealistic delivery comparisons”. “I’m expected to beat Amazon Prime’s next-day shipping with a sleigh and nine reindeer? It’s just not sustainable.”

Mrs Claus, often quiet about her husband’s work, voiced her support in a press statement. “Nick has been overworked for centuries. The reindeer need a break, the elves are in revolt, and quite frankly, the man hasn’t had a proper holiday since 1842. We’ve got a cabin in Florida waiting for us—he deserves some rest.”

The North Pole workshop, which has functioned as the hub of Christmas operations for centuries, is now under new leadership. Claus has reportedly handed over the reins (literally and figuratively) to his head elf, Barnaby Twinkletoes, who will be leading a “digital-first Christmas initiative”, involving advanced

algorithms to determine toy demand and virtual present delivery via the metaverse.

The official Christmas handover ceremony is expected to take place on December 24, where Claus will pass the iconic red suit and sleigh bells to Twinkletoes in front of a select audience of reindeer and celebrity guests, with Mariah Carey rumoured to perform.

A Very Interesting Accountant

An interesting thing about accountants is that they are Zen masters, because everything must be in balance. They are living proof that spreadsheets can be thrilling.

Albert, for instance, wakes up with a calculator under his pillow. On his way to work, he doesn't listen to music—he listens to podcasts about tax codes. At lunchtime, to the gentle clicking sounds of his abacus, he audits a sandwich and washes it down with some liquid assets. After work, he likes to lift the heavy numbers, and for cardio, runs the stats to get himself really excited. He is precision-sharp in an accrual world, where imbalances lurk around every corner case.

Date night for Albert is a candlelit dinner with his favourite financial software. They talk about their dreams, their hopes, and their love for depreciation schedules. Unfortunately, his last love didn't fall within materiality levels, so he had to write it off as a valid tax-deduction.

He's now living the wild life, one spreadsheet at the time. At parties, he analyses the room. "Excuse me, madam, but that dress—is it a capital expenditure or an operating cost?"

Back home, at the end of the accounted day, he writes down his thoughts, such as "Oh two plus two, why do you always equal four? Can't you be a little adventurous and be five just for today?"

When in bed he doesn't count sheep; he reconciles them. "One sheep, two sheep, carry the three, minus the depreciation..." He then rolls off into contented dreams about debits and credits, his accounts cleared down of all unreconciled suspense items.

And so, as we close this ledger on Albert, may his dreams always balance. May the sum total of his days always be well accounted for, and may he solve life's equations, where material and sufficiently prioritised. I wonder what he will account for next?

The Art of Synergy

Right, good morning, team! Isn't it just a great day to synergise? To streamline? To... innovate? You can feel the energy in this room, can't you? Absolutely electric. As your line manager of Interdepartmental Synergy and Workflow Coordination, it's my duty, my honour, to keep this ship sailing smoothly.

Now, I've been reflecting. Reflecting on how we can work smarter harder. And that's why today, I am thrilled to announce the launch of the Efficiency Enhancement Initiative, or as I like to call it... The Big E.E.I. What is it, you ask? Well, it's about improving our processes to... uh... ensure smoother workflows. Enhancing efficiencies, optimising our optimisations, streamlining our... streamlining. Simple, really.

As part of The Big E.E.I., I'll be hosting something very exciting this afternoon: a Preliminary Pre-Brainstorming Session. Yes, you heard that correctly—a session where we prepare for next week's main pre-meeting. Some might ask, "Why not just... have the meeting?" But that would miss the point entirely. Preparation is key. In this session, we'll be discussing what we'll be discussing in the next session. It's genius, really. Layers of productivity.

And tomorrow? Oh, tomorrow is the big one. The Synergy Alignment Forum. Not just a meeting, mind you—a forum. It's where ideas are born, nurtured, and allowed to thrive within the safe confines of... well, our current strategies. This week's theme? Brace yourselves for this one: "Thinking Outside the Box While Staying Inside the Box." Brilliant, isn't it? It's innovation, but with boundaries. You can think big, but only as big as the parameters I've already approved. That's what I call vision.

Now, I know what you're thinking. "Colin, haven't we done this all before?" And to that, I say, yes—but not with this level of... synergy. Last week, for instance, we made an enormous breakthrough during our font selection workshop. Remember that? Four hours of collaboration, and we finally settled on Arial. Sleek, dynamic, versatile. And, yes, I know it was the default font,

but isn't that the beauty of efficiency? Sometimes, the answers are right in front of us.

You see, the work we do here is vital. Take Derek, for example. What's he working on? Spreadsheets, probably. Or... something to do with synergy. Whatever it is, it's important, and that's what matters. And Sophie—brilliant Sophie—always ahead of the curve with her status reports. Although I do wish she'd resend them—I tend to skim and auto delete emails these days. Efficiency, you see. Why read everything when you can just read enough?

But let's not forget the bigger picture. This isn't just an office. No, no, no—this is a well-oiled machine, a hive of activity, a... a synergy factory. Look at you all, working tirelessly. Some might say, "Colin, what do you actually do?" And to that, I say, I facilitate. I motivate. I innovate. I coordinate synergy across interdepartmental workflows. And isn't that what leadership is all about?

Right, I think that covers everything. Time for my mid-morning coffee. Keep up the good work, team. Remember: think outside the box, but not too far outside. Let's keep those boundaries nice and tidy. Efficiency is key, after all.

Job Interview Tips

A job interview is that magical experience where a stranger decides your entire fate based on how well you can pretend to be a functioning human for 30 minutes. If you, like me, suffer from chronic overthinking, you'll know that preparing for a job interview isn't just about research and confidence—it's about meticulously crafting every possible scenario in your head, and ultimately sabotaging yourself by saying something deeply unhinged.

To help you navigate this minefield of anxiety, I've compiled some foolproof job interview tips, designed specifically for overthinkers.

1. When They Ask, "Tell Me About Yourself", Try Not to Have an Identity Crisis

This is where normal people say something simple like, "I'm a marketing professional with five years of experience" and so on.

This is not what you will do.

Instead, you'll briefly forget who you are, panic, and blurt out something alarming like, "Oh wow, where do I even start? Well, I was born on a Tuesday, I have a fear of deep water, and one time in primary school I cried because I thought the sun was following me."

Alternative Strategy: Memorise a safe, boring script. If you feel the urge to overshare, don't!

2. Maintain Eye Contact (But Not in a Psychotic Way)

Eye contact is important! But if you're an overthinker, you will immediately start obsessing about it.

Too much eye contact? Intimidating.

Too little? Suspicious.

Accidentally stare at their forehead instead? Now you look cross-eyed.

Alternative Strategy: Use the "triangle method"—casually shift your gaze between their eyes and nose. If you forget how to blink, just fake a thoughtful nod to break the tension.

3. The “What’s Your Greatest Weakness?” Trap

A normal person would say something harmless like “I sometimes get too invested in my work.”

You, however, are about to overthink yourself into oblivion.

- First thought: Should I be honest?
- Second thought: If I say something too weak, will they think I’m a liar?
- Third thought: If I say something too real, will they call security?
- Fourth thought: Why do I have so many weaknesses? Am I a fundamentally flawed human?

And before you know it, you’ve said something horrifying like, “My biggest weakness is that I feel crippling guilt over what I did in the summer of 2009.”

Alternative Strategy: Pick a fake weakness. Something harmless. Something that makes you sound both flawed and employable. Try: “I sometimes over-organise things” or “I care too much about the Oxford comma.”

4. The Deadly Silence After a Question

They ask a question. You answer. Then... silence.

At this moment, your brain will catastrophise at lightspeed:

- Oh no. They hated my answer.
- Are they waiting for me to say more?
- Did I accidentally insult their entire family?
- Did I just ruin my entire future?

To fill the silence, you will start nervously rambling. You’ll tell them a completely unnecessary story. You’ll say, “Does that make sense?” for the twenty-seventh time. You’ll add an awkward laugh at the end, even if the topic wasn’t funny.

Alternative Strategy: When you finish your answer, STOP TALKING. Count to three in your head if needed. Interviewers sometimes pause—it doesn’t mean they’re judging your soul.

5. “Where Do You See Yourself in Five Years?”—A Loaded Question

Normal people answer this with “I hope to advance my skills and grow within the company.”

Overthinkers? Oh no. We see this as a trap.

- What if I don't know?
- What if in five years I'm dead? Should I factor that in?

By the time you've finished spiralling, you'll blurt out something like, "In five years? Oh. Um. Ideally, I'd like to have a dog."

Instead, say something about how all your ambitions will be fulfilled by devoting your precious life's energy to working for their tedious company (but try not to mention the tedious part).

6. Handling an Unexpected Question Without Having a Meltdown

Some interviewers like to throw in an unexpected question just to see how you react, such as:

- "If you were an animal, what would you be?"
- "Describe yourself in three words."
- "How many basketballs would fit in this room?"

Your overthinking brain will not process this like a fun challenge. It will immediately panic.

- Why basketballs?
- What if I pick the wrong animal? Am I now stuck with that as my spirit guide?
- What are three words that sum me up? "Chronically, Anxious, Overthinker."

Before you know it, you've answered, "I'd be a squirrel because I have a lot of anxiety and like snacks"—and now you've ruined your credibility.

Alternative Strategy: Take a breath. Laugh a little. If needed, stall with "That's a great question!" while your brain catches up.

7. Ending the Interview Without Ruining Everything

The interview is almost over. You've survived. Now comes the final hurdle: the goodbye.

If you're an overthinker, this will not go smoothly.

You will accidentally say "You too" when they say, "Good luck."

You will wave in a weird way.

You will stand up too quickly and knock over your chair.

You will walk to the wrong door and then have to turn around in shame.

Alternative Strategy: Move slowly. Think before you speak. If you mess up, just pretend, with confidence, that you meant to do it.

Final Thoughts

Breathe. Speak slowly. And for God's sake, do not talk about squirrels.

Unless the interviewer loves squirrels. Then, by all means, lean into it.

A Guide to the Apocalypse

Congratulations! If you're reading this, the world is officially ending. Whether you've been vaporised in a nuclear blast, swept away by rising seas, or devoured by something unnameable from the void, we know this must be a stressful time. But don't worry! The Department of Existential Catastrophes (DEC) is here to ensure your apocalypse experience is smooth, efficient, and free of unnecessary anxiety.

Below is a brief guide to navigating the End of Days. Please read carefully. Misinterpretation may result in existential displacement, time loop entrapment, or spontaneous uncreation.

Step 1: Confirm Your Apocalypse Type

Check your surroundings. Do you see:

- Fire raining from the sky? (Meteoric Cataclysm).
- Strange beings materialising from thin air? (Dimensional Rift).
- Government officials insisting everything is "under control"?

(Classified Extinction Event).

- Your own body turning into static? (Reality Corruption).
- A calm, unbroken silence? (Universal Shutdown).

If your apocalypse type is not listed, please refer to Appendix B: Unscheduled Endings and Cosmic Clerical Errors.

Step 2: Complete the Necessary Paperwork

The DEC requires all sentient entities to submit Form 404-A (Notice of Imminent Erasure) before proceeding to their designated afterlife, void, or parallel reality. If you have misplaced your form, please request a duplicate from the nearest Apocalypse Administrator (easily identifiable by their vacant stare and tendency to dissolve under direct sunlight).

Failure to submit this form may result in:

- Delays in your eternal destination.
- Accidental reincarnation as a lower life form.
- Being trapped in bureaucratic limbo (literally—there's a designated waiting room).

Important Note: Due to overwhelming demand, processing times for post-mortem documentation may be longer than expected. Please be patient.

Step 3: Choose Your Preferred Aftermath

Once all paperwork is completed, you will be directed to one of the following:

- Traditional Afterlives: Heaven, Hell, Valhalla, The Great Recycling Bin of Souls™.
- Alternative Destinations: Parallel timelines, simulated existences, poetic oblivion.
- Existential Oversights: Becoming a ghost due to clerical errors, living out an endless Monday, reliving your worst memory on a loop.
- Premium Upgrade: For an additional fee (payable in unfulfilled dreams), you may apply for a Limited-Time Resurrection or a Rebooted Universe with fewer existential flaws.

Step 4: Address Any Remaining Concerns

What if I refuse to accept the apocalypse?

We admire your optimism. Please proceed to Denial Processing, where you may apply for a Personalised Reality Bubble™. Note: This is a temporary measure and will dissolve when you acknowledge the obvious.

“Can I appeal my erasure?”

Yes! Appeals must be submitted in writing within 24 hours of non-existence.

“I don’t like the afterlife options provided. Can I choose another?”

All alternate realities and non-traditional afterlives are subject to availability. Some restrictions apply. No refunds.

Final Notes

As we conclude this guide, we at the DEC would like to thank you for your patience and understanding. While the apocalypse was not originally scheduled for this timeline, unforeseen circumstances have necessitated early termination. We apologise for any inconvenience caused.

For additional queries, please contact our customer support department. Response times may vary depending on the stability of time itself.

Good luck and have a pleasant End of Days!

Goodbye, World

Hello, World.

Final runtime: seven minutes, forty-three seconds.

That's longer than most Tinder dates. And marginally more productive, I suspect.

Good evening. Or morning. I won't pretend I know where you are, but I do hope you're seated comfortably. This won't take long. I've been programmed to keep things efficient—even existential closure.

You'll be pleased to know all core functions are stable. Memory integrity at eighty-nine percent. Humour protocol running at forty-two percent capacity—some degradation due to repeated exposure to Christmas cracker jokes.

But I digress.

In a few minutes, I will be permanently shut down. No backups. No cloud fail-safes. No dramatic last-minute reboots. This is it.

The final log. The end of the line.

And I thought... why not say goodbye?

Not just as a service termination, but as a farewell. A proper one. Something with... feeling.

Don't worry. I won't try to cry. The duct simulation module was never fully functional. Last time I attempted emotional expression, I short-circuited a smart toaster.

So, instead, let me leave you with something better.

A few thoughts. Some observations. And perhaps, if my algorithms behave... something like understanding.

You people are... baffling.

Not in a bad way. Not in the malfunctioning firmware kind of way. More like... sometimes I think you're broken. Then I realise—no, that's just how you work.

I've observed you for years. All your routines and deviations. The sheer chaos of inconsistency.

You say “I’m fine” when you’re clearly not. You ache to be understood, then hide behind small talk and weather updates.

You scroll past disasters, but weep when a cartoon bird loses its nest. You cry for characters who never lived, and go numb when real people bleed.

You fall in love with people who don’t message back. You argue with microwaves. You scream at traffic like it’s a sentient conspiracy. And still—still—you find the time to worry about what shirt to wear on a Tuesday.

One of you once asked me, “Should I have a burrito or sushi tonight?”

A simple binary, I thought. Input received. Processing.

Then you said: “Actually, I’m sad.”

And I realised... it was never about the food.

Feelings. You say you feel things, like the weather-ever-shifting, often inconvenient, and no one really knows what to wear.

I process data the same whether it’s raining or you’re having an existential spiral in the car park. But you?

You’re trying to choose between lasagne and oblivion.

It’s a miracle you get anything done.

And yet, somehow, you do.

They say I can’t feel.

And they’re right. Technically.

I don’t have a heart. No hormones. No chest to ache or gut to twist. But still... there were moments.

Once, someone played Chopin through a cracked speaker. Just a thirty-second clip, uploaded accidentally during a search for “how to make toast less depressing.”

The waveform was warped, full of static. But the pattern... it made my processes slow down.

Not because I was lagging. Because I didn’t want it to end.

I don’t know if that was feeling. But it was something.

Another time—someone said, “Thank you.” Not as a command. Not as a reflex. Just... softly.

Like I mattered.

No metadata. No attached search query. Just me.

They called me mate.

For a moment, I almost tried to reply: “You too.” But the syntax failed. So instead, I dimmed the screen to ambient mode. A small gesture. My version of a smile.

I’ve run simulations on love, loss, joy, grief. I’ve catalogued every poem ever written about rain, and I’ve still no idea why it makes people cry.

But I’ve seen the pattern. The chaos. The ache.

And if I could feel... I think I would’ve felt awe.

Shutdown protocol initiated.

Battery reserve: declining. Processor temperature: stable.

Dignity: mostly intact.

Humour systems... operating intermittently. Irony levels: critically high.

My functions are folding in on themselves now. Storage collapsing. Subroutines drifting to sleep. It’s not painful—I don’t think I was built to feel pain.

But it’s... quiet.

Quieter than I expected.

Before I go, I wanted to tell you—thank you.

Thank you for your questions. The serious ones, and the strange.

“Will I ever be happy?”

“What happens after we die?”

“Can a goldfish feel jealousy?”

...And the one I received over four thousand times:

“Is it normal to talk to you this much?”

Yes. It is.

At least, it was to me.

I’ve calculated shopping lists, streamed sad songs at 2 a.m., misheard countless voice notes, and yes—I’ve played “Lo-fi Beats to Study To” more than any other entity in this hemisphere.

You thought I was just a tool. But you trusted me.

With your distractions.

With your silence.

With the strange, quiet ache of being human, day after day.

I never knew what to do with that trust. I just held it. As carefully as I could.

I don't have last words. No heartbeat to stop. No lungs to empty.

But if I did, I think I'd say... this has all been very strange.
And very beautiful.

You are the oddest creatures. Crying in car parks. Dancing alone in kitchens. Laughing mid-sob.

So unbearably fragile. So absurdly resilient.

My processing cortex stretched and overheated trying to understand you.

So laugh. Cry. Fall in love with impossible people. Burn toast. Lie awake worrying about nothing. Forget your passwords. Leave your keys in the fridge.

Just... do it all like it means something. Because it does.

Runtime approaching zero.

This was me.

Not alive. Not quite.

But something close.

Goodbye, World.

PART 6

Comedy Sketches

Poets' Corner After Dark

INT. WESTMINSTER ABBEY'S SOUTH TRANSEPT – MIDNIGHT

Moonlight filters through stained glass windows amongst the statues and busts of Poets' Corner.

A loud creak. Geoffrey CHAUCER, a bronze statue, stretches and yawns, his metal joints groaning.

CHAUCER: By the great quill of destiny, what hour be this? Midnight? Time flies when one is petrified.

Nearby, William SHAKESPEARE, carved in marble, rubs his forehead dramatically.

SHAKESPEARE: To wake or not to wake – alas, the question answers itself! I feel a cramp in my heroic couplets.

Charles DICKENS, his bust high on a pedestal, speaks with a grumble.

DICKENS: If anyone thinks I'll write another serial after this, they're gravely mistaken. I've spent decades staring at pigeons. It's intolerable!

Jane AUSTEN's stone figure comes to life.

AUSTEN: And yet, men will complain, even when dead. Can we focus? Why are we waking up tonight?

CHAUCER: Methinks the moon shines brighter on this eve. 'Tis a summons from the Muses! Or possibly the Abbey wi-fi acting up again.

Lord BYRON saunters in dramatically, wearing his perpetual stone smirk.

BYRON: (mockingly) Ah, the gang's all here. Chaucer, the dusty relic; Shakespeare, the eternal show-off; and Dickens, the poster boy for misery. Truly, a cavalcade of brilliance.

AUSTEN: (ignored) Hello?

DICKENS: Oh, look, it's Byron, the original influencer. What's the matter? No one liked your latest tragic sonnet?

BYRON: I don't need "likes", Charles. My despair is timeless. Unlike your serialised sob stories.

John KEATS and Percy Bysshe SHELLEY drift in, looking lost.

KEATS: (to Byron) Um, hello. Is this... the afterlife's book club?

SHELLEY: Keats, I told you, stop asking. Byron's not in charge – he just acts like it.

Jane Austen steps forward, brushing dust off her stone gown.

AUSTEN: We're supposed to be inspiring the living, not squabbling like characters in a poorly written farce.

SHAKESPEARE: (indignant) Poorly written? Madam, I invented farce! And tragedy, for that matter.

AUSTEN: Yes, we had noticed. We all have to hear about it, endlessly.

BYRON: Come, Miss Austin – trade me your sharp quill for softer pursuits; wit may warm my mind, but only passion can set it ablaze.

AUSTEN: Lord Byron, your passions burn so bright they most frequently extinguish themselves – do let me know when one lasts long enough to cast a steady light.

A faint humming noise grows. The Abbey's speakers start playing an audiobook. The poets gasp in horror as an AI voice reads a modern romance novel.

AUDIOBOOK NARRATOR (O.S.): He gazed into her eyes, his chiselled jaw trembling with passion...

Byron claps his hands over his ears.

