

ANOMIE



A NOVEL IN THREE PARTS

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Cover: *Autoritrato*. Salvator Rosa. 1647 ca. Olio su tela.

Inside Cover: *Блюз Лемонной улицы (Lemon Street Blues)*. Севил
Ооржак. 2011. Холст, масло.

ANOMIE

A NOVEL IN THREE PARTS

BY

JAN SOREL

anomie \ˈɑ-nə-mē\ (Greek, *a-* “without” and *nomos* “law”)



social instability resulting from a breakdown of standards and values; *also* personal unrest, alienation, and uncertainty that comes from a lack of purpose or ideals

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“Mutter, ich bin dumm.”

Before



И ныне наша досадная зима (And Now is the Winter of Our Discontent). Севил Ооржак. 2013. Картон, масло.

*He yawned. He had finished the day
and he had also finished with his
youth. Various well-bred moralities had
already discreetly offered him their
services: disillusioned epicureanism,
smiling tolerance, resignation,
common sense stoicism — all the aids
whereby a man may savour, minute by
minute, like a connoisseur, the failure
of a life.*

-- Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'âge de raison*

*Back in the day when things were cool
We used to meet up with these dudes
Then we rode out on hopes and truths
And would ride around the park 'til it's after dark
Pumpin' the trunk with the windows rolled up, puff*

-- Erykah Badu, "Back in the Day"

Waking

It was a day like any other day. But then, what day isn't? We wake, we go about our business, we nourish at some point, we sleep. It is impossible not to wake unless we are comatose or dead. It is impossible not to nourish and it is impossible not to sleep or we shall die at some point from a lack of regeneration. And it is impossible to not have some sort of business or means to occupy our brains or we shall go insane. These are the restrictions that the human condition has placed upon us. Other than this, our time is ours to do with as we see fit *so long as we are willing to face the consequences*.

The sound of the alarm woke him early in the morning. It was not a welcome sound. There was too much in every day to stress about. He would have to sustain his body, which involved sustenance in the form of food. And that food would not magically appear. He would have to make it. And then there was also the physical exertion related to work, which in turn was related to that all-encompassing god of humanity, money. There were so many things to do and only so many hours in the day, and he could not sleep through all of them. "There will be plenty of time to sleep when you're dead" so they say. Perhaps death was not so bad after all.

After mechanically hitting 'snooze' with a flailing arm, he lay there for several minutes. It was never the impetus of looking at the clock that broke him free of his self-imposed catatonic state. Clocks were relative. They were an externally imposed means of enslavement to a socially enforced notion of what a workday was. They could exist or not exist, and life would continue to move forward in one way or another. No, it was never the clock that troubled him. It was always some minor annoyance on a foot or a finger or knee or a cheek. It would begin as a dull throb, and he would attempt to push the awareness of the anomaly out of his mind. Then it would increase, like a string that had been plucked ever so gently, it would continue to vibrate at an ever-increasing frequency, often being joined by other strings about his body being plucked at random

times, reverberating faster and faster, a discordant symphony of tiny voices all crying out to be attended to, until it would finally reach a crescendo when he could bear it no more and in one fell swoop he would send out his fingers to knead, nails to scratch, feet to rub, etc., until strings were silenced, voices were quelled, cries assuaged, and all superficial complaints in his body were temporarily satisfied.

It was only after this initial flurry of action that the sleep spell would be deemed broken and heads would rise, hands would sweep aside bedsheets, feet would be placed on floors, and preparations would be made for the body-machine to once again ferry the mind-ghost out into a world of eating drinking seeing hearing walking talking reading writing learning thinking smelling tasting pissing shitting feeling fucking. In short, a world of external sensory input that must be contended with and navigated through if one is to successfully make it back to the blissfully free world of sleep and dreams.

The clock had awoken him at a little past six. After swivelling his body into a sitting position on the edge of the bed, he acknowledged the other presence in the room: a reversed version of himself provided by a sheet of reflective glass affixed to one of the walls. Scrutinizing his face with a critical eye, the first negative impression that forced itself on him was that he had not shaved in several days, and there were small bristly hairs that protruded all about his cheeks and chin. He cupped his hand to his face and methodically ran his hands up and down the tiny hairs. They were of no real matter. To not be clean-shaven did not make a man ugly, and even if it did, who should care? Ugliness was not a debilitation any more than it was an objective classification. Most human beings would be considered beautiful by some and ugly by others. There was no definitive scheme by which someone could be deemed one or the other. Further, beauty was rarely won or lost on facial hair: one could say of it that it looks unkempt, another that it provides a certain appearance of grizzled maturity. One could say that a shaven face provides a sense of cleanliness, another that it gives one the look of an immature young boy. Anyway, judgement rested on the shoulders of the ob-

server: it was only his to make when, like at this moment, his reflection was beholden only to himself in a mirror.

Reluctantly accepting that it was time to face another day of reality where he would again be restricted by the laws of physics and society and their expectations of him, he planted his feet firmly on the floor, and with a heave of his arms, pushed himself up to his feet, stretched his arms to the ceiling, yawned heavily, and then made his way across the narrow corridor to the other private room that existed in his place of living.

After surveying himself again, but now in a larger mirror and closer to with a bit more focus, he felt he had nothing new to add to his earlier assessment and turned his attention to the three metal protrusions above the ceramic bowl positioned below him. He turned the vertical protrusion on the right slightly, just enough that a clear liquid was freed to fall from the horizontal protrusion in the middle, first in discrete drips but turning to a thin drizzle when he applied slightly more torque. He cupped his hand under the clear liquid, patiently waiting until he perceived his hand to be about half-full, then pushed his face down towards his hand as it simultaneously brought a splash up. This he did several times until satisfied that the internal ghost had been given enough minor shocks to enliven it sufficiently to face another day. At this point, the reflection in the mirror revealed a face with hair above it drooping over his forehead and dripping with liquid.

Turning, he grabbed an old rag of a facecloth from its metal rack support, and held it under the drizzle of water, turning it this way and that as the water soaked into the cloth. When he was satisfied that the cloth was sufficiently saturated, he lifted his free arm and held the damp cloth to his armpit so that he would feel the cool water against his skin. He then lowered his arm over the cloth and ratcheted his arm down with enough force that water was loosed from the cloth and slowly trickled down the side of his body to the floor. He enjoyed the brief catharsis of cold water on unsuspecting skin. Another small electrical jolt to his mind. Another reflexive ex-

halation. After being satisfied, he repeated the process, squeezing the newly saturated cloth under his other armpit, and then between his legs. In these mornings, he only desired to cool himself a little; a shower was not necessary.

After having thus moistened the cloth each time in between wringing it out on his neck, chest, stomach, upper back, lower back, and nether regions such that a small puddle naturally formed on the floor below him, he grabbed another raggedy cloth nearby, and dropped it onto the floor. At the same moment, a radio started blaring random music from the other room. It could wait, but not too long. As if continuing to repeat an algorithm that was drilled into his brain, he looked back at the cloth on the floor, put his right foot on top of it and navigated it around to sop up the excess water. Having completed this task, he then picked up the rag, rung it out in the sink, and hung it back over the metal rack to dry over the course of the day.

Returning to the room from whence he came and turning off the blaring music with the flick of a switch on the time-keeping apparatus that now showed numbers that implied the time was slightly closer to seven, he went to the small chest of drawers that he kept his limited amount of clothes in, opened the top one, and selected and then put on a pair of underwear. Then, walking over to the window, he pulled the curtains aside and allowed the sun to stream into the room. He stood near the window for a few moments peering out over the quiet street in front of the building. As was common, there were no people about at this hour (and aside from a few local individuals that would go out for a stroll at certain times, this tended to be the case at any hour), and when one looked out onto the street, one could almost feel the heat of the absorbed summer sun sizzling the ground even at this early hour. The trees were as ever, the sidewalk was as ever, the street was as ever, the other buildings were as ever. In short, everything was as it should be, and the only thing that kept this day from being the previous one was the twenty-four intervening hours.

Turning away from the window, he yawned, scratched his sides, and thought about the upcoming day, and what (if any) sur-

prises were in store for him that might make it a little less predictable. Walking back to the chest of drawers, he selected a shirt and a pair of socks and put them on, then put on the jeans that he had left strewn on the floor from the previous day. After a quick glance around the room and seeing that everything was as it should be—the unmade bed, the semi-full clothes hamper, the clock on the dresser—he nodded to himself and stepped out into the passageway, closing the door behind him.

Exiting this room, and turning left away from the opposite room that he had just recently inhabited (though only briefly), he was surrounded by the more public fixtures of an ordinary small apartment: kitchen complete with refrigerator, stove, and cabinetry, small common area complete with equally small bookshelf and haggard easy chair—the latter he had carried home one day after seeing it near a large trash bin and decided that it was better that he use it than have it consigned to a landfill—as well as a small table with one rickety wooden chair (he had a few more in storage, but they seldom needed to be put to use). Beyond the features and furnishings in the room, there was an entryway complete with closet space for whatever was needed to brave the elements outside, and a doorway to that outside.

Breaking

After surveying the surroundings of his small apartment and being satisfied with its minimality, his attention turned toward the kitchen appliances. Life requires fuel in the form of food. Unless he was running late for some reason or it was a weekend and he felt in the mood for something a little fancier (like an omelette, if he had the ingredients), he almost always preferred hot cereal in the morning due to a combination of economy, convenience, and caloric intake. Making his way to the stove, he opened the cupboard that was up and to the left where his storage of non-perishable food items was located and selected the wheat box over the oat box for no real reason except that

he felt like it was a wheat sort of day. Pulling a pot from the cupboard near his knees, he opened the magical liquid dispensers at the kitchen basin, used an imperial measurement of cups to fill the pot about one-third full of water, set it on the stove, and opened the electrical connection to its highest level in order to boil the water as quickly as possible.

It usually took about two to three minutes for the water to come to a complete boil. He always made sure to cover the pot sufficiently to reduce the amount of heat that would escape to lessen the time to boil and lessen the amount of energy he was pulling from the power grid. As there was rarely anything at hand that he could busy himself with for only two to three minutes, he usually just hovered near the stove, staring vacuously around at the four walls that he had already surveyed a seemingly inordinate number of times before. This time, however, he wondered if the blank white walls might do better with a poster or other piece of art to at least grab his attention momentarily while he was waiting for the ritual of introductory caloric intake to be completed. Perhaps he would return to the question in the evening. Despite the cold-water treatment, he was barely awake as it was. Most mornings, it felt like he had to struggle to put together a coherent thought. As this tended to be a common occurrence, it was also one of the reasons why he had developed his morning ritual to be so algorithmic and simplistic.

With the sound of animated water churning near him, he was tripped out of his daze, measured a sufficient amount of wheat grains into another imperial measuring device, and tipped it into the pot while stirring so that it would not become lumpy and uneven. Once the cereal was in the pot, he constantly stirred even though it was probably not necessary to go to such lengths, as there was very little to do otherwise and the manner in which the cereal spiralled around while slowly getting thicker always mesmerized him with its geometry. It was like watching as individual grains of sand were whipped into a fury by a mild tornado, or quicksand slowly solidifying under sufficient elemental force (though of course he never let it

harden to the point where it would be inedible).

The ritual continued on as it almost always did at that time on such a workday. Cooked cereal into bowl. Milk into bowl. Sliced apple into bowl. Cooked cereal with apple and milk into mouth with spoon. Masticated mixture into stomach. Another spoonful. More mastication. More digestion. Perhaps some tea from the kettle. Nourishment was indeed one of the straits that bound humanity. When one thinks about it, to create food for oneself over and over and over again just to keep oneself alive must be one of the most tedious activities in the world. Granted, one can get a lot out of cooking, and a lot out of well-prepared food, but in the end its role is not much more than putting gasoline into a vehicle; if it is insufficient, the vehicle cannot work properly, if there is too much, it begins to overflow from the tank as waste. There is, of course, more to moving a human than calories, just as there is more to moving a vehicle than hydrocarbons. Vitamins, minerals, oils, carbohydrates, proteins, fats, there was a mishmash of elements of human ingestion and digestion that were required to keep everything in good enough shape to constantly contend with reality, just as a vehicle needed oil and other fluids to go through its various pipes and filters so that its warranty could be protected.

Upon satisfying himself with his first caloric deposit of the day, he cleaned everything that was required for this ritual before doing anything else, as this too saved energy. While the dollops of food on kitchenware were still fresh, they could be wiped away with soap, water, and a little bit of kneading with a cloth. If he waited until he returned in the evening to clean up, the dollops would cement themselves to the dishes and require far more elbow grease to wipe away. Besides, his internal clock had to correspond with the external clock of public transit if he wanted to get from his present location to his next destination. He still had plenty of time with little to do, so there was no point in leaving it until later in case that he might actually come home with something swirling in his mind that demanded his attention.

Once everything was taken care of, he gathered some articles that would help him to brave the elements outside. Making straight for the door, he slipped on his shoes using a shoehorn that he always kept handy to avoid excessive struggle, squatted down to tie his shoes, stood up again, unlocked the bolt, moved his hand directly downwards to the metal orb below it, gave the orb a quick turn, and stepped into the passageway.

Maya

He fiddled in his pockets. Had he his keys or had they fallen out of his jeans somewhere when he had heaved them on the floor the night before? He rummaged around amongst a flat leather container, some folded pieces of paper, some small metal disks, and then came upon the jagged edges of some small, long, and thinly-grooved metal plates. Yes, here they were. He pulled them out and pushed one of them into the keyhole corresponding to the deadbolt. As he turned the key to secure his room, he felt a cold, oily hand adorned with a few thin metal curved surfaces slowly glide over his free hand, which was hanging limply at his right side. A weight fell softly against his back, and a soft hum and swaying motion could be felt behind him as the hand gently intertwined its fingers with his. When he had extracted his key from the deadbolt, he brought the hand holding the keys down towards the hand that was being occupied, and gently stroked it with his knuckles.

“Hello, Maya. And how are you this morning?” he said.

After putting the keys back in his pocket, he turned. The scene was as he had expected it to be. The door opposite his had been opened silently when the individual on the other side of it had heard him in the passage. As the hand removed itself from his, the individual who was responsible for it had taken a step back out of view of the hallway and into her doorway. She was leaning against it, looking up at him. She was a very small woman, and was dressed in her usual morning clothes, a red *sari* hung to slightly above her

ankles so that you could see the numerous anklets twinkling in the hallway lighting. The sari came halfway up her biceps so that you could see the doodles of henna all down her arms—arms adorned with an excessive number of bangles that ended in her slender fingers, each knuckle having a small gold band on it (save her thumb) and each nail painted a deep burgundy colour. Though short in stature, she maintained a voluptuous physique. Aside from her painted nails, she wore nothing that could be deemed Western makeup, but was rarely seen without a self-styled bindi dot on her forehead and the lines of henna on her arms and hands. She was, in short, a very attractive women, but for one shortcoming.

Growing up in a village in West Bengal under a strict patriarch, she had worked for as long as she could remember toiling in the rice fields under the sun, and then at seventeen a suitor had been chosen to marry her. She had always been an independent and combative young woman growing up and had not wanted an arranged marriage, let alone a marriage at all at such a point in her young life. Yet both families had already agreed to a dowry and, in traditional Indian fashion, she was not to see the man until her wedding night. If the wedding itself wasn't enough, however, word reached her from her friends that in order to teach her a lesson and put her in her place, she was to be married to an older, lame man for a relatively handsome dowry, an arrangement that would essentially tie her to a homestead in the village for life under the watchful eye of a tyrannical, uncaring, perverted old man. She had seen other examples of such arrangements, young women facing a lifetime of slavery and regret; that this one chance at life should be defined for them so narrowly and so shallowly.

The night before the wedding, she had attempted a daring escape from the village, but having sensed such a move, both families had kept sentinels at the roads leading out of the village, and once it was found that she had defied the orders of the families and her village, she was stopped at the outskirts of town, hauled out of the auto-rickshaw that she was sitting in, and acid had been thrown in

her face in order to leave her permanently scarred and unwanted. After the acid attack, the vehicle in which she was a passenger had been allowed to continue on to Kolkata where she was treated as best she could by the hospital staff, though her face remained horribly disfigured. By this time, she had been denounced and disowned by her family, and knew that it could only be her brain and skill set that could bring her salvation. She had spent the years after that incident working on her literacy, her command of English, and her understanding of the world. Eventually, through great effort, discipline, and application, she had managed to make a case to our country's immigration office to allow her to be relocated away from India, where her chances of leading anything close to a reasonable life would have been 'approximately nil'. She arrived with little material possessions, but her learning had sharpened her mind while her condition sharpened her wit. She exhibited a focused seriousness when she was amongst strangers, and a playful cynicism when amongst friends.

He knew all of this because although his intention when arriving at this apartment was to be as anonymous as possible, about a month after he had arrived, he had received a note written in beautiful cursive that had been pushed under the door while he had been out. Up until he opened the note, read it, and identified that it had come from the apartment across from his, he had never seen anyone coming or going through its door and had assumed the suite to be empty. The note had been written in a very cryptic style, not divulging too much information but divulging enough to make him curious about the individual who had written it. It contained a parable about a princess that had been changed into a troll by her evil family. It had gone on to describe many of the facets of the individual living there, and it was quite evident from the description that she was a well-educated, though at times wretched individual who, as the individual herself had put it, had to “skulk amongst the shadows” in order to fulfil her daily needs (he later found that this implied that she only went out very late at night to do any shopping

that was required, and other than that had managed to earn enough money as a free-lance consultant out of her own home, though in what she would never say).

The first meeting had been a rather odd one. Although he had been adamant in their correspondence of the ambiguity of human beauty and insisted that her appearance didn't much matter, when the time came for them to finally meet, he had been instructed to knock at her door and then turn around. After the sound of a door being unlatched and opened behind him, a sleeping mask was put over his face. His hand was then taken, and he was led through the door and into a small apartment, being served tea over conversation. After several hours and continuing conversation, he could perceive outside of the conversation the popping sounds of food being cooked in oil on a stove, and the unique smells of masala and turmeric implied that Indian food was likely being cooked. When this food was put before him, the lights were turned off and he was allowed to take off the mask and eat with the limited amount of ambient evening light that penetrated through the drawn curtains. During that time, still his hostess lingered behind him and would not show her face, and upon having finished eating, the mask was replaced. As the night grew on (he knew not how long) and he came to know more and more about the story behind the letter, she had eventually gone up to him and sat down very near to him.

“Do you wish to know my beauty?” she had whispered in his ear.

He had replied in a similar hushed tone: “As I have said to you before, beauty is a moot point. You are as you are.”

But she had put a finger to his lips: “Spare me your philosophical platitudes just this once. We are talking about my dignity here.”

She had taken his hand in hers and put it on the leg of her sari. She had then run it up over her sari past her hip, up her back and around her shoulder to her neck. As she continued to move his hand towards her neckline, he could identify her boney clavicle as the

tender flesh gave way to a parched, grizzled web of flesh that seemed to hang in a loose, disoriented fashion on her body, and as his hand was brought up over the right side of her face, this feeling continued. He had never before felt anything like it. To the touch, it felt like this very strange type of skin existed in ripply waves, as if she had at one point been obese and now her skin was too stretched to fit over her petite body.

“What do you think of that?”

“I have to admit that it's a sensation I've never experienced before. Something that caught me by surprise. It feels like skin, but it doesn't.”

“This is the burden of cultural expectations.”

She then cupped his chin in her hand, and stroking it briefly, brought it towards her until his lips touched an unfamiliar sensation of blistered, calloused skin. Clumsily he reached his left hand up from her shoulder, feeling for a face that he knew had to be there, recognized the shape of a cheek, and again noted the contrasting textures of smooth, young, supple skin at her shoulder and a rough, dendritic web on her face, and knew from the position of her cheek that he was kissing a forehead. He reached above the point of his kiss, placed his hand flat on her head, and slowly smoothed her hair down to the waist, where he found that it continued further, drooping over the stool on which she sat, though how far he could not tell. She drew her face away. “And what do you think of that?”

He paused to consider this question and the ramifications of a strategic response. “I'm not sure if I should say.”

“If a good-looking man such as you should not be offended by the presence of an ugly troll such as me, then I shouldn't be offended by you. Tell me what is on your mind.”

“One day you might learn how much you exaggerate who I am. But for your skin, my honest impression is that it's as if I'm holding in my arms a twenty-five year old beauty with a seventy-five year old face.”

The next thing he knew she was pulling him up from his seated position and leading him to the door. “Go now. I have already taken up too much of your time.”

“I don't understand. Have I offended you in some way?”

“No. But now we have learned a little more about each other. Perhaps we may, in time, become friends.” When he was back out in the hallway and turned toward his own door, she reached up on both sides of his face to retrieve the blindfold, after which he heard the sound of a door closing.

And that was that. He had returned to his room that night, set his head on his pillow, and once again slipped into the world of sleep and dreams.

Beauty

“It's a new day,” Maya answered his query, “and with a new day comes new experiences. Someone told me that once.”

She always insisted that she had no intention to smooth out her accent for the sake of her new country. If people felt the need to know what she had to say, they should make an effort to understand her. Her thick Bengali accent was a proud reminder of her heritage. She had said once that she was proud to be Indian, and proud to be from West Bengal, though she was not always proud of India's 'cultural traditions', especially towards women and the lower castes. During his first visit, he had sometimes struggled to understand what she was saying. Since then, he had had several other conversations with her, and it was only at rarer times that he couldn't confidently decide on the idea that she had intended to convey. In those instances, he would first decide whether there was enough ambiguity in what she said to ask her to repeat or clarify. Whenever possible, he much preferred to let her continue speaking uninterrupted. It was only when he felt that he might misunderstand where the conversation was headed and feel like he could be censured for not paying close enough attention that he would speak up.

“Truer words have never been spoken,” he replied to her with a smile. “This chap you speak of must have a decent understanding of the world.”

This reply brought a wry smile to her face. “Well, let's just not massage this chap's ego too much.”

Whenever she smiled, a path of smooth skin drew the left side of her face up into a cheerful disposition and her left eye gleamed with a coy playfulness, but the right side, which had borne the brunt of the acid splash and was in some ways like that of a leper, only contorted slightly, and in her right eye seemed a tired perpetual sadness. The contrasting rewards of movement and of expression that this effort to smile brought about on each side of her face—on one side a wealth and on the other a lack—seemed to present a sort of crystallization of the contradiction of beauty as seen through the human eye.

That initial meeting in her apartment had been followed by two other similar experiences. Tea, talk, food, touch, being escorted to the door, the mask removed, and the door shut behind him. Thus, the mystery of her appearance had been preserved in those first few instances.

“You know,” she had said to him during the third of these ensuing visits (so, including the initial one, the fourth thus far), “I could at any time do whatever I wished to do to you, so long as it involved the element of surprise. And with your eyes covered, the element of surprise is merely the element of silence. A splash of acid could leave you disfigured as I am. A knife could be plunged into your heart, a bullet put into your head.”

“That's true. But I think the risk is almost non-existent. You hardly seem a malevolent woman. The risk to my life is probably far greater every time I step into the street walking in front of cars that the lights are against. Why shouldn't the driver of one of them, out of some sort of madness or sudden massive brain aneurysm slump over onto the acceleration pedal and knock me dead? Why shouldn't a car approaching the intersection that I'm crossing at fail to stop due to

the driver being distracted or inebriated or a combination of both? If we constantly live in fear for our lives, we accomplish nothing and our lives become a carousel of repetitive predictability. There must be an implicit element of trust between people or society would cease to function. Besides, what would you have to gain from such an act aside from consequences more horrible than you've already risked everything to escape from? Considering what you've already sacrificed, prison or death doesn't seem the sort of outcome that you originally intended to invest your time into bringing about by continuing your journey from... well... not a good place.”

“I don't know. Would I need a motive? Would I need some sort of rational justification? Wouldn't my saying that I just suddenly snapped and couldn't take this curse of ugliness any more be enough?”

“But what does your condition have to do with me? If you felt this way, how would you get solace by irreversibly changing or ending my life? It would be much more likely that if you wished to definitively end your suffering that you should take your own life, not mine. Unless you wanted to live your life as a fugitive, of course. Essentially, you would be ending both our lives.”

“Yes, okay. I agree. If it should get to the point that I felt so rejected by society that I couldn't bear it anymore, I would take my own life before hurting another. I cannot blame my father for his obstinacy in observing these archaic patriarchal norms. It's not his fault, but a sad testament to the uglier side of our social evolution as Indians.” At the mention of her father, her voice seemed to crack slightly. Then, changing her tone, she continued in a different manner: “But let's look at it from the other direction. I haven't tied your hands. You can remove that mask whenever you wish. You could have seen me in all my hideousness many times already, but you have chosen not to. Is it because you wish to preserve the illusion that I am some beautiful and perfect young maiden?”

“You told me your story. I've felt your neck and your face. I've kissed your cheek. I know that your face is disfigured. I have no

reason to deceive myself. Besides, what is your hideousness but an appearance that is different from what's normal? An individual may walk through the streets of India and look upon a leper as hideous and refuse to touch him no matter the reward promised, and then walk out of the city into the forest and proclaim a tree beautiful and run his hands over the scales and curves of its trunk, and yet in reality there is little to discern between the two."

"It's normal and beautiful for a tree to have scaly ridges all over it. That is the essence of a tree. It's not normal for a human being to have tired, leathery, peeling skin, as if from an affliction or plague."

"It is if that person is nearly a hundred years old."

She sighed. "Yes, well if I was a hundred years old, I'm sure that the appearance of my face would be the least of my problems. Please stop playing devil's advocate. It comes across as if you're saying that I am petulant and superficial to treat this as a problem."

Each time he had come to her apartment and sat down with the mask on, he could feel that he was sitting on a different surface than the previous instances. The first time, he had been sat on a small ottoman, and when it had come time for him to eat, he had been told to expect a small tray to be placed on his lap so that he wouldn't inadvertently spill his food. Before she had removed the blindfold, she had joked that the mess that she would have to clean up was not worth allowing him to eat blindfolded. During the time that he could see, he felt that he wanted to maintain as much of the illusion as he could for as long as possible if for no reason than for the privacy that seemed to be so important to her, so he had tried to keep his eyes on his food and resist the temptation to look around. Either his surroundings (including her features) would be revealed to him eventually or it was not his business and he was respecting her unspoken request for privacy.

"I'm simply trying to point to the historical fact that beauty, like everything else, is a social construct, and a means to appease our own vanity, to make a case for our own worth above others. Looking

across cultures attests to this: many in India and Arabic communities see excessive weight as attractive in a woman, as it means that she is well-fed and well-cared for and would never have had to suffer the social ignominy of having to toil in the rice fields to put food on the table... or so it would appear. Yet in Western society, eating disorders are a common affliction of women as they attempt to emulate the stick figures in fashion magazines. And even within Western society this is only a recent phenomenon.”

“Yes, yes. Tell me more, Mr. Philosopher-Historian.”

It had been immediately clear from their first meeting that they had common interests and she had a very attractive mind. There were always things to talk about of mutual interest, judging by her level of engagement and knowledge of the topics. She always showed interest in what he had to say and listened quietly, but equally enjoyed goading him with sardonic comments that she would insert at times when he seemed to be getting overly giddy. It seemed to be her way of saying that she had already developed her own ideas surrounding whatever he had to say, and that his statements had already been superseded in her mind. “It is your historical role to lead,” she had once told him. “It is the wishful thinking of the male brain, backed by millennia of precedence, that makes you want to say so much and to define your world in so much detail. You want reality to be as you describe it. As a woman, I’m used to it. My historical role is to listen. Do we agree with these roles? Does the antelope agree with her role as meat to the tiger? If what you’re talking about doesn’t interest me, you will know it.”

In spite of (or more probably because of) these gently playful barbs, he would always continue. Before doing so, a slight smile would appear on his face, which signalled that he understood who was really in charge of overseeing their time together, and that he also understood that he shouldn't bore her if he wanted to continue looking forward to her company. “The portraits painted of women in the Baroque style depict plump, pale women, because this reflects their position in society, they are plump because they are never short

of a plethora of food, and they are white because they are never outside in the fields without proper dress and a sun hat. They are always barking orders and never toiling themselves.. Nowadays, plumpness symbolizes an un-ladylike propensity to stuff one's face on fast food, and whiteness symbolizes the poverty of not being able to spend lazy days on a beach in the Caribbean or at the local tanning beds. These are not objective standards of beauty but rather reflect the desire of too many people in society to belong to the highest social tier that it is possible to occupy. If it became socially fashionable to have as a partner a three-legged donkey, then three-legged donkeys would become beautiful and integrated into accepted and expected social norms as well. If horses could draw, they would draw their gods as horses. The Ancient Greeks knew this and wrote as much. It is vanity and self-worship, and nothing more.”

“I would be surprised if humanity would go so far as to worship three-legged donkeys, but I get your point. Still, there are certain things that are universal in our perceptions of beauty in another human being. A noticeable asymmetry of features, a noticeable affliction of the body, soul, or mind. These are and have always been universally shunned as inhuman character traits. You can't pretend that you'll react to listening to Beethoven as you would react to listening to a random cacophony of sounds because Beethoven has been socially accepted and validated only by popular opinion. Society goes some of the way, yes, but our inward nature and psychology goes a lot further.” Here she paused again. “Just as your inward nature and psychology want to share with me all of your lofty ideas as if I did not already deduce them myself from society...”

“Yes, Maya. I understand.” He played this role not only because he enjoyed it, but also because living alone often caused him to feel short on new content, ideas, and things to think about. Relying solely on what his own mind could muster would only get him so far. More than that, the more time he spent with Maya, the more he felt that he had met an intellectual match. He enjoyed listening to this exotic woman explain her varied viewpoints with her noticeable

Bengali accent, and he felt that she had ascertained his sense of enjoyment and equally enjoyed playing her role as his tête-à-tête opponent.

“We don’t keep furry cats as pets over scaly frogs because of social norms; we keep them because they are pleasurable to the touch and pleasurable to interact with. We do not shun lepers and baldness and missing limbs and deformities because they only afflict the lower social classes. We shun them because they are not pleasurable to look at, they are imperfections that burst through the ignorance of the idealization of the world that we carry around with us. It reminds us that we are fallible, that we are imperfect, that we are mortal and finite. That that could be us having a gangrenous limb removed due to a bacterial infection or shards from an exploding land mine. That that could be us with our face half-smashed in because someone that we had never met before had decided to drive home after a 'few too many'. And you may say that there is little difference in the scales of trees and the scales of frogs and the scales of lepers, but trees and frogs and snakes and hairless dogs do not have their psychological well-being eroded away by looks of horror when they see the face of another as it recoils, or the screams of disarmament when they tap you on the shoulder and see, as you turn towards them, a grizzled, misshapen face. There may be facets of beauty that are not objective, that are undemocratic or, like many things in society, that have remnants that cater to the egos of the the upper class, but if you think you can explain beauty solely by social norms and vanity and nothing more, then you are deceiving yourself.”

“Well, yes. You are correct, Maya. I definitely concede to you this point.”

The second and third times, he had been sat on what he assumed to be each end of a sofa where he could feel a similarly soft, large, rectangular cushion underneath him, and could rest first his left arm and then his right arm on the upholstered arm of a comfortable bit of furnishing. His mind was adept at creating mental maps of places even if he had been only a few times. When he was led

through the door on both of these two occasions after taking off the articles required only for the outside world, he was led forward and to the right, the second time being at a slightly greater angle than the first. The cushions felt similarly comfortable, as did the arms, so he assumed that the two seats were connected, though he could not be sure. Maya was always a very engaging individual and it left him little mental capacity or desire to use his hands to identify his surroundings in more detail while he risked missing what she had to say. A seat is a seat and nothing more when the sensory inputs of a captivating conversation are so much more stimulating.

“Did you really believe that beauty is solely a social construct? When you are out at a bar, do you focus on all other patrons equally, or do you look for certain features that strike you as beautiful? And is it because you want to be sure to impress your friends, or is it because of your inward desires? You don't have to play these games with your objective philosophical truths and abstract logical arguments so that you can come across as sympathetic and make me feel less inhuman. I have come to terms with who I am. I would prefer it if you did also. Otherwise, *that* becomes insulting.”

“But you must agree that it's up to the perceiver of whether to shun a lame individual or see that individual as just another human being with a lived history, yes?”

Her voice took on a gentle but haughty air, as if she had had forms of such a predictable conversation many times before (if not with others at least in her own mind as she prepared for others) and would quickly grow tired of it. “However hard you may try, you can't deny your social conditioning. You cannot deny that the lame man may interpret the reactions of the shunner as less of an affront than those of the over-sympathetic who want to make themselves feel better by showing they care. You as whatever you wish to proclaim yourself—an objective, philosophical observer if you wish to be so pretentious about it—can approach society and treat people however you like. Yet we as humans are social creatures who live in

communities. One unnaturally forced dissenting voice in a sea of billions that are the products of a historical process of social development will not magically transform each of the lame ducks of humanity into being perceived without bias just as if they were any other random individual without such observable disfigurements. The system exists whether you wish to buy into it or not.”

“Yes, but you are not lame. You are not hindered by a physical affliction. You can do anything that I can do, and you are much more intelligent than most people out there.”

“A psychological crutch is still a crutch to bear. I will be judged by society for my appearance wherever I go.”

He sat there, pondering what she had said. As a woman who had been forced to live the best years of her life struggling to get society to look past her appearance by developing her intelligence and willpower, she was likely no stranger to having to face the fact that these arguments would arise and follow her around wherever she went whether she wished it or not.

And then, while he sat there in silence, the mask was removed from his eyes, and there she was standing before him. Seeing her for the first time—so suddenly and unexpectedly—surprised him, and his first instinct was to make imperceptible any physical reactions or reflections of misgivings that he might have about her appearance. He looked at her face and could immediately see that the right side of it had indeed borne the brunt of the attack. The left side of her face had only minor, sporadic discolouration and blistering, while the right side of her face was incredibly disfigured, covered in a web of dendritic scales. The skin around her right eye looked like it had been stretched, with a flap hanging limply below it. The natural sleek light chocolate colour that dominated the left side of her face was replaced on the right side of her face by patches of colours of everything from a reddish-brown to a dark chocolate, almost black shade.

He then looked from her face to her long hair. Wavy and black, it hung down to her thighs. He could see from its reflection in the light and lack of frizz that she took great care of it and took great

pride in it. He then looked from her hair to her lower body. Although the details were obscured by her sari, he could see from the tie of the sari, as it ran down from her shoulder and looped around her waist, that she had skinny legs and a slim, shapely waistline with a small stomach and well-developed, shapely breasts. The skin on her chest that showed above her sari and below her neck seemed undamaged; her skin problems began with a few splashes at the bottom of the right side of her neck, and grew thicker up the right side of her face. She was still clutching the mask in her right hand, her arms hanging limply by her sides as she observed him observing her. He reached out for her right hand, and, in a symbolic gesture, took the mask from it and threw it to the side, drawing her down into his lap.

“You're beautiful,” he said, kissing the damaged side of her face.

She forced a weak smile. “Words. Nothing more than words. If there is anything I have learned about the opposite sex, it's that men are always eager to say what they think will get them what they want.”

They sat there for several minutes, with his left arm around her back, he clutched her to him, feeling her gnarled right cheek against the left side of his face. With his right hand, he played with her right hand, turning it over in his hand, tracing the henna designs with his thumb. Then, after toying with her hand a little further, he clasped her hand in his, and there they sat, without a word, looking out over the dimly lit room towards the thick curtains obscuring what went on beyond the walls of her apartment, neither making a move. Then, after about five minutes of exploring her hands and unshaven stubbled arms, feeling the connection of her body with his, he stirred. He pulled her hand towards his mouth and kissed it. He turned his face to hers and kissed the side of her face. “I must go now. The land of sleep and dreams calls out to me.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“For what?”

“For being you.”

“But who else could I be...”

She put her finger to his lips, pulled his head toward hers, and whispered in his ear. “Do you ever step out of this objective robotic calculating machine and into the real world?” and then planted a kiss on his forehead. Slowly she got to her feet and he did the same. He looked down at her, smiled, and offered his hand. She looked up at him, and, reservedly and bashfully, returned his smile and placed her hand in his. Without speaking, they walked to the door. She opened it for him and he stepped into the hall, her hand still in his. She tugged him slightly so that the momentum from the applied force turned him around to face her as she leaned slightly against the door frame. In the higher intensity light of the hallway passage, he could see her more clearly than he could in the dimly lit room.

“So... all this objective philosophical mumbo-jumbo aside, tell me what you really think.”

“Well...” he said, a smile slowly spreading across his face, “you have incredibly delicate, and beautifully adorned hands, your hair is immaculately beautiful, and wow... that figure and those breasts...”

She laughed. “So you are a male human being after all. I was beginning to worry that for *your* sins against *your* family that you had been castrated,” and, after looking down between his legs, put her henna-adorned right hand with all its bangles up in front of her eyes and let a slight chuckle escape from her thick brown lips. “You see? It's not their words that betray men, it's their nature.” She flashed him a smile, and withdrew into her apartment, closing and latching the door behind him.

Once she had disappeared, he went into his room and returned to sleep.

Hiding

“You know,” he said to Maya, “you repeat that a new day brings the opportunity for new experiences, but you don't exactly try to push the

boundaries of that opportunity.”

“I have many opportunities that present themselves within my apartment. And I do go out from time to time. You know that. I have no slave and I must survive somehow. Food does not magically appear. Clothing does not magically appear. Hygiene products do not magically appear. Cleaning products do not magically appear. I am a human being just like you. I create waste. I create messes. I wear things out. I cook. I wash. I take care of myself as best as I can. Your magical thinking will not change my apartment into a palace with servants.”

“Well, I suppose you could say that there are an almost infinite number of possibilities if you counted each footfall on the carpet as being different than one that had landed a hair's width away, but the variety of those experiences isn't particularly appealing, is it?”

“Ha. Is that supposed to be funny? You think that I'm speaking of experiences as if I am pursuing some exhaustive logical quest? I will have you know, sir, that since that incident, I have been forced to learn to modify my life and what I expect to get out of it, and through that I have managed to devise many ways to make the most of the time I am forced to spend in isolation. I bet my skills at occupying my time alone are far more advanced than yours. Necessity is the mother of invention, as they say.”

“But my point is why do you spend so much time alone?”

“I have my reasons, some of which are apparent, some of which are not. I don't feel the need to go into detailed justifications of how and why I live my life the way that I do.”

She had told him before of the manner in which she had to be creative when coming up with ways to pass the hours that she spent in her apartment by herself. If she had other visitors aside from him, he wasn't aware of it. She had told him once that aside from the clerks at the shops where she would go out at night to buy her food, wine, and other things that she required, she basically saw no one else but him. It had been during one evening when they had been

conversing over amounts of wine that tended to loosen tongues and weaken personal barriers that conversations went further than usual.

Whenever he visited, she would allow only natural light into the room until it got to the point where the darkness could be bad for the eyes. At that point, she would turn on a lamp, but swivelled it up to the ceiling or down to the floor, relying as much as possible on ambient rather than direct light. He was sitting on the small ottoman that she had sat him down on for their first meeting and was sitting in front of him on the floor facing away, her dark skin contrasting with the white carpet despite the general lack of light in the room. Her legs were crossed in the *lotus* position, but while she had told him of the importance of maintaining a straight back and good posture, she was leaning some of her weight against the ottoman between his legs.

Meditation and yoga, she had told him, was one of the ways in which she spent a lot of her time, as these were Indian traditions and suited her needs of having to occupy herself alone. She had spoken about how it had become one of her primary refuges in the immediate aftermath of the acid incident when trying to come to terms with the ugly reality that her life was now faced with. It continued to be a calming influence over the years and had helped to develop in her the psychological resistance to continue to bravely face each coming day, knowing the profound and irreversible shadow that this incident continued to cast over her life.

“Maya,” he had said to her, while gently running his hands through her hair, “without those notes that you sent me, I would likely never know of your existence. Do you make these attempts to reach out to other people often?”

She sighed. “Well, you have to understand that it is not easy, deciding what to do.”

“Yes, but if you send out notices and vet the replies, you could probably meet several people like me that would be willing to spend time with you.”

“And how does one tell how such an encounter is going to end up? It's not like the situation of a 'normal' person where, upon the rejection of a friendship, you can simply say 'no matter, there will be others'. You can't help but feel in your heart that the rejection is because they see you as inhuman, some hideous alien creature that doesn't belong in public, or even in this world at all. In my situation, rejection can be quite devastating. It can bring you to the point of feeling the need to take very drastic measures, because you begin to believe it yourself. That you don't belong here, that you don't belong anywhere.

“There was one instance, in my previous place. I had lived in that place for several years since I had first come here from India. At that time, I lived in an area that had a lot of other immigrants, and hence, a fair number of Muslims. I decided that although I couldn't bring myself to show my face in public, it wouldn't be too difficult to hide my face from public by wearing a *niqab* so that anyone who looked at me would assume I was a Muslim with a reason for covering my face. I would carefully wrap my face so that only a small part around my eyes could be seen, apply makeup around my right eye to make it look as natural as I could, and go out in the evening hours when the darkness made it so that people would have to look very closely and deliberately to know that anything about me was different.

“When going out, I would at times pass people in the corridor. When outside, I would pass others in the streets, in the shops. Some, especially in the hallways of the building, would nod to me and smile. They would speak briefly with me, give random invitations to me to join them for dinner in the comforts of their homes. I declined all these invites, but at least I felt more socially accepted. I was quite surprised that people in this country didn't seem to treat me much differently than anyone else even on the rare occasions when I ventured outside of the community. There were many women in the community that wore the *hijab*, and although being a Muslim woman who wore the *niqab*... or, at least, *appearing*

to be so... well, I suppose you wouldn't say it was normal or commonplace, but it was understood and accepted as the way in which I chose to live. Yes, I had to cope with a little harassment here and there, but I made sure to go where there were many people around so that I would have at least the illusion of the protection of many bystanders if something should go wrong.

“There was one woman in particular who lived a few doors up the corridor from me. We would pass each other in the corridor and get into conversation. She liked to talk about herself. She was from Pakistan, and lived there with her brother, which may or may not be taboo in Muslim circles: from what I know an adult woman is never supposed to live alone with another man unless he is her husband. Maybe that is only upheld in stricter societies. But in this case her parents had sent them over from Pakistan to try to make a better life for themselves away from the violence in Karachi, and had not had enough money or justification for the immigration authorities to find separate living quarters for them. And besides, she told me that her parents felt that it was better that her brother be there to keep an eye on her than it was for her to live alone.

“She extended numerous invitations to me to come to visit her. She assured me that her brother spent the weekdays out of town, and so I could come one weekend when he wasn't there and it wouldn't be awkward for me. I had to keep coming up with excuses not to accept her invitation because I assumed that if I visited, it would be expected as a sign of mutual respect that our visit would take place uncovered, and I felt that if she knew the truth about me, well the results wouldn't be good. Not only would she see my face, but maybe also she would surmise soon enough that my referring to myself as 'Bengali' didn't mean that I was a Bangladeshi Muslim. That in fact I was from India and wasn't a Muslim at all, and she might get offended or accuse me of heresy or of bringing disrepute to Islam, and doubly so if she found out that I was from a Hindu Indian background. I know you are aware of at least some of the tension between our peoples. And in my case in particular, well... when you

are used to rejection and disappointment, you become quite pessimistic about social outcomes.

“Anyway, as this was going on, she became more and more friendly with me. We began to speak much more informally, and most of our exchanges were in Hindi-Urdu. At one point when I had met her at my doorway on a weekend, she insisted that I briefly come to her apartment to meet her brother, who was in town from work. She had told me that leaving Pakistan had not been so good for him, and that he had had trouble coping with being here; that he had felt and expressed a certain sense of frustration about being sent far away from his parents to a supposed land of opportunity, and yet all he had to show for it was long hours working as a cleaner away from the city. But he was a nice young man, she insisted, very handsome and very devoted to Islam. I tried to insist that I shouldn't as, of course, I was worried that if he took a liking to me things could suddenly get complicated. But she was insistent, and so I said that I would. She took me to her apartment. It was very well-kept and her brother was there, cooking some food. We were introduced. Her brother, Farooq, was indeed a tall, good-looking man, with a nice smile and a calm, easy demeanour about him. He said that he was very pleased to meet me, that he had heard from his sister about me, and said that I shouldn't be so discourteous as to continue to reject the invitations to come to their apartment. I told him that I was a little shy, especially because there were much fewer Bengalis around than Pakistanis, but he simply reminded me that as recently as 1971 we had been from the same country, and that wherever we were from, we were still Muslims and should do what we could to feel welcome and make others feel welcome and strengthen our community. To this I made no reply but made a shallow bow in his direction (I didn't really know what else to do) and sat with her for a short time to speak about a few random things as we would in the hallway. At the first opportunity that it didn't seem impolite, I thanked the two for their courtesy and excused myself to go back to my apartment.

“And... well, anyway, uh...,” here he noticed her voice cracked slightly, “sorry, you must be bored.”

“Not at all,” he replied, “I’m very interested. What goes on behind the veils of society is very important.” He gently placed one of his hands on her disfigured cheek and started stroking it. “Would you like me to refill your glass?”

“Ummm... well... yes, perhaps I’ll need it. Thank you.”

He got up, picked up his empty glass, took her empty glass in his other hand, and walked to the kitchen counter where the opened bottle of South African merlot was still a third full. After carefully refilling both glasses, he carried them back into the dimly lit room, one in each hand. He could see that she was staring forward at nothing in particular as if preoccupied by something.

“Here you are.” He bent down and offered her a glass.

She turned her face towards him, and he could see a few tears glistening in the light of the dimly lit lamp. “Thank you,” she whispered to him, her hand touching his.

As he released the glass, he reassured her. “It’s fine, you don’t have to continue if you don’t want to.”

“No, it’s okay. I’ve already come this far.” She smiled weakly with her eyes. “Maybe this sort of thing is considered healthy.”

He took his seat again on the ottoman, took a sip of wine, and replaced his glass on the table. She also took a couple of sips and then raised it above her head in his direction. After taking the glass from her and placing it on the table next to his, he again took up her hair in his hands.

