

THE NINTH BERTH

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20260208

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TRACTATE 1: NIGHT

22:04 – 23:06

You can get there if you find a driver willing to take you from the strip they call an airport. Or you can walk for an hour along a dead-straight road lined with rye and potato fields, like those poor souls I saw from the backseat dragging their bags into the night. The road was narrow and potholed. When vehicles passed us, the woman driving muttered words I didn't decipher. Her car was clunky and built in another era. Its single wiper dispersed the rainwater with a squealing sound and paused three seconds at every stop. Colder raindrops hit my right cheek and shoulder, as the nauseous gas smell inside forced us to slide the windows open—probably also kept us from carbon monoxide.

We made it to Skhodresk, a town in one of those countries no one can place on a map. We drove through streets lined with lifeless red-brick houses and after a roundabout with a statue of a hatted horseman we reached a parking lot and stopped.

Train station, yes? You go, she said. It sounded like she'd learned the words phonetically. I got out and looked around.

Nothing here resembled a train station. Just sparse lampposts and their meaningless light. The gravel lot extended on one side to the wall of a brutalist edifice, like a post office or administration. On the opposite

end was a dimly lit convenience store. Couldn't tell if it was open. Facing me, between the store and building, stood a wall of raw grey bricks with tasteless graffiti. Parallel to the wall, a narrow path cut across a patch of dead grass littered with food wrappers and rusted cans. It led farther on the left to a low makeshift building.

You sure this is the station? I asked.

Yes. Train there, she said with a shooing motion. You go. Goodbye.

She shut the window and drove off. I'd already paid her. That left me with an hour to find the station and the train.

I set out to the small building. The walkway was made of concrete squares laid out randomly. Some were missing, some were submerged in gray-green puddles, and none was aligned. I followed the path with my duffel bag in one hand when a shape appeared across the facade, a human figure through the sodium lamps. The man wheeled a suitcase, unbothered by the rain. We reached the building's canopy at the same time.

Good eve-a-ning, the man said.

Chinese, maybe, mid-fifties, average height. Black suit pants and jacket, the build of a man who sat too much. Rimless glasses covered in raindrops. Messy black hair, freshly shaved. A smirk at one side of his mouth betrayed an air of gravity. A scar ran along his right cheek.

Hi, I said.

Do you have the time?

I raised my wrist to check. It's ten past ten.

Ten ten? He looked like I'd announced a good news.

Yeah, what about it?

Nothing, a Japanese thing. My name is Kagami, nice to meet you.

Sure. I'm Miles. You here for the train?

Of course. The train.

So this is the station?

Yes. Over there is the train. He glanced behind him.

I followed his gaze. A somber metal frame stood beyond tangled trees and bushes like a pathway hovering in the air.

You walk there, he said, gesturing toward the structure.

Thank you, I'll head that way then, I said, hoisting my bag. He went the opposite way.

I pushed through the bushes and found the Skhodresk station: two platforms with two tracks adjacent to each. The metal walkway stretched above the tracks but had no stairs, like a bridge connecting two invisible towers. On my right, the second track disappeared under a dark emerald locomotive and its same-colored cars, each marked with a yellow stripe and a faded railway logo. I checked my ticket: car 3, berth 8. I stepped onto the platform. Orange lamps flickered over the concrete as if scanning the area.

Shapes resolved through the mist: passengers boarding, others smoking, a few walking aimless. Car six. I kept walking. A man was peeing on the empty track across the platform. I reach the carriage door, number three painted above. Four people there: a woman with a violin case and an elderly couple talking to someone small. Not a child but a man, a short man in an oversized navy-blue uniform. When he saw me he raised the palm of his hand.

The line, sir! The line! Do not reverse the order! he shouted.

It sounded like a matter of life or death. I didn't answer and walked behind the woman.

She was young, between twenty-five and thirty. Slim, almost gaunt. She wore a beige trench coat and tight black jeans that weren't really jeans, I think they're called chinos. Her brown hair was just past the shoulders and tied back with a crimson band. Her face was delicate and cold except for a small round mouth. Little make-up, if any. I didn't see her eyes up close but they looked dark, not just in color. She looked as if she didn't

smile easily.

The short uniformed man let the couple aboard. She stepped forward and handed over her ticket. She let his greeting unanswered. He glanced at her ticket and said something inaudible and then she climbed aboard, the violin in one hand and a small leather travel bag in the other. She vanished into the corridor.

Cricket ticket, please sir! he yapped at me.

I unfolded the paper and showed it. The man was barely 4'7". Asymmetrical lips jutted beneath a black moustache too thin for his face. When those pale eyes locked onto you he wasn't looking anywhere else. His sharp cheekbones tightened the stare but his misaligned eyebrows made it hard to take him seriously. He wasn't bald but nearly. There was a gold name tag with black lettering on his chest: Wiktor Czerny.

He waved the ticket above his head like he expected it to hatch something and he stared at me.

Sir, what's your favorite color?

It didn't compute. I must have frowned.

Favorite color, he repeated, dearest hue?

Uh, why?

Security reasons.

I'm sorry? Whatever, blue. He must have been drinking, not uncommon here.

Color tells direction, he said, still not looking at my ticket. Color tells truth.

He stamped the ticket and handed it back. His English was fine but he rolled the R's like a Scotsman.

You have what you have, he said. Go ahead.

He motioned me through and I walked past him and towards the carriage door.

I climbed rusted stairs and stepped onto dusty burgundy carpet. Over-

head lamps reflected against walls yellowed by smoke and time. I entered the corridor. The floor was that soulless pale-green linoleum you see in hospitals. On the right, old wooden window trim clashed with modern compartments on the left and their clinic-gray plastic. Each door had numbers in minimalist black frames. 1 2 3 4 read the first one. I heard voices from inside and walked past it and to the next: 5 6 7 8 9.

My free hand slid the door open and I entered a square compartment with two berths stacked on each side. The bedframes were of sleek composite material, the bedside walls paneled in faux walnut wood that drank the lamplight. The large uncurtained window looked out onto the brush I'd passed earlier. The black violin case rested on the upper berth to my left. She was sat against the opposite wall.

The air inside felt stale and alkaline. I left the door open. Berth numbers were stamped onto the white bed frames. Number 8 was on the top right. I climbed up and tossed my jacket at the foot of the bed. I settled in and pulled out Lord Jim, a book I'd already read, a seaman's redemption story. It felt appropriate. I started reading, the compartment soundless save for the rain pattering on the window glass.

Twenty minutes before departure a man stepped into the compartment. He carried a worn-out caramel suitcase that looked heavy. At least sixty, maybe closer to seventy, slightly overweight. His messy eyebrows loomed over small non-trivial eyes. He had the premeditated smile that wise men wear whatever the circumstances. His skin was pale yet almost Mediterranean, with olive undertones, and under smooth lips a silvery beard fell to his chest with straight strands like brushed silk.

He scanned the room and saw us.

Good evening, how are you?

Hi, good and you? I replied.

I'm very well thank you. It's a beautiful night, a beautiful train, don't you think?

I didn't pin down his accent. It had oriental intonations but the vowels bent European.

The woman didn't react.

The man shrugged off a grey wool coat and revealed a stocky frame squeezed in a beige corduroy jacket too tight at the chest. His right wrist bore a bracelet made of dark wooden beads and his right hand a golden ring. His left hand wore nothing, as there was no left hand, just his forearm holding the sleeve.

He turned over himself a few times in the narrow space then found a hook to hang his jacket and placed his suitcase on the berth below mine. When he stopped moving things in and out of it, the compartment fell quiet again.

I checked my watch: three minutes to departure. Three of us in that box of a room. I let myself relax. But voices resonated in the corridor. A door opened and closed, luggage bumping into the walls.

Then he appeared in our doorway.

Sorry, is number five here?

It was the Japanese man, Kagami, carrying his case and a brown paper shopping bag.

A voice answered below me.

Yes my friend... number five? This one here. He gestured at the empty berth opposite his.

Kagami saw me and nodded without a smile and I waved back. In less time than it took me to climb onto my berth he had arranged his space with pillow, thermos bottle, snacks, a book slid in the interstice between the mattress and frame. He'd fixed his hair and wipe his glasses,. With his white polo this gave him a different air.

It all seemed out of place. The pristine compartment in this antiquated carriage. These dissonant companions. This would be a memorable journey.

TRACTATE 2: NAMES

23:07 – 00:04

The rails clattered as the woman browsed a thick yellow book titled Algebraic Topology, pencil in hand, earbuds in. The man beneath me had opened his suitcase on his bed and rummaged as if searching for some vital ingredient. The Japanese tapped his phone and sipped from his thermos every two minutes, until he turned to us, phone in his hand.

Excuse me, he said to no one in particular. Do you know how to get a connection?

The one-hand man snorted, still bent over his luggage. Why do you need that?

You won't catch a cell signal out here, I said. Wait till the next town.

Ah... thank you, he said, glancing up at me. He reached into his crumpled paper bag and lifted a cupcake that he unwrapped with as much care for the paper as for the cake.

Minutes passed and we reached a steady, sluggish pace. I closed my eyes and dozed off but awoke when the door opened without a knock. The car conductor stepped in. The Wiktor that checked me in. He looked like late for an appointment. He stared at the window a with his mouth half-open then addressed us.

Mesdames et messieurs, kindly direct your attention to the booklet

bearing your image and the name your parents toiled to choose and prepare it for control. Look at the photograph. Now look at your face. Attempt resemblance. Then await instructions.