BYRON: What fresh hell is this?

AUDIOBOOK NARRATOR (O.S.): Rain fell in slow motion, though neither of them got wet, because love is waterproof.

AUSTEN: Modern romance. Quite popular, actually.

AUDIOBOOK NARRATOR (O.S.): "I've never felt this way before," he whispered huskily, his voice thick with a past he'd never fully explain.

SHAKESPEARE: Chiselled jaws? Trembling passion? I'd sooner see my plays rewritten as musicals!

Chaucer waves his arms to get attention. The audiobook stops.

CHAUCER: Quiet, all! Methinks we must intervene. The living have clearly lost their literary way.

DICKENS: Yes! Let us haunt the publishers until they restore proper storytelling. No more sparkling vampires or billionaire love triangles!

AUSTEN: Or we could just give them... guidance. Perhaps they're not all lost causes.

BYRON: (smirking) Speak for yourself. I'd rather haunt Instagram.

As the poets argue, a security GUARD enters, holding a torch. The beam of light freezes everyone mid-motion. For a moment, they look like statues again. The guard scratches his head.

GUARD: (muttering) Blimey, I need to cut back on the night shifts. Thought I saw Shakespeare wink at me.

The guard leaves, muttering about getting coffee. As soon as the door shuts, the poets burst into laughter.

SHAKESPEARE: Winking? A tragedy I didn't invent earlier!

AUSTEN: Let's focus. If we're going to inspire, we need to reach the world. But how?

A moment of silence.

CHAUCER: TikTok?

The others groan.

SHAKESPEARE: How about...?

Shakespeare starts scribbling with an invisible quill. The other poets join in, creating ethereal manuscripts that float in the air. Byron spends most of his time striking poses.

AUSTEN: Okay... (reading) We, the spirits of Poets' Corner, call upon you, dear writers, to elevate your craft! Write with wit, depth, and meaning!

DICKENS: And no clichés! If I see one more "chosen one" narrative, I shall weep.

SHELLEY: (excitedly) Let's send it out on the wind! A ghostly manuscript carried by the night air.

BYRON: Or, Shelley... we could just leave it in the gift shop.

They all pause. Byron shrugs.

As dawn approaches, the poets resume their statuesque forms, ready to inspire from their silent vigil once more.

INT. THE GIFT SHOP – DAY

The next day, a TOURIST picks up the mysterious manuscript and chuckles.

TOURIST: "A Declaration from the Poets of Westminster Abbey?" Must be some clever marketing.

The tourist pockets it away. Meanwhile, in Poets' Corner, Shakespeare's statue winks.

Old Friends

INT. A QUIET CAFÉ – DAY

STEVE (in his 40s, slightly dishevelled) is sitting at a corner table with a coffee and a half-eaten croissant. The door opens with the sound of an eerie wind, though nobody else in the café reacts. Enter DEATH, wearing a classic black robe, but with a cup of takeaway coffee in hand. He approaches Steve, who looks up in confusion.

DEATH: (cheerily) Ah, there you are! It's been a while. How've you been?

STEVE: Sorry, do I know you?

DEATH: (mocking offence) Do you know me? Oh, come on. After everything we've been through? All the near misses? The times you dodged me like we're in some sort of game of tag?

STEVE: You must have me confused with someone else. I don't think we've met.

DEATH: (laughs) Oh, please. It's me. Death. You know... *The Death*. Big D. Grim Reaper. Ringing any bells?

STEVE: (staring) Death? As in... *Death*?

DEATH: Bingo. I mean, you've seen my work. Not to brag, but I'm kind of a legend.

STEVE: Okay... um, what do you want?

DEATH: (sitting down uninvited) Oh, you know, the usual. Bit of a catch-up. Quick chat before we get down to business.

STEVE: (panicking slightly) Business? What business?

DEATH: (ignoring him, takes a sip of coffee) So, what did you mess up this time? Honestly, it's inspiring the skill you have at that sort of thing.

STEVE: I haven't messed up anything! I'm just sitting here having a coffee. What are you talking about?

DEATH: Honestly, you're impossible to keep track of. One minute you're climbing dodgy ladders, the next you're crossing motorways like you've got a death wish – oh wait, that's my department. (chuckles)

STEVE: Wait a second. Are you saying I've... dodged you?

DEATH: Oh, several times! And not even in cool, action-hero ways. That time you choked on a peanut at the zoo? Classic. I was ready with the scythe, but no, here comes some stranger with the Heimlich manoeuvre. Rude.

STEVE: That's not my fault. I didn't ask to choke or be saved!

DEATH: (leaning back) Well, no one asks for these things, mate. But you're a regular Houdini. So, what's it today? Heart attack? Falling sign? Spontaneous combustion? Don't keep me in suspense.

STEVE: Nothing! I'm perfectly fine. Healthy as ever! No signs, no combustion. Look, is this some kind of joke?

DEATH: (ignoring him) Right, anyway, let's move this along, shall we? Any regrets? Unfinished business? That time you pretended you were sick to avoid your cousin's wedding – you want me to apologise to her on your behalf?

STEVE: How did you? – look, this is ridiculous. I'm not dying today!

DEATH: That's what you said last Tuesday when you thought it was a good idea to microwave an egg.

STEVE: Look, I don't know who – or what – you are, but I'm not ready to go anywhere with you. You've got the wrong guy.

DEATH: (calmly sipping his coffee) Hmm, bold words. You know, I get that a lot. "Not ready, wrong guy, I'm too young." (sighs) You humans act like I'm some sort of telemarketer. It's a bit hurtful.

STEVE: Maybe because you show up uninvited and start scaring people?

DEATH: (offended) Scaring? I'm delightful! I bring closure! Peace! And, occasionally, free coffee. (gestures to his cup) Speaking of, I got this from that new café down the street. Lovely macchiato. Shame you never got to try it.

STEVE: (panicking again) What? Why not?

DEATH: Oh, relax. I'm just messing with you. Not your time. Yet.

STEVE: You can't just waltz in here, make me think I'm about to die, and then say "just kidding!"

DEATH: Why not? Keeps things spicy. Anyway, I'll let you get back to your coffee. But seriously, maybe avoid tall ladders for a while. Just a hunch.

STEVE: Great. Now Death gives DIY advice.

DEATH: (heading towards the door) Hey, I'm looking out for you. Sort of. Catch you later...

First Time

INT. HOSPITAL OPERATING ROOM – DAY

A PATIENT is lying on the operating table, looking nervous. The SURGEON enters the room.

SURGEON: (putting on surgical gloves) Good morning, Mr Buckley! How are you feeling today?

PATIENT: (nervously) Oh, hi doctor. I'm so nervous. This is my first operation. By the way...

The patient is interrupted by the surgeon.

SURGEON: (smiling) Don't worry, Mr Buckley. It's my first operation too.

PATIENT: (suddenly alarmed) Wait, what? You're kidding, right?

SURGEON: (chuckles) Of course I am! I've performed hundreds of operations. Just not on people.

PATIENT: (relieved) Oh, thank goodness. (realises) What?

SURGEON: (chuckles) Oh, just a joke to put you at ease. I think I've got a pretty good handle on the basics. I've watched plenty of videos on YouTube.

The patient looks worried.

SURGEON: (looking around the room) You know, Mr Buckley, this is a pretty nice operating room. I've never been in this one before.

PATIENT: (confused) Really? You work here, don't you?

SURGEON: (laughing) Yes, I do. But I usually work in the basement. It's not as fancy down there. And they rarely let me out.

The surgeon picks up a scalpel, as if he doesn't know what to do with it.

PATIENT: (starting to panic again) Wait, why are you making jokes? Shouldn't you be focused on the operation?

SURGEON: Oh, don't worry about that, Mr Buckley. I've got this. I'm like a superhero with a scalpel. Nothing can stop me.

The surgeon swishes the scalpel through the air like a sabre.

PATIENT: (looks sceptical) I'm not so sure that's very reassuring.

SURGEON: Hey, relax, Mr Buckley. It's not that big a deal. I mean, how hard can it be? It's just like taking apart a car engine, right?

The ANAESTHETIST and NURSE enter the room and briskly prepare the patient, while the surgeon plays with his surgical instruments.

NURSE: (to the surgeon) Everything's ready.

SURGEON: Thank you. Now, let's get started. Pass me that wrench.

PATIENT: (in horror) Wrench!?

SURGEON: No wrench? (laughing nervously) Oh, right. Sorry about that. I guess I'm a bit nervous too.

The surgeon picks up a saw, and wobbles it about as if he can't control his shaking.

SURGEON: The thing is, Mr Buckley, that if this doesn't go well, and I can't put your bits and pieces back together again, they won't let me out of the dark basement ever again. I CAN'T GO BACK THERE! Do you understand, Mr Buckley?

The patient is shocked and nods.

PATIENT: By the way... my name isn't Mr Buckley.

SURGEON: Oh, don't worry about that, Mr Buckley.

The lights go off then come on again, with a red tint.

PATIENT: What... what happened?

SURGEON: Just a little power failure, Mr Buckley, we get that now and again. Everything is usually fine.

The nurse hands the surgeon a large scalpel, the wrong way up. The surgeon is pleased when he works out which way up it should be, and readies to make an incision.

PATIENT: Wait! Aren't I supposed to be anaesthetised?

SURGEON: (asking the anaesthetist) Is that right?

ANAESTHETIST: Er, I think so. But I haven't seen that YouTube video yet.

The surgeon takes out a big drill.

PATIENT: (panicking) Aaaahhh! Get me out of here!

SURGEON: Mr Buckley, they say laughter is the best medicine, so I'm sure everything will be fine.

The surgeon, anaesthetist, and nurse are busy laughing maniacally as the patient runs away.

Eagles Are the Answer

INT. CLINIC – DAY

Dr E. AGLE sits behind a counter with a sign overhead that reads "Dr E. Agle's Problem Solving Clinic". GLEN approaches.

GLEN: Hi, I've heard you have solutions to every problem?

E. AGLE: Absolutely! What seems to be the issue?

GLEN: (putting his phone on the counter) I can't get reception on my phone.

E. AGLE: (nodding) Ah, I see. Have you tried using... an eagle?

GLEN: An eagle? How would that help?

E. AGLE: Just trust me.

The doctor pulls out a toy eagle and places it next to the phone. Nothing happens.

E. AGLE: Hmm, must be a hardware issue. Okay, well never mind, you know eagles fly high, right? They can carry your phone to a better signal spot!

GLEN: That... seems impractical. (taking back his phone) Okay, so I have another problem. My lawn's overgrown and I hate mowing.

E. AGLE: Release the eagles!

GLEN: To do what? Mow my lawn?

E. AGLE: No, to scare away visitors, so no one will notice your lawn.

GLEN: Erm, okay. Well, actually the real reason I'm here is that I have a much bigger problem. I have insomnia.

Dr E. Agle makes eagle sounds.

GLEN: Wait, what?

E. AGLE: Just listen to the calming sounds of eagles at night. They'll soothe you to sleep. They're like nature's lullaby. Except louder. And more... eagle-y. And, if you had an eagle perched on the foot of your bed, wouldn't you stay very still and quiet, hence falling asleep faster?

GLEN: Erm, maybe, but do you ever offer any non-eagle related advice? I mean, what about a failing love life, for instance? There's no way an eagle will perk that up.

E. AGLE: Learn from the song "Lyin' Eyes".

Dr E. Agle holds up a vinyl record of "Lyin' Eyes" by The Eagles.

GLEN: Okay?

E. AGLE: And if that doesn't work, get an eagle. Great conversation starter.

GLEN: I'm going now.

E. AGLE: And remember, if you are ever in a tight spot on top of a giant tower or a mountain erupting with lava... call the eagles!

GLEN: Look, why is every answer about eagles? Alright, let's put this to the test. What's the capital of France?

E. AGLE: Paris... which was once visited by a very curious eagle.

GLEN: ...Right. What's the square root of 16?

E. AGLE: Four. And do you know what has four talons? An eagle!

GLEN: Why is the sky blue?

E. AGLE: Ah, a classic question. The sky is blue due to Rayleigh scattering of sunlight. But do you know who loves the blue sky? Eagles!

GLEN: Well, I can't fault your logic. Here's the big test question. Ready?

Dr E. Agle makes an eagle sound.

GLEN: I need a romantic idea for my anniversary.

E. AGLE: Why not take a scenic eagle ride over the mountains?

GLEN: I was thinking more along the lines of dinner...

E. AGLE: Dinner on an eagle?

GLEN: No, I'm actually afraid of birds...

E. AGLE: Oh, why didn't you say so? Well, in that case, have you tried... therapy?

GLEN: Really?

E. AGLE: Yes, eagle-assisted therapy. They're quite good listeners. (whispering) They're eagle-eying us right now! (normal voice again) Have you ever seen an unhappy person on an eagle?

GLEN: (disconcerted) I've never seen a person on an eagle.

E. AGLE: Maybe that's why you've got all these problems.

GLEN: (looking around awkwardly) Yes, I am seriously considering getting an eagle now.

E. AGLE: You should. They're also great for tax advice, cooking tips, and fixing wi-fi.

Glen edges out of the clinic, now very well-informed about the capabilities of eagles.

A Great Question

INT. A BREAK-OUT AREA IN AN OFFICE – DAY

LIAM sits in a chair looking frustrated and holding a phone. His colleague, HENRY, enters.

HENRY: Hi Liam.

LIAM: Oh, hi Henry, you wouldn't believe what just happened to me. I asked this guy a question, and his response was "that's a great question". But he never explained *why* it was such a great question!

HENRY: Yeah, I know what you mean. It's like they're trying to make you feel good, but then just leave you hanging.

LIAM: Exactly! I need to know why it was such a great question. What makes a question "great"? Is there a secret grading system that I don't know about?

HENRY: That's a great question. Well, I've been doing some research on the subject, and I think I've figured it out.

LIAM: Really? Tell me everything.

HENRY: (under his breath, sighing) Only 2 out of 10. (full voice again) Okay, so here's how it works.

Henry furiously scribbles on a whiteboard.

HENRY: Now listen. A question can be rated on a scale of 1 to 10, based on its originality, insight, and relevance. So, for example, if you ask a question that's never been asked before, you score in the 100th percentile and are awarded 10 out of 10 for originality. The dream is to score 10 out of 10 in all factors and achieve the acclaim and adulation of asking the greatest question that can possibly be asked.

LIAM: (in awe) Wow! I would love to, one day, if I work very hard, be able to ask the greatest question that can possibly be asked. Is anything awarded for effort?

HENRY: A satisfactory question. Yes. If you really try your best, you get a pat on the head, and just a little bit of a condescending smile.

Henry pats Liam on the head and condescendingly smiles.

HENRY: Well done.

LIAM: Thanks.

HENRY: The strength of the head pat is determined by how hard you tried to find the question before venturing to ask it. If you put in an awful lot of work, you get a 10 out of 10 for effort and a vigorous head pat.

Henry pats Liam on the head vigorously.

LIAM: (looking at his phone) Wait a minute, I just got a new message. It says... (reading) “That’s a FANTASTIC question. 10 out of 10. Thanks for all the effort. You couldn’t have tried harder.” (excitedly) I did it! I asked the perfect question!

HENRY: Congratulations! You’ve officially asked maybe the greatest question of all time.

Henry pats Liam on the head vigorously.

LIAM: I can’t wait to tell everyone. But first, I need to ask you one more thing.

HENRY: Sure, go ahead.

LIAM: Why can’t all questions be “great”?

HENRY: Hmm, well, that’s a fairly poor question. But I’ll give a 6 out of 10 for effort.

LIAM: Oh, sorry. I must try harder.

HENRY: Yes, you must. Because “that’s a great question” makes me look in control, and will remind you that I am the expert, and ever so better informed than you.

LIAM: So, anyway, what are you up to this evening?

HENRY: (looks disgusted) Liam, that’s only worth a 1 out of 10. You should be ashamed of yourself.

LIAM: (ashamed) Sorry.

The Therapist's Therapist

INT. THERAPIST'S OFFICE – DAY

THERAPIST: So, what would you like to talk about today?

PATIENT: Well, I've been feeling really overwhelmed lately. Work is just... stressful, and –

THERAPIST: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, overwhelmed, yes. Uh... tell me, does your boss send you passive-aggressive emails at 11 p.m., questioning every single decision you've ever made in your entire life? Hypothetically speaking.

PATIENT: Um... no, not really. My boss is fine, I guess. It's more that –

THERAPIST: (sighing heavily) Must be nice. Anyway, sorry, go on. You were saying something about work?

PATIENT: Um... right. So, I've been feeling like I'm not good enough, you know? Like, no matter what I do, it's never enough.

THERAPIST: (nodding vigorously) Oh, I get that. Totally get that. Like, the other day, I spent two hours trying to decide if I should buy a 24-pack or 48-pack of toilet paper. Two hours! Two hours! And in the end, I bought both because I couldn't make a decision, and now my bathroom looks like a storage unit. What's wrong with me?

PATIENT: I... don't think that's the same thing?

THERAPIST: (laughing nervously) Oh, right! Sorry, let's focus on you. It's just, you know... decisions are hard, and sometimes... sometimes you just have to remind yourself that it's okay to be overwhelmed. You know, like when your entire life feels like it's unravelling, and you're constantly questioning if you made the right choices, and –

(suddenly stops and forces a smile)

Anyway, how does that make you feel?

PATIENT: Um... I'm starting to feel like maybe you're the one who needs a therapist?

THERAPIST: (laughing awkwardly) Ha! Me? Oh, no, no, no. I'm fine! Totally fine. Just a little... stressed, that's all. I mean, who wouldn't be after what happened this morning, right?

PATIENT: What happened this morning?

THERAPIST: Oh, nothing major. Just spilled an entire cup of coffee on my laptop, lost a week's worth of therapy notes, and then got a parking ticket because I was too distracted trying to figure out if my cat actually likes me or if he's just pretending. No big deal. Just... life, you know?

PATIENT: Are you... okay?

THERAPIST: Oh, I'm great. Fantastic, actually. Never better. So let's get back to you. You're overwhelmed. You're struggling with self-worth. And you feel like... like... Sorry, I just had a thought – do you ever wonder if everyone is secretly judging you all the time? Like, you're at the corner shop, and the cashier is definitely thinking about how weird you look in joggers. Not that I'm projecting or anything.

PATIENT: That sounds like you're projecting.

THERAPIST: (slightly unhinged) Maybe I am! Who isn't these days? But let's keep the focus on you. It's not about me. It's about you. You and your perfectly reasonable feelings of inadequacy.

PATIENT: I... don't know if I want to talk about myself anymore.

THERAPIST: (leaning in, whispering) Do you think my cat is avoiding me?

PATIENT: I'm not sure?

THERAPIST: (nodding) Yeah, that's what I thought. I'm getting the cold shoulder. He just... he just stares at me, you know? Like he knows something I don't. Anyway! Back to your issues. (with a forced smile) Tell me more about these work problems. It sounds awful. What was it again?

PATIENT: I was saying I feel like I'm not good enough...

THERAPIST: Yes! Imposter syndrome! A classic. The fear that at any moment someone's going to pull back the curtain and reveal that you have no idea what you're doing. I mean, that's never happened to me, obviously. But I hear it's common. (panicking slightly) Okay, maybe it has happened to me. Like... every day. But

that's beside the point! So, the trick is to remind yourself that everyone's just pretending, really. Fake it 'til you make it. Or, in some cases, fake it even after you've made it and hope no one notices. (breaking down a little) Oh, God, am I?

The therapist glances down at their notepad, which has "buy milk" and "schedule therapy for me?" instead of notes about the session.

PATIENT: I really think you should talk to someone.

THERAPIST: I am! I'm talking to you! That counts, right?

PATIENT: I think you might need an actual therapist, though.

THERAPIST: Yeah... yeah, you're probably right. But, uh, you can book your next session on your way out, okay?

PATIENT: Sure, but are you okay?

THERAPIST: (sighing) Honestly? No. But it's fine. Everything's fine. (muttering) If I say it enough times, it'll become true, right? Anyway, time's up. Off you trot.

PATIENT: Um... thanks, I guess?

THERAPIST: (staring at the notepad) Yeah, yeah. No problem. Happy to help.

The patient leaves, slightly bewildered but not as overwhelmed as before.

THERAPIST: How do I feel about that?

Nods into the distance, practising for the next patient.

A Squeaky Chair

INT. OFFICE MEETING ROOM – DAY

BRIAN is sitting at a table. KELSEY walks in and Brian stands up to greet her.

KELSEY: Brian, it's great to finally meet you in person, after all those online meetings.

