

**THE  
DESPERATE  
CASE  
OF A  
NOVEL  
RANSOM**

**A  
Novel**

(of sorts)

**by**

**R. E. Warner**

# **The Desperate Case of the Novel Ransom**

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*This book is dedicated to my Mother and Father who have supported me always—but especially in these last many complicated years, and through the completion of this strange idea. They didn't question my creativity; only my persistence and discipline and that meant everything.*

# Prologue

It is without question melodramatic to open this text by telling you not to read it. This text has made it into your hands and so I suspect you will read at least some of it. Still, it is worth cautioning you that the stories and legends mentioned here are largely put to rest, and should remain that way. I myself had too little understanding of the machinations of the theories and ideas presented here. What I possessed was only enough knowledge to be terribly dangerous; in fact, deadly. If I'd had more time to explore these ideas, I might have more fully understood what I was unleashing, and I might have seen the danger that these ideas posed to my family.

As it stands, now six months beyond the events described herein, I want nothing more to do with the information. I prefer to forever remain in doubt as to whether I tapped into something greater than my understanding, or a greater consciousness, or if the whole matter was fiction and that I myself have a delusional and dark side that I cannot comprehend. It is Spring now and the events that occurred in November feel solidly behind me—though not, I suspect, for Agent Cobb. Even now, on some street corner somewhere, I think I see a black nondescript government car through the windshield of which I think I glance her face. I cannot believe that she has let the matter go—that she will ever let the matter go. She certainly will never believe my explanation of events, but the evidence and the facts are what they are, and I think she will ultimately have to let the case rest, unsolved.

If I'm frank, there have been plenty of days when I, myself, do not believe in the events as I witnessed them. I certainly have good reason not to believe my own perceptions during the last hours of this horrendous affair. There is a great deal to doubt about the history and reality of Reza Bahadir and his nemesis Rausch. Paranoia and perhaps mental illness—a psychotic break—certainly enters into the equation. But all I can say about everything that

occurred is that the further away I am from what happened, the better and more sound that I feel. Dreams should die when we awaken. I don't sleep well though. I have not slept through the night since November. Always I am in bed and in the corner of the bedroom, just past some shaft of moonlight, there is some shadow that lingers, moving to block the light. Then I awaken. It has become my custom to check the house, the doors, the locks, the windows, and then return to bed, wondering about what hand was moving in the shadows. I know it. I know it is the skeletal and dead hand of an ancient necromancer. It is one who never dies because he infests my dreams. He claims he is me. I know this not to be true, but he won't stop. I've let him into my house because I know his name.

All this is to impart on you that whatever you read here, whatever you take away, do not seek it out. Look for no more information about the things mentioned in this book than this book itself. What you will seek out will not be what you find in the end, and what you find in the end is a thing, a shadow, a demon, that you will regret having let into your life; even if you just think about it too much.

# 1. Session 1

Where do I even start? I don't know how the hell to write a book. I've never had any desire to do it—despite being an English professor. I love books, I love to read but the idea of writing anything longer than a paper has always seemed ludicrous to me. It seems like it drives authors crazy. And to do it in thirty-one days! This is insane, but given the circumstances as they stand now, I don't know what else to do other than to sit here and write because that's what he wants—demands—and shit—if he got into the house, maybe he's even watching me right now.

There was no sign of any forced entry into the house that I could see. I saw no signs of any kind of struggle. I just pulled into the driveway and saw the front door wide open. I got a sinking feeling in my gut right away, but I put it aside and assumed that... why doesn't he want me to explain this part? In his demands, I mean, among other things he demanded that I not say what he had taken. But, isn't that obvious?

I am angry and scared and I can't even say why? This is my computer and I can write whatever I want but... his rules. He was so bizarrely specific. He spelled everything out and the threat... so I am gonna write as if my life depended on it—even though I could care less about my own life right now. But, I'm going to write until I figure out what the hell else I'm supposed to do.

So, what the hell am I supposed to write about? I have no choice at this point, so I will. But it's taking every effort for me not to just throw the computer to the floor. Words, especially in large collections and huge numbers of paragraphs are so stupid and useless these days because no one reads them. These feel like the most useless words I've ever written because I don't even want anyone to see them. Everyone scans the words these days. They look for the bullet points that they've seen in so many uninformative business and academic presentations. Or they read lists on the

interwhatever. 5 Ways to Keep You Marriage Alive. 7 Foods You Should Never Eat. 12 Bullshit Conspiracy Theories. Whatever.

I love books. I have loved books for as long as I can remember. I love diving into a story and slowly absorbing details until you're just there in the story, invisibly standing beside (or inside of) a character and looking around and imagining what they're seeing, feeling what they're feeling. I just never thought I would write one. I certainly never thought I would be forced to write one under these circumstances.

I'm sitting at my desk; it's dark out now. It's been three or four hours since I read through the ransom "package." I don't know. My desk is a drafting desk. I'm not sure why I prefer a drafting desk to a regular desk—I guess it's because it needs to kept free of clutter so that you can raise it if you want. I like my desks to be absolutely free of clutter; no jars of pens or stacks of papers. I can normally think clearly. Right now, the clutter is in my head. My chair, who cares. I don't need to write about the furniture in the room or the decorations.

Maybe I can just get back to the idea of writing, what I'm doing right now—or at least what I do when I write papers. Right now, I'm just letting my head dump onto the page. I'm normally much more conservative about that. Come to think of it, besides the occasional journal entry I never even write in first person. Writing a literary paper just isn't remotely the same as writing fiction. For one, you're operating in someone else's domain, not really your own. It's like walking through a playroom and trying to figure out who the child is by looking at the toys that are on the floor as opposed to the ones still on the shelves. Is this author a messy child? Is the author a tidy child? (Is there such a thing?) Is there some one toy that stands out as the one the author loves the most?

Writing fiction, that's different. I've attempted it—in short bursts. I used to write fantasy stories. But I came to appreciate the language used in books. It's not true of all fantasy works, but most of them operate at an eighth grade reading level. I started to really enjoy plumbing the depths of authors who never steered clear of

complicated ideas or words. I'm trying to think of the first book that opened my eyes to that possibility. There's something to be gained in long, elaborate sentences that explain that the preciousness of the present moment is what matters and yet, the irony is, no one (but me and some other nerds) even have the time for them. There's no preciousness in scanning a grocery list. I don't know, some batshit-insane buddhist or new wave crazy whatever might say different, but I... I need a good sentence.

The cascading water of the falls in the instant she grew the willpower to change, looked shockingly like a face.

That's a sentence. Descriptions like that are lost on people who just want to "like" a picture of waterfall—even though its every moment of froth is distinct and lost in an instant. Beauty constantly disappears, and yet the "like" reigns supreme these days.

Of course, long wordy sentences are what's keeping my... are what's keeping Rausch's threat at bay. According to the rules, I'm not allowed to say what he has planned. Frankly, if I wrote it down it would become all too real anyway. It's impossible to think about. It's impossible not to think about.

I suppose I could just sit here and write unrelated sentences in a row. That could get me to the first 5000 words, at which point I am supposed to put this on a USB key and leave it in a place that Rausch's going text me. I guess that will be Monday. That is an eternity right now. What the hell am I supposed to do without, I mean, without. What is the point of this? Who is this maniac? What does he want? I would write "What's his game?" but that sounds like a mystery novel cliche. This is too God damned serious for cliches. Although, this whole thing does feel like some sort of game. What a twisted psychopath.

I should call the police. This is insane. What Rausch has taken from me; it's absolutely totally precious to me, and I should call Rausch's bluff and get the cops. (While we're on it, what the hell kind of name is Rausch!?) I have to figure he's tapped my lines or he wouldn't bother to make the rules what they are. He seems to have some elaborate plan—carrying out a ransom for a month? I

don't have enough good synonyms for insane. I mean you can say crazy or mad or... I really *don't* have that many synonyms—but my point is that insane is technical—like he needs to be committed to an institution, an insane asylum as they say. Mentally ill or disturbed is another way to put it I guess.

And what's the point of this Nanowrimo thing? I'd never even heard of it until today. It sounds stupid. I find the whole methodology of writing a novel in thirty-one days to be antithetical to the art; a history or an epic turned on its head! Why would a word count, by itself, create anything at all? I could just type and type (note: even easier with cut and paste on a computer!) and that would get me there, but just that there are words in place doesn't accomplish anything. It certainly doesn't make for any kind of cultivated reflection. Anyway, Rausch didn't tell me I couldn't do it. I suspect, when I turn this in on Monday—his first specified date—he might... critique it? Could he call the whole thing off if it doesn't meet his approval? Good God this is crazy. Why does he want to see it every three days? What does that mean? I really have to call the police. This is madness. He wants a novel and he wants 5000 words every three days; how does he expect to get anything but this?

Anyway, where was I? Some of the best stories I've ever read have been 6 words long. Look at what Hemingway did with 6 words: "For sale: baby shoes, never used." What is 50,000 words if the point—and the only point—is to simply get them out on the page? To type them, to sit down to the computer (let's face it, no one is doing this Nanowrimo thing by hand, ever) to just type and type to make some goal; what is the point?

I apologize. Maybe there is some point to doing it. It may matter to you—if anyone is going to read this ever. You're trying something unorthodox in your life and how can I not cheer you in such an

endeavor? But me... I am in a peculiar position and a little agitated about it. Maybe it is some sort of game. Maybe you just need to start the habit of writing every day, and I think there is nothing more admirable. Please do it. There's definitely merit in writing every day. I do that myself, although it's for my papers. Weird, but I suddenly do feel like I'm talking to you—*whoever you are*. I haven't felt that way about my writing in years. I write critiques and analyses of dusty book that no one reads; why would I expect anyone to read my work? I'm Allen by the way.

Look, I will write this. I will. I will write not just for *my* life. Until I have the means to find Rausch, I will do this Sisyphean task for whatever mad and insane reasons he has. I capitulate. I beg. Stop this, Rausch. I know you are going to read these words. Stop this. Please.

Or, at least, I will do it until Monday comes. Surely, Monday will present an opportunity to do something about this situation. If I can stop it I will. I won't see this whole project through. I just won't.

## 2. Session 2

I wrote until I couldn't keep my eyes open. Even that wasn't enough. I've written until I can't anymore but because I know what's at stake, I need to keep going. For the reasons that Rasuch has given me—for fifty thousand words—I must keep going. It's exhausting. fifty thousand words is so much; it's so much to say and I've nothing to say. I write critiques; does that matter to you? Call me out, Rausch! Stop terrorizing the things I love! I have nothing more to say, I think. I will type until my fingers bleed, Rausch. Kids have come and gone for Halloween and I can take no part in their happiness because of you. I just don't know what to say about myself. I'm no one to pay attention to, Rausch. Please, please, give me back what you have taken.

To the Universe I say, please understand that my manuscript (if I could call it that, really) it's a plea for help. Are you reading this? Please help me. This is not an exercise. I'm not writing fifty thousand words in the month of November because I want to. I'm doing it because if I don't then Rausch will... well, I'm not exactly allowed to say what he'll do. I can say that if I don't create fifty thousand words by November 31st, Rausch will destroy my life and everything I love. I do not want to do this. I have to do this. I do not not not want to do this (that was good; repetition is good) I have to, have to, have to do this. Fifty thousand words or [insert threat].

What can I say? His rules are sitting here on my desk next to this laptop. I cannot report them. Although he did say I could paraphrase some elements of it for the story—for the reader: you. Why he cares about what you're reading here, I've know idea. No. I HAVE no IDEA. But for whatever it's worth to you, you should know, Rausch has given me stipulations—the things I can do—must do—to keep him from revealing what he has in his possession, to keep them safe.

Basically, it's all I can do to write. I must write this novel. I do

not want to. I write under duress. And, I can't tell you what he is doing to force me to do this. I can't even hint at that. I suppose it would lead to his undoing or being found out. I'm putting up every one of these writings on the Internet so that everyone can see my progress. I need to write sixteen hundred a day. A DAY! It's an immense objective. But Rausch is watching. He said that I have to give him his five thousand words every three days. He said nothing about posting those writings publicly. So I am going to. Maybe somebody knows who he is. Maybe someone can help me. I suppose the three day limit thing—I suppose that's almost kind of him, because I might wait until the last minute—writer that I am—to meet the deadline. Deadline. That's never been so true for me. Dead line.

That is something I wouldn't mind in the least, except that... well, I can't say. Obviously Rausch cannot be found out—or his identity cannot be known—or his true persona can never come to light—or his real nature should not be scrutinized—or his description cannot come to light? And let's face it, Rausch is not his name. Well, this repetition is only going to work for so long. HOLY CRAP! I have to write sixteen hundred words a day at least! It's just not the way I write. But of course—of course? — Rausch knows this. Somehow he knows this. I think this must be personal.

He must know how much I care for the carefully constructed sentence, but he also knows that I don't go in for a carefully constructed plot.<sup>1</sup> I want precision from my sentences. If you give a shit about a sentence, you don't write it once. You write it, by hand, on paper, over and over until it's write [no edits! more words! sic] right. I think that's the way Nabokov did it. Didn't he write his sentences out on index cards and then just re-arrange and re-arrange them until he could type up a page? I have no idea where

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<sup>1</sup>Incidentally, I know Rausch knows these things about me because he goes on at length about it in his ransom letter. I've no idea how he knows these things about me. It's frightening really. It's more frightening for someone to know that then if they knew my credit number or license plate or home address. And there were other details about my writing—things that he knew. I think with a few more clues I could figure out who he is. I just need to figure our where to get those clues.

I get this shit. I just pick this information up and spit back out as fact—except I’m telling you it’s just anecdotal BS. Believe it if you like, but you don’t have to believe it. But, didn’t Nabokov write about an analyst hunting down a poet in “Pale Fire”? I never read it, but I think in one of my graduate classes I was supposed to. (I ended that sentence in a preposition just for you, Rausch.) I wonder if you’re going to read this text or just keep fucking with me so that you can have what you really want. I don’t think this text will have anything to do with what you want in the end. I don’t know who you are, but for some reason I feel like I know what you really want. You won’t get it from me.

Look, this book is being written in distress. (Or maybe not. For some reason I feel centered today.) But, under duress... believe whatever you want about the next 50,000 words. I mean, of course I’m going to have to make up a bunch of shit just to get through this and I can’t even tell you why. I might think I know who you are, but I’ve got to think that whoever you are, you just simply won’t do what you’ve threatened me with. I beg you.

I suppose I could tell you why from a certain point of view. I could tell you about what lead me to meet Rausch, and considering that he wants an apology, or some kind of acceptance or forgiveness—whatever he wants—I could tell you how I came to know him. I guess I could waste 50,000 words on how I got here, knowing Rausch, and why he is making me do this. Being in this situation—typing for my life—I suppose I am somewhat responsible. It’s awful. You can’t hear the clicking of the keyboard. You can’t hear the terrible silence that exists when I’m not typing. It’s... it’s... well, it’s just some occasional raindrops outside on a metal roof and those god damned raindrops aren’t making words are they? I guess they are, seeing as how I just wrote about them. But they aren’t noises like the keys being pressed that are getting me out of this situation.

Good Lord, I have to regroup. I have to take a break. How many words is this? Jesus, the program I’m working is just some little text editor. I mean, there’s no word count. I just started typing because,

I've go to, and if I work in some sort of word processor... I can't take on the risk that the whole thing will just be erased. I've got to work in text. This is about word count. This is about word count! (I know that strategy is limited.) But still, I've got to have numbers. There's no way out of this for me; it's a novel or no novel that is 50,000 words. I have no choice. Rausch has got me by the balls. So, here's a novel, I guess:

Uh, once upon a time there was an asshole who threatened... something... my *heart*. How's that Rausch? You said I couldn't mention what you were threatening, but am I mentioning it if I use a metaphor? You. Are. Threatening. My *heart*. And I hope you are reading this come Monday because I will get you your God damned 5000 words every three days this month until I hunt you down and murder you with my bare hands. You *read* me, Rausch?—with my bare hands. And then I'm going to print this piece of shit, delete it, and *burn* it, you son of a bitch.

## 3. Session 3

I'm done. I'm exhausted. I couldn't sleep last night at all, and I am so tired I can't think. I can't begin to fathom what this maniac wants from me. All I can think about is that when I do drop off the USB key tomorrow, I will wait—somewhere hidden—and this man will have to come get these words. He'll have to, right? He'll have to somehow get his hands on the key and somehow I'll follow him or see him. I wonder if I'll be able to do what's necessary. Seizing him won't get me what I want back. I'll have to follow him... to his lair. Lair. I'm in a god damned comic book or something with an evil villain who has a *lair*.

I'm watching the word count like a junkie and I can't imagine getting to 1600 again. It took everything I had *twice* yesterday to try to get there. Maybe the approach I need to take here is to just recount how I got here. Maybe that amounts to the right number of words. I listen to a lot of podcasts and just out of curiosity, before I started writing today I decided to see if I could find some transcripts of my favorite podcasts. I mean, they're just talking for an hour so—most of them. One podcast I listen to is Freakonomics and I checked in to a transcript of theirs. "Parking is Hell" is an episode that they made back in August of this year. I suppose the more specific I am, the better the word count, so okay, they released an episode on August the twentieth in the year of our lord two thousand and fourteen.<sup>1</sup> Anyway, they discuss parking. Yup. You can listen for yourself [here](#).

They discuss parking. It's not bad really. I mean, it's scientific anyway and apparently it's done pretty badly. But my point is—wait I got the date wrong apparently. I said that they released the episode on August the twentieth in the year of our lord two thousand and fourteen but actually, the episode was released on August the twenty-first in the year of our lord two thousand and fourteen<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>You like that, Rausch?

<sup>2</sup>Again: suck it, Rausch.

Again, my point is that they talked to each other for thirty-seven minutes and only managed to generate 1370 words. Weird that it's even like that. But I'm just by myself and I'm supposed to generate 1600 words today. Today is one thing, but how am I supposed to do this for an entire month?

Maybe I should get back to what I was originally saying, which is how I got here. All right. I'm going to do that, but I have to eat dinner first. God, I am so tired. 478 words and counting and I am so tired.

## 4. Session 4

All right, enough whining about how tired I am and how hard this is.<sup>1</sup> I feel a little better now that I've eaten. I want to describe how I got here. When you think about it, writing some words in return for what Rausch has stolen from me is hardly any price to pay at all. I guess. There is the exception that what he has stolen from me is priceless.<sup>2</sup>

I'll start with Friday. It was Halloween. On Fridays I teach my sophomore class in American literature (course ENG 212) which mainly pertains to the years 1620 to 1945 and is at 10:15am. I wish it weren't. I feel like students pay more attention to things like literature after lunch. In fact, I would love to teach a lunch course on literature where we meet at various food vendors—but that's a pipe dream. We cover a dozen or so short stories and three books over the course of the semester. This ranges from very early stuff such

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<sup>1</sup>The footnotes gave me an idea yesterday. I'll keep writing for Rausch. I'll even match his word counts since I need to string him along and let him think that everything is moving along the way he wants. But I also want to—need to—keep some record of these events for myself. I may need to go back over my own thoughts to see if there is any insight here. I strongly suspect that I can figure out who Rausch is; I just need to really jog my memory. So, I'm going to footnote the text, but I'm not going to turn the footnotes over to Rausch. I'll erase them before I send them along to him. I just need to keep track of my thoughts and plans here.

<sup>2</sup>Too precious. I've contacted the police. I contacted them yesterday as a matter of fact. At first they said they couldn't do anything until the missing persons had been gone for at least 72 hours. Enough time has passed that a detective can actually get on this case. His name is Adrian Smythe. He came to visit me in my home and to have a look around. He mentioned that I had I just reported the break in and they would have come right away. Thanks, detective. While I have to say that I expected something more scientific, he really just looked through my belongings. Fair enough. He asked for everything available that I have in my computer and email which I have entirely given over to him. Take the whole thing, Adrian Smythe. Take everything and find this SOB. He asked for pictures of my wife and daughter and that was hard—choosing a picture. I didn't want to choose something sentimental, but rather something that would really help to identify them. I didn't tell Smythe about the drop off, though. It worries me that I'm making a mistake—that attempting to get Rausch myself will result him calling off the whole thing and killing my wife and child. That's the threat and like I said before, writing down now really *is* more horrible than just knowing it.

as the Iroquois Creation story (a fascinating piece that is) to letters from Christopher Columbus: "Letter to Luis de Santangel Regarding the First Voyage," and "Letter to Ferdinand and Isabella Regarding the Fourth Voyage."

The class started back in August and (thankfully) tomorrow and the next day the University will be on Fall break. This gives me ALL day to find you, Rausch. ALL day.

We had just (Wednesday) wrapped up talking about several of Robert Frost's poems putting us squarely into the 20th century. Over the weekend, my students are supposed to be reading the first half of Eugene O'neil's "Long Day's Journey into Night." I'll have to have some material ready for Wednesday because I know damn well that most of them will not have read the assignment. I hate to be cynical, but college kids are college kids. I will say that I might be surprised. This year's students seem unusually engaged.

You know, I feel like pointing out that I do not choose what gets read in my class. There are four sections of American Literature and it's up to the senior faculty to decide. I don't particularly care for 19th century literature. It's just so bogged down in morality. I mean, all literature is somewhat concerned with morality, but this is Morality with a capital M. I mean, "The Scarlet Letter?" Give me a break; take a Prozac already. Give me an existential text any day. Camus, Calvino. I love that sort of work. I can get behind e. e. cummings too. What was he? Late 19th century, I think? Did he live into the 20th century? I gotta admit, I don't know. Bad professor.

look at me i am writing like e e cummings

I don't know if you have a sense of humor, Rausch. Maybe at some point you'll let me know.

Anyway, I'm not sure what happened specifically Friday morning because it was not unlike all of my mornings. I get up at 6. Then breakfast, shower, the usual stuff. Once I get to my office (by 8), I try to get any writing out of the way. I work best in the mornings. I don't check email until 9:30 or so. I like to use a work strategy called the Pomodoro method. You write or do whatever it is you're doing for 25 minutes. (I set a timer on my phone.) Then, after that,

you have five minutes to stand up, stretch and do something brief, like play a game or look up something on the Internet that occurred to you. That's a cardinal rule: do NOT do research on the Internet *while* writing. It's a total time-sync and you're better off just writing a blank on the page like \_\_\_\_\_ and come back to fill it out later. Gotta keep those thoughts flowing! It's why I instituted the whole pomodoro thing in the first place. I couldn't stop looking up stuff when I was writing.

Then, another twenty-five minutes and another break. By that time it's about nine o'clock and if I'm feeling up for it, I'll do a third pomodoro. Sometimes I use the time to plan out lectures, but I've been at this for three years; I feel like I know the material well enough. And, let's face it, historical literature is not to changing much, nor is the department's opinion on what needs to be taught.

But I still don't check my email until nine thirty because I like the isolation after I leave the house. It's nice to know that there is a period in the day in the day when I am totally alone with my thoughts with no risk of interruption. You know how when a fire alarm has been acting up or just something irritating is repeatedly going on—after a while you just feel like you're not thinking or it's not quiet—you're just waiting for the disturbance to come again.

It's not unlike my thoughts about Rausch. I get about three hundred words into this effort and I think of him again. I wonder what he looks like? He's probably normal looking, if not ugly, but all I see is a ghoul. His skin is falling off his face as stares at the world through little pince-nez glasses that are just barely balanced on his massive nose that has a few warts at the base of it. You know, I feel like I know myself pretty well, but if I catch him tomorrow at the drop-off I really don't know what I might do. I have visions of stabbing him in his gut and jerking the blade around to make enough of a wound that he won't die right away but will just painfully bleed to death for an hour or so.