Left us speechless.

Wiktor Czerny peered upward at me with a quirky smile.

Ready Bobby?

The word you're looking for is 'passport,' I said.

I noticed a smirk on the opposite berth. She bit her top lip as her fingertips flipped pages and her other hand wrote in a notebook resting on her right thigh.

Czerny sighed. Passport, shassport, whatever soothes your soul, sir.

He stepped back with a theatrical salute and shut the door. The aluminium handle shook for a second.

That's when I first heard her.

Seventeen, she said, lingering on the 'een.' Her voice was higher than I'd imagined and a little raspy.

Sorry? I replied.

This dude. Obviously a seventeen. She kept scribbling in her notebook.

Synesthesia? I asked.

What else?

I found nothing to say. Thought about asking my number but didn't.

The compartment was silent for ten minutes until we decelerated with a metal-on-metal screeching. When the train stopped with a slight rollback a loud bang got us staring at the floor where a vitreous black stone lay. A cube the size of a lemming with sharp edges and polished corners. There was a thin mark around it like a junction line.

The Japanese studied the thing like an entomologist faced with a new beetle. The one-hand man muttered apologies and clamped the thing between his hand and stump.

What is that? Kagami asked.

It's mine, thank you, don't worry about it.

Is that stone obsidian?

I don't know, the man said in falsetto. He took the stone and closed his suitcase and placed it in the luggage space under his mattress.

The math girl caught my glance.

Hexahedron, she said, not a regular cube.

Then she turned a page like she hadn't spoken. On her notes I noticed one word in large letters: 'RECURSION.' Brought back memories of self-reference from my aborted law school in London. But she was right, it wasn't exactly a cube.

And what's his number? I asked her, gesturing towards the man underneath.

Not seventeen. More like a six.

Are you into numerology?

Jesus. Do I look like a hip cat lady? She sighed. I just associate people to numbers. My brain does that, it's meaningless.

I felt she realized how she took the bait and got back to her book.

The door slid open again. Wiktor Czerny entered with a clipboard under one arm and a black linen pouch in hand. His eyes glinted like a raccoon who'd found a fresh trash can.

My friend, you're back! said the man under my bed with uncanny enthusiasm.

Czerny crossed his arms, rolled his eyes, and cleared his throat.

Lady and gentlemen, I must keep this train in a copacetic state. It is time for the compliance ritual. The proving of identities. Please place your record of bureaucratic truth inside this humble sack.

He offered the pouch like a priest holding a confessions basket.

I handed my passport first, ignoring the ridiculousness of the scene. He moved the pouch to the opposite berth. From her violin case he fished

a blue document from a side pocket and bent down to drop it with the fluidity of a contortionist.

Please, milady, Czerny acknowledged.

Kagami handed a red Japanese passport. Then the one-hand man lifted a worn, soft-edged booklet with a piece of ribbon stuck between pages.

Don't lose it, he said before dropping it.

Czerny weighed the bag in his palm.

I thank you for your donations, he said. My assistant, Djimon, shall perform the security due diligence. Please do not derail his work. He's a clement interlocutor but has a finite patience.

Czerny left. I hadn't seen other staff in our carriage.

Silence. Then three knocks on the bulkhead. Czerny reappeared wearing a red deerstalker hat and white gloves, his name tag gone. He greeted us with a theatrical raspy voice.

I am Djimon, controller daemon, railroad Charon. What room is this again?

He squinted at the number on the door and stepped in. He plucked a passport from the pouch and examined it. Lion and unicorn on the cover, mine.

What do we have here... A Miles William Marston, born August 5th, 1989. He scanned our faces like a portrait painter on ketamine.

Who is Paul?

I'm Miles. Not Paul.

Miles, Paul, Jack, Saul, all the same in my files. Is this your first surgery? First time on this train, I said.

What brings you aboard, Paul?

Miles. No particular reason. Just visiting for a few days.

Visiting? No one just visits. Please elaborate, sir.

I'm a freelance journalist. Writing an article.

I couldn't tell them I'd decided to vanish for a while, let alone why. Couldn't explain what happened, and certainly not to Czerny's lethargic brain.

I must investigate your case, Paul, Czerny-Djimon said.

He retrieved the clipboard from Kagami's bed and placed my passport atop and started riffling through a stack of handwritten documents, lists, and tables from what I could see from above.

Two minutes later the white gloves returned my passport.

My papyrus say you're kosher, he said.

He picked another passport.

Next, we have... Jesus, this is unreadable. Is this from the pharaohs' times?

He examined the document, struggling to read. He looked under my bed.

This, this is you. Menachem Shesh.

Yes sir, I am me... Call me Reb Shesh, the man said. I'm a rabbi.

Fantastic. What's your number, rabbi?

My number here? Six. You know this, why do you ask?

Are you sure?

Look here, he pointed to the number six on his berth's tag. Not a coincidence... The first word of the Torah has six letters and the first verse has six words.

The lunatic dwarf cut him.

Lucky six, you're not trouble to me. Take this. Reb Shesh solemnly took his passport back.

Next, you! He turned to her with a blue passport in his hand. You are a... Seraphina, Seraphina Whiteman, American.

Whitman, she corrected.

What?

It's Whitman, not Whiteman. Do letters trouble you as much as

numbers?

Oh pardon me, Miss Algebra. Djimon is but a humble bureaucratic daemon of lists, he said, waving his papers like scriptures.

He flipped through the booklet, pausing at stamps, squinting. Seraphina Whitman went back to her book as if the clownish performance was beneath her threshold of attention. The examination lasted.

As Djimon browsed through his lists, a strident noise tore through the compartment, like a distorted violin crescendoing for five seconds before it died. We all winced. Then the lights went out.

Holy moly, Djimon belched.

The piercing sound returned. The overhead lamp flared, hesitated, and snapped back to its warm white like a system fighting itself. The train slowed down and shook. A bang cracked through the dark. I couldn't tell if it came from outside or inside. Light returned.

Her yellow book lay cover down on the floor with Shesh's dark stone atop. We all froze. The stone had a matte line mark around and a black cut like a keyhole. Kagami bent and handed the cube to Shesh with reverence.

Djimon watched the scene and pointed his skinny arm. What is that... thing, rabbi? Smuggling a purloined relic?

It's a talisman, Shesh said, the cube in his hands.

Pardon?

We call it a kudz, Shesh replied, lingering on the 'oo.'

Call it what you like to call it, but don't play with it in my ship.

The thing felt familiar to me. I'd seen similar-looking stony boxes in books about Russian Cosmism. Fringe stuff. Mad men who believed in immortality and thought they could revive the dead. I kept that for me.

Seraphina Whitman stared at the book on the floor and Djimon handed it to her.

Too much nonlinearity, he said with mock solemnity.

Thanks, she said, frowning at the absurdity of the scene.

Djimon pulled up a form and a pen and copied information from her passport.

Can I now resume my work? He pointed the pen at her.

I must ask you a few questions, miss Whitman.

What just happened? she asked, book in hand. What was that sound?

An interference, I reckon. Glitches in the train circuit, this happens when we cross this shaky area. Can we now proceed?

I guess, she said with a jaded voice.

What's your occupation?

I do mathematics.

Admirable. And music too?

Not as what you'd call an occupation.

A preoccupation?

I'm not preoccupied. Are you?

Geez, Louise.

Seraphina.

Terrible name. Sounds like a fictitious character's name.

Sorry, I'm as real as the square root of two.

Oh, a platonist on the train? That's against our policies.

Platonism is as incoherent as you are.

What the hell brings you here, miss Whiteman?

Personal project.

Personal?

None of your business. Nothing to do with math or music if that's what you're asking.

Czerny stared at the passport, flipping pages and decrypting immigration stamps. He wrote a note on his form.

Carrying any lethal merchandise, miss Whitman?

Yes. She lifted her book.

He took more notes and read from one of his listings with blinking eyes. When he was done he extended his arm to her with the passport between two fingers like a dirty postcard.

Welcome to America! he said with wide eyes and a smile that lingered.

He raised his arm as if to check a watch that wasn't. Are we done yet? he said, showing the empty pouch. He gestured towards Kagami as if he owed him a punchline. Mister, look at my hat, he said. Kagami didn't look at the hat, he just looked irritated.

It's in your hat, Kagami said flatly.

Djimon took his hat off and showed the passport, feigning surprise. You spoiled my trick! he said, and put the hat back and flipped through the Japanese document.

Kagami Tetsuro. You are 54 years old.

I know, thank you.

Please confess your occupation.

Scientist. Physics professor. I am invited. Look at the letter in the passport. No need to question me.

I liked his mild defiance. I took him for a nutbag when we'd first met in Skhodresk, but maybe he was sharp. Maybe even trustworthy.

Djimon found a piece of paper folded to fit in the passport. He unfolded it and held it to his face. He grinned and shook his head and then handed both items back.

Without further words he addressed us.

The Minister of Identification thanks you for your cooperation. I must now retire myself. Business is business!

TRACTATE 3: ANGELS

00:05 – 01:02

The train accelerated past the checkpoint barricade and into a pine forest. The line of trees made a dark spiked wall so high it hid the skies, so close you could have touched the needles if the windows weren't locked.

Our gooseneck reading lights cast a yellow beam on the ceiling. Nobody had complained when I turned off the room's sterile overhead lamp. I leaned against the outer bulkhead, facing the door and doing nothing, the pine trees behind.

Shesh stood up, his balding head a ring of gray hair outlining it like a crown.