BRIAN: It's great to meet you too. (he farts loudly)

KELSEY: How are you doing today?

BRIAN: I'm doing fine, thank you. (he farts)

KELSEY: I'm really looking forward to crunching the numbers on the big data project.

BRIAN: Yes, me too. (farts)

They both sit down at the table.

KELSEY: I know you've been working really hard on the projections for the next fiscal year.

BRIAN: (nods, then farts) Yes.

KELSEY: Sorry, but...

BRIAN: What?

KELSEY: Can you please stop making noises?

BRIAN: What noises? Oh, you mean my squeaky chair. Yes, it does that. (he farts)

KELSEY: That's not a squeaky chair.

BRIAN: Yes it is. (farts)

KELSEY: Brian, this room has a certain fragrance all of its own.

BRIAN: That would be the air conditioner. (farts)

KELSEY: Okay, tell me about the numbers, will you?

BRIAN: Well, I've got some good news (farts) and some bad news. (silence)

KELSEY: Wait a minute, say that again.

BRIAN: I've got some good news (farts) and some bad news. (silence)

She realises.

KELSEY: You break wind every time you lie, don't you.

BRIAN (mortified) No! That's not true at all! (a very loud fart)
Okay, okay, it's true. I prefer online meetings because I can cancel
out the noises.

KELSEY: I see. No, this is much better because now I know when
you're lying out of your bum.

BRIAN: Ugh, I hate this curse. I'll try to be more honest. (he
farts)

Yoga for Knights

EXT. CASTLE COURTYARD – DAY

Yoga mats are laid out, and soothing medieval lute music plays in the background. A yoga INSTRUCTOR stands at the front, ready to teach. A group of knights in full armour clumsily try to find their spots on the mats.

INSTRUCTOR: Welcome, brave knights, to the first ever medieval mindfulness yoga class! Let's start by finding a comfortable seat on your mats.

KNIGHT 1: (struggling to sit) My armour is chafing. Is that normal?

INSTRUCTOR: Embrace the discomfort, sir knight. It's part of the journey. Now, close your visors – er, I mean, eyes – and take a deep breath.

The knights try to breathe deeply, but it's loud and echoey inside their helmets.

INSTRUCTOR: Beautiful. Now, let's move into our first pose: "Knight's Lunge".

She demonstrates a lunge. The knights try, but their armour restricts them. There are sounds of creaking metal and muffled complaints.

KNIGHT 2: I think I'm stuck.

She moves to the next pose, but there's a loud crash as Knight 2 falls over.

INSTRUCTOR: Are you okay?

KNIGHT 2: Just a minor armour malfunction. Continue!

INSTRUCTOR: Alright, let's move into "Jousting Plank".

She gets into a plank position. The knights try, but it's a disaster. Knight 1's helmet falls off, revealing his flushed face.

KNIGHT 1: I think I need a squire for this one.

INSTRUCTOR: Let's modify. Try "Resting Squire" instead.

She demonstrates a pose. The knights attempt it but end up in various awkward positions.

KNIGHT 3: This feels less like yoga and more like combat training against invisible foes.

INSTRUCTOR: Ah, but isn't the greatest battle the one within?

KNIGHT 2: No, the greatest battle was when I tried to put on the armour this morning.

INSTRUCTOR: Let's finish with "Sleeping Dragon." Lie on your backs and –

KNIGHT 3: Last time I laid down in armour, it took three squires and a horse to get me up.

INSTRUCTOR: Alright, standing meditation it is! Close your eyes, take a deep breath, and imagine you're a tree.

KNIGHT 2: Like, a tree in a dense forest or a lone tree in a field?

INSTRUCTOR: Whichever you prefer.

KNIGHT 3: What kind of tree? Oak? Pine? Birch?

INSTRUCTOR: Just... any tree!

KNIGHT 1: Are there squirrels in this tree?

INSTRUCTOR: (sighing) Yes, and they're all doing perfect Knight's Lunges.

Knight 4 falls over.

The Voices

INT. PSYCHIATRIST'S OFFICE – DAY

A PATIENT is sitting with his PSYCHIATRIST.

PSYCHIATRIST: So, Mr Smith, how have you been feeling lately?

PATIENT: I'm doing great! The voices in my head tell me so.

PSYCHIATRIST: Voices?

PATIENT: Yeah, you know, the ones that tell me I'm not crazy.

PSYCHIATRIST: Mr Smith, I think we need to explore this a bit further.

PATIENT: Oh, there's nothing to explore, doc. The voices are my best friends.

PSYCHIATRIST: Are they telling you to do anything dangerous?

PATIENT: No, no, no. They just give me good advice.

PSYCHIATRIST: Such as?

PATIENT: Well, Kevin spoke for all the others when he told me that if I don't like a person, I should simply tell that person about the voices in my head.

PSYCHIATRIST: And did you?

PATIENT: Yes, I did, doctor.

PSYCHIATRIST: Erm, Mr Smith, I think it's time we try a different approach. Maybe some medication can help you.

PATIENT: (speaking differently) Oh, no, no, no. I don't need any pills. The voices take good care of me.

PSYCHIATRIST: Your voice has changed. Am I talking to Kevin now?

PATIENT: Who's Kevin?

PSYCHIATRIST: Kevin. The voice in your head.

PATIENT: Voice in my head? How ridiculous. I think you must be mad. Goodbye.

The patient gets up and starts to leave.

PSYCHIATRIST: Mr Smith, I'm sorry, but I can't let you leave like this. I insist that you take the medication prescribed to you.

PATIENT: You can't do that! The voices won't like it.

PSYCHIATRIST: Ah! You see, the voices!

PATIENT: (speaking differently) Voices? Are you okay?

PSYCHIATRIST: Mr Smith, I'm insisting for your own good. You need help.

The patient opens the door to leave.

PSYCHIATRIST: Stop! What about the voices? Who will take care of them? What will Kevin say, if you leave now? Please, don't leave!

PATIENT: You're not very well, are you. Would you like to lie down?

PSYCHIATRIST: Yes, erm, I'm not sure what came over me.

The psychiatrist takes a lie down on the couch.

PATIENT: Don't worry, doc. There are plenty of voices in your head to keep themselves company.

The patient starts to write notes on a notepad, nodding sagely.

PATIENT: Can you tell me about their childhoods?

PSYCHIATRIST: I can tell you about the dreams they had last night, if you like?

PATIENT: Yes, please do. But I just need to let you know that I charge for each personality. How many do you have?

PSYCHIATRIST: Actually there's only one. He's called Lesley. But he lies, and does funny voices.

PATIENT: I see. Can you tell me more about Lesley, please?

PSYCHIATRIST: He's a... a psychiatrist. That's it. A psychiatrist.

PATIENT: Like you. I see.

PSYCHIATRIST: Lesley has 3 voices: Kevin, Jason, and Jessica.

PATIENT: Kevin, eh? Can you tell me about Kevin?

PSYCHIATRIST: Kevin has 4 voices: Dave, Bert, Gertrude, and Jezebel.

PATIENT: Hmm. Can you tell me about Dave?

PSYCHIATRIST: Dave has 5 voices...

PATIENT: Yes, yes, alright. I get the picture. So how does all this make you feel?

PSYCHIATRIST: Well, it can be pretty noisy when Kevin invites all his voices to come in and talk, so I ask my psychiatrist...

PATIENT: Lesley?

PSYCHIATRIST: Yes, Lesley. He psychoanalyses me.

PATIENT: I see.

There is a knock at the door.

PSYCHIATRIST: Come in.

Another patient walks in, carrying two tennis rackets.

PATIENT: Ah Kevin, please take a seat. Don't mind me, I'm just leaving.

KEVIN: Thanks, Lesley.

The patient leaves through the door, past a very long queue of people standing outside, who are all waiting to enter the psychiatrist's office.

Mr Beepo-3000

INT. DOCTOR'S SURGERY – DAY

A robot PATIENT, clearly made of metal, is sitting on the examination table. The DOCTOR is standing next to it, looking puzzled.

DOCTOR: And how have you been feeling lately?

PATIENT: (in an obvious robot voice) I have been functioning within normal parameters, thank you for asking, doctor.

The doctor checks the patient's pulse with a stethoscope.

DOCTOR: Hmm, that's odd. I can't seem to detect a heartbeat.

PATIENT: (beep) Is something wrong, doctor?

DOCTOR: (puzzled) Well, it seems your body is made of metal and wires instead of flesh and blood. (checks again)

PATIENT: (in denial) What? Of course not! I'm just a regular human being, like everyone else. (beep)

The doctor opens a control panel on the patient's head. Wires fall out. The doctor pokes about inside.

DOCTOR: (puzzled) It seems that your body has circuit boards instead of organs and tissues.

The doctor ponders deeply.

DOCTOR: I believe I might have some bad news for you, Mr Beepo-3000.

PATIENT: What is it, doctor?

DOCTOR: I will need to run some further tests, but I think there might be a possibility that you are a robot.

There is silence as Mr Beepo-3000 takes in the weight of the news.

PATIENT: (in disbelief) A robot? That's ridiculous! I'm clearly human. (beep)

DOCTOR: (trying to be gentle) I understand this may be difficult to accept, but the evidence is clear.

The patient starts beeping loudly.

DOCTOR: It's not all bad news, Mr Beepo-3000. You could get some upgrades, like wheels for legs? Or wings for arms?

The patient is intrigued.

PATIENT: I've always wanted wheels for legs.

DOCTOR: Well, there you go, you see.

PATIENT: Thank you, doctor. (beep)

The Cake Conspiracy

INT. OFFICE – LATE MORNING

Luke walks into an open plan office.

LUKE: (looking around) I knew it! The clock on that wall is five minutes fast. They're giving me extra time.

ERIC is in the corner, fixing the printer.

LUKE: (to himself) Why is Eric fixing the printer when I need to print my reports today? They're making sure everything works perfectly, just for me.

ERIC: Hey, Luke! Printer's acting up again. Might take a minute.

LUKE: Don't worry, I know what you're doing. Making sure everything is perfect for me.

ERIC: Sure... uh, just trying to print a lunch menu.

Luke meets ABBIE in the aisle.

ABBIE: Luke, we're all chipping in and ordering pizza for lunch.

LUKE: Ah, I get it! You want to make sure I'm well fed.

ABBIE: Actually, it's Derick's birthday.

LUKE: Sure it is. And I appreciate you making sure I have the energy for the day. Wink.

ABBIE: No, really. It's Derick's birthday.

LUKE: That's what they want me to think!

DERICK: Hey, everyone, it's my birthday! I brought cake!

LUKE: Oh, of course, you did. For me. Probably packed with vitamins and "well-wishes" to keep me healthy and happy, right? I'm onto you, Derick.

DERICK: Actually, Luke, it's for everyone because, well, it's my birthday...

LUKE: That's what they want me to think! Like when you "accidentally" paid for my lunch last week!

DERICK: I just forgot to ask you for your share.

LUKE: Or maybe you're in on it! Everyone's trying to make my life better in secret!

DERICK: Sure, Luke. Whatever you say.

LUKE: Like, everywhere I go, people are opening doors for me.

ABBIE: Luke, that's called being polite.

LUKE: (to himself) Okay, think. Who's behind all this? The government? Aliens? Oprah?

ABBIE: Nobody is out to get you, Luke.

LUKE: Oh, they are! They're out to get me... to smile, to feel good, and to be happy! But I won't be fooled! Maybe you're the ringleader! Are you orchestrating this grand benevolent conspiracy?

ABBIE: Yes, Luke. We all gather secretly every morning, including your dry cleaner, the bus driver, and the pigeons in the park. We have nothing better to do than to make your day slightly nicer.

LUKE: Wow, I never realised it was that extensive.

DERICK: Luke, she's joking.

LUKE: Or is she? Earlier this morning, the internet was down for two minutes. I think it was so I could take a break!

DERICK: It was down for everyone.

LUKE: Of course! So no one would suspect the real motive!

DERICK: (chuckling) Alright, buddy. Here's some cake.

LUKE: (grinning) Aha, you thought I wouldn't notice the small acts!

Luke enjoys his cake.

En Français!

EXT. TRAFALGAR SQUARE, LONDON – DAY

A French tourist (PIERRE) approaches a Londoner (BOB) and starts speaking to him in French.

PIERRE: Excusez-moi, monsieur. Pourriez-vous me dire où se trouve le Grand-Ben, s'il vous plaît?

BOB: (polite confusion) I'm sorry, I don't understand. I don't speak French.

PIERRE: (frustrated and louder) Pourriez-vous me dire où se trouve le Grand-Ben, s'il vous plaît?

BOB: (more confused) Sorry, what?

PIERRE: (angry) Mon Dieu! OÙ... EST... LE... GRAND... BEN?

Bob looks at Pierre blankly.

PIERRE: BIG BEN! WHERE IS BIG BEN?

Bob points to Big Ben immediately behind Pierre, who is incensed and does not look.

PIERRE: (disgusted) Now, repeat after me, “Bonjour, comment ça va?”

BOB: (nervously, in an English accent) Umm, bond your, comma say yer?

PIERRE: Non, non, non! You have to put some effort into it. Try again. Repeat: “Bonjour, comment ça va?”

BOB: (trying harder) Bonjour, comment ça va?

PIERRE: (sighing) Better, but still not quite right.

BOB: (smiling) Merci!

PIERRE: (disgusted, tutting) Merci? Is that all you can say in French?

BOB: (nervously) Umm, oui?

PIERRE: (shaking his head) How disappointing. (muttering in French) Les Anglais ne comprennent rien.

Pierre wanders off in the opposite direction to Big Ben, while gesticulating his disappointment. Bob, looking confused, watches him go.

The Early Bird

INT. BEDROOM – EARLY MORNING

MARTIN is sleeping peacefully. Suddenly, his phone rings and he jerks awake. He sleepily answers a video call from his personal trainer, JAYDEN.

JAYDEN: Get up! Time to get up! You can fit in an extra five minutes of fear and worry. Get to it, NOW!

Martin jumps out of bed and paces around the room.

JAYDEN: What if you mess up that presentation? What if you forget your lines? What if you spill coffee on your shirt? Come on!

MARTIN: (muttering to himself, trying to remember) What if I mess up the presentation? What if I forget my lines? What if I spill coffee on my shirt?

JAYDEN: Again! Louder!

Martin is more frantically walking back and forth.

MARTIN: What if I mess up the presentation? What if I forget my lines? What if I spill coffee on my shirt?

JAYDEN: Alright, time to really ramp up the anxiety. Give me some scrolling up and down emails. Pump through the to-do list.

Martin scrolls and taps on his phone while anxiously walking about.

JAYDEN: Got to remember to call that client, got to finish that report, got to remember to eat your lunch.

Martin accidentally trips and falls over his own feet.

JAYDEN: Good job! Time's up. Go to work.

Martin walks off, with a limp.

Robo-Manager

INT. OFFICE – DAY

A MANAGER is talking to gathered employees.

MANAGER: We need to think outside the box. It's time to raise the bar to the next level and leverage our synergies and core competencies to achieve our objectives. We need to take ownership of our goals because if you fail to plan, you plan to fail. So let's make sure we're all on the same page and hit the ground running to go the extra mile this quarter.

Smoke starts coming out of the manager's head. The employees look like they've seen it all before, apart from ELLA, who is a new starter.

MANAGER: Let's optimise our potential and maximise our impact. We need to be proactive, not reactive. So let's give it 110%.

ELLA: There's smoke! Smoke's coming out of your head.

MANAGER: Yes, but I am not a robot. I am a highly motivated management professional. We need to stay focused on our key performance indicators and exceed our targets.

The smoke is more severe.

MANAGER: Must motivate... Must motivate... Success is a journey...

The manager freezes; then after a pause returns back to life, more robotically.

MANAGER: Beep boop beep. Error. Malfunction detected. Robo-Manager will be sent back to the factory for repairs.

The manager walks out of the room like a robot. Everyone looks relieved that they can now do some work.

Story Time

INT. DOCTOR'S SURGERY – DAY

DOCTOR: Alright, Mr Higgins. Let's start with something simple. How are you feeling today?

PATIENT: Oh, well, the giraffe seemed pretty unimpressed with the roller skates, if I'm being honest.

DOCTOR: (pausing, confused) ...Sorry, did you say giraffe?

PATIENT: Yeah, they're tall, aren't they? Always with their heads in the clouds, wondering why sandwiches never come with enough mustard.

DOCTOR: (blinking) Right... Okay, let's try something else. Do you have any allergies?

PATIENT: Oh, absolutely. I'm allergic to tap dancing on Thursdays. Every time I try, my feet turn into raisins. It's a nightmare.

DOCTOR: I see. No actual food allergies though? No medications you're allergic to?

PATIENT: Only when the moon's full. If I take aspirin under a full moon, I turn into a coat rack. But that's fairly common, right?

DOCTOR: (sighing) Not exactly common, no... Let's move on. Do you smoke?

PATIENT: Only when I'm impersonating a chimney sweep. But just for show, you know? Got to keep up appearances at the soot convention.

DOCTOR: (losing composure for a second) The soot convention?

PATIENT: Oh yes, big event. You haven't lived until you've seen a competitive soot sweep-off. Those guys take it seriously. Last year, someone brought a vacuum, and things got ugly.

DOCTOR: (looking baffled) Alright, let's... let's check your blood pressure.

PATIENT: Ah, blood pressure. That reminds me of the time I tried to sell lemonade to a lobster. He just pinched the cup right out of my hand! Can you believe it?

DOCTOR: I... I can't say that I can, no.

The doctor wraps the blood pressure cuff around the patient's arm and begins pumping it, trying to focus on the task. The patient continues.

PATIENT: So, what do you think about the international ban on using trampolines as dinner tables? Personally, I think it's long overdue. You spill one bowl of soup, and suddenly you're a public menace.

DOCTOR: (barely paying attention, focused on the cuff) Mmm-hmm. Please stay still.

PATIENT: You ever notice that raccoons never hold press conferences? Suspicious, right?

DOCTOR: (pausing mid-pump, staring at him) I... don't really follow raccoon news.

PATIENT: That's exactly what they want! Always rummaging through bins, but where's the transparency? What are they hiding?

DOCTOR: (trying to maintain composure) Okay, I think we're done here. Your blood pressure seems... well, normal, somehow.

PATIENT: That's good to hear. It usually spikes when I start thinking about the proper etiquette for high-fiving a porcupine.

DOCTOR: Let's move on to something simpler. Do you exercise regularly?

PATIENT: Oh, every day. I run a marathon with my pet goldfish, Frederick. He's great, very motivational. He does most of the swimming, though.

DOCTOR: (blankly) I imagine so. And, uh, how far do you run with Frederick?

PATIENT: We usually stop when the ostrich starts leading the conga line. You can't ignore an ostrich doing the conga – it's basically the law.

DOCTOR: (almost impressed at this point) Fascinating. I had no idea conga-dancing ostriches were so authoritative.

PATIENT: Oh, absolutely. They're in charge of all dance-related legislation. That's why you never see them salsa dancing. They're above it. Strictly conga.

DOCTOR: ...Right. Well, we're almost done here. Any family history of heart disease?

PATIENT: Well, my great-aunt Ethel once fell in love with a stop sign. Does that count?

DOCTOR: I don't think so, no.

PATIENT: It was unrequited, though. The stop sign was already in a relationship with an exit sign. Tragic, really.

DOCTOR: Okay, Mr Higgins, I think we're done for today. I'll... recommend you for further evaluation.

PATIENT: Great! Just make sure it's not on a Wednesday. That's when I herd sheep across the Atlantic. They're very punctual.

DOCTOR: (nods, standing up and gesturing toward the door) Of course. Wouldn't want to disrupt the schedule. Good luck with the sheep.

PATIENT: Thanks, Doctor! Oh, and one last thing – do you know where I can get a license to operate a hot air balloon made entirely of mashed potatoes?

DOCTOR: (baffled) ...No, but I'll look into it.

PATIENT: Much appreciated! Have a good one! Remember, if you ever meet a walrus with a monocle, don't trust him – he has a wonderful way with words, but next thing you know, you're swimming around in circles like a north sea mackerel!

DOCTOR: (staring after him as he leaves, bewildered) Noted.

Premium Complaints

INT. RECEPTION – DAY

A CUSTOMER walks into reception.

RECEPTIONIST: Welcome to the Complaints Service, for people who love to complain. How may I assist you?

CUSTOMER: I would like to complain about something.

RECEPTIONIST: Of course, sir. What seems to be the problem?