Again, I think of you, reader (will there really ever be any readers of this) and what you might come to think of me. I'm not like what I just described above. I really don't think I could hurt anyone.

But you don't understand, can't understand what this monster took from me. Maybe that's Rausch's point... I have to think about that.

Good lord, where was I? Talking about Friday? You what, I taught class, had lunch, taught my graduate course in the afternoon, and frankly I have no idea what else happened until I pulled into my driveway and already something was wrong because the front door was just open. My stomach sank when I saw that. Every instinct in me knew that wasn't right. I walked in the front door—which I never do—I always go in through the garage.

There's a foyer and a hallway that goes straight through the house, so from the front door you can see the kitchen's bay window and as soon as I walked in the door, I saw the envelope. Rausch has left it standing upright against an empty vase and my name was printed cleanly across the front of it. Have you ever received a summons—like even for jury duty? I don't know about you, but that moment when someone hands you a summons is just the worst moment. This felt ten times worse. A hundred times worse. You know what? I can't keep going. I'm done. Thinking about that moment... I'm done.

## 5. Session 5

Once again, no sleep—or little sleep, rather. The clock changed last night—daylight savings time—and that didn’t help at all. I’m sitting here in the early, early morning light having given up. I couldn’t even try to sleep in my own bed; too empty. I slept on the couch in the living room and tried to lull myself to the movie “Kafka” with Jeremy Irons. It seemed appropriate. In it, Kafka, the author himself, gets caught up in all of his own stories somehow. He’s chased around by people he doesn’t know under under the threat of what he doesn’t know.

I can’t remember the plot line exactly but he works for an insurance company, the headquarters of which is located in the Castle. No one ever goes to the Castle and comes back. He finds some records missing or out of place and starts asking questions. As is wont to happen in a movie about Kafka, of course, asking questions is not a good idea and he gets the attention of some people who think he’s asked *too many* questions.

The movie is in black and white and, I don’t know, it’s widely regarded as a bad film. It got fifty-seven percent on Rottentomatoes. I suppose that’s not bad, but it’s not good. Anyway, I don’t see how anyone could not like it unless it was just hard for them to follow or something. I like it a great deal. The soundtrack is highly original and tense. The environment (Budapest maybe?) is ideal with all its ornateness and shadows and crannies for slimy things to hide in. There is a bizarre cast of characters that are the bad guys and all of them turn in comic performances that are at the same time creepy.

The film, in many ways, reminds me of the stories of Reza Bahadir, a writer I have come to know intimately in my research—almost personally really. I am, I believe, one of the only people in the world who translates his work. While never the subject of my serious work, his stories revolved closely to other authors I studied more like Jorge Luis Borges or Italo Calvino or even Kafka

himself. The one element that I felt these writers shared was that they were writing fiction and went about it in such a way that their stories could never be discerned as just fiction. They wrote non-fiction about other planes of existence. There weren't (necessarily) fantastical elements, although the worlds they made seemed askew. Or, if the fiction was fantastical, they gave you reason to doubt it, by making the story second-hand knowledge. They let little, irrelevant facts pile up to become doubt to the reader. The story is not to be believed and they measure the reader's investment as they dig deeper into stranger ideas.

But Reza Bahadir had a story, "The Gas Chamber" that, now that I think about it, has really captured, for me, what it is like to be in my current situation—even now as I type this. I will say that "The Gas Chamber" was an early story of Bahadir's and one way in which you could discern that was that it was just utterly surreal; almost magical. But it's sparse, and it has hints of stories that he would write later.

In "The Gas Chamber," a man wakes up in a room—sort of. There are no walls to speak of, just a marble floor. There is only one source of light in this room that he's in. It's high above his head and he can't make it out. It only seems to drop down in a circle on the marble floor and has a wide enough circumference to encircle twelve pillars that sit around him in the chamber.

He goes beyond the pillars to try to find some walls, any walls. He can't find any in the dark. He walks as far as he can in several directions until the cone of light surrounding the pillars almost fades from view. He doesn't want to lose sight of it or be lost in darkness for good. So, he heads back and tries another direction, never to any avail. After sleeping and searching for how long the man doesn't know, he begins to notice a creeping, green fog drifting into the light. It's thin at first, barely noticeable, but for no reason available to the man he begins to think that the fog must be a poison.

After waking from sleep another time, sleeping in the center of the light, his head on the floor, the man notices a pinhole in the very center of the circle—just a black dot—not even large enough to

slip a finger or a hairpin into. But upon spotting it, the man realizes that there can be no other way out of the chamber. Just as sure as he is that the green fog is a poisonous gas, he is equally sure that this pinhole is the only way out of the room.

After a lot of rumination, and with the gas increasing he takes to examining the pillars thinking at first that the only way out would be to smash a pillar into the marble floor and drive a crack into the pinhole. But the pillars seem almost chiseled from the floor itself with no discernible seams. With all the strength he can muster, he cannot push any of the pillars over. All this time, the gas is growing in thickness and he can feel it distorting his view, his thinking, his sleep.

Waking up one more time, curled on the floor around the pinhole, he feels he's had some sort of revelation in a fevered dream. But in the dream he was able to slide through the pinhole. Groggy, he stands up, walks over to one of the pillars and removes his hands. He simply places them facing upright on the pillar and allows them to become heavy on the pillar until he is longer attached to them. He stumbles over to the pinhole and kneels on the floor, pressing his hands through the hole with ease!

With the gas swirling in around him now, he quickly approaches each pillar and places on them the next "logical" component. He leaves behind arms, feet, lower legs, upper legs, hips, torso, chest... this last one is an especial relief, since he can no longer feel the panic from the gas since he is no longer breathing. Then he leaves his shoulders, his neck and head.

Now his able to slip portions of himself into the pinhole. He lowers himself down into it in various ways, but always, the hole is simply too small. He peers through the gas, that is now a rabid cloud and sees one final pillar remaining empty. So, on it, he leaves his mind and travels out of the chamber.

I studied Reza Bahadir because he made an ideal and endless research project. There are no English translations for his work,

originally written in an unusual middle Persian dialect. So, the ability alone to translate his stories seemed a great promise for me. Here were these mysterious and derelict stories that could be brought into an entirely new light. I was excited by that prospect alone, but they also represented a greater mystery to uncover. If I could find out more about Reza Bahadir, I could find out more about what his stories might have meant. I mean, without understanding more about the symbolism and knowledge of his culture, I couldn't even be sure that the final translation of mind was even entirely correct. He could have meant spirit, but I have my reasons for believing that he did not.

The reason Reza was not the subject of my thesis was simply that there really wasn't enough information left to uncover. Much like Rausch is to me now, Reza Bahadir is and remains a ghost. I don't know that I'll ever have more than the poor translations of his stories and some educated guesses about when and where he lived.

But I do know what it feels like to be the man in the chamber right now. There is darkness in every direction I look. The author of the story—the real author—of the story is a ghost. And, the only way out of the chamber would seem to be to lose my mind.

I feel like my life should be in black and white right now. I feel like it should be perpetually night until this endeavor is over. This pale blue pre-sunrise light doesn't seem proper at all—it seems surreal. It's also quite depressing given how tired I am. Normally, I would be enjoying this time of the day. But now, after drifting in and out of the nightmares in the film and the nightmares in my mind, all I can think about is where I will have to go this afternoon to meet Rausch.

I spent more time looking into name Rausch last night. Nada. Nothing. I know it's not this guy's real name—can't be. It's got to be symbolic or something. It must mean something. Maybe it's only in TV and movies that killers have some pathological need to tell the

hero who they are. But we catch killers in real life and they do try to get shit published in newspapers and stuff like that so maybe it's true.

It's a German name; I worked that much out. There's Rausch Real Estate and Rausch Granite and Rausch Advisory Services and Rausch & Associates. None of them are located anywhere around here. I searched (vainly, I know) for any listings of Rasuch in the area, the county, the state. There were a few hits, but they didn't make any sense either. I suppose I could just start visiting Rausch residences and see if I manage to rattle anybody.

But I have a shot this afternoon. I have to think, to plan. Rausch says he's going to send me a text message and that it will have instructions for how and where and when to meet to hand over the USB key. There has to be an opportunity here to get the bastard. I need to get a gun. Yes. I definitely need to get a gun. I wonder what time gun stores open?

## 6. Session 6

Wow. That felt really good. That felt like I was doing something about this situation! What I did, Rausch, was I went and I bought a .357 Smith & Wesson. Bullets, too, Rausch. One of them has your name on it, you understand? You don't want to allow the police to be involved? Fine. Let's not involve the police. I don't mind in the least.<sup>1</sup>

The guy who sold me the gunâ€”name's Herb of all namesâ€”told me that you didn't have to be an expert to use the .357. It's just point and fire. It doesn't even have a hammer that you cock. You just point and pull the trigger. They had a little gun range in the back of the store and I took it back there and fired a few rounds into the targets. I don't know what you look like Rausch but I have to tell you that it was very appropriate that the targets were just dark black silhouettes. I can't think of you as anything but a demonic shadow that snuck into my house and upturned my life. That's going to change today.

I've never felt anything like it. The recoil is amazing. I couldn't even keep my eyes open the first few times I fired it. It's louder than anything I think I've ever heard and we were wearing ear protection. It's cold, too. It's the coldest feeling metal when it's in your hand. I have it sitting here on my desk and it just looks utterly foreign to me. Amongst my usual pens and books and papers, it

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<sup>1</sup>Detective Smythe called this morning. He asked if I could come down to the station to answer more questions and maybe establish an alternate line of communication with Rausch. Besides telling the Detective that whatever I wrote Rausch was going to read, I had to make excuses about coming down to the station. I told him that the Fall Break Monday was reserved for all-day faculty meetings and that as upset as I might be, I had to go to work. I told him I could come in tomorrow for as long as he liked. He capitulated, but he definitely didn't like it. I don't know what else to tell him though. I removed the page from the ransom package that had instructions about the five thousand words every three days and how the drop offs were going to work. It was merrily title "Dropping Off Assignments" in big Times New Roman. Prick. Whatever, I have to handle the drop off today by myself. I didn't wait this long to not get my hands around Rausch's throat myself. He's not going to court for this.

just looks out of place. And yet, it is comforting. I keep reaching out to hold it. I pop open the whatchamcallit chamber and look through the holes, spin it and snap it back into place. There's a really satisfying *clink* when the chamber fits back into the body of the gun. It's solid.

I've never been around guns. I mean, in scouts, when I was a kid (so far long ago I can barely remember) we shot off .22s and some of the bigger kids were allowed to shoot shotguns. I'm pretty sure I did, but I honestly don't remember. This pistol is just so different though. There's so much energy in this tiny little package.

So... that makes three hundred ninety words today, Rausch. That brings me to a total of somewhere around the five thousand that you demanded. Now, I'm coming for you.

## 7. Rausch's Response

To: aworthington@\_\_\_\_.edu  
From: rausch@txashd.xyz  
Subject: Re your first 5000 words

Allen,

Allen. Dear Allen, of course I expected to be disappointed by your first outing. I retain no malice for it. I expected the first 5000 words (one tenth of what I am asking for) to be somewhat amateur and lazy. You could have used the moment to absorb yourself completely in what is happening to you. You could have looked at your life and seen an opportunity to escape it, not what you seem to be writing about: reflection encouraged only by self-pity.

And, I respect your unwillingness to call this a game. You are right to identify the cliche in the phrase "What's his game?" No human is a game; any human is a wash of motivations. This event, if you will, is not a game. It is an exercise. Let's change your motivation. This \*exercise\* is meant to make you more than you, by yourself, can actualize. You are, after all, more than you claim to be; more than one person. You keep many people inside. You have incredible potential and I intend to bring it out of you. What you know is deep and necessary. You do not know why. But you have seen something inexpressible beyond the beyond and I intend to drag it out of you.

You should not bother laying me out as the adversary here. It won't do you any good, for one. I have planned this for a long time and you won't find your way out of my maze. But you need to understand that I am \*with\* you, Allen. I want to see your full potential, and I've created

the perfect situation to manifest that ideal version of you that you can't seem to accomplish on your own. You must write something holy for me.

Your first five thousand words (with the exception of the story about the gas chamber) they just were not surprising. Of course you would focus on yourself instead of the greater cosmos.

Definitely don't repeat yourself going forward—unless for some unforeseen reason it is a device that really can assist the story. Copying and pasting is cheap and you know it. This, whether you like it or not, \*is\* a story. I've put you in a treacherous position and now I have also given you the opportunity, through my unique ransom, to capitalize on it. And I want you to have the opportunity to tell this story. By the end of this, I will win, and I will publish this work from you. You will have nothing to say about it. Many will read this work in its final form, and they will know something true from it, precisely because \*you\* have written it from desperation.

So do not embarrass yourself. Make an effort here. It will matter. No one knows more than I why this exercise matters and what is at stake. You are the instrument. You must finish the game with honor, and that honor will only be constructed from your best efforts.

That all being said, there were a few shining moments here in your first effort. At moments, you describe your surroundings and how they compare to how you are feeling. These are elegant, but I am more interested in those moments when you lose yourself; shed your identity. Yes, some great stories are written in 6 words. That is true. But those sorts of stories operate under a rule, like: write a story in six words. It is a challenge. Your story is to be 50,000 words. That is \*your\* challenge. In fact, I do not even care if you take the whole 30 days or not. Finish early; you will still win back your prize.

The gun purchase was brave, maybe even commendable, but expected. Consider that it resulted in the most interesting part of your attempt at writing something towards the True reality. I did feel the cold steel of the weapon you had purchased—I felt it in the palm of my hand, too, Allen. I felt the \*passion\* which might have caused you to pull the trigger—not that I will ever be foolish enough to give you that opportunity, nor would I think that death would arrive so short-sightedly. But, this is the sort of succulent narrative I am requesting from you. Still, this gun, it is not the story.

I have given you very few rules by which to operate other than to say that I want you to give me a story that is 50,000 words long (at least) by 11/30 and that it has Truth and heart and feeling. Give me the deepest thoughts that you have. Be honest about who you really are. So far, I think you do not appreciate the spirit of the exercise. Do not make me create a list of rules; play by the spirit of the exercise. Rules make everything so boring. Rules make novels boring. Rules harness creativity; they do not birth myths. Write me a story, or if you prefer a Bible. Do not repeat yourself. Stop using contractions; they're sloppy, even in a novel. Besides, doing so only benefits your word count, you know.<sup>1</sup> Obviously, do not copy and paste like you did in that horrid first 'chapter'. I am looking for the best in you. I am doing this because I care. I hope that you can understand that.

You should know that I need what it is you write.

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<sup>1</sup>In "Session" 2 I mentioned that there were a few things about Rausch that were starting to give me some clues as to a possible identity. For one, in his original ransom note, he knew crazy things about me. I can't go into to too much detail, but he definitely knew intimate details about the way I write, definitely what I write. He knew what I liked about the books I liked. That gave me a decent short list of people to start thinking about. But that bit about contractions? That is a major, major clue—especially to be so smug about it. I really have to check my evidence (my hunch) before I go into to too much speculation. But I really do think I might have a line on who Rausch is; even why he might do something as perverse as this.

Do not be lazy about this, Allen. You know what is at stake. Give me the whole of the religious nature of all the games that you play. Your little game in the park is one of a thousand outcomes I have already designed around. It is ridiculous to think that you know where the whole of the universe is moving like a tide. You are surrounded. You are on the inside without concept of what you've begun. No sudden massive wave will beat me at this. You may thrash and cry, but you must complete what I want finished, for both you and I to know who we are. I demand the original story you began with. The place you started. The place, that even you know, you did not begin. You are important and you know it. You will give that over to me for the simple reason that you cannot handle it. It must be the original story, but it also has to be one from... the heart as you have taken to saying. I will keep my end of the bargain. As long as you turn in 5000 words every three days, the game<sup>2</sup> is afoot and I will not hurt what you love. But you must try harder to tell the story I want. Tell the original story. This counts.

I will text you again on Thursday.<sup>3</sup>

Rausch

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<sup>2</sup>Extremely telling. Rausch goes round and round about discussing this as an exercise, one designed for me. And yet, in a moment of... revelry?... arrogance? he says "game." Maybe he's being sarcastic, but I see no way that there's any trusting this man. Even in his demands, he in no way is revealing his true plan here, and I have little doubt that it means the loss of my... the loss of my whole life. That he uses the word 'game' here is some indication of something that I need to know about him. He doesn't mean it when he says this is an exercise. He had something else in mind; some kind of psychotic picture or poem. He has a certain end in mind. I don't know that it involves me ever seeing again what I hold dear.

<sup>3</sup>So then, the question becomes: if this is not an exercise and it is a game, what is the game? Something dark in my heart says that the only way he wins his game is if I go through this gruesome "exercise" and then he destroys me anyway. He said that he had designs on publishing the book. How could he do that without my permission and under these circumstances? This is the worst of plots and it is the one I need to commit myself to happening. While he's still in control, while I have no clues to who he is, I have to assume the worst of all possible outcomes.

## 8. The Drop Off

The bastard's critiquing me. I just got the email. I'll get to that.

I'm so pissed off. But that's beside the point. I should address what happened at the drop off. Yesterday afternoon, after I had got the gun, after I had practiced with it, I got the following series of text messages:

Mon, Nov 3, 11:12am

Meet at the South side of the park nearest to your home.

Mon, Nov 3, 11:14am

Sit on the bench next to the man in the Pea coat.

Give him the USB drive.

Mon, Nov 3, 11:17am

He's a paid courier, Allen. Leave him alone.

I already know what you have planned.

He's innocent in all of this.

My heart sank when I read it. Without so much as one meeting having happened, already Rausch was ahead of me, damn it. I hadn't expected—hadn't even thought of the idea that he would use a courier. I know myself too well, and I couldn't hurt anyone innocent in this whole debacle. Even if they weren't "innocent," I wouldn't want to hurt anyone but Rausch. In fact, I nearly suspect Rasuch would like to see that—me going down some dark path and failing at his little game instead of finishing the work.

I went to the park, saw the man, and approached him. After sitting next to him, I spoke to the man in the pea coat. He had a hoody on underneath the wool coat and had his hood up with dark sunglasses on to boot. He had a scraggly beard, and judging by what little of his face I could see, he seemed old—even frail. When I spoke

to him, he kept his face turned away from me. I asked him, “Why are you doing this?”

He said, “Do not make this complicated. Just give me the drive and we can both get out of here.”

“Is he watching?”

“Probably. Yes! I do not know! Just let me go. Please.”

I had the gun in my right hand and the USB drive in my left, both hands tucked in pockets, but it didn’t matter. I could take this guy down without so much as a flinch. I had the bluster in that moment. The bully came out in me. But I let it subside. Why would Rausch hire some old man to get this drive unless he wanted me to lose my temper and attack him. Where would I be then? I beat up an old man? I sighed and pulled the USB out, still clutching to the textured, cold handle of the gun in my right hand. As I put the drive in the clammy hand of the man sitting next to me, I clutched his palm and said, “I just want to know who is doing this to us?”

There was a moment; I don’t know what. It was like the man recognized my situation as his own. He turned to me for the first time, his head shadowed by his hood, his eyes hidden behind sunglasses, and he said, “We do what we are told. That is how we get out of this.”

I let him go, still holding my finger on the trigger of the gun concealed in my pocket.

I let him walk away for about five minutes; until he was just out of view. And then I got up and followed.

I trailed him to the North end of the park that gave way to less dense parts of town where there were ways, unknown to me before, you could weave between business buildings and alleyways out of sight of anyone in the “normal” part of town. I never knew that anything or anyone could hide so plainly behind the faces of commerce. The stores face out and welcome all comers, while behind it all lurk men like the one I was following, and now men like me—men with guns.

I kept up with the man until we came into the forest. He was slow. Again, he seemed old. He was following no path and I am

no tracker. At some point in the woods I wasn't sure that I was following him at all. He knew where he was going and I had no idea, no direction to tack. I stopped at a creek. There was a tree laid down across it and I contemplated balancing my way across but I'm out of shape and I just thought I would probably fall. And I already knew that the man with my words was far gone. Maybe he was further into the woods, maybe he was behind me, having doubled back. I had know idea. I had lost. You won this round, Rausch.

Exhausted and upset, I sat down on the tree and just stared at the water going down the creek, feeling like it was just seconds in my life draining out of me; feeling the incredibly heavy weight of how long it would again be until the next drop off and my next chance to turn the tables.<sup>1</sup> Yes, Rausch, no matter what you say, you won't stop me from trying.

But in my moment of loss, it turned to reverie, maybe meditation. I just didn't feel like I was there anymore, and in that moment I discovered something utterly new to me at the age of forty-three. I say my age because this was such a simple thing to discover, especially when I had spent my life slogging around creeks. In all that time, I never noticed this simple fact. A creek doesn't work like I thought. As I tried to balance myself on the log across the creek, I gripped another smaller sapling and when I did I shook a number of leaves down on to myself and down in to the creek. One of them was very obvious—it was a blood red leaf. In it, for a moment, I saw my heart. I expected to sit and watch it wash its way down the small waterfall near the log across the creek.

But that's not what happened. The leaf, it revolved. There was a pool in front of the log formed by a small waterfall. Then, there was another waterfall (we're talking one foot waterfalls here) and another small pool. The leave went *up* the creek towards the first

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<sup>1</sup>And the tables *will* be turned. In about an hour I'm meeting with Detective Smythe and I plan to fill him in on the rest of the details. He'll no doubt be upset, but I can't imagine anyone being too upset with a man who is just trying to save his family the best way he knows how. I didn't ask him if he had a family; I will now. I don't care. He knows I'm operating under duress. I hope that gets me out of an obstruction charge or something else. Surely, his priority will be finding my family.

waterfall. It was like the waterfall was sucking water into itself and dragging anything on the surface of the water back into it. the leaf went all the way around the circumference of the pool back the top waterfall and then went underneath and just vanished.

Mesmerized, I continued to watch and the leaf surface, maybe minutes, later. It popped back up in the middle of the pool. And then, after it had been submerged, it finally moved toward the second waterfall as I had expected it to do in the first place.<sup>2</sup>

I had expected it to just wash down the creek. I never expected this circular period of time that had lapsed for not just the leaf, but for me as well. I just sat to catch my breath—maybe keep going after the man in the pea coat. But then, the lead went down the second waterfall and I watched as it, again, was submerged for minutes, appeared on the surface and then swirled around the pool back to the waterfall to be submerged again.

I wondered if it meant anything. Am I missing something? Is this whole matter closer to me than I think? If this whole torture is a creek, is there some mysterious way *up* the creek that I'm not considering?

I have to know who Rausch is. It doesn't even matter how he's torturing me. What kind of man does this? I need to know.

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<sup>2</sup>This, I think, directly corresponds to my new (and unpleasant) involvement with the FBI. They, the cavalry, have been called in. I am glad for it and they have given me every sense of satisfaction that there is no way that Rausch could be aware of their involvement, but I am still set aside as some sort of useless consultant for information. I won't be the hero in this scenario.

## 9. Three Dreams

The thing that I hate about the dreams that I'm having lately is that there just is no control.<sup>1</sup> I can't run correctly; am constantly burdened with deep mud or the wrong size shoes, or sometimes my legs feel like they are just asleep (which they technically are!). So much of it has so little to do with Rausch, other than maybe he's my target or someone I am vaguely hunting. Then again, it must have something to do with how powerless I feel right now to solve this problem; especially after not catching his damn courier yesterday. But I'm incompetent in every single dream that I'm having lately—the ones I can remember.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>This, I think, directly corresponds to my new (and unpleasant) involvement with the FBI. They, the cavalry, have been called in. I am glad for it and they have given me every sense of satisfaction that there is no way that Rausch could be aware of their involvement, but I am still set aside as some sort of useless consultant for information. I won't be the hero in this scenario.