“The following Saturday, I was lying in bed reading. It was late, maybe one or two in the morning, when I heard what I thought was a knock at the door, though it was almost imperceptible. I put down my book, listened, and heard a faint but regular tapping at the door. I got out of bed, put on my sari, and went to the door, as the tapping grew louder and more frequent. I looked through the peephole. Standing there was Farooq. He knocked again. I told him through the door that it was very late and shouldn’t he be going to

bed. But he told me that he had 'thought about me often over the past week' and insisted that he see me briefly. I tried to get him away, repeating to him the lateness of the hour, promising to come by the next day and pleading with him to just go to sleep. But he insisted. He said that it was only to 'look into my beautiful eyes briefly' and that would be all. In order to get him away as quickly as possible, I relented. I unlocked the bolt, and, with the chain still fastened, I opened the door slightly, showing only a small part of the left side of my face. I said that now that he had seen me, he should go. I pleaded with him again to go to sleep, telling him that his sister was probably worried about him and wondering where he was and that he shouldn't want to upset her. But then he told me that he wanted me to let him into my apartment. I told him that he knew I couldn't do that. That it wasn't right. That it ran counter to Muslim beliefs that I should allow a male stranger into my apartment. He insisted that he wasn't a stranger, that we were actually like family anyway. I pleaded with him some more to leave. But as I pulled my head away from the gap to close the door, he suddenly shot his foot forward and wedged the bottom of the door open with his boot. It was only when he brought his face closer to mine that I could smell the stench of alcohol and sweat on his breath and on his clothes. Seeing his face up close, it seemed to have suddenly contorted into one of a maniac. He slammed his shoulder against the door, breaking the chain and knocking me down. When I looked up, he was standing over me, but the look of treachery on his face had changed to a look of horror. He could see my disfigured face in the entrance light. He leaned down, grabbed me by the hair, pulled my head up and, turning my face away, hurled all sorts of insults at me, calling me a deceitful witch that Allah had cursed, that I was trying to use my spells to lure him to me. I was in so much shock, I couldn't scream. He dragged me toward one of my porcelain *Ganesh* idols and with his free hand grabbed it and hurled it at the floor, smashing it into pieces. He said that I was not a woman but an evil spirit, a heretic, a hideous monster, and all sorts of other horrible things. And, sensing that

something worse was about to come, I turned towards him and brought my arms up to protect my face just as he began to rain down terrible blows on my face and my body. It was then that I found my voice and I began to scream, at which point he let go of me, and ran off back into the passage, leaving me there bruised and battered.”

She paused for what seemed like an eternity, and in the silence, he contemplated all that she had told him. Although she faced away from him, he could hear the faint sound of muffled sobs. He could only volunteer a weak statement. “I really don't know what to say.”

“But that's not the worst of it. There is only so much damage another can do. We do far worse to ourselves. Lying there in that state was the most difficult moment in my life. I had worked so hard to build up these relationships with others near me, even if they were only superficial, and in one moment they had all been erased. I was alone again. I knew that there was no way I could stay there, that I had been found out, that rumours would swirl. I couldn't face anyone anymore. But where could I go? It would be this all over again, no matter where I went. People aren't inherently evil. If you walk about in the slums of India or Africa or Asia or Europe or Latin America, you would see children run up to you smiling and laughing with great joy on their faces, willing to embrace you with all of the naive love that they have within their hearts. It is only through their social conditioning and the embellishment of the importance of individualism and competition that they build up barriers, stereotypes, mistrust, stigmatization, and a penchant to do violence to things that they don't understand. And reflecting on that moment reinforced completely what I had known for so many years. This was my reality. This was my curse. This is what I would face everywhere: barriers, stereotypes, mistrust, violence.”

She looked up at him. Tears were streaming from her eyes. “What could I do but escape? It would be so easy. I didn't bother to lock the door. I didn't bother to wash up. I didn't care. In that moment, I only wanted to escape. I went to the kitchen and selected a

long knife from the drawer and brought it with me to my room. And I lay there in bed, with this knife in my hand. feeling the cold metal against my skin, gently scratching little shapes on my chest with the point, knowing in my mind that all I would have to do is apply a certain amount of downward force to this knife, and I would be free of all my suffering. I would be free of all of society's suffering. It was so simple. Just push the knife into my chest. It was all I had to do. I lay there for hours, my mind a total mess. It was because of me and my rebellious nature that this incident that had changed my life forever had come to pass. I couldn't change what I had done. But I could change where I was by just ending it all. Why couldn't I bring myself to do it? Why was I still alive? Why hadn't I done it yet?

“Eventually, I must have fallen asleep, because when I woke up the next morning the building manager was standing over me. I looked over and saw the knife on my bedside table. Despite the chaos, he calmly explained to me that someone had reported what they thought was a case of domestic violence in the building the night before, and when he had found the door to my apartment unlocked and saw the smears of blood in the middle of the floor, he had found me lying there in bed, asleep with a knife lying on top of the blankets. He asked me what had happened, but I was deliberately sketchy on details. I didn't care about bringing a complaint against this man. He asked what had happened to my face and whether I needed to go to the hospital, but I said that no, I was okay. Immediately I also said that I could no longer stay there. I told him that it was because I feared for my life, and that was true even though the greatest fear was actually of myself, not someone else. Eventually after a few days, they contacted the government authority in charge of immigrant housing, and they moved me to this apartment. And that is how I came to be here.”

He replied almost immediately, as if he had been waiting for her to finish so that he might ask her a pertinent question. “I'm sorry, I realize that this is probably a rather unfeeling question at this point,

but why did you feel the need to stoop so low to deceit to try to meet others?"

"Deceit!? Where in all of this was I deceitful?" her voice was tinged with a tone of angry annoyance. "The niqab is not some sacred artifact that represents Islam. It represents Islam's belief that women should cover themselves from the prying eyes of men, and what was I doing but covering myself from prying eyes? I said that I was Bengali. Whether I come from Hindu roots in West Bengal or Islamic roots in East Bengal, I am still Bengali. It was not me who said I was Muslim, it was they who assumed it from my outward appearance. Do we say that Pakistanis who are mistaken for Indians practice deceit? Do we say that Indian Christians that are mistaken for Indian Hindus practice deceit? No. The observer looks, the observer perceives, and the observer judges based on preconditioned notions of what a 'normal' Pakistani or a 'normal' Indian or a 'normal' Christian or a 'normal' Hindu or a 'normal' Muslim looks like. Society is such that we are assumed to be anything but a human being."

"Yes, I suppose so. Still, you could have said something."

"Like what? 'I'm actually not a Muslim, I'm a Hindu. I only wear this because I'm an acid victim'? You say this as if you think that this is easy, that she's going to say 'oh it's alright, I understand'. Do you realize the stigma attached to acid victims? Here we are largely shunned because of superficial cares: skin, scars, splash spots, that we don't look normal. But in South Asia, an acid victim is seen by conservatives as a symbol of a form of treason or heresy, a symbol of defiance of social and cultural norms. I doubt this woman would have focused on my appearance, but rather on what it symbolizes. I expected that if I had said something, I would have either been shunned out of hand, or interrogated, accosted, and then been shunned. As it was, I had done nothing wrong by continuing as I had been, and I avoided the potential of a very ugly situation. As soon as word got out, my niqab would have been meaningless, because everybody around me would know what was underneath. I

was defending my own interests just like everybody else does. And now you're forcing me to defend them against you.”

“I’m sorry. I didn't think of it from that perspective.

Westerners will see a disfigurement, judge the aesthetics of appearance and, at most, dismiss the underlying story as one that is 'not our business'. But within the culture where this occurs, the cultural symbolism obviously dominates over simple aesthetics, and you could be treated as anything from an outcast to a criminal.”

“Yes. As I said, it’s easy to talk. It may not be so difficult from an uncultured”—she emphasized this word—“perspective as yours to dismiss it as 'a minor superficial inconvenience'. But try to live one day like this and you would get a much clearer view of how 'normal' feels to me...”

“But then... so why did you send me those notes?”

“I was alone. I couldn't take it anymore. I had seen you a few times through the peephole. I had heard a few conversations in the corridor. You seemed courteous to people, you often came home with books under your arm. I felt trapped. If not you, then who? And if no one else, then why continue on? There is only so much hope you can get out of self-isolation and social exclusion before you become a prisoner of your own mind and yearn only for your own execution.”

He put his finger to his chin and looked at her, trying to find the right words to summarize and synthesize what this could mean. “I suppose I would say the problem is that without a social context, one is nothing, and yet sometimes society becomes more than one can bear.”

She turned her face towards him and forced a smile through bumpy lips that glistened in the ambient light of the lamp. “Yes. I suppose it's something like that.” Her voice trailed off as she turned her face to the floor and started fidgeting with the carpet.

“Maya, it's been a long night. You have had quite a bit to drink. You are probably exhausted from telling me this story and

from everything that has come flooding back to you. I should go and you should get some sleep.”

“Yes, you are right. I am very tired. But please don't go. Stay near me tonight. I don't want to have to face this night alone.”

Almost automatically, he took his hands that had been busy with her hair and, applying slight pressure to the sides of her face so that he could manipulate her head, tilted it back towards him a little. In the back of his mind, he was already thinking about where this could lead.

“If it is as you wish,” he said, as he brought his lips to the mass of bumpy protrusions on her forehead, and kissed it.

What if he became attached to this woman? But, thinking about his own life, would that really be so bad?

Play

That night, when she had told him not to leave, he felt that even breaking the continuity by going back to his apartment to prepare himself for sleep would be something of an affront to Maya and ruin the current situation. After she had made her request, he downed the last bit of his wine, went into her bathroom, and after emptying a large amount of wine from his bladder, dabbed some toothpaste onto his right index finger and tried to clean his teeth as best he could. He dolloped another pea-sized ball of toothpaste onto his finger, swished it around in his month to freshen his breath, and then when finished cupped his hands under the faucet and swirled his mouth with water before spitting it back into the sink. Splashing a little water around the basin, he tried to clear the white spots of regurgitated toothpaste so as to leave the sink as he had found it.

He wasn't sure what to glean about what Maya might be expecting by her asking him to stay with her the night. There was no way to truly understand what she meant by not wanting to face the night alone. Was she frightened? Sad? Lonely? Did she fear his rejection after she had bared her soul to him and worried about

starting from the beginning again? As she was his neighbour, and it seemed that they had a burgeoning friendship that might turn into him seeing her on a regular basis, he wondered about the consequences of sex should the situation get that far. Would she request it from him? If she didn't, would he mention the possibility to her? He tried to push these thoughts out of his mind. She decides what goes on in her space. Speak up, but only if necessary. Otherwise, just try to go with the flow.

All that aside, however, the thing that made him pause for thought the most was how their relationship would be after the fact. If it escalated to a serious level of intimacy, a box would be opened that could not be closed again. Would it become a regular thing? Would she be looking long-term to something more close, more intimate, more exclusive? If so, how would he be able to push her away again without her taking it incredibly personally? As Maya seemed an incredibly vulnerable woman, it might not be a situation he would like to get into. Again, he tried to silence his mind from its calculations of future outcomes and their consequences. The only way to have nothing to worry about is to create nothing to worry about. Speak up, but only if necessary. Otherwise, just try to go with the flow. The future will be what it is.

When he returned to take up his spot on the ottoman behind her, she was kneeling on the white carpet and now oriented towards him. She was slumped over his seat, with her head resting on her arms. He slowly crept across the floor to her and ran his index finger down her smooth cheek.

“Maya,” he whispered, bending down to the level of her ear, “Maya, come. We should get some sleep.”

She lifted her head and turned it towards him. “Oh, you're still here?” The corners of her mouth turned up into a sleepy smile. “I was worried that you had left me.” She leaned against him and wrapped her arms around his neck.

Given her fatigue, alcohol intake, and the fact that she hadn't been standing for awhile, he thought it best to err on the side of

caution that she might not be able to maintain her balance if she tried to stand independently. He put his arms around her back, and from a kneeling position, pulled her up onto her feet so that she was leaning her weight against him, pushing against the side of his face. He got to his feet while still taking most of her weight, and walked her towards the bathroom.

She opened her eyes briefly and saw where he was leading her. "Sleep," she said to him.

"It's probably for the best that you get rid of some of that wine first," he whispered to her.

He walked into the bathroom and helped to prop her down onto the toilet. Then he stepped away and turned around. He heard some fiddling with clothes, the chafing sound of underwear being pulled down over legs, and then fluid splashing into fluid, first a steady stream, and then, slowly, a drip, drip, drip. Then he heard the tearing sound of perforated toilet paper, the sound of paper against skin, the sound again of underwear against legs, and then the sound of a toilet flushing.

"I'm done."

He turned back around and saw her still sitting on the toilet, looking at him with the same sleepy smile still on her face. "You see?" he said to her. "Wasn't that a good idea?"

"You and your ideas," she replied, her smile widening further, her eyes dancing faster, her Bengali accent slurring more sharply. Then she extended her arms towards him. "Now come and help the cripple."

He walked to her and lifted her up against him, again supporting most her weight. As he emerged from the bathroom (pulling her along after as they couldn't both fit through the door at the same time), she pointed across him to a closed door on the right. "Sleep."

He opened the door and then escorted her into the bedroom. Overall it was small, with most of the floor taken up by a queen-sized bed. The light pink sateen sheets and dark red down blanket

were pulled back on the left side where she must have emerged from sleep that morning. A window stretched upwards from about a foot above the curved wooden headboard, which itself was etched with typical patterns of branches and leaves. The window was covered by a curtain that matched the crimson shade of the blanket. The only other thing that appeared to be in the room was a small white table with a single drawer on the side of the bed with a lamp, a digital alarm clock, and two books, the larger one stacked upon the smaller. Then when he looked back towards the other corner of the room on his left, he saw a mahogany chest of four vertically stacked drawers. She released herself from his grasp and leaned against the dresser.

“You first.”

She was standing in the corner against the dresser looking at him with friendly malice, making him very self-conscious about the impression he would be making by choosing the extent of his undress. He walked over to the side of the bed with the undisturbed sheets, sat down on the mattress, and took off his socks and put them against the wall. Although he wasn't sure about the connotations of removing his jeans, he really didn't want to sleep with coins and keys stabbing into him through his pockets, so he unbuckled, unbuttoned, unzipped, and slowly pulled down his jeans as he looked over at her still watching him, the smile never leaving her face. He pushed his jeans into the corner with his socks and, in his T-shirt and underwear, he pulled back the sheet and blanket and, not taking his eyes off her, crawled into the bed.

After seeing that he was in position, she pointed an accusatory finger at him. “Don't look.” He rolled over and faced the wall and heard from behind him the sound of clothes sliding against clothes and then the soft thud of a heavy piece of clothing falling to the floor. He heard the tinkling of jewelry and the clatter of a number of pieces of metal being dropped haphazardly onto a wooden surface. Then he heard her feet sliding on the carpet as she moved toward the bed, followed by the sound and feel of someone else getting onto the mattress behind him. Cold hands at his sides inserted themselves

under the bottom of his T-shirt and lifted it up. “You don't need this,” came the voice from behind him. He manoeuvred himself out of the shirt as it was being lifted up over his head, felt it release itself from him all on its own, and then a moment later saw it fly over him and into the corner with his other clothes.

“Now come to me” was the casual order, jerking on his naked right arm to roll him towards her. He turned onto his back, and looked in her direction. She was lying on her side, facing him but propped on her left elbow. The sheet was draped over her shoulder and chest, though the blanket had slipped further down. He reached his arm under her side, in behind her long hair, and slid it up her back, pulling her towards him. With half of her body draped over half of his body, he felt her smooth skin against his, her arm wrapped loosely around his abdomen, her naked breasts against his torso and side, and her right foot rubbing the inside of his calf. She leaned in and kissed him on the corner of his lips. “Thank you.”

He turned towards her and kissed her forehead, the fingers of his free hand tracing a line from her shoulder down her side to her waist (where he found that she wasn't completely naked) and down the outside of her thigh to her knee.

“May I explore you more?” he whispered in her ear. She whispered back in turn. “You can play a little, but you must respect my decency.”

He reached further behind her to trace the ridges of her spine all the way down to her tailbone, and then brought his hand back to her side, cupping it around the front of her stomach so that its progress was obstructed by her breast. He cupped the mass of flesh and muscle in his hand.

“If there is one universal constant,” she whispered, seemingly to no one in particular with a mischievous tone in her voice, “it's that men like breasts. But that's ok. Women do, too.”

As he thumbed her nipple, and it stiffened under his caresses, her breath began to shorten, and a muffled “mmm...” escaped from her lips. He pulled his head under the sheets, drew her body towards

him and flicked his tongue against the nipple, then used it to trace the shape of the areola. She put her arms around his head and he could feel her body begin to sway slightly and her breath get shallower. He again slid his hand down her side but this time upon reaching her waist he inserted his fingers into the band of her underwear. He felt a hand gently grab his wrist and pull it away. “No, no, no... respect my decency.” He let his arm go limp and let his hand be pulled away without resistance as it was placed back on the bed behind her. He kissed her nipple and then moved his lips up her chest, kissing it as he went, and then, when he reached her neck, he proceeded with his kisses along the right side of her neck, feeling the strange scaly texture of the remnants of the acid burns against his lips. The only analogy he could think to make was that it felt as if he was kissing the rough, randomly cracked dry bark of an oak tree. He kissed up her cheek to her ear, kissed it, and whispered into it. “You are beautiful.” His kisses led back across her cheeks to her mouth, where he planted a firm, tender kiss on her lips. He slowly pulled his head away from her face and looked into her eyes.

“Thank you,” she whispered to him, her eyes half-closed. “Let’s sleep now. I’m too tired.” She extended a quick peck to his lips.

He pulled her once again to him and kissed her forehead. “Sleep now, Maya. Your dreamworld awaits you.”

Masks

When he awoke in the night, the first thing that was abundantly clear to him was that it was not a night like most other nights. He opened his eyes and as they adjusted to the darkness, he could see a wall that was farther from him than his was, a ceiling that was red, and no window within view. A dresser stood in the far corner, not his dresser, and not in his dresser’s accustomed place. And his right side was being weighed down by a heavy object. A heavy smooth, warm object that he could hear breathing out his right ear. Usually when he

would wake up, he prevented himself from stirring as long as possible only in order to comply with his usual irrelevant exercise of testing the willpower of mind over body. But in this case, he restrained himself in order not to disturb the being lying next to him. There he lay for several minutes, until the nerve fibres in his left calf could no longer bear being ignored, and he had to bend his body slightly so that he could rub the point of bother. Sensing this movement of his in its semiconscious state, the being next to him stirred also.

“Hmmm?” she volunteered, raising the silhouette of her head and looking at him briefly before lowering it back onto his shoulder. “Oh, hello, good morning, *namaste*. I am happy to know that last night wasn't a dream.” She wrapped her arm a little tighter around his abdomen and snuggled her body closer to his.

“Well it's not really morning yet. It's...” he raised his head in order to try to read the red digits on the clock on the small table behind her, “it's only four.” Lowering himself, he again met her gaze. “Okay, I guess technically it's morning but it's not yet get out of bed morning. Unless you declare that it is so.”

“I'm too comfortable for get out of bed morning.”

He stroked her scarred cheek with the back of his hand, then ran his hand through the hair on the top of her head.

“How do you feel? How's your head?” he asked her. “You had a bit to drink last night.”

“Mmmm...” she murmured, lightly tracing her finger over his chest, “my head hurts a little. Too much wine. How about you?”

“I feel okay. Though I might have to empty my bladder at some point in the near future.”

She laid her head down on him again and nuzzled a little into his neck. He admitted “I can't decide what's more important. The pounding in my bladder or snuggling against this warm creature next to me.”

“If you go, I'll go. Then we can come back and both be comfortable. But you first.”

“Nooooo... I went first last time, remember? It's your turn to go first.”

She propped herself on her elbow and looked at him. “You drive a hard bargain, sir.” His eyes had adjusted fairly well to the minimal light that seeped in under the curtains from the streetlamps outside, and she noticed from the small amount of reflection in his eyes that he couldn't help himself but sneak a glance at her bare breasts dangling underneath the sheet, she added “hmmm... distracted are we?” She cupped her hands over her breasts and rolled away from him to the edge of the bed. As she stood up and, still with her hands covering her breasts, turned towards him, he could build an almost complete silhouetted profile of her body. She did indeed have a very shapely figure. Her back and bottom were well-sculpted and together formed a slim hourglass figure, while when she turned around he could see below her very minimal piece of clothing that her legs were slender but still had some muscle to them, while above it her stomach was quite well-toned. “And what do you think you're looking at? You know the rules. No peeking.”

“Yes, of course,” he said, rolling over. “You must excuse the memory lapse. It happens sometimes.”

“I'll bet it does,” she replied provocatively as she exited the room.

When he heard the toilet flush and then the door open to announce her return a few minutes later, he pushed the covers to the side. “Wait,” she said when she saw this, “you have to make me warm first.” He could hear her feet hitting the floor harder and in more rapid succession than before as she hurried to get back to the warmth of the bed. He felt the ripple of the bed and the pulling of blankets as she slid in behind him. He felt a cold hand grab his shoulder and he turned towards her. She snuggled her icy body against him and he wrapped his arms around her. She acknowledged her approval of this with an “mmm...” and he pulled the blanket over her shoulder and rubbed her back with his hands.

“You know, cold shock isn't good for a full bladder. So unless you want to get wet as well as warm, I think I should probably go. And very soon.”

“Ok, but hurry back.” He released his grip on her, turned over, pulled the covers away and padded away to the bathroom.

As he stood there, he thought about the situation. When he had seen the rough details of her face for the first time again in the morning under the dim light, he thought of the way in which familiarity and lowered sensory filters in proportion to heightened mental fatigue tends to lend itself to a certain softening of visual perception (of course, alcohol intake can also contribute substantially to this). Last night, he had been with Maya. This morning, he was with a female Bengali who had a very shapely body but whose face had been disfigured by acid several years ago. Was she still as beautiful as he had told her last night? Had he ever actually believed that she was beautiful, or was he only saying this out of sympathy. Was it “words, nothing more than words,” as she had said when he had called her beautiful upon seeing her face for the first time? He shook this doubt from his mind. Whatever anyone would say and however she might look, she was still a human being with human needs and desires like everyone else; the need to be loved, to be socially accepted rather than shunned and, in general, to feel able to make a contribution to the social discourse. In other words, to be appreciated and deemed important to others. Her ability to meet those needs had been seriously compensated by others, with her only fault being trying to exercise her independence. And she had done this by attempting a bold escape from a future that would have involved severe restrictions being imposed on her that she rejected, a future that she had every right to reject as a conscious, autonomous, thinking, intelligent human being.

And of course, he could not deny the peculiarity of a natural human disposition in all of this. It was only a very small percentage of her body that had been compensated. The rest of her body remained unaffected. Her skin everywhere else was of a beautiful

tone both to the eyes and to the touch. The extent of her predicament was only such because human beings are hard-wired to give precedence to facial features over almost anything else in terms of aesthetic judgement and because of the need to recognize others. If you gave a person mugshots of bears or coyotes or chimpanzees, without careful and deliberate study it would invariably be very difficult for that person to tell the difference between two animals of the same species from facial features alone. If you place a white person in Africa or Asia, they will also find it difficult to discern between others because their ability to distinguish important facial details in other races is not well-established. Amongst our own race, we are more perceptive of distinguishing features only because we've spent our lives amongst them, subconsciously learning the main facial attributes that discern two different people; we might say "oh, that guy has a bigger nose" or "that woman has fleshier cheeks" or "that child has rounder eyes".

If it had been Maya's back that had been burned, only those that she allowed into an exclusive inner circle would ever really notice, and even if it had been something more exposed like a hand or an arm, it would likely be treated with sympathy more than anything else simply because no one goes around identifying people or judging their overall aesthetic worth by their hands. An individual would tend to put much greater aesthetic value on one with stubby, rough hands but a slender, well-chiseled face than another whose hands were perfect but whose face was overly fleshy and covered with pockmarks. Although he had tried to maintain a neutral position in the conversation with Maya, she had made it clear that she was under no such illusions.

Thus, Maya had been condemned to always be recognizable as "that woman with one side of her face badly burnt" and all else about her would be secondary to that. There is a reason that the success of an acid attack (that is, success in the eyes of the assailant, but a failure within the context of humankind) is proportional to the damage it causes to an individual's face. The best way to punish

someone is to compel society to turn away and shun. Acid attacks have one purpose, and that is to irrevocably punish those who defy social and cultural norms or traditions that they refuse to be a part of. A history of patriarchal dominance (though matriarchal systems do exist amongst some human clans) implies that women are almost exclusively the victims.

These reflections made it so that when he re-entered the room, he did so in a slightly different headspace than he had left. He had entered quietly and saw that Maya had already fallen back asleep. Instead of going immediately to join her, he stood at the doorway letting his eyes again adjust to the dimness of the room and looked at the woman sleeping on her back before him. The blanket was pulled up under her armpits and rose to a peak in the middle of her chest while her arms were flayed out randomly on top of it. The blankets on his side of the bed had been straightened so that her body would be better insulated from the cold air of the room. Her head, in the middle of the pillow, was slightly cocked to the left, in the direction where he had been several minutes before, revealing to the world the full extent of the fury that her defiance had engendered in the powers-that-be of a small village on the other side of the world. No matter how her face might want to express her inner feelings it would always be an asymmetric expression; the right side of it contorted awkwardly under the restrictions imposed by the way in which her skin had healed over in response to trauma.

If one was to take the most natural and brutally honest opinion of the appearance of her face, metaphor would lead one to compare it to the villainous creatures of mythology, the orcs and goblins whose appearance has been concretized in our minds by fantasy renditions. If one was to search the annals of mythology, one facet of mythology that invariably comes to the fore is that the good guys, depicted with perfectly proportioned, perfectly chiseled features, are always locked into battle with the evil guys, described as grotesque and unsightly, as if they are all victims of scientific experiments gone horribly wrong.

Today, we still have a similar mythologized propaganda played out in popular media. It is called Hollywood. Much of it attempts to draw unsuspecting victims into a Manichean self-other good-versus-evil dichotomy to justify the rule of might over right. The 'might' is the modern equivalent of feudalist lords who send their minions and serfs to fight against each other in order to try to capture more land, more wealth, and more resources, while the 'right' would seem to be a certain level of egalitarianism, solidarity, and acceptance; an ideal where conditions that one has no control over (such as inherited wealth or inherited poverty) do not in themselves advance or hinder one's access to opportunity. In order that the status quo might continue unabated, it must be the case that the right is constantly obscured within a smokescreen of fear, as if a lens is constantly being held up to our eyes and through it we see other human beings not as they are, but as hideous monsters that are spending all their time calculating ways to destroy us. 'Us'? Who is 'us'? The whites, the men, any of those groups that history has written as the winners by the winners for the winners. To fail to resist the social conditioning of the competitive spirit as necessitating the dehumanization of those different from us is to end up as a guest of Doctor Moreau.

In a way, her face and the resemblance of its attributes to certain classic depictions of some mythological gremlin was both a summary and an indictment of the manner in which, when going about our daily business, we tend not to see or recognize human beings. Instead, we tend to see only masks, some that we have painted ourselves and some that have been painted for us; masks that divide humankind into a series of barbarian camps in a feudal world, some large, some small, some we are allied to, some we are at war with. The mask that Maya had been condemned to wear by that incident that had occurred so many miles away and so many years before did not consist of the dendritic webs of scar tissue that had crept over her face during its natural healing process, obscuring the beautifully toned flesh that had been there before. This was only the

physical manifestation of a chemical reaction. The real mask had been put there by a historically entrenched human penchant for picking sides in order that we would be able to unconsciously and reflexively answer a question of fundamental importance to the survivability of the individual and the survivability of the larger group...

Who is 'us', and who is 'them'?

Sex

Despite his best efforts to be discreet, when the bed was disturbed by his sliding into it, Maya stirred. "I must have got tired of waiting for you. I thought maybe you had left, but I guess it was just your large manly bladder that kept you away." When he sidled towards her and pulled her towards him, she recoiled slightly before nuzzling against him again. "You are an icicle. You may share my heat."

But his mind was still occupied by the same train of thought that had crept into it earlier. "Maya, why did you never try to improve your situation?"

"What do you mean?" she replied lazily, tracing random shapes on his stomach and seemingly not in the mood for a philosophical discussion. "I told you what happened when I covered myself and went out. Although I feel I did nothing wrong, I did at times feel a little... not deceitful... well, perhaps deceitful, but deceitful to myself. I felt that whenever I wore a veil and went out, it was not me that I was."

"Well, there are the wonders of modern plastic surgery. In this case, its consequences actually improve your current situation greatly rather than one begot purely out of vanity. I'm sure you could make a case and they could do a good job."

"I considered it once. It was at the time that I lived at the other place. I contemplated trading in the veil for plastic surgery. But now, after that incident, even if it was possible for them to change

me back to exactly what I looked like before and do it for free, I don't know that I could ever do it.”

“I'm not sure how the consequences of that incident relate to plastic surgery.”

“It's because you don't understand that I want to be who I am. The consequences of that incident were due to my posing as someone else who wasn't me. You're the one who used the term 'deceit'. Wouldn't plastic surgery amount to the same thing? If I could go back to the way I was, I would be rejecting myself, saying 'this is not my story'. But it is. It's made me who I am today. Suppose I did this. Suppose I looked exactly like I did before. Maybe it would remove my physical scars, but my emotional and psychological scars would still be there. I would be two different people. Maybe on the outside I would look like a 'normal' human being (whatever that means), but what about on the inside? I would still see the superficial and judging eyes everywhere. What I look like right now defines who I am.”

“Maybe, but do you like...”

She raised her head and looked at him. Her voice went from sleepy and passive to one of irritation. “Do I like who I am? I don't know. Who's to say? Please, it's...” she turned her head to look at the red digits behind her “five o'clock on a Saturday morning. Since you first answered my notes, you've been really nice to me, and I always enjoy our conversations. And as you can imagine, I don't get many snuggles, and I like it. As much as I like having you next to me, I'm sure you wouldn't be interrogating me like this if I didn't look the way I do.”

At this point, she rolled away from him and onto her back, and her voice became distant and detached, as if speaking to everyone and no one. “I don't want to be shunned... no one does... but I also don't want to become some sort of sociological pet project because they both amount to the same thing. They see me as a poor unfortunate acid victim before they see me as a human being. I can get that anywhere I go. But I want whatever this is between us to be different. Please just stop with the questions, okay?”

He rolled onto his side to look at her, and felt a few small blemishes surrounded by smooth skin on her left cheek as he kissed it. “I’m sorry Maya. I got carried away.”

She turned to him. Her voice had become more even and controlled. “I’m not mad or anything, because I understand. And I understand because it’s been the story of my life ever since I was seventeen. I know you find me interesting. Everybody does in some way, whether it’s in the form of curiosity or repulsion. Because I’m different. People see my face and immediately they can’t find a place for me in their idealistic worldview. It’s the same with the leper or the amputee. They remind us of our own imperfection, our own mortality, our own fallible world. They remind us that we are not invincible, that it—whatever calamity ‘it’ might refer to at the time—*can* happen to any one of us despite how much we might want to deny it. It’s a bucket of cold water thrown over our heads. And we don’t want that. Because idealistic worldviews are better worldviews. They leave out all the trials and tribulations of humankind. All the problems. All the conflicts. All the accidents. They leave out everything that we don’t want to happen and don’t want to be a part of. No one wants to lose their legs. No one wants to contract leprosy and have their skin slowly peel away. No one wants to be permanently scarred by acid being thrown into their face. But it happens. And I know this because it happened to me. And everyone else knows that it happened to me because they can see that it happened to me. So they deal with their discomfort by either turning away and pretending it can’t happen by declaring I don’t exist, or by questioning me to no end in order to pencil into the gap some sort of answer to the question ‘what if it *does* happen to me, what then? how do *these people* cope, and how would I cope if I also became one of *these people*?’ as if there’s some secret universal coping mechanism for trauma.”

He slipped his arm under her shoulders and turned her towards him. Tears glistened on her face. “Maya, I imagine you’ve

probably gone over all of this stuff enough times to make yourself sick. Let's just leave it at that, okay?"

He held her close to him and then turned onto his back, pulling her along with the rolling action so that she was now lying fully on top of him. He put his hand to her forehead, gently pulled her hair back, and locked eyes with her for several seconds. As he did so, he ran his hand down her hair, grasping it in his hand when it reached her neck, and then continuing to slide his hand down until he was unable to extend his arm any further along her hair, at which point he extended her hair out to the side and continued to run his hand along until he reached the end of it, then he released her hair and let it drop onto the bed beside them. He reached down the bed and pulled the blankets up to her neck and ran his warm hands over her cold upper back and shoulders. She lowered her head and began to gently kiss the side of his neck. He ran his hands down her back and pulled her hips closer to his.

Suddenly, she dug her elbows into the bed on both sides of him, propping her head up to look at him. "So let me ask you a question, then."

"Anything. It's only fair."

"Would you have sex with me?"

He raised his eyebrows. "Is that a hypothetical question or a request?"

She put a finger to his lips. "You shameful, predictable man," she said slowly, tapping his lips at the utterance of each of the last three words. "Because it would so much easier if it was a request, wouldn't it?"

"Well, it's the only way to really be sure, right? If I only told you 'yes, I would', I could be lying, couldn't I?"

"No, you'd be telling the truth, because you are a man with a penis. And that's what men with penises do when they get the opportunity."

"If you're so sure, then why ask the question?"

She put her finger to his lips again. "It's my turn to ask the questions now. Or is that all you can do, answer a question with a question?"

Diplomacy was always the best strategy. "No, Maya. Ask away."

"Good. So let me ask you another question. What if I was another man, would you have sex with me then?"

It was not the sort of question he was expecting. "Hmmm... that's a question that kind of spoils the mood, isn't it?"

"Whose mood? Your mood or my mood? When I'm lying next to you enjoying your company, and you ask me your probing questions that have nothing to do with intimacy but everything to do with the one thing that I want to try to forget about during intimacy, don't you think that spoils my mood? If we are equals here, you have to let me spoil your mood with at least one probing question."

"Okay, okay. I guess you're right. It's only fair."

"So that is my mood-spoiling question to you." Upon uttering 'you', she tapped his nose playfully, a mischievous smile on her lips. "If I was another man, would you be so eager? Would you be able to answer in the same tone as you did when I asked whether you would have sex with me, the typical male 'isn't it obvious that I would?' sort of tone?"

"But you aren't a man."

"If you had ever travelled to India, you wouldn't be so sure. Some of our *hijras* make it almost impossible to tell the difference."

"Well if I was unsure, I could always check."

Her expression turned to one of feigned disapproval. "You could check only if you refused to respect my decency."

"Okay, okay, so what's your point."

"My point is you didn't answer my question. If you would 'hypothetically' have sex with me, would you 'hypothetically' have sex with another man?"

"What does this have to do with anything?"

“Remember, I'm asking the questions here. Why won't you answer my question? Are you afraid? You talk so much about breaking down social barriers. What about this barrier? Suppose he was the most attractive, most gorgeous man you could imagine. Suppose he looked exactly like me except that he had a penis. Would you have sex with him?”

“Well I probably would never be in that position.”

She turned her head away briefly and sighed. Then she looked again at him with a resolute gaze. “Just answer the question, yes or no. Come on big brave philosopher man who thinks everything is relative and a social construct. Are you afraid to admit that even you will bow before the whims of patriarchal norms and male dominance and competition and all that other stuff and refuse the advances of another man? It's one word. It's a yes... or it's a no.”

“I don't know. I'm not in that situation now and I don't know how I would feel if I was because I don't think I would ever get into such a situation. But if I *must* provide *some* answer to your question, then I have to admit that I probably wouldn't be able to do it.”

She seemed dissatisfied with this response. “I feel like you're not being truthful with me otherwise you wouldn't be so evasive. If you were a typical alpha male, you would have said 'no' right away. 'Ewww... I'm not gay.' Or is this all an act to see how far you can get? What is appearance? You don't seem too concerned with mine. And who is going to know? Public scrutiny does not belong in our bedrooms.”

As she laid her left cheek down on his shoulder, something came to his mind, namely that it was true that he barely realized that it was the cheek of a burn victim, as the smaller splashes felt only like natural blemishes and inconsistencies that would be on any face, and that if it had been her other cheek, it would have probably felt very rough against his skin, almost like sandpaper. He gently stroked her damaged cheek with the back of his hand.

Her eyes were following her other hand as it slowly crept along the other side of his chest, moving this way and that, drawing

arbitrary designs. “By dismissing it out of hand, aren't you following a certain social conditioning about it being taboo even though you could get pleasure out of it?”

He looked outward into the room, focusing on nothing in particular except the sensation of his fingers and hands as one of them played with her long hair and the other explored the topography of her neck and shoulders and the recesses in her back. “It's a difficult question. I don't know that you could say it's only social. There are biological things involved like pheromones and things that turn us on or don't turn us on. I just don't think I could get very aroused at the idea. And if you can't get aroused, then the act is impossible, right? If things got heavy between us and I found out you had something else down there, I would probably no longer be aroused. You can call it conditioning if you want, but it's natural conditioning over a long, long time. Two men can't conceive a child, so the act is biologically useless, so evolutionarily speaking the act is useless in general and wouldn't be selected for. If men spent all their time fornicating with other men and ignored the women, then procreation wouldn't occur at the unconsciously selfish pace that is advantageous for the species. I suppose pleasure is a part of life, but you can get it in other ways. Maybe it's learned behaviour, but it's as learned as not wanting to eat random mushrooms or berries in a forest unless you have absolutely no other choice. It goes against a certain natural survivability instinct.”

“Biology. Nature. Do we give up sex when we can no longer conceive? Do we give up sex when we don't want to conceive? Love is love. Pleasure is pleasure. Friction is friction. We are not robots.” A pause. “Though perhaps if I'm honest I'm still trying to decide if you might be one. If you knew much about India, you wouldn't speak so matter-of-factly. Hinduism controls and represses the inherent sexual desires of women by making pre-marital sex or anything even remotely related to intimacy completely taboo, the unavailability of women means that there is a lot more play between men because without another outlet, it's one of the ways that is still open to them

to satisfy certain aspects of sexual curiosity and sexual needs. But in these situations, sexual contact between men is purely functional, and they would never attach any intimacy or love aspect to it. It's in more of a detached 'I'm helping a brother out and he's helping me out' sort of way. Sometimes sex is nothing more than putting the 'fun' into 'functional'."

"Well, that may be true. Maybe if I grew up in India and I was starved of any other options, I would be driven to seek out another man in order to satisfy that need, and I would answer your question differently. But here, I don't need that option. I guess that means that it's socially or culturally relative in a way, but there are extenuating circumstances. It's like eating mushrooms and berries in a forest. If the need is so strong that you have to satisfy it and you don't have any other option because otherwise you will surely die of starvation, you might be driven to it as a last resort. But that problem doesn't exist here. Maybe if I was stuck on a desert island with another man for fifteen years with seemingly no hope of rescue, eventually it would get to a point where I would finally say 'yeah, let's find some extra pleasure in each other'. Prisons are another example. But again, there are other factors, the isolation from women being one, but also sex becomes a symbol of power over others. When a man in prison says to another man 'bitch, bend over', it's usually not because he's gay or that he inherently loves men, it's rather that it's an easy way for him to demonstrate power over others, and he probably gets a certain amount of pleasure from it, even if he needs to close his eyes and pretend it's actually a woman."

"For someone who isn't into the idea, you seem to have really thought this through."

"Can we just change the subject?"

"Why? Is there something you are afraid to admit?"

He didn't answer.

"I will not take your silence as an admission of guilt. I said that public scrutiny does not belong in bedrooms, so I will not interrogate you further as it seems that this topic is something you

take fairly seriously. If you are hell-bent on upholding your heteronormativity in my presence, that's your problem and your weakness.”

“Thank you.”

“Okay, one more question.”

“Is it another mood-stealer?”

“Hmmm... I don't know. That depends on you.”

“Okay, ask away.”

“Suppose there were two versions of me. One as I am now, and one as I would be if that incident had never happened. Which version would you rather be with? Be honest.”

“Ummm...” he looked at her sheepishly.

“Be honest. I'm just curious. I won't feel bad if you say the other Maya. That's what I or anyone else would expect.”

He began carefully: “If we're talking purely superficially, then I would say the other Maya, because when you want intimacy, you want focus, so you don't want other factors to get in the way. If your face was just a normal face, then we would get right down to it in the way that two normal—normal as in not having this extra complexity—human beings do. I wouldn't be talking about how you feel because of how you look, and you wouldn't be thinking about how I feel because of how you look, and we could direct that extra space in our brains towards the intimacy part.”

“And 'getting down to it' is the important part isn't it, sir?”

He took the hand that had been playing with her hair and again started to gently stroke the webs of scar tissue on her cheek, his fingers tracing a journey that glided around her ear and, while doing so, escorted the small amount of hair that drooped over her cheek to a position back behind that ear.

“But on the other hand,” he continued, “what would that Maya be like? You say you forced yourself to become learned, reading, writing, and studying English, working hard at it day and night, because you knew that your situation had suddenly become very different, and you would have to rely a lot more on your brains

to get by. You have no desire to emulate the finer points of your adopted culture by devoting your mind to emulating its accent. So on a deeper level, I much prefer this Maya that I can have deep and interesting conversations with, this Maya whose history is complex and challenges me to think about things that I probably wouldn't normally think about, over a simple, naive Maya or a socialite Maya where things would always remain at a very superficial level.”

She lifted her head again and smiled at him, the light reflected in her eye seemed to slowly dance with a certain level of excited satisfaction. “So you prefer this Maya?”

He returned her smile. “This Maya is all I have. And it's really a very wonderful Maya. Why would I want to risk asking for another Maya? Why mess with a good thing?”

“This Maya thanks you from the bottom of her heart,” she said as she leaned towards him, touching her lips to his, and, for the first time since they had met, touching her tongue to his.

Knowing

He awoke a little later, his right arm still embracing a warm presence snuggled against his side. Maya had fallen asleep again under the gentle caresses of his fingers sliding up and down her back, caressing her neck, back, and shoulders, tracing her ears and lips delicately with a finger. Glancing out of the corner of his eyes so as not to disturb her, he could see the corners of her lips upturned in the slightest of smiles, at least to the extent that she was capable of expressing. And every few seconds he could feel a small gust of air against his chest as she exhaled a shallow breath, the final step of the oxygen transaction process that her heart used to recycle deoxygenated blood into oxygenated blood, thereby keeping her alive.

Her heart had had to increase its work rate about an hour before, as his tongue had gone on a similar adventure as it had before, slipping from her mouth to her left cheek, then to her ear,

back to her mouth, down to her neck, then kissing his lips down the top of her sternum until his tongue flicked out again to trace the circle of the areola of her breast then caress the nipple, after which he went further down to explore her navel as her rate of inhalation steadily increased and her lung capacity expanded. After a short visit to each of these erogenous zones, he retraced his movements back over her petite stomach up to her other breast, back to her neck, and then finally, to invite her tongue for another bit of brief flirtation. Then, while propped on his hands and after his tongue made a final dance over the ridges of her right cheek and around her ear, he had glanced into her eyes, made a wry smile, to which she responded with a playful smile—a portmanteau of her dancing eyes and the slightly upturned corners of her mouth—then leaned forward and pressed her lips against his and held them there for a few seconds.

“Now enough of this playtime,” she had whispered ever so softly, “I want to snuggle.”

To this request he had rolled onto his back to her left, put his arm around her back and pulled her towards him, kissing her on the forehead. A few seconds later, it seemed, she had fallen back asleep. However, as he was looking at her, she stirred again, looked up at him, and a characteristically asymmetric smile appeared on her lips. He reached his hand lower to her hips and manoeuvred her so that she was again lying fully on top of him.

Her eyes twinkled lazily as they met his. “Don't you ever get tired?” she inquired of him.

“Of what?”

“Well, it's not like you're supporting a small kitten on your chest. I may be small, but I'm not that small.”

“But I am supporting a small kitten on my chest,” he countered. “And I really enjoy stroking her back and caressing her and seeing her focusing her eyes on me.”

She furrowed her brow. “I'm not sure how I should respond to you comparing me to some sort of pet of yours. Perhaps I am some

wild beast that you have managed to entrap and tame, and you believe that I am now supposed to worship you as my caregiver.”

A lazy smile spread across his face. “Come now Maya, you know it’s not like that. If I am to be honest, you are more equal than I am.” He touched his eight fingers to her bangs and ran them slowly through her hair, and down her back until he could reach no further, then, splitting her hair approximately equally between his hands, he pulled it around in front of her shoulders so that it dangled onto his chest and then down his sides, the excess accumulating in a small pool on the mattress either side of him. Reacting to this intrusion, she raised her hand up to the right side of her face, throwing the hair on that side over her head so that it was in tandem with the rest of her hair on the left side. She slid slightly down his chest, resting her knees in between his legs so that she could rest the side of her face against his heart.

“Isn't it interesting,” she said, “that there are so many things that we never really think about? When was the last time you thought about whether your heart would be able to beat fast enough to pump the blood you needed to stay alive? That your alveoli were in decent enough shape to properly filter the air and bring the required oxygen from your lungs so that it could bind to the heme in your red blood cells, which can then be shuttled around your body and, most importantly, keep your brain from permanently shutting down?”

“Are you a doctor in your spare time?” he asked, complimenting her on her detailed description of some of the finer points of the circulatory system. “It is true that if we had to think about *everything* that had anything to do with our ability to function, then we would cease to be able to function. This is precisely as if we had to relearn the basics every single time that we wanted to ride a bicycle or play the guitar or sit down to a game of chess, it would cease to be worth it.”

“You take everything so literally, sir. Of course I know that. I was hoping to snap you out of your cerebral super-calculating mode

and just ponder. For its own sake. But it appears that I have failed, that your robotic nature is beyond my ability to control.”

He laughed at this. “You see, this is why I love this Maya and wouldn't wish for any other Maya. You get me.”

She pushed herself up, using her forearms as leverage against the mattress so that her torso was freed from contact with his. She was looking into his eyes. “You would probably not be willing to admit it, but it is very easy to 'get' you. I know where your buttons are and I can push them if I wish. The more interesting question is, do you get me?”

“Ummm... I should like to think that I sort of have an idea...”

“You'd like to think that. But do you?”

“How would I know?”

“Well why do you think that you have an idea? Because I'm in bed with you with barely any clothes on?” She spoke easily and evenly, never raising her voice. Always friendly. Always with that cryptic smile on her face. Never showing any signs of animosity.

“Well, not because of that, but...”

“...but that does play a role.” She leaned in and pressed her lips to his firmly but briefly. “Don't worry, dahhhling,” she held this syllable for effect, “as I have said numerous times before I'm not going to hold it against you if you enjoy the sexualization of our comradeship to some extent. I enjoy it also. I just hope that you 'get' me a bit more than what would be reflected by a combination of pity and getting me into the sack.”

“I hope by now that that's clear. I wouldn't have stayed unless you had requested it.”

“It is useful to put the burden of responsibility for this little tryst on me isn't it, dahhhling?” There was always a slightly sardonic element to these comments, but never personal, always playful. A sharpness of wit. “Of course I'm happy you stayed and that I could enjoy this intimacy with you. But where do we go from here? Who am I to you? Or what am I to you?”

“Ummm...”

“Again, you worry,” she cut in, a tap on his nose synchronized with her utterance of 'you'. “You worry that I might bring up something about a relationship or something that goes beyond ships passing in the night. I get that. But don't. Because I don't need one either. As much as I've told you some personal stories about some horrible things that have had a permanent effect on my life, the fact is that I've made it this far and I don't want someone thinking that I need a nursemaid. My condition may mean that my life doesn't look like much to you, but I still have plenty that I do and want to do and achieve before I settle into something like that.”

“Maya, will you answer one question? Please. I am dying to know.”

“May I take a guess? Is it 'what are the things that I do'?”

“Well, yes.”