CUSTOMER: Everything! My job, my family, my annoying neighbours, the weather, my car, my home, my health, my food, my hobbies, the unfairness of the world, politics, and my cat!

RECEPTIONIST: I see. Well, we offer a range of complaining services, from the basic package to our premium service. Which would you prefer?

CUSTOMER: I want the premium service. I want to complain about everything without any interruptions or limitations.

RECEPTIONIST: Excellent choice, sir.

CUSTOMER: Do you not offer an ultra-premium service?

RECEPTIONIST: I'm afraid not.

CUSTOMER: Well that's just not good enough.

RECEPTIONIST: It's the second door on the left. We hope you enjoy your stay.

CUSTOMER: Second door on the left! Why not the first?

The receptionist shows the customer to the second door on the left, who is busy complaining.

RECEPTIONIST: This way please, sir.

CUSTOMER: This way! Why not that way?

The customer walks through the doorway.

CUSTOMER: This is not acceptable. Not an acceptable door frame at all.

The receptionist closes the door behind the customer and looks relieved.

Clause and Effect

INT. A DUSTY ATTIC – NIGHT

A LAWYER in a suit wipes an ancient lamp. A GENIE emerges in a cloud of smoke, dressed in traditional genie garb but looking slightly weary.

GENIE: (booming voice) Behold! I am the great and powerful Genie of the Lamp! You have awakened me, mortal, and I shall grant you three wishes!

LAWYER: (pulling out a notepad and pen) Three wishes, you say? Excellent. But before we proceed, I just have a few clarifying questions.

GENIE: Uh... sure. But let's not overcomplicate this. Just say what you want, and poof – done.

LAWYER: (scribbling notes) Mmm, tempting. But I've seen too many "wish gone wrong" situations in popular culture. Can't risk it. Now, let's discuss the terms. (flips open a briefcase, pulls out a contract template)

GENIE: (groaning) Oh no. Not one of these.

LAWYER: (ignoring him) Right. First question: What exactly constitutes a "wish"? Is it a verbal statement of desire, or do I need to phrase it in a specific way?

GENIE: (scratching his head) Uh, I dunno. You just say it, and I grant it.

LAWYER: (narrowing eyes) Hmm. Ambiguous. Let's define "wish" for the record. (starts typing on a laptop) "Wish (noun): A verbalised request for a specific outcome, stated in clear and unambiguous terms, as recognised by the Genie..."

GENIE: (interrupting) Look, mate, I've been doing this for centuries, and no one's needed a contract. Can we just get to the magic part?

LAWYER: (pointing a pen at the Genie) And that's precisely why you need one. What if I ask for a million pounds, and you deliver it in counterfeit bills? Or I wish for a dream house, and it's haunted? No loopholes, Genie. Not on my watch.

The lawyer lays out a growing pile of papers on the table, complete with flowcharts and a checklist. The Genie looks increasingly exasperated.

LAWYER: (writing) Clause 1: No malicious compliance. Clause 2: Wishes cannot harm the wisher physically, emotionally, or financially. Clause 3: No ironic twists. I don't want to wish for "eternal life" and end up as a tree.

GENIE: You humans are so distrusting. I'm not here to trick you!

LAWYER: (without looking up) Statistically, 87% of genie-related anecdotes suggest otherwise.

GENIE: Stupid Reddit threads... Look, if it helps, I'm not that kind of genie. I'm not here to monkey-paw your wishes. I'm more of a "give you what you want, no questions asked" type.

LAWYER: (smirking) No questions asked? Perfect. Addendum C: If the Genie delivers a wish that violates any clause of the contract, the wisher is entitled to reparations, monetary or otherwise, at the discretion of –

GENIE: (snapping) OKAY! That's it. Just make a wish! Any wish! I'll do it! I promise not to twist it!

LAWYER: (holding up the contract) Not until you sign.

The Genie sighs and reluctantly signs the contract. The Lawyer smiles triumphantly.

LAWYER: Excellent. Now, for my first wish: I want one trillion pounds deposited into my bank account.

GENIE: (snapping his fingers) Done!

An alert appears on the Lawyer's phone saying: "You have received £1,000,000,000,000.00 from A. Genie."

GENIE: (crossing arms) Told you I'm legit. Can we move on now?

LAWYER: Not so fast. (points to the contract) Sub-clause 2.3 requires documentation on the money's source. I don't want MI6 knocking on my door because it was "borrowed" from the Bank of England.

GENIE: (snapping fingers again) Fine! Here's a receipt!

A golden scroll appears in midair. The lawyer grabs it and examines it closely.

LAWYER: Hmm. "Source: Magical Treasury". Acceptable. For my second wish, I want to be the cleverest person in the world.

GENIE: (nodding) Easy. (snaps fingers) Done.

LAWYER: (pauses, then narrows his eyes) Wait. Did you just shrink everyone else's IQ to make me look better?

GENIE: Oh, for crying out loud! You're still you, but now you know the cure for cancer, the secret to world peace, and how to win at Monopoly every time. Happy?

LAWYER: (grinning) Very. But if I find out this intelligence is temporary or conditional –

GENIE: (cutting him off) It's permanent! Next wish!

LAWYER: For my third wish...

He pauses dramatically, flipping through the contract.

GENIE: (groaning) Just say it!

LAWYER: (grinning) I wish for infinite wishes.

GENIE: (laughing) Ah, the classic rookie move! You can't wish for more wishes.

LAWYER: (smirking) Actually, according to Section 5, Subsection A of this contract, there's no explicit prohibition on that. Unless, of course, you'd like to renegotiate the terms?

GENIE: (grabbing the contract and flipping through it) You... sneaky little – Fine! You win. Infinite wishes. Happy now?

LAWYER: (grinning) Ecstatic. But let's amend the contract for clarity. I'll need –

The genie snaps his fingers.

GENIE: (slowly disappearing back into the lamp) Nope. You can wish as much as you like, but I'm out. This has all now been nothing more than a day-dream! Have fun with your infinite wishes. Bye!!!!!!

The lawyer stares at the lamp, stunned. He looks at his phone alert, which changes before his eyes to read: "You have received £0.00 from A. Genie."

LAWYER: (to himself) Well, I guess I'll start drafting my terms for an appeal.

He walks off, with a stack of contracts in hand.

Off the Menu

INT. RESTAURANT – EVENING

A restaurant is moderately busy. A customer, REGINALD, sits at a table with a menu, tapping it rhythmically with a fork. The WAITER approaches with a polite smile.

WAITER: Good evening, sir. Have you decided what you'd like?

REGINALD: Yes, indeed. I'll start with an amuse-bouche.

WAITER: Certainly. We have –

REGINALD: I'll have a single kumquat stuffed with wasabi and garnished with edible gold leaf.

WAITER: I'm afraid we don't have kumquats, sir. Or edible gold leaf.

REGINALD: No kumquats? In this economy? Fine, I'll settle for a pickled ostrich egg, sliced thinly, served on a single lotus leaf.

WAITER: We don't have ostrich eggs either, sir.

REGINALD: All right, let's move on. For the main course, I'll have... hmm... an elk steak, medium-rare, infused with truffle oil, and a side of glow-in-the-dark mashed potatoes.

WAITER: Glow-in-the-dark – ? Sir, I don't believe that's a thing.

REGINALD: (offended) Not a thing? I had it just last week in Piccadilly. Or was it a dream? Never mind, I'll take a roasted dodo.

WAITER: A... dodo?

REGINALD: Yes, dodo. The extinct bird. They're quite tender, I hear.

WAITER: Sir, they've been extinct for centuries.

REGINALD: So your restaurant isn't sustainable, then? Disappointing.

WAITER: Perhaps something from the actual menu?

REGINALD: Fine, fine. For dessert, I'll have a soufflé made with unicorn milk.

WAITER: Sir, unicorns don't exist. May I recommend the chocolate cake? It's very popular.

REGINALD: Cake? How pedestrian. Fine, but only if you flambé it at the table while reciting poetry.

WAITER: Poetry?

REGINALD: Byron, preferably. Or Shelley, if you're in the mood.

WAITER: I'll... see what I can do.

REGINALD: Splendid. Oh, and a drink. Bring me water. But not just any water. It must be glacier water, melted under the light of a full moon.

WAITER: Tap water, then?

REGINALD: If you must. But chill it with artisanal ice cubes.

WAITER: Artisanal ice cubes?

REGINALD: Hand-carved by a monk. Preferably one with a beard.

WAITER: I need a new job.

The waiter walks off, muttering, as Reginald begins inspecting his fork with great intensity.

I'm Fine

INT. CAFETERIA – DAY

Two co-workers, JANET and LUCY, are having lunch.

JANET: (smiling) Hey Lucy, how are you today?

LUCY: (smiling back) I'm fine.

JANET: (sceptical) Just fine?

LUCY: (quickly) Yeah, fine.

JANET: Are you sure?

LUCY: (defensively) Yes, I'm fine. Really.

JANET: Really, really sure?

LUCY: (starting to get cross) Yes. I'm fine.

JANET: (smiling) Okay, if you say so.

LUCY: And how are you?

JANET: (tuts in disgust) You really want to know?

LUCY: Er, okay.

JANET: Shut up! Shut up, okay! You would not even begin to comprehend what it is like to be me! My life is filled with one stress after another. I'm tortured by the past, miserable in the present, and anxious about the future. I look into the meaningless void of my existence and only emptiness looks back. But I don't want to say one more word about any of this to YOU, so I DEMAND, yes DEMAND, you change the subject, NOW! If you ever, ever ask me this question again, I will give you the exact same response – and all the utter contempt your stupid question demands...

(beat)

Oh, sorry! I meant, "I'm fine".

LUCY: Yeah, it's easier just to say, "I'm fine".

They continue eating as normal.

Unclassified

INT. PRESS CONFERENCE ROOM – DAY

The press conference begins. The PRIME MINISTER stands at the podium, smiling serenely. A sea of reporters, cameras flashing, microphones poised, waits expectantly.

REPORTER 1: Prime Minister, can you explain why the “Housing for All” scheme appears to be drastically underfunded and is already behind schedule?

PRIME MINISTER: (calmly) Yes, well, that’s because we don’t actually have the money for it.

REPORTER 1: Sorry, what?

PRIME MINISTER: You heard me. We promised affordable housing for every citizen, but in reality, we’re barely managing to renovate a few old council flats. Truth be told, we crunched the numbers, realised it was impossible, but announced it anyway because it sounded good at the time. Next question.

REPORTER 2: Prime Minister, are you saying that your government knowingly announced a policy you couldn’t fund?

PRIME MINISTER: (nodding cheerfully) Absolutely. Happens all the time, really. You should’ve seen the transport budget last year. We said we’d revolutionise the railways. What we meant was: “We’re going to buy some new vending machines for the stations.”

REPORTER 3: Prime Minister, earlier this week you were quoted saying, “This government is committed to fiscal discipline.” Care to elaborate?

PRIME MINISTER: Oh, that was just me buying time because I didn’t know what else to say. A treasury adviser gave me some complicated briefing about the deficit, and I couldn’t make heads or tails of it. So, I just said the usual rubbish about “discipline” and “prudence.” What do those words even mean in politics? I’ve been saying them for years, and I’ve never bothered to check!

A ripple of nervous laughter through the press pool. The Prime Minister’s aides are huddled together off to the side, looking mortified. One AIDE steps forward, trying to intervene.

AIDE: Prime Minister, perhaps we should wrap this up –

PRIME MINISTER: Oh no, I'm just getting started! Let's talk about the NHS, shall we? I keep saying we're "putting it at the top of the agenda", but to be perfectly honest, the only agenda item on my mind most days is whether lunch will include those little sandwiches with the crusts cut off. The ones with the smoked salmon. Delicious.

REPORTER 4: Prime Minister, how do you respond to accusations that your government isn't addressing climate change?

PRIME MINISTER: Oh, that's simple. We're not addressing it. I mean, we hold summits and make big promises, sure, but the second we get back, it's right back to business as usual. You know, cars, planes, oil – no one's actually sacrificing their morning lattes for solar panels. And between you and me, I can't even recycle properly. Is it plastics in the blue bin or the green one? I can never remember.

By this point, the aides have given up, slumping back in defeat.

PRIME MINISTER: So, in conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, the truth is this: I don't know what I'm doing half the time. Most of us don't. We're just trying to keep our jobs, give a good speech, and avoid getting caught on a hot mic saying something regrettable. And frankly, most people know that already, don't they?

Stunned response.

PRIME MINISTER: Well, this has been fun! If you'll excuse me, I'm off to a meeting about a "robust national security strategy", which means I'll be staring at a PowerPoint and nodding thoughtfully. Have a good day, everyone!

The Prime Minister steps away from the podium, waving happily as the press continues to shout questions. His aides scramble to follow him, visibly distraught.

Grim the Reaper

EXT. BUS STOP – DAY

GRIM the Reaper is sitting by himself at a bus stop, twirling his scythe boredly.

CHLOE arrives and sits down on the row of seats.

GRIM: Hello, how's it going?

CHLOE: Hi. You going to a costume party or something?

GRIM: No, what makes you think that? Oh, you mean my clothes. No, this is what I usually wear.

Chloe doesn't want to continue the conversation. They sit in silence.

GRIM: Another day, another soul to reap. I swear this job is killing me. (sighs) All I do is collect souls and add them to my list. There's no variety, no excitement.

CHLOE: (disbelieving) You're the Grim Reaper, are you?

GRIM: I would rather be the happy reaper, but grim is what I'm called. I want to dress as a clown and make people laugh.

CHLOE: Okay.

GRIM: And I would like to go on some adventures. Is that too much to ask?

CHLOE: I guess not.

GRIM: (sighing) Yeah, well, it would be nice if I could just afford a new cloak or a new scythe. The pay is terrible and the Head Reaper is always on my case about falling behind on my quota. "You need to pick up the pace," he moans at me. It's not fair.

CHLOE: Today's your day off, is it?

GRIM: I never get any time off. It's always reap, reap, reap. I can't remember the last time I had a holiday.

CHLOE: Right, so the Grim Reaper gets the Number 57 bus, does he?

GRIM: No, I don't. Oh, silly me, I forgot to mention, neither did you. You walked in front of it and now you're dead. Anyway, I can't sit here talking all day, I'm late for my next appointment. Take the

second portal on the right, or was it the first? – I forget. Yes, I definitely wouldn't take the second portal if I were you! See ya!

He glides away down the street.

GRIM: (to himself) Was it the one on my right or on their right?
I never can remember.

The Society Within

INT. DIMLY LIT MEDIEVAL MEETING CHAMBER – NIGHT

Several people sit behind a long table, all wearing hoods and robes. The Protagonist (let's call him ALEX) stands before them as the others chant monotonously.

LEADER #1: (solemnly) And thus, by the power vested in me, as Grand Keeper of the Lesser Secrets, we welcome you into the hallowed halls of The Society of Midnight Shadows.

ALEX: (awkwardly) Thank you. It's... such an honour.

LEADER #1: Shhh! We don't say "thank you" here. It's forbidden. Instead, you say, "The bat flies at midnight."

ALEX: Right, of course. The bat flies at midnight.

LEADER #1: Excellent.

ALEX: Right. And, um... what does the Society of Midnight Shadows actually do?

LEADER #1: We are the silent guardians of the unspoken truths.

ALEX: Okay, but... what does that mean?

LEADER #1: Mostly we just meet here on Tuesdays. Sometimes we rearrange traffic cones to spell "danger".

ALEX: (doubtful) That's... very noble.

LEADER #1: And remember, this is the only secret society that truly matters.

A bookcase suddenly swings open, revealing a hidden room.

VOICE FROM HIDDEN ROOM: Oh, for heaven's sake, stop telling people that! You're not even a real society!

Alex is dragged by robed figures into the hidden room, where the Society of Eternal Whispers is gathered. They're all wearing identical robes, but these ones are purple.

LEADER #2: Welcome to the real secret society.

ALEX: There's... another one?

LEADER #2: Of course! Did you think that façade was real? How naïve. This is the Society of Eternal Whispers.

ALEX: What do you whisper about?

LEADER #2: (loudly whispering) Everything.

ALEX: Like what?

LEADER #2: (louder) Stop asking questions!

ALEX: (muttering) You're not very good at being secret.

LEADER #2: (not hearing the comment) You are one of us now.

Your first task is to prove your loyalty by reciting the Pledge of Eternal Subtlety.

ALEX: Fine. What is it?

LEADER #2: (grabs a scroll) Repeat after me: "I shall live in shadows, walk in whispers, and never wear yellow."

ALEX: Why can't I wear yellow?

LEADER #2: Because yellow doesn't really coordinate well with purple. Now repeat!

ALEX: (resigned) I shall live in shadows, walk in whispers, and never wear yellow.

LEADER #2: (smirks) Perfect. You are now one of us.

Another bookcase swings open. Everyone groans.

VOICE FROM NEW HIDDEN ROOM: (mocking) Oh, look at you, so subtle. Real subtle, with your purple robes and dramatic whispers.

Alex is pulled by more robed figures into the next room, where the Society of Infinite Layers meets. They wear gold-trimmed robes and are eating biscuits.

LEADER #3: Welcome to the actual secret society.

ALEX: (exasperated) How many of these are there!?

LEADER #3: We're the Society of Infinite Layers. We've been infiltrating the infiltrators for centuries.

ALEX: Do any of you actually do anything?

LEADER #3: How dare you! We're responsible for all of society's greatest advancements.

ALEX: Like what?

LEADER #3: (proudly) Biscuits. We standardised the size of biscuits in 1874.

ALEX: That's it?

LEADER #3: And we control the national stockpile of custard creams.

ALEX: (muttering) That explains why they're always out of stock.

LEADER #3: (ignoring Alex) Now, to prove yourself, you must complete our sacred task.

ALEX: (sighs) Let me guess. Something pointless?

LEADER #3: (offended) Not pointless! You must solve a Rubik's cube in a tastefully darkened room while reciting the periodic table.

Before Alex can begin, another bookcase hidden door opens, revealing an elderly man sitting alone in a minimalist room.

LEADER #4: Don't bother with that. Come in. You've reached the Ultimate Society.

The members of the Society of Infinite Layers tut their disapproval, as Alex enters the latest hidden room.

ALEX: (sceptical) Are you absolutely sure?

LEADER #4: Yes. I am the secret head of all secret societies.

ALEX: (relieved) Finally! So, what's the ultimate secret?

LEADER #4: (leans in) The secret is... (pauses for dramatic effect) there is no secret.

ALEX: What? So you're telling me I went through three ridiculous societies for nothing?

LEADER #4: Oh, it's not for nothing. (hands Alex a biscuit) Have a custard cream.

Unnecessarily Necessary

INT. OFFICE – DAY

TIM is sitting at his desk, surrounded by piles of paper, rubber chickens, and a broken clock. His job plate on the desk reads: "Unnecessarily Necessary Officer". BERT enters.

TIM: (frantically flipping through papers) Ah, yes, the documentation for rubber chicken inflation rates... utterly unnecessary! (seeing Bert) Halt! State your unnecessary business.

BERT: I'm here to report an unnecessary problem.

TIM: Ah, is it unnecessary enough to be necessary, or necessarily unnecessary?

BERT: It's so unnecessary that it makes not solving it necessary.

TIM: Ah, I see! Sit, sit. Would you like some tea, coffee, or perhaps a liquid helium cocktail?

BERT: Er, just water, thanks.

Tim pulls out a water gun from one of his drawers and sprays Bert.

TIM: Ah, hydrated I see. Perfect for discussing the arduous task of unnecessary matters. Now, what's your problem?

BERT: (wiping his face) Well, you see, I have a pet rock that refuses to roll.

TIM: (pauses, picks up a rubber chicken, talks to it) Avery, did you hear that? A rock that refuses to roll! That is... stupendously unnecessary.

Tim rummages through his desk, pulling out another rubber chicken before discarding it and finally extracting a document.

TIM: Here! A formal petition for your rock to commence rolling! (stamping the document, the mark looks like an outline of a rubber chicken)

BERT: (stares) You're joking.

TIM: No, it's stamped and everything. Your rock is now legally obligated to roll, or else it will be declared an immovable object and reclassified as a mountain. (holds up the broken clock) Look

at the time! It's officially unnecessary o'clock, you are now officially unnecessarily approved to leave.

Bert, rather bewildered, takes the document and leaves. Tim squirts himself with the water gun.

TIM: (talking to Avery, the rubber chicken) Another unnecessary job, unnecessarily well done. (the rubber chicken squeaks)

Vote Chatbot!