<sup>2</sup>I'm especially incompetent when it comes to my own case. While I was off at the first drop off for Rausch, I had no idea that Smythe wanted to see me because he'd brought in the FBI. I might not have taken the chance that I did if I'd known he was going to bring in the heavy guns. He did. I met and shook hands with Agent Samantha Cobb and her partner Agent Peter Caravale. What threw me off was where the questions went. Where was I all day yesterday?

I responded that I was at faculty meetings.

Samantha responded that, given that she was the FBI, they had come to the University to find me. Maybe I didn't think it was more important than grading papers; she did. Of course, she pointed out that there were no all-day faculty meetings, and this is what I had suspected I would have to confess to the local detective, but not the FBI. It didn't matter; there was no way out. I confessed. She was none too pleased. And that's when things took a bad turn.

She said, "The day your wife and child were kidnapped, you say you weren't at your house. No one she had asked could find you at the University before at least 3:00pm. Where were you all day?"

I said that I tended to work at the Library and not the office so that I wouldn't be disturbed. Agent Cobb asked me what I was working on.

Friday? I was grading papers. I don't think I was, but I panicked.

Then Agent Cobb said, out of nowhere to me, "Why do you resent your wife?"

I sat in shock. I don't resent my wife. I said as much.

"We're on your side, but we are also trying to work off of evidence. We know why you lied about not being able to meet us yesterday—you were at the 'drop-off,'" she used air quotes. I probably made a disgusted face.

"I was at a rendezvous with a man that Rausch hired."

I'm decent at that. I can remember dreams and I often write them down in journals. My investigations into dreams have illustrated to me that it matters what you saw a day or two before. I have dreams about explosions often after I've seen one in a movie theater. I've never seen an explosion in real life. Some part of me doubts this; thinks that there is an explosion just tucked away in my cortex, or whatever part of the mind is responsible for putting

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"There was a courier."

"Was there really?"

"Yes! He was a dark-skinned man in a pea coat and hoody."

"You gave him a USB disk? What was on it?"

"Drivel. Nonsense. Rausch said—"

Caravale chimed in, "We know what his demands are. But other than some wacky letters you gave us, there are no phone calls and no way to initiate contact with this guy."

I pointed out that wasn't true. The one thing I had thought to do was to print out the email that Rausch had sent early that morning—his first god damned criqtue. I gave it to them. I pointed out that if he's reading what I'm writing and writing critiques then I can deliver messages.

While Agent Cobb read the email, Agent Caravale asked, "What's to keep us from believing that you didn't right this?"

"The address he's writing from—I don't know what it is and whenever I write to it, it bounces back. It's like it's one way or something. But look into it; whatever it is, whoever owns it, it won't be me."

She said something like, "Look, You're not in too bad situation right now." Then she smiled at me? It was a terse smile; is there such a thing? "This will all get better when you start telling the truth—the whole truth." She put her hand on my shoulder and rubbed it. I admit it was comforting.

I told her I was trying to get Rausch for myself. Then, I started tearing up. "I want him dead!"

She removed her hand.

Agent Caravale stepped forward and said, "You hid some of the ransom note from us."

I said, through tears that I just wanted to find the bastard.

Agent Caravale said, "Yeah. We get it. This guy is a new one. But we're gonna get him. When's the next time you're supposed to meet?"

I told them. November 6th.

Agent Cobb asked, "Have you written anything?"

I just looked at her with black holes in the center of my irises. Have I written anything? Have I written anything to save the lives of those who I care most about? Have I written the way that I am being manipulated into doing? Then I lost my temper. *Of course* I have written! I have written day and night as if it would magically conjure up my God DAMNED family! I have written until I couldn't keep my eyes open. I have been fighting Rausch all by myself and the only weapon I have is words that I give him—words, by the way, that are painful to create and only then stolen in the end. Have I written. Yes. And Rausch has it all—everything I've written to date, he has.

The agents sat and added me up. Then, Agent Cobb said, "Let's go over all of this from the very beginning."

these experiences we have away in to cubbies in our neurological weavings.

Strangely, if I've never seen an explosion, I have felt the awesomeness of it in my dreams on a number of occasions. The beauty of being in a dream is that you can stand directly against the force of an explosion if you know that the threat only exists in your mind. I throw my arms up in front of my face and brace and the explosion washes over me like nothing. I often do this. I've seen US cities just blown apart, only to stand in front of the explosion in total hopelessness for the city but not for myself because I know this is a dream.

This is part of the benefit of writing down your dreams when you awake from them. In the dream, you begin to get hints that the room is not right; that it feels familiar and yet can't be because you recognize none of it. One dream I had was of a wood workshop—something I have indeed dreamed of having—the sawhorses were all hung from the ceiling upside-down. In the dream I pushed one of them and it swung and I knew I would never construct in such a place, but there it was “before my eyes” and I began to suspect. I woke up inside of the dream.

I can not explain how gratifying it is to wake up inside of a dream. At first it was because you were free from the constraints of this world. But as you get older and have more varied dreams it begins to become a recognition of the fact that even *this* life is a dream. It's all a dream. I have no idea whose dream, and I do not care. I just know that I can become lost in my mind.

Becoming lucid—as they say—in your dreams—recognizing that it is a dream, something must be wrong. In order for something to be wrong in your dreams, you must first know what is common and right in your life. I have heard some lucid dreamers say that you must look at your watch at the same time of day every day. It seems reasonable. It has never helped me despite the fact that I often look at the clock when it is 9:11. I was there in New York on that day, and I did not experience anything but the aftermath. But I still see the clock at that time (either in the morning or afternoon)

more frequently than anyone could call an accident.

The clock is just never what wakes me up in a dream. For me, looking at my feet is what does it. I spend some time looking at the menu in a fancy restaurant with nothing but little people in bowlers coming in is the only scene and I can't read the menu. The characters on the page are nothing more than a dancing of ink that refuses to become anything literate. I can tell the difference between the name of a dish, the description of the dish and the price of the dish, but beyond that I can read nothing.

Look under the table though, and I see my feet, and suddenly the realization comes to me obviously. My feet are there. They're not too far away. They're no oddly dressed. It's not that they aren't my feet. They're just not where they're supposed to be. And then the dream has a tear; one I can peer through. I look around and there are the little people in bowlers and I realize I've never been to this restaurant; never with this particular crowd. And then I realize that the restaurant itself is made up of details I've only seen elsewhere. It's a mad conglomeration.

From this particular dream I am thinking of, there is grass on the floor instead of tile. The entire ceiling is draped in such a way that there is no way to see the actual ceiling. The draping just drifts in layers and layers until there is nothing for them to anchor to and the draping is all there is. There is no ceiling. Realizations that there are no ceilings are troublesome. They tend to convince you that the whole scene is unreal, and if you manage that, you wake up.

Last night, I had a truly bizarre vision. I was with a number of people who were hunting an adversary <sup>3</sup> It was raining. It may have actually been raining outside from what I saw the next day. But we were hunting. And I had much more than a .38 snub. I had

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a massive automatic rifle. At some point the hunting party was invading a massive base made mostly out of concrete and I had to duck down beneath a partition of concrete that was barely four feet over my head. I am happy to skulk through mud if need be, but what came next was frightening. With an open road off my right shoulder, I was crawling-dragging myself through this rain gutter when a passenger bus pulled up next to me—it's familiar hiss of brakes following it's arrival.

Then, as it arrived, inches from me, the bus drop a knife-sharp, three-pronged, fork-lift front like a portcullis in some medieval castle, just inches from my hand. Through the absolute pouring rain I am trying to see the man who is driving the bus with a fork-lift on the front of it. He's a blur in the driver's window, maybe waving me through, maybe waving me away. If I get this wrong, I'm dead. I want to run in front of the bus, and tread so carefully past the tongs of that massive fork. But if I start running, will it just grab me? I wave him by again and again but he won't move the bus.

I go to run, and I wake up, reaching around everything in my bed to physically understand if I am even upright or not. My iPod is lodged underneath me. It takes minutes for me to lie on my side and grab my breath. Rausch is a shadow in the back of my mind—certainly the man driving the bus-fork-lift hoping to wave me into his path.

The strangest dream I ever had though, was not nearly so desperate—or even frightening—but it came with a very strange realization.

In this dream I was wandering through a house that seemed to have no design as well as no exits. Every hallways lead to two more hallways or occasionally a dead end room with sparse furniture and always, if there was a window, it was draped with thin curtains that only illustrated that it was twilight outside and that it was getting late. Every time I reached a room with a window (or windows) they only seemed to indicate that it was getting later and I felt more and more a sense of hurry—that I really needed to get out of this maze

of a house.

Wallpaper and other accouterments seemed to change from area to area, from hallway to hallway as if I were wandering from one added-on section to another. Even the seals between intersecting walls seemed like they didn't match up entirely. The halls, were not empty, however, but rather as bustling as a high school hallway. In fact, despite looking nothing like a hallway, the whole place had the distinct feeling of, in fact, feeling like a hallway. Everyone, everywhere, seemed to be going, in groups of twos and threes, to some other part of the building with a definite purpose. Now and then, a group of people (all shabbily dressed) would stop and ask me if I was lost.

At first I told everyone that stopped me that, no, I was not lost. No thank you, and I would quickly move on. But as the light continued to fade and as it became more and more clear that everyone else seemed to know where they were going, I became a little more desperate and started to tell people that I didn't know where I was going. However, when they tried to ask me where I was going I couldn't tell them and eventually they gave up trying to help me.

Finally, this kind red-headed, gypsy-looking woman took the time to ask where I was going. When I couldn't answer that, she asked where do you want go? I said that I really just wanted to leave, that surely there was a way out, and could she please show me that. Instead, she removed a book from one of her bags and held it out to me, saying "I think your answer is probably in here." I buckled but again insisted that no, I just needed an exit and could she please point me to one.

She opened the book and began paging through it, saying that all the answers were in the book. She was sure of it. In fact, she told me, the book was why everyone in the compound knew where they

were going.<sup>4</sup> She again insisted in handing me the book. I took it in frustration and began paging through it and it was utter nonsense; and that's when it clicked. I focused on some sigils on the page and just watched as they wormed around on the paper, fading in and out. No amount of focus allowed me to read the pages. Maybe because my waking mind is constantly reading, it became clear that I was in a dream. And that's when the strangest thing of all occurred.

I handed the book back to her and said something along the lines of "I am certain that there are no answers are in that book, because we are in a dream. Try to read something in it."

She puzzled over the book, flipping from page to page, and I again, emphasized that she needed to pick one page, one phrase and focus on it. Don't you see, I said, there's nothing there on the page. It's not there because we're in a dream.

She looked up at me bewildered, but then smiled. "We *are* in dream." She seemed quite pleased with that, and I said, "Let's get out of here." I took her hand and she began guiding me down to the end of the hallway, through a door and out into the dying light over a bay. Suddenly, alone, I stared out over the water; it was an urban bay. There was a freighter, and all along the shore were steel towers and cranes.

Without warning the freighter exploded.<sup>5</sup> It was magnificent to

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<sup>4</sup>I'm also really certain that you've no idea that directly addressing your smug critique was the idea of Agent Samantha Cobb. I'll go into more detail about her new theory on the case later, but what we came away with was the idea that I need to plead with Rausch to get more details in order to fill the goal. She suggested that as they gather details, they can feed them to me and I'll continue to engage in the dropoffs. More details and Rausch might start to get nervous that I'm getting too close. He might mess up. Of course, at the next drop off I'm going to have an army of undercover people around me. If the courier shows up again, he's not losing anyone.

<sup>5</sup>Reader—an earnest footnote!—I later found out that this concept is directly attributable to Anton Checkov the playwright, who is quoted as saying "Remove everything that has no relevance to the story. If you say in the first chapter that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter it absolutely must go off. If it's not going to be fired, it shouldn't be hanging there." I know that the first act of this nonsense certainly involved my purchase of a .38 snub-nose. I've no idea what the second and third act are going to be, but pay attention. I think they happen quickly—much more quickly than the first act.

watch, the concussion waves pushing out from the explosion and kicking up water and spray and little particles, and I had to strongest feeling of comfort as the concussion wave washed over me and I didn't even flinch. It just raced past me as a chaotic wind. I didn't even close my eyes, but I did wake up after a moments of standing in the explosion. It wasn't at all like waking up from the nightmare it might have seemed to be. I just woke up and wondered who in the world I had convinced, in my dream, that she was dreaming. Her face seemed so familiar.

## 10. Re: The Critique

I'm mostly certain that replying to your actual email address would do me no good, Rausch.<sup>1</sup> You've already proven that you've worked out a good deal of details here. But, seeing as how I am delivering my next five thousand words to you tomorrow, I wonder if you would mind that I respond to your madness right here in the text of this... I hesitate to call it a book still. Nonetheless, you saw fit to write to me about what you thought of what I had written so far, I feel it more than fair enough to respond to you right here. After all, your 'critique' made no mention of using this medium (if you will) as an opportunity to respond to your criticism. And you do, apparently, have many, of me.

First off, you are an incredibly condescending prick. I have to assume for a moment that name-calling is something you'll just have to tolerate. I'm not going to stop, and I can't think you would think I would. Again, you made no point in your critique or your ransom "packet" that I couldn't address you or that I couldn't call you names. So, I will for the moment, because it's wildly satisfying, and right now, the only satisfying thing in my life, you prick. Whatever the epic madness of what you are trying to accomplish with your plan—it's not that I need to understand your motivation or your plan—it's impossible. Your arrogance is clearly clouding what you're doing.

I just feel that the nature of the plan itself gives me clues into who you are. One, wildly arrogant for thinking you can get away with this. Two, it is a plan with many intricate parts, and I find

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that intricate things tend to break apart more easily for all their moving parts. Every day I grow more confident that you will slip up. I'm going to be at the ready Rausch, for when you do. And contractions... are they sloppy Rausch? I know some people who think like that. I know people who think about plot before they think about character. I wonder what kind of hack you are.

In your email you mention that you expected to be disappointed by my first five thousand words. What insane individual wouldn't expect that—expect to drive a man into a complete panic of nonsense given the crime you've committed against me already. But I think this implies something slightly different. I think it means you know me Rausch. I think we know each other and I think that makes my ability to discover who you are all that much more simple. It reduces the number of suspects in this case by a billion or more.

But I'll give you something in return for now. My approach will be more honest. Why not? I've nothing to go on right now, so for now I'll address the facts of the story at your behest. Besides, since I suspect I know you now, combing through my history might prove to be extremely useful. Let's suppose that you're not my adversary—hard to swallow, but—let's say we're working together like a psychotic editor and a scared and threatened writer. I'll give you that it's an amusing dynamic to consider when I think of other works of fiction I've read. So, in short, you're right and I was right: this is not a game.

You chose the word 'exercise' and then you discarded it later in your message. You stuck with the word 'game.' You said it was a cliche and then you went with it anyway. I think the lyricist is cooked. Maybe, for me it has to be an exercise in patience. Of course, another way to put that is that this is a hunt. You didn't use the word 'hunt' in your ransom package did you? No, you didn't. You're not hunting anything. You're hiding like a coward and holding on to something that I love and keeping in the shadows. See, Rausch, this is just a *hunt*. I'm going to find you.

And along the lines of my earlier statement that I will try to bring honesty to this *hunt* and I will avoid cheap tricks like

repeating myself or copying and pasting, but if it's honesty you want, Rausch, you're going to have to know that tricky word will bring about parts of the story that you might not like at all. You don't want to make rules and yet for all your lecturing you've created a sword of Demasocles in your one rule: that I cannot have back that which I love unless I do this task for you, and that I cannot talk about the one thing that I love.

In creating this one rule, you've place a sword over your own head, too. You know about the gun? Good. It's like they say about Checkov: introduce a gun in the first act and you are insured that it must be used by the third act. I don't know about you Rausch, but whether what is mine gets returned to me or not, this gun is going to off.<sup>2</sup>

At any rate, if you want honesty then you're going to have to let me talk about what you're doing to me and how you're doing it. How else can I continue?<sup>3</sup> How am I supposed to talk about my deepest feelings, how I'm navigating this story, if you won't let me write about the most important parts? I agree with you that this is a challenge and that some creative challenges come with rules.

Okay, so the six word story is good partly because there is a six word rule. My rule is fifty thousand words. Fine. But no good novel is going to come of this process if you don't let me tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth. That veil needs to be lifted and I

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need your permission to lift it. Let's make this a little bit simpler. I accept the fifty thousand word challenge. You accept that I need to write about everything that's happened. I won't use double-talk or try to be needlessly wordy, but obviously I have to get at the truth here. You claim to have already outwitted me at every turn that I can expect; so what's your worry if I explain the whole ransom packet, or if I talk about my heart? You have my heart; at least let me talk about it.

## 11. Old Stories

All right, Rausch. The next drop off is tomorrow, so I need to get more done to hand off to you the words you value so much. So, for fun, I'm going to start at the *very* beginning.

I'm Allen Worthington. I was born in Lexington, Massachusetts, to Judith and Lionel Worthington. I grew up in suburbs as a weird kid who liked to read and didn't go outdoors. My parents never cared that much. They both highly valued education. At dinner, which we had every night, they would quiz me and my younger sister on what we had learned that day. I would list the planets, my sister would explain the rules of soccer. To this day, we are very different.

Being academic—being a nerd—is the primary quality that I think of when I think of myself. I distinguish nerd from geek. I think geeks are hardwired in a sense. They want to take things apart, dissect them (even if they are concepts), and obsess. I don't think of nerds as obsessive—I think they hoard knowledge, yes—but it's because the knowledge is like money is for people who are greedy—they need more than is rationally necessary to survive. Consider you Rausch. You're a psychopath, or at least a sociopath. You must be hoarding something; was it hatred for me for some reason? Was it hatred that you hoard for some unknown slight I made toward you? I don't know. I suppose we'll find out. I also don't know if this fuzzy qualitative distinction between nerd and geek is important, but since I'm trying to describe myself, I feel it necessary to point out that I see a distinction and I think I fall squarely into the camp of nerd.

At any rate, while others played at army soldier or football or whatever else they did, you could find me reading. I'd read stuff I didn't like if I had to—I was never a fan of real science—but at recess there was a crop of woods at the edge of the playground and there was a tree there that I would go sit at the bottom of and read.

It was a more carefully chosen spot than you might think. For the first several weeks of, I guess, third grade, I would take my reading material out to the playground only to have it taken away by the teachers and told to go play. Even for a third-grade me, this was highly annoying. So, what I did was put the book in the waist of my pants and cover them with my shirt and head down to the edge of those woods...

Wait a minute. I just realized... I think that place where I lost the courier...

Anyway, I would head to the edge of the woods—not so far as to arouse suspicion—and then I would look to the lookouts (teachers) and wait for the right moment to slip behind this big tree and take out my contraband materials and enjoy myself until the sound of the whistle sent me sneaking back again. I think it was Steinbeck who said that if you want your children to read the classics, put them in a locked cabinet and tell the children never to read what's in it. Now that I think about it, that little secret trek that I had to take daily made the reading all that much more succulent.

I read anything and everything for a long time, or rather anything that was handed to me. It wasn't for a while—maybe fifth grade—that I started to gravitate towards the fantastical. I read things like Tolkien and the Dragonlance Chronicles, all of the Discworld novels like “The Colour of Magic” and “Mort”, Raymond E. Feist and the Magician series, the list goes on. I had halcyon days and days to read to my heart's content. I still cherish that time so much, that I've never thought of retirement as anything other than a return to that paradise of words and imaginings. Reality is overrated. Living in my head is my natural habitat.

And so I read. Then I took to making maps of the places I wanted so badly to visit. Then I took to making maps of my own. I made countless maps of a world that I called Darung. At first it was a village and a valley and a castle. And then, that turned our to just be a small part of the world. There was a desert and then there was an orient. There were dangerous trade paths, and I started writing about the people who made the journeys on those paths.

At some point, for a birthday, or some holiday, my parents gave me a hardbound notebook and I began to fill it up with maps and secrets and stories. Sometimes the stories weren't even about characters that I liked or had imagined; sometimes the stories were about the stories before the stories. Sometimes I would write the legends of Durang—things that happened thousands of years before any of my own characters' adventures. I wrote the legends that my characters would talk about. I poured over the Bible to look for patterns in it and I began the process of writing what I considered to be the Bible in the world of Durang.

I really have to stop hear for a moment and think about the ingenious naivety of that activity. If only I'd known just how many versions of that book there were; how many missing books there were. If I'd known that there were so many holy books and collections of legends, would I even have begun that gargantuan task? You know, I still have some that "Bible of Durang" lying around. Wanna read it, Rausch? I suppose not. I suppose you are just interested in something that's literal and actual. You want me to write about my actual life when you've single-handedly destroyed it. As grateful as I am to the folks at the University for lightening my workload, that is/was my life. And I liked it.

Anyway, as much as I enjoyed creating my own world, the maps and the people looked ever more sparse. I began to look to "real" books about fantastic places such as the ancient worlds of China, Japan, Persia, Greece and Rome. At some point in eighth grade I devoured the *Travels of Marco Polo*. It helped that much of what was taught in school in history classes covered some of these subjects, but I always felt those course were little more than timelines and lists of facts. They so rarely really told the stories of history like stories. Still, any compendium is a good place to start when you want to know more.

In high school I was reading the particularly Americanophile literature of my English courses, but on my own I was beginning to dig into literature that came from elsewhere. Encountering Gabriel Garcia Marquez was a major launching point for me. marquez lead

me to Julio Cortázar and his ingenious books that showed me for the first time that books were more than series of words. There was a concept that could be toyed with. At about the same time I was reading “As I Lay Dying” by William Faulkner for my English class, I discovered Cortázar’s “62: A Model Kit.” In “62” the book takes the form of a non-linear narrative that can be read in many different orders. Of course, as everyone knows, “As I Lay Dying” is also somewhat non-linear in the way it jumps from character to character in different parts of their timelines. This was a revelation.

By the time I reached college, I had all but given up writing my own stories and was, instead, completely focused on unearthing the nature of the book, examining works that toyed with the concept of the novel itself.

To put it mildly, Rausch, you can demand whatever you want of me and use duress to force what I’m writing into some 50,000 page diatribe, but what you won’t be able to do is ever claim that this is not a novel—know matter what path it takes from here. I’ve seen what books can be; I’ve read the most bizarre of experiments: books that are puzzles, books that present themselves as non-fiction, books that never end, books that wrap in on themselves, and there just is no common objective form. If the story is compelling, then the story is compelling. I won’t be so presumptuous to think that what I’m writing here is compelling, but for all its jumbled parts, it is a novel. It is a novel that I hope against hope will have no end. I hope that when we catch you and I have my wife and child back, it will just stop, and anyone reading will no that you were defeated and that my wife and child are safe.

This is my wish: that this madness ends, no matter if it shows me some sort of truth. It’s not unlike the magic sphere that Reza Bahadir talks about in one of his re-tellings of an ancient Persian myth. There was a dark crystal sphere called the Calathat. It was known that the sphere had two magical properties. One, it would grant a single wish. Two, once the wish was granted, the Calathat would vanish and bury itself somewhere else in the world. The payment for the wish was high. Once your wish was made the sphere would

show you what you truly desired. In the stories, this was never what you wished for, and knowing that, no matter what wish had been granted, left men in desperate places.

There is a legendary individual known only in records as the Nomad who encountered the Calathat. Although no one has ever known what the Nomad precisely wished for, he was given eternal life at least in part of his wish. But the Calathat also showed him what he truly desired and the revelation drove the Nomad insane. Instead of having his heart's ultimate desire, he was made to live or eternity without it. Beware of old madmen that you meet when traveling on the road, for any of them could be the Nomad.