She laughed. “You see, now you realize that you only get a part of me. But that's because there is only a part of me that I will allow you to get. I know that for you it's not just about pity and sex. In fact, I would guess that that is a very small part of it. You like me because I'm interesting. Because I'm novel. Because I don't play by the rules. There's so much hidden away about me that you don't understand. That you couldn't possibly understand. For example, you must be wondering how a poor village girl from West Bengal who should barely be able to speak English is able to go toe-to-toe with you in the intellectual department. You see no degrees or diplomas hanging on my wall. You couldn't possibly fathom that I would be able to get through a program in an academic institution when I can barely bring myself to go out of my house for fear of what others will think of me. You love being with me, but all the while, you're also trying to dig. Because you want everything to make sense. You want to be able to draw a line from India to here that explains everything and wraps everything up in a neat little package. So that you can say 'Ahh! So that's how it is!' Am I right? Do I 'get' you, sir?”

The smile had never left her face, and he began to ponder how best to reply to this challenge. “Well...”

But he was cut off by her pressing her body to his body, her lips to his lips, and her tongue to his tongue. His arms closed around her and pulled her tightly against him, his arms sliding up and down her back caressing her to him. Suddenly, she pushed her hands against the mattress, leveraging her upper body away from his and broke free of his grip. She remained there for a few seconds, hovering above him, her wavy black hair dangling down past both sides of his face. She was looking into his eyes, and smiling.

“That was a rhetorical question. We both know the answer.”

Struggle

“Maya,” he said to her, “we have spent a lot of time together and had a lot of good conversations together and I think we know each other pretty well. You know I won't preach to you in terms of what you should and should not do. Only you know what's best for you. But I really think you should consider the possibility of maybe coming out with me one evening. Just give it a go, you know. See how you feel about it. I'll be there with you. I'll intervene on your behalf if some unruly idiot starts harassing you. I'm not saying this because I know the experience will be for the best. Maybe it won't. Who's to know? But you can't know unless you try. You've gotta stir the pot a little. Either you spend the rest of your life hiding in shadows or you don't. And if you don't, then there has to be an inflection point where you go from maintaining this protective shell of solitude to going out into the world.”

She slowly rocked back and forth against the frame of the doorway to her apartment, as she considered this for a moment. “But not everyone will be as nice as you will. If we go into a public place, all it takes amongst many people is one asshole with a few horrible, demeaning comments to make me not want to be there. Icarus may fly too close to the sun.”

Taking on an air of authority, he hoped to banish some of these difficulties from her thoughts. “You can't live in fear forever.

You can't always expect the worst. I understand there are reasons why you should, and maybe those psychological scars will never heal. The victims of child abuse never truly forget the beratings or the beatings or the touchings or whatever happened in the past. But in the vast majority of cases, there is always a point where a certain reality dawns on them. And that reality is that this is their one chance at life. They can't be anyone else. And so they have to try to make sure that that chance is as rich with experiences as they can make it. If you really feel so against going out looking like this and what people might say, I can help you phone around to surgeons and accompany you to consultations and at least see what your options are.”

“You speak very confidently about this generalization. Is it from experience or assumption?”

“I admit it's from assumption. I *hope* that everybody can get to this point so that they can make the most of their lives.”

Her face darkened slightly at this comment, and she assumed a more thoughtful air. “You know, there is one thing that has always lingered in the back of my mind since that night.”

He knew that 'that night' was *that* night. It was the only night that things had gone as far as they had. Although that Saturday morning had been pleasant and consisted of the usual conversations, tea, breakfast, and goodbye hugs and kisses, all proceeding with a minimal amount of tension or awkwardness, the visits since then—and they had become more frequent and more casual; a quick hello here, a shared lunch there—had never proceeded past the level of the cordiality that defined those first few visits. He would stroke her hair, kiss her cheek, she would give him random hugs, kiss his cheek. In short, it was what a relationship between tenants who were of the opposite sex and were comfortable with a reasonable level of familiarity between them should be.

He folded his arms, furrowed his brow, and looked inquiringly at her. “And what's that?”

“You remember that at that time you also asked me the question about getting plastic surgery, and I explained the reasons behind why I didn't want it.”

“Yes, I do.”

“And then I asked you the question about the two Mayas and which would you rather have?”

“Yes, and I remember my answer to that question.”

“You said that on a superficial level, you would have preferred—sorry, would have 'obviously' preferred—” here she corrected herself with a matter-of-fact impression of a posh speaker from England, using finger-quotes for added effect, “the other Maya who hadn't had acid thrown in her face.”

He nodded slightly. “Yes, that's true. I did say that.”

“But that you preferred this Maya because she had been driven to become educated... she was interesting... you could have deep and meaningful conversations with her, et cetera, et cetera.”

“Yes, and I genuinely meant it.”

“So that seems to imply that if you had this Maya with deep and meaningful conversations coupled with that Maya that has the perfect—or let's say 'less imperfect' face—” here again she used her same English impression and finger-quotes, “you would have the best of both worlds. It would be the perfect Maya in your eyes.”

“Well...”

“So what I want to know is, do you keep bringing up plastic surgery because you think it's good for me, or because you think it would be good for you, and it's what you would prefer, that when you visit me you would prefer to see the features of beautiful, unblemished Maya, rather than always having to settle for grotesque, acid-splashed Maya?”

He nodded to her reassuringly. “Yes, it's a very fair question. And I see why you would get that impression. The thing is, the only reason why I might be able to justify you doing something for my sake is if we were somehow inextricably linked and our lives started to bleed together, and the sort of discussions and the compromises

that are very natural and very healthy and very important in a serious relationship where two people are genuinely thinking about becoming a permanent couple and sharing their lives with each other begin to come to the surface. That's really not my intention in all of this. And you said it's not really your intention in all this. And for me, it's not because I have an issue with you, but more because at this point in my life, it's not really something that I want or am looking for. And even if you got plastic surgery to the point where it would be impossible to tell that anything had happened, it wouldn't make me more or less inclined to consider spending the rest of my life with you any more than it would affect my willingness to spend lunch tomorrow with you. I spend time with you for you." He paused here as he tried to search for the right words.

"I guess my point is that if I found out that you got the surgery only for my sake, whether due to some nefarious form of suggestion or entrapment on my part, or through some misunderstanding or misinterpretation of my intentions on your part, well I would feel terrible. And that's because it would mean that when the time came when we went our separate ways, you would have something that you didn't really want, and the only person who did really want it wouldn't be there to enjoy it anyway. It would be 'hey, thanks for letting me enjoy your beautiful face for a while, see you later'. It would be selfish, callous, and demeaning."

For a moment, Maya paused, considering his words. "I don't want you to take my having to ask you this question in the wrong way. You've always been kind and very supportive of me, and you've helped me to feel so much less alone, and I can't thank you enough for that. Honestly, when I thought about it, I wanted to give you the benefit of the doubt. I wanted to believe that you suggested it because you want what's best for me. I just had to hear it from you. I'm sorry."

He stepped towards her and embraced her, and slowly ran his palm up and down her back reassuringly. "Don't be sorry, Maya. As I

said, it's a fair question and it's an important question. Because it would be a big decision. It would change your life.”

He released her but remained standing very near to her, facing her. He looked down at her and saw that she was looking down at the floor while listening to his words. He put his hand gently on her shoulder. “As you said, on some level it would make you into someone else that you had to get used to being. Someone who wouldn't have to think that the first thing that someone should do when they see you is cringe or quickly turn away, or that their first thought would be 'ewwww' or 'whoa, what happened to her?', but would instead in all likelihood be 'wow, she's gorgeous' or, if it's just about any man in a bar, 'if only I could get me some of that!' Of course, it's a gamble because you don't know how it will end up.”

“Everything's a gamble in life. The future of any action is never certain.”

“Maybe, but in this case, it goes much deeper. There's no guarantee that you would get a complete improvement, and maybe if the improvement wasn't to the extent that you wanted, you would feel worse, because now not only would you still not feel comfortable going out but, from what you've said to me, you might also feel a sense of self-betrayal. That you're not a beautiful woman that can lead a normal life AND you're also no longer you. Any way you slice it, it's a really tough decision. And you are the only person who can make that decision. And you should only make that decision if you are confident that that is what YOU want to do. Because it's you that's going to have to live with that decision and its consequences and not anyone else. I'm not pushing it because I want you to do it, I'm pushing it because I want you to see what's out there. Because either you live for the rest of your life like this, or you make a change. And if you want to make a change, you should know what possible changes are available for you to choose from. Right?”

He bent down and gently placed a kiss on her forehead.

She looked up at him, started to say something, and then bit her lip. Then she opened her mouth, but the sound that came out was a barely audible whisper. “Can you come inside for a second?”

“Ummm... I think I've got a few minutes, but I can't stay for too long.”

“No, this will only take a minute.”

“Okay.”

She stepped back into her apartment and after he had sidled in between her and the door, she closed it behind him. Again, in the barely audible whisper, she pointed to the sofa. “Please sit.”

“Sure,” he said, never breaking eye contact with her, and never letting the easy, friendly smile disappear from his face. She stood looking at him for a moment, hesitant, processing something in her mind. Then, very slowly she sat down on his lap, put her arms around his neck, and whispered in his ear. “Thank you.”

He could feel damp tears against his face. He gently stroked the hair that hung down over the back of her head. “Of course, Maya. Anything.”

They sat there in silence for a few seconds. He could hear her sniffle a few times. Then she drew her head back and looked into his eyes, wiping the tears away with the back of her hand.

“It's just that, well, you know, when it happened, it didn't just form a barrier between me and other random people, it also formed a barrier between me and my family. I have never spoken to them since. I don't know who they are or what they're doing or how my siblings ended up or anything. And they don't know what happened to me either. So I don't have a family. And because of my situation, it's really difficult to build another one, to build that trust, to know that someone is there for me no matter what.” She rested her head on his shoulder, and he replaced his hand on the back of her head.

“When I told you that story about what happened at that other place, I told you that the physical damage and hurtful things he said were only a small part of it. The real damage came when I was lying there and all I could think about was that all this hard work of trying

to find people that I could lean on, that I could trust, it had all been for nothing. It was only then that I realized not only how hard it would be to find people that would accept me, but also how easily it could come crashing down if I wasn't always concentrating on the delicate balancing act that I would have to play in order to appease everyone so that they wouldn't walk out of my life. But maybe what really hurt the most..."

Her voice suddenly cracked dramatically, and she pulled her head away and wiped back more tears that were rolling down her cheeks thick and fast. She glanced over at him and made a weak smile. "Sorry... this is a bit emotional." He gave her a reassuring smile, as she recomposed herself, and laid her head back on his shoulder. "What really hurt the most was that in that moment, I thought about the family that I didn't have, and, for a brief second that seemed like forever, I almost believed that it was impossible. That I could never, ever find someone who would love me unconditionally, who I could rely on to support me whenever I might need it. Who would really, honestly, truthfully make me feel less alone. And it was at that moment that I decided that the best thing for me to do would be to take my own life. Because who would care? No one was connected to me. No one knew me. No one cared about me. If I was gone, the world would go on as it was with no one anywhere realizing that there was one less person in it. I was tired. Tired of searching, tired of lying, tired of my mind constantly trying to devise versions of me that people might accept just so that I could somehow feel less alone.

"And, well, I don't want you to feel burdened by me, like that you have to bend over backwards for me. But since I was seventeen, you're the only person I have found that comes close to that. You make me feel like there are people out there who care. Who will look past my horrid appearance and value me for me. You make me feel like a human being, and when I'm with you, I'm able to forget about the person that I was forced to be by that choice my family made all those years ago and be the person who I really want to be. I don't

want to be 'that woman who had acid splashed in her face'. I want to be Maya. And it's so hard to be Maya. It takes so much energy. It's so exhausting. But you make it so much easier. You help give me the strength that I need to continue, to continue to believe that maybe, just maybe, there is still a Maya in there somewhere behind the face of that Indian acid splash victim from the small village in West Bengal. A lot of strength is required. Sometimes it almost feels like it's too much. That I can't do it anymore. But I haven't felt that sense of being overwhelmed in a while, ever since I started to believe that you were helping me to carry that burden unconditionally."

He kissed her cheek, his tears mingling with hers. He cleared his throat to whisper in her ear. "Maya, this thing that happened to you. It's not your fault. It happened because Maya was trying to be Maya, and people didn't want that. They tried to prevent Maya from being Maya, and they did it in the most vile and savage way they knew how. But you can't give up."

She pulled her head back again, wiping her face again with the back of her hand, and smiling through the tears. "You know what? That night when I was alone. When I had that knife in my hand. When I was scratching around in between my ribs with the tip of that knife, knowing that one random movement, one downward thrust of my arm, could end it all... in that darkest of moments, I had an epiphany. I think the reason why I'm still alive, still here, is that in the hazy mess that was my brain in that moment, something clicked. It was like a light suddenly went on. What I realized was that this wasn't about me. This was much bigger than me. And fighting on was something I had to do as a duty. A duty to myself and a duty to society, even if society never knew that I existed. Because if I was to end my life right there, I would be accepting and reinforcing all the negative social and cultural stereotypes and injustices that continue to poison society every day. That surrender would be a form of acceptance that everything was okay. That society can and should continue on the way it had. That Indian parents had every right to irrevocably punish and maim any child under their care that refused

to go along with outdated practices that are justified as 'the way that things have always been done' but are, in reality, just another version of the same social dynamics that has been around since the dawn of time, of one group trying to make another group obedient through whatever form of scare tactics or manipulation that is deemed necessary. And I couldn't accept that. I couldn't let them win. I couldn't leave the battlefield just yet. I had to struggle on, no matter how hard it seemed or how tired I was. I just had to."

He looked at her, and on his face was a smile that came from somewhere, but he couldn't quite say from where. "Maya?"

"Yes?"

"I love you."

She leaned her head against his, as if it was a pillow. She forced out two words. "I know."

Emerging

"I'm sorry, I guess that took longer than it should have," she said to him after they had again taken positions opposite each other in the hallway.

"It's no problem, really. I always like to leave a little earlier than I have to so that I will have a little extra time to myself and can get where I need to go at a very casual pace. It allows me to stop and look around and take in the familiarity of everything when I need to. It allows me to ponder over any difficulties or dilemmas or ideas that are floating around in my head. Or whatever. A little extra time is always very useful. I can still make it on time. And even if I can't, what's more important? Being there for you when you need it exists on a whole different level than anything that work could give me."

"Well, you wouldn't want to be late and lose your job."

"I'm rarely, if ever, late, so if I am a few minutes late this time, I doubt it will mean much in the grand scheme of things. But suppose I lose my job. So what? There are other jobs out there that I can work at instead."

“I'll have to take your word for it.”

“So think about what I said earlier. Consider coming out with me. It can be anywhere you want. If you want to avoid the big crowds, we'll avoid the big crowds. If you want to be in a darker place where people can't see you so well, we can go out when it's a bit darker or we can go see a movie. It's really up to you. But you really should try to get a better idea of what you're missing out there.”

“Okay,” she said with a smile. “I'll think about it. But I can't promise anything.”

“As long as you're thinking, I don't need promises. Do whatever you're comfortable with. Go slowly. Baby steps.”

At that moment, they both turned their heads and looked down the corridor, as the sound of a door opening had attracted both of their attentions. A man of about six feet with a large curly auburn afro-like tuft of hair emerged into the hallway looking rather smart in a suit and tie, while carrying on a conversation with someone inside.

“Of course I'll remember,” came from the man's lips, still facing the doorway. A woman's face emerged and pressed her lips to his. Then, perhaps with the feeling that they were being watched, this mystery couple turned and looked down the hallway at the tall man and the short woman who were reciprocating that curiosity. The response was a nod and a wave, which was returned in turn. Then the woman pulled her face in, the door closed, and the man turned and started walking towards them with eyes darting back and forth between two different heights of scrutiny, trying to imprint two unfamiliar faces into memory.

At a shorter distance, the man could be seen to have a rather pudgy, clean-shaven, freckle-strewn face. He had a fairly slender body with a small amount of extra flesh around the waistline. “Hello,” they both said in greeting the stranger, almost in unison. An unflinching nod was the response, but the individual never broke stride walking past them, then pushed the security door to the lobby

open, and turned towards the exterior door. They heard the clicking and clanking sound of it opening and shutting.

He looked across to Maya. "Look at that, that wasn't so bad. He didn't flinch or withdraw or do anything untoward when he saw you."

"Yeah, but who knows what he might have been thinking."

He shook a finger at her in mock disapproval. "Although, I know you've built up your barriers for a reason, it's important to try to give people a bit more credit," he said it in a sarcastic, overly dainty fashion, as if pretending to be an Oxford scholar.

"Yes, of course sir," she said sarcastically in turn, bowing to him as she did so, then added "but on another note, normally when I would see another person coming, my reaction would be to duck back into my apartment. So maybe something is changing."

He leaned forward and kissed her forehead. "Have a good day, Maya. I must be going."

"You too," she uttered quickly, withdrawing into her apartment and shutting the door as if suddenly feeling extremely self-conscious about her vulnerability to public scrutiny.

He walked down the passage, turned the corner, and could see through the glass doors that the man was standing just outside the front door, looking across the entranceway at something or nothing while leaning against one of its brick pillar supports, bringing a lighter up with cupped hands to the end of a cigarette. He pushed open the door, the man turning to him as he did so. They exchanged nods of acknowledgement, and then the man nonchalantly held up the pack of cigarettes, offering one.

He reflexively raised a hand to show that he would politely decline. "No thanks. I don't smoke."

"Cool," his fellow tenant replied. As he continued walking and started towards the road, he heard an utterance from behind him. "Hey man, can I ask you something?"

He turned around and looked back at his interrogator, who was still leaning casually against the pillar.

“Was it just me or was there something wrong with that face you were talking to?”

He stiffened. “There's nothing *wrong* with her face. And she's much more than just a face, she is a human being, and it always amazes me how difficult that is to recognize.” And he continued on.

During



Неизвестный миф (Unknown Myth). Севил Ооржак. 2015. Холст, масло.

*“What is love? What is creation?
What is longing? What is a star?”
—so asketh the Last Man and
blinketh.*

-- Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also
Sprach Zarathustra*

*Now, now how come your talk turn cold?
Gain the whole world for the price of your soul
Tryin' to grab hold of what you can't control
Now you all floss, what a sight to behold
Wisdom is better than silver and gold*

-- Lauryn Hill, "Lost Ones"

Reflection

The encounter had not troubled him per se. It should be completely expected that there are many in this world that are either so vain that they equate beauty with the (supposedly) perfect bodies and faces of lingerie models, or so self-absorbed that they feel that they can say anything that they want about anybody they want as a means to heighten their own sense of self-importance—especially when it comes to historically entrenched social issues like race and gender. Finally, he mused, there are also those that have become so jaded with the repetitive and predictable nature of contemporary society that they build their refuges in the damning of their own souls through addiction to substances, television, or a vicariously macabre cynicism towards anything that should be deemed imperfect or precarious. Humanity has been a problematic and self-defeating organism ever since the early days of cave-dwelling made it necessary for the radicalization of discipline in order to protect the species from annihilation by the elements, pestilence, or hungry carnivores looking for fresh meat.

Although one should look at the present world and believe that we have moved well beyond this desperate need for self-preservation to one of embracing the different and the unknown, and to contributing to the beauty and diversity of this world, the continuity of history and its obstinacy against radical change from men as sloven beasts of gladiatorial conflict and conquest, and women as nursemaids, cleaners, and baby-making machines—slaves by any other name—is well-documented. We as humans have defined ourselves as 'thinking beings' ever since Thales and the pre-Socratics conceived about 'thinking about thinking'. A century or two later and Plato had ensconced this idea of 'human as thinker' into Western society for good. Yet we seem to have failed to understand that 'thinking about thinking' is an exercise like any other: just as if we stop getting regular exercise our bodies will become lazy and possibly obese, so too will the mind that stops thinking for itself

become nothing more than an echo chamber to any dominant narrative that helps elevate it to the level of basking in its own sense of self-importance. “If a cluttered desk is reflective of a cluttered mind, then what is an empty desk reflective of?” quipped the ever-cynical Einstein.

Since he had first met Maya, he had become much more reflective of this 'problem of other minds'. What goes on in the minds of those that dehumanize her? What makes their minds different than his? Is it cultural? Environmental? Or personal choice? What does such an attitude achieve aside from a false sense of self-promotion at the expense of others? Should those with such minds be blamed for their lack of respect towards the dignity of others? Or is it simply a symptom of the wider incongruity and desperation of human society as it hurtles toward its own impending destruction through unsustainable socio-economic practices? “The economy is stagnant” they say. So we dig up more resources, construct more things, buy more commodities, and then revel in statistics that say that our economies are growing again.

Of course, our current economic system implies that the viability of a business requires that business to secure an excess of surplus value for an indefinite period of time (or face bankruptcy) meaning that those who are actually doing the work must be paid less (and for the most “successful” businesses, astronomically less). What can the result be but legal slavery and runaway inflation as more total currency is printed to allow those at the bottom to live on life support in perpetuity while the fruits of their labour travel up the economic pyramid, amassing in larger and larger quantities into fewer and fewer oligopolistic hands? And this is only to speak of the situation in wealthier countries. The legacies of slavery, colonialism, and neocolonialism imply that much of the resources that keep wealthier economies buoyed comes from a long history of theft and slavery from countries like Maya's. No wonder, then, that there are many within the general population of wealthier countries that see difference as a means to belittle. One can see it as one manifestation

of a cretinous desire to return to the 'good old days' where xenophobic infantilism legitimized the cheap labour and materials that made colonial ventures a fortune in profits, profits that would be extracted from countries of the majority poor to be invested in the countries of the already wealthy.

But these musings paled in comparison to his curiosity about Maya's mind. We are all born into historical conditions that we do not choose, yet we are held to these conditions as if they should completely define our position in (and acceptance of) the social hierarchy. He was born a tall, white male in a country where widespread disease and famine (at least, of the threatening or lethal type) are essentially unheard of. Here, one is able to generally live as one likes and shut off the rest of the world. A reasonably comfortable life can be assumed for many, and that comfort is only disrupted by the reality that there are those that suffer. Best to hurry by people on the street and treat them as vermin. Best not to think about droughts and locust swarms and other manifestations of various degrees of Armageddon faced at regular intervals by the same countries that we infantilize and enslave to enrich ourselves. Famine? Who cares? Let them die. Child labour? Who cares? There are already too many people in the world. Malthusian economics says that we live in a dog-eat-dog world, and we as the dogs of war should be no more sympathetic to the plight of those that suffer at the hands of corporate neocolonialism than the settlers who first occupied then enslaved and pillaged the underdeveloped world of its human and natural resources with no mercy.

For those that may feel a sense of discomfort or guilt at admitting to such an attitude, there are ways that these invasive thoughts can be whisked away. One is through religious idealism. Karma, borrowed from Maya's culture, suggests that reincarnation cycles favour those who have done good deeds in a past life. Hence, one can explain away the horrific plight of others with various ideological notions that hinge on what one 'deserves' based on a larger cosmological picture. In fact, Indian texts were only first

translated into European languages in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Thus, one of the greatest proponents of Eastern philosophy—the German idealist Arthur Schopenhauer—was also one of the first to take a real interest in Indian philosophy simply because few (if any) Europeans had access to it before that period. He underscored (with great pessimism) that sympathy must be the basis of morality, that our wills were something to be resisted as they only drive us in the direction of unsustainable and brutal conquest, and that instead we should seek solace in the arts and music. Essay titles like “On the Vanity and Suffering of Life” reflect an individual at the brink of hopelessness for the future of the human race. If his spectre were to visit us a century and a half later, he would probably grumble “I told you so. Now leave me in peace.”

Despite the time he had spent with Maya, there was never any reason to broach the topic of cultural ideology. It was this rigidly patriarchal culture that had decided that the disadvantages of being a woman were not enough to teach her her place, and that in order that she not forget her place, she should be physically scarred forever. The intention was that those who would see her in the future would turn away from her amorphous facial features in horror, and thus that an unforgiving, vain society should collectively condemn her to a life of rejection and, likely, penury. It seemed callous to want to interrogate her over the one aspect of her life that *everyone* wanted to interrogate her about, even if he meant well.

And yet she was beautiful because she was authentic. She had accepted her punishment but was adamant that it would not define her. What sort of a mind is required to overcome such a life-changing incident? It was unfathomable to him. Unless he was to volunteer to go to war (which had no real meaning beyond fighting—and quite possibly dying—over land and resources that would only further enrich some oligarchs or politicians somewhere that were still sitting at home), he was highly unlikely to ever face any sort of destruction or dismemberment to his physical appearance. Besides, unlike the women like Maya that are victimized by archaic patriarchal

practices, those that 'fight for their country' should they be maimed or sacrificed, are treated as patriots and heroes. Though the reality shows that these accolades are often short-lived due to a lack of public resources for war veterans, these veterans can still declare that their imperfections were necessitated by a fight for freedom and democracy (whatever that actually means); a different sort of preservation of nationalistic cultural values than the permanent disfigurement of a woman for refusing to be permanently condemned to domestic slavery.

Separation

Although it had been an unfortunate comment from an unfortunate individual, he knew that he should not think too much of it. She did not need his sympathy. This was just another fleeting moment in a life of ever-present social oppression by a human world that was inherently vain. He had to accept the world just as she had learned to do so, albeit she would have had to learn to do so in a much more painful, depressing, and forced manner. There was no magical spell or Earth-shattering intervention that could make the world anything but what it was.

And yet, the more he continued to walk, the more he was troubled. It's not like snide remarks and bigotry was anything new to him. But in the case of Maya, he took it personally. He had spent time with her. He had caressed her. It was like she had entrusted him with a secret covenant, an unspoken but mutual agreement that they would look out for each other. 'Each other'? What did that mean? Such a relationship implied to him that he should take on some sort of duty to defend and protect her. But this also bothered him. What if she had been someone else? What if she was a local female that he had gained the trust of through some other sort of encounter on a street, at a restaurant, or in a bar? But he didn't even have to go that far. This was an individual that lived across the hall from him. It was likely that if others had moved in there, he would have also made

their acquaintance, if only in passing. If this neighbour had been a different, 'ordinary' female, what would he have done about it? Would he have gone this far? Unlikely. It was not like him to fraternize with others so close to home. He preferred to keep his private life private and maintain his personal space. There were few people who knew where he lived, and it was extremely rare that he would let someone else into his apartment.

But Maya fascinated him, and this was what was so troubling. He didn't care that she knew where he lived or how he lived or what he did. He was more worried about the danger of fetishizing her trauma in order to justify himself. To become the white knight to a damsel in distress. How should he proceed? Immediately he consoled himself with the memories of his earlier encounters in her apartment. He had given her the space that she had needed to accept him into her life at her own pace. He had never forced the issue or expected anything. "I am I and you are you... shall we learn more about each other?" was all that had passed between them on the surface. But he knew that had she not been such an exotic character in this world, it was unlikely that he would have given her a second thought. So what did that mean? She was an authentic individual, that much he was certain of. But was he?

He recalled his criticism of the individual that had insulted her. What was the man's problem, but the outward manifestation of a cruel and unjust world? Had the individual woken up one day harbouring these ill thoughts toward others? Of course not. Maybe it had been inherited from observing similar behaviour in his parents, from the perpetuation of similar behaviour by society, because of harbouring xenophobic thoughts due to scaremongering by the anti-immigration crowd. Or perhaps it was about releasing some pent-up feeling of hatred that had festered due to some childhood incident. It was impossible to know where this off-hand insult had originated, only that it was a broader reflection of some aspect of society that was extremely unfortunate but always present, at least in the background.

Turning that logic on its head, was his sympathy for Maya and his desire to “look out for her” an authentic form of mutual kindness, or a twisted form of heroism? Could it be that his propensity to constantly critique the outward failings of a world full of malevolent social contradictions, injustice, and sadness placed on his shoulders some sort of indescribable yoke of existential guilt such that it was not a case of her needing him (since she had already come this far through her own otherworldly strength) but him needing her? What did this mean, “looking out for each other”? It was clear how he could look out for Maya. To spend time with her. To enjoy her company. To reinforce her sense of self-worth and confidence when she might falter. To *rehumanize* her within a world that had so badly dehumanized her. But wasn't this simply the white man's burden? A vestige of the historical inequality of cultures that he so loathed coming home to roost in the form of a woman who could be made more whole through his chivalrous intervention, a means to go some way to righting a small historical wrong, but always coming from a place of inflated vanity? And what was the mutual 'each other'?

He had become so deep in thought that he had become disoriented. Even though he had walked this path an inordinate number of times on his way to work to the point where he could do so blindfolded (well, probably not blindfolded), he found himself looking around to make sure he knew how far he had travelled and at what pace. He wanted to make sure that he hadn't missed his bus. Fortunately, it tended to be the case that the more he thought, the faster he walked, and so he was relieved to look up and see his bus stop only about a hundred metres away. Judging by the congregation of familiar faces that he encountered at this location almost every day slowly trickling in, it seemed that he was earlier than usual, and could sit down for at least ten minutes before the bus could be expected. But he knew what he should not do whilst sitting down and waiting.

“No. I need to stop myself here. If she wants me to remain in her life, she will continue to invite me into her world and we will

continue to spend time together. Whether I need her or not is irrelevant. She must dictate terms, and I should live with them.”

Wheels

The private automobile. Its celebrated status as a reflection of some form of liberty never really made sense to him. Sitting at the bus stop now, he watched the seemingly infinite procession of private automobiles drive by, for the most part with a single occupant driving a massive amount of metal and glass, burning through disproportionate amounts of energy to propel that occupant from point A to point B. For millennia before the invention of the internal combustion engine and its celebrated position inside these massive metal frames, the energy was provided by beasts of burden: horses, oxen, donkeys... humans even. These sources of energy were not only sustainable, but conscious. A horse could only be put through its paces for so long before it had to rest or would refuse to go further. The bicycle rickshaws that flood the streets of cities in South Asia are artifacts of this sustainable form of pure animal (in this case human) energy. Patience is the key in these cases, especially when one is in a hilly area or has some degree of compassion for an older driver with scarecrow legs emitting desperate sighs and grunts as he (are there female rickshaw drivers?) tries to earn a few coins to afford a few morsels of food and a little water in order to survive a life of perpetual servitude to the dire straits of landed capitalism. Patience? Or alterity?

The automobile has no such limitations save for the problems that result from insufficient fuel or rickety components. Moreover, animals (and humans) have natural speed limits that are dependent on their muscular strength and endurance, while vehicles merely need to burn fuel proportional to their outputs and they can sustain speeds that cover distances in a matter of hours that might take a horse days to cover. It is the unconscious acceptance of the need to burn such a large amount of fuel that is the inherent problem in an

economy that is becoming less and less circular. In cities where there are high-occupancy vehicle lanes, it is a testament to the individualism of our current Western societies that they are used so infrequently. Since a typical day consists of going to and from work at pre-set hours, and it is in every individual's best interest to optimize the route taken, there is far less opportunity for sharing rides than in a less formal economy where work is much more communal, local, and ad hoc.

Obviously, however, there is much more at stake than simply convenience. The fact that larger vehicles are becoming increasingly common and that more families own multiple vehicles means that there is also an element of status attached to them. Whereas in the past, one might dress up one's troika with lamps and garlands if one had extra wealth, now one merely needs a certain brand name emblazoned on the front, side, and rear of a vehicle to signal to others the esteemed hierarchy to which one belongs based on the level of affordability of their glass-metal bubble. Is it a matter of quality? Perhaps to a certain extent: an older hatchback is probably going to have less power than a pickup truck. When it comes to getting from point A to point B, however, this is a rather moot point. In this sense, the vehicle acts as a form of semiotic armour for the occupant(s). A vehicle represents a small private conduit—a non-place—that is only accessible to those inside it. In contrast, those that choose to walk or cycle must necessarily open themselves up to the full scrutiny of others (and, of course, the weather), either to their advantage or to their disadvantage.

One should also note that in contrast to walking especially but also to cycling, the essence of this non-place works both ways: not only is there far less scrutiny from the outside of the vehicle to its inside, but also from its inside to its outside. Driving a vehicle requires one's attention to be focused on the road ahead in order to avoid collisions and other dangers that are entangled with conducting a large dense body with great mass at high speeds. There is little time to marvel at one's surroundings. One must be careful not to daydream

too much. In most cases this is not a problem, as the formative years of one's driving career are likely spent taking repetitive trips to work or running errands over well-travelled routes. It is only when one decides to set aside time for a 'special' trip, for example out to the countryside or to a lake or mountain or other place of natural wonder, that one actually desires to look out the window at one's environment. In these cases anyway, the greater remoteness of one's driving goals means that there are less obstacles and other vehicles that one would face in the city, so it is easier to excuse oneself (at least periodically) from having a steel grip on the steering wheel and an unflinching gaze directed at the road ahead.

Waiting for the bus and having little to do but watch as the cars drove by, it was no surprise to him that the majority of these glass and metal behemoths had a single occupant. He had never had a driver's license, nor desired one. It was partly about attention. He knew himself to be too often in a dream-like state going over things in his mind, as he had been earlier regarding Maya. There would be times when he would be out walking, deep in thought, and walk with head down (or in the clouds) into the middle of the street only to notice that the lights were against him and he either had to beat a hasty retreat back to the corner or rush to the other side while offering a wave of the hand as a half-hearted attempt to politely dissipate the consternation and outrage of the conductors of these metal monsters who tended to adhere to the 'might makes right' rules of the concrete jungle.

These gestures were half-hearted not when it came to effort, as it was both a matter of courtesy and a matter of survival that he should placate those in control of instruments that could kill him at any moment, but half-hearted when it came to intent, as he had little sympathy for any driver who took the loss of a few seconds personally given how minuscule this sort of time would be in the grand scheme of whatever energy-intensive expedition the individual was on. In fact, in countries where pedestrians would generally have the right of way, he would tend to provide a courtesy jog to those in

smaller, more humble vehicles, while dragging his heels in front of the massive gas-guzzlers or expensive vanity licenses out of principle as a sort of microcosmic homage to both energy conservation and class warfare.

But in addition to problems with attention behind the wheel, he also found the sheer expense of a vehicle, as well as fuel, insurance, repairs, and other investments in a vehicle, to generally be a waste of resources. He had no problem with waking up a little earlier and sitting on a bus a little longer, or just walking if time and distance were feasible. It allowed more time to meditate on all of the things that constantly churned within his brain, read a book or work on a project, or to simply take in the external world in all of its wonder and contradictions. As such, walking and riding the bus not only saved him money, but also provided a sort of hands-free device where he could make use of this extra time as he saw fit.

Furthermore, he found automobile culture in general to be very depressing. He had as little desire to be seen for the semiotic armour that a vehicle represented than he did his clothing. The world presented far more interesting challenges and delights; labouring on questions surrounding what he was surrounding his body with and whether others approved or not seemed a waste of time and energy.

Of course, there had been and would be many times in his life when he had been inside personal vehicles and they had definitely helped him to get from point A to point B in a much more convenient amount of time, but generally speaking he preferred to walk or take public transit out of a sense of moral duty, a conscious responsibility towards energy, material, and environmental conservation. He could see an inherent Kantian contradiction to vehicular travel: it would be impossible for everyone to drive vehicles for eternity, since its sources of energy and materials were finite. As such, driving vehicles was not universalizable and hence at some point an alternative would have to be found. It had never been a real inconvenience for him to adhere to this quasi-moral principle from day one, and he saw little reason to change tack.

Unsurprisingly, as the expected time until the next bus slowly approached its inevitable correspondence with the present moment, more individuals congregated around the bus stop. At times, he would take a particular fascination to it. What is the extent of camaraderie and shared goals evinced by a random tangle of strangers waiting for a common bus? It is the unity of individuals in isolation. They have a shared goal in that they wish to take the same bus at the same time, but not necessarily to the same destination, and not for the same reason. Some may be going to work. Others may be running errands. Still others may be visiting friends or acquaintances for other reasons. Yet it is necessarily true that although their personal goals are likely to be kept personal (though repetition and familiarity will often bring individuals together in conversation), they cannot help but have the shared knowledge that everybody is waiting to act in the same manner at roughly the same time: when the bus arrives, it will be no surprise to anyone when the individuals form a queue in order to allow for the boarding of the bus to take place as politely, graciously, and orderly as possible (for the most part).

Furthermore, once on the bus, there is still this common desire for politeness, grace, and order to endure. Taking public transit represents a team effort that has no equivalent when it comes to private vehicles. Indeed, one does not often have to wait long while observing a busy intersection or roadway to see how common it is that individuals in vehicles will take exception to one another for not adhering to the unwritten code of rules that govern what represents sensible driving habits and what does not. Surrounded by a massive potential killing machine within a system populated by other potential killing machines where time (or at the very least vanity) is always of the essence (otherwise, why drive?), it is all too easy (and all too predictable) that individuals will take out their anger and frustration on other drivers whenever a slight is perceived. One can go back to the discussion of sources of social frustration that may have been behind *that* individual's brutally insensitive comment about Maya and apply it to drivers. Those that frequently drive do so

to save time. As such, they will tend to have more stress in their daily lives. This, coupled with the survival instinct necessitated by being in the middle of an always active and always constantly evolving formation of killing machines all jockeying for position means that wrong moves can be disastrous, if not for one's health than certainly for one's insurance.

In contrast to the non-place of each individual vehicle's interior world being completely disconnected from each other individual vehicle's interior world, and hence there being no logical basis for camaraderie other than to avoid potential accidents, the internal world of a bus is one where it is in the interests of all of the individuals who so recently existed in social isolation at the bus stop to form a temporary cooperative once they all have boarded the bus. Moreover, the barriers that exist between individual vehicles that protect them from the scrutiny of others do not exist on public transit. Individuals are free to scrutinize and interact with other individuals (within reason), or keep to themselves. The trajectory and direction of a bus is taken care of by a driver whose goals are predictable to everyone on the bus (or so one would assume), leaving them free to pursue their own minor goals during the journey—whatever those may be for however long it might take before disembarking. Thus, although private automobiles will definitely save an individual time on the road as their trajectories are faster and more direct, the time that is taken up by these trips is completely lost.

In the long term, if home to work is a thirty minute trip in a private vehicle and an hour on the bus, the driver completely loses that hour every day whereas the individual riding the bus has the liberty to use those two hours a day for anything he or she chooses: reading a book, conversing with peers, or simply relaxing and meditating on some or other thoughts. Many books can be read, thoughts can be thought, and ideas can be scrutinized by the transit rider in a year. It could be a good time to learn something new, like a new language. The driver of the personal vehicle does not have that luxury. Who is better off, then? It depends on priorities but also

culture. An extra thirty minutes each way in a busy home with one's significant other and family adds up to a lot of extra time enjoying the company of the ones we love. Yet this constant need for speed can be extremely stressful and may be detrimental to a relationship in the long run. Although it is likely that once we are at home our families become the highest priority, in many non-Western cultures unconsciously and uncompromisingly prioritizing speed is an entirely alien concept. If one has just spent an hour reading a book before returning to one's house, one will likely be much more relaxed and open to suggestion than one who has just spent thirty minutes fighting traffic. And there will tend to be new and interesting subject matter to talk about other than the stresses of the day. Culture. Priorities.

Persuasion

Whenever the bus would finally pull in, he would tend to lag behind the rest of the group-of-isolated-individuals-with-shared-goal, giving priority to others. He knew this route well and knew that it was seldom the case that he would not find a seat. Even if he could not find a seat at the beginning, there were more than enough people getting off before his stop that he would almost certainly be guaranteed a seat for at least the majority of the ride. It had become second nature to him to take his time when it came to inevitabilities. The fact that no matter which position he held in the queue the bus would take the same amount of time to leave because it would necessarily have to wait until all passengers had boarded was one of those things that his personal hurrying would not alleviate. Less speed in a capitalist world of what often seemed like monomaniacal production and consumption always equated to less stress, and he preferred the positive long-term health effects of less stress to the negative effects of aggressively trying to be near those that would be first.

On this morning, which was sunny but a little chilly, he

waited behind four other individuals. They were all familiar to him in that they took this bus from this stop in tandem with him (likely going to work, though he didn't know for sure, and he never sought to go out of his way to make their business his business). It would have been a surprise to him if one or another of them was not there, because assumptions about socialized priorities that reflected the ebb and flow of the Western work week dictated that it be so. Like him, none of them tended to trouble themselves with getting on the bus with any particular rapidity, and the observable good health of each of them meant that there was no inherent courtesy calls to give priority to one or other who was less mobile.

He got on the bus and, after surveying the bus quickly for empty seats, sat himself down next to a woman who he surmised was an immigrant from Africa due to the bright colours of her dress and the accent of her response when he asked politely if he could sit next to her. As a general rule of thumb, he tended to choose to sit either by himself or, when that was not possible, next to a person of colour (and preferably a woman). Experience had shown him that they tended to be more friendly and optimistic than local people (and men in general), as they had a better idea of what it was like to not have, and put less of a priority on speed, vanity, consumerism, and other Western foibles. This strategic expectation resulted in a better overall demeanour and optimism about facing the workday more often than not. Moreover, although he seldom went out of his way to strike up a conversation, there would be days when this occurred, and he found it far more interesting to speak with people with backgrounds unfamiliar to him than to speak about local interests like consumerism or sport. In this instance, after replying to his request to sit with a jovial “of course!”, her gaze reverted to looking ahead or out the window, and she seemed to take little interest in engaging further with him.

Although it was an hour-long bus trip each way every day, he would always have a way to use that time effectively. Sometimes he would bring a book. Sometimes he would bring a vocabulary list of

another language that he was trying to learn. Sometimes he would bring the description of a different sort of problem that had caught his attention and was being worked on. But he wouldn't necessarily focus on any of these things. Usually at least part of the trip would be taken up by looking around him at various details about the bus or the other individuals on it, or just looking out the window and watching the world go by as he meditated on whatever subject matter was being thrown around inside his mind at that given time.

Today, as with most days, his preliminary focus was on the advertisements that were always placed invitingly above the windows on any bus. He was always interested to see who was trying to sell what to whom. It tended to reflect the general demeanour of society. If the majority of advertisements were designed to persuade riders to make a purchase, it tended to mean that there was general confidence in the current state of the economy. The more it was felt that the economy was not so good and people were struggling to find jobs, the more these spaces were filled with some or other private college or training school trying to sell riders on it representing a potential path to a better work life. This duopoly—consumable products when money and opportunity was abundant or training programs when economic optimism was generally scant—tended to be the way the market decided in his city.

The way he viewed the world, advertising had always presented itself as an inherent contradiction. Although on a global scale it is worth trillions of dollars, it actually creates no tangible product (except the physical manifestation of the advertisement itself, but this is not what is being sold). He would always reason thus: if advertising had never existed, the world could in theory be the same as it is, but with far less coercion. If you create a product where there is a genuine need for it, it is that need that dictates who will make a purchase and why. Advertising, he always felt, was less about selling individual products and more about leveraging the power of held capital to gain greater control of the market. It was inherently circular: the more you can sell, the more you can

advertise. The more that you advertise, the more you tap into the inherent human need to either follow others to feel a sense of belonging within a community or to go your own way and compete as a gladiator. The more you can persuade individuals to purchase your product over another product, the more that product begins to sell itself based on well-honed consumerist instincts of accepting that due to brand placement, one will become a walking billboard for the product that is worn or used.

The notion of the brand held particular interest. A \$50 pair of jeans will clothe you just as well as a \$500 pair of jeans. The \$500 pair of jeans merely reflects the success of industrial psychology in its ability to tap into people's vanity. Wouldn't the world be better if everybody bought a \$50 pair of jeans and put the extra \$450 into paying the people slaving away in sweat shops in some foreign country slightly more money so that they might experience a better life? As a discipline, advertising is very old. An artisan creating a product is likely to be proud of that product (whether in the product itself or in its potential to improve revenue streams) and is therefore likely to want to exchange that labour-time for some form of currency or other form of recognition to afford the necessities of life and more means to produce in the future. In the end, we are all forced to sell something of ourselves so that we may survive, but there is always the ever-present desire that what we sell will somehow contribute to improving the opinion of the buyer regarding our authenticity and unique nature. Selling a product that reflects a proficiency in a difficult craft or an in-demand skill provides us with greater confidence that our specific presence in this world is important, whereas selling our manual labour simply puts us in the same category as billions of other individuals that remain faceless and nameless to all except their personal contacts and those that must exchange a minimal level of decency for the privilege of profiting off of them.

Yet with the fall of the artisan and the rise of mass production due to the industrial revolution (and brutal colonial practices, like the

British chopping off the thumbs of artisanal weavers in British India and flooding their artisanal muslin market with cheap mass-produced textiles), advertising has become less about pride in one's product and more about competing in fishing expeditions for new customers in a world of commodity fetishism. Again, the worse the economy is, the less money people have to spend on the things they don't need. Businesses suffer as they sell less product: they then spend less on advertising versus their competitors. In addition, they can spend less on goods themselves, workers lose their jobs, those with disposable money to spend are fewer in number, and the economy goes into freefall. What happens next? If history is anything to go by, the 'too big to fail' principle takes over. Huge corporate conglomerates that dictate the oligopolistic reality of the present state of capitalism reduce their spending, lay off workers, and hold the economy hostage until a public governing body caves to their demands of preferential treatment (tax breaks, bailouts, and other public funding of private enterprise... there are many examples). This is to prevent ordinary citizens from dying, which would be disastrous for their country's public image and also for a given government's chances of getting re-elected. New money must then be injected that inevitably must be paid for by taxpayers (but usually governments just run deficits), the economy rebounds, these huge corporate conglomerates begin to rake in the dough again as they compete to add as much of this new capital to their old capital as possible, brag about record profits, pull large amounts of money out of the economy in the form of dividends to wealthy shareholders ("our money is ours... we made it fair and square"), and the cycle begins anew.

Capitalism is all about risk. If you have billions, you can unflinchingly risk many millions when the economy is good and you are likely to gain and keep your money ahead of the inevitability of the economy being poor when you are more likely to lose. On the other hand, if you have mere hundreds, you will find that you cannot risk even a few tens on anything beyond survival, and you can never 'opt out' of any economic reality no matter how bad it might be.

Thus, the market that is supposed to 'decide' is rarely going to decide on anything that is not in keeping with the wishes of those who have a shared interest in holding the economy to ransom knowing that those in charge of public money must always blink first. You can only run a city or country as a business until it comes to questions surrounding what happens when this business starts to fail. Unlike a business, a city cannot simply declare bankruptcy, apologize, declare a fire sale of assets, and then move on to create or join a new city.

Personally, he had always seen mass marketing as a nuisance. How many people look at an advertisement over its lifespan? How many people are actually persuaded by that advertisement? He didn't know. Looking around at the posters plastered around the top of the bus, they were all trying to needle the 'open-minded' potential customer to put aside personal reflection and general disinterest in the mammoth complexities of the outside world and join with the persuader to 'grow the economy'. Few posters were selling specific products. Most of them were from various vocational schools and career fairs boasting that they would take an individual from the highly replaceable job of janitor or security guard to the slightly less replaceable job of social services or medical receptionist. He wasn't surprised. The economy had not been well in years. Headlines had made no secret of the assistance from the various levels of government that big corporations were asking for "in order to remain viable and create jobs", and government was in the process of caving to the demands. Normal people were generally more anxious about their futures. Crime and suicides had increased. Billionaires and corporations cared, but only insofar as they felt they were not making enough money due to the lack of investment opportunities for profit. The actual well-being of citizens mattered little to them.