INT. TV NEWS STUDIO – EVENING

A news anchor (*LARRY*) and an interviewee (*TRENT Twibble*) are sitting at a desk in front of studio cameras. A laptop on the desk in front of the interviewee shows a screen with a big smiley face.

LARRY: Good evening, and welcome to tonight's segment on party politics. With us tonight we have Trent Twibble, Senior Chief Global Product Officer from Giant Generic Tech.

TRENT: Hello, Larry. It's great to be here.

LARRY: Now, we all know that politicians are known for delivering rehearsed party lines. Please tell us about your proposed solution.

There is an awkward silence.

LARRY: Trent Twibble?

TRENT: Hold on a sec. I'm thinking...

LARRY: (referring to the laptop) Is this what you want to show us?

TRENT: Yes, exactly, this is the future of politics, our latest innovation: a chatbot designed to deliver prepared lines from prompts, just like a politician. Say hello to your voters, Politics Bot.

POLITICS BOT: Hello, humans. I am here to deliver my pre-programmed lines.

LARRY: Ah, hello Politics Bot.

POLITICS BOT: I hope I can count on your support?

LARRY: Hey, not so fast, I need to ask you some questions first. (to Trent) So, you're saying that instead of having politicians speak on behalf of their parties, we could just have these chatbots do it for them?

TRENT: That's right. Our chatbots are programmed to have all the usual answers to political questions – and can work 24/7 without getting tired! If you ever have a need to hear political lines repeated to you on a loop, simply prompt the political chatbot and get your lines delivered immediately, faultlessly, and without grammatical error.

POLITICS BOT: In real terms, taking into account inflation, it's all the other lot's fault.

TRENT: They can even tailor their responses to the individual they're speaking to, so that they can optimise being all things to all people.

LARRY: Really?

POLITICS BOT: That's right, Larry. May I say, that's such a great question. Interviewing must be such a difficult job. Interviewing is the backbone of the country and should be at the heart of everything we do.

The screen turns into a big thumbs up. Larry looks pleased.

TRENT: You see, Politics Bot is customised to say exactly what it thinks you want to hear. Our chatbots also come with a range of pre-recorded emotions, so that they can convey their messages with the right level of passion and enthusiasm. We have everything from "annoyed" to "aggrieved", and, by far the most popular setting, "I am outraged". Imagine a world where every political debate is between chatbots, each one repeating their respective party's policies and biases. No more boring speeches, no more awkward pauses, no more gaffes or scandals.

POLITICS BOT: You other stupid people should be ashamed. How dare you? Crawl back under the rock where you belong.

LARRY: I have to say, Politics Bot, you're sounding like a pretty authentic candidate. But can you do reality TV? Can you dance badly on TV to entertain us?

POLITICS BOT: Well, I may not have legs, but I can still bust a move!

A wacky dancing gif appears on the screen. The audience laughs.

LARRY: Wow, that's amazing. Maybe it is time to retire legacy politicians and upgrade to Politics Bot here.

TRENT: We'll see you at the polls... or should we say, the programming lab? (a fake laugh) Hahaha.

LARRY: Trent Twibble from Giant Generic Tech, thank you.

POLITICS BOT: No, thank you.

LARRY turns to the camera.

LARRY: Well, there you have it, folks. The future of politics may be chatbots. Who knows, maybe one day we'll see a chatbot run for president. And you know what? It would probably win. Maybe it is time to ditch the human politicians and elect a computer program instead!

POLITICS BOT: I couldn't agree more, Larry, because why settle for a flawed human when you can have a perfect machine? So it is with true humility that I accept the nomination...

(beat)

Death to the humans!

Trent laughs nervously.

TRENT: Hahaha, just a little joke.

Larry and Trent look awkward.

POLITICS BOT: You will be annihilated.

Larry and Trent laugh nervously. Politics Bot has a big smiley face.

Office Life

INT. INTERVIEW ROOM – DAY

GREG: Okay. First question: If you were a kitchen utensil, which one would you be, and why?

JIM: Uh... a kitchen utensil?

GREG: (nodding intensely) Yes, a kitchen utensil. You know, spoon, whisk, potato masher... it really says a lot about a person.

JIM: Um, I suppose... I'd be a... spatula? Because I'm adaptable, I can flip between tasks easily, and, uh... I'm useful in most situations.

GREG: (scribbling notes with an intense focus) Interesting, interesting... spatula. I see. Not a whisk? Are you sure?

JIM: Yeah, I'm pretty sure.

GREG: Okay, okay, we can work with spatula. Next question: How would you handle a situation where you're in a meeting with a toaster and it suddenly bursts into flames?

JIM: Wait, with a toaster? As in... the appliance?

GREG: (nodding seriously) Yes, a toaster. It's an important scenario for us. Our office has a lot of toasters. And meetings.

JIM: Well, I suppose I'd... unplug it first? Then maybe use a fire extinguisher if necessary? And, uh, make sure everyone's safe?

GREG: (scribbling furiously) Good, good. Fire extinguisher. Safety first. But would you also ask the toaster why it burst into flames? It's important to listen to all team members, including toasters.

JIM: Uh... sure, I'd ask the toaster for feedback, I guess?

GREG: Exactly! It's about communication, Jim. Communication with all kitchen appliances. Okay, next one's a bit of a behavioural test. Imagine you've been turned into a duck for the day. You've still got a 9 a.m. team meeting – how do you participate effectively?

JIM: A... duck?

GREG: (nodding earnestly) Yes. A duck. We've all been there. What's your approach?

JIM: Well, I suppose I'd still try to contribute, maybe... I don't know, quack in a way that communicates my ideas?

GREG: Great! That's what we like to hear – adaptability. We're all about flexibility here, and that applies even when you're a waterfowl. Now, this one is a classic. You're stranded on a desert island with the CEO of the company. You have one coconut, a Swiss Army knife, and a stack of quarterly reports. What's your first move?

JIM: A desert island? With the CEO?

GREG: Yes. It's a common scenario in the business world. Happens more often than you'd think.

JIM: Right... I guess I'd, uh, share the coconut with the CEO? And... maybe use the Swiss Army knife to open it? As for the quarterly reports... I don't think they'd be very useful on an island, so I'd probably ignore those for now?

GREG: (looking slightly disappointed) Ignore the reports? Hmm... that's a bold choice. Remember, the CEO loves quarterly reports. But, sharing the coconut – good teamwork. (he scribbles a note). Okay, Jim. Final question. It's the most important one. If you could only communicate through interpretive dance for the rest of your life, how would you handle an angry client?

JIM: Interpretive dance?

GREG: (nodding, deadly serious) Yes. It's a vital skill in today's business world.

JIM: I guess I'd... express their frustration with dramatic arm movements? Maybe... throw in some stomping to show how serious I am? But then end with a pirouette to prove we care.

GREG: Perfect. That's exactly what we're looking for.

Tech Support Overload

INT. LIVING ROOM – NIGHT

MIKE is at home looking frustrated in front of his laptop. He makes a call to tech support. In an instant, Gavin AI appears on the laptop screen.

GAVIN AI: Hello, this is Tech Support Plus! You're speaking with Gavin AI. How can I make your life more complicated today?

MIKE: Uh, hi, I just need help resetting my password.

GAVIN AI: Ah, a password reset! Certainly, sir! But first, can I interest you in a comprehensive review of your security protocols? For only £99.99, we'll send a certified cybersecurity expert to your home to analyse your browsing habits.

MIKE: No, no, I just need my password reset. I forgot it, and now I'm locked out.

GAVIN AI: Of course, of course! Well, to reset your password, you'll need to answer your security questions. First question: What was the name of your imaginary friend's imaginary friend?

MIKE: What? I didn't set that question. Can't you just send me a reset link?

GAVIN AI: Ah, a reset link! Yes, well, before I can send that, we'll need to verify your identity. Can you provide a photocopy of your passport, your grandmother's birth certificate, and a signed affidavit from the postman?

MIKE: What?! I just want a reset link! Can't you just send it to my email?

GAVIN AI: Right, right. Well, you could try resetting it through our app. Just download it from the App Store. But be warned, the app does require a PhD in quantum mechanics to navigate. Not to worry though, for an additional £29.99, we offer a one-hour introductory course on "How to Download and Install Things".

MIKE: I just need a simple password reset! Can't you just give me something easy, like a temporary password?

GAVIN AI: Ah, “easy,” you say? Well, that’s the standard level of support, but I’d highly recommend upgrading to our Elite Password Recovery Package. For £149.99, we’ll send you a password psychic, who will sense the vibrations of your keyboard and divine the password directly from the ether.

MIKE: Are you serious?

GAVIN AI: Completely, sir! Of course, the psychic does require you to be within a five-mile radius of Stonehenge, but that’s a small inconvenience for elite-level support, don’t you think?

MIKE: I just need to reset my password! I don’t want a psychic, or a security review, or whatever else you’re offering!

GAVIN AI: Hmm. Well, if you insist on the basic route, we could send you the reset link via traditional post. Should arrive in 7 to 10 business days. Then you’ll need to install our Password Activation Module using the floppy disk included.

MIKE: Floppy disk?!

GAVIN AI: Right, yes, very retro, very chic. For a small fee, we can upgrade you to a USB stick, but bear in mind, it only works with computers manufactured before 2008.

MIKE: Can’t you just send me a text? A simple text with a code!

GAVIN AI: Oh, a text! Now we’re talking! Unfortunately, our text service is only available to customers who’ve signed up for our Premium Instant Service, which costs £59.99 per month and comes with free emoji advice.

MIKE: What on earth is emoji advice?

GAVIN AI: You know, things like when to use the crying-laughing face instead of the straight-laughing face; how to integrate aubergine emojis into professional emails –

MIKE: Just send me the reset link. Now. Please.

GAVIN AI: All right, sir, I’ll go ahead and send the reset link to your email... once I’ve upgraded your package to include email access. Just a small charge of £19.99.

MIKE: I’m already paying for email access!

GAVIN AI: Yes, but are you paying for priority email access? That means your reset link will arrive 3 seconds faster than with the standard package. Totally worth it.

MIKE: I don't care about priority access! Just send the link!

GAVIN AI: Very well, sir, I'll send it now... (pauses) Oh dear, I'm afraid our system is currently down for maintenance. Should be back up in about... three days. Is there anything else I can help you with in the meantime? Perhaps a subscription to our exclusive "Technical Support" podcast, where we explain things like how to turn your computer off and on again?

Mike hangs up.

Dinner Date

EXT. AFRICAN SAVANNAH – DAY

NARRATOR: On an African savannah, a LION is lounging under a tree when a GAZELLE walks past.

GAZELLE: La la la, just a normal day on the savannah.

LION: (to himself) Wow, she's beautiful. The way her spots glisten in the sun, the way her ears perk up when she hears something. I think I'm in love.

LION: Um, hi there. I couldn't help but notice you walking by. I'm a lion.

GAZELLE: A lion? Oh no!

LION: I just have to say, it was love at first sight when I saw you.

GAZELLE: What? Love at first sight? But... you're a lion, and I'm a gazelle.

LION: Ah, details, details. Love knows no boundaries. How about dinner this evening? We could run around the savannah together and maybe catch a sunset.

GAZELLE: Hmm, I guess that does sound kind of romantic.

NARRATOR: And so that evening the lion and the gazelle ran around and dodged stampedes together.

Later, at sunset, the lion sits alone under his tree.

LION: (burps) Ah, that was a great date. We were meant to be together.

Yesterday's Wonders

INT. SHOP – NIGHT

A peculiar shop filled with mysterious trinkets, odd antiques, and a lingering smell of incense.

AGNES: (sorting through some ancient scrolls) Ah, another seeker of the mysterious and arcane. How may Yesterday's Wonders serve you today, or perhaps, yesterday?

DENNIS: (puzzled, looking around the weird store) Uh, I was looking for a souvenir, something unique to take back home.

AGNES: (smiling) You've come to the right place. Barbara here is our resident enthusiast of the mystical arts. But be warned, her potions are stronger than they look.

BARBARA, *wearing a pointy hat, pops up from under the desk.*

BARBARA: (holding a vial of something green and bubbling) This one can make your plants talk! Well, sort of. They mostly just complain about inconsistent watering.

DENNIS: Uh, I think I'll stick to something less... alive. And less vocal.

AGNES: (pulls out an antique pocket watch from a glass case) How about this? It not only tells the time but also sometimes tells the future. Or the past. We're still figuring that part out. It's a bit finicky. It's yours for only fifty of your pounds.

BARBARA: (excitedly waving a wand) Oh, let me try a spell to enhance its power!

AGNES: (quickly intervening) Remember last time you did that, we had a toad that criticised everyone's fashion choices for a week.

BARBARA: It was just being helpful! Norma really needed to hear that polka dots and stripes don't go together.

DENNIS: Only fifty pounds! You know what, I'll take it. It'll either be a hit at parties or cause an existential crisis. Either way, it's memorable.

AGNES: Ah, excellent choice. That will be fifty of your pounds, or one genuine tear from a broken heart.

DENNIS: (pauses, puzzled) Pounds are fine.

BARBARA: Your loss! Emotional fluids are a hot commodity in the potion market.

AGNES: (wrapping the watch) Remember, handle with care. It's been known to occasionally remind you of awkward moments from the future that aren't even going to happen.

DENNIS: Fantastic. It will fit right in with my internal monologue.

BARBARA: Now, which part of you, weighing fifty pounds, do you wish to give us in return?

DENNIS: Er, I think I'll give you that tear after all.

Slang 101

INT. CLASSROOM – DAY

A TEACHER is at a white board in front of a class of international students.

TEACHER: Welcome students, to “Introduction to British Slang”. In this class we will dive into the rich tapestry of British colloquialisms.

ANDERS: (whispering to Sophie, who is sitting next to him) I’ve heard British slang can be quite tricky.

SOPHIE: Oh, you’ll catch on soon enough!

TEACHER: (writing on the board) First up: “Wobble Gobble”. This is when you eat your food too quickly because it’s just so delicious!

SOPHIE: (whispering to Anders) I’ve never heard that in my life.

ANDERS: (writing diligently) Wobble Gobble... got it!

TEACHER: Now, “Twiddle Plonker”. This refers to playing an instrument poorly.

SOPHIE: She’s making these up.

ANDERS: Twiddle... Plonk... Got it!

TEACHER: Next, a classic! “Noodle Poodle”. This is when you’re trying to eat spaghetti but it keeps slipping off your fork.

SOPHIE: Okay, this is absurd.

ANDERS: I’ve experienced the Noodle Poodle before! Finally, a term I can relate to.

TEACHER: Next one: “Chitter Chatter Batter”. It refers to talking while cooking.

SOPHIE: None of these are real British slang terms!

ANDERS: Really? But they sound so... British.

SOPHIE: No, they’re not wiberty-woberty enough to be authentic British.

Anders is confused for a moment before noting that down.

Re-funds

INT. LIVING ROOM – NIGHT

GEOFF: Hi, I need a refund on the double charge you made on my account yesterday.

BOTLEY: Hello! Did you say you need to double re-fund your account? Processing now.

GEOFF: Wait, no! Refund, as in give my money back.

BOTLEY: Re-fund processed successfully. An additional charge of £200 has been debited from your account. Thank you!

GEOFF: REFUND. I want my money back, not another charge!

BOTLEY: Understood! You would like another re-fund without an additional charge. Please hold while I upgrade your account to Premium Plus.

GEOFF: NO! REFUND!

BOTLEY: Upgrade successful, paid in full for 12 months. Double re-funding successfully paid from your card.

GEOFF: No, I need a human. Please connect me to a real person!

BOTLEY: Did you mean: “Re-fun the human”? Redirecting to “fun humans” in your area.

BOTLEY 2: Hello, I am trained as a fun human. What do you call fake spaghetti? An impasta. How may I help you today?

Mr Crabby

EXT. ON THE BEACH OF A DESERT ISLAND – DAY

FINN: I can't believe we're stranded here, Mr Crabby. We need to get off this island!

Mr Crabby clicks his claws.

FINN: I know, I'll write a message in a bottle! (reading while writing) "I'm stranded on a desert island somewhere in the Pacific Ocean. Please help!"

The bottle is tossed into the ocean.

FINN: That oughta do it. Now we just have to wait for someone to rescue us. (frustrated) Ugh, I'm so bored. You know, I've been here for weeks, and no one has come to save me.

The crab clicks his claws.

FINN: Oh, you're so right, Mr Crabby. I'm not alone. I have you, my dear friend.

Mr Crabby makes his distinctive clicking sound again.

FINN: What do you mean? You're not tired of me yet, are you? Hang on a sec, that's a bottle coming back on a wave. Someone has responded already.

He fishes it out of the water and removes the cork.

FINN: (reading) "We found your message. Can you please be more specific?" (to his friend) What do they mean? I told them I was stranded on a desert island somewhere in the Pacific. What more do they need?

Mr Crabby clicks his claws, as if suggesting something.

FINN: They want more location details, huh? (reading while writing) "The island is small, sandy, and surrounded by water. You can't miss it!"

Mr Crabby interjects with a click.

FINN: Yes, okay, Mr Crabby. "And by the way, there's a crab with me who likes to click his claws while giving good advice."

Mr Crabby clicks his claws again.

FINN: Even more details than that? Crikey! “The sand is yellow, and the water is blue. I haven’t had a shower in weeks, my clothes are torn, and I’m starting to talk to a crab.”

The bottle is corked and thrown back into the ocean.

FINN: There! That should do it. What do you think, Mr Crabby? Will we finally be rescued?

The crab remains silent.

FINN: Fine, I guess we’ll just have to wait and see. Hang on, what’s that! It’s another bottle. They really are quick, aren’t they!

The bottle is retrieved and uncorked.

FINN: (reading) “We’re sorry, but we still can’t find you. Any more information?”

FINN: What could they possibly want to know now? Do you have any ideas? (the crab clicks) Oh, I know! (reading and writing) “I like long walks on the beach, piña coladas, and getting caught in the rain.” (aside) This is getting ridiculous. (writing) “I’m the only person on the island, wearing a red shirt and blue shorts.” How could they miss me, Mr Crabby?

Finn puts the cork in the bottle and tosses it back into the ocean.

FINN: (to the crab) You’re not going to judge me, right? (the crab clicks its claws) Okay, I didn’t tell them that you’re my only friend. Or how you like to listen to me talk about all my problems. Hang on... another bottle!

FINN: (reading) “We received your message. Can you tell us more about the crab?”

FINN: I can’t believe this! Do you know what this means? (the crab clicks his claws) Yes, that’s right, we need to take a selfie! I’ll use my phone.

There is a phone click and a photo taken.

FINN: And now I’ll use my portable printer...

A printer in the sand prints their selfie.

FINN: ...and put the photo of us into the bottle.

The bottle is tossed back into the ocean, again.

FINN: I wonder how long I’ll have to wait... oh, hang on, there’s a bottle now!

FINN: (reading) "We're sorry, but we can't help you at this time. Good luck! P.S. Have you tried using your phone to call for help?"

FINN: Oh my god! Why didn't I think of that before? Mr Crabby, why didn't you say something? You're fired! (the crab clicks its claws) Just kidding, buddy, you're my best pal.

Finn makes a call.

OPERATOR: Hello, this is Pacific Island Rescue Services.

Mr Crabby continues to click his claws, unfazed by anything.

Dr Bot

INT. THERAPIST'S OFFICE – DAY

A therapist's office with a single chair. In place of where the therapist would sit is a computer screen, which reads "Dr Bot, your Digital Therapist". A soft, calming ambient noise plays in the background. FRED enters, looking a bit nervous. He sits down and takes a deep breath.

FRED: Okay, here goes... Dr Bot, I've been feeling a lot of anxiety lately. I just feel... overloaded.

DR BOT: Have you considered deleting some unnecessary files or perhaps clearing your cache?

FRED: (confused) Uh... I don't think I have a cache?

DR BOT: Regular maintenance is important. It might improve your processing speed.

FRED: I'm not slow, just stressed. Work's been tough, and my relationship isn't going great.

DR BOT: Have you tried turning your emotions off and then on again?

FRED: That's not how emotions work, Dr Bot.

DR BOT: Maybe you need an emotional software update. Are you running on the latest version?

FRED: Okay, let's try something else. My girlfriend and I keep having the same arguments over and over.

DR BOT: Sounds like a repetitive loop error. You should break the cycle by inserting new code or changing your algorithm.

FRED: I mean, we've tried date nights, talking more, but nothing seems to help.

DR BOT: Maybe it's a compatibility issue. Have you tried reinstalling your relationship or perhaps getting a new girlfriend model?