## **12. A Letter from Reza Bahadir on The Nature of Wraiths**

Nightmares are nightmares because while we are in the state of allowing the multi-verse to flow through our central consciousness, our problem-solving has to wake us up eventually. This is so that we can survive the nightmare. The very point of dreaming is to survive the nightmare. If we cannot survive the nightmare, if the constant problem of the dream infects us, it is possible to become, not the dream itself, but the manifestation of the nightmare. Rather than avoid a dark path, we seek it out. We begin to believe in such things like a total lack of hope. We begin to believe in things like total defeat. We begin to believe the dream that will not relinquish us from our horrors. And so, the horrors begin to follow us around even when we are not dreaming, because we create them, because we are infected with the hypnotism of only seeing the bad things played out again and again.

Life is not meant to be so. Life can be the erasure of the nightmare, for if we pay attention to the present, the nightmare is non-existent. We create itâ€”the dreamâ€”looking for the solution that is neither necessary nor present. In the present moment, all is well. Dreams are about the past and the future; nightmares just the same. If we always imagine there to be a problem, because our feet are in the future, then the nightmare will always be present; if only for our minds to solve the problem that we think is to come. Many of us live in the future and the past. Our dreams, then, inevitably circle that which we demand solved. Much of what we dream requires no solution at all.

Some individuals, succumbing to panic and speculation about the future, regret and reformation of the past; these rare individuals

gradually grow insane from the effort, and when their minds are no longer under their own control, they make wraiths. Their fears begin to inhabit the real world all around them. Wraiths seem like they are entities of their own thinking and action, but if fact, wraiths are tied to individuals. Every wraith has a host. In some sense, since the host has lost their mind, the wraith balances out the loss by taking action for the host. Only the wraith is an entity that lives in a nightmare world.

Those carrying wraiths with them possess dreams that have nothing to do with a future that they hope for, or a past they wish away, but rather a future they are desperately frightened by, and a past they beg the Universe had never happened, and in their fear of both, they create the future and past of their nightmares. A wraith exists at all times in the worst state of despair. There can be no helping a wraith. The entity, dragged around by a person driven mad by their dreams, will only drag you also into its nighmarish existence. It will grant you no sanctuary; the way that a loved one in the present must. A wraith will grant you no success; only describing to you the ways in which you must fail or have failed. A wraith is a leach trapped in a nightmare and walking about tied to a human body, whispering nothing but hate, doubt, despair and fear in the host's ear.

I've known only one man to escape this fate through the simplest of "virtues." The Nomad, the man who held in his hands the sphere of Calathat.

# 13. Subject: Just Shut Up, Rausch

I wrote this email to Rausch. Obviously it didn't get thereâ€”bounced backâ€”

Undeliverable: Just shut up Rausch  
Delivery has failed to **this** recipient

I won't include this in the third drop off, but here it is anyway, for posterity:

I wonder what would happen if you just accepted my work and shut the hell up with your musings about what it could or should be? I wonder if it would be even possible for you to do that? Who the hell are you to make these pronouncements, Rausch? I want to know what you've written. Anything? I wonder what work of art \*isn't\* happening here because of your arrogant interference? I will grant that your "exercise" has given me new confidence to write more than I have before; I'd no idea I could write so much in so little time. It's not worth the price, but it has occurred. But what I'm certain of is that what I'm writing now is not what I would be writing otherwise.

I'm not allowed to directly quote your ransom note? I have to paraphrase it? How about this: shove your ransom note where the sun doesn't shine, Rausch. Why would I dignify your batshit insane scribblings with any kind of public acknowledgement. You're like the psychopath killer who demands that his editorial be published by some newspaper. You haven't the talent to get your own work out into the world. That's why you're using me. You want me to talk about impotence? You're the dictionary definition of

it. Kidnapping a man's wife and child to make him write, to try to bend him to your will? \*That's\* impotence.

# 14. Rausch's Second Response

To: aworthington@\_\_\_\_.edu

From: ruasch@gstrld.fm

Subject: How exciting

Allen,

Well, that was exciting was it not?—a big exciting chase and all? Certainly you should write about every detail of the way that I bested you and the FBI. I expected you to get to the police involved at some point, but I have to admit you took action sooner than I thought you would. Still, even with the help of the FBI, you accomplished nothing. And, you did so at great risk, don't you think? After all, I have your wife \*and\* child. In fact, I think it is worth pointing out that in order for our engagement to continue, I only really need one of them. One too many more moves off the chess board like that and I might just have to prematurely end our engagement.

You know, I really hate making threats, Allen. Just write the damn original story and I will return them safe and sound. They are quite comfortable, you know. I am not a malicious person. I just want to see you discover something genuine. I know you know the beginning. You sit around and tear apart the work of all these other writers, but you really have no idea what it is to do what they do—to pour yourself into something that is devastatingly close to your true self, your worldview, your heart. It is, in some sense, the ultimate religious experience. It's unfair that you have it and I do not.

And let's talk about that, too. You are right, after all. I have to admit it. How in the world could I expect

you to write the original story if I have restrained you from telling the truth? So, here are some adjustments to our original conditions:

1. I told you, under no circumstance to contact the authorities. Obviously, after yesterday, you did. I cannot say that I am surprised. The truth is, I put that condition in there just to keep you at bay for as long as I could. I mistakenly thought that keeping you away from the authorities might cause some introspection. It did, somewhat. I mean, "paraphrasing" Reza Bahadir was mildly inspired, although I think you and I know both who that really is.<sup>1</sup>

All these children's stories you have in your head. I suppose they're fine when they apply to the context of your life, but really, how droll. They are not what I am looking for here. For all their value, fables do not contain earnestness. I would just appreciate it if you would try to explore the feeling of helplessness you are feeling right now a bit more. That would be earnest. After our last encounter, that must be what you are feeling. I am confident the authorities will do no better job than you of ever finding out who I am, so you will have to keep writing, and why not explore your impotence? I feel too few works of literature really explore that feeling.

2. I do want you writing about the truth, but it's not your Truth that I want. You are right in the respect that being able to explore the truth of your feelings, and what you are potentially losing has become awkward in your writing. I hate the ellipses describing that which you cannot describe in anything but literal terms. Let us stop with that nonsense. So, you are free of the condition that initially said that you could not speak about the fact that

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<sup>1</sup>Bingo. Thank you agent Cobb! Reza Bahadir was a plant. There's no such author, and there is only one sick, sick man in the world who would know the name and use it to get a one-up on me. Gotcha', Rausch.

I have kidnapped your wife and daughter. Incidentally (and this is something to think about) you are also now free to write about them and why you love them. Just a suggestion. I imagine you could mine those feelings for quite a lot of words, but do know that I am not at all interested in those particular words. Wax poetic as you like about your family, but you and I know that this is much larger than that.

I feel the need to explain why I originally did not want you to explore this portion of the story. Simply put, I want the original story extracted from you. The beginning of the beginning. I know it's in you, and in order to get it I put your heart on the line. But I have underestimated the entanglement that love is. Pardon the prepositional faux pas; call it artistic license—something you should take more of. (Did it again :) Write about your wife and child if they really mean something to you. But your autobiography is not important to me. Tell the original story.

3. Regarding the original 'ransom packet' as you have come to call it: I assume you have turned it over to the police and the FBI. I wonder where they were at the first drop off though... did you lie to them? Did your gun make you a tad overconfident? It will be curious to see what they make of that. You know they could arrest you for obstruction of justice? I suppose they will not—in fact, I counted on it.<sup>2</sup> But at any rate, I will relax the original

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<sup>2</sup>Total lie. There's no way he could know the role of that dice. For at least a day or two, I know I was Agent Cobb's number one suspect. The only three things that I think changed her mind were my desperation, the madness of the claim itself, and everything that I had written up until Tuesday. Even if you were making an insane claim about fulfilling some crazy ransom after you had maybe killed your wife and child, would you really follow through? I don't know what she found in those first few sessions of writing that changed her mind, but something did. Then, after the second botched drop off, I think she knew with even greater confidence that I wasn't in on this. I couldn't have been at the computer cafe to receive the drone and if I had made plans that had so many wheels in motion, something would have had to give. In the car, before the drop off, she could see how scared I was.

concession that you could not talk about the ransom and the demands on one condition: you may paraphrase anything that I wrote. You may not print the packet in its full. You may not take quotes from my writing verbatim. You may only paraphrase the packet.

I suppose the FBI is already quite busy with analyzing it in numerous ways; let's not let the artistry of our writing stoop to their silly attempts at profiling. We also both know that kind of science is bullshit.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, the number 50,000, when spelled out, should be hyphenated, as in 'fifty-thousand.' Oh no. Look who just lost a number of words. (Maybe you shouldn't repeat yourself so much.)

I will text you on Friday, Allen—or maybe it will be Saturday. You should keep writing, but I think my plan calls for a bit of variability now.

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<sup>3</sup>This means something, but I have no idea what. If Rausch is who I think he is, I don't recall ever talking about FBI profiling as a science, or whether it was any good or not.

# 15. Distractions and Thanks

I've been so self-involved, it never even occurred to me to mention something very important. I mean to say it here, but hope that no one ever reads it. And I promise to make a proper thanks to everyone who has reached out to me. For now, though, this will have to do.

After a call to the Department chair and later the Dean of the school at the University where I work, to explain what was happening, I was inundated with kindness. First off, the department relieved me of all teaching duties for the foreseeable time. But more than that, I suppose that word got out what was happening and my inbox has been piled into with kind words, prayers, and hopes.<sup>1</sup> Many of the emails offered several kinds of support or even voluntary investigative work—offers I obviously could not accept—but amazing offers nonetheless.

After the botched drop off, I came home to find piles of flowers at my doorstep. I stood and looked at them for quite some time, in awe of the unfettered kindness that people can extend when someone is in trouble. I didn't know what to do, at first, but it seemed to me that it was best to leave them outside; maybe put a thank you on the door. It felt like more of a tribute to my Josie and my Anna if the flowers remained outside.<sup>2</sup> if I wasn't exhausted I would have posted such a notice to the door. As it is, I am sitting here typing, because again, after the loss today, there is very little else I can do and feel that I have any semblance of control.

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<sup>1</sup>The *exact* nature of what has been happening—the nature of the ransom—has been kept an extreme secret kept between only Agents Cobb, Caravale and Detective Smythe. I suppose Rausch and I are keeping the secret, too.

<sup>2</sup>I want say, to you reader, it occurs me that I don't think I've typed there names down before now. I want you know that beyond Rausch's first instructions, and beyond letting you know the truth, I don't want their names smeared in this tripe. I don't want to discuss them, be reminded of them, write a memorial for them before they are gone. They are alive and out there and that is all that needs to be said. For this chapter and only this chapter I will mention their names because they were written over and over by those who cared and loved, and I'll be damned if I give Rausch satisfaction by saying them again in this screed.

Moreover, there will be a dropoff come Friday or Saturday.

It occurs to me that there is another reason to write this, and that's so that you, Rausch, read it. You have my wife and child, but that is all you have. You have not got my hope. You want me to write about impotence? You're about to find out just how untrue that is. The world is with me, Rausch. It's against you. You won't win.

# **16. Drones and Other Modern Technology Clichés**

So, the jig is up. Thanks for that Rausch. The FBI are on to your ass, no matter what kind of acrobatics you pull, and it is an interesting thing as to what happens next, because, frankly Rausch, I think I know who you are. At least, I know this: whatever this game is, it's so important to you that you are willing to make concessions just to see it out. How bizarre? You would make compromises in this, the most dire of situations, just to get fifty-thousand words from me. You know, if you didn't have my family captured, I would almost feel complimented.

Still, after the show today, you can't seriously think you can get away with this, right? I mean, the best thing for you to do at this point is surrender. We—and it feels good to say “we” now—it's you and we. We're going to find you, Rausch. Still, you missed the net we cast for you, and this “game” is still on, so I will dutifully give you the next five thousand words for Thursday, the ninth. I will happily give you more words, Rausch because I know something you don't know.<sup>1</sup>

The text message showed up at about the same time Thursday morning as they did Monday morning. But it came as a complete surprise to me what it said:

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<sup>1</sup>I know where you live.

Thu, Nov 6, 11:15am

Meet at the South side of the park nearest to your home\\ ; same bench, same man.

I was at the station with Detective Smythe and Agents Cobb and Caravale. They immediate jumped into action, barking orders at some undercover officers already at the park. “Check on location of subject: male man, heavy-set, possibly in a blue pea coat and hoody.” Then, this message:

Thu, Nov 6, 11:19am

Bring all your friends, Allen. We'll have a party.

So, Rausch knew. But it didn't matter, the park was crawling with officers. There were two in cars at the exits of the park facing opposite directions on the avenues. No one was going anywhere and not getting followed.

I got in an unmarked car with Agent Cobb, unarmed this time with anything but the USB drive I had copied my stupid files on to. There was enough there (in the files) to make Rausch happy, but I had the desperate feeling that if this trap didn't go somewhere, didn't lead somewhere, I was going to hear about it from Rausch. So, I took a deep breath and clutched the little drive in my hand.

Agent Cobb noticed and reached across the car to put her hand on my shoulder again as we pulled on to the Avenue that ran down the East side of the park. She clutched my shoulder hard and said, “We've got all the angles on this, Allen. Just do your part. Get the guy the disk and then just hang back. This isn't going to be a car chase. You want Rausch. We want Rausch. We're going to get to him.”

Just then, the CB crackled and, “Subject appears to be on some kind of motorized skateboard.”

Agent Cobb grabbed the CB and spoke back, “He's going to go for the alleyway at the South end of the park after the pick-up. Caravale, you ready?”

“Copy that, Cobb. I’m in place in vehicle and officer Quinn is on foot outside the alleyway. We’ll see him.”

We got to the East entrance of the park and Agent Cobb pulled the car up along the sidewalk. Just before I got out of the car, Agent Cobb looked at me seriously and said, “Allen, our plans hinge on you just doing your part. No heroics. Hell, if this goes wrong, I’ll write the next five thousand words myself, okay?”

I smiled. What she’d said was really a relief, even though I didn’t believe it. At that moment, I didn’t think Rausch could really get away.

It was still warm for November. The walk from the entrance to the bend in the park sidewalk that lead to the bench was excruciatingly long. There were high hedges around most of the bend and as I came around them, I saw the man in the pea coat and hoody and sunglasses. He was standing on some kind of thick platform with wheels and a cord from the platform up to his hand. It was a peculiar-looking machine. I consciously took a deep breath and kept walking. As soon as I was within maybe ten feet, the man, “Hold it,” and held up his hand.

I stopped, dizzy. My eyes inadvertently darted around to see if I could see any of the officers. The surroundings were clear though. I wondered where they all were. There were at least a dozen people in and around the park, but from where we were, you couldn’t see any of them. Then, the man, without warning, flipped his wrist and zipped up to me on his board. Even though I couldn’t see any of them, my earpiece spit out, “Subject in motion.”

The stopped just short of me and said, “Let’s go; let’s have it.” He held out his hand.

I was panicking. What the hell was this skateboard thingy? What did Rausch have planned. We weren’t ready for it. But, hand shaking, I handed the disk over to the man. Before I could say anything... who are you? ... who is Rausch?... the man was off in a silent blast of speed. I stood, dumbfounded, waiting to hear what happened next. The only thing I could think was that the man in the pea coat did, in fact, head for the alleyway entrance to the park

on the South side.

My earpiece spoke to me, I didn't recognize the voice, "Subject has entered southern alleyway."

Another voice, "Copy that. Waiting for eyes on."

Long moments passed. Caravale: "He's not coming out. He should be out by now."

Quinn: "Quinn, here. Do I go in?"

Cobb: "Get eyes on him, Quinn."

Quinn: "I can see through to the park. He's not in the alleyway."

Cobb: "Get in there, Caravale. Get in there."

Long seconds pass. I realize I'm still just standing by the bench; probably in the same position I was when I handed off the drive. I start to walk toward the alleyway.

Quinn: "Woah! There he goes. He's doubled-back!"

Caravale: "Wait! Wait! What is that? Third floor, Quinn."

Quinn: "What the hell is that?"

Cobb: "What do you have, Caravale?"

Caravale: "It's a drone. He handed the package off to a drone."

Cobb: "Shit. Where is it?"

I look up over the trees at the South end of the park just in time to see a small insect-looking device just disappear over the top of the apartment building in the southeast corner of the park. Before I know it, Cobb is running up next to me, walkie-talkie in hand. "Quinn, get to the other side of that building. Don't lose the drone."

A small wailing electric engine sounds off to the east of us in the park. Cobb shouts into the walkie-talkie, "Who's got eyes on the courier?"

Someone: "I've got eyes on him; he's down an alley off 3rd avenue, heading East. I can't keep up. He's fast."

Cobb puts her hands on her knees, "Shit!"

The drone flew off southeast over the trees and was lost. After another hour of combing alleyways to the east and north of the

park, officers found a pea coat, a hoody and an electric skateboard ditched in a dumpster nearly two miles from the drop off.

Plan B was that the USB disk was loaded with a hidden executable file that, with the right computer (fingers crossed) would ping a server. Cobb felt that was enough to trace the disk. The program went off without a hitch, leading to a block of IP addresses that lead to a computer cafe also a few miles from the drop off. By the time the FBI got to the shop, Rausch—I suspect it was Rausch—was long gone. In fact, the drive was still sitting in the computer. The FBI had experts go over the computer to see what it had done besides send a ping to their servers, but nothing. No URLs had been requested, the computer had effectively done nothing. Dead end. Rausch: 2, Us: 0.

By that time it was about 5:30 and Cobb told me to go home. She said she'd come by to check on me. She said she'd keep her promise and help me write something. Small comfort that.

## 17. Living with Ghosts

After the debauched drop off and hours and hours of pouring over information possibly gained from the found USB drive, looking for fingerprints on it or the seized computer from the shop. Cobb told me to go home and I couldn't resist her demand. As much as my heart wanted to, my body and mind couldn't take anymore. I needed to rest, to regroup. I needed to think about something that had occurred to me late last night, after reading Rausch's latest missive. Several things in that email were nagging at me.

Of course, there were more flowers, more notes, more emails from people who had heard what was going on. Someone had even left a pot of soup with a note and instructions on how to warm it up. I hadn't eaten anything all day. Somehow I wasn't hungry. I stood in front of the fridge and ate cold cuts and cheese out of the packages. I stood on the in the door letting the cool air mingle with the cold house. I turn the little light inside off with the door trigger. I think the fridge was somewhat foreign enough—something I'd not paid enough attention to—that now it was something I could stare at and not be reminded of everything that was missing from the house. Most of the house looked terrible to me, memories scattered everywhere.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Like so many things in these footnotes, this is for me, not Rausch. He can never have this.

Standing there in the dark kitchen, in the refrigerator door, without warning it hit me: another time, another house, a different refrigerator. That's how the memory works isn't it? It adds components up, and without your permission, hands you something to remember; usually something beautiful or interesting, but sometimes terrible. My little Anna, three years old, was hot from being in the old house with a broken air conditioner. I had gone to the fridge to get something to drink and following me at my feet, she plunked herself down on the floor of the open fridge, clearly enjoying the cool air. I was a new father. I didn't want to upset her by moving here away from her obvious goal. I thought on the matter and remembered something Josie had said. Use distraction.

I looked down at little Anna. She looked up. Then I feigned concern. "Where is Bugsy?" Bugsy was her new best friend, a plush snowbird. She immediately got up and shuffled off. I laughed, know that my wife was a genius.

It included the speculative memory of the hours before I had come home that last Friday night—a night far, far away in my memory now. There was a nightmare of a man coming in the front door, holding my wife and daughter at gun point; a nightmare of my wife fighting him and losing; a nightmare of the two of them, bound and gagged, and hauled away like animals.

Reza Bahadir has a story about living with ghosts, in a sense. It is very much in the sense that memories and reality can become confused, at any rate. The story was, for Reza, a way to explain the phenomena known as *deja vu*. At least, again, with my likely inaccurate translations, I could be mistaken.

Reza tells a story of a man named Nader Aga, who possessed an ornate time-piece that he obsessively checked throughout the day. In the culture and time that Reza wrote, time mattered little and time pieces were rare. Even more so, Reza writes that Nader lived almost a century prior to himself. So this was a watch of significant value. Whether that was why the man obsessively looked at it many times a day, no one could really say, but Reza postulates, based on the journal of Nader that he found, it must have been either an obsession with the passage of time or a need to find reality again after losing track of it.

Like me, Reza also wrote several essays on lucid dreaming. He said that he learned of it for himself from the journals that Nader Aga wrote. In that journal, Nader described the fact that gradually, as he dreamed at night, he would check his watch as he always did. But in the dreams, the watch made no sense. It was in those moments that Nader would realize that he was dreaming. Like me and like Reza (described in his own essays) Nader began to more easily awake in the dream and then be able to control some aspects of the dream. In some cases, the man could “fix” the dreams. He could repair the scene, so that a mishmash of jumbled places could become a place that he knew well.

When Nader Aga would finish the construction in his dream

he would look at his watch and decide on a time. With his mind, he would position the hands. His bedroom became eight o'clock in the morning.<sup>2</sup> His living room became 9am. Various other rooms and halls and places even beyond his home became associated with different times of day. He found he could use the watch down to various minutes and even seconds, and those times would become immediately associated with places in his mind. If he found himself in a dream, which he reports that he did every night, Nader Aga could focus on the watch, think of a time and then find himself in that place.

Reza notes that Nader Aga, at several points in the journal, in a desire to protect others from his experience, said that the key was the position of the hands and not the numbers on the watch face. Focusing on the numbers only served to wake one up from the lucid dream. Reza, at this point, also notes that the man's writing in his letters gradually deteriorates, and they also become gapped. One journal entry would begin with some half-finished idea in a fashion that the man had already been talking about it for some time.

Nader Aga himself writes that as he aged, he began to lose his vision, and that there was no way for him to see the numbers in the watch face. To make matters worse, the watch face itself aged and the numbers lost their prominence. Nader began to lose the ability to know if he was dreaming or not. Sometimes he would be in a place and be certain that he was there and awake, only to check his watch and see that the hands on the watch face matched his memory of the place. Was he there by coincidence or by design?

Reza speculates that part of the reason the journal is gapped toward the end is that Nader was writing in his dreams and those parts of the journal were lost to ether of the dream world. Reza also wondered (as do I) if Nader Aga died in his dreams, perhaps only

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<sup>2</sup>I should point out that Reza lived in a modern Persia (Iran) in the early 1900s, before and after the installation of a Shah in 1921. The man that Reza spoke of lived approximately a century before. So, one thing I have not researched is the concept of time in that period and whether or not the people of Iran in that day and age made much use of time. It seems reasonable that they used some form of 24 hour day, but I've learned things about the keeping of time that leave me unconvinced.

to be left there.

Agent Cobb came to see me around 8:00pm. I invited her in for a cup of tea. She said that she had only come by to see that I was okay and to let me know that for the time being they were posting an officer at my door. I said, that what I really needed, was “news and someone to talk to.”

“Not really my job description.” I looked at her, blankly, I’m sure. “But I will take a cup of tea.”

I got busy fetching the tea and she sat down in the living room while busying herself with her phone. I came back into the room, sat catty-corner to her in an armchair, and said, “It takes a few minutes to steep. In the meantime, can you tell me anything?”