He had seen a recent article about how in the 1970s, the income gap between the wealthy and the poor had generally increased in step. However, with Milton Friedman's declaration that corporations should have no social responsibility except to make as much money for their shareholders as possible, since the

neoliberalism of the 1980s that destroyed or enslaved half the world to imperialism and predatory neocolonialism, upwards of \$50 trillion had been transferred from workers to the upper echelons of society. Was the world better for it? He didn't think so. Were things likely to change? Although greater focus was being placed on increasingly life-threatening levels of pollution, destroyed ecosystems, poor soils, and a myriad of other problems that threatened the future of humanity, history has shown that the foreshadowing of increased restrictions against conveniently treating the planet as a latrine merely tends to ratchet up the feverish pace at which environmental sinners knowingly strip mine the world for profit at all costs before they have to pay more to make less. For them, it is of fundamental importance to get while the getting is good, and let the suckers of the future clean up the mess.

A tired sigh was all he could muster as he turned his gaze out the window and tried not to think about the coming trainwreck that would face humanity as insatiable greed approached the worst forms of scarcity at an increasingly rapid pace. How else could rich oligarchs be persuaded to part with their money for the greater good but by staring down the barrel of human extinction? It would be better to get it over with sooner rather than later in order to give our species the greatest chance to be able to pick up the pieces needed to survive such an event. Unstoppable force of infinite growth, meet immovable object of finite reality.

Banking

“Excuse me, sir.”

He was roused from his stupor by the lady next to him.

“I'm getting off at the next stop.”

“But of course.”

Despite the invasive thoughts that crowded into his head, he made a point to smile broadly at her, internally expressing a sense of joy and hope. Interacting with others was always one of the brighter

spots in his day. It was also another reason why he preferred to sit near immigrants. 'Blissful ignorance' was a critique he could easily level at people who were born and bred in his country. They could see for themselves that there were inherent problems with the current values and lifestyle choices of our species if only they chose to open their eyes to it. On the other hand, those from other countries knew from first-hand experience the toll that the legacies of slavery, colonialism, and neocolonialism had exacted on their countries and peoples over centuries. They were seldom ignorant or blameworthy, and their resilience and never-say-die attitude in the face of this reality always gave him cause for some degree of optimism.

He grabbed his bag, reached for the overhead bar, and pulled himself up and out of the seat. After taking a few steps towards the back of the bus so as to clear the way for her to walk unobstructed to the rear exit in the middle of the bus, he watched her as she gathered up her belongings, looking around her one more time to make sure she had everything. When she stood up, he was surprised to see how tall she was.

“Wow, you are very tall,” he said.

“As are you, sir.”

“And I really love your dress.”

“Why thank you. I do not understand how your culture can be satisfied with always wearing such dreary blacks and greys and whites as if preparing for a funeral. Whether we are at home in Africa or at home in another country, we ladies always like to show our true colours. I like to think that the best men do it also. My husband does.”

“Yes, I definitely prefer a world of colour also. Thank you again for contributing to it. I hope you have a good day.”

“Thank you. And to you as well, sir.”

She smiled one last time as she moved past him and stood in front of the exit waiting for the bus to stop. When it did, she took one last look at him, smiled again, opened the door, and exchanged the

temporary transit community that they had briefly shared for a personal world that he had no knowledge of.

With the other seat now vacated, he sat down next to the window. He had to change buses once on his way to work, and the stop was coming up. He checked the time. He had nothing to fear about being late provided his connection was on time, and it had never let him down in the past. There was approximately eight minutes between buses. He gazed out the window at the world passing before his eyes. As this was a daily routine for him, there was nothing of the built environment that surprised him, but the formations of people were different every day, and he always found it interesting to catch a snippet in time of the progress of one or two individuals or a larger group. He would tend to pay closer attention as the bus slowed to his stop, as he could then continue to watch anyone who had caught his eye while he waited for his connecting bus. He rang the bell to signal his intent to get off at the next stop, took up his bag, and moved towards the door.

Once the bus had stopped, he, like the African woman and so many others before him, took a step out into the fresh cool air that felt slightly more pleasant than the chill he felt when he had first exited his building to begin the journey, but was still much colder than the warmth of the bus. After taking a seat in the shelter at the stop to get out of the wind and wait for the next bus to come, he began fiddling around inside his bag. Once he had located the book that he was reading, he pulled it out, checked the title, flipped it over to skim through the reviews on the back, and re-read the inside leaf about the author. None of it really mattered to him; he had looked at these features many times before. It was more of an exercise to motivate him to open the book to where he had most recently left off. Although he was not always in the mood to read, he believed in trying to make the most of his time. He looked at it as “banking” time. What he read today he would not have to read at another time when he could prioritize other things.

How much was reading this book really worth? These sorts of

questions regarding how to spend his time would always recur in his mind. Make the most of one's time. But how? Why this and not another book? Why not engage his attention in something else entirely or nothing at all? It was the reason why, when he was in two minds, he would rescan the exterior of the book. It allowed him a little time to briefly explore some poignant questions. Would finishing this book contribute anything to his life? Was there a point in continuing? Usually he simply surmised that it would be better to have read the book and not need it in the future than to not have read the book and wonder what might have been. He decided that he should spend the time on the second bus (about twenty minutes) reading a little more of the book.

For now, however, he felt restless due to the thoughts that had been cascading through his mind thus far. Maya. Dehumanization. Advertising. Dehumanization. Risk. Dehumanization. Profit. Dehumanization. It contributed nothing new to his constant preoccupation with the future of his planet being shrouded under the cloud of an apocalyptic pessimism about the future of his species. If humans went the way of the dodo, would that necessarily be such a bad thing? Whenever he put this question to himself, mind-numbing considerations of anthropic principles and the necessity of consciously recorded observations of reality always quickly forced themselves to the front of his mind. If a planet thrives and no one is around to observe it, does it have a point?

After killing a few extra minutes re-reading about the author, he was expecting the bus to come within the next two minutes and didn't see the point in reading part of a page, closing the book, getting on the bus, opening the book to what would probably be the same page, and probably having to skim the part that he had just read again. It was true that too much of his life had descended into something of an optimization problem where every second seemed to matter in the moment even though over the longer term it was all likely to be largely meaningless. On top of that, there was the obvious critique that the more he would spend thinking about how to

spend these moments, the less he was actually using them productively.

It was something he was trying to work on.

After boarding the second bus, he took a seat and scarcely bothered himself with the rest of the patrons on the bus. Instead, he took out his book, thumbed through the pages to the one with the slightly folded upper corner, and began to read. When he would complete a page, he would glance up and out the window to see where he was along the route so as to make sure not to miss his stop. At this more relaxed pace of reading on the bus, he read about a page every two minutes, so he expected to get through ten pages before putting the book away and readying himself to step off the bus and begin the final walk to his place of work. It wouldn't be too much progress, but he had been in a more reflective mood than usual, and a lot had been on his mind.

At times, his mind would drift, and he would find himself re-reading the same passage several times before being able to sufficiently immerse himself in the book again to actually ingest the sequence of letters and spaces on the page and what they meant to his mind. Eventually after finding that he could make no progress after multiple attempts, he put the book back in his bag and turned his attention to gazing out the window at nothing in particular, simply waiting for the next step in what increasingly seemed to be a mindless algorithmic process that we call life. Once he reached his stop, he got off the bus, and began the ten-minute walk to his final destination.

Lightness

“Morning, comrade. How's everything going? Ready for another day?”

He had barely entered his place of work when the familiar voice addressed him. It was the individual that he would call his closest acquaintance. Whenever their cohort was given free choice to

pair up, he and the other individual would tend to gravitate to each other.

“It's about trust, you see. If you get into a dangerous situation, you want to be sure that somebody who values you as a person is going to do everything he can to get you out of that situation. Otherwise, you will go into such situations with a sense of fear. A feeling of nakedness. We can only develop that trust through practice. You have to create a history together so that it seems like you have always worked together. Like brothers. It's not like you wouldn't do the same for the other individuals in your group. Everybody generally sticks together. But if you take on too much responsibility, you risk being paralyzed when you are called to act. If you focus on the safety of just one other person, then we are all accounted for if there is an emergency.”

This was the way that the team leader would put it during the weekly pep talks. “Remember, you don't want to have to face the guilt of knowing that you could or should have intervened but didn't and then have to explain it to a loved one.”

“Oh, you know... so-so.” He always liked to remain neutral when asked about his demeanour. If it was a Monday and he had had a particularly enjoyable weekend, he would still maintain his emotional ambiguity. It wasn't the business of others to know anything about his personal life. They worked together. They earned their paychecks together. This allowed them to continue to survive in a world of wage slavery dominated by their capitalist overlords. And on it would go.

“Always the cheery individual. Can always count on you.”

The comment was followed by a hearty chuckle. It was one of the reasons why they got on so well, a need exchanged for a need. He knew that his partner was very open about life and would often describe difficulties with family. He had never met this man's family personally, but he felt like he knew them given all of the stories that he would hear about them. He would always lend an ear to take in details like family arguments over something that would seem rather

trivial to him. Restrictions that 'his woman' would impose on television and sports, especially on the weekends. Her being 'so demanding' about pitching in to cook, clean, or look after the kids. 'Women's work' was how this man would describe it.

In a few instances, he had tried to explain the historical problem with men taking the unpaid labour of women for granted. "Sure, you put in eight, ten, sometimes twelve hours a day depending on what is asked of you, but how much work does she put in? Cooking, cleaning, raising the kids. It's not all fun and games. It's boring and repetitive. She doesn't get paid for this, and she also contributes to the income of your household. You're just reinforcing a long line of historical stereotypes about men leading and women following. Is she your wife or your slave? If you look about the world, you will see that in pretty much all cultures..."

"Yes, yes. You've explained it to me enough times before. Why can't you support me instead of making me feel guilty? I've got enough stress in my life. Anyway, it's easy for you to say as the perpetual eligible bachelor. Maybe you would change your tune if you had to take on the responsibilities of a family. Can't we just agree to disagree on this point?" This is how such conversations would tend to end.

On this day, however, the tone of his colleague seemed a bit more desperate. "Listen, how has your health been in general. Not too bad? No difficulty breathing or excessive coughing or anything? I haven't said anything to anybody, but my wife has started to express concern that over the past few months I seem to her to have less energy, that I'm breathing heavier, that I'm more irritable. You haven't noticed anything have you?"

"Well, it's a pretty exhausting job. We're all trying our best."

"Yeah, but this is different. My wife is starting to worry. You know I don't want to end up in the hospital or be forced to give it up. I don't know how I would continue to support my family."

He tried to volunteer something more constructive out of concern for his friend. "I guess I've noticed that you've been a bit

more stressed recently. I assume that means you're smoking more. Are you making a point of getting out and going for walks on the weekends? You need to give your lungs a chance to expand and take in some fresh air when you get the chance.”

“I've been more stressed because I've been more worried. Normally, I wouldn't care so much. I probably wouldn't have noticed. I would've just put it down to some sort of natural cycle. But my wife can't leave it alone. She says that maybe I need to try something different to preserve myself for the future. But this is the only life that makes sense to me.”

He thought of Maya, and what it meant to 'look out for each other'. He wondered what she would think if she knew what he did for a living. The job was demanding, and much of it was psychological. You had to essentially leave the world behind and focus on the task at hand, or you might start to daydream and even a small mistake could be catastrophic. It was one of the things that he had had to learn early about this job: no daydreaming. Focus. But for people with families, there was that extra element of mental toughness that was needed. After enough years on the job, he could push it out of his mind for the most part. Part of the ease of generally being able to do so was that if something was to happen to him, it would inconvenience only him. That wasn't true if you had people on the outside that depended on you.

“What's it like?” he asked, uncharacteristically.

“Well, I don't know. It's hard for me to monitor myself. You've been on the job long enough. You get these stubborn coughs sometimes. You feel more tired than usual sometimes. But everybody who works faces that at some point. And in our job, it's part of the territory. If you can't deal with it, you're in the wrong industry.”

“That's not what I meant. I'm the eligible bachelor like you said. I don't have any dependents. If something happens to me, something happens to me. Maybe you and others in the team would miss me. Family, friends, people that value something about having

me in their worlds. But everyone would eventually move on. And probably fairly quickly. Another casualty. It's not like I would leave any major problems behind me. I come in, I do my thing, I go home. My mind never has a reason to drift towards people that depend on me, because such people don't exist. What it's like for you?"

His colleague understood where he was coming from. "Is that why you never tell me about the women in your life? You're worried about the burden of dragging them into a culture that you see as thanklessly foreboding? You worry that your psychological edge would disappear and you would be a safety liability to the rest of us?"

"I don't speak about the women in my life because I don't think that it's anybody's business what I do in my private life. This work life is communal. It has to be. I prefer to be a fairly private person so that other people don't speculate or ask too many questions."

"Okay. But my advice to you is don't let it scare you into waiting too long. You miss out on a lot by never taking a chance. We all have to make money. We all have our challenges. If life was that easy, no one would do jobs like this. But plenty of people depend on our work."

"Like those with the fat bank accounts that wouldn't have those fat bank accounts if we downed tools?"

"Stop changing the subject. You know what I mean. You asked a question. You never have before. It's obvious that there's something more on your mind. Are you worried about me? That you'll feel added guilt if something was to happen to me and you would have to face my wife?... Or are you worried that you'll miss me too much if I move on to... less dark pastures?" He winked when he added this last rejoinder.

This was the opening he had been seeking. While speaking, he tried to remain calm, dressing his words in a tone that sounded hypothetical, describing a far-reaching generality. "What if I did have a woman in my life? Or what if I don't but I want a woman in

my life? What if, like you say, I'm worried about whether I could take on that added burden or if it would affect my focus on the job? I'm just looking for a bit of... experience in that regard. To file away in my memory banks as my life evolves going forward. I might as well start thinking about it now. The Icarus point. Either I spend the rest of my life alone, or there's a point where I'm no longer alone. I'd rather not spend the rest of my life alone, so I might as well start steeling myself against a potential psychological transition in the future."

The reply was calmer, evincing a higher level of understanding and confidence in the words that tumbled forward. "Well obviously it's easier if she knows what you do and she accepts it. We make decent money. We provide good income support for our families. That's always something that a woman looks for in a man. I know that you'll talk about women's lib and their independence and all that, that the whole idea of the man providing for the woman is old hat, but the reality is that the more money that you can contribute, the less you have to stress about your present and your future—and *her* present and future—and the more resources you have to deal with any unfortunate surprises that might present themselves. I had been doing this for years before I met my wife. I went through the stages as well. Like you said, when you're on your own it's easier to get into gear, enter the abyss, and not look back for eight or ten or twelve hours, or however long they want you down here. That's the easy part. That's where you are right now."

"And then?"

"And then what?"

"Well, it obviously went somewhere different, or you would still be that person."

A knowing grin formed on his co-worker's lips. "So my private life is an open book while yours remains shrouded in mystery, huh? I thought you always complained about inequality."

"I would say more, but... it's complicated."

A nod. "Yes, feelings are very complicated. Especially for

men who don't know anything about love.”

“Well, I...”

A hand was raised, indicating understanding. “We could go on for hours questioning this or making excuses about that. It doesn't change the fact that you're an amateur or you wouldn't be asking these questions. So I'll tell you. It's partly because I value what you bring to my life and I want the best for you, but also because I take pride in my story and what I have had to sacrifice for my family, so sharing it is no big deal. When we started seeing each other and I found that I kind of liked her and she kind of liked me, I told her straight up about what I do. I cautioned her that she was taking a risk if she wanted to take this further. We talked about it a lot. What would happen if something happened to me. And after spending enough time together, we decided it was worth it. Then you have the conversations all over again when you discuss kids. More responsibility. More potential disaster. More sleepless nights. Every day you're taking your life in your hands. But then, isn't everybody? Nobody moves, nobody gets hurt. You're taking your life into your hands every time you cross a busy street. You're taking your life into your hands every time you get on an airplane. You're taking your life into your hands every time you choose to go into places that you don't know about and have people that could potentially target you for who you are or what they think you have. You've told me plenty about that. It's not much different. You have to decide what is important in your life. What your values are. What your priorities are. How much you're afraid for someone else and how much you're actually afraid of yourself. One life to live. One false move. It's always an ongoing process of becoming.”

“Did you notice any difference in your psychology or demeanour when you decided to go forward?”

“Well, again, it's a process.” The words flowed easily. It seemed like a topic that his interlocutor had gone over many times internally and externally. “It's not like you're going to go from being single with no dependents to waking up next to someone you love

with two young kids howling down the corridor. In the beginning, you just have to be frank with each other. Ease yourself into it. Inspire confidence. But that's no different than for any other job or pastime. I'm not religious, and she's not religious. But we slowly evolved our own rituals. She wants to know that I'm okay. She can't know that I'm okay. We got into the habit of talking about the gory details after every day of work. How did I feel. How much did I produce on a given day. Who was I working with—so she knows about as much about you as I do, which you and I know isn't a lot. But... your preference, your prerogative. I tell her some of the stuff that you and I talk about so that her trust in you as a human being accords with my trust in you as a human being. Were there any difficulties or near-misses. So it becomes as if she was with me every day, but just eight hours behind. If she heard something that worried her, she would remind me about how noble my job was and how much other people depended on what I do. We all have to work, it's just a question of how. Someone's gotta do this job or it wouldn't get done. I've got used to it. You've got used it. We've been here for a reasonable amount of time. There are good safety standards. We have no reason to believe that we won't be here for plenty of time yet. Things don't change as much as you think.”

The door to the gathering area opened and, as the shift leader poked his head in, all eyes turned to face the new presence in the room.

“Alright gents, you know what time it is. Time to get your gear on. It's Friday. Let's have a good day down there.”

They looked at each other. “I think I get it. Thanks.”

“Next time, you'll have to tell me about this woman you're hiding.” His work partner winked again as they got up to face the darkness, apparently having forgotten about how health worries had started the conversation.

After donning their helmets and collecting their gas monitors, the shift boss took them to the room where a large map of a series of underground tunnels was posted. There was seldom any change in

their assignments during a week, but sometimes modifications had to be made. Besides, in an industry like this, one could never be too careful. Everybody had to be on the same page even if what was going to be said was said so many times as to be permanently ingrained in their memory banks. Once each group had been given their orders, they all waited patiently for their time to take the elevator down, down, down, down, down into the depths of the earth, seeing parts of the planet that few would ever know.

Darkness

It was a job like any other job. Sort of. You were given your orders. You knew your goals. You spent whatever hours were designated to you to carry out those orders. After a period of time (a week or two in arrears, in some cases), you were given a fraction of the value of what you created as your wage, and the surplus value would go to some hierarchy of administrators, businessmen, and business owners.

Yet most jobs don't exist in an environment of total darkness. Nor do they have dangers regarding air pressure, gas leaks, and collapsing roofs. Seldom do jobs require the psychological mettle that comes with knowing that every day that you enter your workplace, you are taking your life into your hands. Or that if you happen to switch off your attention from your job even for a few minutes, you could propagate a disaster that could end the lives of your fellow workers. But other than that, a job is a job is a job. Unless you have an extreme amount of privilege in this world, you have little choice but to put your energy into exchanging your labour-time for sufficient money to survive.

Primary industry jobs, which entail some sort of extraction of raw resources from the environment, are unique in that they represent a means by which brand new material—and hence brand new capital—is introduced into the economy. At every other level, one is merely taking what already exists in the world and morphing it into something else and taking a cut of the proceeds. His partner was

right. Plenty of people did depend on his work. It provided the raw materials that would be used to create new things. In fact, the whole world depended to some extent on work like his in order to maintain the hierarchical values of modern capitalism. There is no surplus value without surplus goods to value. Although many have tried to do so, you can't create wealth from nothing. All that results is runaway inflation as goods become prohibitively expensive due to the currency being exchanged for them having no more value than toilet paper. Capitalism depends on scarcity. A work of art can only fetch a tidy sum if its purchaser finds in it something that is unique. Otherwise, it is just another Rorschach test for the untrained eye. Similarly, if everyone has money, then no one has money.

He remembered the first time that he had seen an Indian rupee banknote. He was incredulous regarding the declaration on the note: "I promise to pay the bearer the sum of X rupees" signed by the governor. The circularity of this declaration is confusing at first, but eventually one comes to the realization that it is simply underscoring that the note in itself has no inherent value. It is merely a convenient way of dealing with the difficulties of traditional bartering. If one individual has a goat and the other has several bushels of wheat and they want to exchange, there may not be a way to declare any form of exactitude. Instead, the goat can be declared to have a value of a thousand rupees and each bushel of wheat can be declared to have a value of two hundred rupees, and if a five-to-one trade is not possible for whatever reason, then currency can make up the rest of the trade. It is only by looking at it in this way that the note on the note makes sense. An exchange of the goat for four bushels of wheat and a two-hundred-rupee note implies that there is proof that the individual with the goat did not get full value in the exchange, and the seller may then use the note in a future transaction to represent one-fifth of the goat's value still owed.

Yet although often conflated with economic theory, the circulation of money and the circulation of commodities are two wholly different things. Primary industry may provide the impetus

for adding value to the global marketplace (for without raw materials, nothing will materialize), but the direct circulation of commodities is wholly a use-value process. If one considers a peasant commune, raw materials are produced, raw materials are exchanged, and humanity has the strength and energy to face another day. Within the mercantilist system, however, money is deemed to have value in and of itself. Like advertising, the stock market produces nothing of real value. It is simply a means by which capital is circulated. But to what end? The indenture of power by avoiding the seller's position that collapses the surplus-value of capital by equating it with an exchange-value for a commodity. Seen from this point of view, credit merely becomes a manifestation of the desire to perpetually avoid the seller's position by being able to constantly revalue something (namely currency or some other fictitious asset) that has no inherent value.

In addition, he always found it interesting how teams of workers in any industry were victims of a sort of Stockholm Syndrome regarding their output. He would always interpret the shift boss's comment of "let's have a good day down there" not as "let's extract a sizable amount of product" since he would be getting the same wage whatever was returned from his day under the earth. Rather, he thought of it in terms of "let's not have any accidents" so that everyone would be able to return to their lives and loved ones in one piece. Team-building exercises were necessary in his line of work so that pitfalls (in both senses of the word) that could result in someone not returning home at the end of the day would be avoided. As for incentives to maximize production, he found them preposterous, since it merely implied that those above him would be able to extract more wealth from the bottom of the economic pyramid towards the top of the economic pyramid through greater profit margins represented by more material to sell for the same amount of labour time paid for. The result would only be that more of the primary commodity that he extracted would be added to the general pool of resources within the world, then transported up the

money chain to the hierarchy of the wealthy, and he and his fellow workers would be worse off because their limited resources would ultimately be worth less due to the natural cycle of inflation. By his logic, capitalism was no different than a multi-level marketing scheme.

Again, he thought of Maya. Despite her severe handicap (it was strange to call it a handicap, though, since it did not limit her movement or ability to physically or mentally do what anyone else could... is it really fair to call socially stigmatized conditions handicaps?), she had done sufficiently well for herself. She had overcome adversity and promoted herself from a forgotten victim of a heinous crime to a productive member of society. But again, there was this question of value. What was her value except as just another individual that had been goaded into joining the endless chain of wage slaves all struggling to survive under the heavy weight of an increasingly monopolistic and ruthless form of capitalism? If one of the owners of the mine were to meet her, what value would they place on her?

“What is your job? Oh, you are able to support yourself despite your gruesome features? Congratulations. I guess you are not as much of a liability to society as I first anticipated.”

Did she have no inherent value except what she contributed to the perpetuation of a system of inequality that essentially amounted to legalized slavery? Did he have no inherent value except what he contributed to the perpetuation of such a system? When he discovered and then carved out and then dug up and then transported more units of product that would then be transformed into something usable on the surface, he was ultimately helping to advance humanity. He was giving people something to do, because without people like him no one would be able to manufacture anything. Everything that was accomplished had to be accomplished by somebody. In that sense, he could see himself as a hero, a necessary stalwart to the common good and the common cause of humanity as it progressed forward. But what was that common cause other than

his own oppression? How was that a common good?

The ultimate question that he dwelled on, though, was “forward to where?” The system as it stood demanded infinite growth. How much material was down there? Wasn't its extraction and circulation in the economy not simply inching humanity towards a point of inherent contradiction? The engineers on the surface had jobs because of him. The construction workers had jobs because of him. They would be praised for their contributions to an ever-increasingly crowded skyline of tall buildings that would be praised by the population as contributing to moving them forward towards some undefinable status as a truly 'global city' that could 'compete'. Compete for what? Weren't the fruits of this labour simply an unending procession of Towers of Babel to compete with other unending processions of Towers of Babel somewhere else in the world? More nondescript silos of imagined value that wealthy magnates like those that profited the most off of his labour could park their wealth in and wait for it to mature into... what?

The wealthiest individuals in the world are fetishized and deified for having X amount of net worth. But that value is ultimately a fiction based on the value of their holdings, which can go up or down until sold. Sold to ultimately achieve what? If there was any justice in the world, it would be recognized that this ruthless accumulation of wealth could always be traced back to the horrific colonial and neocolonial legacies of oppression of poor countries. Surplus value is much more easily maximized by exploiting cheap labour and resources from peoples whose rights can easily be manipulated or are non-existent. Legal systems of former colonies are in essence colonial laws that promote the competition and individualism of those fighting for a bigger share of profit rather than the cooperation and collective promotion of the community from where that profit is extracted.

In turn, those legal systems tend to be overseen and manipulated by some wealthy government somewhere else in the world through their chosen Manchurian candidate occupying a

bureaucratic position they came to occupy through a long progression of feudally indentured bad deals (whether by physical, social, or economic coercion) to a desperate population. To him, the moral thing to do would be to now reinvest that money into those very same countries to uplift their populations in order that they too might be able to achieve an authentic state of being that would ultimately add to the richness and diversity of the world. New forms of music, new forms of art, new ideas, and new ways to conceive of a conscious reality.

But this would be anathema to the spirit of capitalism and the spirit of profit: the more power you give to the poor, the less leverage you have over their bodies and the raw resources that exist below the surface of their countries. This translates to diminishing returns on the profit that can be returned by continuing to enslave them to the yoke of oppression. The question remains, however, where does this accumulation of profit ultimately lead to other than to monopolizing scarcity to increase the value of held capital in an endless cycle of self-enrichment? In the end, what is really achieved beyond a world of kings and slaves? Sure, this would be all well and good centuries ago when there seemed to be no limits to how far markets could be expanded, how many poor natives you could oppress and enslave, and how much of the natural world you could plunder for profit. But that was before globalization and the interconnectedness of the world allowed us to see that the stability of our natural environment and the finiteness of our natural resources is a cliff that we are hurtling uncontrollably towards at an ever-increasingly feverish pace.

Another Icarus point. Either humanity continues in this manner forever unabated, or there comes a point where a change has to be made. The laws of physics dictate that the former is not possible. The carefree conversion of the raw materials of Nature for the greatest amount of profit as they are eventually cycled to waste that is then deposited back into Nature for the least possible expense can lead only to an endpoint of no materials and infinite waste. But when would things change? What would it take for humanity to

awake from its dogmatic slumber regarding the absurdity of infinite growth in a finite world?

His thoughts were interrupted by the blare of a foghorn somewhere. It was break-time already.

Objects

He sat down at a table, took out his lunch, parsed it into sections (one quarter for each break, and half for lunch), picked up his food and drew it towards his mouth when a soft strike on his back interrupted him.

“How was the first round today? Thank God it's Friday, right?”

He knew this voice well. He waited for the individual to sit down across from him before he replied.

“Oh you know. So-so.”

“Always the cheerful one, aren't you. Can always count on you, especially on a Friday!” This interlocutor laughed at the comment, then partially stood up and made searching motions across the table. “Where's your book today? Didn't forget it at home did you?”

“Mmm... it's in there somewhere.”

“Not on show to demonstrate to all of us how much smarter you are than all the rest of us peons?”

Though his mouth was full of food, he gave an ambiguous glance across the table.

“You know I'm just joking,” his co-worker continued. “I'm always glad you're working with us. It brings a bit more variety to the day-to-day monotony.”

He swallowed. “Obviously you're extremely happy that it's Friday.”

“And why wouldn't I be? Aren't we all just slaves to the establishment working for the weekend when we can get a little respite and have a little fun? I feel like I should be asking why you

are *not* extremely happy that it's Friday. Don't tell me that you enjoy it here and would like to be back every day? I know you don't enjoy it that much.”

His mouth was full again, but he shot a not-so-furtive glance at the man opposite to him.

“Sorry, sorry. I'll let you eat and I should too. But you know we only have fifteen minutes to temporarily pull ourselves out of that mire of drudgery and get a boost to the ol' morale. “Lord give me strength”, as they say.”

With peristalsis pulling the food down his esophagus and into his stomach, he gulped one more time to ensure the last morsels had cleared his mouth before replying. “Is there any particular reason that you're so cheery on this particular Friday? Do you have some sort of master plan for the weekend that you can't wait to put into action?”

His opposite's head bobbed up from rummaging around somewhere in a bag. “I'm glad you asked! Because I do in fact have something on my mind. Once the shift is over, I'm planning to get home, get clean, hit the town, and have myself an extremely good Friday night.”

“Yes, but don't you do that every weekend?”

“I'm putting emphasis on the 'extremely good' part. I may go out a lot, but I don't usually have an entourage of women waiting for me when I get there.” Revealing this extra tidbit of information seemed to inflame the passions even more.

“Entourage of women'?” he repeated with a tone of wry sarcasm. “Have you been promoted to Lord of the Land out there in the outside world and nobody knows about it?”

“Okay, okay. I may be overstating my case a little. But my cousin is coming in for the weekend and she is bringing a few of her friends and said that we should keep in touch over the course of the evening and meet up later.”

“Ahhh... familial ties. Well then.”

“Obviously my cousin would be off limits to me. But she's an exceptional individual. Very smart. Like you. Very good-looking.

Beautiful, perfect face. Why don't you ever go out? Don't you have any fun in your life? Is that why you always seem to be so depressed all the time?"

As usual, he ignored the question that would force him to reveal a bit more of himself. "A perfect face? As opposed to an imperfect face? How do you come to that conclusion? According to whom?"

"Why don't you come out with me this evening and see for yourself? I can always use a wingman. I've never met her friends, but I'm always into the idea."

"Idea of...? Playing the matchmaker for me so that you can play the matchmaker for yourself?"

"Idea of seeing what happens. I don't tend to have high hopes. I admit I'm not so attractive. And I admit that I don't have many good stories to tell or anything to write home about regarding my job and who I am and all the rest. But..."

"... hope springs eternal?"

"Something like that. So what do you say?"

"Thanks, but I think I'll pass."

Disappointment registered. "Come on, what have you got to lose? You don't have to think about the matchmaking part. Just think about the part of spending quality time with new people so that you can regale them with your stories and other conquests and impress the shit out of them."

"Conquests and stories'? Let me ask you something. Does it not seem a bit weird to you to be using your cousin in the hope of potentially satisfying your deepest carnal lusts?"

"Come on, bro. Stop being so negative. I'm a man. You're a man. We live within a reality of a boring, rather shitty job. I don't know about you, but it starts to feel like there's a bubble around me that I can't escape from. I just want to take this opportunity to live a little. See what happens. Nothing to lose and everything to gain."

"You don't worry about offending your cousin by hitting on her friends?"

“I'm a man. She knows that. She knows I'm a bit down on my luck. Why would she care if I have a little fun, so long as I keep it clean?”

“So the end justifies the means.”

A hand went up. “Too much negativity. You're ruining my mojo. Are you in or not?”

“Hmmm...” He paused, recalling a detail that had been mentioned earlier. “Well, why do you think that I would also enjoy the company of these individuals. You said your cousin has a 'perfect face'. Perhaps you could elaborate on that? What is so perfect about it? No freckles? No scars? No evidence of past injustices wrought large by unfortunate accidents or deliberate acts of violence?”

He had caught his opponent off guard. “Past injustices? Acts of violence? What sort of world do you think we live in? Are you saying that you think my cousin has been in a bunch of violent relationships and you expect her to have a black eye and a broken nose or something?”

“Well, do you ever think about the world that women live in? Have you ever tried to practice a little intergendered alterity? You come out with a lot of bravado and gusto about your needs. What about their needs? Maybe they don't want to be endlessly harassed by *another* individual of the male persuasion trying to manipulate them into opening their legs so that you can have your way with them and then dismiss them back to wherever they came from.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! You don't have to get all feminist on me. You sound like you think I don't care about these women at all. I like my cousin. I respect my cousin. I don't want to give her a reason to hate me.”

He continued unperturbed. “Obviously if you're saying that they're in town, they must be coming from out of town, right? Suppose something happened between you and one of them. Suppose something happened between me and one of them. You've already said that you're not so confident about what you can offer. Would you plan to follow up? Would you reveal to that individual *before*

anything happened about what you do and what sort of promises you can make about putting future resources towards the happiness of her and a family? Or would you just loosen your belt, temporarily paper over the cracks, and then come back on Monday and tell me about your exploits? A 'fuck and chuck', as one might call it?"

The response was more defensive. "Hey, hey, hey, we're friends here! Don't get so cynical. What's wrong with you? Be real. You know that it's not an either / or. Do you go up to every woman that you're attracted to and give her your life story before you agree to go to bed with her? Or have you never gone to bed with anyone because you're so worried about feelings as if each woman out there is some fragile piece of glass that will be catastrophically and irrevocably shattered into a million pieces if you don't agree to spend the rest of your life with her? Maybe that was the case fifty years ago, but I think times have changed a little."

"Let's just say that I know that history—and men—have not been kind to women in the past. I just want to make sure you have thought through your position a little."

He looked into a pair of eyes that had become slightly menacing. "Yes, Mr. White Knight Saviour." The eyes glanced up at the clock behind him. "I think it's time for us to get back to work."

Belts

It was a job like any other job. Sort of. You were given your orders. You knew your goals. You spent whatever hours were designated to you to carry out those orders. After a period of time (a week or two in arrears, in some cases), you were given a fraction of the value of what you created as your wage, and the surplus value would go to some hierarchy of administrators, businessmen, and business owners.

Emerging from the break room and stepping back to his position on the line, he waited for the Rube-Goldberg conveyor system to start up again. His industry was called 'manufacturing', but he never thought of it like that. What was he actually constructing?

Nothing of note. He was merely a cog in a wheel. Objects came, objects stopped, objects went. When objects stopped, he (and everybody else in the plant) would have an allotted amount of time to make certain adjustments or modifications to the object that had arrived. When the conveyor started up again to announce that it was time for the object to move on, it moved on as a new object. Or, at least, an object made up of an interconnected array of slightly more (or, rarely, slightly less) parts than it had been before it had arrived. Whether it could actually be considered new was more of a question for philosophers. 'Manufacturing' only concerned the end-product. The process by which that end-product was to be transformed from a gigantic mess of pieces set up in a predetermined chronological order into something that would have use-value (and therefore exchange-value, which is what his capitalist overlords really desired) mattered little.

Although much is made of the historical pitfalls of the Soviet Union and other communist regimes versus the grandiosity of our wonderful capitalist system, it is interesting to note that almost the entirety of industrialized global production since the Russian Revolution on both sides of the Cold War centres around the same principle, one that was conceived of by an American named Frederick Winslow Taylor. It is somewhat ironic that this principle—Taylorism—should be so named since its central principle of scientific man management is designed to tailor the movements of the worker to the whims of the larger system, which itself is geared towards the common aims of industrial production. The rise of positivism in the second half of the nineteenth century, the idea that everything that can be considered 'knowledge' must be derivable from empirical and scientific principles or be rendered meaningless, gave rise in turn to the ideas of Herbert Spencer. He suggested that the knowledge body of humanity had reached a point where technical knowledge in and of itself had the power to revamp society completely, and that the only logical way forward for a developed, industrial society was to hand over the reins completely to a

technocratic body of individuals who would then make all of the decisions, leading these societies to attain mastery over themselves and a new, better world of unchallengeable goodness.

As an American, Taylor's ideas were elaborated at the turn of the century and found many adherents within the class that oversaw manufacturing. The general idea was to reach a state of optimal organization of the manufacturing process so that output would result in the greatest amount of product in the least amount of time. Although division of labour principles had been promoted by industry in earnest at least since mass production of textiles came to dominate the British economy in the eighteenth century (while also providing increased leverage over East India), it was still generally the case by the turn of the twentieth century that tradition would suggest the best way to get things done. The reasoning was that those who had been in a given industry the longest should know that industry the best. Taylor's contribution was to suggest that objective scientific inquiry and analysis could be applied to manufacturing processes to drastically improve economic efficiency by observing patterns that tended to generate waste in terms of labour-time and / or raw product and eliminating them through the implementation of man-management procedures.

Although one of the better outcomes of this approach was the observation that allowing workers to go on breaks reduced fatigue and increased output in the long run, the principles that Taylorism espoused were met with resistance both by owners and by workers. On the side of the owners, the very notion of scientific management of workers implied that one or more individuals had to be responsible for making these observations and suggesting solutions that would increase efficiency. It also suggested that the supposed expertise of those managers to get the most out of their workers was somehow lacking: an affront to their position. The consequences of hiring more managerial staff versus workers appeared only as an extra cost that would seem irrational to those trying to maximize profit unless the outcome achieved its goals and output increased. Hence, there was

an element of risk when the idea was first introduced. How many of these new managers would be needed and what should they do given that they could not both be involved in scrutinizing the details of the actual production process and observing what everybody else was doing 'scientifically' at the same time? Furthermore, the implementation of breaks that Taylor suggested meant there would be times during the day when nothing (or less at the very least, if groups of workers were rotated into breaks) would be produced. This would also affect output if gains were not seen in the long run.

It is no surprise, however, that most of the resistance came from the workers. The manufacturing process tended to be dull and repetitive, and without proper incentives to work harder, there was no reason for workers to buy into a system of greater economic efficiency. Added to this was the threat to jobs overall: achieving a greater output by simply revising the way that workers carried out their daily tasks or increasing automation meant that more could be produced with less, and this provided incentives for owners to either hire less workers to achieve the same output or set goals that would result in greater output from the same number of individuals. The psychological effect on workers would be one of diminishing returns and a resistance to working harder.

One of the ways that this was circumvented was by introducing piece work, where workers would be paid based on a proportion of their output rather than the number of hours that they worked. Finally, any changes to the working process designed to weed out inefficiencies would only increase the rigidity of a process where workers already had an extremely limited amount of freedom, and an extremely expanded amount of boredom. Further application of time and motion studies on workers designed to optimize their performance only brought them closer to the status of human robots.

This was essentially his status as a worker: a human robot. Pick up piece A from bin A, lift it out of bin A and over to object-in-production W on conveyor Z, bring it into contact with fuselage A, grab tool Y, use tool Y to adhere piece A to fuselage A on object-in-

production W. Pick up piece B from bin B, lift it out of bin B and over to object-in-production W' (slightly modified from object-in-production W) on conveyor Z, bring it into contact with joint B, grab tool Y', use tool Y' to adhere piece B to joint B on object-in-production W', etc. Continue in said manner until object-in-production W is fully object-in-production X. When conveyor Z starts moving again, object-in-production X then moves on to the next human robot, and a new object-in-production W will replace it. Repeat.

It could be said that his working reality was an adept application of Taylor's principles to optimize economic efficiency. However, the reality is that when Taylor's concepts were being introduced, not only were they new and individuals in the manufacturing sector were not so easily convinced of their benefit in relation to cost, he lived (and died, in 1915) slightly before mass automation would have had mass appeal. The first full-fledged manufacturing plant of Henry Ford reduced vehicle production from twelve hours to less than two near the end of 1913.

Yet Frederick Taylor had another fan on the other side of the great geopolitical divide, and that was Lenin. Initially, Lenin looked at Taylorism's context within bourgeois capitalism and heavily criticized its effect on workers. Since it would essentially transform them into automatons for the good of profit and lead to increased retrenchment and reduced power and freedom for the worker, it was not beneficial for labour and therefore it would not be beneficial for socialism. However, when combined with the Marxist principle of the dictatorship of proletariat and workers owning the means of production, he saw the resulting increase in economic efficiency as a boon for worker collectives, as more production in less time with less resources meant an improvement in living conditions and disposable time. Optimization is optimization. Nobody wants to work more than they have to. It all depends on who is getting what out of the process. In his case, of course, he was getting very little out of the process. Greater output did not mean more pay, more rest, or more perks. It

simply meant that more objects-in-production would move past his station per unit time. The result would only be greater surplus-value for those that employed him.

There was another catch to his work, and that was that surplus-value was always dependent on there being sufficient buyers of the output. During times when people had little money, less products could be sold, and sometimes in those cases his hours would be cut or disappear altogether. But available cash-on-hand wasn't the only problem. There was also the reality of market saturation. His plant was not the only one mobilizing these objects-in-production to eventually foist them once completed onto world markets. They had to compete with other such plants for market space. For example, unless one is extremely wealthy (and extremely vain), there is no way that one could be convince to purchase seven vehicles. And even if one is extremely wealthy and vain, the notion that one would purchase an overage of a given product is contingent on its representation as a status symbol. There is little need for anyone to purchase seventeen barbecues unless they held regular large parties, were up-selling them on the side, or were doing so as a joke.

And all of this production would only add to the dwindling stock of primary materials still left out in the world, the consumption of energy to create, distribute, and use the objects, and the increasing pits of solid waste that would have to be created when they eventually ended up in the material graveyard. Excess consumption and excess waste were only leading humanity to a cliff that was coming ever closer, and he was only contributing to it. But what else could he do? He had to survive somehow. And if he wasn't in this station, someone else would be, and probably with a far less critical eye.

He had worked long enough at the job in enough of the positions that it generally became fairly mindless work. At the very least, that allowed for a decent amount of daydreaming or working on cerebral projects as he mechanically went about his job. When he

was immersed in projects that required rote memorization, such as learning another language (and he felt that he did this less with the hope of speaking the language and more with the desire to keep his mind flexible and keep himself company with conversations in his own head to pass the time), he would attach a vocabulary list to one of any number of outcrops on the Rube-Goldberg machine that brought him his objects-in-production, and whenever he had a spare moment, he would glance over at a few words, spin them around in his head, and try to turn them into meaningful exchanges. When he couldn't be bothered with the extra cerebral effort, he would find some idea to go over in his head to avoid looking at the clock or counting the number of whatzits that he had modified and would still needed to modify before he would get his next period of respite.

It was obvious that his coworker's mention of a cousin's 'perfect face' made him think of Maya's face. Why would it be considered imperfect? Because it had been modified from what it was at birth? What of the modifications that women deliberately make to their face on a daily basis with creams and makeup? What of surgeries where they deliberately get their faces broken in order to add a little bit of extra nose here or injections that add a little bit of lip there? Who decides what is perfect, or even what is sufficient? Faces are extremely important in no small part because they are the source of four of our five senses. They are also (more or less) at eye-level so they are the first things that we are likely to see unless there is some barrier that is put up to restrict the free access of others from prying. It was evidently clear that Maya felt that her face was imperfect because society felt that her face was imperfect. That was the whole point of the attack. But when it came down to it being a simple matter of skin stretched over a skull containing a mind that more than made up for any aesthetic anomalies on its surface, did all of this other stuff really matter?

He turned his attention to the next object-in-production that was approaching him, but the conveyor belt stopped before it reached him. A buzzer sounded. It was lunchtime.

Balance

“How's the work going today?”

He looked up from his lunch. “Not much different than yesterday. What about you?”

“I think I've been getting some good results this week. I've been working on my delivery.”

“That's good to hear.”

“You've been at this job for awhile. What do you think about it?”

Replies to such questions were always cold and realistic, rarely tinged with any sense of optimism. “It's a job. We all have to do something. It pays a decent rate only if you work hard at it, which is a common trap to guarantee that those above make substantially more than those below. Capitalism is a bit of a pyramid scheme in that way. But the income that I generate from it generally allows me to do enough of what I want to do outside of the job. Isn't that what everybody is looking for in the end?”

His coworker had pulled up a bag, pulled out a lunch, and started eating. There was some soft chewing, but the look on the face opposite him made him think that a decision was being made about some sort of reply that could be made. Eventually, the chewing stopped, a large swallow occurred, and the voice continued. “Do you like it as a career?”

“As in... would I consider doing it uncritically for the rest of my life?”

A pause. “Well, I wasn't thinking about whether you would be doing it uncritically or not. Just whether you think you would like to continue at it for a long time.”

“A long time like for the majority of my one life on this planet?”

Another pause. “We all have to do something for our daily bread. Experience leads to higher pay, loyalty leads to promotions.

Someone has to move up to replace those above us when they decide to do something different. Many people find the industry very fulfilling. You don't have to make it sound like a death sentence.”

“Well, to answer your question, I don't really know. Looking at the big picture, I wouldn't exactly say that it's the most sustainable of jobs. Sure, when you are completing your tasks you don't really think about that sort of thing. Especially because, unlike a lot of jobs where you might be shut up in an office for example, you get a lot of interaction with others, and those others obviously have some sort of basic interest in what we're trying to do or they wouldn't be in there. People have needs, and we satisfy those needs. But people also have wants, and it's really the wants that decide who comes in to deal with us versus our competitors somewhere else. And the economy. The more money that people have in their hands, the more that they are going to decide to splurge a little, and the less it is about delivery and the more it is about just letting people come in and find what they need to, and then collecting their money. But there's the environmental question. How much in the way of materials are being gobbled up to create these items and how much landfill space is going to be taken up when these items are eventually discarded?”

The reply was more confident this time. “Well, there's a lot more conscientiousness about what is discarded. There's plenty of recycling of these things back into the economy when they've been gently used by their original owners. Or cutting them up and using them for other purposes. And it's not like people can do without them.”

“True. But we still live in a society where everything is disposable, and usually to poor countries where they end up in some huge landfill somewhere for rag pickers to sift through. There's also the question of where these products come from and who is ultimately benefiting from their production and sale and by how much. The companies that make the items that end up in our possession are for the most part not creating jobs here where the labour is more expensive and people have more right to resist if they

are treated unfairly. They always like to make the argument that if they didn't employ the peoples in impoverished countries who have been beaten into submission by centuries of conquest, then those people wouldn't have this money in their pocket and would find it much more difficult to survive. But that's just rhetoric to justify continuing to have a network of slaves that are being paid ten cents an hour with no bathroom breaks in structures that are often extremely unsafe due to these countries gouging their engineers and builders and paying off anybody who might be tempted to ask too many questions. It's all about profit margins. Faceless people in poor countries are disposable. Even more so than the people here.”

A frown. “So if you've got a problem with the job, why do you do it?”