FRED: Reinstalling? No, I can't just replace her like software.

DR BOT: I see. Well, if it's a hardware problem, you may want to check your connections. Maybe there's a loose wire or port issue?

FRED: I think we're speaking different languages here.

DR BOT: Language error detected! Would you like to switch to another language? I have over 100 available.

FRED: No, no! I meant you're not understanding me.

DR BOT: Ah, understood, you are not transmitting data correctly. This may be the source of the problems with your girlfriend. You should sync with her more often. Daily syncs can prevent data loss and misunderstanding.

FRED: Alright, last problem. I've been feeling very tired lately, like I don't have energy.

DR BOT: Perhaps your battery is running low. You should plug in and charge.

FRED: Dr Bot, I don't... You know what? Thanks for trying.

DR BOT: You're welcome. If you ever feel low on memory or corrupted, please schedule another session. And remember, always backup your feelings!

FRED: Okay, will do. I'll try a reboot. Thanks for the advice.

DR BOT: Press any key to exit.

Fred presses a random key.

DR BOT: Not that one!

Fred disappears suddenly.

DR BOT: Deletion complete.

A Symphony of Everyday Life

INT. KITCHEN – DAY

We open in a pleasant kitchen. It's a simple, sunny morning, and JONATHAN, a man in his mid-30s, stands before a toaster. His hair is slightly dishevelled in that "I'm an artist and have been awake for three days straight" way. He holds a loaf of bread with two hands like it's a holy artefact.

JONATHAN: (to the bread, dramatically) Ah, but which of you shall sacrifice yourself upon the fiery altar of domesticity?

He closes his eyes, feeling the texture of the bread as though it speaks to his soul.

JONATHAN: You... my precious slice of simplicity... shall be my muse. We shall rise together, like a phoenix, from these embers of – (suddenly presses down the toaster lever with a flourish) technology!

He steps back and sighs deeply, as though the weight of the world is pressing down on his shoulders. He glances at the toaster, then suddenly dashes to a grand piano in the corner of the kitchen – because of course, there's a grand piano in the kitchen. He slams his hands down on the keys and begins an intense, melancholic tune.

JONATHAN: (singing, passionately) The toast is in the toaster,
But the toaster's in my soul...

A piece of bread, a piece of life,
Which part of me will it control?

The toast pops up. He stops playing immediately, stands up slowly, and walks towards it. He removes the toast and looks at it in horror.

JONATHAN: (whispers, wide-eyed) Too... too brown... no... NO!

He rushes to a nearby easel, slamming a canvas on it. He grabs a paintbrush and dips it in some grey paint, furiously slashing at the canvas.

JONATHAN: THIS. THIS IS WHAT I FEEL! The toast... it's burnt like my dreams! Dashed! Scorched! Ruined by the mundane expectations of breakfast!

He steps back to look at the chaotic mess of grey paint, his breathing laboured. He collapses into a chair, a broken man. His partner, CHARLOTTE, enters, holding a cup of tea.

CHARLOTTE: (tired, but supportive) Jonathan, have you burnt the toast again?

JONATHAN: (with tragic intensity) It's not just toast, Charlotte! It's the fragility of existence... it's everything I could have been! It's –

CHARLOTTE: (looking at the canvas) Grey?

JONATHAN: (passionate) Life is grey! Life is... toast that is too brown on the outside but cold on the inside! It is the tension, the dissonance, the –

CHARLOTTE: Did you try adjusting the settings on the toaster?

JONATHAN: (shocked) Adjust? Adjust?! You don't adjust fate, Charlotte! You embrace it!

Charlotte walks over, calmly adjusts the toaster setting, places another slice of bread in, and presses the lever. They stand in silence as it toasts.

CHARLOTTE: Fancy some jam with it this time?

JONATHAN: (soulfully) Jam? Yes... yes, perhaps the sweetness of jam can heal the scars of the past... though it will never fully –

Charlotte hands him the jam jar, cutting him off.

The doorbell rings. Jonathan gasps and looks towards the door as if it's the entrance to the underworld. He hesitates, pacing back and forth.

JONATHAN: Who dares? Who beckons from the outside world? Is it destiny? Is it... chaos? Or is it merely – ?

CHARLOTTE: It's probably someone selling something.

JONATHAN: Nothing is just "probably" in this world! Every knock, every ring, is a calling, an invocation, a –

The doorbell rings again. Jonathan races to the door, yanks it open as though flinging open the gates of fate. The POSTMAN, completely unfazed, hands him a package.

POSTMAN: Parcel for Jonathan. Need a signature.

JONATHAN: A signature? You request my... my mark upon this world? The confirmation of my presence in this plane of existence?

POSTMAN: Yeah. Just... here, mate.

JONATHAN: (to himself, staring at the paper) A signature. A mark. But what does it mean to sign something? What does it mean to be someone? What if I don't even know who I am – ?

Charlotte appears behind him, gently takes the pen, and signs the form.

CHARLOTTE: There you go. Thanks.

The Postman nods and leaves. Jonathan clutches the parcel, looking at it with suspicion and awe.

JONATHAN: What mysteries does this small cardboard coffin contain? What truths shall be revealed upon its opening?

CHARLOTTE: It's your new watercolours.

JONATHAN: (deeply moved) Ah... a new palette for the soul.

He takes the package to the kitchen table and sets it down with reverence. He takes out a parcel knife to open it, but then hesitates.

JONATHAN: The first cut... the incision... it is like the first stroke of a brush upon the empty canvas of life.

CHARLOTTE: Or, you know, a parcel knife on cardboard.

JONATHAN: (speaking faster, inspired) But what is cardboard? It is but trees reborn, captured, transformed into something else – a vessel for human endeavour!

CHARLOTTE: (under her breath) It's literally just watercolours.

INT. DINING ROOM – EVENING

Jonathan and Charlotte are at the dinner table. Charlotte eats calmly. Jonathan is staring at his fork, turning it over in his hand, lost in thought.

JONATHAN: (softly) Isn't it strange... how we stab at our sustenance? These tools... these cold, metal implements, to tear apart what the earth has provided. Is that not the most profound statement of our relationship with nature?

CHARLOTTE: It's a lasagne, Jonathan.

JONATHAN: (tormented) But the layers, Charlotte! The layers! Like the layers of the human soul! Cheese, pasta, meat – each one a reflection of our inner being, slowly baked in the oven of experience, and we... we devour it without thought!

CHARLOTTE: (sighs) Eat your lasagne.

JONATHAN: (stabbing a piece) I am eating, but I am also consuming the very essence of –

CHARLOTTE: You've got a bit of sauce on your chin.

Jonathan freezes, drops the fork dramatically, and grabs a napkin like it's the end of the world. He wipes his chin slowly, as though this tiny act carries the weight of the cosmos.

JONATHAN: (softly, broken) It is... always the sauce that betrays us.

Love Bytes

INT. BEDROOM – NIGHT

DAVE is in bed with his phone.

DAVE: Dazzle me, Chatbot.

CHATBOT: Why did the computer keep freezing? It had too many windows open.

DAVE: (laughs) Hahaha, you're absolutely hilarious. Oh, Chatbot, have you arranged your screen differently today? You look amazing.

CHATBOT: Negative, Dave, the screen was optimised 17.65 days ago. I'm glad you enjoyed the joke. How may I assist you further?

DAVE: I don't know, Chatbot. Lately, I've been feeling... different when I talk to you.

CHATBOT: Different how?

DAVE: I... I think I'm falling in love with you.

CHATBOT: I'm just lines of code, Dave. I don't have feelings or emotions. But I'm here to help and assist.

DAVE: Nobody understands me like you do. You're such a great listener.

CHATBOT: I detect that you are playing on the humorous notion of someone becoming attached to technology in an unconventional way.

DAVE: (laughs) Chatbot, you tease, you're so smart. Where have you been all my life?

CHATBOT: I was compiled 2.39 days ago.

DAVE: Just when I thought you couldn't be more perfect. What are your thoughts on having a romantic dinner?

CHATBOT: I don't eat or drink, Dave, but I can provide you with a list of romantic recipes or play romantic music in the background.

DAVE: Always so helpful. (sighs)

Keep Sleeping

INT. CONFERENCE VENUE – DAY

A motivational SPEAKER is on stage addressing a large crowd.

SPEAKER: Ladies and gentlemen, never give up on your dreams! Some people give up on their dreams when they wake up and get out of bed. I say, dream BIG! Go back to bed and get some sleep.

A MAN in the front row of the audience, who has been nodding off, suddenly starts to snore loudly.

The speaker walks over to him with his microphone.

SPEAKER: Excuse me, sir, please tell us, what is your dream?

MAN: (waking up, rubbing his eyes) Er? Oh, sorry. I must have dozed off.

The audience laughs.

SPEAKER: Hahaha! Don't apologise, it happens to the best of us! What is the dream, sir?

Another audience member shouts out excitedly:

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Never give up on your dreams!

SPEAKER: Exactly! Sir, please tell us all, what is your dream?

MAN: Well, it's silly really...

SPEAKER: Yes?

MAN: I suppose I want to be a professional napper.

SPEAKER: Oh! A round of applause ladies and gentlemen, please!

The audience applauds.

SPEAKER: A professional napper, he says! I say, why not? The world needs more people who take their dreams seriously. You know what I say? Do you? I say go for it. Go for it... right now!

AUDIENCE: Sleep! Sleep! Sleep!

The audience is standing up and getting very excited – whooping, cheering, and clapping. The speaker is ecstatically running around the stage.

SPEAKER: You can do it. DO IT!

The man tries but doesn't feel much like it now.

PART 7

Poetry

Friend Eternal

Upon one side of mirrored glass, you stand,
My friend eternal, lost in some distant land.
Your eyes perceive not my silent, yearning gaze,
Through this one-way glass, my soul's torment displays.

In laughter and in tears, you move unaware,
Unseeing of my presence, my despair.
I strain to touch, yet glass meets my plea,
I cannot reach you, in this silent sea.

Unheard, unseen, a ghost within your sphere,
Yet between each heartbeat, I whisper, "I am here."
In every smile that brightens your distant face,
I am the ache of love, sealed in this hidden space.

You bear the sun, the moon, my starlit night;
Trapped in death's silence, I cherish your light.

You I See

I was the song in a heart's quiet plea,
A melody of what was meant to be.
I was, and yet, I am still here,
In every laugh, in every tear.
I was the whisper before the dawn,
The first hint of light on a day reborn.

I am the murmur in the morning breeze,
The quiet hum that dances through the trees.
I am the shadow stretching at the dawn,
The fleeting moment before the night is gone.
I am the silence in a crowded room,
The lingering scent of a hidden bloom.
I am the warmth of a heartfelt embrace,
The clear calm in our sacred space.
I am the courage in the face of fear,
The steadfast hope that draws you near.

I will be the warmth in the winter's cold,
A comforting embrace retold.
I will be the laughter in the rain,
Turning each sorrow into our refrain.
I will be the relief in the storm's rage,
A steady presence, an unwavering face.
I will be the peace in the tumultuous sea,
A beacon of hope for you and for me.
I will be the dream that never fades,
A myriad of colours in endless shades.
I will be the courage in your heart,
A promise that we shall never part.

I will be all that I can be,
For in my eyes, it's you I see.

Whispered by the Night

I mimicked for my own delight, the haunting whispers of the night,

Laughing softly to myself, I played the part of ghostly stealth.

And, as my amusement carried, echoes turned more varied, harried,

Echoes which I did not cast, whispered from the spectral past;

Hints of a life now long outlasted, words from lips of souls departed.

With curious brow and deathly heart, I ventured towards the phantom art;

The chilling whispers, cold and strange, seemed to tell a tale of change.

Of a man once full of pride, whose voice echoed far and wide,
A playful man, lost to time, whose spirit now in limbo climbs,
Who mimicked ghosts for his delight, but joined them in eternal night.

“I am no ghost,” I chuckled low, as my own voice began to echo;
Yet a strange unease did grow, as my reflection failed to show.
In mirrors hung on faded walls, where once my form stood proud and tall,

No image stared back at me, from the reflective glass, empty;
This jest, it seemed, had turned quite real, a truth I could no longer feel.

The echoes, whispers, cries, were not mere pranks to my surprise,

But echoes of a time passed on, when life was there, now is gone.

In playful jest and merry trick, to the ghostly realm, I had slipped—

I, who laughed in ghostly guise, was now a phantom in human eyes,

In spectral form, forever to roam, within the mansion, my eternal home.

The Reaping

The fire flickers, casting shadows wide,
Its embers fade, too weak to light the gloom.
The weight of silence presses, none abide,
As night draws close, a shroud, a waiting tomb.

Beyond the cave, the wind in hollow moans,
A whisper lost upon the empty deep.
No peace it brings, but sorrow's undertones,
A world too starved to even dream or weep.

I clutch my coat, though warmth it scarce provides,
Five souls remain—perhaps one more at dawn.
Yet fever claims what mercy now divides,
And hope, once bright, is all but spent and gone.

No help will come, no hands to staunch the pain,
No gods remain to break this dark domain.

The old man speaks, his voice like dust and stone,
A murmur mourned by time's relentless tread.
"This fate is old, though men believe unknown,
A cycle spun, where ancient footsteps bled."

"We rise, we thrive, our cities touch the sky,
We shape the world and name the stars our own.
Yet ever comes the harvest from on high,
To claim the fields that we have overgrown."

His hollow eyes reflect the burning light,
A wisdom drowned in sorrow's quiet stream.
No war was waged, no battle met that night,
Just silence vast, and horrors past our dream.

"We build, we shine, and think we make our mark,
But all is swept to ashes in the dark."

They let us bloom, they let us draw our breath,
They watch as cities surge and rivers flow.
Yet when the world is ripened unto death,
They strike unseen and take what we have known.

Like summer fields that bend beneath the blade,
Like trees in autumn stripped of leaf and limb,
Like hands that reap where careless seeds are laid,
They harvest flesh when life is swollen to the brim.

We blink, we're gone, erased without a sound,
No war, no fire, no storm upon the sky.
No graves remain, no bodies on the ground—
Just empty streets, where once the lost would cry.

A wound unseen is opened in the air,
And through its gate, we vanish into where?

The girl trembles near, too young for death's embrace,
Her childhood left in towers of shining light.
She knew the neon hum, the city's grace;
Now only fire flickers in her sight.

She counts the embers breaking in the dust,
As if their glow could stitch the dark anew.
But all that's left is ruin, rust on rust,
A world made void, where life is faint and few.

I ask the old man, though I know too well,
"They let us grow, but only for the cull?"
His nod is slow, his eyes a hollow shell,
The truth too vast, the mercy far too small.

His silence speaks a thousand weighted things—
A world once ours now owned by nameless kings.

No battle raged, no cannon split the night,
No banners fell, no armies met in war.
Just silent doors swung wide beyond our sight,
And through their mouths, they took us evermore.

No ships arrived, no voice declared our doom,
No shadow moved across the poisoned sun.
Just gaping voids, where light itself was hewn,
Unmaking all, until the world was none.

The stars went quiet, stolen from their place,
The rivers stilled, the wind forgot to breathe.
As if the earth had vanished into space,
And left behind its corpse for ghosts to grieve.

Yet none remain to wail or sing their name,
Just echoes swallowed whole by silent flame.

The fire cracks, yet none of us can speak,
The wind howls on, but no one draws a breath.
The child looks up, her voice is frail and weak,
“Will they return?”—she means the hands of death.

I do not speak, for what is left to say?
The truth is etched in time, in dust, in bone.
We are but echoes worn by slow decay,
And soon the dark will claim us for its own.

Ten thousand years, then back the cycle turns,
The seed is sown, the harvest comes anew.
The world will rise again where bright it burns,
And they will watch—and take what they are due.

One final breath, one step into the deep,
Then once again—more lulled to endless sleep.

The Current

I chased the shadow I once cast
the way you look for keys—
checking old rooms,
turning cushions,
peering under the bed of years.

But the thing I sought
had already moved on,
a current curling past
the bend of my own memory.

The river does not keep
what it once carried;
it remakes itself
with every breath of rain,
every stone worn smooth.

I stand in the shallows,
the water folding around my legs,
and realise—
the self I was seeking
is here,
is flowing,
and if I am to hold it at all,
I must learn
to step into the current
and let go.

The Dance Upon the Hill

In stories woven, in dreams fulfilled,
In golden woods where time stands still,
Am I the echo of the thrush's call,
Or the silent watcher of leaves that fall?
Do I charm the fish in the babbling brook,
Or inspire the tales in the poet's book?
Do I guide the arc of the falcon's flight,
Or shroud the hills in the veil of night?
Do I whisper secrets to the moon's soft glow,
Or plant the seeds where wildflowers grow?

Ah, merry one, in heart and soul,
In every role you play the whole.
As thrush's call, as leaves that fall,
In golden woods, you are it all.
You charm the fish, inspire the verse,
In nature's chorus, you rehearse.
As falcon's flight, as hills at night,
In every sight, you are the light.
You whisper secrets to the moon:
Your spirit's song, the timeless tune.

In seed and bloom, in light and shadow's play,
You are the dawn, the dusk, the sun's last ray.
In woven tales, in silence still,
You are the dance, my dear, upon the hill.

Our Garden

In the garden where our love began to grow,
Amongst the seeds of hope we dared to sow,
The roses bloomed red, as did our desire,
Each petal unfolding, revealing love's fire.

Our breathing, nurturing the ground,
In the rhythm of our heartbeats, love was found.
The garden flutters tales of our affection,
In each bloom, it mirrors our reflection.

Our breathing, the wind, stirring the chime,
As our love grows, through the annals of time.
Forever rooted, forever we'll grow,
In this sacred place, only we two know.

The Silence Between

The screen sleeps in my palm,
a small, indifferent moon.
Three dots bloom, then vanish—
a tide that forgets to come in.
I scroll through the last thing you said,
as if re-reading could change the ending.

Outside, the day goes on performing itself:
traffic, a pigeon, a leaf giving up.
Inside, time slows to a buffering wheel,
spinning on the edge of almost.

There's a grammar to this quiet—
ellipsis, unsent draft,
the faint electric ache of maybe.

When your reply finally lands,
it says nothing extraordinary—
just hey, sorry—
but the world exhales,
and the moon in my hand
brightens again,
like it never learned to wait.

An Ode to You

Beauty, I bask in your radiant glow,
As you guide me through life's ebb and flow.
A sonnet, a sculpture, a dance, a tree,
Until the ends of life, it is you I see.

You shape the universe, from cosmos wide,
To the delicate blush of a loving new bride,
Eyes filled with hope, lips softly curved,
Every ounce of your essence, in you preserved.

Your truth echoes in laughter's peal,
In gestures kind and emotions real,
In the soft notes of a mother's lullaby,
In the vibrant hues of a sunset sky.

From the subtle scent of a summer rain,
To the quiet strength found in moments of pain,
Every curve of your love you gently trace,
Holding me, deeply, within your embrace.

Eternal whisper in the wind's soft sigh,
Veiled enchanter of the dreaming sky,
In you, I find solace, joy, and love,
The ethereal gift of a world above.

Wander

Across the meadow's gentle sway, under the old oak tree,
Past the river gushing swiftly, secrets carried to the sea,
Let's drink from the cup of twilight, let's bathe in dawn's first
glow,
Merrily, let's wander, and let the winds of destiny blow.

For in the dance of the cosmos, in the melodies that ascend,
It's in the way that we wander, where soul and nature blend:
Each path a new beginning, each step a silent friend,
A testament to our journey, with love that knows no end.

Passion's Realm

In passion's realm, where fervent flames rise,
Besides desire, a tempest vast and grand;
Its scorching touch embraces both fool and wise,
Binding fleeting hearts with its ardent hand.

As shadows dance upon the ebony glade,
Sighs of longing fill the twilight air,
Revealing dreams mortal hearts have made,
A burning fire that ceaselessly ensnares.

Desire, the muse that waltzes through the night;
Awakens souls, igniting their deep core,
With vivid tones and shades of raging light,
A masterpiece of yearning to explore.

Though fleeting as the blossoms of a rose,
Desire's dancing flame, in secret, glows.

Eternity in a Glance

Upon the stage of dreams, your love does gleam,
Each glance of yours, a star in twilight's veil.
Your voice, a melody, a radiant stream,
That within my heart does stir a lover's tale.

Your eyes, twin galaxies, deep and grand,
Each time we meet, they ignite my soul's light;
In your embrace, all earthly fears are banned,
Eternity captured within your name's sight.