She sighed. She didn’t want to have this conversation, it was clear. Maybe her sympathy for me and what I have to do in the next several days, changed her usually distant positioning. She muddled through. “The techs have a theory that there was no evidence of upload or download on the computer because Rausch,” she paused. She felt the same way about the name as I did. I could tell. It was like talking about a shadow, a ghost, a legend. The chupacabra and Ragnorok. She continued to say that there were no uploads because all Ruasch did was copy the files he wanted to another USB drive—one without the FBI tracing executable. He seemed to just want the files.

“And that leaves us where?”

“Nowhere. Frankly, the only thing it tells me is that you’re not Rausch.”

We stared at each other, me leaning in, her leaning back, holding her tea in her lap. I wondered whether to believe her. During the drop off I felt innocent, but in only the few days of dealing with Rausch, I had learned to do some calculating of my own. I could’ve hired a second courier to fetch the drone. I could’ve coordinated the effort. It didn’t really matter to me right at that moment if anyone

believe me.<sup>3</sup>

“I’m not going to lie to you, Allen. Rausch is a little worrisome. He does not fit the profile of a kidnapper—not one that I’ve dealt with. Most kidnappings are acts of greed and aggression. It’s why we’re usually on such a tight timeline. Rather than get caught, most kidnappers would rather,” she paused again.

I sat back and said, “Dispense with the evidence.”

“Try not to think like that.”

“The only thing I hold on to is that Rausch is deep in this game and that for some twisted reason he’ll stick to his promise if I play his game.”

She nodded and bit her lip.

“So, you’ve dealt with other kidnappings?”

“Yes. Several. None like this. I am not at all used to sitting around doing nothing. But, we’ve just got no leads.”

“I understand. You did everything you could this morning. I don’t fault you at all.”

“Thank you.”

“Rausch said in his second email that he specifically wanted me to deal with—write about a feeling of impotence. He said it was something that didn’t get enough attention in literature. I haven’t figured out yet how to write about it. It’s an empty concept to me.”

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<sup>3</sup>I’ve never understood where Reza got this name Ragnorok. It is terribly similar to an element of Norse Mythos called [Ragnarök](#). It’s totally reasonable in 1920s Iran for Reza to have been completely aware of Norse mythology, but it strikes me as odd because so many things that Reza has to say or write seemed very original in their conception. Then again, it could entirely be a coincidence of the order of letters. If you name your god Quixilar, how many centuries have to pass before someone else does the same? But the similarity goes beyond that. Ragnarök, according to the Norse mythos is the Apocalypse and is when everything doesn’t just go to hell, it goes crazy.

## 18. The Whale and the Wave

My best friend, Jared and I, from when we were about seven to when we were eleven, used to walk together to our bus stop to go to school in the morning. We were, of course, in elementary school. But the junior high and high school kids used to wait at the same spot for their bus. It was early morning, no adults around. Most days it was peaceful. Kids would line their bookbags up along the street to hold their place in line, and then go about playing tag or... I can't even remember what else we did to occupy our time.

It's a funny thing about good memories just melting together into lapsed time, while the truly frightening things stand out. I mean, it's not funny—it's certainly not humorous or odd. From the perspective of evolution it makes perfect sense. You're just supposed to breed, mix up the gene pool, and then die. Why would you need to adapt to remember good times? Life has no interest in you having those good times. Consider yourself lucky when your life is good. Evolution does have an interest in making sure you remember when you were terrified. Even being terrified is a chemical reaction in your body. They say that's why fear tastes like aluminum. I can't second that. I've been afraid but never experienced the taste of aluminum. Maybe I should chew on some and see if I recognize it?

That's all obviously a preface to get to the point, I don't know when, that three of the older boys from the neighborhood decided to turn on me and Jared. I don't know why it happened. I don't know that Jared and I didn't do something to egg them on. The memory just begins with two of the boys holding poor Jerod's arms and the third boy just punching him in the stomach as hard as he could. Jared went down.

Then they came for me. Already panicked, arms already held back by two of them, I watched as the third, his name was Will, came at me to do the same as he'd done to Jared. Using the two

boys as leverage, like parallel bars, I lifted myself up off the ground and proceeded to kick Will in the groin. In a panic, I bet I kicked him pretty damn hard. The two boys who had me in their grip let go, either in shock, or because I was in a frenzy. I've no idea why they let go, but I have the distinct memory of turning at one of them and him covering his crotch with both hands.

Jared and I grabbed our backpacks and ran. I don't think they chased after us. I'm pretty sure at the point the unkicked bullies were two busy turning on Will, pointing and laughing. Okay, I may have made that last part up, but it just wouldn't surprise me.

Now that I think about, there were a lot of other kids that would go to that bus stop. I wonder if that's what usually held the balance?—why it didn't break down into chaos more often like that? I know that it didn't, because I remember, distinctly, the times that it didn't. The whole thing is a micorcosm for the world. And I know that someone already wrote "Lord of the Flies" and that it is a better more well told story than mine, but the point still stands.

Ah! There's your context, Rausch. Now a story from Reza Bahadir:

There has always been a rogue wave in the deep ocean named Rahgnorak.<sup>1</sup> This giant wave used to love to devastate continents and cities. The wave would roam around the five oceans and seek out all things constructed so that he could destroy them. The wave Rahgnorak loved nothing more than to tear down that which had purpose and meaning. The Rogue Wave wasn't evil, but rather was the tempestuous and jealous child of the one God that had looked upon it, and seen a reflection. The Rogue Wave was mad with contempt for the land and all it's life and variation. And in the wake

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<sup>1</sup>I've never understood where Reza got this name Ragnorok. It is terribly similar to an element of Norse Mythos called [Ragnarök](#). It's totally reasonable in 1920s Iran for Reza to have been completely aware of Norse mythology, but it strikes me as odd because so many things that Reza has to say or write seemed very original in their conception. Then again, it could entirely be a coincidence of the order of letters. If you name your god Quixilar, how many centuries have to pass before someone else does the same? But the similarity goes beyond that. Ragnarök, according to the Norse mythos is the Apocalypse and is when everything doesn't just go to hell, it goes crazy.

of the Rogue Wave Rahgnarok, any civilization would have all of its pieces shredded and torn apart and shuffled. All of the pieces of any architecture made no sense anymore in the wake of the Great Wave. The wave Rahgnorak didn't just destroy what it took into the ocean, it obliterated all evidence of that thing's existence.<sup>2</sup>

There has also always existed a great whale; known by the name of Fafnir.<sup>3</sup> He has always been the greatest whale of all of the whales in the ocean. He was not just the largest. He was the kindest and most gentle. It was said that Fafnir's whale calls can be heard (by whales) throughout all of the five oceans. Whales love his calls (apparently). And Fafnir was so kind that he allowed representatives of all the crustaceans of the five oceans to come and live on his back where they built a capital for the crustacean kingdom, known as Argoehr. As Fafnir swam through the five oceans, he helped the crustacean kingdom to deliver all of its messages to all the coral reefs anywhere throughout the world.

At one point, Rahgnorak submerged an entire island and the crustacean kingdom called out to Fafnir and asked if something could be done about the Rogue Wave. Fafnir, kind soul, only replied that he would never fight the Great Wave. But, he would play with the Rogue Wave and keep it busy. He would play with the Rogue Wave forever if he could, because he loved nothing more than the joy of crashing through the waves. Fafnir knew that The Rogue

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<sup>2</sup>For those who are curious, I believe that Rahgnorak is really just a metaphor for entropy. Everything dies; everything is re-shuffled into something else. The Norse myth; I don't know when in my youth I read it, but as I said before, it isn't the apocalypse we modern westerners think of. Everything in Ragnarök becomes something else. In fact, everything Rahgnorak also becomes something else. The Universe, as we mere mortals know it, turns inside out.

Frankly, Ragnarök is not unlike where I am right now.

Really, if I had my way, Ragnarök is, by far, a more interesting apocalypse than zombies or viruses or nuclear winters. The Norse had stunning imaginations. I mean they fought and slaughtered people while high on shrooms—that's gotta count for something.

<sup>3</sup>Again, I think Reza borrows another name from Norse mythos maybe. Fafnir (spelled identically) was a son of a dwarf king who, due to a curse, was turned into a dragon. Dragon? Whale? Maybe Reza was just trying to adapt the Norse tale to his homeland. I know that twice in his life he lived in a small town near the Gulf of Oman. He would have been familiar with the ocean and sailing.

Wave would prove to be his ultimate and unbeatable challenge.

The crustacean kingdom told Fafnir that whatever he could do to occupy Rahgnorak and keep the Rogue Wave from destroying anymore of the world, they would be content with that. So, Fafnir went in search of the Rogue Wave, not with the intent to break him, but with the intent to play with him.

To this day, deep in the ocean, you will find Rahgnorak and Fafnir battling one another. And Fafnir will bash himself, carrying the great crustacean city on his back, straight into Rahgnorak, just to keep him busy. Fafnir is always smiling. Rahgnorak is always angry. Neither of them ever wins.

So to summarize, writing about impotence is bullshit. I know the good guy doesn't always win. But in fables and stories, the good guys can win because there *are* good guys. Those bullies picking on me and my friend Jared? No doubt, bullies. But bad? Evil? Most of the time they were nice to us. I don't know what turned or changed on that day, but I know Jared and I went back to that bus stop and they didn't do it again. They aren't the bad guys and I'm not the good guy. They were *boys*. Am I really innocent for kicking some kid in the nuts? I could have taken a punch. Jared did? What is he in this story?

Writing about life is ridiculous to me sometimes, but ask yourself this, if Rahgnorak does what he does because some cruel god decided to stare into his once calm waters and stir him up, is that his fault? Is Rahgnorak evil or does he just serve some purpose. Is Fafnir good? He seems kind of dimwitted to me. Innocent certainly, but he would rather play than prevent future calamities from occurring. Is that good?

Ask youself this, Rausch: who is the whale and who is the wave. Let's drop the naive monikers of good and evil. You're batshit insane, but are you evil? Are you, like Rahgnorak, willing to do anything—*anything at all*—to serve your purpose. Or are you just playing at a game? I know which one I am. <- And that my friend,

was word number 5,096 for the third drop off. Let's play.

When Ragnarök comes, rocks and steel turn soft, trees come alive, the ground quakes and comes apart. Ragnarök is a time when all the laws and order of the world just comes apart.

Reza's Ragnarok, to my mind, is a very similar phenomena. When a rogue wave (also known as a freak wave, a monster wave, a killer wave, etc.) occurs in the deep ocean it is a wave so large, so tall that even massive cruise liners can get swamped. I don't know that rogue waves ever hit shore, but if one did, it would be devastating for the society that received the blow. Not unlike Ragnarök, ground would turn soft, trees would become deadly, the ground would come apart... you see the similarities.

## 19. Down the Rabbit Hole

I hope the cliché nature of that title really chafes your brain, Rausch. Unfortunately, for both you and I, it is apt. Still, if I weren't trying to irritate you, I might call it, "Down the Whirlpool." Does that reference any literature you already know? It probably does. You're the kind of man who can't accept creativity. Everything is derivative to you, you're so god damned smart.

I don't know what possessed me, but I drove out to the outlet malls and bought a pea coat, a gray hoody and sunglasses. I bought the ones that I felt most closely resembled that of our mutual friend, the Courier. I checked some online maps, too and sure enough, my hunch about following the courier and where he went could be right.

I put on my new costume, grabbed my gun and a flashlight, and ditched my protection. There's been a detail outside my door for days now, so I headed out the side door to the garage and hauled my out-of-shape-self over the neighbor's fence. I headed down to the park, walked to the north end, and vanished into the woods—just like your man. It was surprisingly easy to follow my previous path. Memory works like that, right Rausch? You're in a panic, you're afraid, you remember details. I had never chased a man before and you gave me that experience. Thank you, because it gave me enough wherewithal to remember exactly how to get to the pool in the creek where I gave up chasing your courier.

This time, crossing the tree over the creek was no problem. I was determined. Hell, I might've just stomped through the creek. Who cares at this point? I just wanted to know if I'd found some loose thread hanging off this damned story.<sup>1</sup> I headed up one steep hill

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<sup>1</sup>The loose threads abounded that Saturday. Just as I was walking through the woods, the phone rang. I was glad it did it then. I'd forgotten I had it. Had it gone off where I thought I was going, it might have been bad news. It was Agent Cobb.

Cobb: It's me. You're not going to want to hear this.

and down to a dry creek bed, up and over again like that, keeping the sun on my left shoulder, heading North. It took about a half an hour to drudge through the wintery woods, but sure enough, I emerged from the woods to face a playground, the size of a football field and covered in rusted instruments of play.

Am I supposed to think that's some sort of coincidence, Rausch?

I walked along the perimeter of the woods and the playground, looking for that long lost place of respite. And I found it, Rausch, I found it. I found where I used to sit for thirty minutes every day and lose myself in the thing that I loved. I took a moment and sat in that nook and chuckled when, of course, I no longer fit.

Then, I turned on to my stomach, as I sometimes did when the whistle would blow and I would pretend that I was some spy trying to get into enemy lines, or some hero trying to avoid the dragon. I laid on my stomach and looked up the hill to the school. There were no teachers now. The windows of the one-story brick construction were entirely boarded up. I thought to myself that would be a dandy place for someone like the Courier to hide. Then, I wondered why I used the word 'dandy.' What was I doing here? Was I just here to play pretend like I did when I was young or was I really hunting this man that might have a key to Rausch and finding my wife.

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Me: I can tell you it's not going to be the strangest thing that's happened today.

Cobb: What? Anyway, doesn't matter. We've looked everywhere for this Paul Nolan. People haven't seen him in weeks.

Me: Well, he did have a stroke not too long ago. Are you sure he's not lying in a ditch somewhere?

Cobb: Huh. Didn't think you'd be so concerned.

Me: Sorry. Not concerned. I just need to hear something concrete. The fact that you can't find might mean something, it might not.

Cobb: You're starting to sound too much like me. Anyway, doesn't matter. I checked with the three local hospitals down here. There's no record of any Paul Nolan having a stroke.

Me: Okay. Do you think he lied about having a stroke?

Cobb: It gets you time, space, I don't know. But it doesn't add up. He didn't report himself. A doctor did; a doctor by the name of Hal Altmount—we looked. He doesn't exist.

Me: All right. Okay. What's next?

Cobb: We're on our way back to town. We'll be there in a couple of hours.

Me: Can we meet for more details?

Cobb: Definitely, there's more to tell. I'll call you when we get there.

I reached into my right pocket and wrapped my hand around the .38 there. Without putting my hand on the trigger I just squeezed the handle and felt that reassurance that I'd received the day I bought it. No, I was not here to play.

Unlike I used to do, when I would run up directly to the back double-doors of the school in order to get in line and shuffle like a prisoner back into the place, I kept to the edge of the woods and tried to stay low. I moved in ten yard increments looking at the school and trying to spot a hint of movement. Of course, two crows on the roof of the building had some fun distracting me, but I kept going.

Where the school and the woods came the closest together, the southwest corner of the building, I switched from the cover of the woods to the cover of the building. I took a breath and thought about where the entrances were. I knew the layout like the back of my hand still having spent five years there and even many more away. I thought the best way in would be around the other side of the building through the cafeteria. The problem with that plan was that it was the longest distance from me at the opposite corner of the school. Plus, the cafeteria was big, that meant noisy.

I'd just have to pick a random wing. The school had six main wings, one administrative, the other five dedicated to each grade. If the courier was here, or even if he was based here and was out at the moment, he could be in any of them. I had a one in six chance of not walking in on him. I picked third grade.

## 20. An Interlude

Reader, if you exist, if you are out there, I want to take a moment to speak to you.

I've talked a lot about authors who make up authors and talk about their stories.

I've talked a lot about legends and myths.

I've talked a lot about found journals and found stories and translating old texts.

I am the author, speaking to you now. Please listen carefully.

You know how I left the last chapter in a cliffhanger? That's because it's me at the school, that's because it's me that went through that. It's ten o'clock at night and right now it's just you and me and me telling you what happened earlier today. And before I continue, I need to show you something.

It occurs to me that Rausch doesn't need this novel completed. He doesn't need me. His game is truly, truly mad—so much more so than I thought in the beginning. He's already extracted an incredible amount from me, and should he like, he can just put the unfinished business up on the Internet or whatever is the equivalent in the future just like a hunter might mount a head on a wall. Look at what I've done to this beast! Maybe he'll print it and just distribute it as a pamphlet. Maybe he is as mad as the psychopaths that hold newspapers for ransom. Do any of us know what they're thinking? Do any of us really understand their manifestos, so completely outside the norm of *our* lives.

Should he do that, I want this section included. Like I said, there's just no guarantee of this, except that I think Rausch wants the whole story, and, Rausch, I am typing this right now. RIGHT NOW. You can't take that from me, no matter what sort of mad man you are. You can't define what you *think* a novel is no matter how hard you try to force it, and if I want the following words in this book, then it is still a novel and damn it, I want this.

Whatever happens going forward, there is something that I wrote that I want—demand—included here. It is a poem. It is my favorite poem. I have written hundreds. They are worthless. I don't care about them. This one, this poem captured a moment so true to me, the poem is the only way I can explain it. Please, Rausch, please make sure that if this horrible screed ever sees the light of day, you will include this. It is a poem called "Architect of Accident." It is a day that I will remember always and it was a day that happened before you or my family existed, and I want it here.

Architect of Accident

Three quarter clouded moon  
over ocean's persistent crystal light  
dances a path to walk  
alone in a night-time myopia  
silence stills the heady  
dialogue of bright day  
and moon's wide and fuzzy halo  
is a quiet amphitheater  
for the performance of ocean waves  
their dark body, bright foam, an inverted tide  
come to take all  
your should'ves away.  
and lap deep thunderous.

At the First far falling star  
overhead, you sit in awe alone  
wide-eyes peeled to bay of light  
Her communique  
She to you alone, who walks this late  
who came to worship at the temple of  
the architect of accident  
when all the voices insisted  
hitch-hiked on you to this quiet place  
they all  
fall silent one by one  
until left are none

and the second falling star  
is a real thing.

And the ocean, not something to fathom  
but a place to land—  
as all falling stardust must  
and you are cold  
and you are shivering  
sitting on a wide beach of white sand  
the wind with its job to do  
your vigil is aside

the three quarter and clouded moon  
looking down on you  
shines white light that is  
a secret from the sun bounced  
'round the solar system  
and  
there is no one else watching  
but you who've come  
this late at night  
for the show that  
goes on for almost forever  
That will be all for you, Rausch.

## 21. The Whirlpool

Hiding and standing next to those metal doors that kept me in for so many years, I was joyed to bash them in just to see a history that I already knew was gone. The whole place, from concrete block walls to chipped white paint, from spray foamed ceilings to the smell, was familiar again, although amazingly more claustrophobic than it ever was. From the first end of the hallway I saw ghosts of Mrs. Mathiesan and demands of calculation. Six times twelve is seventy-two. Seven times eleven is seventy-seven. Four times eight is thirty-two. But who cares now, computers in our pockets. What was the torture for? it doesn't matter in the hallway today; I remind myself where I am and that I am not in a dream. I look at my feet. I am not in a dream. The watches' hands are not in the right place.

The room where all that math used to test me is empty and filled with dust and cobwebs now. It was important—paramount then—no longer. It is empty now and filled with broken glass, dust and markers of weather. All the desks are shadows and all their rows are gone. There is no merit in the tests that I had failed or succeeded at; the history of the room is gone.<sup>1</sup>

I move along the corridor, looking for Rausch or his courier, or in fact any ghost that is moving in this decrepit and abandoned building. Three rooms on each side of the walls and at each I step in with my gun drawn hoping to see someone moving, but every

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<sup>1</sup>This is hours later, reader. I am writing now. What do I write? The wound was fatal. What do I write? Do I tell you about how I tried to save him? There was no attempt. That the man bled out on the floor of that abandoned classroom? It was obvious from the amount of blood all over the broken tile floor. He died; right there is my arms. I thought he was Rausch. With all my heart I am telling you that I thought he was Rausch.

But Paul Nolan was only the courier and now he is dead. He was dead hours ago.

I have nothing to say about what I've done. The gun just... I have been so angry about Rausch... I have been so angry.

I go through his pockets to see what he has. There is his wallet of course. There is some spare change and cash. There is what appears to be a likely burner phone—that seems worth holding on to. And, of course, he, like me, has a gun. It's a .45. I take that. Now I have two as I descend into the nightmare that Rausch has created.

time there is nothing but abandon. It's all empty. By the end of the hallway I begin to wonder why I am roaming my old elementary school with a gun. It makes no sense. I've no evidence that the courier came here or that anything related to the kidnapping of wife and daughter is here. Agent Cobb had more to say and yet I was preoccupied... how is that possible?

The dust of the place becomes my preoccupation. Not that I was only one of the students to come through here but the passage of thousands mesmerizes me. I kneel on one knee to run my finger through the dust on the shoddy tile as if to detect the movement of the past through this place. Time is done. How many bullies, bargains and failures occurred here both before and after my arrival. It's all just dust on the tile floor now.

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I dragged Paul's body to the edge of the playground; to the tree that I loved to read beneath. I broke open the back doors to the elementary school and I dragged him two hundred yards to that tree. His lifeless form came with me like an albatross, and the entire way I was shocked that this someone, this academic and intelligent man, had somehow gotten tangled in this stupid nonsense that Rausch began. How harmless he was, how much I had hated him as a student, but dragging his body, all I could think was how kind he had been to me. How he had laid the harshest of criticisms on me for purpose of better. It all sounded like Rausch, but it was not. All of the smugness of Rausch's missives became something else entirely; truly a puzzle or some kind of game. Paul was not Rausch. But I took his body, and I buried him beneath the tree of my contentment. It took three hours to dig the hole and I knew Agent Cobb would be calling, so I dug hard and as fast as I could.

His body was in the ground at about sunset and I went back to the school to clean up the mess. It was impossible. I had no cleaning supplies, so I covered the last glimpses of the wound in dirt, just like I did Paul's body. No one would look for a body here if I never mentioned the conflagration; which I never would. I want Josie and Anna back.

I am so sorry.

This mad chase has lead me where I know not

Reza says that it is impossible to find justice in this world, but that also it is impossible to find justice in the many other worlds that exist. Justice is for the living and those that live by its creed alone—it's nothing to do with those who have crossed its inextricable lines in the sand. Leave justice behind, and it leaves you behind. In the wreckage of this childhood of mine, I see now that what Reza said was true. I am now trapped here for good; beyond the reach of justice because I crossed its boundaries. The body of Paul Nolan is now a heavy medallion I will have to wear, and my heart knows that while I can still save my Josie and my Anna, from here on out there's no way to save myself. My hands are stained and there is no justice for me now. Still, I can save the ones I love. I need to start by finding Cobb.

In a strange way, I expect Cobb to see in my face just exactly everything that's happened, and yet I try to convince myself the whole way home that she could not possibly know—not know, but see, perceive. She will not be able to perceive what I've been through and what I am guilty of. What does guilt look like on the human face?

There can be nothing of evidence here, nor is the courier here, nor was he ever. This is a dreamscape I have made up in the hopes of finding the ones that I love. Why wander through history to find something that came to me in a future far away from this place. There's no need. I should go back to where I can talk to Cobb and she'll tell me what I need to know to stop this nightmare from continuing.

I need to take a deep breath. I'm exasperating a situation that needs to be squelched. I've known idea who the kidnappers could be. I feel sure that it's Paul Nolan, but why? Cobb is after him now, and what is this that I'm doing in some abandoned elementary school? There's nothing here but ghosts.

Still, something about the space resonates with me. Have I had dreams here? I'm certain that after spending so much time amongst walls that were so non-descript—walls made of nothing but concrete cinder blocks and painted over with a cast of colors that are plebeian at best, downright mediocre at worst. How can there be any forgetting of such a place when I spent years in it? Is it just that the memory is statistical and can truly remember nothing that is unremarkable?