Let's see if they have tea here. Tea, anyone? he asked.

We all signaled no thank you.

He poked his head into the corridor as if checking for traffic and slipped out, wobbling slightly as his handless arm slid the door shut.

Kagami sat on his mattress with hands on his lap and eyes on the window.

Miss Whitman, he said.

Yes?

What kind of mathematics do you do?

She feigned surprise.

There's only one kind of mathematics, she said.

Sorry. I meant which parts do you know the best?

My PhD was about algebraic topology. Also did number theory, calculus, algebraic geometry, logic. The basic stuff.

The basic stuff, he smirked. I am not a mathematician but I use mathematics a lot.

You use math?

I am a physicist. I do fundamental research. Also cosmology. I worked on pulsars.

I was worried you'd say you're a statistician.

Kagami let the sarcasm fade, then spoke.

Mathematicians think that statistics is not... he searched for the word, beautiful. He looked at the sky beyond the glass and trees.

This is not wrong, he said after a pause. But you can do magic with statistics. You can locate stars.

That's fair. You're talking of VLBI, very long baseline interferometry, right?

For example. VLBI can measure signals at the nanosecond scale. Imagine pointing a laser to a grain of rice on the Moon. Thanks to statistics.

Yeah, that's impressive, she said, unimpressed.

As I noted Kagami's grin, he caught my stare.

And you, sir, what do you do?

Freelance writer. I have a law background, though. More about logic than math.

You sound American too. Are you travelling together? He gestured towards Seraphina Whitman. She turned to see my reaction.

No, we don't know each other. I live in the US but was born in London. I've a British passport, I added, expecting them to ask. Kagami nodded and didn't ask for details.

The door opened and Menachem Shesh returned. No tea.

Friends, he said, I must go to sleep...

He bent to adjust his sheets with his only hand. When he was done he addressed me from under.

You will have to sleep too, Miles... even in this train. When you sleep, your soul visits the angels and they tell you their secrets... that's what the Zohar says.

I wasn't sure if he meant anything or was just exhausted.

I'll tell you if I see them, I said.

Be careful of the unclean spirits on your way... That's why I'm afraid of sleep.

I'm not afraid of spirits. Good night, rabbi.

You shouldn't be afraid. How else do you win the fight?

He lay down and switched his light off and wished us good night and whispered prayers in a sacred tongue. I understood nothing but our names: Kagami, Marston, Whitman. I ignored that for now. I needed the restroom. I climbed down using the tiny foldable ladder attached to the berth frame and walked out in socks on the cold linoleum.

The corridor was lit just enough to see my steps. The compartments on one side, wide windows on the other. We'd entered a flat rural land with rare signs of civilization and light only in the cloudless sky. I paused, forehead against the glass, watched the world scroll by. Daytime trains all feel the same—the boarding and unboarding rituals, the unspoken negotiations between strangers pretending not to observe each other. Night trains are different and this one even more so. The bubble of light, the forced intimacy. They're slower not just in speed but as if time dilated. I liked night trains. I told myself again that leaving was the right call, I'd escaped the madness.

I walked to the bottom of the car, a dead end with a water fountain and an out-of-order coffee machine. I pulled a cardboard cup from a vertical dispenser and stuck it under the fountain. It took forever to fill.

I drank half and tossed the cup in the bin. A mineral taste lingered on my tongue. The mirrorless restroom was spartan but clean and, mercifully, didn't stink. When I came back out, I heard it again—the screeching that preceded the blackout. It lasted shorter this time. Then a door opened and closed at the opposite end of the car. It must have been Czerny. I didn't check.

I reached our door, the 5 6 7 8 9. Inside, the only light was from Whitman's berth. Shesh snored like a lawnmower. Kagami was lying down half covered by the thin train sheet. I climbed to my berth.

I thought you'd need the light, she said.

Thank you.

I'll try to sleep now. You can leave your light on, I don't mind.

Sure.

I pressed the switch and bent the flexible arm to point down and reduce the halo. I tried to doze off but wasn't sleepy. Survival instinct, maybe. Falling asleep is never easy for me, even alone. In this car with that whacko conductor around, impossible. And Whitman didn't seem too crazy, but with mathematicians you never know.

I settled back and continued reading Lord Jim. In the third chapter Conrad wrote of passengers asleep on a ship:

'the pilgrims of an exacting faith slept on mats, on blankets, on bare planks, on every deck, in all the dark corners, wrapped in dyed cloths, muffled in soiled rags, with their heads resting on small bundles, with their faces pressed to bent forearms: the men, the women, the children; the old with the young, the decrepit with the lusty—all equal before sleep, death's brother.'

Didn't soothe me.

I was still reading when the train braked hard and stopped. The book slid from my hands.

The car was still shaking when Whitman propped herself on an el-

bow, looking at me.

What happened? She scratched her eyes.

We just stopped.

No shit. Why?

I don't know.

And where's our rabbi?

What do you mean?

Well, he's gone. She motioned towards his berth.

He couldn't have left. I would've seen.

Well, he did.

Kagami turned his reading light on. He lifted his legs out of the bed stood up, peeking beneath my bed.

That's right, mister Shesh is not here, he said.

I must have fallen asleep, I said.

Kagami bent down towards the empty berth.

This is strange, he said. Look.

Whitman peeked down. He fixed his bed?

Yes, Kagami said, the bedsheets are like nobody touched them.

We heard a crackled white noise. The loudspeakers. Then Wiktor Czerny's voice.

Your attention, briefly. The train has ceased to move. There is no cause for alarm. Please do not attempt egress through the windows. That is not how salvation works.

Not worried at all, Whitman said.

I will go look for mister Shesh, Kagami said, putting his shoes on. He got out and closed the door behind him.

I jumped down to see by myself. The bedsheets were laid tight and cold. Nothing on the bed. I checked the storage compartment underneath. The black stone was there, and nothing else. I took it and placed it on his bed.

He couldn't have forgotten that, I said. Must have left it on purpose.
A farewell gift? she said. She looked at the gemstone, squinting.
What's your name again?

Miles.

Seraphina.

I remembered that. Means angel in Hebrew, right?

Not exactly. Angels come in types. Seraphim are the angels on fire in the Torah. More badass than cherubs. I must have scared the rabbi.

He said something about angels before sleeping.

Unrelated. Those dudes aren't seraphim. In dreamland you'd bump into malachim, or with Lailah if you're lucky, maybe Metatron. Well that's what the rabbis say.

You know that stuff.

I've read the classics. You're talking to a Kabbalah girl.

Do you know why there's a berth number 9 listed on the door?

Duh, that's obvious.

I'm sorry?

Where's the rabbi when we need him. Kabbalah again. Look, two times nine equals eighteen. One plus eight equals... nine. Three times nine equals twenty-seven. Two plus seven equals nine. And do you know how to say nine in Hebrew?

No?

Nine in Hebrew is 'Miles.'

What?

Just fucking with you. I have no idea. Maybe the nine is bad luck around here. Anyway I don't care, won't take this train again.

Well for the return trip.

There's no return trip.

Okay. So we've at least one thing in common.

Yeah. We're in a goddamn stupid train.

TRACTATE 4: KEYS

01:03 – 02:10

No return for you? Seraphina Whitman asked.

No, I said, lying.

Tell me what you're running from.

People died because of me. The police are after me. She couldn't tell which part was a lie.

Uh-huh. That freelance writer thing real too?

Maybe not. How'd you guess?

You're a bad liar.

Takes one to know one.

She talked like she was playing on her phone, passing the time but not committed enough to care if she lost. That's how it goes when strangers share a confined space and a mild sense of threat. They warm up out of survival instinct. Crisis breeds intimacy but then the pressure drops and they vanish, or worse, they try to stay in touch.

Kagami returned with the little deranged demiurge. Czerny looked rattled. He stared at the box on Shesh's bed and paced.

Holy Jesus! This abomination crippled my train? Splendid! You've lost your voyaging friend? I've checked my lost-and-found and he wasn't there. He's not in the vestibule. Not in the latrines.

His sardonic grin turned to Seraphina.

Clean up your mess, princess. Or I will be forced to explain the situation to Djimon. And I do not like explaining things to Djimon.

Before he left I asked:

Why is there a nine on the door?

He blinked and shook his head. I beg your pardon?

The numbers on the door. There's five six seven eight nine but there are four beds and no number nine.

Ah, the nine. Occupied, sir. Always has been. He paused.

He snapped.

Go fetch your holy man, Paul! He's not a jellyfish lost at sea. Pitter-patter! Time is of the penance.

And he disappeared into the corridor.

Have you checked the other compartments? I asked Kagami.

No.

Let me, I said, and stepped out through the door Czerny had left ajar.

I started with the first compartment, 1 2 3 4. I knocked twice. No response. I nudged the door open. The hinges creaked a warning.

The elderly couple from the platform were asleep on the lower berths. The man on the left and the woman on the right. They lay flat on their backs, unnaturally stiff. Their faces bore a forced, nervous smile. The smile that villains in movies bear when they've captured the hero or his lover. I winced at the man's half-open eyelids, the white and no iris visible. I slid the door shut and breathed again.

I supposed the last compartment would be empty. The 10 11 12 13. I hadn't seen or heard anyone else in our car. Still, I knocked before opening.

It wasn't empty. Just devoid of humans.

Turquoise light radiated from both sides, warm and pulsing. Fish-tanks. In a train. Goddamn fishtanks wide as berths. Koi fish swam in

the left one, red and white, gold, black-streaked, their scales catching the bulbs' light like coins. No fish in the right tank. Crabs.