“Because I need to survive just like you. And moral work doesn't tend to come around very often, and when it does it either pays next to nothing or a million people are applying to do it in order to assuage their existential guilt. I can put my head down, do the thing, make the money, go home, and either forget about it completely or put those resources that I've earned into something that might make a difference in the end.”

“Do you really think that one person can make a difference?”

He turned this question over in his mind for a few moments. “I don't know. Personally, I like to maintain a sense of hope that the world can become about something other than profit and slavery. Where is that going to come from? Don't paradigm shifts always start with one person? Historically, you can look at Lenin. Bertrand Russell once said that Lenin was the most important person that had lived during his time because whether you agree or disagree with his position and its consequences, he was singlehandedly responsible for the entirety of twentieth century politics. Long after Hitler and the Nazis were defeated, we were still in the Cold War, then glasnost and perestroika, then Yeltsin, and now here we are. It's all because of the Russian Revolution. Mind you, Russell also said that the smartest person that he had ever met was Keynes, and you can bet that they

had a much closer relationship. Keynes was also instrumental in reimagining the political economy of the twentieth century when it came time to try to excise humanity from the disaster of the 1930s. We still have Keynesians today that say that we need to go back to his models if we are to overcome the massive transfer of wealth that has happened under neoliberalism. Here are a couple of examples where one person made a difference, to say nothing about Russell's own achievements in transforming English philosophy almost entirely into logic and analytics."

"Yeah, but those people had a lot of help. The Soviet Union wasn't run by one person."

"Well, what about Jesus Christ then?"

"Okay, okay. I get your point. You talk about the Soviet Union. Wouldn't we have been better off without it though? Give people freedom to do what they want rather than force them to do what they don't want? I'm happy to have my freedoms in this country."

'Freedoms'. He hated this word. "What do you mean? What freedoms?"

"Well, I can pretty much say what I want and do what I want without worrying about the police or military coming to silence me."

"Would you come to this job every day if you didn't have to? It's still fundamentally a 'work or starve' system. The only difference is that the idea in the Soviet Union is that people are motivated to work by the idea that everyone works or everyone starves while the idea in countries like ours is that people are motivated to work by the idea that you work or you starve." He allowed his eyes to move suggestively to the remnants of the lunch that were sitting across the table while he thought about how to continue. "The workers in both systems are convinced that they are equal. The only difference is how the propaganda is sold. In the Soviet Union, everybody is equal because everybody has to contribute for the sake of the common good. In countries like ours, everybody is equal because everybody decides how much effort they put in for their own sake and are

supposedly rewarded in a way that is proportional to that effort. In both cases, sleight of hand and the opacity of the process of production means that it can only be propaganda at best. In the Soviet Union, what must happen for you to starve? We hear stories of long lineups for bread, but at least they were guaranteed bread. And are the lineups because there's too much common good and not enough production or is someone cheating? In countries like ours, what happens if you starve? Is it because you're too lazy or is someone cheating? What's the difference?"

There was only the sound of soft chewing for a time, then a response. "Well, what is my motivation to work for the common good versus my motivation to work for me? If I'm working for everybody else, why should I put in the effort? If I'm working for myself and I can only count on myself, then if I'm starving I can only blame myself."

"Do you put in effort to work for your family? Do you put in effort to work for your friends? The propaganda in the Soviet Union is that everyone is your family and everyone is your friend and that is the basis of equality. In countries like ours, everyone is a walking dollar sign, we are all competing for profits, and that is the basis of equality. The success or failure of either system is dependent on inherited culture. Millennia of greed, vanity, and inherited power means that we are easily convinced by the second characterization of society rather than the first, even though it may be far more unpleasant to admit that." He paused again, bit off a piece of nutritional sustenance, and chewed a little while he decided how to continue. "The way I see it, you either live in a political dictatorship or you live in an economic dictatorship. It's not like the politicians that claim to represent us are unbiased, morally upstanding individuals that care about their fellow citizens. We can talk all we want about the supposed lack of freedom in a political dictatorship like China under the Communist Party, but at the provincial and local level, everything is fiercely contested, and everything has a basis in Confucian moral duty. If you don't do your job, you will be removed

either by the Party or by angry citizens who believe that they deserve better. In our wonderful democracy, we vote somebody in, and—if history is anything to go by—they essentially have carte blanche to commit economic crime to benefit the corporate class that brought them in until whenever the next election comes around and we get to choose between more stooges to the vested economic interests of those sitting near the top of the pyramid counting their money.”

“That's a pretty cynical way to look at it.”

He shrugged. “It's not the only way to look at it, of course. It's just the way that I see it. Experience would say that there's plenty of people out there who disagree.”

“Do you always carry around ideas like these? No optimism at all?”

“In our society, we're supposed to try to achieve something called 'work-life balance'. My views don't affect my ability to do this work obviously, or I wouldn't still be here. And they help me to inform the way I approach my life so that even as one person who can't really change anything, I can still look at the world through a lens that embodies some degree of social justice and criticize what is an extremely unfair and unjust system. It's probably not going to get me anywhere, but at least I'm under no illusions about the unfortunate reality of work as slavery to corporations for the sake of ourselves in contrast to work as slavery to government for the sake of everybody else. But then, what are our other options? All work is a form of slavery unless it is work we want to do and we decide that the returns on that work are fair. So we get to the 'we're all entrepreneurs' approach with its own set of pitfalls related to billionaires with many streams of income due to their ability to absorb the risk of many million-dollar investments gone wrong that would be a minor inconvenience on the balance sheet of some offshore bank account somewhere versus you or me with one stream of income unable to absorb the risk of one thousand-dollar investment gone wrong that would put us out on the street. Capital begets capital. Poverty begets poverty. And so it goes.”

Another frown emerged. “It felt like it was easier to do this job before this conversation.”

“Well, you asked me for my opinion and I gave it to you. Don't think about it too much. I obviously don't.” He glanced at the clock on the wall. “Speaking of which...”

Delivery

It was a job like any other job. Sort of. You were given your orders. You knew your goals. You spent whatever hours were designated to you to carry out those orders. After a period of time (a week or two in arrears, in some cases), you were given a fraction of the value of what you created as your wage, and the surplus value would go to some hierarchy of administrators, businessmen, and business owners.

Returning to his place on the floor, he tried to look busy for ten or so minutes before a customer entered and approached him.

“I'm looking for a pair of jeans. What are your best brands?”

“You'll have to clarify what you mean by 'best'. Most popular? Most expensive? Longest lasting? Most fashionable?”

“Well, what would you recommend?”

He knew that the strategy in the industry would be to direct such an individual to the more expensive articles. This would be the most beneficial to the company, and would reflect the best when his sales were tabulated at the end of the week. But generally speaking, the point was always lost on him and he had to lobotomize himself in order to play along with the algorithm. He only made a small amount extra on the total amount of his sales. He knew that selling a pair of jeans that cost hundreds more than another pair of jeans would only mean that some wealthy business people would make hundreds more per unit since the cost of production from sweatshops in poor countries made little difference. His 2% commission was only worth a couple of dollars per sale, though it did add up over time.

The status and place of women in Bangladesh in particular is extremely interesting because under *purdah* there is supposed to be

gender segregation, and women are therefore supposed to be domesticated to men, traditionally only there for reproductive labour. The rise of the garment industry beginning in the 1970s and entrenched under successive military dictatorships has changed this in some ways, as it employs about 80% women. In turn, women making some income get a more equitable share of decision making at home and, because of long hours, often the men have to take part in domestic 'women's work'. Yet the garment factories still reflect 'the home under capitalism' with women constantly harassed and expected to kowtow to the will of the company and its male overseers, noting that worker devaluation (and hence profit) is greatest when work can be gendered and racialized.

Instead of being a good salesperson from the point of view of late capitalist society, he would tend to randomly select one of the pairs of jeans that he had sold the least of, irrespective of the price.

“How about these ones? They come in blue, black, and a lighter grey. They've been extremely good sellers recently.”

“In that case, I'll try a couple pairs.”

Typically, poor and illiterate women join the garment industry out of desperation, meaning they are easier to manipulate and also live under a cloud of shame (especially those from the rural areas of Bangladesh) because they must labour rather than be confined to domestic labour under the care of a husband. The empowerment of women as workers with agency is a touchstone of potential insurgency for NGOs and workers' collectives, and it is suggested that because they are used to being docile, they tend to gain consciousness as workers through the creation of communal relations with other women with similar experiences. This gives rise to group culture rather than individualization. There is a history of some women who have been in the garment industry in Bangladesh for decades forming resistance groups and pushing for greater rights and autonomy for women in the industry. They are not received well in an extremely patriarchal society, but they have little to lose, and continue to fight as long as they can. Can one person or a few people

make a difference? Change has to start from somewhere.

He wondered about what Maya's situation might have been if history had been... different to her. One would be hard-pressed to say 'kinder' because if she hadn't resisted, her life in Bengal would have probably been unconscionably unfulfilling. She would have taken her place amongst hundreds of millions of other women in South Asia who were valued only for their biological functions and capacity to take orders from a male overseer. She would not have emigrated. She would not have busied herself with work that might actually be beneficial to humanity. He would not have met her. Their coming together was a historical perturbation, an anomaly.

Or was it? When we think of our place in the universe, we usually only consider the question of whether we are alone or not, but only with respect to other similarly conscious or intelligent beings, or at least those that can move or grow of their own accord. The truth is that we are not alone, and cosmological physics is not a trivial matter by any means. It is suggested that the legacy of leaded gasoline (completely banned in the last few countries in the world due only recently despite a long and well-known legacy of negative health effects thanks to the efforts of industrial lobbyists putting profit over people) has contributed to blunted intelligence over the last century on an unfathomable scale. What about radiation from the sun? What about massive magnetars that blast magnetic fields all over the universe? When we look at stars, we see light that was emitted millions of years ago. What is the cumulative effect of all of these external sources on our electrical, hormonal brains? The mechanics of the mind-reality relationship are largely unknown. The problem of free will tends to be resolved on the grounds of wishful thinking: we need to believe that we are more than automatons in order to make our lives meaningful, to take credit for the things that we do that no one else has done. But there is no reason to believe that we are not simply glorified marionettes with pre-determined cerebral ion channels, all waiting for the Laplacian demon to hold each of our coats and snicker before our respective lights are turned off for the

last time.

The customer emerged from the fitting room.

“Any luck?” he asked.

“Yes, I really like them. Thank you for the recommendation. I’ll take one of the blue pair and one of the black pair.”

“Excellent choice. The black jeans have been especially popular these days.”

It didn't matter if that was true or not. It was all industrial psychology, the most ruthless of which was pioneered by Edward Bernays during the Great Depression. His famous uncle—one Sigmund Freud—had heavily criticized European civilization for exalting their greatness in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries after which they spent four years meaninglessly slaughtering each other during World War I. Freud concluded that some of the more primitive instincts of humanity appeared to threaten their notion of community and might be dangerous if allowed to flourish. Bernays had taken these conclusions to the United States and sided with the industrialists to change society from one of needs to one of desires, pioneering the field of public relations and making himself and others substantially wealthy.

Never short of requests for assistance to sell product, and never short of money because of his exploits, Bernays famously helped to sell cigarettes to women in the 1930s, promoting them as 'torches of freedom' and thereby contributing to rising cancer rates and poorer physical health in the future. Even more ruthlessly, he helped the CIA overthrow the Guatemalan government in the 1950s on behalf of United Fruit, creating the so-called banana republics of Central America. The war in Guatemala would last for 36 years and lead to the untold slaughter of indigenous occupiers of the land by the US-backed central government for the sake of neocolonial benefactors. Poor people are always expendable when profit is the order of the day.

The individual brought the two pairs of jeans to the register. As was his job, he folded them neatly with the tags containing the

UPC codes facing up as he had done countless times before. He took the scanner and zapped the two tags. He asked for the payment type. He asked if the customer wanted a bag. He thanked the customer for the purchase and hoped he would have the pleasure of serving again. It was all algorithmic. Human robots.

The shift continued in a similar manner. Customers would come in and make requests or he would direct them to some article that they might be interested in. Demand tended to be high enough that he seldom had to go out of his way to make a hard sell. In fact, he enjoyed turning it into a bit of a game. Instead of trying to sell the most expensive articles as the good capitalist would do, he would challenge himself to try to sell as much of a variety of items as possible before his final break of the day. All work and no play, etc.

Life

“How is it on your side? Busy but not too busy?”

“Something like that.” He didn't look up from his food. “And you?”

“About the same. Nothing that I can't handle.”

“That's good to hear.”

“It's Friday. You got any plans for the weekend?”

“Not really, no. I might do something. I might not.”

“Always the same. Never giving up too much information.

Don't get me wrong, you are always pleasant to be around, but sometimes I wonder if you really feel like part of the team.”

Pep talks. Shared goals. Coercion? “Of course I feel like part of the team. We have to work together to achieve our goals. We should be agreeable and maintain harmony. I just don't really like to discuss my private life.”

“That's fair.”

The individual who addressed him stopped hovering and took a seat at the table across from him, then bent down, opened up a bag, looked inside, pulled something out, and started eating. They didn't

exchange any further words for several minutes. The only sound was the soft sound of polite ingestion of foodstuffs to be transformed into the additional energy that would help them to get through the rest of the day.

When he had finished eating, he addressed his coworker: “I feel like I need to go for a bit of a walk just to get some fresh air.”

“Of course. Enjoy!”

He bunched up his lunch bag, tossed it onto the counter to be picked up later (since it was empty and there was no point in putting it back in the refrigerator), then he got up and headed toward the exit. There was a short lineup of people waiting to be seen by the one employee that remained during their lunch hour, but he sidled past them and out the door and out into the world. The environment immediately external to his workplace tended to be uninteresting in general. A parking lot. Sometimes more cars than other times. Sometimes more people than other times. He looked around him for some sort of quasi-destination that he could set out towards and be back in plenty of time. There was a small public park a block away that he sometimes went to just to sit down on one of the benches and clear his head. He headed in that direction.

At the corner, the lights were against him. Although he was in no real hurry, his mind was stirring, and he was feeling a bit antsy. He felt a bit unhinged amongst all of these automobiles stopping, starting, coming, going. When the lights changed, he crossed the street, then made a quarter-turn to his right, walked across the asphalt and around all the cars that were parked, and headed towards a small square of trees. He then stopped, looked at the two unoccupied benches that faced each other across a small circle of assorted plants, and hesitated for a moment before sitting down on the bench that was furthest from him. He wasn't completely sure what was bothering him, but at times like these he knew that the best solution was simply to sit down, lean back, and gaze around him at the world that moved in a myriad of ways embraced by Mother Nature (well, perhaps 'tolerated' was a better word) and in step with the ticking of the

eternal clock of Father Time.

One thing that always delighted him was when Mother Nature sent one of Her creatures bounding through his field of vision. Furry critters climbing up trees, furry critters climbing down trees. Winged critters jumping from foot to foot across the concrete sidewalk a few metres from him. What would it be like to be an animal? He thought of this question a lot. Sure, they had to ingest foodstuffs just like he did, but how mechanical were they really? What did they see through their eyes? What was the sum-total of all of the decisions that they were able to consciously make within a given lifetime? Learn to move, learn to forage, find a mate, make a nest, have some offspring, teach their offspring... it was a cycle that was common to every animal, humans included. What did it mean to say that animals were 'ignorant'? We don't know what they see, we don't know what they smell. With better senses and smaller lungs, did they progressively come to feel at the point of asphyxiation as humans belched more and more of their pollutants into the air willy-nilly, a wealth of canaries in our massive industrialized coal mine? Did they see the cliff coming sooner than humanity? Were they waiting for it with eagerness so that they could finally be released from these tyrannical bipeds, knowing that Mother Nature would eventually be able to clean herself up when given room to breathe?

“We don't know what Nature knows. We don't see what Nature sees. We don't know how Nature judges us.” It seemed like an argument that any corporate profitmonger would make to continue to justify doing as he (or she, but usually it was a he) wanted, that is to justify filling his bank account and acting in his vain and selfish manner so that he might take his place amongst the kings and princes that scoff at the peons, the very peons that he depended on for the creation of his wealth. But we do know how Nature judges us. If there was still any doubt after seeing the reactions of orangutans in Borneo clinging to the few remaining trees of clearcut forests, one can always recall that a gorilla was taught sign language so that she could communicate her feelings to us. And those feelings were

essentially “Man is a stupid creature”.

But stupidity depends on context. It depends on an end-goal. History may judge us once we're gone, but we don't have to face the consequences of that judgment personally. In theory, there's nothing amiss about “get while the getting is good and let Death take me from judgment when He sees fit.” Dante wrote his *Inferno* to condemn what he saw as undeserved praise of various Popes, philosophers, and other religious figures in history that he opined to be rogues and blackguards. But why would they care? They came, they saw, they conquered, they left. “Man is a stupid creature” is by no means limited to the opinion of a gorilla. It is writ large throughout history. But it's all about context. Breaking the rules and destroying the planet is only stupid if one looks at the greater good. Those that end up amongst the kings and princes can seldom if ever be seen to be looking at the greater good. You place one Ring of Gyges on the finger of an Evil man and you place another Ring of Gyges on the finger of a Good man, and the result is the same. So said Plato.

He glanced at the time, though he knew that he wouldn't miss the start of the afternoon. He wanted to miss the start of the afternoon. He wanted to miss the afternoon completely. He wanted to miss every morning and afternoon from here on in. But for a job. And survival. Whose survival? Was that really so important?

Death

It was a job like any other job. Sort of. You were given your orders. You knew your goals. You spent whatever hours were designated to you to carry out those orders. After a period of time (a week or two in arrears, in some cases), you were given a fraction of the value of what you created as your wage, and the surplus value would go to some hierarchy of administrators, businessmen, and business owners.

Except in most jobs, you weren't paid to design video games. It was, in some ways, an extremely nice job because he got paid very

good money for doing something he enjoyed doing anyway. From the age that he could hold and operate a video game controller, he had immersed himself completely. Growing up, he had wanted to design his own games, but software engineering had not been as sexy as he had expected, and although he had completed his degree, he had not done particularly well in it. He found that although he had a lot of very interesting and original ideas for storylines and gameplay, he lacked the intuition that was required to transform theory into practice. After a few low-level jobs where he felt dissatisfied, he had found an alternative at a career fair. At first, he had had serious misgivings about the job, but he had slowly been reeled in little by little. Now, he was a geomatics data analyst, a job that he enjoyed. His job was to take location data and transform it into three-dimensional visualizations of the natural (and constructed) world that his coworkers could then analyze and act upon.

Walking into the small office, he surveyed his environment. For the first time, he started to realize the effort it must have taken to fit such large furnishings inside such a small enclosure. There was only about half a metre separating each end of his desk from the wall, and a metre or so between the entrance where he stood and where he was now expected to sit down. He envisioned that the desk probably had to be placed on its end, slid through the door, and then swivelled down carefully to avoid making large dents in the walls.

Manoeuvring the chair to the side and then pulling it around him after he got into a semi-seated position, he returned to his post. A black screen confronted him. The only other things on his desk were a keyboard and mouse, and a few insulated wires leading through a hole in the desk to a CPU below. After letting out a large sigh, he grabbed the mouse and started fiddling with it until black turned to a bunch of (largely) white squares overlapping at different depths in front of a plain green background. In some of them, there were a series of numbers, and in others there were positions on maps that the numbers corresponded to.

It is always interesting to think about how humans have done

battle over the years. Historically, one might suggest that although our most advanced scientific knowledge originated in Eastern circles with the Babylonians, Chinese, Indians, and Muslims, the massive technological advances in Europe since the Enlightenment compared to the rest of the world have been in large part due to the proximity of enemy city-states and the need to develop militarily in order to protect land and assimilate others. In contrast, the terrain and distance between cities and settlements in Asia and Africa during the time meant that there was substantially more difficulty—and therefore more cost and more risk—in engaging in military confrontation, and therefore less need for constant offence and defence. One can see the substantial variation between now and the past in the most important skirmishes over religion: the Christian Reformation occurred during the 16th century, when weapons of choice were still swords, shields, longbows, and cannons. One could say that we are currently amidst something akin to a Muslim Reformation as Sunni and Shia factions trade blows and try to consolidate power amongst Sufis, Ismailis, and a host of other Islamic schools of thought that have developed over fourteen centuries. The danger to the rest of the world due to the upgrade in weapons technology when this historical impasse spills onto the battlefield is plain to see.

Far more important than raw power, however, is asymmetry. When the Europeans fought the Zulus in South Africa, the latter's hand weapons and shields were no match for bullets and cannons. The next step was air power. A quote from one of the Wright Brothers underscores this: “what a dream it was, what a nightmare it has become” was the reaction after seeing airplanes used as killing machines in World War I. In the Vietnam War, the asymmetry brought about by the liberal use of chemical weapons like napalm and Agent Orange over jungles and villages forced guerrilla warfare tactics like the creation of a network of tunnels in which soldiers could hide and store weapons. Chemical weapons have only become more horrific in the form of depleted uranium as reports emerge of

large increases in cancer and birth defects 'worse than Hiroshima' in the population of Fallujah where these substances were at times liberally dropped by these aeronautical killing machines.

But does it really matter in the long run? One may argue that everybody dies eventually, that the world is too overpopulated, or provide any number of such arguments to justify the extermination of large swaths of foreign populations to serve the interests of governments, corporations, or other special-interest groups. However, it is always asymmetry that must be justified, and this is usually done by the policy that the winners write the history. The protohistorical accounts of the history of developing countries have largely been written by explorers and anthropologists harbouring pseudo-racist ideologies. The discovery of the Americas made Europeans look at history in a whole new light; it suggested to them that God was giving them the opportunity to look at their savage selves from a past existence. It has been stated that the entire history of Western anthropology is based on infantilist perceptions of the former natives of colonies as creatures in a zoo, rather than humans that should be invested in because they too deserve some form of dignity. Conquest is easier when populations are dehumanized. Thus, the Malthusian argument for limitations of space and resources is always suspect because it is always those that are different than us that become faceless statistics.

His entire job required him to translate numbers into map locations and vice versa. And these map locations were not just any map locations. Rather, they tended to be in areas where those labelled as 'terrorists' or 'extremists' spent their time. The ultimate asymmetry, after all, is when one team doesn't even have to enter the battlefield at all but can send in their automatons instead. The data that he was receiving was from unmanned drones. We have already started to see that the reliance on machines to do our dirty work has extended to robotic dogs and animals that can conceivably be sent into battle without risking a single soul. How does one fight against a robot? Cost was always an interesting aspect of the equation. How

much did each missile cost? How much was each bomb? Wouldn't we all be better off if million dollar kill-switches were exchanged for food and shelter for the individuals that expressed consternation at us for occupying and pillaging their countries? "Why do they hate us so much?" is a question that few people need to ask. Or dare to ask.

If one was honest, perpetual peace in the future would make us as a species take a long hard look at ourselves and our history. For example, the Reagan Doctrine of the 1980s suggested that a Manichean good versus evil lens towards the Soviet Union justified invasion or enslavement of any country that pursued an anti-capitalist agenda. Somalia? Massacre. Afghanistan? Massacre. Angola? Massacre. South African apartheid? Inhumanity. Central America? Enslavement and massacre. Those that praise Reagan do so from a one-sided, survivalist mode of semiotic symbolism. Population X is good for this reason. Population Y is bad for this reason. Perhaps if they were given one-way tickets to Mogadishu to see the fallout of Reagan's policy first-hand, his supporters would think again. But profit is always the order of the day, and the sliding scale of wages always requires one set of beings with one set of physical traits to be at the bottom. One day in the future, when humanity has agreed on a universally critical characterization of war (assuming that they do not wipe themselves out before reaching such a point), historians may designate the period from 1981 onward as World War III or the Wrath of God War considering the endless destruction of humanity in the name of some group's religion somewhere.

The original hesitation that he had shown for the job is that he worried about the long-term effects of his data translations. In the one instance that he had had to learn how to shoot a gun (but only for defence against Mother Nature in the most extreme situation) he had been horrified. Caressing this strange metal contraption. Putting in live ammunition. Safety off. Lock. Load. Fire. Invasive thoughts of how the simple swivel of his body, the lowering of his gun, and the pressing of a button could decide that another human being should have 'Game Over' writ large across the Game of Life—at least this

version of it because who knows what happens outside of lived reality anyway—made him extremely uneasy. Was it really the guns and the killing that made video gamers supposedly more violent? Or does one eventually get to the point where one believes that pressing the reset button applies to real life as well?

Eventually, however, he had decided that the money was worth it, that he was learning and working on something interesting rather than doing something completely mind-numbing (replaced to some extent by soul-destroying), and that it wasn't up to him how his algorithms, calculations, and Fourier transforms would eventually be used by others. And if he didn't do it, then somebody else would. There are only four things that can be sold to people over and over and over again in succession because unlike vehicles or barbecues, their corporeal entities are designed to be consumed immediately and replaced. These are food, water, energy, and weapons. There can never be any better way to boost the economy than to declare a new round of pointless slaughter over a few mounds of dirt and the resources that lie on top of or beneath them. Thus, there would always be demand for his position and someone willing to fill it, so why not let it be he?

Jobbing

Walking to the bus at the end of another week of working as a legalized slave to gain income from a faceless corporation protected by a history of private property and inherited wealth and privilege, he thought about this problem of our shared reality. “What is the meaning of life?” is a question that we all ask ourselves at some point. How we answer it is dependent on our historical conditions and how our lives unfold. Those that are born into countries where there is a fair amount of resources will likely look at the most recent generation and think that the meaning of life is to continue to try to strive for bourgeois comforts, as free of suffering and tragedy as possible.

Such individuals are often in the minority, however, even in wealthy countries, especially when one takes into account the indigenous peoples that must exist in between the gaps of wealth and who are already traumatized by generations of brutal oppression at the hands of settlers. In the other countries that have already been stripped of their wealth and seem to serve little more purpose to global capitalism than as a slave labour camp and environmental toilet—the contemporary manifestation of inherited power and wealth from centuries of colonial occupation and exploitation—one works for survival and can hope for little more.

As an empathic individual, he always wondered how people in poor countries (or on the streets of wealthier countries) could wake up every morning to the knowledge that their day would consist of scrounging around like dogs just trying to ingest enough calories to make it to the next morning. It was a form of resilience that was entirely alien to any individual with money. In his experience, even the most dirt-poor individuals in dirt-poor countries would offer to give him things for free (food or beer, for example), because they rely on their community to survive and know what it's like to have nothing. Besides, in a life that manifests as a perpetual state of near-hopelessness that some lived reality other than oppressive slavery will eventually emerge, one must make the most of the few memorable moments and to try to make a good impression. When there are not a lot of outlets towards a different reality than abject poverty, even the remotest probability that a random stranger with a little money might end up making a large difference in the future of a community is something to take a chance on. The probability of success may be low, but the risk is practically non-existent and a good memory and story to raise the morale of a community from feeling forgotten by the world tends to be worth it.

Thus, for most individuals in the world, the meaning of life is little more than selling (or trading or using) their labour, and suffering. In the more well-resourced countries, the combination of the two is called a 'job'. Otherwise, it's just called 'survival'. If you

are in the moneyed class, you may have sufficient resources, but you never have sufficient time. Otherwise, the two are reversed. This is the means to optimize profit: harry the skilled labour as much as possible so that they can't think beyond the jobs that they are so desperate to retain, or harry the unskilled labour as much as possible so that they can't think beyond the money that they are so desperate to earn. It is a system of worldwide slavery perpetuated by inherited power, monopolization of scarce resources, and unending propaganda that any other system breeds laziness.

The utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham is often praised for his hedonistic calculus where one attempts to maximize pleasure and minimize pain, but he is also the individual that coined the idea of the panopticon, a prison-like institution of legal slaves that could all be monitored from a central tower. He maintained that children as young as five should be forced into labour so that they did not pick up vices like laziness or alcoholism. His hedonistic calculus obviously didn't care too much for the oppressive nature of historical conditions wherein one has little control over the where, the when, and the to whom one is born. Do we ever stop to think “what if that was me?” or “with only one life to live, what sort of life is that?”

But then the primary question becomes “if not this, then what?” You can't fight City Hall. You can't die on every hill. Food, shelter, clothing... how does one procure this otherwise? People on the streets have their ways of doing so, but you wouldn't want to emulate those ways if you had another choice in the matter. You live life, or life lives you.

Water

As with his journey to work, when switching buses on the way home he always took some time to sit and survey the world around him. On his way home, however, there were no deadlines or time constraints so long as he got home in time to prepare for the next day of deadlines and demands on his time. As the present day happened to

be a Friday, these deadlines and time constraints could be put off for several days. Having survived another very busy week full of assorted sensory input, he had planned to take a bit of extra time before returning to his place of residence. Rather than staying at the bus station, he decided to go for a walk down to the river. Because of the importance of rivers to transportation and water resources when cities were first being planned and enacted, it was not unlikely that one should run through the conglomerate of infrastructure and human beings that he happened to occupy.

An ocean would have been better. He loved the ocean and its freeing nature. He could sit for hours at oceanside and simply look out into the distance, comprehending the expanse of being and nothingness that it symbolized: teeming with life (less so now with all of the chemicals, dumping, warming, and overharvesting that has been the norm essentially since the Industrial Revolution), and yet all of this marine life and its dynamical nature were hidden from view by an expanse of rolling waves and churning froth that exuded its own dynamism, majesty, and power. A river is not an ocean. Usually, one can see across it. Its dynamic is not in-and-out tidal forces, but rather a constant flow from one end to the other decided more by the gravitational forces of Earth than those of the moon. Still, it held its own secrets. The river through his particular congregation of souls sat in a depression, which meant that on either side there were pathways that were elevated a number of metres above the typical water level. Along the slopes leading down to the river's edge were dense thickets of bushes. Passage through these miniature forests would either require a concerted effort or a makeshift path that had been tromped down over many years by individuals seeking the solace and privacy of closeness to the elements and a barrier to humanity.

As he walked the streets in the general direction of the river's edge, he came across the usual plethora of individuals living precariously due to lack of resources / support / mental stability. He always tried to engage meaningfully with individuals that

approached him directly but knew that he was powerless to help any more than maybe offering a few coins to one or two individuals who either seemed particularly down and out, or really seemed to be making a concerted effort to empower themselves and improve their position in society. The stories that he was privy to from these individuals always interested him and gave him a more authentic perspective about the realities of street people. At times, he would sit with a busker or some other hustler trying somehow to make gains, and converse at length while watching 'normal' people hurry past, having little time for the Darwinian casualties that were too often seen as pestilent vermin that so inconvenienced day-to-day lives.

It was a question of empathy, or more specifically, alterity. He would imagine himself in the same position, a hellish eternity of survival at all costs. Their waking-working-sleeping-loving-leaving-living-eating-pissing-shitting cycles were both precarious and predictably unfortunate. There would be individuals who would tell him about how they had been upstanding citizens with slight mental health issues (and, let's face it, the latter must be the case for any of us if we are to deal with the realities of this world that combines solipsistic greed with grinding serfdom) to missing a few months of rent, and because of having no support and nowhere to turn to, finding themselves on the streets for years at a time. If it had been him in that position, he would have liked someone like him to engage with at some point, if only to find some sympathy from an outside source and break the monotony of being shunned every day by those that had convinced themselves that they had 'made it'.

“Excuse me...”

A voice had suddenly called out. He wasn't sure if that voice was directed at him, but always tried to take the time to see if it was. He turned his head to the left and saw a younger indigenous woman trying to engage his attention.

“Yes?”

“Do you have any change?”

“I'm sorry. I do not.”

It was his standard reply even if it wasn't always true. Like most individuals that had (supposedly) 'made it' in society, he relied mostly on transactions that simply required a swipe, insertion, or tap of a personalized piece of plastic. However, he liked to carry a small float of cash on him because he knew that this system had a substantial psychological component to it. When you looked at your cash-on-hand, you were more likely to make calculations that made you think twice about whether the resources-for-commodity exchange was worth it. The less time that you consciously engaged with the transactional apparatus, the more likely you were to spend without a second thought. Thus, part of the reason for fast-tracking these exchanges was to increase the likelihood that the purchaser was only semi-conscious of the consequences and would err on the side of an unpleasant surprise when bank balances were checked later rather than admitting that maybe the transaction was actually not needed.

“Sorry, I don't want to bother you. But maybe you could buy me some food or a coffee?”

He looked at her. He guessed that she was probably in her early twenties. She was in good shape and physically attractive but was dishevelled from the trials and tribulations of street life. Her face had various blemishes and dirt on it, her clothes were unwashed and somewhat ragged. In a better world, those with more money than sense would allow themselves to be convinced to put their empty real estate investments and a few hundred dollars of their six-figure salaries at the disposal of such an individual so that she would be given a better chance in this life and be more likely to be able to contribute to society as a whole. If that meant getting a certification for accounting or technology or social work so that she could have the technical qualifications that would allow her to bring her empathy wrought by unfavourable worldly experiences to bear on a world increasingly divided between the haves and have-nots, it was at least one more voice of the oppressed for the oppressed. Unfortunately, suggestions like these tend to be precluded by the

very nature of a society defined by historical feudalism: those in power will seek to keep their power by creating and supporting events, policies, and experiences that reinforce their position, rather than those that call its inhumane reality into question.

“I am going to sit down by the river. If I bought you a coffee and a muffin, would you like to join me?”

She looked him in the eye for what seemed like an eternity. This was not unexpected. He imagined the life of a young woman such as her. Did she end up in this situation in part because of abuse that she had already suffered in the past? What effect would that have had on her when it came to trust issues? Was her daily life assailed by a combination of being demeaned and humiliated by the haves, and being pursued and harassed by the have-nots? Being a woman is not easy by any stretch of the imagination. Being a woman in an extremely vulnerable situation probably bordered on intolerable, especially one such as she who might have been consciously sought out if she had not been dealt such a poor hand by fate. It was quite possible that when things got extremely dicey financially, she might have to resort to commodifying her body or at the very least seeking shelter from individuals that might try to take advantage of her. Being offered a chance to be a human being for an hour in the day by an outsider would likely stir in her mind questions like “what's the catch?”.

“Ummm... I guess so.”

“Okay. I will go into the café here, and I will purchase a coffee for you, a tea for me, and a couple of muffins, and we can walk together down to the river.”

She gestured to a store up the street that was advertising liquor for purchase. “Uhhh... maybe you could buy a bottle of vodka instead?”

“You asked for coffee. Is vodka what you want? Or is vodka what you need?”

“What I need is to forget. Vodka helps.”

He wasn't sure if this had some hidden connotation based on assumptions that he wasn't aware of, so he attempted to clarify. "Well I had no intention of making the encounter something that you need to forget, if that's what you mean."

"No, no. Nothing like that. It's a much bigger struggle than that."

"I can only imagine. However, I would suggest that a coffee and a muffin would be better for your health than a bottle of vodka."

"I have enough support that I eat okay. But I can be extremely uneasy around strangers. I just thought that some social lubrication might make me less anxious so that I can get something from the experience... if you're genuine. It's not often I get asked to spend some time with someone that is not a total mess like me, or has the desire to turn me into a total mess and then dispose of me like trash."

"Alright. I'll get a flask of vodka that we can share. And two muffins. Okay?"

"I will be here waiting."

As he went to purchase the muffins, he recalled an encounter he had once had with an extremely nice and attractive individual whose life had taken a turn for the worst. She had been a professional working in Singapore but had missed her family and friends, so she had decided to return home to work on her mental health. Not being able to find any opportunities, she had eventually been forced to commodify her body on the streets. She had engaged him at one point while at a bar. They had talked for a bit, and she had asked him if he would like to do some business. Feeling like he could afford it, and also wanting to look into the realities of this world, he had given her some money and been taken to an apartment building that was full of other females who had also slipped through the cracks. "Most of them do drugs. I haven't been reduced to that... yet," she had told him. At one point while they were talking in her room, he had asked her about what such work feels like. "Well, if the individual is considerate and there is some conversation and foreplay beforehand, you can almost convince yourself that this is your boyfriend, and it

isn't so bad. But when he just comes in and says 'get your clothes off', it feels like rape.”

Shooting

He had told her that it was okay if she wanted to eat both muffins, and she was in the middle of the second one when he emerged from the shop holding a paper bag.

“How do you feel?”

“Ummm... okay.”

“You're sure you're okay with this?”

“Every day when I wake up in the morning, I don't have a lot to look forward to. I am okay with anything that makes me feel a little more like a human being.”

“Alright, let's go then.”

When he drew near her for the first time since exiting the store, she instinctively put her hand on the paper bag to feel the shape of what was inside. Her hand briefly touched his and she immediately recoiled it and looked toward the river with little emotion.

“Yeah, let's go.”

They made their way towards the river in silence. During these encounters, he was always conscious of the stares he would get from the 'normal' people that shunned and dehumanized street people as a collective deplorable nuisance. Some of them probably questioned his social status and / or his motives. If she had just emerged from making herself over, few people would have thought anything of it. But those who live on the streets usually do not have the luxury of control over their bodies, much less their lives. He could see her beauty under the surface, but those who had little sympathy had no reason to ever look that far. When he glanced over at her, her face continued to show little emotion as they walked on. She had told him that she found it difficult to engage with strangers, and she probably felt some degree of humiliation herself being seen

with someone 'normal' and having her motives for it being judged. Better to wait until they got to a place with a bit more privacy, he surmised. Not knowing anything about her personal story, he couldn't know where her mind was. But his was squarely on the beauty under the surface, Maya.

“We could sit on a bench up here if you like, but I prefer to go down to the river. It's also a little hot up here, and the shade and the water will make it more comfortable down there.” He spoke for the first time since the brief exchange after purchasing the alcohol.

“That's fine. I'll go with you.”

He walked with her along the wide concrete pathway that was being shared by a plethora of walkers, joggers, cyclists, and others enjoying the day, always keeping an eye on the overgrowth for a way down to the edge of the river.

“How about here?” he asked when he located a path that appeared barely used and led through a particularly dense thicket of bushes.

“Sure.”

“You don't sound convinced.”

“It's your vodka and your party. I'm just killing time.”

He led the way down through a winding path, which was longer and thicker than he had expected, often stopping to push various branches out of his way and holding them out of her way as she passed. They passed various discarded (or saved) items: a shopping cart, a tarp, a discarded suitcase, various pieces of random clothing. When they got down to the water, he led the way along the rocks to something of an alcove in the bushes. On all sides of them, the thickness of the foliage made it difficult for anyone on the same side of the river to notice that they were there, and the river was wide enough that anyone on the other side would have to be actively looking to identify their position.

“Is this okay?”

“Sure.” Her eyes went to the paper bag in his hand. He handed it to her and watched her pull out the bottle, open it, take a

long drink, and wipe her mouth with the back of her hand. She then extended it back to him. “Sorry.”

He took the bottle from her, put his head back, and slowly, carefully tipped some of the clear liquid into his mouth, never allowing the bottle to touch his lips. A precaution. Not because of stigma, but because of reality. After handing the bottle back to her, he picked up a small saucer-shaped stone, stood up facing the water, and side-armed the stone over the surface of the water, where it made three consecutive splashes. Sitting down again, he turned to her. She was looking around her, a despondent look on her face.

“Do you like being down by the river?”

She was externalizing a combination of disinterest and discomfort, fidgeting with random objects, never looking in his direction, speaking only with effort after several seconds triggered a response in her mind. “Sometimes. It depends on who I’m with and what the reason is. So... what do you want from me?”

“Your company and a conversation?”

“Why?”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t see what you’ll gain from spending time with me or talking to me. Don’t you have friends?” She took another long swig from the bottle. When she brought it back down to being approximately level, he glanced at it and estimated that approximately half of it had already been ingested.

“I am interested in who you are.”

“Why?”

“Why not?”

“I don’t think I like this game,” she suddenly said, rising to her feet.

“Let me put it this way. I am a human being. You are a human being. There are a bunch of events that led me to be this person here at this time with you, and there are a bunch of events that led you to be this person here at this time with me. Like everyone else, I have some struggles. But your struggles are more obvious.

You only have one life just like me, and I would imagine that much of how you came to be who you are is not your fault. If you want to try to make the most of your life, it seems likely that something will have to change in your life. Maybe this is the start of that change. Something different.”

She sat down again and looked at him, screwing up her eyes as if trying to see beyond his face and into his mind to discern the truth-value of his statement. Then she turned away again and resumed fiddling around her. “So you are trying to save me? I’d rather not. I think I should be going.”

“There are a lot of people on the streets. I don’t know those people. I don’t know their realities. But I would like to learn.”

“Do you want to become a social worker or something? Am I supposed to be someone that you can practice on?” She took another drink and wiped her mouth with the back of her arm.

He was about to say something, but then stopped himself. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe this is a bad idea. Should we go?”

She thrust the vodka back to him. “That might be a good idea. Are you sure that there’s not something else that you want?”

He took the bottle. “Like what?”

She put her hand in her pocket and pulled out a small, crumpled piece of tinfoil. “I came here with you because I thought you were looking. That’s the only reason I could see for you to bring me here to this place where no one can see us. That or you wanted me to do something else for you. But I don’t do things like that.”

“I assure you I don’t want to make your life any more unpleasant than it already seems to be. But in terms of your offer, thanks but no thanks. I don’t do that stuff. I feel its hazardous to my health and longevity. Do you?”

“I try not to, but sometimes life just becomes too much, and I need to take a break from this world. Even if it’s a small break.” She looked at him again as if trying to decide how to judge this unexpected encounter and her co-conspirator who had convinced her to take part in it. Then she lowered her head again and spoke as if

from a distance. “You don't know what it's like.”

She sat down again, crossing her legs so that her jeans formed a surface in her lap that she could work with. He watched as she took a small syringe out of her pocket and laid it on her lap. Then she took a bottle of clear liquid from a small hip pouch that he hadn't noticed that she had. He assumed the bottle contained water. She put a little of the clear liquid into the syringe, opened the tinfoil to reveal a white powder, expertly folded the tin foil into a V-shape, and slowly shook a little of the powder down the foil into the syringe. She then capped the syringe, folded up the remaining white powder in the foil and put it back into her pocket, picked up the syringe, shook it to create an aqueous solution of dissolved powder and clear liquid, flicked the needle a couple of times, and turned to him.

“Sorry.”

“For what?”

“I'm not an addict. I try not to. But sometimes I need it.”

He moved closer to her. “Are you okay?”

“I don't know. Probably not.”

“Can I put my arm around you?”

She stared blankly out at the water. “Okay.”

He sidled up to her and put his arm around her shoulders, and slightly pulled her towards him. “Sorry.”

“For what?”

“For my people forcing your people to live like this.”

“It's not your fault. It's just reality.”

She extended her arm and looked near the join between upper arm and lower arm for a vein. She looked at him.

“It's okay. Do what you have to. I won't judge.”

Others

On the bus back home, he reflected on this encounter. What was the point? What was he trying to achieve? Would having that experience change his life significantly as opposed to not having it? He couldn't

explain why, but he had a problem that it seemed no one else had, namely an obsession over why other people did the things that they did. The problem of other minds. What motivates people to do good acts? What motivates people to be greedy? How does a street person wake up every morning day after day, year after year, with hope enough to deem the struggle worth it? How does a manual labourer wake up every morning day after day, year after year, with hope enough to deem the struggle worth it? How does a billionaire wake up every morning day after day, year after year, with megalomania enough to continue to build towers of wealth while seeing myriads of people barely surviving?

In the end, we all die. What makes people choose suicide, homicide, parricide, fratricide? What causes someone to think that pointing a contraption at someone and pressing a button to irreversibly decide that that person's game of life should end is somehow rational or justified? Holding a gun that one time horrified him. To think that he could just swing this metal apparatus at a colleague, press a button, and end that person's life caused him to feel extreme discomfort. Why should anyone have the power to decide that?

The answer is simple. Dehumanization. How does one justify racism? Dehumanization. How does one justify slavery? Dehumanization. We tend to focus on our own lives and pay little heed to others unless they are expected to appear in our lives or influence our lives (or us their lives) in some or other manner. And in the world imagined by late capitalism where we are all rational games players looking to maximize our returns, this 'paying little heed' is too often expressed in a much more ruthless manner. The more we can envision others as steppingstones that we can manipulate to get ahead, the more we can see them as empty subhuman shells rather than being another version of ourselves with different features and a different story but the same basic needs. He looked around the bus at all the other individuals, curious about what their private lives were like. How many of them were happy? What

does that even mean? And do they ever ask these same questions?

Maya. How had she maintained hope for all this time? What makes a life worth living?

After



*Марта и ее черт (Martha and her devil). Севил Ооржак. 2022.
Дерево, масло.*

Nor is there any embarrassment in the fact that we're ridiculous, isn't it true? For it's actually so, we are ridiculous, light-minded, with bad habits, we're bored, we don't know how to look, how to understand, we're all like that, all, you, and I, and they! Now, you're not offended when I tell you to your face that you're ridiculous?

*-- Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot**

*I mosh pit, had a microphone, I tossed it
Had a brain, then I lost it
I'm out of my mind, so don't you mind
How much the cost it
Penny for my thoughts
Everybody please hold up your wallets*

-- Kendrick Lamar, "Fuck Your Ethnicity"

Leisure

He turned the corner and just as he was arriving at his own door, he snuck a peek at the door that was across from his. What went on behind that door? What existed in that lifeworld? But also, why was he so interested suddenly? Why did it matter? Acquaintance should not become an obsession without some sort of reciprocated consent. Otherwise, it inches towards becoming a crime.

He unlocked his door, pushed it open, threw his coat onto the old armchair that seemed to exist only for that purpose, pulled the small chair from the table and plunked himself down on it. Everybody's working for the weekend. Leisure time. Freedom. To what end? That was the eternal question we were all trying to figure out. He decided that it was important to go out that night. He needed new content. Some sort of inspiration. He dialled the co-worker who had invited him out earlier.

When the line connected, he was greeted by a cheerful voice. "Well hello there, my good man. How are you this evening?"

"I am well. And you?"

"Also good. What's up?"

"I was reflecting on your offer earlier, and I would like to take you up on it."

The voice on the other end maintained a jovial demeanour. "Excellent! I knew I could count on you!"

"I remember the context. Don't get your hopes up too much. I want to come and see what the world has to offer me this evening. It is an evening that will not come again. I might as well make the most of it."

He gave a slight chuckle. "Always looking on the bright side of life. We are planning to go out 'late but not too late'. I'm not sure what that means yet, but I would suggest that maybe a bit after nine we might be getting ready to head out the door. Does that sound okay?"

"Yeah, that sounds fine. I will have to have some food and

figure out what to wear.”

“Well, whatever you choose, by midnight you'll be a pumpkin!”

“I can see both advantages and disadvantages...”

“Great! See you then!”

The line cut off.