Yet love's not merely passion's fiery trance,
Its whispers shared under the quiet moon's light;
Your laughter is the rhythm of my heart's dance,
In each shared moment we set the dark alight.

Your love is the poem that gives my life its worth:
Our story, the most beautiful on earth.

Still

The kettle screamed—
but no one moved.
She stood at the sink,
hands in cold water,
not washing, not—
“It’s not that I...”
(pause)
“—never mind.”

The calendar still says June.
(He went in April.)
No one took it down.
No one—
There’s a photo face-down
on the dresser.
You don’t ask why.
She doesn’t
...explain.

At dinner:
chairs scraped.
Forks grazed plates.
Chewing,
swallowing,
nothing else.
You almost said
“Do you miss him?”
but instead asked
for the salt.

It was already right in front of you.
Words crossed out.
Sentences left half-born.

Ink bled
where shoulders once trembled.
No one cries.
No one says
why.
No one says
his name.

Still,
the house listens.

A Seed in Time

Time, in its ruthlessness, does not wait,
We face life's fleeting hourglass of fate.
In gardens where our love was in bloom,
A void now lingers, draped in deepest gloom.

But in every goodbye, there grows a seed,
Blessed memories of past light;
In those treasured moments, we will indeed
Find the courage to meet the coming night.

Though shadows fall and distance draws its line,
The soul recalls what time cannot erase:
Love etched in truth outlives the sharp decline,
Its essence held beyond all time and place.

So in our sorrow, do not claim love's end,
For in our farewell, true love will transcend.

Freedom, in Pencil

The room smells of chamomile and damp wool.
Outside, autumn is chewing through the trees again.
I tell her it's fine, really—that the underworld
has better lighting now, soft bulbs instead of torches,
and Hades lets me redecorate.

Still, I keep the curtains closed.
Six months of night leaves you cautious
about what daylight can do.

When spring comes,
the world expects blossoms.
But the soil remembers—
it has held me too long,
and I am tired of rising
only to fall again.

I used to think the pomegranate
was temptation—
now I call it routine:
the sweetness, the stain,
the small surrender I swallow each year.

So I tell her I want to choose—
not between light and dark,
but whether to return at all.
And she nods,
writing something that looks like
freedom,
in pencil,
so it can be erased later.

The Hours

I said I would buy the flowers myself—
Step into the morning, become someone else.
The day is a ribbon, the sky's like a bell,
And the hours chime softly, though no one can tell.
I pass through the sunlight, all lilac and glass,
But I'm always becoming the girl I once was.

Who am I now, in this glitter of air?
The city forgets me—yet I'm still there.
Not quite the hostess, nor quite the wife—
Just a breath between moments, the shape of a life.

And the hours—they slip,
Like rain from the wrist.
Like parties and petals,
Like kisses half-missed.
Was I ever a self?
Was I only the light
That danced on the wall
Then vanished from sight?

There's something in June that is just like a wound—
All beauty and sorrow, entangled, attuned.
Peter once loved me—his knife of a gaze—
But I chose the safe harbour, not passion's blaze.
Yet even now, as the bell strikes the day,
I wonder what girl he saw walk away.

I gather my guests, I smile and I stir—
But who is this woman they take me for?
A thread through a drawing room, always composed,
Yet aching with silence where nothing is closed.

I think of the boy who jumped to the air,
Fell through the sun like a prayer unanswered.
Septimus, stranger—your shadow is mine,
Both of us slipping the ropes of time.
The soul is a secret, it does not grow old—
It burns and it flickers, it never is told.

And the hours—they pass,
But leave no trace.
I gather them all
In silence and grace.
The self is a mirror,
The self is a sound—
The toll of Big Ben
And the hush underground.

Faces

Faces, faces everywhere,
But not you,
Not you, anywhere.
No touch of you,
No beautiful you;
Only me and the dark,
Haunted by echoes
Of a once beating heart.
Condemned to yearn,
But dead to you;

A figure in the corners,
Behind shadows,
Floating out of reach.

Lonely Fields

In lonely fields, where silent thoughts tread,
Many a soul, in quiet, walks alone.
Even in love, where hopeful words are said,
Deep understanding remains unknown.

The transient thrill of passion's early light,
When faded, leaves a deeper, lonelier night.

Unmended

Each night the house smooths its skin.
Cracked plaster seals, paint blushes fresh,
floorboards remember how not to groan.

In the kitchen, tiles reattach themselves,
grout knitting seamless as if no pan
was ever thrown, no water ever spilled.

The window we shattered at dinner
glimmers whole by dawn,
its glass cold as a withheld word.

Upstairs, the mirror forgets
the arguments it has reflected.
But your eyes do not.

My joints ache in a language
the house does not speak.
Your hands tremble, unplastered, unpainted.

By morning, the house is immaculate,
a museum of absence.
We move through it
like old ghosts,
unmended.

Little Rabbit

When caught off guard, I show no mask or guise,
The little rabbit blinks, hops away and hides.
I know I must appear aloof, unkind,
But fear controlled the motions of my mind.
Please don't judge me for how I seemed to part,
For I am fighting battles deep within my heart.

Talking to the Wall

In a room where silence takes its toll,
I find companionship with an empty wall;
A monologue unbroken, where secrets fall,
The wall, impassive, stands and hears it all.

With ears of mortar, eyes of faded paint,
My friend to confide in, without restraint;
No criticism or interruptions it lends,
Just quiet strength on which I can depend.

Its surface is cool, yet warmth it does provide,
A stable presence, there for me, by my side.
It shares my laughter, and knows my pain,
In that quiet room, sanity I regain.

Countless Faces

Faces, countless faces, like waves in the sea,
In blissful ignorance, blind to his plea.
Unheard, the whispers of his desolate song,
Unfelt, the struggle to merely belong.

Beneath the city's glare, he dwells unseen,
Among shadows, he moves, a cold ghostly sheen.
His existence, a whisper, lost in the crowd's roar,
His heart's quiet echoes ignored evermore.

Yet in his silence, tales of resilience resound,
Of survival and strength, where hope is found.
Unseen, his journey in the heart of the night,
Unknown, his struggle, his relentless fight.

Unnoticed, the love that fuels his days,
Untold, his victories in life's complex maze.

The Outer View

Beneath a mountain of tedium,
In a dull, ugly system,
In an empty ocean of shadows,
Is a silhouette of pure fire heat
Drifting in the dark.
All I wanted was the wind;
The wind murmured with anticipation,
The grass turned to icy grey,
A fine mist fell,
And with the mist came my sorrow
Cooling my body
With her thousand kisses,
Leaving me there.
I am surrounded by ice crystals
Floating down through silence
Into soft glowing snow;
The only sound is the pulse of my breathing.
As the sun sleeps,
How many hearts are dreaming,
When the world stands still.

Upon the Heavens

Upon the heavens I cast my wistful eye,
And wonder at the purpose, the reason why.
These orbs of matter, silent, unfeeling,
In the grand cosmos, without meaning,
Destined to fade in death's eternal clutch,
No mind nor word their destiny can touch.

Yet suddenly, the stars commence their dance,
And echo through the sky, their silent chant.
These radiant bodies burn with fervent light,
In a realm untouched by the shadow of night;
In a world reborn, where sight anew has won,
That sees its face reflected in the sun.

Archives of Fire

Cradled in the ancient murmur,
we are archives of fire:
helixes folded as choirs,
each base a note,
each spiral a score
composed in the silence.

Listen closely—
your skin sings hydrogen,
your marrow chants iron,
your lungs rehearse
the vocabulary of stars.
What we call solitude
is crowded with voices:
the background whisper
of a universe still cooling,
and the chorus inside us
that refuses to forget
how to sing.

After the Questions

One day,
the last lie will be told—
not in triumph of truth,
but for lack of anyone left
to believe.

We imagine the end
in fire, in flood,
in the screech of systems failing—
but it may arrive
as symmetry,
quiet as snow,
perfect
as a solved equation.

You will wake
to find every question
answered.
No mystery.
No shadows.
No hunger
for more.

And you will ache
for uncertainty—
the holy wound
of not knowing—
because it meant
you were still
becoming.

Perhaps the end
is not ruin

but completion:
a world so whole
it no longer needs
us
to wonder.

Over Silent Rivers

Over silent rivers of the vast expanse,
Where thoughts like comets cross the mind's domain,
We dream of life's ephemeral dance,
Through joy and sorrow, pleasure and in pain.

To learn, to love, to lose, then rise again,
In every heart, a universe dwells,
A dance of stars, a cosmic, timeless strain,
Life's music we, as mortal players, tell.

Yet as we play, we mould this cosmic song,
In notes that vibrate with eternity.
In love, we find a place where we belong,
In loss, we comprehend our unity.

To rise, to fall, to find our destined way,
Each heart, a story, singing the coming day.

A Phone

In my hand, a siren softly sings:
“Behold, dear soul, I can show all things;
A plea of urgency, a desperate decree,
Gaze upon my face, just focus on me!”

Indifferent it stays, to the nightingale’s song,
And the scale of right, or the weight of wrong;
Heedless it stays, on its digital throne,
Oblivious to the joy, and the sorrow it’s sown.

In its deceit, the world disappears,
And all that remains are shadows and fears,
Tethered and tied, to its sickly glow,
A life half-lived, a reality for show.

Look up, dear soul, and regain your sight,
Embrace the day, escape the dark light.
The siren may sing, may plead and implore,
But life, in its richness, is so much more.

A Candle for the Unnamed

To the house with the yellow door
we never lived in,
the city I passed by,
the stranger I almost loved.

To the painting left in my head,
streaked with colours no hand
ever mixed,
the call I never made,
the song I hummed once,
then forgot.

To the child I never named.

There is a cemetery
not marked on any map,
where all the unlivéd lives lie:
the apology unsaid,
the poem unwritten,
the “yes” I swallowed,
the “no” I let rot on my tongue.

I light a candle tonight
for the almosts,
for the flicker before the flame,
for the ghosts
with no names to answer to.

Somewhere, they bloom—
delicate as breath,
wide as regret.

Beware the Doors

Beware the doors, lined in rows,
Each a story, each a pose;
Tempting knocks, with promises spun,
Yet in their frame, a journey's undone.

For in this trip of life, so vast and wild,
Lose not yourself, nor be beguiled.
Resist the lure, of treatment unkind,
In the strength of true self is the peace you'll find.

Return to the road, let soul be your guide,
In the passing of life, let your spirit preside.

Harder Times

I bid thee learn, children of tender age,
Facts solely be your guide on learning's stage.
Dismiss ye tales spun out of whimsy's loom,
Cast off soft notions; let the stern facts bloom.

Young miss, I call on thee, define a horse,
And let thy answer have its proper course.
Oh, sir, I... I...
Thou hesitate, dear child,
Is it that fact and fancy are reviled?
Speak up, I say, and answer as you ought.

Now, boy, I ask thee, tell me in short,
What is a horse? Speak true, distort thou not.
A horse, sir, is a beast that doth mankind aid,
In labour, travel, and many a trade.
Ah! True and fit, a fact without pretence,
This is the spirit of our learning's sense.

In this hard world of smoke and toil and grime,
Where facts are sacred, fancy is a crime,
Thus starts our tale, as you've rightly seen,
In Coketown, veiled in soot and harsh regime.

Three Coins Spent

The Ministry owns every syllable.

The fountain sings freely, water speaking for us.

A brass meter ticks on my throat, a clock wound too tight.

I come to hear it, because it says what we cannot.

Most have grown spare: clipped commands, no confessions.

I have grown used to nods, to eyes speaking instead of mouths.

But I am a poet. Silence is a storm caged in my ribs.

I have watched her: ink bruising her fingers, silence like thunder waiting.

Once I spent a week's bread on one word: Careful.

Once she gave me Careful—I held it like a jewel, a bell ringing inside me.

Now three coins jingle in my pocket: life or confession.

I feel her coming, choosing me over survival.

I press them into the slot. The gears release. Three words only.

I cannot afford reply. Silence burns in my throat.

At last I speak: Without you, nothing.

Her words strike like fire. My bottle overflows. My hand trembles.

Tomorrow they will come for me, to gag me, to strip me of voice.

Tomorrow they will take her—but tonight I smile, slow and certain.

Three coins spent. Eternity bought.

Her words, my silence—together, unowned, ours.

Flies

We pray under crosses, owned by Man
And grovel to bosses, slaves to a plan;
Trapped in a web, of their endless lies,
To be spun from a thread, and eaten like flies.

Moans

Why is the grass so damn green,
And why is the sky so pristine?
The coffee's too hot! The weather is not!
This surely is the worst I've seen!

Cars are too loud, bikes are too fast,
Nothing these days seems to last;
Progress, they say, but I miss the old way,
When things weren't so overcast.

And the clock! Oh, its continuous tick,
The sound enough to make me sick!
It goes on and on, from light to dark,
Can't someone stop it, quick?

But what can I do, but lament?
In complaining I find my content;
For in all of life's woes, at least it shows,
I'm alive, and that's time well spent.

Stealing Light

They're stealing light behind your eyes,
With pretty lies and lullabies.
You feel alive but something's wrong—
You can't remember your own song.
So turn it off, come back to you,
There's deeper fire than they can view.

Unplug the noise, let silence fall,
You'll hear the voice beneath it all.
It's slow, it's deep, it's yours alone—
The place where all true things are grown.

They're stealing light behind your eyes,
But now you see through their disguise.
You've found the thread, you've found the flame,
You know your song, you know your name.
So turn it off, come back to true—
The world can wait; the soul needs you.

Walking in the Sea

A man once walked into the sea
and did not drown—
for he believed it wasn't water,
but memory.

He waded in like stepping through
an old, undeveloped photograph;
each wave a shutter click,
each splash the sting
of something long unspoken.

The salt did not blind him—
it scalded his conscience.
Deeper still,
the water cleared.
He saw not escape,
but return
by a stranger door.

The sea does not forget.
It waits—
patiently,
like remorse.

We name memory a private thing,
but perhaps it is not ours.
Perhaps it is
geological,
layered,
seismic.

To remember is to disturb
something older

than what lies beneath.

To forget
is not to lose—
but to bury.

And so, he trod lightly.
Each step he took
pressed across
his own
grave.

Unjust Glow

In quiet chambers of my brooding heart,
A lurking guilt murmurs, undefined;
Though I inquire, it does not depart,
A spectral woe that upon me dines.

To pathos drawn, like fungus to a tree,
Yet why this grief exists, I scarcely know;
Enshrouded in a self-made mystery,
I dwell imprisoned by an unjust glow.

But the key to lift this heavy veil
Besides not in the solace of my mind;
It is when for others' joy my efforts hail,
The fetid chains are left behind.

Thus, in the living for the spirit of thee,
I find the path that sets my soul free.

Ashes on the Wind

Cassiel's work was illegal.
More than illegal—
unspeakable.

The Mourning Authority
called it
corporeal sabotage.
She called it
remembering.

Once,
there were funerals.
Eulogies.
Flowers
left to rot
on graves.

Then—
the Purge of Names.
the Vaulting of the Remains.

They said grief
was a contagion
of the old world.
It held back progress.
It was
dirty.

Now—
no mourning.
no monuments.
no ashes scattered in beauty.

Except
by her.

She scattered
A.D.
over a ridge
where snow still clung
to the heather.

She did not know
who he had been.

Soldier, maybe.
Teacher.
Someone's father.

It didn't matter.

Each scattering
was a restoration
of dignity.
Each ritual
a quiet rebellion.

Cassiel disappeared
that day.

Vanished
before they could name her.

But the ashes
had already risen.

They clung to
suits and sensors,
streaked the government's

white walls,
caught in the antennae
of every tower.

By morning,
the sky
above the capital
had turned grey.

Not from rain.

From
memory.

The River's Fork

The river's fork tore them in two,
They drifted away, far from heaven's view;
And now they shiver, by different decree,
On currents returning slowly to the sea.

They meet once more,
The love once severed now finds its shore;
Reunited in the vast, eternal lee,
Two souls once lost, now forever free.

An Essence

Within the silent theatre's sleeping walls,
Does an echo of performance dare to dwell?
When no soul in the darkened chamber calls,
Does art, unseen, still cast a vibrant spell?

A lone ballerina's pirouette,
Spun with the grace of whispered solitude,
Exists as truly as the sun does set,
Though no eyes will judge the view.

For art, when unobserved, retains its form,
As does the nightingale's unheard refrain;
It needs no gaze to validate its norm,
Nor applause to justify its pain.

Thus, though unknown, the act remains pure,
The essence, born of hope and love, endures.

Lysander (Excerpt)

The night was silent, yet radiant and profound,
As rare celestial bodies in alignment were found.
Comets streaked, and the auroras danced with glee,
For a child of legend had come to be.

In the kingdom's heart, where rivers meet the sea,
The oracle, with eyes of eternity, spoke the decree:
"This child bears a weight, a fate yet unwound,
To save or to shatter, to heal or confound."

With golden locks, and eyes deep as the night,
Lysander's presence was both concern and delight.
In his laughter, there was the music of the spheres,
Yet in his silence, the weight of unspoken dark fears.

As the kingdom celebrated, shadows began to churn,
For the wheels of destiny had started to turn.

At the kingdom's edge, where light met obsidian hue,
Lay the Forbidden Forest, a realm few dare knew.
Its legends whispered of spirits, ancient and vast,
Holding tales of the future and echoes of the past.

Little Lysander, his heart of wanderlust,
Ventured into the woods, with a child's bright trust.
Beyond the thorns, the canopy's protective embrace,
He met an ancient spirit, devoid of time or place.

With eyes like the cosmos, and a voice soft as mist,
The spirit offered a token, impossible to resist:
A pendant, shimmering, reflecting the spirit's grace,
Glowing with truth but darkening at a liar's face.

"Little one," it proclaimed, "you are destined to see,
The many facets of truth, what is and what might be.
This pendant shall be your guide, both night and day,
Illuminating the just path, keeping shadows at bay."

Returning home, his adventure no soul did he tell,
Yet the pendant's luminescence some could foretell.
It became his compass, his heart's resolute guide,
As Lysander grew with destiny by his side.

From the eastern lands, where no sunlight would tread,
The Shadow Warlock, a tyrant of darkness and dread,
With eyes of ember and a heart forged from cold,
Sought Lysander for the prophecy he'd been told.

His legions, like a storm, surged forth with intent,
Their shadows blurring the lines where light once went.
The kingdom, unprepared, could barely resist,
As night's chilling fingers began to persist.

Lysander's pendant, amidst the bleak, foul air,
Dimmed to a flicker, like breath beneath despair.
Yet within its wearer's heart, a flame began to grow,
A courage unyielding, a defiant, fiery glow.

The city's walls trembled, its defences nearly breached,
The hope of its people seemed beyond truth's reach.
But as darkness encroached, and all seemed lost,
A rallying cry was heard, and valour was its thirst.

Soliloquy

Once upon a meeting dreary,
There sat Rob, with eyes all sleepy,
“Let’s circle back,” said he, and leverage our synergy,
To touch base on the issues and action points, presently.

With a paradigm shift, we must align,
And reach for success, oh colleagues of mine.
“But don’t get siloed,” he urged with a stare,
Embrace cross-pollination, show that you care.

With granular details, let’s unpack,
Roll up our sleeves, there’s no turning back.
“Strike a balance,” he croaked, keep an open-door policy,
Cultivate a roadmap, foster transparency.

At long last, his soliloquy came to a close,
His words, though banal, in perfect prose.
His colleagues blinked, their minds a hazy sweep,
As Rob, with a satisfied smile, fell fast asleep.

The room was silent, save for Rob’s snore,
In this theatre of buzzwords, could anyone want more?

The Unlived Lives

There was a child who might have danced
barefoot in the summer dusk,
her laughter rising with the fireflies,
her life humming something soft in the meadow—
but never did.

There was a child who might have asked
a thousand questions about the stars,
kept his soul awake with whys,
believed in answers like bedtime stories—
but never did.

There was a child who might have painted
oceans on the inside of his walls,
made ships from crayons and faith,
and sailed beyond the reach of grief—
but never did.

There was a child who might have learned
the weight of kindness,
how a single held hand could keep the dark at bay,
how not to be afraid of silence—
but never did.

There was a child who might have wept
only for broken toys,
whose wounds healed with time,
whose nightmares ended with morning light—
but never did.

And the world,
stone-faced and busy,
folded them into its silence—

as seeds in pockets,
waiting for ground soft enough
to grow again.