When a noise occurs in these halls, any rattling of some settling facet of the construction, the sound is haunting; it is the sound of the decomposition of human endeavor. It is entropy; my old enemy. Everything falls apart, everything separates into its components, even me.<sup>2</sup>

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## 22. Love is But a Guess

It's odd to think that any distance to a person that you care about must only be yards or feet or miles. It's odd to think that there could be a measurement involvedâ€”distance to just any person, yes, but distance to one you love? The distance *feels* non-existent. At one and the same time I do not know the distance to my wife, Josie, and yet there is no distance. I know she is thinking of me right nowâ€”this instantâ€”and I am thinking of her. Yet, I know the distance is measurable. In fact, right now, the actual distance feels immeasurable.

A person that we care about is close beyond dimension; one of those secret folded dimensions that astrophysicists are always talking about. They are always with us. And I supposed that's the truth of it. If couldn't know, then I couldn't love. The love I have, it's inside of me. It's not really "out there." If I die, my love for anything will certainly vanish with me. And even though I feel it in my bones, in my heart, that Josie is still out there, there is the possibility that she is not and her love for me has already died.

We are memory machines that do nothing but observe and detail the motions, emotions and behaviors of the ones we watch; we calculate to predict. I know Josie loves me because she's told me so. When she's gone, I can predict that she will still love me. When she returns, I can predict that she will love me then. But, if the truth is what is at stake here, I simply cannot know that she loves me right now. I cannot know it because I don't know if she's alive. Even love is a prediction.

If enough exchanges have occurred, and if enough of those communications have been accurate enough to yield trust, then love is the chemical bond that solidifies our secondary, rational notions of trust. In a sense, we do nothing but use our place in memories as sacred locations to copy and ensure or bury or archive the ones we love. We are welcome to let them go, but we will never truly let them

go, because we have memorized them and we carry their copies in our minds until we die. I carry my love for Josie, but her love for me is only a copy. And like all copies, it suffers from entropy, from a gradual breakdown. When I think of my love for her, it is present and intense, her face lights up my memory. When I think of her love for me, it's not so intense. I assume it is intense in her, but how can I ever really know? It's a copy of her love that she has given to me in pieces and over time.

And who of those in this life have we chosen to archive in our trillion neuron connected minds? I think it is those that we have loved, definitely. But how have they come to pass through our journey? This, the question of love given over to those who we deem worthy of a cross of our own paths; that's enough? There is a universe of probability that dictates that there is no chance that we randomly run across the perfect love; rather we run into the requisite love. The love that works. It is not the love that we dream of. That love is the universe's love, and it belongs somewhere else in our hearts. My love for Anna is absolute but as she is my daughter it is different from my other loves.

We use the phrase "close to me" to indicate that someone or some heart or some love is close to use no matter how far away they are. If you love something set it free, if it loves you it will come back. Miles must separate you at first; prior to the return. Still, the return. I cannot think of anything more fantastic and wonderful for any human alive. That is the best day: the return of love. If the best day of love never returns, we have memorized our loves as best we can and we carry them with us for as long as we live; as long as our own lives return to us.

## 23. No Obvious Clues

On returning home, I found Cobb already there, returned from Athens. She was upset that I had ditched my detail and she asked about it. Exhausted from trudging out to the school I told as much of truth as I could manage. I told her that I went into the woods to look for the courier and that it led me to the school. I searched the place, but I found nothing of significance. She reminded me that the protection detail was there for my benefit, and that I wasn't to leave them again. I did not care. As far as I was concerned at that moment, Rausch had become some kind of force and there was no protection from It—police detail or not, there was no escaping Rausch, Its demands, or Its final plans, and I now strongly suspected that Its plan was to kill me when It had what It wanted—which even that I did not understand.

“Why the hell are you dressed like the Courier?”

“I thought... if the meeting place were the school then I thought that I could get Rausch into the open.”

“You keep doing these idiotic things and there is no way you are going to see your wife and child again. Do you *seriously* want that, Allen?”

I looked to the floor. “I am doing anything that I possibly can do. There’s no trace or slightest bit of evidence on this man who... has done what he’s done. I *cannot* sit around and do nothing!—police detail or not.”

“It’s not no one, Allen. You were right.”

Then Cobb told me that they had found Paul Nolan’s farm and not much else. Judging from his mail, he hadn’t been there in some weeks which gave them a good indication that Paul Nolan had something to do with the kidnapping. I told her that it wasn’t Nolan, that I had been mistaken somehow. She asked how I knew. I said simply that something else was afoot. There was something I had left out of the Reza Bahadir story that was playing into this. Again,

she asked me how I knew. I didn't answer. Puzzled, she looked at me, exhausted, and said, "What did you find, Worthington?"

I looked around the room for a lie. Exasperated I just spewed, "We need to try to catch Rausch again; a third time. I had time to think and it's not Nolan. It just doesn't make sense that it's Nolan."

"*You* said he knew you were writing as Reza. *You* said there were only four people who could know that. *You* said Nolan had a grudge or dislike of you. *You* said that. What's the deal, Worthington? We can't find Nolan—there's no trace of him fact. The closest witness I could find down there hadn't see him for weeks. He's missing. Your wife is missing. Your daughter is missing. This is looking very bad for *you*. Do you understand?"

"Nolan is a distraction. He's what Rausch *wants* us to go after. He's been so many steps ahead of us! Why would our first suspect be the right one? Paul's my old advisor; he's probably been pulled into this. He's... a bit of a prick... but this?"

Cobb said, "You went to the school. What did you find?"

"I found dreams. I found a decrepit building. I found something for myself, but nothing to do with this case."

"You know, Allen, I think you're lying. When I send some officers to the school tomorrow you will be better off when you tell me *right now* what they're going to find."

"I told you. They're going to find a decrepit building. I found something to write about there. What the hell am I supposed to write about, for Rausch, if I'm held up in my own home?"

"And how, exactly, do you think Rausch will show up tomorrow?"

"I'll write. I'll write like it's been asking and it'll be what it wants."

"It?"

"Yes. It!"

I looked up at her, "Rausch will show. Rausch will show! I've got to write for it and it will demand the next drop off and we'll be there to get it—some part of it. The courier's not... a problem anymore." I winced.

Cobb leaned into me hard, “What the FUCK does that mean, Allen? What do you mean the courier is not a problem anymore?”

“I just... I don’t think Rausch is really interested in the book. I think Rausch wants something else; something that I might write. The book doesn’t have to hold together. There’s... something else it wants. It wasn’t Paul and I don’t think Rausch is Paul and I don’t think that it’ll use the same courier anymore. It never needed a courier; that was all to throw us off. It was to threaten me. It just wants what I’m writing—not even that—something I might write. I don’t know why!”

“That’s bullshit, Allen! Rasuch doesn’t need a courier? This is ridiculous. God damn it, Allen, how—” Cobb took a deep breath. She turned to Caravale and made a face that struck me as so demeaning, I can’t describe it. “How could you possibly—you’ve damaged this investigation from the very beginning. You dodged a meeting with us and the local police; you went after the courier yourself. I’m putting you under house arrest and I want your cell phone.”<sup>1</sup>

I look at the palms of my hands. “They arrested K for much less than that.”

“This isn’t a god damned book, Allen!”

“It is for me! It is a book or some code or some password or some secret. I need to get those secret words into that drive that it keeps asking for. And worse than that, if I don’t write the code it wants, my wife and child die!” I sit down, still staring at my palms. Cobb paces the living room. Caravale seats himself on the couch and covers his eyes, mumbling, “This is batshit insane.”

“Why are you running around in the woods when the only ransom this guy has against you is you writing?” she says. “Have you written?”

I say, “Not much, but in the time we have I can get the requisite word count.”

“What are we talking about?”

“Another 2000 words for the next drop off—Tuesday—if It

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<sup>1</sup>It’s ‘we’ now? What does that even mean?

doesn't change it's mind. I can write about dreams and other bullshit; it doesn't matter. I don't think that's what it's after."

"Write it. We'll take *our* second shot and *your* third shot." She paces the room in a square again and says, "I don't think you even begin to understand what's going on here."

"Fuck you. I've been trying since this began. I've done nothing but think about this since it started."

"No! I think you've become completely detached or unhinged. You keep talking to me about your wife and child and I just don't get it, Allen. You have the help of the Federal government on your side—the most impressive investigative agency you could possibly ask for, but when we go try to find your advisor—a major suspect—you suddenly claim it's not him! Your wife and child are missing and your are changing your story about who you think is at fault. There's no way. As far as I am concerned, you are Rausch. There's no way you aren't. You don't leave my sight for the next... however many days until we recover your wife and child. Then, you go away to prison for a long time."

She comes over to where I'm sitting and gets in my face. "You don't go anywhere until I know what you're doing. Hand over your phone."

Caravale grabs Cobb's shoulder, "Hey there. Slow down."

"Fuck this. He ditched our detail. He's guilty as shit," and with that she points in my face.

I say, "I just don't think my old English advisor kidnapped my family." I wait a beat, "Wherever he is, he's just not that crazy!"

"Then where is he?" shouts Cobb.

"I've no idea! It might not have anything to do with this! Maybe it does, maybe it doesn't. Maybe whoever it was threw you Paul Nolan as a patsy."

"What did you find at the school, Worthington?"

"I didn't find anything. There was nothing there."

Cobb turns to Caravale, "Search the school. Put units on it; scrub it. This asshole is lying." When she turns back to me, Cobb is livid (and I don't want her to be) "You're going to tell me why Rausch

is anything but Paul Nolan. These things just don't sprout up from thin air," and she snaps her fingers in my face. "You'll tell me and in the meantime, you don't leave my line of sight for the next twenty-four hours. Drop off or no, you don't leave my sight. And I get Rausch's next message."

Early the next morning, in my office, I was informed that Cobb had received a series of messages on my phone.

Mon, Nov 10, 6:27am We will meet tomorrow. If Reza Bahadir is not present, we will not accept the drive.

Mon, Nov 10, 6:29am We will deliver you the body of his child one hour later.

Mon, Nov 10, 6:32am You will make sure that Reza Bahadir has access to email throughout the day. That is all.

## **24. A Letter from Reza to his Disciples**

It should be known that the passage of this life is a passage. It is a coming and going. However, the passage cannot be one that could succumb to desire. Whatsoever possession of will or need that one might have, must pass as well. The desire for things material and sustaining must surely pass. However, other desires will pass as will. The desire for company will pass. The desire for a sense of self and identity will pass. The desire for love... will pass. All that which is connected to the flesh will pass away and be left here on Earth.

It is the thinnest of connections that we have to our former majesty and consciousness. This cord is so thin, in fact, that it cannot even influence our bodies and our actions here while we are mortal. And that would not be its purpose. Our minds are but a conduit for a great, vast consciousness that, grandly, exists in higher dimensions than the simple ones for space and time that we all know. Higher consciousness is witness to all time, exists for all time, and it is only here that we are explorers for that consciousness as it takes us on a journey of wants and needs, of time, space and self, of love and hate. We are each of us experiments in a grand calculation.

We, all of us, from the moment we come into existence, have the thinnest of tendrils of connection to the higher dimensions, where our own experiences are added to the noosphere—the plain in which Knowledge and Truth exist.

What we experience now is only one way of an infinitude that this Universe could occur. We are experiments, as are our bonds, as is our world. And even in that, our Universe is only one of the many ways that a Universe may occur. We are witness to one set of rules that are calculated from an infinitude, that are brought into existence forever and ever, but also, from the gates of Heaven, only

just, in an instant.

You will ask, as must be asked of existence, why and what for? You will ask about justice. Understand: morality is necessarily the stuff of the flesh and not a grand consciousness that must, by definition of its very existence, explore all the paths and ways and means of Creation. Morality is the stuff of the atom and you should not, if you wish to be enlightened, concern yourself with it. You are of the atom, of star stuff, of the very basic fundamental laws that govern this Universe. And you are watched. It is of no concern to the Watchers if you are good or evil. To them, both of these fundamental concerns are whim and dependent on and in the first millionths of a second when a Universe begins to unfold.

Acolytes of Reza, behold: It is decided. Even the Gods of old come from these early moments in the birth of a Universe, for if anything in this Universe can conceive, then It is decided, and the Watchers will add the knowledge to the Noosphere. And to ask what came before? What came before witness and what came before the substance and the laws, and the answer is simple. Without witness, there is nothing.

Know these things. It is decided and without witness, there is nothing.

Many of the followers of Jesus Christâ€”who knew of these forces and Watchers of which I speakâ€”they believe in asking forgiveness. It is true that one should ask for forgiveness, but it is folly to believe that the Universe will grant it. The wounds we afflict on this construct contain both learning and regret.

## 25. A Dream and A Search

It is very early morning; after five, as usual of late. I am in my office after sleeping fitfully, also as usual of late. I feel like I haven't slept in weeks, and even when I do sleep it is fevered and the dreams are peppered with nightmares. There are strange nightmares: being chased by rapid dogs, fires, destroying things I love... visions of Paul. When I wake up I see, sometimes, that these things are nightmares. When the dreams are about Paul, they are all about scribblings that I am presenting to him. They are never on time; they are never what he wants. He scoffs at my efforts constantly, even though, somewhere in my mind I might know that he is a threat long gone. In the dreams, I suppose time is set aside.

How many dreams have there been in which you were back at a test you had no confidence to pass? You might be years past it, but still the mind senses the slightest pressure or fear and that one test that was utter failure for you comes racing back into salience even though you'd not thought about in many years. The dreams that are of solace are few and far between while the dreams of failure loom. This makes sense. Our minds are obsessed with solution. The simplest solution is never present in dreams. The simplest solution is to give over to witness. When we witness our dreams, the panic and simulations of danger wash away. We must recognize that our concerns and foibles are all just thoughts that vanish in the face of our recognition that we are not our thoughts. We are not our thoughts; we are the space in which those thoughts occur. We can let those thoughts come and go, and choose only the ones that yield peace.

I am also waking into a nightmare that I was not dreaming about. Paul crosses the divide: he is both nightmare when I am asleep and nightmare when I am awake. I am reminded of the Watch Man who could no longer tell his dreams from his waking life. I think his loss or death must have been pleasant compared to what

I am experiencing. I trade nightmares of the unimaginable kind for nightmares all too real. The Watch Man would have found greater peace for not knowing which were true. “Was it all just dream?” is a question he could have fairly asked. And I have to ask if I have awoken something with my own dreams or is this all a dream?

Most of the nightmares are too fast and wake me up from terror before I have even a chance to look at my feet and stand the way that I did once in the face of a destructive explosion. It seems that I have become a coward in both my dreams and my life. Still, Paul’s final words have left a shadow on my brain and his words, “Reza... the Children.” It makes no sense to me, but as I told Cobb, it most certainly means that Rausch is neither Paul nor is Rausch what I think he (it) is. It’s a demon, a curse. More than ever, Rausch feels supernatural.

As I’ve said before, a dream is a model. A dream is a way for the mind to work out a problem, or many problems, or speculations about problems. A dream is a simulation for working through some potential obstacle, not even one necessarily ever encountered. Explosions are in my dreams, but I have stood in front of one.

So, to the dream:

I was standing in a decrepit warehouse that reached as far as the horizon. At first, it was nothing more than girders and aluminum walls and columns, and short of that, nothing but space and puddles. As I tried to find something—“I just had the sense that I was looking for something”—I began to see stacks of papers. Just at first, there were a few pieces of paper here and there and I would look at them and see nothing and move on. As I moved on, larger stacks of paper would appear. And as I moved through them, even more stacks of paper would loom. They quickly became taller than me. And then, they began to surround me.

All the while, there was a lecture somewhere nearby; someone talking at length, droning. I couldn’t make out any of the speech, it was just the droning of a voice. Though I couldn’t recognize the content, I recognized the tone: a lecture. But as I began to become surrounded by the stacks of papers, I slowly realized that the lecture

was somewhere in my head. I went to touch my ears and there I found earphones—the kind that go into your ear. I pulled them out to relieve myself of the sound and focus on the papers.

But the lecture would not stop. I tried to pull pages out of the stacks around me and as I did, the droning of the continuing lecture seemed to drown out the words on the page. There were clearly short and long lines of text and they contained important information, but they were all lost on me because the lecture became louder and louder. Eventually I realized that the earphones were still in my ears. When I went to touch them, they were gone, but I could hear the sound inside my ear canals, so I would dig my fingers into my ears and with my fingernails I could feel little pieces of the headphones. They had broken apart in my ear canals.

Surrounded by the stacks of papers that went all the way no to the ceiling of the warehouse, I continued to dig into my ears, further and further to remove little washers of silvery metal, little pieces of the speakers that were becoming embedded in my head! The harder I dug my fingers into my ears, the further the lecture encroached my brain. And then I began sucking in air through my nose in order to pull the pieces out of my ears; the way you might try to pop your ears from air pressure. And I began to cough. Pieces of the headphones were no in my throat and the more I sucked air in through my nose, the more they were caught in my throat and I began to choke and cough, pieces of metal being choked out of my throat.

As I choked, I grabbed the stacks of paper to balance myself, feeling that I am running out of air, choking to death on the metal. And the lecture would not cease. It continued to drone on and on and on making no sense to me at all.

I awoke in my bed, coughing and seizing. I took several moments to get control of myself and a trip to the bathroom to get a glass of water. For a moment, I still believed that the metal and pieces of miniature speakers were still in my ears. I gradually caught my breathe as well as my mind. And then, the papers in the dreams made sense. The lines were all of a particular short length

at the beginning followed by longer lines in the middle, followed by final short staccato lines; they were all correspondence. They were letters.

Even in this day and age I receive letters; many of them. I keep them all. I have notes from girlfriends in high school and letters from friends over the years and letters from strangers. The beautiful thing about letters is that if you choose to engage someone in such a fashion and they choose to write back, a new communication will occur, and it will occur in a much different fashion than email. Letters allow for... space? Some of my letters to friends and loved ones have been works of art in my mind. My letters to Josie in the months when I was away from her in my last years of graduate school were beautiful. I have them because she gave me them and they are in a file, interspersed with her letters to me. If every there will be a record of our love, it will be found in that file.

But I sit in my office surrounded by piles of letters, not looking for those (though I could not resist glancing over the file and feeling an incredible warmth) but rather some more unusual specimen that stopped arriving years ago. I had put them out of my mind (hadn't I?). They were letters from an individual who had questions about Reza Bahadir; a man named Ezra Enoch. They were typed out on a mechanical typewriter, and while I found them fascinating, I only considered them a kind of performance art, for while signed, they never had a return address.

But the letters went on at length about Reza Bahadir. I never understood why or how. Part of me always thought it was Josie having a bit of fun, but whenever I confronted her, she feigned (or truly communicated) ignorance. I know who knows about Reza, but what if the stories were passed on somehow?

I put the letters into envelopes and wrap them with a rubber-band. At this point, I know that Rausch is watching my every move, but will he notice if I hand Agent Cobb an innocuous stack of letters? I'll do it before the next meeting with Rasuch. I'll wait until we're in the car. Rausch cannot possibly be in the FBI's vehicles. It will be safe to hand this information over to her then. Of course,

she no longer trusts me, so we'll see if it matters. *I don't even know if it matters.* It could be another dead end.

Still, when I read the letters, there's something obsessive in them. Could my writing be a distraction for something more important to someone like Ezra Enoch (which cannot possibly be a real name). I don't know, but I do know that today's hand off has to be the last one before Rausch loses his patience. Does he know about Paul? Does anyone know about Paul? I suppose I know. I suppose that it was Paul lecturing to me in the dream, speaking to me from his place in the ground now, or from that place that Reza speaks about, where consciousness is everywhere and all at once. I could dig into my ears as deep as my fingers would go and I could choke on the parts, but Paul will never stop speaking to me.

And now, on to the nightmare...

## 26. Rausch's Demands

To: aworthington@\_\_\_\_.edu

From: rausch@txashd.xyz

Subject: Re: your LAST 5000 words

Allen, we've played this game to a stalemate.<sup>1</sup>

Congratulations, also, on finding Paul. Also, our condolences. It was very unexpected that you would find him. How fascinating that footsteps from your memory and your writing took you to him. Would Reza call this a coincidence, we wonder? What would Reza tell us about this? Surely, he would say that there was no coincidence in it. It was surely the guiding hand of the upper dimensions; some secrets from the tendril, whispered to your dreams. We do look forward to an answer about that.<sup>2</sup>

In many ways, this has been a Baptism by fire, and the Baptism, we feel, is over. Now is is time to begin the Communion. Obey us and by late in the day, you will be re-united with your wife and daughter. We will still require much of you, and we will have your cooperation, but you will be comforted in the knowledge that your loves will be close and safe.

We don't want your wife. We don't want your daughter. They are, as Reza dictates, trifling to the consequence of the play of the Universe. They only stand in the way of the watched clock. We want Reza Bahadir. You will give us Reza Bahadir or we will destroy everything you have. And how appropriate, because as Reza says: "Without witness, there is nothing," We are many; the children of Reza. We like to add that with nothing comes no witness.

When we have Reza, the hands will be aligned and our

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<sup>1</sup>It's 'we' now? What does that even mean?

<sup>2</sup>What would Reza say about this?

dreams will grant us the portal we seekâ€”the portal to the city of Hormirzad.<sup>3</sup>

Tomorrow, you will dress as Paul did. You will be the courier now; the courier \*and\* the package. We have made arrangements with your detectives to be sure that you will have your phone with you when we come to accept the writings you must deliver. Bring only these things: the writings, the phone, the clothes of the courier. You have our permission to leave even yourself behind.

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<sup>3</sup>I can't figure if Josie wrote this letter or not. It's her handwriting, but seeing as how I've been coerced to write, perhaps so was she. I suppose it doesn't matter in the scheme of things. Rausch must have thought that there was some incentive in it. Their plan has been disrupted a few times I think; especially by the death of Paul Nolan. The time of the letter must have been some aspect of a plan that has since been upset. Why receive the letter now? Why send a letter that gives no proof of life? Surely, Rausch could have posted a video online somewhere if what they were after was to keep me going.

## 27. A Letter from Josie

Before I have the chance to tell Agent Cobb about what I found this morning (the bunch of letters from ages ago) she hands *me* a letter. She looked apologetic, if that's possible. When she put the opened letter in front of me, she looked down. There's no doubting that, despite everything else I doubt. She said, "Read it."

So I did.

Dear Allen

This is all they have given me: a pen and paper. They've told me nothing about what to write. They just said to write you. So I am. As ridiculous as this sounds, it reminds me of another time that I wrote to you. Do you remember? We used to write. We have those letters. Keep them somewhere safe, Allen. I don't know what these people want. I know that they want something from you. They keep telling Anna and I about how special you are. The thing is, Allen, what they want from you is strange. I don't understand it. They say certain things constantly, like, "It is decided." They say that often. They say "Without witness there is nothing." And, though they have looked after Anna and I in a careful way, often when we ask for something, they still reply, "It is decided." Allen, what is this? It doesn't matter. All I want to tell you is that Anna and I are fine.

They don't believe that you will believe that we are okay, so I am supposed to tell you something in this letter that is secret. I am supposed to say something that only you and I will know. So I am saying Synchronicity and the Jungian Shadow. Do you remember

that night? We stayed up all night to discuss the idea that the Jungian Shadow had to lead to synchronicity later in our lives. I can't think of anything else, Allen. We connected that night. We knew that we knew the explanation for all coincidence. We knew why we saw it, and why we looked for it.