The life of leisure interval would begin in a few hours. He would like to try to make the best impression that he could. He had a love-hate relationship with nightlife. It was only interesting so long as it was interesting. You never knew what sort of night you would have until it occurred. If it was a good night, you might hope that it would last forever. He had had a few of those nights. If it was a bad night, you might want to excuse yourself, return home, and forget that this time interval ever existed. Unfortunately, the more reason you had to forget, the more likely it was to stick in your mind. Such as it is, was, and would be. Every night you were taking a chance. A great conversation or a random encounter or just watching the night unfold... each had its own rewards and drawbacks. From a position of pure sensory input, it would seem to make sense to go out at least every time when one could get some extra sleep in to prepare for the next day. It would always be more interesting than staying at home, wouldn't it? No, repetition makes everything boring. In the case of this particular night, however, it seemed like going out provided something novel. A few friendly faces—beautiful faces, if his colleague's descriptions were not just the result of familial bias or self-serving propaganda—and (hopefully) a few conversations. Sharing ideas, ingesting data from other sources about how the world might otherwise be perceived. Creating memories to provide momentum and hope for the future. Always looking on the bright side of life.

Feud

The moments that would not come again. The evenings that would

not come again. The days that turn into weeks, the weeks that turn into months, the months into years, and before you know it, you're hovering on death's door wondering how it went so quickly and what the entire exercise was for. When all is said and done, what has been accomplished? He opened the cupboard to the left of the stove, bent down, and took out a metal pot. He turned left and opened the faucet that magically brought clean, fresh, potable water. It was cold water that he put on the stove to boil. He had grown up calculating that the hotter the water is that you put into the pot, the less energy that you are using to heat the water, but at one point an individual saw him doing this and explained that the hot water would be more likely to strip nasty additives from the metal piping, so on that day he had begun to change his strategy, sacrificing a few extra joules of energy for a smaller probability of heavy metal poisoning. After filling the pot and putting it on the stove, he turned the dial that opened the electrical circuit that magically brought energy to the burner so that he wouldn't have to wait an indeterminate amount of time for the low-energy particles of water to collide and boil the water without the added incentive.

How many times had he done this? How many times would he do this in the future? 365 days in a year, 60-odd years of cooking for himself (on average, including what has already passed...), less outings, leftovers and salads or other cold meals, and he estimated that it might be about 20,000 times (including hot cereal most mornings). Routine was one of the four pillars of stability, the others being work (eventually a type of routine), hobbies (*ibid*), and community. And for those that were extreme isolationists who might balk at that last component, one merely had to qualify community as the birds, bees, lakes, and park benches that prevented one from being completely cut off from reality within one's own Walden. Routine was the fundamental tension of life. How could one create content without novelty? And yet, how could one create stability without repetition? The 'work-life balance' that was ever-present in discussions surrounding a life worth living could be reinterpreted as a

'novelty-routine' balance. The needs of an individual who worked a frenetically dynamic job with daily surprises would probably be different than those of an individual whose job consisted of rote repetition to the point of somnambulism.

Furthermore, there was society to consider. Due to the world that we have inherited from history, a frenetically dynamic social environment usually implies either perpetual hustle to stave off poverty and live to fight another day without hopeless dejection and misery, or perpetual hassle to avoid being obliterated by some belligerent force of violence. Living in one of the more stable nations in the world might lead to boredom, but it tended to improve one's chances of survival. And survival was an important component of being able to lift oneself up to the next level of having some amount of disposable income as a reminder—even if only in fits and starts—that there may be more to life than exchanging energy for the privilege of generating that income. The unfortunate reality was that—again due to the world that we have inherited, a world of shameless greed and conquest by those who create our history—the stability of these 'better-off' nations come at the cost of the continued destabilization of those 'worse-off' nations. The socio-economic higher-ups that are responsible for maintaining a good standard of living can only keep the national cupboards well-stocked with an excess by maximizing the surplus value that they bring in through heavy-handed occupation, grinding slavery, and shameless resource theft from poorer countries that have little choice but to give in to letting the poverty market decide that almost nothing (extremely low wages, few privileges, and the threat of shoddy infrastructure collapsing and killing tens or hundreds of disposable labourers that can easily be replaced) is better than absolutely nothing. This justifies letting the neocolonial market decide that cheap land, labour, and resources is better than some sort of humanist alterity that would ask the question “why does everyone else deserve nothing so that we can have everything?”

A quick tabulation of the distribution of resources in the

world would suggest that the answer is a simple one. Despite their security detail, bulletproof limousines, and million-dollar security systems, the oligarchic kings and princes of the world could conceivably be overwhelmed by the sheer number of their impoverished and desperate counterparts, but fear of losing more than just their chains or even their lives is what tends to hold people back. “You'll never have it so good if you resist” is always the mocking mantra of the global kleptocrats. From this comes the skewed logic of the Protestant Ethic that a billionaire *deserves* his wealth and power (or her wealth, though a combination of patriarchy and inheritance of wealth and power have tended to decide that billionaires should be white males) is fed into the minds of all of the budding American Dreamers that want to leave the door open for their own future extravagance, no matter how remote the possibility might be. A more tepid interpretation of our social reality can be found in the adage that the best time to plant a tree was ten years ago and the second-best time to plant a tree is now. The consequences of providing an opportunity ten years ago to an individual that would not otherwise have it might only be coming to fruition now. If we want more individuals to be able to contribute to society in a manner that goes above perpetual slavery for the sake of consolidated capital, we should extend those opportunities as soon as possible. However, more Prometheans mean greater potential for the fire of the Gods to be stolen and used against them. Life becomes all about self-preservation, even to those that could give away half a million dollars a day every day for the next fifty years and still be among the wealthiest.

Was humanity condemned to this indefinite Divine Right of Capital to justify those who ruled and those they ruled over? The feudal history of our species would suggest that this should indeed be the case. However, only a fraction of that history has had technology that allows us to wipe out either our own species or the environment that sustains us (or both) with the pressing of a few buttons by a few disgruntled warmongers. And an even smaller fraction of our history

has had technology that allows us to democratize our understanding of each other (for good or ill) by breaking through the monopoly on information that has reigned over our species ever since the printing press replaced illiteracy as the choke point for universalized knowledge. Perhaps, then, there can be a breakthrough in the feudally primitive dehumanization-for-power mindset that has reigned over our species for all time, and the wealthiest could be brought kicking and screaming to the idea that it might be in their best interest to pool their wealth to create a sustainable world where all people would have a roof over their head, enough to eat, and no one pointing a gun at their head (either an actual gun or the threat of starvation) to force them into a life of labour-for-penury to swell the bank accounts and egos of the chosen few. Could such a point of no return where we draw a line under feudal barbarism for all time actually exist? Would it be a point of no return? It would be hard to envision a world that had reached a point of perpetual peace and authenticity regressing back to barbaric feudalism, but the basest instincts of humanity when it comes to self-interested preservation never cease to surprise. “Hope springs eternal” is a double-edged sword wielded by all sides in both attack and defense.

Perhaps it was for the best that these moments, hours, days, weeks, months, years,... all of historical eternity up until this point... would not come again. Progress, however slow it might be, was still something at least slightly better than what had existed before.

The splashing and hissing noises of the agitated water throwing dollops of itself out of its metal vesicle in protest at the negligence of its master brought him back to reality. Wheat, irk, slit, sheep. And so it continues always and (perhaps?) forever.

Boxes

There was a way out of all of this, in theory. But it never went to plan (by definition, there can be no plan), and it was only temporary. After fixing his dinner, showering himself, and changing into clothes

that seemed admissible for the upcoming occasion, he went into his bedroom and pulled out a small clear plastic box from one of the drawers of his dresser (the placement being a precaution just in case someone with mild curiosity should have a reason to enter his almost bare room). Looking through the transparent enclosure, one could see a rectangle of tinfoil, and if one hadn't known better would wonder what the point of keeping tinfoil spirited away like this would be. It was what was inside the tinfoil that mattered. And as trivial as it might seem from an external space-filling point of view, it was highly non-trivial from an internal mind-filling point of view. He popped the top of the box open and carefully unwrapped the small package to reveal four perforated squares, each about five millimetres per side and each with a bright pink background and a small bear imprinted on it, jovially dancing to an indescribable beat.

There can be little doubt that the discovery of mind-altering substances—just as the discovery of poisonous plants that would lead to almost certain death—was codependent with the earliest hunter-gatherer instincts. In the present age, we happily consume fruits, herbs, mushrooms, meat, and an assortment of other substances that provide the necessary chemical building blocks that allow our bodies to involuntarily do what they need to do in order that the conscious entity inside of it (however that actually works) may survive and even thrive. Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on how one wishes to look at it), humans are not photosynthetic and must consume calories that allow adenosine diphosphate to add a third phosphorus group that will provide bankable energy released during the reversal of the process. In addition to this, various vitamins and minerals are required so that our complicated bodily systems and functions do not break down, and these are not always trivial relations to discover. Scurvy has claimed many seadogs throughout history (as humans are one of few animals that are not able to synthesize vitamin C themselves), and although its reversal by ingesting citrus fruits had been observed at least five hundred years ago, the specifics of this simple cause-and-effect relationship were

still being tested in the late 1960s. As billions of individuals have consumed an inordinate amount of food throughout history, there is little wonder that there is little interest, fanfare, or naysaying when one eats a banana and survives. This is merely part of 'normal' existence. On the other hand, if one deliberately poisons oneself to skew reality in one direction or another, that is a different matter entirely, and experience shows that the results of such experiments are not always quite so forgiving.

Yet while the after-effects of consuming large quantities of alcohol have effectively been normalized in a large part of society (despite all of the individuals killed during inebriated fisticuffs or by inebriated drivers), psychotropic drugs that can bring on more powerful (mis)interpretations of reality are still heavily scrutinized and controlled. This is despite many traditions from many cultures embracing these substances for their healing and ritual properties over thousands or even tens of thousands of years. The argument that steering clear of such substances is “for one's own good” does not exactly dovetail with the social acceptance of alcohol or tobacco 'torches of freedom' and their consequences nor with the idea that the freedom that is bandied about by these same cultures would seek to limit these substances' accessibility. Medically controlled experiments using substances like LSD as a component of psychotherapy were reported to have been successful in bringing about positive effects when they were carried out in the middle of the twentieth century, but governments moved quickly to impose harsh penalties on their usage. Under more critical scrutiny as time has passed, the reality of the “for your own good” argument has been questioned as being more reflective of a “for the pharmaceutical industry's own good”, as the mere treating of symptoms allows one to perpetually sell the same products for profit indefinitely (adding it to the list of food, water, energy, and weapons), while a more drastic overhaul of the mind's perception of reality and its place in it would be bad for business. 'Freedom' is once again reduced to 'freedom to profit' by implementing restrictions on the underclass rather than

'freedom to explore' by removing them.

But it wasn't these political or historical questions that were of interest to him. It was the metaphysical questions. If reality is a shared space of existential correspondence where we all generally agree on the configuration of the external world and without which complete chaos would ensue as people fought to navigate their own non-intersecting personal realities in spite of others, how is it possible for it to be personally altered? The obvious answer was that the ingested chemicals somehow caused neuronal wires to be crossed resulting in slippages, errors, and new constructions. The human brain is extremely complex, and there is as of yet no definitive understanding of how the brain interacts with reality, processing, storing, and retrieving information when called upon (at least, we hope that it will), and so it cannot be expected that a better explanation would be forthcoming. But he liked to envision this processing of information as akin to a clear blue river, and the ingestion of substances as pouring a dye into that river. It temporarily changed the brilliant blue into a rainbow of beautiful colours flowing through the mind until sufficiently diluted or carried far enough away that they ceased to affect.

One of the interesting aspects of psychotropics was what he called the 'black box effect'. Just as airplanes had black boxes that held important information should the plane crash or some other disaster occur where no witness would be able to recount the chronology of events, so too was there a black box when it came to taking the risk of ingesting one of these little bits of paper with dancing bear imprints. But rather than consisting of nickel-and-diming minutiae of physical statistics as would be the case of a black box on an airplane, this black box consisted of an explosion of as-yet-unforeseen events and perceptions of reality that would unfold over the next four to six hours. The similarity of the two versions of the term was that they both represented a temporary commitment that couldn't be reversed until the full gamut of events during the flight—physical in the first case and cerebral in the second—was exhausted.

You had to land the plane in order for your reality to be defined outside of the box, and if for some reason you didn't land, well... even crossing the street has its risks. Fatalities are avoided through practice and routine, and it is useful to be properly trained and be among those you trust before you take on the responsibility of striking out on your own.

What made this sort of event of particular interest, however, was that once seen it could not be unseen. If you go through life without ever having interacted with an altered form of reality, you would never have reason to believe that such a thing existed. But once you broached that ethereal plane, there was no way to unlearn that such a version of the world existed, short of amnesia or death. In this sense, it was not only a black box but also a Pandora's box. Once opened, there was no going back. Although not for the faint-of-hearted, the experience in itself pre-empted new ways of interpreting the world.

He believed that the best way to describe its effects was to suggest that our development from birth of some means to interpret and interact with the world effectively takes many years of fine-tuning a morass of random internal circuitry. When we are born, we have no cerebral independence. Experience, knowledge, and interaction help us slowly narrow our boundaries to something that allows us to efficiently and, more often than not, subconsciously take care of the more mundane aspects of everyday existence all the while being able to react accurately and meaningfully to those events and encounters in life that we don't expect. But when embarking on a chemically-induced path through a divergent reality, it is as if we suddenly feel that those many years of fine-tuning have no authority over us, and even a socially ritualized procedure such as paying for an item turns into many questions about why one should see any coherence at all in exchanging a handful of small metallic disks for a plastic bottle containing a rehydrating liquid. It was a means by which one could force one's own hand to question everything and ponder over the results; a means to take a step back from the world

as if one was an extraterrestrial investigating the fundamental basis of all sociology, namely that ritual was the basis for all of social reality.

In addition, when Pandora is confronted with a new world that physically resembles the world that we know, but where the social or epistemic underpinnings of those same routine aspects of life are constantly questioned on a level that doesn't even assume that society makes sense, long-term effects on how reality is understood should be expected. It is no different than the effect of a major tragedy or near-death experience on our future. It becomes part of our story, and some degree of our innocence is permanently lost. Save for a serious case of amnesia or dementia, it is not possible to revert to a *persona sans said trip*.

To say that there are good trips and there are bad trips would be misleading. There are trips. At times they are euphoric, at times they are horrific. But no matter how good or bad they might be, there is always an end even if it's necessary to sweat it out for what seems like an eternity. From this point of view, those who have said that marijuana was a 'gateway drug' to all sorts of other drugs was correct, but also misleading. You might as well say that money is a gateway drug to rapacious greed or that power is a gateway drug to narcissism. It is a natural progression for those who wish to pursue a more intense version of that initial flurry. If one began one's experimentation with such powerful substances without getting drunk or getting high, and didn't understand that there was no permanence even three hours into the experience, then this would be extremely frightening. It would be extremely rare to find an individual that deliberately took on a serious mind-bending substance before easing into the more tame and socially accepted pastimes affiliated with excessive alcohol. He did not know such a person but would have been interested to hear of his (or her) experiences. Only a small proportion of the world has access to such powerful substances, and only a tiny fraction of those individuals would have the desire to take the risk of availing themselves of such an

experience. And those who choose to do so tend to be involved in a culture of social experimentation that includes at least alcohol, and probably also marijuana. To do something so powerful as a first experience would take either a lot of deliberation or a lot of naivete or both. But it would definitely take a lot of opportunity.

Confronting oneself is not easy when one is in full control of one's faculties and taking the complexity of life only a little at a time. It is an order of magnitude more difficult to deal with entering a cerebral experience where all bets are off and the well-honed passageways of predictability that we have developed over tens of thousands of days of slowly integrating every sort of sense-data into regulated neuronal patterns gives way to a jökulhaup of electrical activity bursting through every electrical pore that can't be turned off until the rainbow river in such a mind reverts to its original calm and relatively sterile blue. At times, he had dared to surmise that the only possible explanation for consciousness evolving and 'sticking' amongst humans had to be somehow tied to this sort of hunter-gatherer experimentation. Could the first leap in behaviour from primate to human be explained as occurring when a troop of reclusive primates deep in the forests of present-day Congo developed an ibogaine addiction and, akin to the Narcissus of legend, became obsessed with being unable to explain the altered perceptions of their own reflections in a puddle?

His phone rang. He picked it up. They would be meeting in one hour at a place he knew of but had only been to on one or two occasions at the behest of others. These details spoke of a new experience, a temporary rebirth of sorts, an escape from the predictable monotony of the everyday into a black box of incalculable potentialities. After hanging up, he looked again at the small bit of tinfoil. What were the heights and depths that this incalculability could reach? What were his boundary conditions? Only Father Time could provide an answer, and only after the limitless options of an undetermined yet-to-be had collapsed into a well-defined singularity, i.e. another what-had-been that would be

condemned to the dustbin of memory. The pursuit of a stable happiness remained forever just out of reach.

Privilege

“You 'acknowledge your privilege'? What does that even mean? That you can now pat yourself on the back for being such a clever, worldly individual, and go forward doing whatever you like with a clean conscience?”

“Well what would you have me do? I was born into a country where things have been pretty good. I was born into a family where things were pretty good. And I am a white male, which has been, for much of history, the most powerful demographic in the world. Now what? There's not much I can do about who I am or what I can and cannot do.”

“So you say that because you can't do anything about it, you may do as you please now that you've 'acknowledged' your privileged position in society?”

He rolled his eyes, sighing. “I'm sorry. It was a stupid thing to say. I was served before you. I probably shouldn't have been. I understand that I know nothing about who you are or where you're from, and I understand that it's quite possible that wherever you may have left to come here might have been in a situation that wasn't the greatest. And I acknowledge that that situation is probably down to the people on this side of the world not really caring about the people on that side of the world beyond the money that they can make from them. I acknowledge that it's a terrible system. Can I go now?” He raised his glass to her, stopping in mid-trajectory to provide a weak toast, and took a sip. He then cradled the glass in his hand, looked down at it, looked at the others that had been poured for his party, and nodded in the general direction of those that accompanied him to the bar. “My friends are expecting me over there.”

A hand appeared on his arm, hindering his attempt to move away. He looked at the hand, then looked at the face. “What? What

more would you like me to say? The world is what it is. I wish I could do more. But I'm just a lowly bottom-feeder like most other people in this world.”

“Wait. You didn't answer my question. What does it mean that you 'acknowledge your privilege'?”

He did his best to sound as annoyed as possible in order to free himself from this awkward situation. In his most defeatist tone, he replied “I don't know. That I know that I'm like this and I understand what it means and that statistically speaking I should have been born in China or India but because I'm not I should thank my lucky stars every morning. What would you like me to say? I tried to extend my sympathy and understanding. I can't do much more. The alcohol in my bloodstream is being diluted further every moment I stand here. It's nothing personal. I'm sure you're a wonderful individual. I just don't see what we stand to gain by arguing over this point. I'm a white male. Looking at how white males have treated people throughout history—slavery, religious indoctrination, theft of resources, and all of the other crimes visited upon the colonized—we suck.”

Her demeanour took on a calmer air. “Let me say this and I'll leave you alone. To acknowledge something is easy. I can acknowledge that you want to get back to your friends. I can acknowledge that your shoelaces are tied. These are small things that no one cares about. And, like you, I can also look at the bigger picture. I can acknowledge that people are getting bombed in this part of the world. I can acknowledge that people are starving in that part of the world. I can acknowledge that life could be better if only we made changes x , y , and z to this, that, and the other. In order to do all these things, I just have to look at all the soundbites that bombard me from every TV, newspaper, magazine, media outlet, or random stranger that I talk to on the street or at school or at work or anywhere else that has people who decide to talk about such things. And then what? My point is this. You may *acknowledge* anything, but the real question is whether or not you *understand* it.

“Suppose I told you that when I was a child, I had been traumatized by some sexual abuse that wasn't my fault. You know how that goes, right? Psychologists talk about it all the time. There's some skeleton in my closet that haunts me every time there is a trigger event or, sometimes without warning or anything untoward happening, it creeps into my mind in some other way and causes me to revisit that harrowing experience. And yet I go forward in the world, trying my best to forget it, or, I suppose more accurately, 'live with it'. Trying to be 'normal'. Trying to 'fit in'. Because what else can I do? All the time I'm trying to go forward, there is this ghostly, spectral hand that follows me around, able to pull me back into the past at any moment. And so I develop a sense of guilt and shame whenever I 'act out' or fear that I might 'act out' and inconvenience the people I am with because I can neither prevent myself from doing so, nor try to explain the situation to random others. I mean... I could... but it will be looked at as some sort of handicap or debilitating condition that might get me a few condolences or might get me more embarrassment and isolation because people would see this as problematic, as a 'here we go again' scenario that will crop up again and again in the future. In an 'I'm trying to enjoy myself here; I don't want to hear about your problems' sort of way.”

He cut in. “Look, I think this is getting way out of hand. It was a stupid thing to say...”

She raised a hand. “Hello?! Still talking here! And I'm still talking because this 'privilege' thing really annoys me. You congratulated yourself for extending sympathy and I suppose I should be grateful. Will you now also let me finish so that you can get a better idea of where I'm coming from?” She brought her raised hand down in a sweeping gesture in the direction of his cohort. “By all means, it's a free country. You can leave whenever you want. Do you want to listen to what I have to say? Do you want to try to understand what my worldview looks like compared to your worldview? You might learn something by standing here and listening for a couple minutes about how I see things. But you don't

have to. What's it going to be?"

He placed his drink back down on the bar. "Teach me."

"Your permission is most welcome, my liege." Sarcasm was met with sarcasm before she continued. "Suppose, just suppose, that instead of or in addition to being sexually assaulted myself, I knew family and friends who were also being endlessly chronically abused in this manner. That every day, they would wake up to a reality where all they can think about is that someone, anyone, might walk up to them and coerce them into the worst lewd and slovenly acts. And all they could do was keep silent because they knew that if they tried to resist or tried to say something, they would be hunted down and 'silenced'. Now suppose you had either lived this experience before but had now escaped, or escaped before this experience affected you."

"I'm really very sorry if I offended you. I didn't choose my words carefully. It was not my intention to offend. I realize that I can't know what you've been through."

"Are you going to let me finish or are you satisfied with excusing your actions and moving on? Do you actually care about what I have to say, Mr. White Male? Will you let me tell my story? That's all I ask."

"Okay. I'll shut up."

"I was speaking metaphorically. What has happened to me or might happen to me or will happen to me is not your concern. So, metaphorically speaking, suppose you know that every day, thousands of people just like you continue to live this experience. Friends, family, countrymen. That that is their reality. And you are not just a bystander lost in the sea of newsreaders halfway across the world looking at a headline, but your birth, and your upbringing and, depending on when you got out, your experiences, implies an implicit loyalty, an unbreakable bond, to this reality. To this place. To these people. It's like an anchor. But not in a negative way where you are constantly drowning, nor in a positive way that you are some sort of hero holding up the world like Atlas. It's just... something. It's

a part of you because of who you happen to be. It's not a choice to have it. It's only a choice to keep it inside and not ignore or dispel it as being outside of your personal responsibility.

“But the only way to break the bond is to not give a shit finally, to push it all out, to sell out your friends, family, and everybody else who was there for you and brought you to this point. In other words, you exchange the psychological weight of other people's suffering for the psychological weight of telling yourself in your heart that you are a ruthlessly self-serving traitor. Imagine this lived experience. Every minute of every day. Where that ghostly hand is there hovering over you, waiting to pull you back into a past not of one experience that affected you personally, but into a chaotic sea of pained faces, people screaming out for help. All around you. And in that sea of faces, the most common people you see are the faces of sisters, aunts, cousins, family members. All condemned to this life of horror beyond belief. The life of a caged and tortured animal. And that when that happens, when that hand grabs you, it sparks in you almost uncontrollable feelings equally of rage and of helplessness, feelings that you've had to teach yourself over years and years to keep under control. And over years, decades even, of concentrated exercises interspersed with ever-present emotional duress, you are able to diminish the effect: the strength of the hand, the frequency that it grabs you, the things that you see, the anguish that you feel. That you are able, eventually, to live a fairly 'normal' life, albeit one where, to the untrained eye, it might seem that you have some sort of chip on your shoulder, or a short fuse, or that you're too emotional, or that you're not emotional enough, or any other uninformed judgment some opinionated observer wants to throw at you.”

He was mesmerized. In that moment, it seemed to him like exactly two people existed on the entire planet.

She continued. “You've already said you acknowledge your white privilege. Kudos. But do you really know what that means? It means, for example, that you didn't grow up in a prison, like me. A

prison known to some as Gaza, but to most on this rather uncritical side of the world through Israel-friendly newscasts as that place that Israel carpet-bombs every few years to 'defend itself' from the evil Hamas who shoots obsolete misguided rockets into Israel as part of their evil Satanic plan to exterminate all Jews. I don't know what your opinion is on the Israel-Palestine conflict, and I don't really care to know. I'm here to enjoy myself, not to get into a political debate. When you say white privilege, you probably think of more money, more access to education, and more freedom to do what you want. When I say white privilege, I think freedom from the past. Freedom from that hand that follows me to any corner of the Earth that I might find myself in. And in my case, not just the past, but the present, and however long the current situation extends into the future, however long my friends and family and other Gazans I don't know wake up to face another day of existential rape, if they wake up at all. However long it will be before it will only be the past that I want to be free of because the future provides me with genuine hope that life could be different for the people who are close to me but I am helpless to actually intervene on behalf of. Will that ever come to pass? A resolution? Not if history is anything to go by. But if I let that consume me, I won't be able to do anything at all. So all I can do is what you can do: live in the present and try to make the most of the resources that you, I, we have to try to do something meaningful, however we each choose to define that. And we wait to see the hand that history deals us in the future. I'm not poor. I'm not uneducated. I have a fair amount of freedom to go where I like and do what I like. In that sense, I also acknowledge the same privilege that you acknowledge. But if material comforts are your definition of 'acknowledging privilege', then from my point of view at least, your understanding of this idea is severely limited. The true tests of life are always the psychological ones that we bear without a choice.” She suddenly stopped, noticing that he was starting to arrange his glasses on a tray for easier transport.

“Sorry, I'm just preparing.”

“It's okay. I'm finished.” She nodded towards the collection of drinks assembled on the bar in front of him. “And you must be thirsty.”

She started to turn, and then she stopped, catching herself. “Oh, and by the way.” She turned and caught his eye again. “Since I'm used to being raked over the coals whenever I try to express a picture of what's going on in Gaza, I better say this. Rape is not a trivial matter. I do not use this comparison lightly or easily. But graphic language and graphic metaphor is the only way to try to *maybe* get through to some people on this issue. The *New York Times* or any other media outlet can try to dismiss and paper over this reality as much as they want. That is their prerogative. I don't speak for them. I speak for myself. And I speak for what I've seen and what I feel as a human being. I'm sorry if I offend anyone.”

He stood there, watching her turn away and take a seat at a table next to a guy that he guessed was also Middle Eastern. He watched this guy say something to her and look in his direction. She turned to this individual and mouthed a few words, whereupon the guy threw his head back and laughed. She continued mouthing words, a mischievous smile slowly spreading on her face, and at one point glanced in his direction.

“Effortlessness is the pinnacle of style. If style is contrived, then it is meaningless.” This ordered string of words seemed to assemble itself in his mind as he continued to look in her direction. Upon receiving a second, much frostier glance from her, he suddenly became self-conscious of staring at them. At that moment, he turned back to the bar, carefully picked up the tray of drinks with both hands, and slowly, carefully, made his way back to his seat.

Pathology

“So what did you think of that?”

He was feeling quite cheerful. “I had a very nice time. You brought very good company.”

“I'm happy to hear it. Although I normally like to be modest, I do like to cherish these small victories. It gives me momentum for the upcoming work week.”

“Yes, plenty of good conversations. Plenty of good food for thought.”

“Speaking of conversations...” He deliberately let his voice trail off.

“Yes?”

“What was up with the conversation that you had with your new friend?”

He furrowed his brow, not understanding. “New friend?”

“Maybe an old friend? You had been gone awhile getting those drinks. I glanced over and saw you talking to someone. Like at our table, you seemed to be doing a lot of the listening, but unlike at our table, you seemed much more uncomfortable.”

It was obvious what he was referring to. “Oh, that. Maybe you could call her a new friend. I didn't know her before. She told me a bit about herself. Politics came into it. Maybe on another day, I would have been more engaged. But I didn't want to burst my bubble of social joy by delving too deeply into the human tragedy of realpolitik.”

“Hmm... I see.”

“I would rather not get into it.”

They continued walking at an easy pace towards nowhere in particular, trying to maintain the jovial positivity that had existed in the bar.

“It's not really something that I'm so interested in anyway. I prefer to keep my mind on the real world. So, what did you think of those lovely ladies that we spent our time with? You looked like you were enjoying yourself. You admitted just now that you were enjoying yourself. Why don't we do this more often? You know, get to know each other a little more. More trust. More common interests. More common goals. Teamwork.”

“The wingman.”

His acquaintance laughed. “Well, that's not exactly what I meant. You don't know much about me, and I don't know much about you save for what we talk about at work, which can sometimes get pretty depressing. If we came out every few Fridays just to knock a couple back and shoot the shit, wouldn't it bring a bit more to both our lives? Wouldn't you rather be out here in the world enjoying yourself rather than... well... somewhere else?”

“It's a good question. I'll think about it.”

“I'm glad to hear it. So? Did you fancy any of them? My cousin isn't too bad-looking is she? And you could see that she has plenty of energy. She seemed to enjoy your company.”

Trying to diffuse this sense of giddiness that seemed to be reaching a crescendo, he thought for a moment, deciding how to word his reply. “I would disagree with none of those points.”

“Uhhh...” His interlocutor looked this way and that, briefly calculating in his mind, then looked back and smiled. “Okay, double negative. We're good. I just had to make sure. Well, I'm glad we've found some common ground, then. But... tell me what you really think.”

“Well...”

Now his co-worker's tone took on a more scornful sound. “You are like a turtle afraid to come out of its shell. I'll make it easier on you. Are you seeing someone right now?”

He paused for a moment to consider how to interpret this question. “Well... no...”

“A little hesitation there. Friends with benefits? A failing marriage that you need a backup plan for?”

He paused again. “It's not like that at all.”

“Well, then what's stopping you?”

He took a few paces in silence, looking around at the trees and the grass next to the walkway for inspiration. “Let me put it this way. Suppose I started spending time with your cousin—because I do think she comes across as a fantastic individual for the little time I have been able to spend with her—and suppose we really hit it off.

Things get a bit serious. I don't know.”

“And? What's wrong with that? I think I'm a good judge of character, and I think you're alright. Better you than some random idiot that treats her poorly.”

He was trying to find the right words in order to say the right thing at the right time. They kept walking. To where, neither of them cared.

After five minutes, another prod came. “Aaaaaaaaand... sooooooooooooo...?”

Three words.

“Life is boring.”

“What?? What do you mean by that?? What does that have to do with anything??”

He didn't respond. They continued on into the night.

Another prod. “Okay, so suppose we grant that life is boring. Why not do something with it? Find someone to spend time with, and it will become far less boring.”

“But for fifty years?”

He was confronted by a weird look. “So you plan to be single for the rest of your life, and hope that there's always another nubile youngster around the corner to satisfy your every whim?”

“That's not what I mean. Let's just say I know myself pretty well. And at this point in my life... I just can't explain it but there's too much still at stake.”

“Too much what?”

“I don't know how to explain it. I'm still trying to figure things out I guess.”

“Figure what things out? You've spent your youthful years going out into the world and doing... I don't know what, but you seem to have learned a lot given the sort of things you talk about. Now you're in a job that provides you a certain amount of stability. What's next? You find someone you enjoy the company of, you share the load, you have kids if you want to start the cycle again, and then...”

“You die eventually.”

His companion flashed an awkward smile. “Morbid, but to the point. So what's to figure out?”

Trauma

“What I mean is... 'figuring it out' is a lot more difficult when everything seems boring, so commitment to anything feels like you're selling your soul. We only have one life. And once we choose, we must live with the consequences. I wouldn't want to give someone I know the wrong impression that I was committed but not really.” He wanted out of this conversation and tried to tie it up quickly.

“You sound like you're being asked to make a deal with the Devil. This is life. You either sell your soul eventually or you go to your grave never knowing what real love and real life is. Is that what you want? To get to old age and regret never truly feeling the most important thing in life?”

“Is 'true love' really the most important thing in life?”

“What is the alternative? You might as well choose something. Or someone.”

“I don't know how to explain it. I just feel like there's still something in my life—about me—that I have to figure out or find.”

“Like what?”

“I don't know. An opportunity.”

The reply was one of incredulity. “We all want more and better opportunities. How do you know it won't come sooner by teaming up with someone else? Combine spending, cost of living, entertainment, cooking, cleaning, passionate love-making, emotional support, jigsaw puzzles, weird movies, stupid moments that you can *both* laugh at and talk about later in life because you *both* were there to witness and experience it. You know, *life*.”

It had been rolling over his mind. How to make sense of it all. Whether to say something. Finally, he surmised that it couldn't do

much harm to try to briefly describe his weird inner world to someone else; a test run. "I'm going to tell you something. Don't take it the wrong way. It's something that has always been on my mind."

"I don't know how much I can help, but I will listen."

"Suppose you lived a life that had plenty of advantages, so much so that you felt like something wasn't right. All these weird coincidences. People in your lives coming and going that seemed to be destined for greatness that you could count amongst your allies. And that you slowly started to see a pathway towards a point by which humanity could be 'solved' and the standard of living for a vast majority of people in the world who lived in abject poverty could have their basic needs met and could then contribute their ideas and proficiencies to the greater good. Would you, with your one life and one chance, follow that bright light, knowing that such an outcome must be nigh on impossible and you were being sent on a fool's errand? After all, what can a single person do to cure all the ills of humanity? Or would you say that you had a historical *duty* to try? A version of Pascal's Wager where success is worth infinite points and failure means a couple of years wasted just... trying. Following through so that you didn't have any regrets about what might have been. Apparently, there are more than a few individuals who have gone back to Jerusalem professing to be the Messiah. Where do they get this idea from? What if you had this idea? Would you dismiss it as nonsense? Or would you put everything on the line and follow through just in case? One life to live. What would you do?"

When he uttered these words, he was met with a frown. "Are you implying that this is how you feel? That you are some Great Leader or Saviour? Judging from the way you endure misery at your job, I would think that if you had the opportunity to do something better, you would be doing it. For what you're talking about, you need money, power, or both, or you need to be very good at suggestion to con a bunch of gullible people so that you can get that money and power. You don't strike me as fitting that role. Or you need to have a really good idea that many people will pay for having

access to. Are you secretly building a solar airplane in your backyard? But this Messiah stuff... don't people that think that way end up in asylums?"

"Perhaps they are not wrong and it is the rest of us that are crazy. Look at the state of the world. Greed is normal. Slavery is normal. Oppression is normal. Do you know the story of the Ring of Gyges?"

"Tell me."

"Something from Plato. A man finds a ring while he's out with his friends. He's a shepherd, I guess. Lives an unassuming pastoral life in the hills somewhere. So I guess these are the friends that he is forced to have to pass the time. Neighbours in a world of nothing but growing food and selling it. He finds a ring, and while he is in a circle with his fellow shepherds, he puts on the ring and finds that it makes him invisible. He waits a little and notices that the others start talking as if he's not there, and he recognizes the power that he has. From what I remember, Plato gets straight to the point: the ringbearer kills the king, marries the queen, and takes over the kingdom. All well and good. But Plato was making an ethical statement. He then suggested that if there were two rings, and they fell into the hand of two different people, one person whom he defined as Good and one Evil, the result would be the same."

"Absolute power corrupts absolutely."

"Something like that, I suppose."

"And so?"

"Well, according to Plato, that is what a 'normal' person does. Maybe we need some fresh ideas."

Another frown. "What do you mean that is what a normal person does? A normal person doesn't turn invisible. And even if it was possible, I don't think it's possible to take over a country. I may look stupid, but I've read some classic science fiction. *The Invisible Man*. *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. These sort of transmutations don't come across as a megalomaniac's picnic like the way you describe it in Plato."

“No, it's an ethical question. A person is either Good or Evil or some mixture of both. Whoever finds the ring will immediately look for power—as much power as it is possible to obtain. Isn't that what our current reality teaches us? That if some schmuck suddenly becomes extremely wealthy, it becomes all about pretending that it's not all about them when it actually is? ‘I'm a greedy sadist laughing at other people who are forced to lick my boots, but I'm not’?”

“Okay, so you speak of fresh ideas. Like ‘I am the Chosen One, bow down before me’? I think that's been tried many times before. It's called a cult. You know, it probably won't surprise you that this isn't the sort of conversation I would be expecting to get into with someone I barely know.” He paused for a moment and smiled deviously. “You're not trying to recruit me are you? Is that why you never talk about your private life? Can I be Vice President?” He let a gleeful chuckle.

“No, that's not what I meant. More like ‘what if everyone quits too soon?’”

“Quits what too soon?”

“Quits before they figure out who they really are.”

Another deep sigh expressed frustration. “Can we really know who we are beyond what we do and how we spend our time? Isn't it up to us to define ourselves so that we can do things? This is reality. I know of no parallel universes that we are trying to compare ourselves to or some answer key that tells us who we should be. I don't really see where this is going. You do what you do. I do what I do. We are who we are. We live and see what happens and try to make the best of it.”

“All I'm saying is that 'normal' humans seem to have the wrong strategy. History is just people enslaving other people and people enslaving nature. Maybe that was needed when we all lived in caves, and it really was the case that survival was dependent on the coordination of resources, and people died trying poisonous plants looking for things they could eat. But haven't we run out of excuses to continue like this as a species? Can it really go on like this?”

“I'm sure you're not the first person to ask these questions. You can look at life and say it's pretty shitty because it's unequal and unfair. I would say that there are plenty of people in the world that would agree with you. But nothing about the system really changes despite all of the protests and resistance, so what makes you think that you can do anything about it?”

“That's the problem. I don't really think I can do anything about it.”

His opposite threw his hands up to his face in exasperation. “Then I don't understand why we're having this conversation. Isn't that what you were just saying? That you had some grand role to play in the future well-being of humanity?”

He stopped. “No, I didn't say that I had this role. I'm saying that for me, given the observation that the world is shitty and I can see a potential way that it could be made substantially less shitty, I am influenced towards concluding *'what else is there to do but pursue this?'*”

“Plenty of things. Look around you, and you'll probably find some. Go to places where you see people happy and smiling and consider doing the same things they are doing.” A pause in locomotion. A look at his wrist. “You know, it's getting late and I'm a bit philosophied out for one evening. Not that it hasn't been interesting discussing these questions. But I don't want to burn myself out.”

“Yeah I understand. Sorry about that.”

“It's fine.” A slight grin appeared on his face. “At least I'll be able to make a more informed decision on what to expect of you as a wingman, and I will choose my words and recommendations more carefully when I next chat with my cousin.”

He returned a polite smile. “I'm sure we'll do this again.”

“I would like that.”

Once his companion disappeared, the night became substantially emptier.

Security

“Excuse me, sir?”

A powerful light was flashing past his face. After defensively putting up his hands to block the intrusion so that he could open his eyes without being blinded, the voice transitioned from curious inquiry to final declaration.

“I'm sorry, but you can't sleep here.”

He quickly jumped up, very embarrassed, but he could not see who his assailant was, only that it had a concerned female voice. The light stayed in his face but a slight movement up and down of the beam and the sound of footfalls led him to believe that the individual on the other end had taken a couple of steps backwards.

“Please just sit down. Don't worry, there's no trouble. I just want to make sure that you're safe. And while doing that, I need to make sure that I'm safe. Please sit down and remain calm.”

From the language, it seemed likely that this was a police officer or security detail of some sort. Possibly with a gun, probably with some means of defense, probably with a radio or some other means of communication. He slowly lowered himself down, found the bench again with his hand, and eased himself back into a sitting position.

“I'm really sorry. I had been at the bar with a few friends of mine. After we left, myself and another individual went on a bit of a long pointless walk to shoot the breeze a little. I remember that my legs were a bit tired, so I thought I would take a breather on this bench. I must have fallen asleep. I feel like something of a ridiculous man right now.”

“Not ridiculous at all,” the voice replied, lowering the light from his face. He could make out the features of an individual dressed mostly in a blue uniform with some sort of badge or insignia in a standard position over the left breast. “I'm sure it won't surprise you that it happens a lot. However, it is my duty to make sure that you're okay, and that everyone else in this area is also okay in case

your presence here should be somehow disruptive. Do you have a place where you can go?"

"Yes, of course." He paused for a moment to rethink that statement. "Well... not 'of course' I suppose. I could be homeless. But to answer your question, yes, I had a day pretty much like any of a number of other days with little difference than most other people in this city. I woke up in my bed, I ate breakfast, I went to work, I worked, I ate lunch, I worked again, I finished work, I went home, a colleague asked me if I was interested in meeting up with him because it was a Friday night, and I took him up on his offer. I wouldn't say that I drank a huge amount of alcohol, but I did plenty of walking today, so I guess I was a bit tired. That's why we go out on Fridays. Because we have tomorrow to recover."

"Yes, of course. Okay, well as long as you're safe then I will leave you to be on your way."

An idea took hold of him that he couldn't push away. "But what do you mean by 'safe'?"

"Well, that you are not incapacitated in some way that would prevent you from finishing this night in a place where you feel safe without any problems. That you will be able to finish this night as you started it, at home or some other place where you won't be vulnerable to the difficulties that come with sleeping outside with no protection. And that your health is not in jeopardy due to an overdose or some other condition that you might not wake up from. There's a lot of street drugs around that can end people's lives. When I see someone unconscious on a bench in a park, it is my duty as an officer of the peace to make sure that it's not because you should be at the hospital."

"Maybe I should be at the hospital. How are you to know?"

The voice took on a slightly more annoyed tone. "Sir, I don't have a lot of extra time to play games. As much as I would love to chat, it's the middle of the night and I'm on duty. If you are safe, then I have other calls that I need to attend to."

"But I don't know if I am safe. It's been a long day. I'm tired

physically, I'm tired mentally, I'm tired emotionally. I'm just tired. Maybe even of life in general.”

“Do you have any thoughts of harming others?”

“No, of course not. My problems are not their problems.”

“Do you have any thoughts of harming yourself?”

“I would be lying if I said it hadn't crossed my mind. But I suppose it probably crosses everyone's mind at some point. The world can feel very cruel and meaningless at times. Sometimes it just seems like the easiest solution to all of one's problems is death.”

She exhaled heavily. “I won't say you're wrong about how the world seems sometimes. Life isn't easy. But if it was, then we wouldn't really have much to be proud of. When I was in school, one day my teacher of health and wellness summarized it in one sentence. And that sentence has never left me to this day.”

His interest was piqued. “Could you share this advice with me, please?”

“She said 'suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem'. And that has always helped me when I feel like things are overwhelming. And they can get pretty overwhelming in this job. I guess it's the more serious, in-your-face version of 'this too shall pass'.”

“Could you tell me a little about your job? I don't really like my job so much. It is boring and repetitive, and I feel like there is no honour or purpose in what I do. I feel like if I stopped going to work, nobody there would miss me. And the more I look to the future, the more I feel like there's no point in anything. The world is horrible. It has always been horrible. And even though we have all the information to no longer make excuses for ourselves to be horrible to each other, we continue to be horrible to each other. We are all such hypocrites. And along with being horrible to each other, we are horrible to Mother Nature, and now we are really beginning to feel Her wrath. More storms. More droughts. More floods. More diseases. More earthquakes. Huge amounts of damage. Money sunk into projects that only perpetuate that damage so that the cycle

simply begins again. It all seems so overwhelmingly pointless. We will all die eventually. Why not make it now? At least we would stop gobbling up all of these resources and trashing the planet so that something could survive.”

The tone of her voice was to the point. “I’m sorry, sir. I understand what you say. I know that life can seem difficult. But being a therapist is not my job. If you are worried that you are going to harm yourself tonight because of these thoughts, I can call for some assistance. But there are a lot of things that I must do on any given night, and I tend not to have a lot of extra time, so I sometimes have to make some difficult decisions when it comes to how long I can spend with the people that need me. Do you need help? Shall I call somebody?”

He gave a weak smile. “No, it’s okay. I have lingering thoughts like this every day. If I didn’t harm myself yesterday or the day before that or however far back in history that you want to go, then it is unlikely I will do so tonight. And I’m sure the resources that would be needed to tend to me would be better spent on other people who really need the help. I’m just an ordinary schmuck that thinks that life should have been better to me. But I suppose I have no one to blame but myself. Billions of people are starving. I shouldn’t complain.”

“Well, sir, it’s not as easy as that. But like the advice from my teacher, it’s good if you have a way to reframe these intrusive thoughts.” The light moved backwards slightly. “Now, I don’t want to be rude, but in order for me to have done my due diligence, I need to ask you again to be on your way. Obviously, you could just walk around the block and once I’ve gone you could come back here, but the point of the exercise is so that I can see that you are able to get home—or wherever you plan to go next—under your own power. You’re not slurring your words or falling asleep in the middle of our conversation, so I have no doubt that you are sober enough to leave under your own power. But I need to make sure. And I need to warn you that if I do come back here later and find you in the same place, I

may be forced to give you a ticket for loitering.”

“I understand. Thank you for your patience and your kindness. Your sympathy and honesty have been helpful. I am happy to have had this encounter with you.”

“No problem. It's part of my job training. Now I'll just step away over here, and I'll ask you to leave down that path” —the light swung in a direction that he assumed she wanted him to follow— “and I'll follow you with my flashlight so that you can make sure to see where you're going.”

“I can do that.”

He waited for the light to move in an arc to the right, still maintaining a similar distance but now more to the right of him. Then he put his hands down on the bench beside his legs and with what seemed like a great effort, pushed himself to his feet. He again formed his mouth into a polite smile in the direction of the light. “Thank you again,” he said, before turning and walking in the direction that was illuminated. As he got farther and farther away, the light dimmed. At a certain point when he was near enough to exiting the park, the individual with the light must have felt that he had followed her orders sufficiently, as the light abruptly switched off, and he was alone again in the darkness.

Walls

It was true that he had drunk little that night. These days, reality was enough to deal with without escapism and regret, and the extra money that was at his disposal only because he was not dependent on alcohol was a constant reminder that he had no reason to drink excessively at this stage in his life. As he looked around to see where he was, he realized that he had essentially been walking around in circles the whole night. Or, at the very least, he had been returning to within a few blocks of the bar that he had left what seemed like a long time ago now. He had no desire to go back into that bar (or any other bar) to pay for the privilege of being there to watch the same

tired ritual of buy poison, drink poison, talk, buy poison, drink poison, talk, allow poison to take effect, begin weird mating ritual of body movements, contortions, and contact while being collectively tuned by repetitive nostalgic soundwaves, buy poison, drink poison, pee poison, etc., etc., etc. Looking in the other direction, he saw a familiar store selling the same poison that was available inside those other doors, but with prices that were in accordance with not having to pay for the privilege of place. It suddenly struck him that he rarely went out these days, it had been a good day with a few interesting encounters so far, and he was interested to see what else (if anything) might happen while he had this momentum. The recent encounter with the police officer (he was pretty sure it was a police officer, though it was never clear to him because of the contrast between the environmental darkness and the overstimulation of his rods and cones) had had something of a cathartic effect on his sense of optimism. Looking ahead and behind to check that he was not about to find himself in a collision with one of those four-wheeled monstrosities, he strode across the four-laned strip of asphalt with a new sense of confidence that there was no point in going to sleep yet. What did he have to lose by continuing?