Once the shock passed, I closed the door behind me. The blinds were shut. The air was colder than in our compartment and had a saline aftertaste. The gurgling of the tanks had replaced the train's noises—the wheels' pressure on the rail tracks, the car's hissing, they were all gone, as if this room was soundproof.

I faced the tank on my right. Dozens of crabs no larger than a palm and the color of dried blood. They shifted in a purposeless rhythm, their legs tapping against the glass in staccato clicks. I'd seen this before, or thought I had.

I froze. The door opened, rail sounds returned. Then this voice:
Miles? What the...

She entered and stared at the tanks, mouth half open. She had untied her hair.

Yes, what the hell, I said. Close the door.

Uh, ok, she said, and slid the frame shut. Silence returned.

What is this place?

We stared at the crabs and the brown fake rocks. Larger rocks had a bridge shape for crabs to hide under. When she touched the glass a crab moved away from her finger.

Crabs and carps as neighbors, could be worse, I said.

Look, she said, pointing at a motionless crab in a corner.

A number was printed on the shell. A five in dark marker ink, barely discernible through the hazy water, as if inscribed with a shaky hand.

Numbers again, I said. Wanna tell this crab what five means for his future?

Not funny. And she's female. Look at the wider abdomen.

She unclipped the cover of the tank and we disengaged the whole piece, each holding a side of the rectangle. We slid it backwards, watching

the crustaceans from above.

Number five wasn't the only tattooed crab. We found two and fifteen next to each other, and eight hiding behind a rock.

Then we found nine. Something clung to one of its legs. When she bent down to look closer her elbow grazed mine and she flinched and turned to me.

Can you pick it up? she said. I don't want to wet my sleeves.

I obliged. The water was colder than I expected. The crab didn't resist. I held its carapace with two fingers to thwart pinching but the creature was unbothered.

A plastic wrap the size of a finger was attached to one of its larger legs with a thin red thread. We untied it and unwrapped it, and inside found a key. A copper key with two blocky teeth and a circular bow bearing a geometric emblem not unlike a triangular tower. The copper had turned deep brownish, it must have been underwater for a while. I dropped the crab back into his tank like trash in a can. She frowned at me. I held the key up, my eyes awaiting her answer.

The missing crabic key, she said, with sententious eyes.

She plucked the key from my hand and examined it as if to check it was real, then she got out without a word. I followed her to our compartment.

Shesh's box was on his bed where we'd left it. Kagami was eating a banana while reading a research paper—I peeked at title on the frontpage and noticed 'Bayesian inference' and 'coalescence.'

Look what we found, she told Kagami with the start of a smile. She sat next to the kudz, the key in hand.

After some fiddling, the key turned a quarter circle and clicked. The joints of the cover widened and she pushed it open. Inside was the same matter as outside but raw, unpolished, with an uneven carving that resembled a cave.

How did you... Kagami muttered.

One key, one keyhole, not many options, she said without looking away from the stone.

A small yellowish scroll was inside. Her delicate fingers unrolled the brittle material.

It's a palimpsest, she said, and read us the line etched in tiny letters:
'It is the key which shuts and opens.'

That's what keys do, I said.

What did you expect, a treasure map? she said.

She left the scroll on the bed and pushed the top of the box on its base and turned the key. She stopped midmovement when Kagami interrupted her.

Look, he said, standing to look across the window.

Shesh was outside. He carried his suitcase and looked at our window like at a painting in a museum. Kagami signaled him to come in.

We've summoned him, she said, the scroll still in her hands.

Two minutes later he appeared in the doorway.

Where were you? Kagami asked, calm but curt. We will be late because of you.

I was outside, Shesh said, brushing the frost from his coat.

Outside doing what? Seraphina asked.

The kudz needed me gone for a moment.

He stepped closer and saw the scroll. His face changed.

Oh you found the key? The kudz spoke to you?

He picked the scroll and read. His smile widened.

Seraphina folded her arms. Sounds familiar?

Shesh sat down and cleared his throat.

Maftechah sagir u-fatach, he said, stressing the last syllab of each word.

It's Aramaic, 'a key which shuts and opens.' In the Zohar it unlocks the palace of Creation. A palace with fifty gates where only forty-nine are

visible. No one knows where is the last or whether it is high or low. It's the hidden gate, tar'ahstimah. But nobody takes this story too seriously.

You wrote that line on the scroll? I asked.

No, Shesh said, pensive. He leaned back and laughed softly.

He opened the kudz in the same way Seraphina did and placed the scroll back in locked it close. I didn't see what he did with the key.

Maybe it will open again, Shesh said, maybe not. But let's not worry about it, my friends.

The loudspeakers above the door hummed and Czerny's squirrely voice filled the room:

Friends and foes, rejoice. The lost traveler has been reassembled. We shall resume our trajectory, barring divine litigation or sudden retraction of consent.

Nobody spoke until the train began to move and then nobody spoke for a while but nobody slept either. Seraphina turned her light off. Kagami spoke to Shesh:

You really think this box is magic?

I don't think, I know. Don't call it magic. A kudz reflects the world around. It... radiates prophecies when it opens. Nothing magic.

You make no sense. Stones don't radiate anything, unless they're radioactive.

There are proofs. I believe the kudz is a gift of God. This is why I'm on this train.

You believe... Kagami said, as if he was talking to a child. And I believe you are a fool.

My friend, your reasoning is from the living. You cannot see what doesn't reach your eyes, he concluded with a dignified smile. Then he kissed the kudz.

That was the kind of punchline that made you want to believe in ghosts. Or sedatives.

Thankfully, they got tired of arguing. I was tired of everything. There's a point where nonsense starts making sense. It's called exhaustion. I killed the light and shut my eyes.

I caught murmurs from the opposite berths. Seraphina and Kagami, talking in half-breaths: pulsar, radiation, gravitational wave. She asked and he answered. Then she spoke without pause with a more certain tone, of expansion, field equations, tensors. I let their words drift over me.

TRACTATE 5: FRAGMENTS

02:11 – 04:57

Djimon's lament

Now listen, Johnny.

You think Djimon doesn't see you? Lurking. Judging. Wondering what's wrong with my hat. Djimon's not your conductor. I'm a tensor operator, darling.

Look at yourself. Not even suitably dressed. Sweet Jesus. Make an effort.

I've seen your file. It isn't pretty. Yes, that too. Oops. What's your alibi? Don't blame chirality.

Oh, you trust Paul better? Covenant of disjunct souls, the headlines said. Always trust the news. And the crabs. I negotiated with the crabs. They want jurisdiction. They want absolution. They want jazz.

Don't make that face, this isn't a plane crash. Breathe: 1, 2, 3, 4.

Again. 1, 2, 3, 4.

You've read four chapters. Brava. You can read. That's four sins already. You call it fiction? I call it confession. Adjust your priors, Jessica.

Don't flatter yourself. We're all together in this constellation. Please. And thank you.

Miles's insomnia

The compartment undarkened as my eyes adjusted. Light leaked from the door gap. A charger's LED blinked like a dying insect. I checked my watch: 3:47. I'd dozed off. I rarely sleep in motion. Planes, trains, let alone the back of cars. I close my eyes and wait for nothing. I knew I wouldn't sleep again. Not with Shesh snoring like a haunted accordion.

I know you're wondering. No, no police were after me. I wasn't a runaway. I was responsible for a major fuck-up, a combination of misjudgment and bad luck. Intelligence failure, officially. I wasn't legally accountable but three people paid for that with their lives.

You're told it's part of the job, that occasional failure is inevitable. Kagami would call it statistics. But that's bullshit. It doesn't feel like math when it's yours. You can't just say that shit happens and go on with your day, unless you're a sociopath, maybe.

That's why I was there. To deal with that burden. My little twitch eastward, if you catch the reference.

This train isn't what I had expected but can't say I wasn't entertained.

With his scar, Kagami reminded me of a character from a yakuza flick. Maybe he sliced his face on a telescope lens. I felt like he was hiding something.

Shesh? Religious nutcase, but he had the docile strength of a man who'd seen horror and found a language to forgive it. I wondered who he was back home, a community leader or more of a hermit. I had to find out how he lost that hand.

Whitman... Something about her frightened me. Not sure why. Not danger, not madness. The sense that she sees too much and won't tell you.

Anyway, I couldn't stay on that tiny mattress doing nothing. So I went to the aquarium.

I climbed down using my phone as a torch. The others were still. Out of the compartment, the corridor's glow came from ceiling bulbs the size

of ping-pong balls. One bulb near the next compartment was dead but the tanks' blue pulse spilled across the floor.

The next door was partly open. I crept closer and peeked in from across the corridor. Someone was there. Czerny, in his Djimon attire, deerstalker and gloves, with a blue plastic bucket by his feet. He was talking to the crabs.

Don't trust the Japanese, he said. He's cagey, disentangled. And beware of the violin lady, she's macabre.

He fumbled for a small fish from the bucket and dropped it in the tank. He addressed a crab in the corner:

Really Romeo? A whole chicken burrito? Now you're going to town!

I must have shifted, made a noise. Czerny turned, slow and deliberate, as if he'd expected me. He bent toward the bucket again.

Paul, he said, smiling. Fancy a sardine?

Seraphina's dream

She woke up on a maroon davenport with a white summer dress tied with a red sash. Emerald-colored walls, impersonal furniture all the wrong size: a mahogany wardrobe the size of a footlocker, a hotel phone absurdly large, a window the size of a big hand. Dusky glow from a bedside table lamp. The room had no door.