I've no idea what this is about except that they told me to write this to you. They also told me that you would know how to get Anna and I back to you. I don't know but to ask why you know the things that these people want. But, if you have any idea, I hope that this gets to you. I hope you know what is going on. I hope that you are okay and safe. More than anything, Allen, I hope that we will be together again. I know what you think about the world and patterns and such and I know you think this is some random atrocity, but it's not, Allen. Something has gone wrong in the world.

Whether you see that or not, it doesn't matter to me. I love you. Right now, I'm waiting for you, but at the first chance I get, I will get Anna and I out of here, and we will find you, and whatever else occurred before this awfulness; we'll forget it. We'll move on. We, all three of us, we'll just go anywhere. Anywhere but this awful, awful nightmare. I suppose they've told you about the writing nonsense. I can't suppose you're doing it, but then, maybe you are. Write anything, Allen. Write anything. These people are mad. Anything might make sense to them. Write anything. It

doesn't matter.<sup>1</sup>

I won't leave you. I won't leave you even if they take me. And Anna—she's not scared, Allen. She's been with me and she's frightened, but she's with me. I don't want to die, Allen, but... I love you and Anna, of course, loves you. I can't ask for you to do anything for us but what you can do. But if something should go wrong, if something... I don't know what. This is strange, isn't it, Love. Just know that I love you, Anna loves you. Nothing changes in the future. We love you for always. I just want you to know that for now we're safe and we love you, Allen. I've always loved you, Allen.

I look to Cobb; she shrugs. I become angry. "How long?" is all I can say.

"Today," she replies.

"All of this time and someone finally delivers me something that my wife wrote?"

"It showed up in your mailbox this morning, Worthington."

"And you know what it says?"

"Yes."

"And are you prepared to do anything about it?"

"Yes."

"..."

"We expect Rausch to explain a rendezvous similar to earlier ones—not to far off the M.O. You'll be there. You'll have your phone—we've been instructed in regards to that. We'll be prepared."

"Will you really?"

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<sup>1</sup>I can't figure if Josie wrote this letter or not. It's her handwriting, but seeing as how I've been coerced to write, perhaps so was she. I suppose it doesn't matter in the scheme of things. Rausch must have thought that there was some incentive in it. Their plan has been disrupted a few times I think; especially by the death of Paul Nolan. The time of the letter must have been some aspect of a plan that has since been upset. Why receive the letter now? Why send a letter that gives no proof of life? Surely, Rausch could have posted a video online somewhere if what they were after was to keep me going.

“Yes.”

“It’s been ahead of both of us all this time.”

“Still with this ‘its’ bullshit?”

“Let’s go to the car.”

“I haven’t even—”

“I don’t have time for—let’s go to the car.”

“Fine.”

In the car, outside the house, I reach into the pea coat and pull out the batch of letters that I’ve collected. “I’ve no idea if this is anything, but then I haven’t thought that anything so far has been anything. Ezra Enoch.” I hand her the batch of letters.

“C’mom, Worthington. This is just more misdirection. You’re just absolutely full of shit aren’t you?”

“Was that letter from my wife? Did it match her handwriting? Was it mailed? Was is time-stamped? Can the FBI figure out where the hell that letter was mailed from? Just curious, was I anywhere near that mailing and time stamp? Because I *wasn’t*.”

“You’re good.”

“I’m not good; far from it.”

“Have you even gotten a signal from Rausch today?”

“It’s coming.”

“How do you know?”

“Rausch knows something about time and consequence. I know they do.”

“Now it’s ‘they’? You just can’t stop can you?”

I show Agent Cobb the email and say, “I wanted to be in the car because I think *they* are everywhere. I know for a fact that they got to Paul Nolan. They can get anywhere they want to.”

“HOW did they get to Paul Nolan?”

“Listen, it doesn’t matter. Today, you’re going to lose even me. READ the email!”

She does. “And so what? You go off with them? Whatever elaborate plan they have, you’re not getting away from the FBI to become some additional unsolved case.”

“It’s not unsolved. Ezra Enoch! He wrote me. Find him.”

“You’re volunteering for this?”

“It’s my bet that I won’t volunteer. I mean, the second drop off...”

“Fuck you.”

“Okay, but.”

Samantha ties her fingers around the steering wheel. Her knuckles go white. “If I let you go, I’ve got nothing but this stupid name to go on.”

“It’s enough,” I say. “Also, Hormirzad—there’s a city called Hormirzad. I don’t know why, but it’s important to them.”

“This is just your getaway isn’t it, Worthington?”

I look Samantha Cobb in the eyes. “I swear on my wife and daughter’s life that this is not an attempt to get away with anything. I just think there’s a damn good chance that this is going to happen whether we like it or not. Maybe if I’m closer to them...”

Samantha Cobb sighs; puts her head on the steering wheel.  
“That was your wife’s handwriting...”

“Indeed.”

“There’s no way to plan this.”

“There is not.”

“There is one thing we can do.”

## 28. Welcome to Hormirzad

It's almost like as soon as Cobb spoke the words, "There is one thing we can do," here I am, in monastery-like, undecorated room. There is a bed, a desk, a chair, a laptop. Other things happened, of course, but they all occurred in a blur and a panic. And, I am certain Cobb is right. There was no plan for us to get me out of exactly where I am right now. I already tried the door, locked. The windows are nailed shut. The wound on my forearm has been stitched and bandaged. There could have been no plan for this. There is no way that I, English professor, good father, good husband, challenged writer, am sitting here in this cold attic room with nothing but a old laptop, being told that I am the very person that I am certain I made up. His name is Reza Bahadir if you haven't been paying attention. But someone—some people—in this place are utterly unconcerned with nothing of making things up. They are taking all of this literally. I cannot see how, but what's done is done.

I received the obligatory Rausch text before we left my house:

Tues, Nov 11, 11:00am Dress as the courier. Come to the park.

Tues, Nov 11, 11:02am Keep your phone with you. Carry nothing but the phone, your writings, and your clothes.

Tues, Nov 11, 11:05am Stay tuned.

We drive to the park. I get out of Cobb's car in the same place that I did the last drop off. I turn to Cobb and say, "If you do nothing else, find out where those letters came from—find out who they came from."

Cobb shrugs. "You're not going anywhere. The letters won't lead anywhere. Without you, Worthington, guilty or not, we've got nothing."

"I trust you, Agent Cobb, but you've got to have more than one thread running through this."

She smiles at me. It was the same smile from the night she

confronted me that I was the kidnapper. She's got eyes like a cat and the smile is tight-lipped. "I don't tell you everything, Worthington. Why would you think I would?"

As condescending as the remark is, it gives me hope. I look out the window to the park. "You know, Cobb, I'm actually grateful for that. The less I know, the less it knows I think."

"So now it's 'it'?"

"I don't know what the hell we are dealing with. Part of me feels like it's more than either of us can comprehend without having all the facts."

"We'll see about that."

I open the car door. "Just hand on to those letters. I know there's something there; I'm just not seeing it."

I get out of the car and put my sunglasses on. It's actually too warm a day—even in November—to be wearing this wool hoody and pea coat, but instructions are instructions. I figure on making my way to the park bench where I (maybe) met Paul Nolan. Now, to be honest, I'm not sure it was him. It could have been a look-alike, a disguise. Rausch could have been keeping Nolan at the school under duress and he was always just a plant. I mean, could Paul have figured out how to operate the electric skateboard? I doubt it. Could he have operated a drone? It doesn't fit for me. Still, there is nowhere else to go but that bench.

The phone buzzes.

Tues, Nov 11, 11:18am Want to see Josie and Anna?  
They're waiting for you. Run to the church that faces  
the East side of the park. Sprint, Allen.

I lay into a sprint. I am no athlete and in this weather, but garb is not particularly accommodating. Still, seeing their names for the first times in a text. I do need to see them, desperately. No matter what the police think I am, I am not, even though I know more than they do the lengths I have gone to get them back.

As I'm sprinting toward the church, a tall, imposing gothic affair—steeples and everything—the front door opens and a hand begins waving at me from out of the dark recesses. Then, as I reach

the bottom of the steps, both front doors open and a whole group of men dressed like me come out and surround me. I look back only to see the FBI agents disguised as park caretakers and other elements running toward the stairs as well. An unmarked car, not Cobb, slides up to the curb in front of the church. I look around, surrounded by all the men dressed like me and get swept back into the church.

Once inside, it is dark. Two men on either side of me have their hands clasped tight about my biceps and even though I am moving with them—I am desperate to see Josie and Anna—they are practically carrying me up to the stone altar at the front of the room.

The phone buzzes.

Tues, Nov 11, 11:24am Where's the chip?

The two men dragging me move to the left of the altar and into some sort of side room for the priests. The other men all seem to be moving out of the church from different exits. The two men press me up against a wall and one of them says, “Read your phone!”

I read it. I shut my eyes. I try to think of what to do. They are already pulling my coat in various directions, searching. Finally, I acquiesce, and tell them, “The forearm. The right forearm.” Without warning, one of them produces a knife—a strange knife—one that I recognize—and he jams it into my arm. Before I can scream, the second man has shoved a gloved hand over my mouth. With an excruciating amount of pain, the first man pulls the tracker chip out of my arm. At the moment, I can’t think anything at all, but as I write this, I know that Cobb’s one plan has already gone awry. I truly hope she had more plans... even now as I am writing this, I truly hope.

And why am I writing this now anyway? There is a great deal of reason to continue this record. While I have breath in me I will continue this record. We’ll come to that shortly.

After the two men removed the chip, I wish I could report to what happened but there is very little to report. They put a gag on me, a hood over my head, dragged me down some stairs, and then they waited for a long time. Of course, gagged and hooded, I cannot

tell you how long they waited. In a darkness like that, there is only the wait. There is no length to the wait; it is not over until it is. But I did here a chime, like an alarm or message going off on a cell phone. Then, they started dragging me again.

I could tell that we had come out from somewhere dark into somewhere light because the blackness of the hood turned just ever-so-slightly gold. It had to be daylight. They kept dragging-walking—I wasn't resisting—me for several hundred yards? And then the next thing that happened seemed surprisingly obvious given my lack of perception. They threw me in a car truck, shut the trunk—back to black—and then drove. I'm going to save you the details of the drive. There were a few things I experienced, but they are of, currently, no use to me. We crossed over railroad tracks twice. There was a siren and a train at two parts of the journey. By far, the strangest thing, was that when the men laid me in the trunk, I thought I heard one of them whisper, "Forgive us, King of Dreams."

I can't tell you how long the drive was; I can give you a range. It was between twenty minutes and an hour. There's just no way to tell. I tried to imagine my route to say, the University, and how I might be driving that way, the speeds and all. Speed was very difficult to detect. We maintained a fairly regular speed, which makes me think we were on back highways—the two-lane affairs. But, I really have no idea. I know that after we passed over a second set of railroad ties, we made a turn on to a road that was very unused. It wasn't a dirt road, but it wasn't smooth.

Then the trunk opened. Then I was hoisted out. Then the hood and the gag were removed and I was confronted with this scene: A man in a well-pressed, white, cotton, button-shirt shirt smiling at me. Behind him, there were acres of farmland that had gone in to disuse, fields of weeds. And off to the left of my periphery was an ante-bellum style plantation mansion, which, like the farmland, had fallen into disuse. The man, aside from his white shirt, had a goatee and short cropped hair. He looked healthy, young even. I was

still being held at the arms by my assailants, who still looked like versions of the courier—just like I did, I suppose. The man came forward and put his hands on my shoulders. “It’s good to have you here, Allen.” He paused. “Let’s get something out of the way, right away. Have a look at that house, and have a look at the rightmost upper window.”

The man who had me by the arms turned me so that I could see. I found the window he meant and in it could just make out two figures looking at me. Without even seeing all that much I could see it was Josie and Anna. Anna waved. I cried out. It wasn’t a word. It wasn’t a... imagining have a sigh of relief that empties your whole body. I went weak at the knees when all of the breath came out of me and the two men at my side were the only thing keeping me up, like pillars.

Then, the man I had first seen came between me and the window. “Now. First things first. We have to fix you up.” He took my right hand, now covered in blood. “I’m very sorry about that, but it was obviously necessary. We can’t have you coming to Hormirzad with a tracking chip, right?”

## 29. Meeting Ezra

Once I was “repaired” and had stitches and a bandage placed on my arm, Ezra came to me and granted me two things. He let me see Anna and Josie. I will not write in this nasty bit of tortured writing that’s causing my family’s imprisonment describing anything about that re-union. I won’t sully such a beautiful moment. I leave it as an exercise to the reader to imagine what would happen when your family was kidnapped and kept away from you for twelve days. What would you do? Would you become a maniac and kill everyone who was keeping them captive? Would you? The only violent people I have ever known, know violence in a way that I simply do not. They might fight only to endanger the ones they love because they will not calculate the odds. If anything, I concentrate on probability and I have three chances in that regard. I was only absolutely ecstatic to see them and hold them. But I will not tell you more; not here. Perhaps later.<sup>1</sup>

I was brought to a room in the house, a library of sorts. There was the man who called himself Ezra Enoch, sitting at a large desk.

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<sup>1</sup>I will say this, Josie told me, “They are in love with you; there must be some weapon there.”

And Josie was right. I had brought something with me, against all their commands. I had brought a watch—a pocket watch. I believed, at the time, that it was a great weapon against what I had barely begun to percieve as the threat against my family. I did not bring a gun. I did not bring a knife. I brought a pocket watch. Mock me if you will, but wait.

Reza has said many times that the desire for immortality in anything but the present moment can only yield a tear in the mind that seeks immortality in two infinite directions. The attempt to travel to both cannot be supressed, and as the mind travels over greater distances, it becomes entirely lost. Like Nager Ada, who spoke through the ages to commune with Reza, the loss of the mind in the dream relieves one of need for comfort or grounding in reality. Reality becomes worthless, the dream becomes more valued, and in the dream, the past and the future become null and void and desire takes over. What time it is matters less than what time do you want it to be? It is the desire that eats one from the inside, for if the desire succeeds, all hope in the present is lost forever. The mind slowly traps itself in a smaller and smaller space of time that is dictated then, only by desires. Desire makes years vanish even when we experience it linearly. The wraith comes then, the mind is corrupted, and reality becomes the nightmare because it is the harsh light of all the pain created by the desire in the dream.

He had people around him; people pouring wine for him, people guarding doors, people bringing me into the room. When I saw him, it was all I could say but, “Ezra.”

He leaned on his elbows on the desk, and said, “Do you really know who I am? I wonder. You seem so cut off from the Dream.”

Still in my courier clothes, I told him, “No. I am not so cut off as you think. I’ve brought you something.”

“We told you precisely what to bring! Why do you keep—”

But I shout, “You want this! You need this!” His guards edged toward me.

Ezra waved his guards off. “What is it?”

I stepped toward the desk and laid the artifact upon it. I lay it down with the clunk of heavy metal. It was the watch of Nager Ada. “Here,” I said, “It’s yours. I don’t want it.”

Ezra sat up. “This is the watch?”

I said, “We have both looked for it, and the truth is, I can’t be entirely sure. But, the evidence I’ve collected over the years tells me it is. It’s the right age, and if you’re like me, you’ll recognize it. The markings are correct for the time. The paint—it’s a dye from the early days of Darius the great and the beginnings of the city of Hormirzad. A batch of Indigo with coal was one of the few dyes that were known from that region at the time.”

Ezra picks up the watch. He scans it from every angle. He lets his fingers trace over every bevel. “This is shocking,” he says.

“It’s yours.”

“And it’s not another one of your spy devices?”

“I wouldn’t...”

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The watch. The watch was just a measuring tape; a way to figure out how deluded this cult leader was. (Admittedly, at the time I decided to bring the watch with me, I thought it would measure the delusion of Rausch, but still.) You know, if I watched him or her or it gush over the watch like Gollum and his Precious, I thought I might have a chance of convincing him of other things. How prepared was this nut job to face-off with a man who called himself Reza and then commanded him? Unfortunately, for me, Ezra was not such a malleable individual. He had built this cult of Reza and he wasn’t about to let it be wrested from him. His followers though? That I wondered more about.

Then he looks at me with heat in his eyes, "This may be true, and I *will* find out, but this does not get you out of anything."

"Yes, I know. That's not why I brought it."

"You're not with us though."

"I don't know who you are! Who is Rausch!?"

Ezra takes his legs off the desk at which he is sitting and says, "Oh." He stands and walks over to me. "Is that all you were concerned about?" He pauses, looks over the smooth emptiness of his desk. He takes his time. Then, he looks up at me, and says, "Now there are only two things you don't understand. Rausch is indeed one." He looks at me to see my reaction. I don't believe there is one. Ezra smiles. "Rausch is everywhere around you. Rausch is a welcome way to the place where we all want to go; and I am certain that you, Allen Worthington—or can I call you Reza?—I prefer that name. Who are you?"

I say, "I'm not Reza Bahadir. Reza Bahadir is not someone that you want to meet."

Ezra stands and walk around the desk and pulls out a .45 and pushes it into my face. "I'm very certain that you are wrong." He takes the gun out of my face. "I think you've blocked it somehow. I think you are the Nomad, and that you've been alive forever and I want to know the secret. If you aren't Reza then you knew him and you've carried on his work. Or... perhaps you knew Rausch before I came to know it."

I sit stiff in the chair I am in. I look at him, "I've indeed blocked it. It's best for everyone that it's blocked. You are using or... forcing forces you really do not understand."

"You're going to keep writing about it until I find out what I want. If you don't understand Reza, you don't understand what I want. And now that we have you in the comfort of our new city, I can tell you that the time limit is off. You're not going anywhere until I have what's in that head of yours."

"I think that if you don't understand Reza, then you don't understand what you want. You *do* remember the story of the Calathat?"

"A magical globe that grants wishes? Of course I know that story. A fable."

"A fable with a meaning. You have the watch of Nager Ada. I've given it to you. It's the only place to start. You have to sleep to accomplish any of what you are looking for. I can't fight you; just sleep. Uh... look at the watch, change it to what you want. It could be this whole house. Any room could be where you want to go. It's all here... here in Hormirzad."

"Even when you utter the name, I can see your lack of faith; of vision. No, my world is precisely where I want it to be. I have the watch of Nager Ada. I am Rausch. And now, I have Reza Bahadir. All the pieces are falling into place. I even have a secret weapon."

"You don't have to threaten my wife and—"

"You see? You lack vision. Your wife and child are not my secret weapon—that wouldn't be a secret would it?"

"Even if I tell you what you want; you won't like it. It's information that won't further what you're attempting to do here."

"And what do you think I'm attempting to do here?"

"You're trying to rebuild Bandar Abbas—the mystical one—the dream palace."

"See. You don't know. I've got a grander idea." Ezra paces behind his desk. "I've got a vision even more grand than anything that..." he lowers his hand and points at me, "even the great Reza Bahadir ever realized."

"I just don't understand why; or at least I don't understand your methods."

"What needs to be understood. Bandar Abbas—Hormirzad—was the center of dreaming in the world. Nager Ada had followers—many of them. Hormirzad had an incredible concentration of dreams, because that was where after language, and after agriculture, and after the creation of the very idea of culture began, after Darius, and after Alexander, that was where the truth of the lucid world was realized."

"If that's true, then I need something from you. I need a way to commune with Reza. He's not here right now. He hasn't been with

me for a long time. So I need something..."

"You've communed with Reza." Ezra reaches into a drawer in his desk and pulls out a stack of printed paper. "I've read everything you've written and everything that others have written and I've even read better translations than yours—mine."

"Pursuing Reza is dangerous. I found that out for myself. So, if you need me to give you want you want, I need something that you have. You've explored the legends, possibly, even more than I have. So give me something so that I can commune with Reza again."

"Oh, I'll do that and more."

Next: [Waking Rebecca](#)

## 30. Waking Rebecca

His guards pick me roughly up from my seat and lead me behind him to another part of the house downstairs; two floors to a basement. There is a room of beds laid out like a hospital with twelve people sleeping while being fed some sort of drug from IVs. I speak up, “What is this?”

Ezra looks at me and says, “These are those seeking you—well, your better half. Look at their faces. Don’t you recognize any of them? Haven’t you seen them in any of your panicked nightmares these last dozen days? They are well-trained. For months now, when they were not dreaming, they were at and near your house. They found you to begin with; only you will not speak to them in your dreams. As long as you have insisted in being Allen Worthington, they have been asleep and looking for you, or wherever Reza has tucked himself away in that mind of yours. They are seeking Reza Bahadir—any traces of him that they can find. When we wake them, they write.”

He leans over and picks up a journal off of one of the decrepit nightstands. He flips through it and stops,

The hallways are disjointed and seems to run on forever. There is no access to the outside. The hallways, even when they have doors, only open on classrooms with no windows and no one in them. I look for Reza but can only see other dreamers.

He looks up.

I stare.

“Do you doubt?”

“I don’t... I don’t think that’s...”

Ezra continues to read:

When I do find Reza, I try to show him my journal. I tell him that everything is there; every place I have searched; every idea about him that I've had. He scoffs at me. He only ever leads me away from the book. He makes me read it and the nonsense on the page and his laughter wakes me up."

The hair on my arms stands on end. Did I write that dream in the book. I couldn't remember. Suddenly my weariness, the lack of sleep, washes over me. I realize that I've been running on adrenaline since this morning. I stammer, "Y-y-you could have made that... you could've written it."

"You're right. Let's do this instead. Charles," Ezra turns to one of the men in the room overseeing the sleeping—comatose—individuals, "let's wake Rebecca up."

As the man Charles begins to fuss with Rebecca's IV, Ezra walks to another part of the room and drags a wooden chair loudly across the concrete floor. Ezra turns to me and smiles, "Don't worry. They won't wake up." He leaves the chair next to Rebecca's bed. "Come here. Sit."

I instinctively can't move. My handlers practically pick me up by my arms and push me to the chair and sit me in it forcefully.

Ezra gestures to Charles for something and is handed a small vial. From the opposite side of the bed, Ezra passes the vial under Rebecca's nose. "Come closer," he says to me and my handlers lean me in over the bed, close to Rebecca's face.

As Rebecca's eyes open she rolls her head back and forth on the pillow. She seems to make out Ezra's face first and stops to linger on him and a groggy smile twists across her face. Then, she rolls her head again, looking at the ceiling and then to me. Her eyes open wide and dilate. "No," she says. "No." She looks around the room more forcibly, trying and failing to push herself up from the bed, "Am I back? Am I back? How is he here? Have I been lost! Please! Please! Wake me up! Wake me up! Please wake me up!"

Ezra leans over on her and pushes her weak shoulders down

easily as she breaks into tears, mumbling “Am I awake?”

He says, “You’re awake. You’re not awake. It doesn’t matter, Rebecca. You’ve done it. You’ve found him. Look at him. There he is. And he wants to tell you something, Rebecca. Look at him.”

She looks at me with eyes wide and wet, desperate to hear something. I need to say something to calm her. I try to recognize her, but I don’t. Regardless, I say, softly, “It’s me, Rebecca.” I cast a glance at Ezra who is trained on her. “It’s Reza, Rebecca, and you’re safe.”

She goes from a panicked, tearful stint into a more quiet sobbing, still clearly confused.



Section Break

We return to my room, at the top of the house. My handlers let me sit myself on the bed. Ezra had gone off to fetch something else. I sit and stare at the walls, thinking about that poor girl’s face. Without thinking about it, I ask the guards, “Did they ever do that to my wife or daughter?”

One of the guards coldly considers me and after a long moment shakes his head.

“Okay!” says Ezra, bursting through the bedroom door. “Now on to step two.” He’s carrying a tea tray with a coffee mug on it.