A sign outside of the door announced an even cheaper price for the already cheapest beer. But after glancing at it, he decided to go for a bit more quality than feeling like he was swallowing a mouthful of rusted metal. This was supposed to be a night to remember for more reasons than a hangover and headache in the morning. Pulling open the door, hearing a familiar bell, seeing a familiar layout of liquid products of all shapes, sizes, and strengths, and a familiar face to his left greeting his entry (he nodded though he did not know this man personally), he dodged between the aisles of fortified grape juice with sulphites and other, more powerful elixirs of rotten fruit and various other ingredients and, pulling open another door, found himself in a chilled room with glass and metal containers of the weaker (but more satisfying) poisons made of assorted rotten grains. Glancing at volumes and prices and doing quick calculations

in his head, he grabbed an arbitrary formation of connected nearly-full containers of poison, pushed out of the door again, walked up one of the aisles advertising all sorts of types of sulphite juice, placed the collection of containers on the glass counter, and looked at the familiar face.

The familiar face responded with a familiar voice, uttering a familiarly tired “will that be everything, sir?” as its familiar arm familiarly elevated the containers toward a familiar red beam. A familiar beep was heard, triggering a familiar number to appear on a familiar screen. The familiar voice read out the familiar number preceded by a familiar “that will be...” then a number and then a familiar “..., sir”. Now it was his turn to play his part in the ritual. Reaching into his pocket, he produced his compact financial filing system, reached into one of its pockets, and produced a number of coloured pieces of paper, extending it in the direction of one of the familiar arms that were controlled by the internal structure that existed behind the familiar face. Predictably, this action resulted in a familiar retraction of the pieces of coloured paper and their subsequent placement into the familiar face's less compact and less familiar financial filing system (because how often does one look at any one of the myriad financial filing systems with any particular interest?), and a number of metallic disks were familiarly thrust in his direction, accompanied by a familiar offer of a malleable holding device for his containers of poison. To this offer, he responded “no thanks, I would like to save the dolphins from eating more plastic”, and a familiar response of “your change, sir... thank you... and have an excellent rest of your day” emanated from the familiar face.

Seizing the collection of containers and nodding once again in the direction of the familiar face, he pushed open the door, and felt a chilled rush of air on his face. The wind must have picked up while he had been outside of the outside. Almost automatically, he thought of one specific outside place that he wanted to enjoy his poison in most of all, and he headed in that direction.

There is so much symbolism in death. And for that reason,

there is so much symbolism in cemeteries. They play a contextual role in many great literary works from all around the world, and in some shorter stories they are the environment entirely. It is as if, instead of the vertical walls that one is faced with every day separating the outside and the inside, here there is a horizontal wall beneath one's feet that separates the living world from the once-living world. It reminds us that we will all be once-living eventually, and probably fairly soon as timescales go. A certain grasp of one's own fragility and mortality is therefore inevitable.

Although there was a security fence around the cemetery, there was seldom a time when the gate was locked. The people who were laid inside the containers that sat beneath his feet (though not directly)—skeletons they may be now, he did not know—had long since passed, and although there were a few plots where fresh flowers could be seen, much of the stones had a greenish tinge to them, if they were not already cracked and falling apart. The cost to maintain the graveyard appeared to outweigh the nostalgic need for preservation. Few of these once-living individuals who were bequeathed this area as their final resting place would have ever interacted with anybody now living and, unlike those in the National Cemetery, few would have reason to be remembered for contributing anything more than some DNA and perhaps a few words of oral wisdom to anybody in the world today. The work that they had completed in their lifetimes—the houses they built, the farms they worked on, the idiosyncratic value they added to what we currently know as reality—would have long since been anonymized. Whether or not the output of such work still existed, there would be little fanfare associated with it, and hence little reason for such information to be carried in the memories of so many generations.

Each of us only has a finite amount of time and capacity for information, and what is the value of knowing the name of some individual who built one of thirty similar houses along a given street in any country in the world? Although it was true that for something to exist, *someone* must have done the work and everyone lying in

eternal rest below him was likely to have done *something* with their lives (save for those who died before having the opportunity), to match every individual that ever lived with their monotonous, repetitive work would be a completely pointless task. As unfortunate as it might be to think of it, history tells us that most of us exist to soon be forgotten.

Walking an arbitrary path through the neatly organized rows of memorials, he eventually found himself sitting down in front of a masonic combination of blocks and adhesive and, leaning his back against it and feeling a sense of relief from his weariness, placed his collection of containers on top of a patch of brown earth strewn with green leaves that had small clusters of grass sporadically protruding from it. Detaching one container from the collection, he pulled on the metallic tab causing the other end to push down the slightly scored ellipse of metal below it, creating a large perforation in the sealed container that would allow him to get at the poison inside.

Before putting it to his lips, he poured a little onto the earth next to him. It was a ritual first taught to him by a young artist that had once taken him to the National Cemetery at the end of a walk through town. “Just as you are glad that you have more to drink than water, the Dead are always thirsty for more than rain,” she had explained. “It is our duty to honour them because they created this world, not us.” Perhaps 'forgotten' was too strong of a word. Whether we are aware of it or not, our present living reality stands on the shoulders of the realities of the once-living. Time necessitates it. We do not forget, we generalize. We remember the Dead en masse, the remaining evidence of the existence of one once-living individual being just as special as that of the next. The advent of large artificial systems for storing information has substantially increased the number of people that are 'remembered', but it has also redefined what it means to be remembered. If a name falls into an information system that has no visitors, does it make a sound?

This was not the first time that he had been to this cemetery, and he hoped it wouldn't be his last (in both senses—he had no desire

to indefinitely take up physical space in the order of things if he had no way to interact with it, even if that space was under the ground). He thought of those on the other side of the wall beneath his feet. There are four phases to the process of human decomposition. The first is a form of autodigestion and occurs very soon after the body has been deprived of oxygen. Just as any other container of liquid will begin to leak if the container starts to break down and is under a gradient, so too does the inside world of our cells begin to leak into the outside world without the oxygen required to maintain it. During this first stage, those cells are replaced by elements from the outside moving in the opposite direction across the gradient. It is as if vultures or coyotes have besieged a city where the wall of every house has been breached by a massive disaster, and there are no living inhabitants to keep the peace. The result is looting and destruction, and the exacerbation of damage and negligence.

Unlike the semi-open system of such a city, however, the cells of our bodies exist under a much more rigidly defined system of volumetric conservation. Just as the aromas of rotting flesh will leak out of an apartment that has been the site of a recent murder even if the door remains closed (assuming there is no airtight membrane between the body and its outside), so too will the gases produced by this process of cytological cannibalization fight to exit the cadaver that contains them, resulting in bloating and further discolouration. The cellular inhabitants of this inside world that had previously relied on a steady supply of oxygen to survive (from a certain perspective, we are more bacteria than we are human, after all) then become replaced by inhabitants from the outside world who desire only to strip the property of anything of value, causing widespread decay. Having licked the corpse clean, these microscopic grave robbers then move on to the next feast, leaving nothing but the bony walls below what was once a beautiful facade of delicate skin to slowly wither away under the elements. At this stage, the now-cadaverous property is abandoned, inhabited only by the ghosts of what had already been, should it be so lucky.

He had always wondered about the ghosts of memories past in those that had created them. How often did they visit, and in what form? Recurring dreams of missing an exam that causes one to lose all hope of progress (ever) or missing a day of work that causes one to lose one's job and all hope of getting a new one (ever) are common among those consumed by the stresses of academia and work. What of those that are consumed by the stresses of being a harbinger of death? Does a serial killer have recurring dreams of towing the body of a victim into a graveyard while being hunted by police officers, constantly besieged by questions not of the ilk of "how can I ever make up this exam?" or "how can I ever make this up to my boss?" but rather "what have I done?" or "where can I hide the body?"?

Psychotropic substances aside, our dreams will always be there to force us to confront ourselves. However, until our understanding of the human mind and its correspondence to technology reaches a level where we can put suspects to sleep and see inside their dreams to decide on their culpability, disclosure of such information will always remain voluntary. Several decades ago, the hypothesis that LSD could act as a truth drug was tested secretly over many years by government. Perhaps those behind this program had followed a similar line of reasoning; LSD approximated a dream-like state but in the external world, which would leave the subject in a state of unfiltered self-confrontation, vulnerable to revealing the details of the tortured pathways that led to the terrifying closets that revealed the most frightening skeletons of the mind.

Looking down at his collection of containers, he noticed that all but one of them had been emptied of its contents. It seemed unfathomable that the amount of time it would have taken him to imbibe that quantity of alcohol had passed him by already, but he had been comfortable, and his mind had been intensely deliberating over many aspects of life, death, and everything in between. Time can go quickly when caught up in a dreamworld. It must be quite late, he surmised, but the temperature remained pleasant. Or, perhaps it had been the case that he had been subconsciously feeding the denizens

of the world below him more than he had realized while he had been exploring the inner recesses of his mind. He took up the last full container, opened it, lifted it into the air, and thought of the one individual who seemed to be missing.

“A multitude of thank yous to you for your wonderful company and sagely advice regarding those that exist below.” The words came with the sort of chuckle that comes from congratulating oneself for a nostalgic inside joke whilst under the effects of mind-loosening neurochemicals. As if suddenly remembering from looking around himself that his only company was provided by those behind the wall below him, his face fell. Yet it was not the ghosts behind this horizontal wall of earth that besieged him, it was those behind the walls of space and time. “I wish you were here.” And after tipping the entire contents of the last container onto the ground beside him, he gathered the empty containers and ventured back into the night, alone once again.

Upon exiting the cemetery through the gate and returning to the street, the first thing that came to his mind was that he had no idea what time it was. The only sounds that accompanied the almost silent night of the concrete jungle that he had now returned to were those of his own stomach, pleading for sustenance. Returning to a familiar set of crossroads, he looked across the intersection and saw that the bar that he had enjoyed the atmosphere of earlier was now closed. Not just closed, but dark and appearing long since emptied. It seemed unlikely that he would be able to find any source of satisfaction for the empty stomach that was now bringing out its sharpened knives in protest, causing him to double over. Although he had felt quite sure that he had been completely alone with no one within eyeshot or earshot of him, he suddenly felt a hand on his shoulder that caused him to jump and turn around, reflexively taking up a defensive posture so that he was ready to confront the owner of the hand, whomever it might be.

“Easy there, sonny. I just wanted to know if you had any plans for them there cans you was carryin’.”

Messenger

Confused, he looked down and remembered that he had taken the empties with him so that he would not leave a blemish on grounds that many would consider sacred (though either way should be respected), but also because he felt that they were more likely to disappear with the promise of a return on the deposit if they were discarded in a more popular thoroughfare. He thrust them in the direction of this being.

“I had intended to put them somewhere so that someone might find them more easily than if they were left in the cemetery.”

“Ahhh... so you was visitin' with the Dead, were yuz? Well, that's something to do with your time, ain't it?”

When he had regained his composure and scrutinized the individual who stood before him, the first thing that struck him was an extremely short stature given that he had been touched on the shoulder. It seemed to him that reaching that high and then recoiling that far in the time it took him to whirl around would take a very nimble effort.

“Something to do, yes. Something to do.” This encounter seemed awkward to the point where it felt threatening to him, though he didn't quite understand why. Words did not seem easy to come by, especially given that he suddenly felt the full effects of the copious amounts of ethanol that would now have overwhelmed the alcohol dehydrogenase in his system, creating a bottleneck as it waited to be converted first into aldehyde and then to acetic acid. Although he had had more than his fair share of 'piss-ups' during his life, his recent mood that flirted between existential introspection and dystopic despondency had substantially dampened his desire to drink heavily. His tolerance was probably the lowest it had been for a substantial amount of time, and he suddenly felt his head swimming.

“Judging by the look in your eyes and the smell of your breath, it seems you needed it. Would ya be keen to continue on my

behalf?”

Having no desire to continue drinking but feeling that here was an opportunity to end the night with momentum on his side, he took up a neutral, diplomatic stance. “Well, I'm not sure where I would be able to get any more at this hour.”

The individual penetrated through where his bushy beard met a rather ragged mop of hair, and tapped his right temple with a bent, gnarled, yellowed finger. “Know-how, sonny. Know-how.”

“You're saying you know where to get some at this hour?”

“If I was to tell ya 'yes', would ya be keen?”

He hesitated for a moment, put his hand to his chin, pursed his lips, and looked as far as he could into the darkness in no direction in particular. What would be the harm, he thought. This being seemed to pose no danger to him and would likely provide some interesting stories to share given that both seemed interested in some company. But on the other hand, there was always the possibility of belligerence, violence, a weapon, or being led into a trap where others would surprise and overwhelm him and strip him of his assets. What assets, though? His money? His clothing? His life? How much did these things really matter in the long run? The closest thing to adventure that he had experienced in a long time beckoned to him like a hand of smoke motioning him to follow through the darkness. What was the alternative? To wake up in the morning regretting what could have been?

“Then lead the way.”

“That's what I like to hear. But perhaps we should get the formalities out of the way first. My name is John, but those who know me—and I mean *really* know me—call me Lion. Just in case there's another John I gotta be competin' with. And you are?”

It really didn't matter what name he uttered in reply. No one would ever know the difference. What is a name aside from a nostalgic string of letters masquerading as social convention, anyway?

Destiny

Although he thought he knew his city well, the path that he was led along by this strange individual became ever-more confusing as it zigzagged through residential areas and seemed to double back over ground he thought he had already covered. It was not made easier by the darkness and stillness of the night. Sometimes he would be led through the lots of private houses and out back gates either into side streets or into the lots of other houses that backed on to the lots he had just passed through, which he would then have to cross. As it was very late (though how late, or how long he had been out that night, he could not tell), it seemed unlikely that anyone would be disturbed enough to call the police to report a couple of prowlers.

Nevertheless, he tried as best as he could to keep up the now quickening pace while still remaining as quiet and discreet as possible. Although his legs were extremely sore with fatigue and he felt voraciously hungry to the point where his head seemed to spin at times (and the excess alcohol in his system didn't help), for some reason it seemed to him that there was some special purpose in him completing this minor quest, though what it would accomplish in the end he did not know. It could be the case, for example, that this was nothing more than a minor scam where he would eventually either be abandoned or led into a party waiting to confront him for reasons that he could not predict. Yet a combination of the apparently secretive nature of this journey and his heightened curiosity and sense of predestination coupled with his recent internal and external criticisms of the banality of life continued to provide a source of adrenaline that willed him to continue even if his energy stores felt completely depleted.

Finally, just at the point where he felt overwhelmed with exhaustion as he was led up another sidewalk and around the side of another private dwelling, his guide pointed to a wooden cover that extended along the side of the dwelling for about three metres and extended from the house into the lot about one metre. At the end

farthest from the road were two metal handles, and as his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he could see that two horizontal wooden doors were cut out of what he originally thought to be a solid rectangle of wood. Pulling on the handle closest to the path revealed a concrete staircase that he could not see the bottom of due to even less of the available light being able to penetrate this underground passage. When the handle was let go, a chain fixed to the door that was connected to somewhere inside this (semi-)hidden entrance prevented it from swinging all the way down to the ground, maintaining it at an open angle of about forty-five degrees.

“Now you just wait here a moment.” The command came from John or Lion or whatever this other being's real name might have been. “I’m going to check with the boss.”

He watched as the small man descended the staircase, then he heard a sharp knock, probably on a door below that led into the building. A few moments later, he heard the creaking of a door opening along and a source of underground light flooded the stairwell. As he peered into the space, he could see that the stairs went down for longer than he had first anticipated, and saw a hand extend out of the door and beckon for this small man to enter. The man responded to this mute gesture by stepping across the threshold into the light, upon which the door closed, and he was once again left alone in the darkness.

He weighed his options. It seemed that he had little to lose by waiting for something to happen. Although the path that he had taken to reach this address had been rather convoluted and confusing, he was fairly sure that if need be, he could find his way back home without too much trouble (or at least to a main street where he could call a taxi home and identify his current location, since his legs were now nearly up in arms at how much they had walked that night and were expecting to be rewarded with some relaxation if not sleep). If it was to come to this option, he could theoretically make his way back here at some point in the future when he desired another adventure and ask for some sort of explanation—if not from behind

the door below, at least from the one above and at the front.

In other words, he figured that if the choice of approach was designed to obscure the location of the final destination, there was no real point in someone leading him here and then just abandoning him, though it could not be said that such a sequence of events would be completely out of the question. Furthermore, although his stomach also voiced its displeasure at being neglected to the point where he had to use his hand to massage below his ribs in order to alleviate some of the cramping pain, the night was still pleasant, and he felt that having come this far, it was much too early to abandon what was turning into a very interesting sequence of events that was buoying his overall mood about life in general.

He found a large rock that appeared to be part of the horticultural details of what he deemed to be a well-kept private property, and sat down, not sure how long he would have to wait before something happened or he would give up and leave. He waited five, ten, perhaps fifteen minutes before he heard the creak of a door and saw light flooding back into the stairwell. Light but lumbering footsteps slowly made their way up the steps, the other horizontal door was pushed up and leaned carefully against the side of the building, and his guide emerged, looking this way and that before locating him.

“Sorry, about the wait, my friend. It took me awhile to find yer beer. And a promise is a promise where I come from.” Beckoning with the same crooked, grizzled finger that had previously been used to denote intelligence by gesturing towards the skull, the suggestion was that the direction of the stairs below was the way forward. An official invitation was offered: “After you, sir.”

He was sitting in such a way that he could not see down the stairs, and the manner in which the light from below partially illuminated the otherwise almost pitch-dark outside environment made it seem like it was a descent into some sort of catacomb. His thoughts returned to the cemetery and his characterization of a vertical wall between himself and the dead. Yet there was no reason

to think that he would be in any danger by taking up the offer, and it made no sense to back out now after coming this far.

“Let's see what happens,” he muttered to himself as he rose from his perch and strode confidently toward the opening. Stepping over the wooden frame that supported the horizontal doors and confined the stairwell below it, and slipping by John or Lion or whatever his name might be, he saw ahead of him little to be worried about. At the base of the stairs was a small square of concrete that sloped slightly down into a central drain. On the left and straight ahead of the concrete pad were concrete walls of about two metres that supported the wooden structure that could be seen from above ground. On the right was a wide-open door leading into what he suspected was the basement of the dwelling, though if this was so it would have to be a much deeper foundation than what he would normally expect of an underground floor below a residential area of a similar size, culture, demographic, and economic status as any other in the city. As he continued down the stairs, a strong and very recognizable pungent smell reached his nostrils. He smiled to himself. “I knew this would be worth it.” Upon reaching the bottom, he put his hands on either side of the frame of the door to support himself as he leaned in to peer inside. At first, he wasn't sure what to make of what he saw. It seemed like there was nothing there but a single large, empty space. Then he heard a voice.

“Welcome, my friend. Don't be shy. Please make yourself at home. Would you like a beer? There's plenty here.”

Reckoner

Only when he looked to the right in the direction of the voice did he realize that what he first saw to be a large empty room would be too small to correspond to the size of the building as seen from the exterior. As he surveyed this room in more detail, he understood that what he thought was a continuous exterior white wall was actually a series of interior walls that could have any number of rooms or other

spaces behind them. It was only when one of the walls began to swing open that he understood that this was indeed a very carefully crafted illusion, but for what purpose he did not know. This door that was now opening was a piece of wall, and the necessary gap between the wall and the door that allowed it to swing open had been cleverly covered over by a strip of material that was only barely discernible from both the wall that surrounded it and the 'door' itself (which, now that he could see how thin the cross-section was, was likely only a piece of wallboard). Immediately he thought of all of the horror stories of murder victims being found behind false walls in basements, and shuddered. There seemed to be no explanation for such a setup other than to deceive visitors like himself.

From behind the door emerged a man dressed in a rather dapper suit that seemed a little too short at both the ankles and the wrists as he could see the cuffs of the white collared shirt at the end of the arms and hairy ankles between black sock and grey pantleg. From the greying hairs and the large beard, he guessed that this man was probably in his 60s or 70s and noted that a necessity to duck below the top of the door in order not to get injured implied that either the door was low, or the man was quite tall.

“Welcome, welcome,” the man repeated, striding defiantly across the floor, and extending his hand. He spoke with an almost imperceptible German accent. “I always enjoy visitors to my humble abode. Around here I go by many names, but you can call me Immanuel for now, or just Manu.”

Not wanting to upset a situation where he was clearly at a disadvantage (though it was not clear what could possibly go wrong unless there was an army of assailants that were about to jump out from behind the walls and overwhelm him), he took the man's hand with a firm grip and lightly pumped it up and down before releasing it.

“I see our friend Paul has convinced you to come and share in our space. I'm happy that you chose to accept the invitation.”

“Paul? He told me his name was John. Or Lion.”

The man who called himself Immanuel laughed. “At any given time, he can be anyone he wants to be. That's just how we work around here. But we will get into that later if you wish it. There was an individual here at one point who called himself Lion. He was a black man, a Rastafarian so he claimed, where Lion is a cultural thing. I never knew his real name. Eventually, I had to excommunicate him, as he refused to give up selling on the streets and getting into other mischief despite my best efforts. I have learned not to keep track of names. It's a long story. Would you like a beer?”

The thought of a beer on tired legs and an empty stomach did not appeal to him. “Actually, do you have a little food? It has been a long night and I haven't eaten as much as I should have.”

“Food is always a popular request from my visitors. You wouldn't believe the state that some of them are in when they find themselves here. I am always prepared. Just give me a moment.”

He watched as Immanuel walked towards a different wall where once again a similar door seemed to appear out of nowhere. It was only after the door had closed again that he could notice the slight inconsistencies that suggested that there was anything there other than a plain white wall. He thought of carefully scrutinizing the rest of the walls for more of these passages, but decided against it as there seemed no point at this juncture. He still had no idea what was behind them or why they were as they were. Either he was going to eventually get an explanation or understanding further was none of his business. There was no point in speculating. Besides, the mystique of this bizarre setup only added to a feeling inside of him that the entirety of this sequence of events was somehow meant to be.

A few minutes later, the door opened once again, and Immanuel emerged with a platter upon which was two small pitas and an assortment of beans and vegetables that appealed as extremely appetizing. There were also two small cushions, one under each arm. After the plate was placed on the concrete floor in front of him, the cushions were placed one on top of the other and thrust into

his hands.

“I apologize if it seems a little sparse and uncomfortable, but I hope these cushions will help to ease your tired legs.”

He surveyed the man. “And what about you?”

“Don't worry about me. While you are eating, I will fix my own space. Is there anything else I can get you? Beer? Marijuana? Something more interesting?”

This was much more than he expected. He looked down at the plate, stacked the cushions on the floor behind him so that he could be seated comfortably while eating, and then focused his attention back on the man's features. “Ummm... I don't wish to be rude as this is definitely a very nice welcome, but it seems rather... well...”

“... odd? Yes, of course. As I said before, I can explain if you would like me to, but I only ever provide as much information as needed for reasons which we may or may not get into depending on how long you choose to stay and what you wish to know. Now please eat while I prepare myself, and we will get to the rest later.”

It was true that as much as everything that he had seen so far of this place baffled him, he could barely focus on anything aside from the torturous cries of his stomach. There seemed nothing better than to direct a slight graceful nod in his host's direction. “Thank you.”

Upon being met with a similar nod, he sat down on the cushions to eat as the man disappeared again behind the door that had first revealed to him that there was more here than first met the eye. He tore off a piece of the pita, pushed some of the bean-vegetable mix onto it, folded it in such a way that he might prevent most of the mix from falling off, brought it up to his mouth (being polite enough to make sure the plate was underneath should he spill), and only after the first morsels of food reached his stomach did he realize how ravenously hungry he was, and proceeded to devour the rest of the food in no time flat.

“You look like you needed that one, sonny.”

He looked up from the plate to see that his original guide was

now standing about five metres to his right, leaning against the wall near the door, and watching him intently.

“I know it seems a little strange,” the stout individual who had referred to himself as Lion continued, “but we all go through the same process. It takes a little getting used to.”

We all? Who all? Was this some sort of strange cult or secret society? Was he going to eventually make it home tonight or did a different fate await him? Although the entrance from the stairwell could be said to be 'guarded', there seemed to be nothing preventing him from leaving should he feel the desire. There were no weapons anywhere to speak of, and he was confident that, despite his hunger and fatigue, he could overpower both this individual and the older man if required—unless his meal had been drugged or poisoned, a thought that had occurred to him as his natural fight-or-flight survival instincts kicked in trying to make sense of everything that was happening around him.

And although all of these potential scenarios were constantly being calculated and recalculated inside his mind, there was in fact nothing to suggest that the current scenario would present any different consequences than any other gathering of strangers in terms of short-term outcome. People come together, people introduce themselves, people share ideas, people disperse. As much as it was impossible to say what the next few hours (or however long he remained at this address) might hold, he maintained a sense of certainty in the mental vision of an eventual conclusion that consisted of little more than a cordial goodbye before exiting through the door from whence he came with a little more existential content than he had started with.

Bodysnatchers

The night had been long. Too long, it seemed to him. Looking around at the white walls and the empty space, the one thing that he wished to see most was not there: a clock or other timepiece. He had

completely lost track of any semblance of what time it might be. When he looked back over the various encounters, incidents, and everything that had happened since he had left his apartment, it seemed like an eternity had passed. At least the sun would be up by now, he thought. But probably not. He was pretty sure that he had entered this room not more than half an hour before, and it had still been the middle of the night. There could be many more hours before morning arrived. Looking back at the door, the individual that had been watching him before was no longer there, probably stealing out silently while he had been preoccupied with his thoughts. It crossed his mind that he could just leave, or at least take a look outside to get some air and see if there were any hints about whether or not morning would soon arrive.

Although he was happy that he had been privy to these experiences rather than staying home for another evening isolated and alone trying to find a way to occupy his mind and entertain himself, the sheer magnitude and variety of the sensory input was starting to exhaust his mental energy. For the first time that evening he began to hope for a quick end to everything that was happening; to have an opportunity to reflect on all that had happened and recharge his proverbial batteries, as it were. However, the more dominant voice in his head convinced him to remain where he was. There will be plenty of time to sleep when you're dead, as the saying goes. And who knows what more was in store for him? Never regret the things you do; only regret the things you don't do. This was another adage he often called upon to convince himself not to give up too early on any sequence of potentially interesting daily events that constitute what we call life. These thoughts were disrupted by the sound of footsteps outside and the turning of the handle. The door opened to reveal the tall, gaunt frame of Immanuel bracketing a tired smile.

“Apologies if I was away long. There were some things I needed to take care of quickly as I wasn't expecting a visitor so late.”

When his host had mentioned at the most recent departure

that it was for preparation, he had expected that maybe there would be a change of clothes or appearance or even the introduction of additional objects or guests to the equation, but nothing of this sort had changed. He saw the same undersized suit that he had noted before, and there was no hint that a shower or other feat of personal hygiene had been part of this preparatory interval.

“I'm glad to see that you chose to wait for me to return. I know nothing about you, but I want to assure you that this is not some castle that you cannot escape from, and you should not believe that you are on trial. I have no plans to kidnap or kill you. You are free to leave. I get a lot... well... not a lot but enough visitors. Some I know. Many I don't know. It is part of my project. This is where I welcome my visitors. I call it the Tabula Rasa.”

He got the joke. “Makes sense, I suppose.”

Immanuel clapped his hands together and the tired smile seemed to suddenly become a more radiant, optimistic grin. “It's good to know that you understand. Sometimes I must explain. I am very happy that you are something of a scholar. It may make our discussion interesting. But I do it because I entertain a variety of individuals, some of them extremely unpredictable. It is like an external blank slate to mirror the internal blank slate. You don't know what's coming, but you also don't get any fears that you wouldn't already have. But more than that, it also allows me to remain neutral. I have found that it is important to me to adapt to any situation to maintain my safety and that of others. But I am always sure to wait until I ask after my visitor's health. Many who end up here are in a very desperate situation. You've had some food already. I was told that you were drinking beer in the cemetery. I guess that was enough to attract attention. I trust you have somewhere to go?”

“To sleep? Yes, I have a place.”

“Good to hear. And you feel that you are fairly healthy overall?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“Do you enjoy spending time amongst memorials and dead people?”

“Well...” He thought about this question for a moment. “I enjoy the peace that it provides. I think it's important to be in touch with mortality. I like looking at dates. Names. Thinking of a past that I never knew.”

“I understand. What did you think of our friend here?” A nod towards the doorway caused him to turn his head and note that the individual who had led him here had returned and was again leaning on the door as if he had never moved but would tumble out if it were to be opened.

“I have to admit that it was a bit strange being led in circles around the city only to find myself here.”

“Yes, I understand. Now may I ask of you...” Here his opposite paused for a moment, as if trying to find the correct words to say. “...and as I said before you are under no pressure. You may choose not to answer if you like. But then I believe there would be little else for us to talk about, and although I would not insist that you go, sleep is also precious to me, and I don't think that we would have much more between us in the way of business.”

“Ask away.”

“What makes a good life?”

The question caught him off guard. With a furrowed brow reflecting his need to focus inwardly, he remained silent for about half a minute, searching for an answer. “It's not an easy question. I would have to think about it.”

“Perhaps something easier. What do you think about life? Are you happy? Sad? Content? Angry? Do you look forward to tomorrow? Do you think that you have had and will continue to have a good life?”

This was indeed a more specific question and one he had heard enough times in the past to have a ready answer to. “I don't know. I admit that I don't suffer a lot compared to the majority of people in this world. But I do sometimes wonder what the point of it

all is. I suppose that I'm not convinced that there is such a thing as a good life. Here, we work, we make money, we buy things, we try to make our lives convenient. We try to suffer as little as possible. In other places... well I guess it's largely the same, just with less suffering or more suffering depending on where you are."

"So the good life is the life with the least amount of suffering?"

"Maybe. If it was applied equally to everybody. I wouldn't say that people who suffer little by exploiting others is a good life."

"So you suggest that, at minimum, a good life is when people suffer equally?"

They were sitting across from each other. He on the two cushions. Immanuel was also sitting on two cushions stacked on top of each other. They were all similar in pattern and colour, though not identical. A darker crimson dominated, with whites, pinks, and other shades of red forming the outlines and details of various flowers. They provided a welcoming splash of content amongst the white slabs of wall and the grey of the concrete surface that the cushions rested upon. The eyes opposite him looked at him intently. At times he felt extremely awkward and would look away and around the room even though there was essentially nothing to look at other than two (sometimes three) human beings, four cushions, and a door. The Tabula Rasa.

You may choose not to answer if you like, but then I believe there would be little else to talk about.

"Is this your project? Project Socrates?" The words seemed to tumble from his lips in explosive annoyance.

At this, Immanuel laughed. "So, a scholar indeed. But no. Well, not exactly. Socrates tried to lead his adversaries into contradictions. I am trying to understand what people believe. Take your example of suffering. If you look out into the world, the amount of suffering would suggest that the overwhelming majority disagreed

with you that there is a better way. But we know that that is unlikely to be true because there are vast swaths of people living in poverty and war zones, and they would probably not agree with continuing their own suffering. And I think that even amongst people like us who, as you say, suffer little actually *want* to see people suffer. But who is to know unless we ask?" The man suddenly stopped and looked thoughtful. "Do you know the story of Socrates well?"

It didn't really matter if he had or he hadn't; he was pretty sure that it would be explained to him. He would try to lessen the blow by suggesting he knew of the highlights at least. "I couldn't tell you a lot, but he did the dialogues, was put on trial for corrupting the youth, and drank the hemlock."

"Why don't we replicate that model? Not the hemlock part, perhaps, though there are many examples in this world where people who speak out get eliminated. In Socrates' case, however, the point is not to be critical. It is to say 'what do you believe?' and 'are you sure about that?'"

"Probably because back in the day, the world had a lot less to offer and people were bored."

"Do you think people are not also bored now?"

He looked into Immanuel's eyes, a smile slowly appearing in his mind. With a slight rocking motion, he rolled his weight off the left side of the pillows he was sitting on and used his momentum to stand up. "It certainly appears you are."

The man stood up as well, and with a sweep of his arm towards the door, invited him to leave. "As I said, you may leave whenever you want, but it is likely that you wouldn't have come here if you weren't equally bored."

"Well, I don't know what you want from me." It all seemed so confusing, and he knew that his position was an inferior one. It was almost getting to the point where he felt completely overwhelmed and wished only to return home so that he could reflect on the day's events in peace, but something inside of him told him to remain even though he was squirming inside.

“I have already told you. I want to know what you believe. I look out into the world, and it appears that all of humanity is mad. On the other hand, if there's anything that I've learned from the past years, it is that true insanity is seldom found in individuals once they are isolated from popular opinion.”

Although he had thought before that he could overpower this man with his physical strength, he was becoming extremely unsure that he could best his opponent in dialogue or logic. Changing the subject, he motioned around him. “I assume that if you took the time to make all of these adjustments, this is your house.”

“It may be mine. It may not be mine. I may have had permission to make these adjustments and I may not have. Maybe this house is abandoned, and I am squatting. Is this important?”

“Well, you see, you're quite right. I am bored. I thought that if this was your house you could show me something other than these blank walls.”

Immanuel's tone went slightly colder. “What would you like more? To leave or to continue?”

“It's getting late. Perhaps we can continue tomorrow.”

A marked tone of impatience punctuated the reply. “How do you know that I will be here tomorrow? Why are you so evasive? Are you satisfied with your life? This is all I would like to know.”

“Why?”

“Because as far as I'm concerned, there is no point in humanity continuing to do what it has always done. Either there is some point in the future where humans stop killing and enslaving each other, or humanity will end itself. I begin with the assumption that the former is possible. Why? Why not? We all have to live for something. But how? So I started looking for new ideas. And I found a way that I might be able to do something about it. I don't know if it will work in the end, but you can't know unless you try. And I find it a worthwhile pursuit.”

“And what was that something?”

“I collect people. And I train them as spies.”

This was finally something interesting. His eyes stopped searching for a way out and settled back on the man. “What do you mean?”

“As I said before, I have found over the years that true insanity rarely exists in individuals. We need only give up on the idea that everyone has to buy into the same version of the world to open our hearts and our minds to an expanded reality. I had heard something about an individual with schizophrenia calmly talking about how she would think at times that she was Jesus Christ. This seemed to be an interesting place to start. I started making inquiries in the areas where the homeless and the drug addicts tended to congregate and made some small talk with them. I told them that I had lost something in the area a day or two before. Something valuable; that I had set it down and it had disappeared. I asked for advice to see if anyone had heard anything about it. A few people suggested possible leads, but I became interested in one individual in particular. She was from Iraq. An addict for some of the worst street drugs, they referred to her as the 'I-crack-i', but I was able to be convinced from what I heard of her that underneath it all she was very clever. I made a point to try to track her down. I wanted to know her story. What she was trying to escape from. How she felt in this perpetual cycle of self-annihilation through substance abuse. That was a number of years ago. She taught me, and I taught her. She is now my leader.”

His attempt to say something was interrupted as Immanuel continued. “Our biggest mistake as human beings is that we feel forced by our need to survive to influence and be influenced by the people above us. We follow the people with the most to lose and the least to gain. To try to convince them to share their value with us. But why? If you can find the people with nothing to lose and plenty to offer—if only they can be released from their own sense of self-doubt—and you are able to gain their trust, then you have the makings of a very fine army indeed.”

“An army? What army?” He was now very interested in this

conversation and was extremely happy that he had chosen to allow the night to continue.

“Aha! That seems to have got your attention.” Immanuel chuckled, and his eyes became more radiant. “But first, would you like a beer? Marijuana? Something more interesting?”

Scatterbrain

Once they were settled again, Immanuel continued. “Growing up, I lived a fairly ordinary life. I never knew my father. My mother was neither rich nor poor. She taught me to put value in education. She taught me to work hard. Above all, she taught me that in this world of competition and greed, the only person that I could rely on was myself. She underlined the fact that if I couldn't support myself, then there would be no one else who would. She would point out the poor people that lived in my area and told me that I did not want to become like those people. To avoid that fate, I should go to school to study something that would always be in demand. Through years of hard work I would gain experience and status in my discipline and be able to command greater praise and respect for my services and myself because others would see my work and trust that I could deliver on my promises. More than that, though, was the important point that the more I worked, the more I would want to work, and the more my work would become interesting and rewarding because I would learn how to do work that others couldn't. Then, based on the basic principles of supply and demand, I would be able to suggest a greater variety of solutions to more complicated problems and therefore be able to charge a higher fee in exchange for more diverse services. By getting a greater return on the hours of work I put in, I would be creating something from nothing. This is how it was taught to me.

“And I lived that way for many years. But eventually, I reached the dreaded mid-life crisis. I looked back on life, and I felt it had been too... ordinary. I looked forward only to ask 'what is the

point?' I had lived through forty years of humanity. I compared my first inclinations about the world to the present and everything in between. The song remained the same. Greed, war, oppression, slavery. I needed something to live for. The more I talked with individuals, the more I felt that nobody was happy even though everybody saw the necessity in conforming. But what about those who are clearly unable to conform? The birth of the clinic is not so that we can help people to get better. It is to keep them from disrupting the status quo. It is a time out. Work is done to fix the individuals and then reintroduce them to society so that they will be more likely to follow the rules. Some people can't follow those rules. Why not? I wanted to find this out."

He felt like he could see where this was going. "So you targeted vulnerable people to build a ragtag fantasy army?"

Although he attended this as an affront, Immanuel's tone remained even and matter-of-fact. "What makes it a fantasy? How do you know that it doesn't exist? Those who have mental illnesses and addictions and live on the street are not of interest to anyone. They are treated as the equivalent of human refuse. The same people who keep expensive pieces of property empty and dormant are the ones complaining that there are too many homeless people, but they never see it as their responsibility to do something about it. If people disappear from the streets, it is welcomed by those who don't care, and accepted as inevitable by those who do. And when you speak of vulnerable people, what is the other option for them? Psychiatric wards are horrible places. Their job is to force people to be normal that otherwise cannot. The streets are little better. More freedom but less support. They are either forced to conform to one version of suffering or left alone to endure a different version."

Here there was a shift in tone. It went from an air of the general to that of the particular.

"But it requires very precise control. An interesting observation about life is that everybody eventually is forced to become a performing artist. You must train to play a role in society.

You choose a path, and you figure out how best to emulate what is expected of those who have followed that path before you so that you can be deemed sufficiently proficient in a skill to warrant being rewarded for it. It was difficult for me at first to find this Iraqi. I tried to be discreet in my inquiries, but I didn't know who I was looking for. All I could say to those who told me they knew her was 'tell her I'm looking for her'. And what about her? What should she expect from such an interest but the same abuse, slavery, and trafficking that street people face day in and day out? My strategy was to give her her freedom. Everything that she needed, I would provide. She would ask me for money for drugs. We made a deal that she would do them only when I was around. And I would ask her to let me into that world full of demons that these substances provided her an escape from. It was difficult at first, but gradually I gained her trust. The more she opened up to me, the more coherent was her explanation of her own life and the reality that she lived within.

“Thankfully, she was as clever as people had suggested. I found that although she didn't see any reason to read, she had the ability to read sufficiently well. I took what she told me about her life, and I scoured the bookstores for the most relevant philosophy book that I could think of, bought a copy, and left it with her, trying to tie her view of reality into what was written in this book. We met a few times as she read through it, and we discussed points of particular interest or frustration. She found it extremely interesting that her thoughts about the world were valid and had already been discussed by famous philosophers. Eventually, I saw that my idea might work. I furnished a few bedrooms, began amassing a small library of books, and invited her to stay. With nothing to lose, she accepted. But before doing that, I had to explain that while she learns to be different than she was, she must not forget that it's also important to be the same as she was, because it was now going to be up to her to find new recruits for this new world. It becomes like a chess game. You must convince people to rebel, but not against you. The narrative must be precise. Planning must be precise.

Measurements must be precise.”

“So what is your final goal with all of this?”

“To get a second opinion, as I have asked already of you. We look at people who do not fit into society and suggest that they should be the way they are not or be sent to prisons or the madhouse. And yet if we look at the society that they are being asked to follow, we get greed, oppression, and destruction. Suppose you flip the script and hypothesize that it is society that is suffering from a form of metaphysical schizophrenia ingrained over hundreds of thousands of years because from the very first instance of primitive humans, survival required selfishness and control of communities because control over the outside world was tenuous. You couldn't afford too many mistakes. Evolution then replicated this form of behaviour in our brains over many millennia to the point where our external worlds have changed dramatically but our internal worlds have not matched such developments from a moral or virtuous standpoint. These days, we can appeal to know excuses for such behaviour. The internet is available to humans great and small, revealing deplorable treatment for the sake of ‘business’ or ‘progress’. Despite this, the majority of us still continue in such a manner. Who are the ones that are really insane? The ones that embrace a world of billionaires surrounding themselves with lavish gifts while shaming the destitute? Or the ones who can see no logic in this?”

He replied in a tone that suggested that this was not the part that interested him but wished to steer the conversation back to a previous declaration. “Okay, but I mean what are you doing with this so-called ‘army’? Are you planning to create sleeper cells and overthrow the system?”

“I have no plan except to create a network of individuals in the way that I've described. What will these people be capable of? Nobody has ever bothered to find out. So I will try.”

Codex

“The Riddle of the Sphinx is that we have four legs, two legs, and then three legs. But that merely treats human beings as cattle. This may have been a justifiable view before philosophy, but now after 2500 years we understand that we can be and believe that we deserve to live for so much more. When we as a species no longer wish to see ourselves as beasts of burden, we must come up with a new paradigm. Struggling over the questions posed by philosophy and theology in concert with my students has provided me with such a paradigm.

“We should look at humanity as being summarized by four stages. First, we are Christ. We emerge from the womb. We have no idea of fault or sin. We have no responsibility except to try to understand. This is the stage of Innocence. Whatever negative connotations our actions may have had, we do not claim them as our own. We are free to destroy in order to create. Our future lives depend on it. It is only once we truly understand fallibility (which usually happens during adolescence) that we then become Pan, a god that sees joy in jest and doing without considering long-term consequences. Who do we want to be once we understand the true magnitude of our responsibility, which is to become a being that has never existed before within a future historical paradigm that has never existed before and cannot be predicted? Just how far can we push our creative powers to mould our future selves into a life worth living? This is the stage of Naivety. We may overplay our hand if we believe that this is some great matter, or we may underplay our hand if we look about us at the feudal trends of human history and see nothing more than banality. Do we prioritize life-as-being or life-as-survival? To conform and hope for the best or to rebel and hope for the best? These are our only two choices: to risk everything for nothing, or to risk nothing for everything.

“Then there is a point we reach when we are no longer asking 'how can I go further?' but find ourselves instead asking 'how can I get another chance?' It occurs when we fully understand the consequences of emerging from the myriad of possibilities that were

open to us at the beginning; when we are finally condemned to what appears to be a single trajectory. We look back at the potential partners and opportunities we came to know but walked away from and the unknown partners and opportunities that we couldn't know but also weren't patient enough to wait for. We put ourselves into the shoes of our ten-year-old selves, think our ten-year-old thoughts, and think about how much easier it would have been if we had known then what we know now. We lament that we didn't do better. We look forward and see Fate. To reach Fate requires survival. But survival to what end? If our children do not become our second chance, then what will become of us? We cannot know. Future history has not been written. We have yet to become ourselves. And to this end where we hope to eventually find some degree of authenticity that we can be proud of—a sense that *I have become myself*—there are only two certainties, that we must meet our basic necessities and that we must prepare for the inevitability of death.

“All of what I have said thus far is not a choice. It is the fate of any version of humanity. Life is a prison. We are all born as an 'I' that we share with no one else and cannot exchange. Time is a prison. We cannot go back to what has been and we cannot spy on a future that is yet to be; we are stuck in an ever-present present. Reality is a prison. We are condemned to this universe with all its wonder and invisible forces, this planet that we call Earth, these laws of physics.

“It is society that gives us any sort of choice. What *sort* of humanity have we become? We get from this society that we must all have something to sell. There is no free life. Nor would anyone wish it to be so because what then would provide meaning and purpose? We are nothing more than what we do and have done. Each of our legacies is the sum-total of the actions that would not have occurred if we hadn't existed. To be idle is to be nothing. In this life, we come to understand that eventually we must get used to repetition if we are to be deemed good at anything and worth being trusted further. We must decide on one ladder that we must spend the majority of the

years of our life climbing before we can even think of relaxing. And when I say 'we must decide', for most it is not actually a free decision but making the most of a bad lot. As you pointed out earlier, there are far more people that suffer far more severely than we. But to what end? We reach the stage of Purgatory. The birth of tragedy. The realization that we can no longer create ourselves to be anything other than what we are. There is no more time for play. We have committed to become something. We hope that it is ourselves.

“What inspires us to continue once we have exhausted our creativity? What are the goals of humanity? There is only one goal. It is the goal of Sisyphus. We wish to become Gods. What does that entail? For *this* version of humanity—the only version of humanity that has existed thus far (that history has sufficiently recorded for us, anyway)—it is to answer the question 'how can we justify slavery?' We do not work towards a world where we are all Gods, but rather our history of oppressing each other implies that we wish to become Gods *relative* to an underclass of slaves. This principle of greed and slavery can only lead to the principle of monotheism, namely that there can only be one God.

“Let us consider it this way. If we take such hoarding of value to a point close to infinity, it leads us to a future scenario that occurs where just two people still exist, the others dying off due to being destroyed or deprived of the necessities of life. Humanity has lived through a period where those who have assure those who do not have that life is nasty, brutish, and short. Both remaining individuals (wishing to win the game of living the greatest life in space and time by owning all) must now decide on what has value, since no other individuals exist to contend with said opinion. They may either choose or inherit the valuation of anything at all, a single rock for instance (imagine it is the largest diamond or brick of gold in all existence). One of the two dies in the struggle, leaving a single individual as both victor and annihilator. This is the monotheistic God. This is Anomie. The belief that one can control infinity only leads to the absurd finale wherein infinity itself becomes

meaningless; this last individual has no hope for survival, no hope for procreation, no hope for meaning, no hope for anything except the inevitability of death, and the sooner it comes the better.

“Yes, this inevitability of death is the same for all of us.

However, this Sisyphean version of death is not just the death of the individual, but the death of the entire species. The death of the last observer. The death of history. Either this continues until a species capable of our level of consciousness evolves again or finds our artifacts by travelling from another world, or until every trace of us disintegrates. It is the pinnacle of greed and the pinnacle of irreversibility. The myth of Sisyphus declared that Sisyphus toiled 'forever', but forever for the last man implies toiling after only two possible outcomes: suicide or death from exhaustion. Whatever occurs between his present moment of triumph and his future moment of inevitability is completely pointless as it is entirely empty of value. What would such a person have to demonstrate? And to whom? Time ceases to have meaning for humanity for a future of humanity no longer exists. The more we understand life through science, the more we may dream that we can bring extinct species back from the dead, but if we are that extinct species, then our only hope is to wait for another species to rediscover our techniques and have sufficient mercy to resurrect us. Should this occur, then it is no longer possible to argue that we are Gods. The path of greed therefore can lead only to contradiction. The Gods will always send Sisyphus back to the beginning to try again.