She rose and drifted to the window. It opened to nothing. Void as a starless cosmos, total darkness.

A dream, she thought, immobile.

On the wall above the headboard was an equation scrawled in black marker. She recognized von Neumann's projection postulate, an expression of how the state of particles collapses when they are observed. The symbols faded the more she stared. Until they all dissolved.

The ceiling was white, except for the square outline of a hatch above the bed. She knelt over the blanket and stood up but couldn't reach the

foldable handle, even if she leapt for it. She needed four more inches. She dragged the small wardrobe from against the wall and placed it on the bed under the hatch. She climbed atop and grabbed the handle and pulled it open.

The hatch door swung downward and almost hit her head. White light shone from above, so bright she turned her face away and lost balance and fell backward onto the bed like a marionette cut from its strings.

Something in her left hand pressed against her palm. A paper note that she unfolded. She recognized his handwriting. His messy, unmistakable handwriting. She tried to hold the dream and to read the letter but the lines blurred as if submerged in water. Then she woke.

TRACTATE 6: THE KIDOGJFOY PAPERS

04:58 – 05:44

I'd slept barely two hours. And no coffee in that godforsaken train.

I shifted on the thin mattress with heavy eyelids and a twitching shoulder when the train brakes howled. Just before we stopped, light flared from Kagami's berth and lit up the room.

Seraphina was curled up under a blue blanket, still asleep. The contour of her lips quivered. She blinked and without effort opened her eyes. She looked at the ceiling, almost coy, then rose on her elbows and turned her reading light. She stretched and ran her fingers through her hair with grace.

I reached to the cord hanging from the window blinds and pulled them open. In the dark beyond the glass a faint glow bled from the other side of the train.

Shesh yawned as the speakers resonated:

Esteemed passengers, this is a short safety stop. The local time is five o'clock and the temperature 282 kelvin. Please immediately exit the facilities—do not remain seated. Your friendly crew will proceed to an inspection. We shall depart at half past five sharp. We wish you a pleasant

pause and a smooth onward journey.

That stop wasn't part of the schedule. Another delay.

Here we go again, Seraphina muttered.

Kagami wiped his face with a handkerchief and put his shoes on as if going to work. I grabbed my jacket and followed him out.

The cold got in my chest before I reached the door. We stepped out the carriage and onto a platform just three or four steps wide. Scattered lampposts threw sad cones of light over the concrete and passengers' silhouettes. I ambled towards the locomotive. The only edifice stood at the end of the platform, a ramshackle wooden cabin with door and windows half their normal sizes. A sign hung on its shingled roof like a broken jaw: KIDOGJFOY.

Across the platform there was no other rail track but only a strip of derelict ground, mix of gravel and cracked concrete slabs. Next to a mound of detritus stood the rusted carcass of a car. Beyond, uncultivated plains stretched as far as I could see.

I strolled back towards our carriage and spotted Shesh in conference with passengers from other carriages, a young couple and a tall bald man. Shesh carried his suitcase with his hand and the other arm gestured towards the train's facade and when he lifted it they all laughed.

Kagami and Seraphina were by our car. I walked to them and they saw me but didn't stop their discussion. I heard her first:

What do you mean?

I cannot tell you, Kagami said, with a morose frown. But I cannot tell you not to worry.

She turned to me:

Miles, you don't look all right.

I'm all right. Didn't sleep much.

Hung out with Czerny?

Actually, yes. You don't wanna know.

Jesus. You'll tell me. Let's walk, I'm freezing.

The three of us ambled away from the train and the platform. About ten meters farther, Kagami stopped and looked up at the star-filled sky. Seraphina looked up too. So did I.

Cloudless, starry sky. I know nothing of astronomy—I can barely spot the North Star—but starlight always enraptures me. You're seeing the past, millions and billions years ago. The closest thing to time travel.

You see Taurus? Kagami said, raising a finger. Just left of Orion's shoulder. That smudge is the Crab Nebula. The pulsar B0531+21 is inside.

A dead star, she said with authority. Nothing to see.

Yes. Nothing to see with our eyes. But it emits light in the form radio waves, X rays, gamma rays. It spins thirty times a second. Precise as an atomic clock 6500 light-years away.

He took a breath and added:

It was a star. It exploded into a supernova in 1054 AD. That is when we saw it on Earth. But it had been dead for 6500 years, long before the pyramids of Egypt.

Let that sink in, she said, looking down at her feet. What physics you said you do?

High-energy physics. I specialize in quantum field theory.

QFT? Feynman path integrals and all? Math sacrilege, if you want my honest opinion.

Kagami chuckled. Yes, pure mathematicians hate Feynman path integrals. Like they hate statistics.

Different hate. At least statisticians don't integrate over an undefined infinite-dimensional domain.

That is fair. Maybe physics progressed because physicists don't worry so much about mathematical rigor. Even imperfect mathematics help us understand the universe.

Cute. I've seen enough math to know that reality doesn't owe us comprehensibility. And physics hasn't progressed lately.

Kagami smiled faintly, not disagreeing. He paused, then added:

I am here for work because of the progress I made in physics. But I don't know how I can help.

You'll see soon enough, she said. You're going to the collider?

Yes.

We kept walking away from the train and past the forlorn wasteland with the car skeleton I'd seen earlier. I glanced behind and at the cabin bearing the station's name. A small shape scurried out of it carrying a cardboard box. Their stance was unusually peart, like an overexcited kid about to trip.

I checked my watch.

It's already five twenty. Let's not miss the train.

Would be a pity, she said.

Kagami checked his phone, intrigued.

My phone says five twelve. It's always on time.

We turned to Seraphina.

I don't have a watch. I'm never on time.

Whatever, I said. We'll see when people get in.

We resumed our walk. Kagami had moved ahead and stood by the ditch between us and the grassy field where no tree or habitation was visible.

That's when I saw it. She saw it too. She grabbed my arm and hissed. What is this?

A male deer with wide antlers stood five meters from us. It appeared as if it crept out from the dark, its spotless sleek dark brown fur and bright eyes staring at us.

Don't worry, I said. It won't attack humans, it's a herbivore.

Not sure he remembers that, she said, as the stag took a step in our

direction.

She released my arm and stepped back. Kagami was farther than us and was recording a video with his phone.

Let's just walk back to the train, I said. Czerny won't let it in.

I checked my watch again. The mechanical hands now showed 5:17.

What time do you have? I asked Kagami.

Five seventeen, he said.

I must have misread before, I thought. Sleep deprivation.

We turned back. The stag paced and shook its head as if to shoo away flies and galloped towards the tracks and along the train. The last travellers rushed inside. It roared at the locomotive, kept on for the cabin, and without a halt struck the door with its hooves and hit the KIDOGJFOY sign with his antlers, the letters falling to the ground. Furious kicks demolished the windows in a bang of shattered glass.

Kagami trotted towards car number 3, still recording. Seraphina and I had slowed down to observe the rampage. When the stag saw us it turned away from the cabin and in our direction. I took her hand and we ran to the car and I pushed her in and closed the door behind me.

Czerny was waiting in the small entrance hall. He looked amused:

Summoning the evil spirits? Entropy can't decrease, it's the law. Watcha gonna do? The Maxwell demon won't save you, Paul. Please reenter your premises, telegrams await. And we're late!

Shesh and Kagami were in the compartment, each holding an A4 brown paper envelope.

We were waiting for you, my friends, he said.

What's that? I asked.

Two other envelopes were on my bed and Seraphina's.

Shesh's envelope had 'Menachem S.' handwritten in black ink. Kagami's bore Japanese characters and mine was 'M. W. Marston (Paul).' I didn't see what was on hers.

Could just be a prank from that guy, I said.

This feels wrong, she said, squinting at the paper.

Kagami unsealed his envelope and pulled out a printed photo. He held it in two hands and opened his mouth in disbelief. He showed us the photo. Younger Kagami with a woman and a young girl.

It's my daughter and my wife, before she passed. His voice was steady, like he couldn't afford a tremble.

Shesh put a hand on his shoulder.

You looked happy... Your daughter must be a grown up now. What's her name?

Yaeko is nineteen now. She lives with me, she's a student. But why is this photo here?

Mystery... Shesh said, unstartled.

Was the photo in your luggage? I asked.

No, Kagami said. I have never seen it. Or I do not remember.

The photo didn't leave his hands and he studied it with reverence and without sadness, then he closed his eyes for a couple of seconds.

Seraphina held her envelope. My turn, I guess, she said.

She tore the brown paper open and took out a letter. Her eyes scanned it once. Then again, slower. Her lips compressed. Tears slipped down her cheek and darkened the cotton of her white shirt.

Bad news? I said, as tactfully as I could.

It's my brother's handwriting, she whispered. I thought he was dead.

She scanned the letter again and slid her fingers over the lines as in reading Braille. Nobody spoke. She slowly folded the letter in two and placed it in her topology book and kept the book on her lap.

She glanced at me and my envelope. I opened it, not without apprehension. I unfolded a white sheet of paper. It was empty. No text, no ink.

Well, nothing for me, I said.

Nothing else inside? she said. The corner of her eyes still glistened.

I ran a finger inside the envelope. Nothing else.

Rabbi, your turn, I said.

Shesh shook his envelope beside his ear like a child guessing a toy, squinting as if to eavesdrop secret words inside.

That's not a letter, he said.

He clamped the envelope under his left arm while his right hand tore it open. He lifted the unopened side with three fingers and gave a little shake.