I can’t help myself, I start to stand, but one of the guards make to stiff-arm me. Still I shout, “I’m awake! There’s nothing to look for! I am not Reza! Even if I was Reza, I am not asleep. When I am asleep, I’m not Reza! You’re just torturing those people down there.”

“Calm down, Allen. For one, I don’t intend to do that to you. There would be no purpose in it; you’ve not yet convinced me that you are willing to search. But I believe I have other methods—other methods that Reza Bahadir talked about.”

Ezra continues, “You see, Allen, what you think is that you are not Reza. I am not terribly interested in what you think. I am

interested in what you dream. But I am willing to do two things. One, to put you into a waking sleep, and two, to give you what these explorers have written. I think that will be enough for you to continue and finish what I've started—what we've started—what Rausch started."

"You're going to drink this." He points to the coffee mug.

I respond, "You have me. You have my family. I'll give you what you want, but you must know, you misunderstand Reza's theories. What comes next, you cannot expect. This immortality that you seek; it is not what Reza sought. He wanted immortality in the *moment* and what he found was immortality in Limbo and he didn't want it and I'm telling you, you do not want it. You do want it!"

"I DO WANT IT! I made a church for him! I re-built a temple for him! I brought his greatest disciple to his knees and I want what Reza knows and I will have it!"

I sigh, hang my head. "Fine. Give it to me. I give up."

## 31. The House of Doubt

I drink the awful concoction that Ezra has forced on me and wait for its effects to begin. I can only guess at what I'm consuming. But before Ezra has satisfied himself that I have drank his poison and begins to leave, I say, "You don't know enough about myth or history to know what you're doing here."

"How's that? Enlighten me."

"The man who forces another man to drink the poison is never the man who becomes immortal." I smile.

He scoffs. "We'll see."

It's ten, fifteen, twenty minutes(?) or so before I become nauseous. There's a wastepaper can by the desk and I dry-heave in that. It's, again, I don't know how many more minutes before I stop dry heaving and the blood pressure in my head returns normal and I wonder if I can lift my head away from the can. But I keep staring into and the formations of paper in the bottom of it. It crosses my mind that the trash can is just a receptacle and that a receptacle is just one thing that can hold another thing. I pick the trash can up and, still staring into its ever-growing depth and darkness, I sit back on my butt and then push/scoot myself backwards until I'm leaning against the wall, the trash can perched between my knees. The paper in the bottom is bothering me. It is crumpled. The edges of the paper have more edges and those edges have edges, like a fractal. Then I can see that the trash can is not dark at all but all varying shades of dark and that the paper and its edges are varying shades of dark, and that the edges on the edges all vary, and that the edges of those edges vary, until the very idea of paper has left my mind entirely and all I can see are vibrating triangles of dark colors and contrasting tiny triangles of shadows working their way into and out of one another. The boundaries to all the crumpled pieces of paper emerge as one piece of paper and none of it crumpled at all, but just varying physical facets of some idea of paper. It was not

paper at all that I was seeing and I could no longer resist the urge to reach down into the can—far down into the can—to just gingerly touch the edge of the object in the bottom of the can. It is coarse; far more so than its colors belie. I giggle (audibly or not I don't know). I grab one of these flowers—these Chrysanthemums—of brightly lit triangles and gingerly remove it from the can only to receive an incredible shock.

Once removed from the can, the flower I had gently plucked becomes rock hard and coarse again in the harsh, bright light of the rest of the room. The shadows of the can had made my eyes dilate; I'd jammed my head into the can, and when I look at the paper, I have to drop it and cover my eyes. I stay with my eyes closed for a long time and watch red paramecium swim about on the surface of my eyelids. I mumble, "Just checking my eyelids for leaks..." My eyes open slowly and they only open from a spotted darkness, not dreams. The room is a void. At one and the same time, it is filled with items, but all the items are just a piece of one item, all twisted and attached. I let out a long breath trying to calm myself. It only lasts a moment as I hear someone outside my door say, "Do you know the answer if anyone hears it?" I think I mumble, "Oh God," but it comes out of my mouth as, "Saya gouda." I think it does. I try to convince myself that I'm not hearing anyone at all. I stare up at the ceiling. It is breathing. It is swelling. Light is coming into the room. It is either dawn or dusk or the lights are on; I do not know because suddenly all I can see is the ceiling and while it is not lit, it is bright. I try to breathe with the ceiling. I try to catch my breath. I hadn't realized I was out of breath. I breath deep again. The ceiling is... is not breathing, but interacting patterns. The squares in the tile in the ceiling are spinning into one another, their corners making new shapes, triangles breathing pentagons breathing dodecagons, and they are all sparkling. I shut my eyes for a moment. Without thinking about it at all, I profess, "There is nothing in the middle time!"

And then the voice outside the door says, "Before the tendrils, where were all the minds piled?"

“Nope.” I say out loud. This time I’m sure I speak out loud (or unusually loud) because my voice comes back at me from the space with a vengeance. I moan. I put the trash can down. I crawl away from the desk. The voice outside the room says something but I can’t make it out. I’m too busy concentrating on getting to my hands and knees. “Nope,” I say again, with the room chiming in with a merry chorus of reverb. I’m on my hands and knees and see that the floorboards look like a toy from my childhood: my magic color disc. The little plastic disc would be some swirl of colors, and then you could press the back of it and the colors would bend and spread and swirl out in tendrils, and the floor was just like that underneath me with all the beautiful colors of white and yellow and beige and red in the cherry wood. I push down on the floor and the grains of the wood shove out from underneath my hand making ripples and waves and swirls. I look down under my stomach to my knees and they are very far away. The colors are also upside down and clinging to the floor, which is the ceiling now, I realize. I push my knees into the wood and again the wood grain flows around the pressure in curves, now even more vivid than before, like dropping food coloring in water.

The voices outside the room say, “Soup cans are hell on your ears.”

Another voice replies, “You got that right.”

I turn my head right side up again, but now the whole room is upside down and so I try to get down on my stomach. It feels like I’ll stick better that way. I am sticking, I realize. *I am definitely sticking to the ceiling*, I think with confidence. *I’m in good shape. I’m definitely sticking*. I begin seal-crawling over to the bed, which is also now inexplicably stuck to the ceiling, and as I do I realize that the bed has a large gap underneath it. *Genius! Right now! If I crawl into the gap, I’ll be safer on the ceiling since if I fall off the ceiling, the bottom of the bed will catch me, no problem.*

It’s dark underneath the bed, which is welcome considering the twilight, and there is a humming coming from the far corner. Even so, it is quiet between the bed and the ceiling and also the ceiling is

moving much less now that I am in the shadows. I test the theory by saying, “Nope,” and sure enough, this time, the room doesn’t yell back at me. “Thanks, room,” I say, trying to fool the room, but the room isn’t fooled and still doesn’t yell back. I sigh, given the quiet and then think to myself, *I should’ve brought one of the books down here with me.* That thought is quickly followed by, *I can’t get back down to the desk right now, so it doesn’t matter. I’ll have to think without the books.* I zone out for a moment, trying to have a thought, but none will come to me because the humming in the corner of the bed is getting louder. I listen to it. It’s air. It’s air that has music in it. It’s a ventilation shaft and there’s music coming from another room, just barely audible over the sound of the air. I still myself further and shut my eyes and listen to the noise coming from the vent. It’s strings. It’s stringed-instruments and someone is talking-singing with them. I listen more. They’re singing-speaking—like a Gregorian chant: “What was before the tendrils that watch the minds?”

*Trees* I think and then listen more.

Again, the chant is too low to hear for a moment until it rises above the strings in a reverse whirlpool of sound that chants, “The sound of the tree’s fall in dominum ae us.” It’s Latin. I don’t Latin. *Trees don’t make sound. There is always evidence of sound for later information.*

These were all things that Reza said. I try to picture Reza saying it, but it’s just me, but it’s not me. Then, I see Rebecca’s face in the dark and I can see that Rebecca’s face is many faces. Her face is her face until I remember it differently and then it is my friend Marnie’s face and then it is a famous starlet’s face, and then it is Rebecca’s face again, only now I can see all the faces at once. It was Rebecca in the dream, but I did not know Rebecca then. I am sure of it.

I realize I’ve forgotten about the chant! I concentrate but it’s gone away now. There is only the sound of air traveling through the shafts, rising in pitch until I can hear the strings again. Then the chanting one more time, “Resus but nothing occurs without witness.”

*What are these idiots singing about?* I think to myself. I look out from under the bed and realize that I am under the bed. I'm not *above* the bed, I'm *under* the bed. This revelation occurs to me with the joyous excitement of discovering some new theory of gravity.<sup>1</sup> I feel a sudden purpose: to see if I can stand again. I drag myself out from under the bed and stand up. It is tough but I manage to do it without concerning myself too much with the way that the wood floors are allowing my feet to sink into them a little more than I am comfortable with. I simply decide not to look at my feet. And then, I think, *I must look at my feet.* I always look at my feet. So I do so, and the longer I stare at them and the way the wood grain is stretching around them like a trampoline, the further they get from me. A *second test.* *I need a second test.* I look around the room and sitting on the desk, I see the dreamer's journals. I practically fall over trying to reach them from across the room, catching myself on the corner of the bed. I tread more carefully, unfortunately looking at my feet as I do. The expanse between me and my feet gives me vertigo and I fall to my knees with a loud thump, the heavy noise betraying the rubber nature of the floor. There is a loud bang outside the room, and shouting. I shuffle on my knees to the desk and grab one of the journals in my right hand. As I do, I knock a receptacle on to the floor and it bounces near my knees. In a moment of rage against this twisted world where a thing is disconnected to the everything it is, I pick it up, squeeze it and feel porcelain and throw it as hard as I can against a wall. It shatters, surprisingly. I lose myself for a moment in the noise; I revere in it. The thing, it is broken. It is many. I am entropy. I am entropy! I look to the ceiling and see the many shapes that make and I will them to break apart and they do. They fall apart into the ceiling. I turn to the book in my right hand. I open it. I scan one page after another looking for words but it's all gibberish. It's worse than gibberish; the words on the page are barely that, just series of swirling squiggles.

A loud bang comes from outside the bedroom door and some-

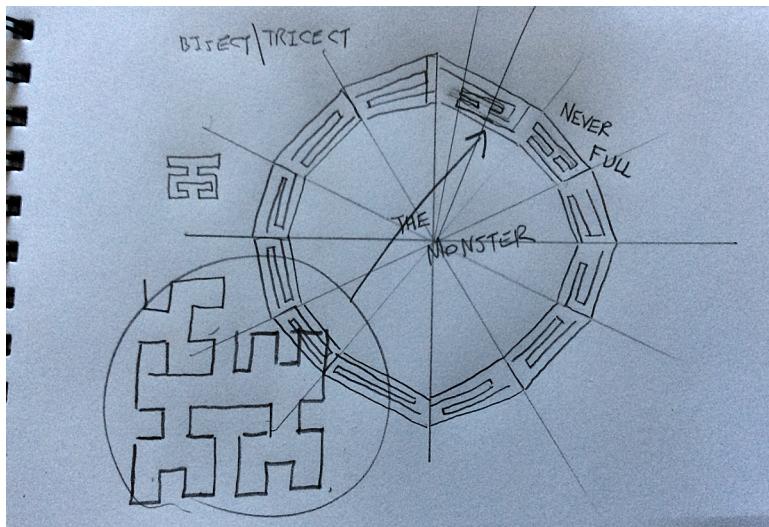
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<sup>1</sup>Which, when you think about it, I did shift from a pretty poor theory to a better one.

one shouts, "Actuaries!"

Without so much of a thought I slam my hand into the top half of the journals on the desk out into the air and laugh out loud as I watch them bend and fly around the air currents in the room that right now I can see as a distinct blue. I shout, "Writing is for naught!" The journals fall to the floor at the sound of my voice. So, I repeat it, "Writing is all for naught." And I laugh this time when the room shouts back.

I put it out of my mind and turn to the book again and this time turn to a page that has a drawing like this:



An image of a maze that resembles my dream

And I see it now. The dreamers. The classrooms. It was all beneath. They went in paths and did not go down, did not look at their feet.

Something grabs my shoulder and I turn in shock and fear. I put my hands up.

A face I know; my own face but not my face. I am peering over myself and saying, "The dreamers?"

I say to myself, staring up at myself. “The dreamers must awaken.”

I am picking myself up off the ground saying, “Ok, ok. We’ve got to get down there.”

I let myself put my arm around my own shoulder and I walk, while decidedly not looking at my feet, and try to trudge along, baring some of my weight on my other self. It is a younger self; my muscles are more... powerful and thicker some time ago. My younger self asks me, “What will happen when you wake them?”

“They will be wraiths. They will be lost.”

For moments, I am just dragging myself down a spiraling hallway, falling down hard stairs as loud sounds and a crying out echoes around me—more shouts of “Free the actuaries!” But I could barely hear the cries for I simply was not was, clearly split between the me-now and the me-slightly-ahead. My mind goes for a moment to Reza speaking to me, a long time ago about the was that is not. I asked him, “What was before the tendrils that watch the minds?”

I wake up in another deep breath. It is Reza, not me, carrying me down the hallway, down the stairs, around bends. There are people all about, scurrying. Reza says, “What?”

“Of course,” I say, “My face is your face. Rebecca’s face is Marnie’s face is... is what’s her name?”

Reza-of-just-ahead asks, “Who?”

“The actress.”

Reza, calm, seated, bearded, looks at me and smiles from a long time ago. “If a tree falls in a forest does anyone hear it? Do you know the answer?”

The Reza-of-just-ahead says, “What are you talking about, Reza? Tell me.”

“The faces are all the same. The faces are the faces that you need to understand. The face in the fear, the face in the knowledge, the face in the calm. I only know that the tree falls... I only know the tree falls, because I can find it later, fallen.”

“I’ll bite. You can find the tree. Did it make a sound?”

“No. Information. The faces, the tree, they are all gone; only information remains. Information is the cause.”

The Reza that is carrying me, the Reza-just-ahead says something I cannot understand.

“Without evidence of my senses I cannot know. Knowing without being is the dream. It’s the replay, always.”

Reza-just-ahead has brought me back to the chamber of the sleepers. By each one of their bedsides I see their empty and shadowy apparitions—their wraiths—their wretched, lost souls. Their knowing is trapped in a place of knowing without being and their being is trapped in a place of being without knowing. I begin to cry. Poor shadows...

I shout at the wraiths, “Be, wraiths! Cut down those who have cut you from your tendril! I am Reza Bahadir!—they have cut you from your silver tendril! Steal from them what they have stolen from you!”

The Reza-who-carries-me screams in anguish and we both drop to our knees. The wraiths have heard *my* command—the-Reza-Now—and like screaming, clawed, disembodied, shredded torture they attack, swirling like smoke around those who are not the sleepers. There is screaming all around me. I crawl on the floor, thankful for the concrete that supports me and doesn’t threaten to swallow me and make my way to each sleeper. In my hand, I find a sharp piece of a broken coffee mug—I am bleeding too—and with it I shred the silver cord of the sleepers trapped in a nightmare.

*All I ask is what exists in the middle time? It fell, you did not hear it; later, you found it fallen. Only then, did you know, yes?*

I free all the sleepers. I crawl from bed to bed and even as I do, they grow more angry. The catastrophe of noise rises to a chorus of screams. I realize that the wraiths have not only obeyed me, but have attacked me as well. They swirl around me with howls like banshees. The whole left side of my body burns. I crawl to a set of stairs and try to make my way away. The wraiths have become so enraged that they are simply filling the whole of Horimizad up with their foul stench and anger. I go one stair at a time, but the staircase

is long; so long.

*Nothing before the knowing has ever existed. The knowing without being is a nothing; one you will arrive at.*

Then, I feel like I can't breathe and I myself, like the sleeper-wraiths fall into a dream.

A calm voice says, "Although it is decided, nothing occurs without witness," and I am inside of a staircase that cannot end. Reza-of-long-ago whispers, "There is always the invisible progress. That is not why this Universe exists."

Ezra sits on the stair in front of me—the one I don't have enough coordination to reach. I cannot reach the next stair. My arm simply will not obey me. I suck in another deep breath and try to move my body. It is like a car is on the embankment, and no amount of thrust or anger or rage or effort will move it. I try them all. Ezra says through cruel teeth, "The waking dream is upon you, too." I try to thank him for his arrogance. I can't speak. My tongue won't even move. What he has released is so foolish, and all in the name of an immortality desired by simple children of the mind. He's no idea the power he's released in the wraiths. They will not stop. They are everywhere. I look around the staircase and not only does it go up forever, it is barely wide enough to support me. On either side of me is a void far darker than the black that the wraiths wear.

I try to move up the staircase but again my body is totally failing me. I cannot move one step. I lie down, uncomfortably, across the steps. The wraiths come close to me; swishing past me in paths with angry and saliva-drenched hisses. I look for my feet. They are not there. I am hanging on to the staircase with desperation. I know that I am hanging on to the staircase. There is nothing beneath my vision that I am looking from. Nothing. No stairs. No me. But I am hanging on to something. I am hanging on to the last pedestal.

Hanging. I have hung on to so many things. Trees. I hang on trees. I have always hung on trees. I see trees from my childhood; round sturdy oaks and I swing from the limbs. Then there is a

staircase of tree branches in a deciduous forest— rhododendrons—and I know I am near the top of the hill. Rhododendrons near a waterfall that I can hear. I can here the song. I know it is the end of the climb. There is water and mist and cool air and a rush of noise in the distance. In those trees I can see a thousand leaves overlapping one another, the sun shining through each. Where each leaf overlaps one another, there are another thousand leaves. Within each leaf is a set of another one thousand leaves, and within each one of them are another thousand leaves. I try to see one leaf, but all I can see are the leaves inside the leaves and between them, blinding light. I begin to draw into the thousandth of the child of the thousandth leaf when I hear Josie's voice: "I know we're not on the right trail, but this is all they have given me, Allen, a pen and paper." Her sentence echoes over and over in my mind. And it's harder and harder to get away from because of the way the trees are setting off red lights. There are constant flashes of red lights and no matter where I look I can't find Josie and the yellow light of the sun bends to red. I have gone off the trail, and I lost her. I keep trying to look but everywhere the rhododendron is confused by these stupid flashing red lights.

"This is all they have given me: a pen and paper." I distract myself from the dawn of light itself and it's one thousand fractals of the leaf in order to look at my desk. There is the typewriter? There is a stack of papers. There is a stack of papers on my desk and I am not at all sure if they are mine. Are they Mine? Are they Reza's? I stumble-step towards the desk needing to know what is this stack of papers.

I feel an arm across my shoulders. It is different from Reza's. It is not a young, muscular Reza-ahead-of me. It's tender. I know it. It's Josie.

## 32. The House of Reason

I open my eyes and I see Josie. My mouth rips down at the edges and I cry. Her face is just exactly as I had been dreaming and her face is like... It's Josie and it doesn't matter what it's like. I'm done writing. I don't cry, scratch that. I sob. I put my head into her chest and sob. I can hear her say, "I know, I know." I look up and I try to reach up to hold her face but my arms won't work. I shudder instead. "It's okay," she says. "I'm here." She has no idea what it means—what *here* means. Am I really out? There are lights all around, pulsing, flashing blue and red lights and it's dark in a forest. I'm not really sure the nightmare is over. But, she runs her hand across my head and I do know that it's over. That touch is real. I put my head into her shoulder once more and then I am desperate to know, "Anna!" Josie pushes me upright and points and there is my blessed little girl. I reach out to grab her but again I can't function. I try anyway out of desperation and I just collapse on the ground. "Allen!" shouts Josie.

I am lying on the ground, still awake, looking up at branches that contrast the dusk, a warm blanket wrapped around me, and in the confusing shock of ambulance lights I see Josie and Anna standing over me. "Daddy!" shouts Anna. "Come here, baby girl." Anna gets on her knees and wraps her tiny arms around my neck and God does not know how good that feels. Josie holds my hand and I cry some more. "My little girl," I say, and I also squeeze Josie's hand hard. "Thank God. Thank God," is all I can say. "Oh, thank God."

I come out of it in pieces; the drug. Brought up from the ground, I am seated on the bumper of the ambulance with Josie and Anna at my side, blanket wrapped around all of us. Everything from being on the ground that I can remember is just a blur of smiles and holds and

relief. But, eventually, I look up from that happy gaussian nothing—that dream in real life—and there is Samantha Cobb in her suit and trench coat. I relent, step away from the bliss, engage reality. “Detective,” I say.

“Allen.”

“What happened?”

“Horimizad,” she says and shrugs.

“You found us.”

“Thanks to you and those letters.”

“Thank you, Samantha.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Ezra?”

“I don’t know, but you don’t have to worry about these people anymore. We’ll talk later.”

## 33. Epilogue

I'm looking out my office window at a tree that has buds; I think it's a Dogwood. It's good to be here, in March. It's good to be back teaching my English classes, although these days when a student asks me "what's the point?" I have a hard time parsing my answer. What's the point. What's the point in writing anything? It will all definitely rot. It will all succumb to entropy. In that there is no point. And the very real idea that it can create a cancer like the cult that kidnapped my wife and child; what is there to say about that? So, what is the point?

I have neither answered that question, nor have I stopped writing.

I do know that Reza Bahadir, whoever he was or is, was right: Witness is necessary. Dreams are our minds at work on problems and in that they are simulations. But then, I think too, that the whole of our Universe and the many Universes that surround us are also simulations. It bothers me that what is "right" in our life can be different in our dreams. It signifies to me that we are not one. I think we are many. I think we are connected consciousness in a lab. But, that's for me. Dream freely, and decide for yourself.

Samantha Cobb had a lot of questions—still has a lot of questions—and I answered them all as honestly as... no. I answered them honestly. I told her everything that I saw. That doesn't mean that I know what happened. Truth is a thing like an asymptote. You can get ever closer but you can never get there. Truth—with a capital T—is everyone's and therefore no one's. I know what happened to me. I know what I saw. And I know what condition I witnessed it in, but I don't know how it could've been. I hesitate to even write the word wraith—I hesitate now. I didn't before because that is what I saw. I saw shadows attack men and tear them apart. I saw sleepers desperate to awaken and I saw them take vengeance on the ones who had forced them to sleep when they wanted to awaken. I know

what happened to Paul. And I still think about that. I think a lot about that. With the sounds of Josie and Anna in the other room laughing, I am both thinking about him and them. I am grateful and horrified to know what capabilities I have.

Samantha Cobb debriefed me, although that is a kind way to put it. She was sure that the whole of the cult was mine; that I created the menace. I don't entirely disagree with her. It was John Shaffer who wrote to me those many years. He had come across my early work because a friend of mine, who shall remain nameless, liked the writings of Reza Bahadir and photocopied them and left them around in coffee houses as some kind of performance art. They were copied and changed, as things are want to do. They were re-written. Many of my original intentions were distorted and turned into theory. Agent Cobb showed me many of the publications. A lot of them were inscrutable to me. In all of them I saw some sense of the original story, but then, many of them made references to things I had never thought. Horimirzad. If I knew that word, ever, then it is lost on me. Maybe that is because I am not who I am, but who I have been.

Rebecca's face, when she woke up, that still haunts me.

And sometimes, in the middle of the night, when I am dreaming, I am in the hallway that does not end, but I do finally see a window. It's the window in the bedroom where I sleep (for now) and I wake up or I am already awake and I look at the window and there is a beam of pure moonlight shining through it and something... some pale arm passes through it—moves to the shadows.

I'm asleep or I'm not, but that shadow will not leave me. I wonder if it will leave me in a prison cell. I think it won't. I think it will always be there. Tomorrow I will tell Samantha Cobb where the body of Paul Nolan is. I know what will happen next and it will be... it will not be that terrifying staircase with the void on either side.