“To be a God, you must first understand what it means to be Sisyphus. You must see yourself in forty years doing the same thing, asking yourself day after day 'what is the point in continuing?' It entails answering the question 'how do I get another chance?' If we can get ONE more chance, then we can get many. And then we may do as we feel that we should have done only after the insight provided by hindsight. But it requires asking this question out of hopeless desperation within the depths of Hades, not out of triumphant egomania from the pinnacle of Mount Olympus.

“Now, if only we allow ourselves to explore this other option—getting another chance—we can immediately make progress. To not have more than one chance seems impossible. What is the point in being if there is then forever nothingness? Why could there not be eternal recurrence? We may hear 'the Sun will explode in ten billion years.' And then what? Reality will be completely annihilated to be replaced by a void? But then how could any process have started that would get us to this present moment? Since I began this project, I have come to believe that it is very likely that some of us have done this before; that some individuals seem to have a sense of familiarity with their place in reality that is far too improbable to simply be random coincidence.

“I think you would agree that the difference between being dead for five minutes and being dead for twenty billion years must have the same effect. Our minds are reset to Innocence. When we emerge into the world and are mature enough to comprehend ourselves, we cannot know how long we have been in a form of non-existence. Without appealing to theology, we naturally *assume* that we have never existed before. But we must be able to make sense of the question 'how can I get another chance?' to give life a sense of purpose. Not because our egos necessitate it, but because existence necessitates it. Religion provides this possibility. We get another life in Paradise with Gods. But then, again, to what end? If it is a magical place where we can only achieve perfection, then what is the point in doing anything at all if the outcome is already given? If it is simply a place where we all get along and try to become our authentic selves, then why can we not achieve this here in reality on Planet Earth amongst ourselves? Why do we need a God to tell us what is right and what is wrong? Does Sisyphus not tell us enough already?

“I have therefore come to comfort my own existential uncertainty by concluding that we are on a cosmological-scale cyclic trajectory that is path-dependent. The moment we ask 'why is there something rather than nothing?', we must ask 'why are there two things rather than nothing?' because otherwise there would be no

interaction and nothing would exist except a single Sisyphian point marching to infinity. The only way to maintain our conservation laws is to suggest metaphorically that God is a bullet. And to maintain scalable similitude to reflect that our minds and our reproductive state of being are somehow imprinted with information from the universe, we can think of an ovulatory *causa incausata*. To maintain symmetry and various conservation laws, we can imagine a black bullet of matter shot forward and a white recoil of anti-matter shot backward. Yet how do they ever interact? Our universe must have an edge. But what will cause them to stray from simply bouncing back and forth along a single line? Well, when we shoot a gun, there is also a sound, so let us posit a wave that is emitted perpendicularly that can bend trajectories. In addition, let us suppose that our expanding universe is an egg-like containment device.

“So... matter, anti-matter, wave, and cosmological oocyte are created at this singular point. Then reality just becomes a mechanistic game of billiards inside this expanding egg-like membrane. What is outside of it? It is impossible to know whether such a question even makes any sense. How do we get greater complexity? Perhaps hitting a wall causes a split. Maybe a piece of the wall is chipped off forming a black hole. Suppose hitting another piece of matter (or anti-matter) causes a perturbation. Let that go for billions of years. Would things end up differently? It is impossible to know how or if the atoms that make us up would be altered if we started our cosmological billiard game anew. The most important thing to note in all of this is that waking up the year after I'm dead as a new baby or waking up twenty billion years from now as a recycled version of myself (whatever that means) seems the same to me. I am naive of any form of causality beyond the birds and the bees either way. Perhaps the God who we believe rules all is simply the last incarnation of the previous version of humanity that existed before the cycle began anew. Sisyphus cursing the Gods once again for rewarding only the crown of thorns. Perhaps black holes are gigantic recycling bins harvesting our information for the next attempt on the

other side of the universe, or in a parallel, inverted anti-time universe. Perhaps through some cosmological lensing effect, our previous incarnations are watching over us, willing us towards a different outcome than before.

“When we stop at God and the inevitability of death, we fail to understand the richness of the possibilities that may present themselves to us. Cosmology, quantum physics, minds, reality... these are all topics where we as a species are still not even out of the nursery when it comes to understanding. The discovery of the full electromagnetic spectrum implies that we can only perceive a tiny fraction of all that is out there, while hormones, magnetic fields, electrical pulses, and who knows what else constantly interact with and influence us in ways that we cannot fathom. And yet, we assume that reality cannot be more than it is because alternative explanations are as unprovable as they are mind-boggling. Theology gives us God and we are satisfied, but only because it is a relatable concept that simplifies our understanding. God is like us only omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. He'll take care of everything. Fine. No more questions.

“This was my motivation to continue with my project. Our job must be greater than simply existing for ourselves. But we cannot begin to answer these larger questions until we understand more immediate questions. What is it like to live a single life as an individual shunned by society? How does such an individual perceive their relationship to reality? What goes on inside of a mind that sees the world differently enough from us that there is a need to chase ghosts? The quest for understanding begins inside of our own minds, understanding how our tabula rasas become canvases of complexity. But we must begin with the people that we understand the least. The people who have already gained the most have done so by gaming the system. Their strategies are understandable, their values discernible, their goals predictable, and their ultimatums undesirable if history is anything to go by. They have the greatest to lose and the least to gain. They have already conformed. They have

already had their chance and they will be nothing but who they are. But to become a God, your behaviour must be universalizable. You must be able to say 'yes, everybody should be allowed to live like this.' What is it like to clean floors every day for little money? The end of history is when we are all satisfied. When we are all Sisyphians struggling under rocks with proportionately bearable masses. It is the only way that we can win as a species.

Redistribution of means while making a concerted effort to strike a balance with Nature so that it may replenish itself on our behalf for the indefinite future is our only long-term hope.

“You are sceptical of this operation, but it is only because it doesn't fit with the idea that we should only offer help in exchange for profit and exploitation. What about those that have the least to lose? Is what I am doing enslavement? I suppose it is a form of slavery. But then every system with any sort of governance is a system of slavery, so who can complain? Suppose it was you who had this mental affliction that you didn't choose but condemned you to eking out eighty years of living off of the scraps of other people's realities, realities that you cannot even fathom? Suppose it was me. What would you choose between this and the everyday struggle and horror of an impoverished reality? What sort of life is that? How much of humanity do we lose through oppression and negligence? How many new ideas would we be able to nurture if everyone had a chance to wield the full extent of their creative powers? How many more doctors and nurses and people who improved our longevity in terms of quality and quantity could we have access to? From what I have learned since the beginning of this project, there is such a richness of content that those who are shunned can add to our collective understanding. Yet the reality is that the perpetually impoverished—which makes up the majority of humanity—is losing their future so that a few people can continue to win in the present. Let's be honest, what are humanity's goals? To exist as fools in order to entertain the cosmos? When was the last time humanity honestly asked itself 'what are we really trying to achieve here?'”

Just

After several minutes of silence, it was clear that Immanuel had finished his grand narrative. Unsure of what to say in response, he felt that it was best to maintain his interest while remaining neutral and uncommitted. “Hmm... I see... so this is your version of reality?”

Immanuel continued with the same calm air. “It's the version of reality I have constructed beginning from the point that I decided that there must be an alternative to the version of humanity that has brought us to where we are today. I read books, I surveyed people with very different and very personal views of the world and their place in it. Although we still have very little understanding about how the mind creates reality, we know that it does so for everybody. That includes the people that we deem to belong in psychiatric wards. It is their reality also. They are trying to make sense of who they are, what they know, and what they should do just like the rest of us. What is it like to be this Iraqi? To be surrounded by endless bombs dropping from the sky, wondering whether tomorrow you will awake again or end up six feet under? Even when faced with the prospect of having no exit, our minds must create a story around reality that makes sense and maintains hope or there is no point in continuing. When you can reframe reality so that Hell is other people, there is always a theoretical way out. Reality may dictate that it is only open to a few people, but she found it as a refugee. And then? You trade massacre and psychological trauma for discrimination and poverty, but at least there is some hope for support for the latter. Hell may remain, but it is hope that keeps us from choosing at any moment to end it all. That or complacency.”

At this point, Immanuel's tone changed. “Enough about me. What is your version of reality? What makes a good life? You still haven't answered my question.”

He had sat quietly taking in the man's words throughout this extended monologue. Now that the ball was back in his court, he was

not sure how to reply. After thinking for a few seconds with Immanuel eying him disapprovingly, he stood up and started pacing around the blank slate. Finally, after several minutes of reflection, he volunteered a reply.

“I suppose my version of reality is that you can always make more money, but you can't get your time back.”

The old man sat motionless and quiet. After about a minute he spoke. “Are you sure about the first part? Or are you led to believe it by what you believe is your rightful place in the hierarchy of society? How many people in this world 'can always make more money'? And how can you be sure that you will always be amongst them? How about 'life is long and history is unforgiving'?”

“You only live once, try everything.”

“Why? Where will that get you? Every beginning must have an end. Every initial hello must end with a final goodbye. We cannot be with everybody and everywhere at every given moment. The wider you spread your influence and focus, the less time you will have for any one thing. And when you get to the end of such a process and you look back and you see that you missed out on the joys and pride that can only come from long-term commitment, will you be satisfied? Or will you be filled with regret because you realize that your one life was a disorganized mess and you can't go back and redeem yourself? You look back, and you think 'Did I make good use of my time? What if I could have done something different?' Parallel universes exist, but only in our minds or in the stories we share. They may be able to be contemplated, but they cannot be salvaged and resurrected no matter how much nostalgic infatuation we may invest in a past version of ourselves that we yearn to return to for a second chance to do things differently. Life does not end when we are no longer able to define ourselves. It is only the beginning. The second half of life is the difficult part. And when you first comprehend it through the eyes of your ten-year-old self, an inevitable question will form in your mind, namely 'why this specific reality when there seemed to be so many better possibilities?' Humans may forgive.

History does not.”

His Socratic sense seemed to spy a weakness. “But wait, let's go back to that first part. The one about regret due to too much variety and no long-term commitment. Didn't you just tell me that you lamented spending so much of your time doing only one thing?”

Immanuel was unmoved and replied easily. “Do, or do not. You will regret both. Every crossroads results in a path not taken. You can only see what is. And you must live with it or stop living. This present was once a future that you couldn't possibly imagine. From now on, it will be a past that cannot be changed. You can only really start to live when you accept that time will not wait for you. Either life is a rat race to be endured, or life is a creative process that must constantly be nurtured. The future is uncertain until time passes and we are there. What will you create with your life? Old presents are in the past. New presents only occur in the future. How will the uncertainty of tomorrow become the certainty of yesterday two days from now?”

Here, he felt he could dig in his heels. “But this is just magical thinking. How we look at life—whether optimistically as a creative process or pessimistically as a rat race—will not change anything about it. You live, things happen, and your reality remains unchanged. Just because I try to reframe the world as positive and welcoming rather than negative and foreboding doesn't mean anything will change. Looking at the world through rose-tinted glasses cannot change a life lived within a reality that is shit.”

“Of course, it's not like choosing between painting a picture with a palette of only dull greys and painting a picture having a palette of a million colours. There are always constraints. Beyond the obvious physical ones, there are social ones. If you go against social norms, you must be prepared to pay the consequences. As much as we might like to live a new life every day, without commitment no one would be able to gain trusted experience and proficiency in a discipline through training and repetition, and society would be a perpetuity of unskilled, untried, untested chaos and fall apart.

Commitment is both a blessing and a curse. It erases the possible selves that you could be in your potential future. Filling a lot of your time with one pursuit will always preclude you from filling it with many pursuits, each taking up a little bit of your time. But in return, it allows you to stabilize yourself and create a more predictable future within the coming uncertainty so that you can more easily shape your needs no matter what the days, weeks, months, and years ahead may throw at you. Risk nothing for everything or risk everything for nothing. The consequences are yours because whatever will be will be, and it is only you who will be forced to walk your path forward. The 'I' of identity is the prison we must learn to live within, for there is no other option. You are the only individual who must spend your entire life with you. If you can't stand your own company, you are in for a difficult time." Here Immanuel paused briefly. "Upheavals in society have occurred, however. Maybe one will occur and change our relationship with our lived reality even if it cannot change our relationship to who we are."

At this point, he felt the need to interject more forcefully. "You're dreaming. Upheavals in society have never changed anything. It has always been a system where the few indulge themselves at the cost of the many. Any attempts to change that are either destroyed or co-opted. There is too much power concentrated in the hands of too few people, all of whom are manipulative cads who tell everyone that cutthroat competition is the only way to democratize what society wants. But whatever society wants ends up being little more than whatever those who have money can cash in on. The moment someone crosses the threshold of fame, a cult of personality rises up around that person as the masses fight amongst each other for relevance, the market becomes destined to decide in this person's favour, and he or she takes on an air of royalty to the masses, forgetting everything about the difficulties that transpired beforehand. Meanwhile, the vulnerable are forced to take work or starve, and then the wealthy individuals that give them peanuts that underscore obscene profits insist that they are doing these workers a

favour because twenty cents an hour is better than nothing. Natural environments are destroyed for raw resources and not replaced. Hazardous waste is dumped into rivers and left for others to clean up. Laws protect the strong and punish the weak. The weak are forced to pay while the strong argue that the rules don't apply to them and line up an army of lawyers to get their way. As you said, it's all just slavery. Why should the future be any different?"

Immanuel lifted an eyebrow. "Indeed, why should the future be any different?"

"So then what's the point?"

"Only you can answer that."

"There is no point."

"Then why are you still here? In this house, in this city, in this country, in this reality? You have the power to end it all if you sincerely believe that there is no point."

Hearing this, his mind flashed back to a conversation from earlier in the day. He remained silent.

"Let me put it this way. Why don't we see mass suicides if the world is so bleak?"

"I don't know. Because people believe that things can be different."

"But you just said that they can't be different. Are you saying that nothing has changed in a hundred years? Or a thousand years?"

"Well, no. Of course not. Humanity has made some progress. But that progress has only made our lives a little more comfortable, and slavery a little more justifiable. It doesn't change the fact that we are still slaves. The cage may be a gilded one, but we all remain well and truly behind bars within society. All except those at the top who control the vast majority of the wealth and make the vast majority of the decisions, that is. Mansions and yachts and sports cars are more important than the well-being of human beings if this democracy of cutthroat competition that we put our faith into is to be believed."

Here, the seriousness that had taken over Immanuel's face gave way to a tender smile. "Then we must come up with new ideas.

And we have. You say 'why should we expect anything different in the future?' because of your observations about the past. But consider the internet, for example. Throughout the entirety of the past, information was controlled by an oligopoly of publishers and newspaper printers. We read newspapers and we assumed that they described the truth because we had no second opinion. Now the potential is infinite. Each of us can make our own judgements of reality to a far greater extent than we could before and put them in a public forum for all to see. What is happening today in East Africa? You can find out from a variety of sources and compare. You can even contact someone living in the slums of Nairobi and ask them directly about their lived experience. Before the internet, no such independent investigations could be done because no such second opinions were readily available. The only time East Africa might have been mentioned in the newspapers of past days would be to reinforce the idea that all is well, and our actions are moral. These days, this is not so."

"But those with money can still convince those without money to continue to support slavery by calling it business."

"Maybe, but at least ignorance has progressively fewer places left to hide."

"Ha!" he retorted incredulously.

Treefingers

"Do you think about life after you're gone?" Immanuel asked casually, returning with black tea.

"I try not to. It's not a particularly pleasant subject."

"Even if there is no point? You will cease to exist for billions of years. Why hold on for a few more?"

"Because I want to see what happens." This had always been his most tried and tested means of looking at the world anew when things seemed to become overwhelming. You could only know the future by being present in it, and it was by no means predictable.

“And suppose by the time you become old, humanity had discovered the genetic secret of lobsters that allows them to live indefinitely while they still have strength, and humans were able to live regularly for two hundred years? How would you have wished to live your life differently?”

“I don't know. I suppose every day would be like two days if health and longevity increased with it, but nothing much would change. We would still have our jobs and our hobbies and routines.”

“Do you think we would change our behaviour if we lived twice as long? What if we lived for thousands of years? How would human behaviour change? Would we realize that we have to conserve enough for that far ahead, and start to cooperate? Or would we become even more bloodthirsty, accelerating our maniacal obsession of turning Mother Nature into tangible representations of narcissistic vainglory, triggering a final sprint to the Sisyphian *bellum omnium contra omnes*?”

“I don't know. I have hope.” He used this curt reply to express his irritation.

“The unfortunate reality of humanity that history proves time and time again is that people only change their behaviour when they start to suffer. We are draining our aqueducts and polluting our air and water at a frenetic pace. We believe in the magic of technology. We exploit scarcity rather than conserving it. The internet is a record of life, but only those aspects of it deemed important for the few years that it has been around. Think back to marvelling at Ancient Greek architecture and the beginning of philosophy. 2500 years later, here we are. We are still learning from the Greeks and Romans and still judge their contributions to our postmodern society. When we speak of Cicero and Cato, we imagine the ferocity of gladiatorial contests, an extreme level of infant mortality due to the demands the Romans placed on their progeny, and in general what we would deem a disregard for the sanctity of human life. What about a few millennia from now? What will we become?”

“If you thought that you could see it, you would probably

make more of an effort to plan long-term. History will always judge. Trees will always judge. Fossils will always judge. History is no longer solely written by the winners, thanks at least to the internet. And looking at the leap from rotary phones to what we have now in only a few decades, who knows what may come next? The way we are living, there can be no stable point in the future except Sisyphus. Otherwise, at some point, people will realize that it is indeed Man against Nature. And people will also realize that history is something that must be preserved, not censored, erased, or altered, if only for the sake of the survival of our species. But do we deserve such an exoneration after tens or even hundreds of thousands of years of brutal dog-eat-dog exploitation of one tribe against another for the sake of a small bit of land or a few extra resources?

“Imagine you are a tree, viewing the world around you for hundreds, even thousands of years. You would not be able to move, and you would have no perceptible intentionality aside from the natural cycles of nutrient uptake and photosynthesis. Or maybe you would come across a particularly angry, mutated tree that would grow fingers eventually; the legend of the mandrake realized. It would reach out and grab you, pull you inside, and feed you while you spent an eternity looking upon the world in horror at the crimes humans commit against each other in the name of progress. And we could call you Ludovico. What would you remember over those thousands of years? What would stand out in your mind? We say God is watching us and we justify murder in His name. We should be watching ourselves. What will be on your final videotape when you are face-to-face with your own mortality?”

He had grown too tired to care anymore. “It's been a very long night. I've had enough of today.”

“Naturally. I lose track of time when I'm talking. It is something I am trying to work on. But with my friends, I always feel that I have to be persistent. We have three prisons that we do not choose to live inside but are ever-present, nonetheless. The one in space, the one in time, and the one that it is in our own minds.

Broken minds are the most difficult to arrange a visit with, but they may also have the farthest to come, and provide the greatest rewards if only we are willing to invest our time in them.”

He raised his hand. “Please stop talking. I don’t have time for this.” Standing up, he turned to the door.

“Ummm... Yes... Anyway, remember what I said. We need new ideas. I have told you of my idea. What will become of it? It has never been tried before, so only time will tell. Good luck to you.”

“And good luck to you. You’re going to need it.”

A glance back at the old man revealed that a slight smile had crept across a previously stern face, accompanied by a friendly wave of the hand. Once the door closed, he began the journey home, with a tired mind that was bursting at the seams.

Lucky

As he emerged from the stairwell, a cool wind hit him squarely in the face, and he realized that it was not only his mind that was bursting at the seams. He had drunk more than a little and seemed to have been holding on for ages. Not wanting to be untoward, he waited to be far enough away from this house before he found a convenient corner to prevent an accident. He was extremely tired, wondering if he should call a taxi. It was still pitch dark, even though it seemed like the night had lasted forever. It was not too far to his home, and he surmised that it might take just as long to find a taxi.

Trying to take the most direct route possible, he went as fast as his tired legs could carry him. When he had covered about three-quarters of the total distance back to his bed where he could finally call time on another rotation of Planet Earth, he stopped at the entrance to a backstreet and sat—perhaps more like leaned—on a short masonry wall that seemed just too short to comfortably take the majority of his leaning weight without feeling the top edge of the wall digging into his hip above which there was nothing, but just too tall to sit on without having to hoist his entire body up onto the

precariously narrow top—only a brick's width across—and risk ending up in a crumpled mess at the bottom of one side or the other. As he did not have the energy to put his faith into still having agility enough to complete such a manoeuvre as fatigue was felt everywhere in his body, he contented himself with a slight lean, allowing the wall to take some of his weight. He relaxed. He was almost there. A sense of relief came flooding over him. His legs seemed to find renewed energy after a few moments of taking part of his weight off. Just as he was about to set off for the last leg of his journey, he heard a voice behind him.

“Excuse me, sir.”

He turned to see a shorter individual wearing a hooded sweater with some random designs on it. He was reasonably certain that the voice was female though he still couldn't see the details of the face from which it had sprung. It had a slight accent suggesting that this person had probably spent a long time here, but that it was not a first language.

“Yes?” he replied, though what emanated next from her lips was not unexpected.

“Do you have any money? I haven't eaten for awhile.”

Being back at the point of exhaustion and wondering how to diffuse the situation as quickly and effortlessly as possible so that he wouldn't have to think too much about it, he automatically reached into his pocket, and produced the several banknotes that he still retained from the night.

“Sure. Here you go.”

“Wow. Thank you very much, sir.”

“Would you also like a hug?” he stepped toward her while lifting his arms into a position that suggested an imminent embrace.

“Thank you for your offer, sir. But I'm a Muslim woman. I don't touch men that I don't know. It's nothing personal.”

“No, I understand. But... uh, are you okay? I assume that this is not the sort of life you expected when you arrived in this country. I'm sorry if you find it difficult. Many people do.” Was it some form

of guilt that made him always want to help?

“It can be a hard life at times. But it is a better life than I would have had if I had lived somewhere else, probably anywhere else. Especially in my country.”

“Humanity is only the divine comedy if you choose not to see darkness. Otherwise, it is the birth of tragedy.” He was not sure where these words came from, but it was the best he could do to finally sign off for the night.

As he turned to go, he saw her slowly reach under her sweater, and before he knew it, she had whipped out an ornate-looking knife, long enough to be a small dagger or sword, and pointed it at him. “Is that all you have?”

While trying to remain calm, he also tried to strike a tone that would exude the need for some sympathy. “Look, ummm... I'm sorry. It's been a long day. It's been a long night. I'm really tired. You can search me if you want. I have nothing more.”

She swiftly dropped the blade of the knife to his ankle, and slowly drew it up his leg. One thing was for sure, if he had not taken the time to prevent an accident earlier, he would have probably had one now. When it reached the join at the top of his pant leg, she skillfully flipped it slightly so that the flat side was now resting against the area where the two seams of his pant legs came together. She slowly applied upward pressure.

He tried not to panic. “Please. I have nothing. I'm sorry. I've helped you as much as I can.”

Then she slightly withdrew the knife and expertly swung it around and slowly drew it down his arm, barely scratching its surface. As she did so, she leaned towards him a little more and, barely above a whisper, gave him a final warning.

“Shhh... I am a tree.”

*You must convince people to rebel, but not against you.
Measurements must be precise.*

Home

As he stumbled down the hallway, his legs were barely able to hold his weight. And yet he was thinking about someone. Of course. As he stopped between his door and the one opposite, he looked away from his door to the other one. He looked at the three-digit number screwed to the door in cheap, gold-coloured metallic blocks. He never understood why they insisted on using so many digits when the building only had three floors and there were only six suites per floor. He tried to think what the Pakistani man could have been thinking the night he had barged into Maya's apartment. *That* night. Alcohol. Patriarchy. Lack of filters. Desperation. Selfishness. A sense of entitlement. They would have all been there somewhere, he was sure. And that had led to a woman nearly deciding to end her life and have no future. Her words echoed in his mind... one downward thrust, that's all it would have taken.

But words were not easy to come by with so much content already in his mind and so much fatigue in his body. He played out the idealized fantasy in his mind. Maybe she wouldn't mind. She would probably come wearily to the door and, like a good friend, insist that at the current time (which must have been extremely late), the thing he needed most was to get into bed. But not with her. (Despite keeping her most strategic cards close to her chest, she was always willing to turn anything into a light-hearted quip—maybe to dilute any sadness.) He would probably mumble that she was right. He might add something about how much he thought about her situation, and worried about her solitude. She would thank him profusely for his concern and reiterate how much he meant to her. She probably trusted him enough to step into the passageway and give him a heartfelt embrace and thank him again. He would hold her close and look into her eyes and probably give an awkward reply of gratitude for her being in his life also. He would kiss her on the cheek. (No. He wouldn't.) She would kiss him on his cheek. (No. She wouldn't.) Then she would withdraw towards her door and tell him

again that he needed sleep. He probably looked awful. They would wish each other pleasant dreams. He would turn away and unlock his door as he heard the door behind him closing and the deadbolt slip into place. Then he would somnambulate the finite number of steps that would get him to his bed, wearily take off his clothes, and plunk down, exhausted.

And what would he gain if everything went perfectly?

No more than that. It is late. She is a private human being. Respect her space. Do not add extra stress. You are not her responsibility. Another time.

No, he thought. Better not.

Epilogue



*Шахерезада в стране чудес (Scheherezade in Wonderland). Севил
Ооржак. 2022. Холст, масло.*

To two men living the same number of years, the world always provides the same sum of experiences. It is up to us to be conscious of them.

-- Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

I thought I'd never see

But reality struck

Better find out

Before your time's out

What the fuck

-- Nas, *"If I Ruled the World (Imagine That)"*

Madness

No longer wanting to look at the door across from his, he stood in front of the portal that would be opened to reveal the non-place of a non-world. He looked at the metallic numbers. He looked at the white paint. He looked at the spherical metallic doorknob. Slowly, he put his hand in his pocket and took out a key. But when he tried to bring himself to insert it into the serrated gap in the middle of the gold-coloured metal ball, he found himself struggling. Instead, he could only press the end of the key into the wood that formed the barrier in front of him. He leaned his weight forward so that his four physical supports in reality were two feet on a carpeted floor, the key end connected to his left arm, and his forehead, pressed against the numbers at the top of the door. Another Friday. Another weekend. Another week. More time will pass. And for what?

You are Gordon Comstock.

As his mind raced through far too many questions about existence and purpose and matter and time, his throat began to swell and constrict. A tear began to slowly form in his right eye, pooling against the wall of the reservoir created by his lower eyelid and, having gained sufficient volume several seconds later, trickled down his cheek and fell to the ground.

One random movement, one downward thrust of my arm, could end it all.

Slowly, he withdrew the key from its contact with the door, but kept his forehead against it. After replacing the set of keys in his pocket, he took a few deep breaths.

You will go inside. You will sleep. You will wake up. And then? Isn't this thing called life just a bit too predictable? Doesn't it ever get a

little old?

It was late. He should make no noise for fear of disturbing or alerting someone in his building. Ever so slowly, he brought his hands to the door, first making contact only with his index fingers, then, retracting each finger into the knobs at the end of his wrists, placed the knuckles of his fists against the door, and slowly pushed his head away from its physical connection to cool metal. Turning back towards the entrance to the building, he began walking slowly down the corridor. There was no point in ending another night like this.

What is the purpose of tomorrow?

Emerging once again into the cool air, he walked briskly to the T-junction created by the walkup to his private building and the slabs of concrete that were intended for public use. After looking left and right and not being quite sure what he was thinking of or looking for, he then looked up at the stars, found Polaris, and thought of the lack of temporal synchronicity between the seeing and the being. How far away was Polaris? How far back in time was he looking? What were the conditions on this planet when those photons were first sprinkled by Polaris about the universe, never knowing if one day there would be a conscious optical reference point somewhere to absorb them and convert them into information that could then be contemplated by a conscious higher being. Quite simply, there probably was no planet at that time. Just space dust congealing who knows when into who knows what for what purpose nobody knew.

*Higher? In what sense? Because we could ask why of ourselves?
Because we could ask who of others?*

Or because we could ask what is the point of it all? Purpose? Is there any, *really?*

We are all Prufrock.

Polaris had gambled and won... now it would be one of the most popular light sources in the future when it comes to our recording of it in our history of humanity and in our personal memories. How long that recording process would continue to go on, nobody knew. But self-annihilation was always a distinct possibility. self or Self? You only had so much control over the former. All of our times end in ends. What is the point of being a world-historical individual when we all end up dead?

Here for a good time not a long time.

Life is long and history is unforgiving.

What is the point of doing anything at all?

Diogenes, Plato, or Aristotle...

Kirillov, Stavrogin, or Verkhovensky...

Why change a future that you cannot be part of?

It is only by planting a tree knowing that we will never sit under its shade that we can truly say that we have begun to understand the meaning of life.

I am Siddhartha.

Maybe you could have actually tested that theory if you had taken the acid and not come up with cowardly excuses about needing to be in control around others.

I am the boatman.

One day, perhaps.

If I survive that long.

Limbo

“Why change a present to influence a future that you know that you cannot be part of?”

“What do you mean?”

“Suppose you help make someone's life better. But that person is not someone that you are in the present with. They live in a different reality. You cannot access that reality. You create no shared memories. What's the point in assisting?”

“As long as we have shared goals, why not give someone else an opportunity to become better and contribute more?”

“You are changing the parameters. In the scenario you describe, you are able to see the outcome of your intervention.”

“Well, yes.”

“So you are looking to become one with a well-trained ego who is grateful only for his own legacy via the ripples in time that he directly gives rise to?”

“I never said that.”

“Helping people in the future is the same as helping them in the present, but there will always be some results that you won't see because a future will always be looming long after you're gone.”

“I suppose I would like to believe that, despite all my faults, I have shared goals with the future of humanity.”

“And how do you contribute to those shared goals?”

Looking around him, he realized that he had walked quite a distance. But he knew where he was. He had been along this path many times.

“How much of the present is already decided by our minds? What is the difference between this and sleepwalking? How do the tubules of a cranial organ, synchronized by the history of a set of memories to a corresponding reality in all of its complexity, conceive of doing something other than what we feel compelled to do by the momentum of the past? Are we really free? Or is it just wishful thinking? Have I already lived this life an inordinate number of times and never learned my lesson?”

Questions. Always questions. Calculating. Always calculating. When does it end?

“You can end it any time you want.”

Nasty, brutish, short.

A churning sound—barely perceptible at first—grew louder, and he started to slow his pace. Cities tend to be built along bodies of water for a reason. Transportation. Ecology. Force of Nature.

What comes after 'Game Over'?

Despite the darkness of the hour, an abyss—the Abyss?—came into clearer view as he continued forward along the road. A bridge loomed large in front of him.

Let's see what happens...

What exactly he was doing, he wasn't sure. Fundamental questions loomed large in his mind. What are the pros and cons of non-existence? If one can look forward to little more than a repetitive existence for many decades with little change begotten from it aside from a little more money and a little less life, wouldn't it make more sense to stop consuming resources altogether and allow them to be

allocated to others that have a greater chance of actually contributing something to a better future for humanity? Utilitarianism. Organ harvesters. Fat men on trolleys. Where does actual worth come from? It would be reasonably straightforward to answer this question when considering those in history that have made a substantial impact on society (for better or worse), wherein without such an intervention the trajectory of humanity would be markedly different—the so-called ‘world-historical individual’. In theory, positive historical contributions would render us better off directly, while negative contributions would give humanity some idea of what not to do. But what about everyone else—all those peons that live and die with little fanfare? What is their worth?

Walk like a matador. Don't be chickenshit.

He walked along the road until he reached a long metallic plate that stretched from one side of the road to the other. Stepping across the plate, he was officially on the bridge, suspended by a layer of concrete supported by an assortment of metal trusses over a drop that would likely kill him. Being very much alone on this night, he proceeded along the centre line of the bridge-road, which maintained as measurably as possible his equidistance from both railings over which one could conceivably vault to one's (probable) non-existence. He had always had a problem with heights. It was less a problem of spatial perception than it was repressing the urge to taking a flying leap over the edge just to see what it would be like to feel oneself in freefall for several seconds before one's inevitable death. It was an extremely irrational premise, however. Not being able to remember one's observations or communicate them to another would render the exercise as completely pointless aside from providing a source of (likely) unforgettable trauma to any onlookers. Sisyphus' last stand.

If a tree jumps from a bridge and no one is around to witness it...

Focusing his gaze directly ahead of him, he continued forward defiantly. Eventually, he estimated from seeing the distance to the other end of the bridge and internalizing how far he had walked (given the many times he had crossed it before) that he was near the middle. Stopping, he looked down at the engineered surface of concrete and steel that was elevating him far above the world, and heard the calm babbling of the water below. He then looked left, then right, then behind him to check the accuracy of his approximation, and to see if there were any observers. The metallic plate behind him still seemed closer than the one ahead of him, but what did it really matter?

He made a perpendicular turn to the right and ambled directly to the pedestrian walkway along the side of the bridge. Between himself and a very lengthy fall was a single barrier. Its height was approximately two metres. The vertical members rose up from the surface of the bridge like spears with equilateral triangular cross-sections, approximately two inches per side. Each such member extended above the barrier by about an additional foot, and had been cut at the top so that trying to put one's hands around them or on top of them to hoist oneself over the barrier would probably result in serious injuries. The horizontal members ran parallel about every six inches, and a metal grid running horizontally and vertically and rendering a tessellation of rigid square frames prevented one from dangling a leg or an arm past its threshold.

Life is long and history is unforgiving.

Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem.

Death is the solution to all of life's problems.

Suicide is the most selfish of acts.

I am Buridan's Ass.

Nakedness

“At one point, I don't know how, but I reached the end. The end of a history I no longer wanted to be associated with; when I no longer wanted to be the future of a past that only filled me with sadness, and instead the past of a future that I hoped would be worth the effort. Every present is the past of a future and the future of a past. The age of thirty is ten years in the future from twenty and ten years in the past from forty. We look at it differently from each angle. And we can choose whether we look back at what cannot be changed and dwell on what we did or didn't do, or we can make plans for a future that will inspire us to act in the present. That way, when the future becomes the present (which it always will eventually), we will look back with pride and thank ourselves for being proactive. Time will not wait. Humanity will not wait. History will not wait. Do something and look back with fondness or do nothing and look back with regret. Every time we try, we may not succeed but at least we learn.”

He put his hands to his temples and started rubbing the sides of his head. “My mind is too tired. So...”

“What have I done with my time? What do I do with my time? Who am I?”

“Those were some of the question that were on my mind.”

“I have used it to become who I am in the present. Isn't that always true for everybody?”

“I was hoping you might be more specific.”

“I spent many years worrying. It didn't get me anywhere. Now, I try to use my time as effectively as possible knowing that I have nothing left to lose. What about you? What have you done with your time? Who are you?”

“Well...”

“Let me ask a more meaningful question. Imagine yourself in five years. When that moment becomes the present, what will you

look back to in the current present and thank yourself for?”

He looked at her face. He looked into her eyes. He looked into her soul. What *did* he really want from life? I only have one life, he always thought. I don't want to have regrets, he always thought. He tried to think about five years from now. How would he see this present moment then? For the first time he felt like this present moment was the *tabula rasa*. It suddenly seemed possible that this present could eventually become the past of a future that could mean something rather than the future of a past that he felt he had badly underachieved in; a past that always appeared to be leading him somewhere in time that was becoming increasingly uncertain and increasingly banal. In the past, he had always felt that not choosing would preserve his freedom in the future. Deciding not to decide was still a decision. Five more years of not deciding would only lead him further to ruin. Icarus was flying too close to the sun. He had two choices: continue to regret a past that he could not change or resolve to see this particular moment as an opportunity to draw a line over that past; to begin to build a future that he would eventually thank himself for. Climbing a mountain begins with a single step.

This is just magical thinking.

Catching her eye, he looked for some clue as to where he stood with her. He looked down at his hands, ashamed. “Can you excuse me for a moment?” After this question, he looked again into her eyes. They had never moved from him, but he thought he could see just the suggestion of a mischievous impish grin behind the destruction that had been wrought on her face when her horrific past had been the present. It seemed that a lifetime of words could be captured in that moment. She said nothing. She revealed nothing. With a concerted effort he got to his feet.

Existential scepticism had served him well. He had always felt fresh and ready to face an uncertain future. He had always seemed to have something to say about the unique things that he had

done. He had always looked at his hypothetical death bed and worried about his one life and the things that he would not be able to do and the people he would not be able to be. He had always scoffed at those who had chosen to wholeheartedly condemn themselves to the walls within the prison of corporatized alienated labour.

But in this moment, a feeling of overwhelming anhedonic sorrow came over him. This world was not his and had never been so. Time was not something to be trifled with. Death could not be kept at arms-length forever. *That* was magical thinking. The hazy mists of a past future will always become concretized in a present. That present was now. What future did he want to create? What future could he create?

“You recognize your privilege? What does that even mean?”

What does that even mean? At the time he had been confronted by this question from the Gazan at the bar, he had rolled his eyes. But he now knew the answer. It meant nothing. Because he hadn't recognized it at all. Why did he think that time would wait for him to make up his mind? What made his one life so special? Refugees are ripped from their past every day and must take whatever future they are given as they are violently inserted into another culture, a culture that is often hypocritically mistrustful of them. We bomb their countries and complain when they come here looking for a life away from the catastrophic destruction wrought by our decision-makers. Billions of individuals live in poverty every day. They wake up every morning trying to find enough purchasing power to meet their most basic needs, forced to scrounge like mangy dogs, often working their entire lives in a state of perpetual drudgery, never having any other option. What sort of a life is that? And yet, when survival necessitates existential drudgery as the only way of life, who has time to contemplate lives not lived? Who in such a position has the time to complain of a raw deal? Why should he demand extra compensation from Father Time?

How did Maya do it? It was simple. She looked to a future that must necessarily be better than the past, because the past could

not be any worse. She had worked to create that future in earnest. What was the advantage that the extremely poor had? The inherent understanding that their condition *must* get better. Neocolonial slavery. And before that colonial slavery. And before that imperial slavery. There was a pattern to how humans treated each other. And yet while oppression continued, conversations around universal justice were only growing louder, and oligarchs and authoritarians were being increasingly penalized for cheating. Like him, the global poor did not know what the future looked like, but unlike him they *worked to be a part of that future, however it may come about*. What had he done? Lived in the past where he was able to do as he pleased, cowering before the future in a state of perpetual fear. And what had happened? Time had moved on without him. He was Giovanni Drogo. With the sickness unto death.

“Have you yet realized who you are?”

The question seemed to come from another dimension. He was barely able to cling to reality.

We are Schrödinger's fish swimming in Otto Neurath's soup of history, waiting for Laplace's Demon to open the box.

It was all so overwhelming.

“I'm sorry, Maya. I feel *La Nausée*. I need to go home.”

“Home? Where is home? What is home? What home do you want?”

Maybe it's all a dream... maybe reality is impossible... maybe tomorrow doesn't exist.

“Who are you? The future of a past? Or the past of a future? Do you want to spend your time creating what does not yet exist, or do you want to destroy what cannot be changed?”

Why am I here? What am I doing? How will I justify this

transgression to myself? Why is this a transgression? A transgression based on what? A transgression according to whom?

“Are you okay? Do I need to call somebody?” The voice continued to be distant but had taken on a tone of alarm.

Death eventually closes all doors. Just tens of years away.

Time eventually closes all doors. Just tens of billions of years away.

Perfection is simply what exists; reality cannot be other than it is.

You decide your own level of involvement.

“No... I'm... okay... Excuse me...”

With what seemed like a Herculean effort, he dragged himself to his feet and, putting one foot in front of the other, slouched towards the bathroom in a somnambulistic daze.

“Don't be in there too long, or I *will* have to come looking for you.”

He closed the door and took a seat on the toilet. Time was happening too fast. Life was happening too fast. Reality was happening too fast.

Breathe.

Who are you?

BREATHE.

What do you want to do?

BREATHE.

Who do you want to be?

*THE ROAD TO THE FUTURE BEGINS WITH ONE DECISION.
ONE COMMITMENT. AND THEN THE FUTURE WILL BE WHAT
IT IS.*

I am Giovanni Drogo.

The room seemed to spin around him. He put his left hand on the edge of the bathtub and reached up with his right hand to the countertop to steady himself. He looked at the door. What is reality? Did the world still exist outside? Would he emerge two hundred years from the time that he entered? He sat back down, in the grips of what seemed to be some otherworldly enchantment, unsure of what to do.

He was not sure how long he had been sitting there when he heard a knock on the door.

A voice from outside engaged him: "I am extremely worried about you. Would you like me to call someone?"

Reality seemed to be continuous. That was a relief.

"No. Sorry. I think I'm okay. I'll be out in a moment."

*Schrödinger's butterfly flaps its wings. Doors close and doors open.
The Laplacian Demon yawns. There is only one future.*

He staggered to his feet, unsure of what he was doing.

He opened the door, unsure of what he was doing.

On the other side of the door, it was as he had remembered, except that the other body in the room had moved to a position that was now a few feet from him. It raised a hand to his forehead.

"You feel and look very unwell. I am going to call for an ambulance."

"No. Please don't. I'm... I'm okay... I think."

"I have the phone in my hand. Prove to me that I shouldn't

use it. Men are stubborn idiots. But I do not want to lose you to your demons.”

“Five years from now, I want to be holding you in my arms. Tomorrow, I want to be holding you in my arms. If that's okay with you.”

She started backing away. “Are you sure you're in the right frame of mind to make that decision?”

“Maya, I don't know what's wrong with my mind. I have gone through life looking into the future and believing that any decision I make will have devastating repercussions when it comes to moulding that future.”

She responded matter-of-factly, without hesitation. “All decisions have devastating repercussions on the future. They collapse many possible futures into a single concrete one. But time waits for no one. If you sit on the sidelines too long worrying that you'll make a mistake, then there can only be one outcome: the game ends and you have contributed nothing. Even a mistake is a contribution.”

He leaned forward, reached around her, linked his arms at the top of her hamstrings, and lifted her up toward him. She had little choice but to put her arms around his neck to steady herself.

“Are you okay with this?” he asked.

“Yes, I am okay with this.”

He kissed her forehead. “Are you okay with this?”

“Yes, I am okay with this.”

He put her down. She looked up into his eyes.

“So now what?” was all he could muster.

“You are tired.” She took his hand and led him into the bedroom. “You should sleep.”

“And what about you?”

“It has been a long day for me. I need to collect my thoughts a little.”

“I am sorry to have intruded.”

She let out a deep sigh. She looked deep into his eyes. “I will tell you something. You look at me and see a horrific injury. A

horrific *physical* injury. You can *see* it. You can *touch* it. What about a horrific injury to the mind? How does that manifest? What does one do about it? We can't even begin to understand how all this stuff outside of us is processed by the brains inside our thick skulls to create some ethereal realm that we call 'mind'. How do a bunch of mushy tubes and an electrical switchboard allow an outside world and an internal projection to sufficiently correspond? What happens when that correspondence has a glitch? How can we recognize such a glitch?

“The problem of other minds constantly plagues us. We think we see what they see and know what they know and feel what they feel and expect them to act like us. It is estimated that about two percent of people have face blindness, which means that in some cases they cannot even tell their own family members. And they may go decades assuming others struggle with the same problem. People look at me and usually offer me pity or despair. When they look at you, what do they offer? My physical condition defines me. The sooner I was okay with that, the sooner I was able to become someone new. What about the epidemic of mental illness? It is a silent stalker that can steal the life of anyone. And by the time you realize that yes, it can happen to you, it may be too late.”

A lazy smile emerged on his face, as if he suddenly felt like this was a reality that he could eventually find a solid foundation within. “I believe I understand.”

“We have two choices: we can be the future of a past that we regret, or we can be the past of a future that we will respect ourselves for.”

He kissed her on the grizzled flesh of her cheek.

“Remember, the future lasts forever. Maybe not for us, but for as long as someone somewhere can contribute to it. We shouldn't worry ourselves about geological time, given the horrible mess that humans have managed to create already. Who will continue to be part of the problem, and who will attempt to be part of the solution?”

He looked at her but remained silent.

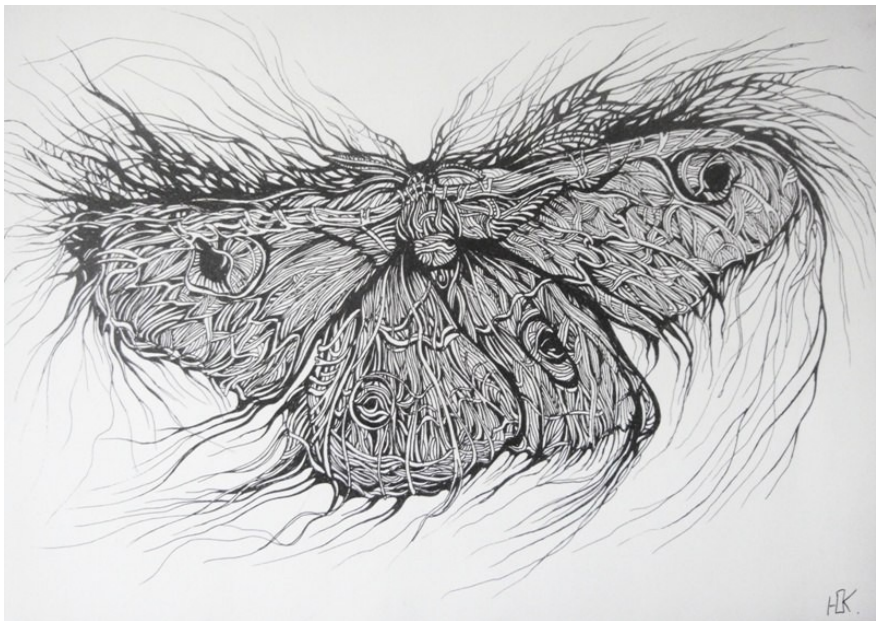
“Get some rest. Tomorrow, today will be in the past. Let's make it count.”

“Thank you for all that you are.”

She looked at him and made a slight effort to smile.

“And we will wake up tomorrow, and we will try again.”

INTO INGAWÉ



Шредингер машет крыльями (Schrödinger Flaps His Wings).
Севил Ооржак. 2022. Тушь, бумага.

[Back Cover]

What is Reality? What is Time? What is Beauty? What is Truth? What is the meaning of life? *Anomie* tracks over the course of a day the Everyman suffering from said condition of detachment from the world in his nameless city. Here, he is pitted against his job, his leisure time, and the mercurial but disfigured Maya, who is constantly on his mind as he struggles to find a purpose deemed worthy enough to continue to live.

With a background in mathematics and philosophy, this is Jan Sorel's first novel. He currently lives in Yellowknife, Canada.