A copper key dropped onto the bedsheet.

TRACTATE 7: MEMORIES

05:45 – 06:59

...

What haunts you, berthniner? We outran the horned horse, au revoir Kidogjfoy! Your mates unwrapped their correspondence. Tormented, aren't they? Fear not, this is a safe space. A fine shrine. Be grateful and tip your waiter.

...

The key is gone. I'm sure I put it there. What's going on, my friends?

Shesh held his wallet open before us. He didn't sound panicked. He sounded like he was having fun.

Just open the damn box, Seraphina said, handing him the key.

As Shesh reached for the kudz, Wiktor Czerny walked past the open door. Kagami rose and called him.

Do you need my assistance? Czerny asked, pausing in the doorway.

Yes. Kagami held his empty envelope. Where did you find this?

This rail mail is kindly delivered free of charge, you're welcome. Czerny smiled like a dog.

I saw you coming out of that cabin, I said.

Me? Czerny tilted his head. I am but a disposable courier. Don't boot the messenger, sir.

Seraphina exhaled. This makes no sense, she said. Nobody knows I'm on this train. What kind of fucked up prank is this?

Czerny raised his palms and squinted as if facing the sun:

I'm not of your reality, milady. Any complaint must be addressed to the tour operator. I'm not Hercule Poirot.

You're a demented goblin, she let out.

Get on your bike, Monike!

Czerny slipped down the corridor toward the crabs room.

Shesh was holding the key with the kudz beside him. Seraphina had climbed down and sat on the table under the window. She picked up the obsidian stone with two hands, her frail fingers moving as if tuning violin strings. The contrast of her silver-pale skin made the object seem heavier.

Want me to try? she asked Shesh, one hand on the kudz and the other extending toward Shesh.

Sure. You opened it once already. The kudz trusts you.

With the key in her right hand she flipped the stone and examined its surface. She scratched it with a nail as to scrape off rust but the metal remained unchanged. She held the circular bow between her fingertips and slid the key into the lock and turned counterclockwise.

A mechanical click echoed and the top shifted. She pulled it apart and we looked inside.

A scroll was there. Another scroll, darker than the first one and blotched with broad brown stains. She unfolded it and read:

It falls and shall not rise again. The light no longer fits its vessel.

Encouraging, she added.

She let the scroll rest on her thigh over the fine dark cotton twill.

No one moved. Kagami, pensive, caressed his scar with a finger.

What's that again? I asked, quieter than I meant to.

She read it again slower, stressing 'its vessel.'

Shesh took the scroll from her lap and read. His lips moved, sound-

less.

A prophecy, he said. Not about the future, but the present.
I call this a riddle, she said.

I thought Shesh had made the whole thing up, getting the key out of his envelope with a sleight of hand, to gather witnesses of his prophetic gifts.

Is the key still in it? Shesh asked Seraphina.

Yes, she pointed to it.

Can you close it and open it again?

She pushed the top down until it clicked close. She held the kudz steady and pinched the key and turned it in one direction, then in the other. The box remained locked. The key rotated without resistance in both directions.

What the... ? she started.

It's too late, Shesh said.

Too late for what?

I don't know... but the kudz knows, my friends.

Another magic trick? I couldn't tell if his ominous undercurrent was sincere. I felt unwell. The humming of the train had grown louder and the air was thick, with an aftertaste of burnt rubber. The others seemed unaffected.

I need to get some fresh air, I said.

I slid the foldable ladder and stepped once on it then on the floor and got out the door left open.

She followed me.

Going to ask the crabs for advice? she said, steps behind me.

Yeah, I need the air of the sea. That room is oppressing. You?

Just going there, she said, pointing towards the restroom. I'll join you later.

The air in the corridor was fresher and more breathable, but a noise

from the engine kept igniting my headache. A thumping metal-on-metal kick at irregular intervals like an erratic blacksmith at work.

I faced the fish tanks compartment. Before I could touch it, it slid open:

Paul? Were you looking for me? Czerny said unsteadily, a hand holding the door.

Just wanted to see the fish. Talk to them. Share my feelings.

You're being facetious, Paul.

What are you doing in there anyway?

That is not your prerogative to know. You may enter but you must adhere to the rules.

The rules?

Goddammit Paul. Read the security policies, for fuck's sake. You're a liability not only for your fellow travelers, but also to yourself.

You should go take a nap. I'll watch the crabs.

Paul, the rules! Do not tap the glass. Crabs are not pets. Do not mention shrimp, Paul. Ever. No eye contact with twelve, he's under observation. Understood?

Sure, I said.

And lock the door when you leave.

But there's no—

He was already gone, knocking the window glass with his knuckles as he walked to the other end of the corridor.

I entered the compartment. The same blue glow as last time, the only light in the room. The humming of tanks' water filters. The blinds shut. Some kind of peace.

I sat on a stool left between the tanks and watched the koi carps to clear my mind. I checked my wristwatch: 5:30. Seconds had stopped ticking. That was the time when we had left Kidjogfoy.

She stepped in perhaps five minutes later. She looked fresher. Her

white shirt was fastened all but the top two buttons, sleeves rolled to reveal thin forearms.

Do you mind? she said, without expecting an answer.

Sure.

She sat on another metal stool, facing the koi in silence. She bit her upper lip. Something in her had changed after she'd read that letter, as if her moves were lighter, her chin higher.

Why don't you just ask? she said.

Ask what?

What was in the letter. You want to know, right?

I don't mean to pry.

But you're curious.

You said you didn't want to talk about it, so I didn't ask.

But do you wanna know?

I don't mind.

Okay. I said I thought he was dead.

You weren't sure?

Death certificates leave little room for doubt. But I hadn't seen the body.

What happened?

He liked fast motorbikes.

Not as safe as trains.

Depends which train you ask. Anyway, I wanted to die. I tried. It's harder than you'd think. So I committed myself. All fun things end, and here I am.

Why are you telling me this?

Because you asked.

Sure. But—

You remind me of him.

What makes you think he's alive?

That letter. And dreams I had. It was his handwriting, his words.
Said he was looking for me. No one else could know.

And that personal project you mentioned?

Are you even listening?

I don't understand.

I know you don't. I thought you smarter than that gnome. Told you
I wouldn't return. Want the dirty details? She didn't flinch.

Sorry, I muttered. The first time I'd felt afraid for her. The way she
said it. The way she didn't.

That's fine. You need more sleep.

You must have been close to your brother.

Any mind readers in your family?

I take it you won't elaborate.

You always love the most what you don't have. I loved him very
much.

I'm not sure I follow.

That's fine. My turn to be nosey. What's your life like when you're
not stuck in a night train with a rabbi and a suicidal girl?

I worked for the government. I quit. Too much stuff going on.

You're a Brit with a government job in the US?

That's right. I wasn't a spy, but not exactly a diplomat. Can't elabo-
rate.

Of course. You'd have to kill me.

Please.

Wanted to surprise you with the cliché.

Apologies accepted.

What else happened? You were married.

Uh. How'd you guess?

There's still the mark of the ring.

Nice. Can you guess who left?

You did.

Yikes. Is that so obvious?

Yes. The sorrowless way you asked. No nostalgia.

I'm an open book. Okay, my turn.

Okay.

What's your earliest memory?

Jesus. Let me think.

Take your time.

Not sure it's the earliest. Memories have no timestamp. I was little, maybe four or five. My brother and I were in a small inflatable pool decorated with flowers and dinosaurs. We held hands and ran around the pool but the floor was slippery and I kept falling. We laughed a lot. Then my mother called us from the kitchen and that's when I saw pomegranates for the first time. I still see the garnet red alveoles and the seeds tasting like cherry.

Not a traumatic memory then.

I had earlier ones, but they're gone. I just remember remembering them—if that makes sense.

I get the idea. I also have such metamemories, if that's word.

And of course that memory could be distorted, or made up. Maybe they were tangerines.

We can't know what we've forgotten.

Memories fade, mutate. Like my first bike. I remembered it as blue but now I see it as red.

How can you tell?

When I was fifteen I started writing my childhood memories in a book. Since then I write my future memories and I note when a memory changes. There are things I never wrote—some I still recall and some I probably don't, but I wouldn't know. Memory is a treacherous bitch. It keeps what you want to forget.

And erases memories of the good times.

That's why I write the good ones. It's a controlled experiment to see how my brain diverges from reality, how crazy I get.

Recording history is an atavistic impulse. Even before writing, families and tribes passed stories down to generations to bind themselves together. Distorted and exaggerated over time, memories became myths.

So the Trojan horse wasn't real? Jesus didn't walk on water?

Time doesn't just change memory, it changes how we read it. Like a faded photo that you'd view through new tinted and warped lenses.

Time is change, by definition. But it's not what we think it is. It's a movement. Time hasn't always been around. Which makes no sense if you start thinking about it.

Because the spacetime we experience is an artefact of the universe where we happen to be. There could be other versions of it.

You sound like Kagami. But yeah, if you speak anthropically. We don't have the brain circuitry to conceive a universe without our familiar notion of time. Try explaining the concepts of color and opacity to a kid born blind.

When he checked me in he asked me my favorite color.

Czerny? He asked me too. He's a madman.

As she said that, she crossed her arms and glanced around us.

You're trembling. Are you cold? I asked.

I'm not cold.

You okay?

A bit off.

She held her shivery hands together and turned around to face the koi tank as if to hide her eyes from me. She breathed deeply, in controlled sequences. A smile quivered on her hollow cheekbones.