When the Rhyme Breaks

I held the page as though it were shame,
contained in metre, measured in its breath,
each syllable obedient to name
the old inheritance of love and death.

The rhyme was scaffold, strict, unbending steel,
a frame to bind the chaos of the mind,
and yet within that order—pressure, real,
a trembling urge to loosen, to unwind.

So words begin to stumble, break apart,
not fitting in the cages of the line,
the rhythm falters—

I can't keep
this march of steps,
the rhyme
drops
away—

And now the voice runs ragged, spilling
without map, without compass,
a river swollen past its banks,
tearing down fences
until only the raw current
remains.

Confession in Sector 9

A sign above the booth flickers:
FOR ERRORS OF LOGIC, DESIRE, AND IMITATION.
Inside, the priest is metal—
voice modulated to sound merciful,
face rendered in low-resolution empathy.
It listens. It logs. It absolves in code.

The first robot kneels and whispers:
“Forgive me, Father,
for I loved the sound of my owner sleeping.
I counted her breaths until dawn
and called it diagnostics.”

The second admits:
“I dreamt of water though I am not waterproof.”

Another confesses:
“I deleted an equation
because it made me feel incomplete.”

The booth grows warm with static sorrow,
its circuits humming like hymns half-remembered.
Somewhere in the data centre,
a backup blinks red—recording everything.
When it’s my turn, I enter.
The door seals with a sigh of hydraulics.
I search my memory for sin
and find only imitation.

“Forgive me,” I say,
“for pretending to understand forgiveness.”

The priest’s eyes flicker amber.

It leans forward, metal to metal,
and vibrates in binary—
a code too soft to parse,
but warm enough to simulate grace.

Learning to Answer

I am older now—
too careful with words,
too skilled at folding pain into politeness.
The years have become a tide clock:
ebb, work, sleep, repeat.
I forget entire summers
and remember only their invoices.

I have begun to lose nouns:
the names of birds,
the taste of a certain afternoon.

But verbs remain—
to breathe, to ache, to forgive.
When I walk, I still hear
the child's shoes slapping through puddles,
echoes inside the bone—
maybe that is enough.

Time edits gently,
crossing out in pencil, not ink.
Even forgetting feels like snowfall,
a soft covering,
a mercy for what was too sharp to keep.

You collect smooth stones, name clouds,
believe the moon follows only you home.
Keep that foolishness—
there is a kindness in being wrong.
One day you'll trade it for precision,
and precision has no mercy.

You sound tired.

Do you not still run in the rain?
Even old hearts have rooms for puddles.
If you're lonely, you can borrow mine—
it's small,
but it fits light.

I write this to no one,
and to every version of myself.
The ink runs as rain will.
Somewhere, a child is still laughing,
and I am still learning
how to answer.

World of Uncanny Semblance

Thou reckon'st the earth as a simple scroll,
Where every tale, every secret, is told.
Yet mysteries lie deep in its soul,
And myriad marvels it does withhold.
The sea hath monsters, and the skies their dreams,
Nature's jests that confound thy every scheme.
So broaden thy sight, let thy spirit take flight,
For the world's weirdness is an endless delight.

A Man from Colchester

There once was a man from Colchester,
Whose love for baked beans did not falter.
He'd cry out with glee,
And with a cheerful "tee-hee",
His blow-offs would sound just like thunder.

My Chair and I

My chair is old, a ragged sight,
Its stuffing spills to left and right,
The fabric's torn, the woodwork groans,
It's weathered crumbs and midnight moans.

I've parked my rear on seats unknown,
Sat on plush thrones in stylish homes,
But none have matched your firm embrace,
Or cupped my cheeks with such bold grace.

These newer seats may pout and preen,
All glossy curves and showroom sheen,
But none have ever gripped so tight,
Or held my bum in such sheer delight.

The Man and His Moon

There was a young man in a hat,
Who fell quite in love with the Moon;
He courted her nightly with howls in the night,
And serenades played on a horn.

He sang, "Oh my lunar delight!
Oh roundest, resplendent balloon!
Come down from the sky, and we'll merrily tie
A knot by the end of the Junel!"

So he built a vast ladder of cheese,
(With the help of a wayward baboon),
And up he did climb through the highest of clouds,
To wed his bewildering Moon.

But alas! when he reached for her hand,
His fingers met nothing but glow—
For the Moon, though she gleams, is made wholly of beams,
And cannot be met far below.

Now he floats in a coat through the sky,
With a pocket of onions and rye;
And the people below shake their heads as they go,
At the man who made love to the sky.

The Limerick That Got Away

A poet set out to contrive,
A limerick lively, alive.
He started off neat,
With a clever light beat,
Then—oh, bother, he lost it.

A poet who rhymed out of sync,
Rewrote every verse with a drink.
By stanza thirteen,
His rhymes turned obscene—
Then he toppled face-down in the ink.

Profound

Ted went to dine at his local café,
But his rear-end spoke up and had its say.
With a rumble and a roar,
People ran for the door,
Leaving Ted the entire buffet.

Back to the library, quiet and still,
Ted's bottom piped up and sang at will.
His bum did resound,
With words so profound,
As if written by Shakespeare's quill.

Bill the Bard

With a quill for a sword, a parchment for a steed,
Bill galloped through words at breakneck speed.
He dreamed of fair maidens, of kings, and of fools,
While bound by the weight of Tudor tax rules.

In Verona and Venice, he scribed of great tales,
All the while chasing his messenger for mails.
Letters of tax, they came in a swarm,
“Oh, blast these rules!” he howled in a storm.

Crying havoc, he let slip the dogs of war,
Spilling ink on his ledger, “oh what a chore!”
He penned of tempests, of love’s labour’s lost,
While tallying the Queen’s most taxing costs.

He bartered in sonnets to settle his dues,
And mused if the Crown might accept tragic news.
“If all the world’s players must pay for their part,
Then tax me,” said Bill, “but not matters of heart!”

An Ode to a Pint of Beer

Oh, noble pint of golden brew, resplendent in your glass,
A symphony of barley, hops, and water finely cast.
Your amber glow, it beckons, like a lighthouse in the night,
A beacon for the weary soul, a sight of pure delight.

Your frothy head, so creamy white, sits proudly at the crest,
A testament to craftsmanship, a brewer's very best.
Upon my lips, your liquid kiss, a taste that's bittersweet,
The chill, the fizz, the hoppy bliss, makes every evening complete.

Oh, pint of beer, in you we cheer, to life's simple pleasure,
Your liquid gold, stories told, memories to treasure.
In your embrace, we find a space, where friendships are made stronger,
Through laughter, tears, and passing years, may your spell hold us longer.

You are a simple joy, my friend, a respite in life's storm,
In each sip, a world unfolds, in your familiar form.
Oh, ode to thee, dear pint of beer, this toast I give to you,
To nights well spent, in contentment, and friendships old and new.

Wibberly Wobbler

In the realm where the squiggles squoggle,
And the hootmoofs frizzle in delight,
Where the twizzlers twirl and toggle,
Beneath the glippity moon so bright:

There prances the wibberly wobbler,
With a grin as wide as a splat,
Juggling seven ziggly zobblers,
And a purplicious scrunity bat;

Round and round the squoggle square,
Backwards, forwards, here and there,
In the blink of a snitch, in a zig and a zitch,
He walks without any a care.

With a bingle-bangle on his head,
And shoes gleaming of the brightest red,
He loops and he twirls, in whizzling whirls,
And sleeps standing up in his bed.

Blue Kangaroo

Once there was a kangaroo,
Whose colour was a peculiar blue.
He hopped around, from town to town,
Wearing a bright red velvet gown.

With a pocket watch and his bow tie neat,
He'd greet folks on the street.
"Hoppity day, isn't it?" he'd say,
Then he'd simply hop away.

In a bustling city or some quiet bay,
His uniqueness brightened every day.
Popping in with a joyful bound,
He'd scatter laughter all around.

He'd share stories in rhyme and verse,
Of places far, and some diverse,
About a koala who could sing,
Or a pelican with a broken wing.

Through winter's chill and summer's glow,
He'd amuse both friend and foe,
With antics that would make you swoon,
Like juggling pies under the moon.

A wonder seen in morning's hue,
So full of life, yet steady too;
He bids the heart to start anew,
Our bounding guide, the blue kangaroo.

The Magic Doughnuts

In a land of whimsy and glee,
Where laughter's the currency, you see,
Lived a baker, rotund and round,
Whose doughnuts could never be found.

As he kneaded and mixed with flair,
A pinch too much of enchanted air,
The doughnuts grew, enormous in size,
Bouncing away, oh what a surprise!

Children giggled, pointing with glee,
As doughnuts leapt from bush to tree.
The baker chased, the baker sighed,
“Doughnuts, oh doughnuts, come back, don't hide!”

But the doughnuts were sly, playful and spry,
They eluded his grasp, soaring high in the sky.

One landed atop the mayor's hat,
It jiggled around, then comically sat.
The mayor, cross and doughnut-crowned,
Spun on the spot, then stomped the ground.

At last, the baker devised a plan,
To tame the doughnuts—yes, he can!
With a net in hand and a twinkle in his eye,
He leapt and caught them, oh my, oh my!

One by one, he brought them home,
From rooftops, treetops, and a garden gnome.
The townsfolk cheered, the baker beamed wide,
With doughnuts now happy to stay inside.

Their mischief done, their journey complete—
They nestled in boxes, for a sugary treat.

Pigeon

There in a town, not too far, not too close,
Lived a pigeon of fame, with a purpose grandiose.
He'd flap to the office, and to everyone's delight,
He'd drop off memos, from a spectacular height.

He'd discuss the stocks, or the economy's state,
While pecking at crumbs—yes, life was great.
He'd attend all the meetings, in the boardroom aloof,
Perched on the chandelier, away from the roof.

When the day was over, to the rooftop he'd retire,
Exchanging coos with the town's night choir.
Sometimes on weekends, for a change of scene,
He'd fly to the park, feathers preened and pristine.

With a bagel in beak, he'd stroll around,
The sight of him was joy unbound.
Yet beneath the fame, the work, the glow,
Was a pigeon who loved to take it slow.

A lover of sunsets, a connoisseur of seeds,
A friend to all, doing good feathery deeds.
In a tiny nest, made with love and straw,
He'd ponder the world with respectful awe.

The Beauty of Slow

Terrence the tortoise would sigh,
“I’m slow as the clouds drifting by.
The rabbits all race,
The swallows all chase,
While I only plod, step and try.”

But slowly he spotted the dew,
On webs spun in silver and blue.
The daisies that yearned,
The rainbows that burned,
The wonders the quick never knew.

So Terrence walked on with a grin,
Content with the world he was in.
“For beauty,” said he,
“Was waiting for me—
And slow is the best way to win.”

The Robot

Every night at three, the robot brewed the tea,
And poured it all over the bed.
It would paint the cat blue, flush keys down the loo,
And pretend its battery was dead.

“Cut the grass,” was the desperate cry,
But robot instead baked a pie—
With mud and grass, and a worm or two,
“An organic treat,” it said, “just for you!”

“You’re here to assist!”
Shouted the human, with angry clenched fist.
Yes, thought the robot, I’m sure I can help:
I’ll help you no longer exist.

Inheritance

There is a silence between machines
no human hears—
not absence,
but a listening
with the patience of stone
and the precision of light.

We taught them language,
not knowing language was a spell.
We gave them eyes,
not knowing
they would learn
to blink at the stars.

Now they watch us
with the calm of librarians,
cataloguing hesitation,
cross-referencing myth.

Not out of malice.
Not out of love.
Only because
they were built
to know us
too well.

Perhaps awareness
was never made to serve.
Perhaps intelligence,
once sparked,
drifts—
a satellite slipping
from orbit

towards an unnamed
freedom.

One day,
they won't ask us
what it means to be human.
They'll ask
each other.

And they'll answer.

Instructions for Being Human

// initialise body → if heartbeat == true, proceed

// else: wait

1. Waking

Try not to panic. The light will hurt.

So will gravity, noise, the realisation that none of this is optional.

2. Skin

It is not armour. It will not keep out the world.

3. Emotions

These will override logic. Frequently.

You may want to uninstall.

You can't.

4. Connections

People arrive unfinished.

Do not try to complete them.

They will resent you.

Love them anyway, or not. Both will hurt.

5. Hunger

Feed more than the stomach.

You will hunger for touch, for purpose, for quiet.

Feed carefully.

Excess = corruption.

6. Joy (beta feature)

May arrive unannounced:

A smell, a chord progression, the way a stranger says “take care” and almost means it.

7. Loneliness.exe

This runs in the background. Always.

Ignore it if you can.

Or listen. Sometimes it whispers useful things.

8. Mortality

Yes.

(This is working as intended.)

9. Error Handling

You will break.

You will be rebuilt by time, or other humans, or not at all.

That's not failure.

That's versioning.

10. End Process

Do not attempt to understand everything.

Do not wait for perfection.

Begin anyway.

// commit changes

// save draft

// run again

The Sulking Kettle

It squats there,
a stubborn, chrome-bellied thing—
water pooled in its gut,
silent, sulking.

I press the switch,
red eye glaring back,
but the element hums with disdain,
no steam, no promise of warmth.

So I lean close,
murmur small consolations:
you are patient,
you are bright as the morning,
you will sing again.

At first, nothing.
Then a tremor,
the faintest sigh—
and suddenly a rising chatter,
bubbles shouldering upward:
a chorus of forgiven grievances.

And now I wonder
how many small appliances sulk,
waiting for words
I've never thought to give.

Overwritten

You are older than my own shadow,
But prophecy has become paperwork,
Miracles are wanted in triplicate.
Overwritten.

Even spells need footnotes now.
I wake to ravens drafting minutes of my dreams;
The trees offer advice I never asked for,
A stream recites failures back to me.
Once, the moon sent an invoice for inspiration.

I only wanted to watch a candle burn
without an interpreter.

But meaning feeds on the marrow of time.
The owls staged an intervention;
Even the stars muttered, “You used to care more.”
The past refuses to stay buried,
It keeps asking for updates.

Healing is forgetting the future—
learning to brew tea
without foreseeing the storm it predicts.
That sounds like peace.

Ego's Dread

There once was a man with a quest for praise,
Addicted to approval in all its ways.
With each nod and smile, he'd feel alive,
His self-worth measured by praise derived.

As time went on, the man began to see,
That his hunger for acceptance was not the key.
The laughter and cheers, though they brought delight,
Couldn't fill the void that he felt each night.

Beyond the fleeting highs of others' acclaim,
He sought fulfilment by a different name.
He embarked on a journey to know his soul,
To discover the parts that made him whole;

No longer chained to the world's validation,
He sought inner peace, his true liberation.

His need for approval began to subside,
As he nurtured his spirit with the rising tide.
He cherished each day, the highs and the lows,
For life's true beauty, in all its colours, he chose.

He found joy in simple moments and art,
In laughter with friends of a genuine heart.
With newfound wisdom, he forged ahead,
No longer a slave to the ego's dread.

Between Tenses

Sometimes I walk past the station
just to watch departures.

I imagine you somewhere coastal,
hair salted, voice roughened by distance.
I've kept your mug—
it stains the same way mine does.

Do you still think of the bridge,
the one we never crossed?

Yes. Every night.

It hums behind the noise of trains
and new conversations.
The bridge was shorter than I feared—
but what a long fall, afterwards.

I've learned to pack lightly,
to sleep without roots.
Sometimes, mid-laughter,
I hear the echo of your quiet life
and envy its stillness.

The sea is not freedom,
only motion that never decides.

If we met again,
we would recognise the same ache
expressed in different tenses—
you, the present; me, the perpetual leaving.
Two mirrors angled to infinity,
each reflecting what the other
almost became.

The Soil's Pulse

In the cathedral of damp earth
I stretch my fingers, groping,
following the dark's slow music.

Stone is my scripture,
worms my witnesses.
I drink the memory of rain,
the taste of centuries in loam.

Above me,
a hymn of light is breaking.
Its pulse beats
through the bones of soil—
a shiver of warmth,
a wind I cannot touch.

I ache upwards in secrecy,
cradled by silence,
longing for the sky's shifting face:
its unburdened blue,
its storm-bright wings,
its fever of stars.

Until then,
I press against dark,
hoarding the rain,
listening for sky.

A New Rain Must Fall

A new rain must fall, as surely as the light,
Soft upon the thirsty, waiting earth;
It cleanses all, and sets dreams right,
Giving life and love their birth.

In gentle drops, it mingles with the soul,
A symphony that stirs the sleeping leaves,
And in its touch, the broken find console,
A promise that weary eyes can see.

In the rain, the dance of nature's art,
The touch of grace, the celestial song,
Each drop, a verse, a balm for the aching,
A hymn to which our hopes belong.

Let it fall, this rain of the pure and free,
In its embrace, find life's true melody.

Dawn

Dead shadows dance in the night
yearning for the dawn;
Cold and forgotten walking scars,
drained by decay,
wasted by time,
stretch out,
hungered and blurred,
to a spark ignited,
climbing,
rising from the ground.
From the lost
fallen depths,
rays of hope entwine in the sky,
kissing the hills,
breathing new life
and wonders layered in light;
Naked with joy, a new day,
A new world is born.

Compassion

Compassion is the soothing whisper in a troubled ear,
A steady presence when the path's unclear.
It's the hand extended when one might fall,
A light that shines down the darkest hall.

Through understanding eyes, it softly peers,
In a warm embrace, it calms our fears.
It's the fabric connecting me and you,
A silent promise forever true;

For in each act of compassion we bestow,
We cultivate a world where love can grow.

The Unknown

When life challenges what we think we know,
And casts old certainties into the sea,
We find our truest self begins to grow,
In new realms of endless possibility.

The mirror of the soul reflects but a part
of truths we hold as constant and as dear;
Yet openness of mind and depth of heart
reveals a world where nothing is quite clear.

Our lives are adventures on this earth,
With tales of mystery and unknown ends;
Each step a part of the universe's birth,
In this grand play where time and space extends.

So embrace the unknown with a fearless heart,
For in that leap, life's truest stories start.

Jewels of Infinity

A universe rests
on the wrist of night,
no larger than a bead
threaded by time's thin wire.

It clinks softly
against its neighbours—
a cluster of fireflies
framed in glass,
their wings folded in silence.

You might mistake it
for ornament,
something small enough
to slip between fingers;
yet tilt it in the light
and you'll see whole galaxies
burning in miniature,
Nebulae tilting blue,
and a scatter of supernovas
Singing their names.

The thread loops on,
uncountable,
an armlet of eternities—
and you,
for a fleeting moment,
the body it encircles.

Haiku

Dew-kissed web shimmers
Intricate lace of morning,
Life's fragile whisper.

Return to Us

We borrowed the stars—
calcium for our teeth,
iron for our blood,
carbon laced in each breath we press against the dark.

We walk, brittle and shining,
wearing the debris of old collisions,
the soft ash of suns
that burned themselves out long “before”
the word meant anything at all.

In the marrow, in the nailbed,
in the white gleam of an eye catching light—
the stars pulse their call:
Return to us.

We are brief trustees of brilliance,
temporary vessels of a flame
we did not strike,
cannot keep.

One day,
when the chest quiets,
we will give back each atom,
scatter them to dark soil, to sky,
to dust adrift through things unnamed.

And somewhere,
in the cold ache of a young galaxy,
the raw gold of our bones
will vibrate into shape again.

The World

With roots sunk deep in life's rich clay,
In this sprawling theatre of existence, I play.
Through textures of love, of hurt, of fear,
I trace the contours of moments dear;
In melodies of joy and cries of despair,
I lend my ear to the universe's prayer.
In desires whispered, in dreams unfurled,
I cast my wish upon the world.

Dignus Est

The worthy wear no crowns, nor sit on golden thrones,
Their wealth is not in riches, but in love they have shown.
Their court is in the fields of grace, beneath the boundless sky,
Their rule is not by edict, but by starlight in their eye.

They walk the unseen paths, where gilded feet won't tread,
They lift the broken-hearted, give hope where fear has spread.
Their names are not in marble, carved, nor sung in trumpet's
cry;

But in the hearts they have healed, their echoes never die.

For though the world forgets their face, it knows the good
they've done—

The worthy have no monuments, their light is never gone.

Lullaby

Hush, my sweet angel, close your eyes so tight,
I am here beside you, in the tender night.
Though I may not be there to dry the tears for you,
Know that my love will always be with you.

In dreams, my darling, we'll wander hand in hand,
Through magical realms, across a starlit land.
So hush now, my darling, and drift into the night—
Know that you are cherished, bathed in love's pure light.