Can you open the blinds? she said in a soft, quavery voice.

The crabs won't like it.

Come on, she muttered.

Okay, ready your eyes.

I reached for the cord by the window side and pulled the roller blinds open. Sunrays entered the room as white deserted plains emerged before us. She stood up and faced the window by my side, immobile, a palm against the glass. We weren't expecting snow. Snowflakes skimmed the glass before melting into droplets and she followed them with a finger, her translucent nailpolish meeting the sunlight. She had a thin gold chain around the neck. It held a white-gold ring and a small steel key that swayed each time she chased another flake. She told me why she'd trembled and thanked me and stood up with a serene stance. We lingered by the window, watching flocks of starlings and corvids, cattle and horses shifting in the whitened grass near a narrow lake where silvery reeds rose like crystalline stalagmites.

TRACTATE 8: LOST

99:99 – 99:99

THIS TRACTATE WAS NEVER FOUND. PRESUMED LOST.

TRACTATE 9: RUPTURE

07:00 – 07:23

After we talked, she left and I stayed a little longer watching the crabs. A tiny one scratched the tank's glass, two larger ones bumped into each other like paralyzed wrestlers. When I got out, she faced a window in the corridor, a little forlorn, immobile save for her lips talking to the glass. Outside, the train drew a flickering shadow over the rocky ground. Beyond it, the frosty plains glinted with the first sunbeams. It had stopped snowing.

She wasn't alone. Shesh was two meters behind her with two other familiar silhouettes. I walked towards them without hurry.

Shesh pointed the numbers on the door as he glanced down at Czerny's bulbous head. His corpulence loomed comically over the small man who, hatless and visibly irked, paced like a chihuahua. Czerny's hands fended off Shesh's questions but after the rabbi insisted he took a step back and replied:

The nine again? Yes they're here. No you can't see them. What's wrong with that?

He spoke with a rattled cadence and waved his arms like a street preacher. He lowered a hand into his jacket's inset pocket and fished a yellow document that he unfolded before us. He spoke to Shesh again:

It's on the train manifest, see. Five: occupied. Six: occupied. Seven: occupied. Eight: occupied. Nine? occupied too. He jabbed a finger at the paper under Shesh's faces. Seraphina wasn't paying attention or pretended not to.

It's just a piece of paper, Kagami said bluntly.

Says he who writes so-called scientific papers about invisible waves and nonexistent dimensions? Where's your imagination gone, professor? Turn a six on its head and you get a nine. Careful professor, the nine hears you.

You are a bad joke, Kagami said. He turned his back to the little man and sauntered into the compartment. Wise man, he doesn't argue with dunces.

Shesh pinched his beard with thumb and forefinger and eyed Czerny.

You're saying it holds a spirit? A benevolent one?

You misinterpret, Reb. I've pelted you with proofs. The plaque, the manifest, the rest. You confuse the unseen occupant. Face your comeuppance.

I got closer and caught Czerny's stare. I spoke first:

You also gotta tell us. What's the deal with the fish and the crabs? Some kind of contraband?

Paul, Paul... You're sagacious as a lemur. They're for the nine's entertainment. I'm a mere fishwarden.

Seraphina inclined her head with her shoulders still parallel to the glass. She wore a gilt earring, a glinting triangle pointing to her shoulder. She looked at me, without darkness.

She turned to Shesh, ignoring Czerny.

There's a simple explanation for all of this, she said in a soft voice, her right hand adjusting her hair near her temple.

What do you mean? Shesh asked.

Cabin fever, the agony of confined space. He needs help, she added

in mock whisper.

What do you think the nine is about? Shesh asked.

Bad math? she said, looking down at Czerny.

Czerny half-raised one hand.

Are you having fun, princess? he said with a rueful grin.

She just looked past him as if the sound came from the wall behind.

I think you're anxious, Jessica. Is it about the letter?

What letter? she replied, as if to herself.

Czerny paused, tilted his head.

You amuse me, he said. I'll miss you. What can I tell you? It ain't too late to repent. Even Shesh's magic box sees the nine.

Repentance isn't my business. Her eyes darkened.

Czerny opened his mouth as if speaking without sound. Then he turned and he strolled toward his compartment while whistling the Happy Birthday tune, but the rhythm and the notes were off, which gave it a sullen undertone. He spread his hands above his deformed skull like a parody of a blessing. For the first time, he scared me.

Seraphina and Shesh had watched the scene without a word. The rabbi stood between our compartment's door and the previous one, his serene smile unaltered. I liked how he took serious matters lightly and innocuous matters overseriously, like this business with the number nine. His gaze followed Czerny's shape until it vanished in the darker end of the corridor.

I glanced through the window at the drab mosaic of farmland and abandoned fields. A thin layer of snow covered the brown soils, shards of melting ice drifted on the ponds. In the windless landscape nothing moved except flocks of birds and the occasional car along a distant road.

This reminds me of when I was a kid, Shesh said. Freezing winters, farms. Now I live in a city.

You're from this region? I asked.

No. Not even from this country. But in winter all flat places look alike, don't they?

I don't know, I've never lived in the countryside.

Before Shesh could answer, he cried out and jerked his arm up as if he'd been bitten by a snake.

Oi yo! I was shocked. By this door.

He pointed at the handle of compartment 1 2 3 4 and stepped back toward Seraphina. Around the same time, the linoleum beneath my feet trembled.

Then the door 1 2 3 4 slid open.

The elderly woman stepped out. She wasn't much taller than Czerny. A black velvet headband tied her straw-blond hair. Glasses too large for her square face gave her a severity that reminded me of one of my linguistics teachers, which is not a compliment. She wore a dark beige jacket over a gray dress with a faded tapestry of flowers. The man was by her side, slightly behind, in a mustard-colored linen shirt. At least as old as her, no less than eighty, quite stocky for his age. He had thin patches of hair on the sides of an asymmetrical, otherwise bald skull. His small eyes looked younger and livelier than his pallid hairless face. They stood there in silence, at first more interested in the view through the opposite window than in us. Then the woman scowled at Shesh and his handless arm.

Nice to meet you, Shesh said. They didn't react.

Nice to meet you, he repeated, louder.

The woman and the man scanned him. She spoke words I couldn't decipher, in a harsh German-sounding dialect. I caught zu roysch or something like that.

When Shesh responded in the same tongue, the woman softened. He gestured toward our compartment, then toward Seraphina and me. As he spoke, they nodded and punctuated his phrases with nu and richtik.

He asked them something. The woman spoke for a while and the man dipped his head in agreement. They went on talking and I didn't catch a single word.

With a lower and slower voice, Shesh answered a question that I guessed was about his maimed arm. As his index finger traced a line from his elbow to his wrist, he blinked twice and when he stopped talking no one spoke for five seconds. Then Shesh spoke again and they all laughed. After a final exchange the couple told us something that must have meant nice-to-meet-you and stepped back in their compartment.

Very nice people, Shesh said to Seraphina and me. They're visiting their family, a son and two grandchildren.

Was that Yiddish? I asked.

Yes. My first language. I rarely speak it now, alas.

Kagami appeared behind us. He had changed into a black t-shirt with the logo of a Japanese rock band, or so I guessed.

Mister Shesh, can you come see something please?

Shesh obliged and disappeared into our compartment with Kagami.

Seraphina stepped closer to me:

The lady complained about the noise. Shesh blamed the train's mechanics, but she didn't buy it. He called us his good friends.

You understand Yiddish?

I know German, and some Hebraisms too, it helps. Anyway, they also asked about his hand.

Figured as much.

He lost it in a war. He served in a platoon. He said he misses the friends he lost that day more than his hand. I sensed remorse. He made a joke I didn't understand, something about the train and two beds.

That's when they laughed.

Yeah. One bed he sleeps in, one he won't.

After that, we returned to the compartment.

The kudz was on the tray table with Kagami and Shesh sitting motionless around it. The stone shined as if a fire burnt within, a dark cobalt blue fire.

So it serves as a bedside light, Seraphina said when she came in.

I've never seen this, Shesh said. Come closer, touch it.

I leaned in and touched the stone. It was warm as a cardboard sleeve around a takeaway coffee. Seraphina pressed her palm against the gleaming surface and held it there for five seconds, as if trying to cool it down.

The kudz began blinking at irregular intervals, its hue growing more luminous. Shesh ascribed it to our touch. He said the square was complete, whatever he meant. Kagami brushed the stone with the back of his hand and said it was heating up. At the same time, cracks like wood splitting and debris striking metal came from the train's underframe.

Kagami asked what was happening but Shesh answered only with prayers. The strident screech we'd heard earlier returned, higher-pitched this time. The noise below us grew louder and thicker. The stone was brighter than ever.

I told everyone to sit on the floor and cover their heads with their hands. They did, without asking why. Kagami said he needed to get his envelope and the photo from his berth. He stood up.

The train lurched violently and halted. Kagami's head slammed against the frame of the upper berth and he crumpled to the floor.

TRACTATE 10: LIGHTS

07:24



Seconds after the impact something outside slammed the ground and our car shifted downhill. A high and abrasive alarm went out. Kagami lay unconscious on the floor. He had a content face. Shesh and Seraphina hovered by the mattress.

He's breathing, I said. He got knocked down. Should wake soon.

Thank you, Seraphina said. She was catching her breath. Her stare held gratefulness and also fear.

I turned to the window.

Jesus, I let out.

The carriages formed three sides of an incomplete square. The emerald flank of another car faced us in the distance, parallel to ours. The car between the two had collapsed on its side. All I saw was its dark underframe. Windowpanes slid out from above and people emerged and periscoped like meerkats. They found a desolate terrain of grass and mud

where broken poles and catenary lines lay like the abandoned toys of an irate deity.

Let's get out, Seraphina said. She grabbed the violin case.

Shesh watched Kagami as if trying to solve a riddle.

This is not the final destination, he said, mostly to himself.

The alarm stopped and white noise replaced it. Then Czerny's voice, uncannily calm.

Valued passengers, we have arrived where we shouldn't. Please remain calm and vacate the premises immediately.

What happened?

It was Kagami. He looked calm, unbothered. Shesh and Seraphina explained what happened and helped him stand up and showed him the wreckage outside. He didn't react.

I've been dreaming, he said after a moment. Of this.

What did you see? Shesh asked.

The rail track stopped. The train didn't slow down in time.

A prophecy, Shesh said.

Are you all right? Kagami asked us.

We're fine, I said.

I opened the compartment door. Water flowed downhill and the fish from the aquarium with it. Crabs explored corners of the corridor. Through the window on my right was the overhang of a cliff. The front of our car stood close to the edge and its white stratus. The car perpendicular to us was closer still. Far away across the ravine, the jagged silhouette of a rocky massif like flatten Dolomites standing witness.

I stepped back into the compartment and told them what I saw. I climbed a mattress and the tray table and found a box attached to the bulkhead by the window. I opened the transparent plastic clip and lifted the emergency hammer out. I aimed its tungsten tip at the left corner. The windowglass spiderwebbed. We pushed it together until it detached

from its frame and fell away. I cleared the remaining glass from the bottom edge and helped Shesh step out. He dropped down on the mud where he almost fell, his one hand braced against the frame and his handless arm carrying a black fabric bag. Kagami and Seraphina followed through and I went last.

■

We stood by our car next to a patch of soiled snow.

Low clouds and morning mist mixed with smoke from some unidentified place. Sunrays pierced through grudgingly. The emerald cars and the dark green of the pine needles colored the grey scene. Birds called from the trees but we didn't see them.

Passengers coalesced in the middle of the square, assisted by staff in blue uniforms. No sign of Czerny. The elderly couple from our car strolled along the collapsed car, smiling, stopping to take pictures with a film camera the man held around his neck. I turned and saw their compartment window untouched.

Kagami was still groggy. We moved on closer to the forest edge on the other side of the railtrack, at a distance from the precipice. Kagami sat on a dead tree trunk. Shesh sat next to him and conjured a water bottle he offered him.

More passengers spilled from the carriages.

Could have been much worse, I said. What you'd call a miracle, rabbi?

We shouldn't count on miracles for our survival, my friends. The kudz spoke to us, warned us. I'm happy we're alive. And if we died, we wouldn't be here discussing it.

Never heard a rabbi bring up an anthropic argument, Seraphina added. As far as I'm concerned it's all happenstance. Where are we anyway?

She was looking at Kagami who was checking his phone.

If the GPS is right, we are just twenty-six kilometers from the terminus, he said without looking up.

Shesh's smile widened. He looked at the sky as if contemplating stars in a cloudless night.

Almost there, he said.

He bent to fetch the fabric bag and handed it to Kagami.

I won't need this anymore. Please have it.

Kagami accepted the gift and picked the kudz from inside. He didn't know what to say. He said thank you with a polite nod.

I'm going to walk, Shesh said. I'll arrive before you. Maybe I'll meet new friends along the way.

Don't, I said. You'd walk the whole day in the cold.

Walking will warm me up. I'll see you all soon. Take care of yourselves my friends.

And he left towards the head of the train. We watched him grow smaller against the wreckage and the mist. He didn't look back.

Kagami sat in silence. I asked if he was all right. He said he just needed rest and his head didn't hurt anymore. He pulled the photo from his pocket and smiled at it. Seraphina brought him a blue blanket and wrapped him in it. I didn't know where she got it.

Kagami held the kudz in both hands and stared at it.

Everything all right? I asked.

He looked up as if waking.

Yes. I was thinking. About the train. About this object.

The rabbi's box, I said.

I will keep it with me. Bring it to Japan. Shesh is a good man.

¶

Miles, look.

Her hand rose toward the trees. A blackbird lifted from a low branch and vanished into the canopy. Below where it had been, an aperture opened between two giant pines.

She left her violin case with Kagami and walked toward a narrow path into the forest.

Her anthracite shell jacket and black pants disappeared in the shade. I followed her.

The path was of brown pine needles and zigzagged between trunks that rose branchless like wooden columns. Ten meters in, the path widened and straightened. Under the sparser needles layer, square cobblestones emerged.

When she heard me catching up she slowed.

You didn't want to follow him? she asked.

The rabbi?

Yeah.

I'm not that adventuresome. And it's objectively not the right thing to do. But you knew he wouldn't listen.

I don't think he was much concerned with what's right. She glanced at me.

What do you mean? I asked, glancing back.

Defining right and wrong takes so much trouble. All the risk-reward calculations. Discomfort and unpredictability scare us but that's how you learn. The journey matters. Even more so when it's on your own terms. She paused. I know how that sounds.

The way rabbis tend to comment on religious matters, I said. Seeking the right line of argument, conclusions as a by-product.

More clichés. But maybe. I don't know, I'm not a rabbi. She kept

walking.

The forest was now sparser and with different trees. Not only pines but also birches and bare oaks. Beyond their crowns the sky lightened. Shy sunlight broke through and lit remnants of snow that sparkled like abandoned crystals.

We strolled slowly and stopped when we heard sounds. She said she'd seen an owl fly from a branch but I'd missed it.

She stopped and knelt.

Look, she said.

She stood up and handed me what she'd picked. A white feather.

That's fitting, I said.

Yeah, angels watching.

Or your owl.

It wasn't white. I saw it.

Must be an angel then.

Do you believe in angels, Miles?

Come on.

What?

You sound like a lawyer. Asking a question only if you know the answer.

Right? I was interested in what you'd say.

And?

You said exactly what I expected. She smiled.

I got got, I said, and I pocketed the feather.

¶

We'd been in the forest for almost half an hour. Now the path was just bare earth going downhill to a small rift where no tree had grown. It was

an expanse of torn ground as if moved by machines decades ago, a mix of forest soil and limestone covered by a thin skiff of snow.

Beyond the treeless zone the ground fell away into darkness. Tree crowns rose from below and between them something green and curved that wasn't a tree.

Let's see what's over there, then we'll go back, she said.

Fine by me, the train won't leave without us, I said.

The path got steeper and slippery. We held branches to keep our balance. I slipped on a flat rock and almost fell.

When we reached the flatter area the path vanished and we stepped in the snow. There was no other human footsteps but there were animals' steps. It was quiet and windless. We paused.

Beautiful, isn't it? she asked.

It is. Let's see what's over there? she ignored that and stood still.

This place reminds me of something, she said.

Of what?

I was ten, a hike with my dad in New Mexico. It was drier, obviously, but the colors were the same.

Rio Grande? I asked.

Maybe, I don't remember. But I saw a snake and I wasn't scared. He was proud.

Were you living in New Mexico then?

Yeah, a couple of years. Then we moved out again. My dad's work.

What'd he do?

He was a scientist. Nuclear physics.

Like Kagami.

Not exactly the same field. But not that far, now that you mention it. It ended up driving him crazy, literally.

Kagami seems quite sane to me, as far as scientists are concerned.

Fair, but his mission is insane. He's an idealist, unlike my dad. He

thinks if there's one chance in a million it's still better than none.

You don't believe that.

It's not about belief, it's about statistics. I only believe in the law of unintended consequences.

I thought you hated statistics.

Which is a way to acknowledge it. You don't hate something unimportant. Nobody'll tell you they hate the number 98 or trees' branches. And I don't even hate it, for that matter. It's just less worthy of my time than other things.

Guess you could say the same about people. It's not the people themselves you resent but the time wasted with some of them.

Not sure of that. It's not mutually exclusive. Wiktor Czerny is an interesting case study. Like a serial killer is. But I'd rather hang out with you or Shesh.

I'll take that, I said.

I walked to the edge. The green structure was a half-sphere blanketed with moss atop a cubic stone edifice the size of a cabin. At each corner stood pyramidal stone spikes point upward and bare of dust or stains. The wall beneath was ochre and stained by moisture and lichen. Stairs descended on both sides to what I guessed was an entrance.

Seraphina joined me.

What is that? she asked.

A temple?

Let's find out, she said.

I took the left stair and she the right. The stone steps were eroded and of uneven height. We met at the center before a narrow iron-barred door. She found the handle and pulled and the door opened without a sound.

Inside, a flat ceiling and walls painted white save for the lower third tiled in pale turquoise squares depicting flowers, plants, animals. Pale

stone benches flanked each wall.

Across from us, a niche framed by a roman arch was empty.

In the center of the room, candles burned in a shallow pit. Five thin white candles with twisted shafts, their flames steady in the still air. Unlit candles waited in a small wooden bucket beside the pit.

We stood in silence.

Miles, she said.

She knelt and chose a candle from the bucket and lit it from one of the burning flames. She planted it among the others and looked at me.

I knelt and took a candle. The wax was cold on my fingers. I held it to the fire until it caught and placed it with the rest. Seven flames.

I stood first. She raised a hand toward me but then withdrew it and rose on her own. She smiled faintly.

We should come back here someday, she said.