

THE GLASS DOORS

By

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CHAPTER 1

Availing

The short school bus provided a ferry service from Huntsville to the main kiosk in Algonquin Provincial Park. I loaded my gear into the back of the short bus, and I brought far too much for an already challenging hike up to Provoking Lake.

There was my tent, sleeping bag, and the kind of gear that one would expect. However, add to that, a dozen CDs and Discman, ten softcover books, a few dozen batteries, cans of food, a sixer of beer, canned heat, and enough clothing for several weeks. I didn't intend on going back to Toronto. This was the end of the road for me.

The bus driver was a stocky woman whose furrowed brow should have alerted me to the overestimation of my hiking ability. I was wearing running shoes, yet she didn't have to suppress laughter. She was genuinely worried. Perhaps, she had a sense that I wasn't the typical camper. I wasn't a camper at all. Mine was a pilgrimage to my grave.

The bus driver's daughter sat in the front seat just behind her mother in the driver's seat. Even this child – no older than ten – sized me up with a nervous stare. We headed off toward the park. There was a maturity to the daughter's furtive glances, as if she was a wild animal keeping a close eye on one in her herd that was not alert to the stalking of a dangerous predator nearby.

I had been through much and it wasn't worth explaining myself to a pair that would be unlikely to appreciate the strange choices I had been making in recent years. One of the last strange choices was to pick up a box of rat poison from the local hardware store back home in Toronto. The poison was now packed between Van Halen's 1984 CD and a copy of George Orwell's 1984. An unhappy coincidence, I suppose.

It was August 12th, 2005, and I was fortunate that the high-profile hiking trail cut through dense forest. The summer sun struggled to burden my journey, although the sheer amount of gear had me taking several resting breaks along the way. Ten miles into ascending and descending steep rocky paths, I finally reached the campsites. The Nike runners had my poor feet screaming, "just don't do it again!" But I pushed past the pain and worked on setting up my campsite before nightfall.

I would stay at that campsite for the next seven weeks. On the morning of August 31st, 2005, I sat up in my tent and pulled out the box of rat poison from my backpack. I swallowed two large mouthfuls of pellets. Although the expectation was intestinal pain, passing out, and not waking up – no such thing occurred. My stomach grumbled for several hours. I distinctly remember feeling nonplussed.

There was yet another strange choice to make: continue with the original plan of suicide, or back out and try something else. I walked down to the lake not more than a dozen meters from

my tent. I squatted in the rushes, the murky water coming up to my waist. It was time to consider pushing off the rocks and sinking to the bottom of the lake. The poison should have worked, no? I couldn't shake that thought, and so I got out of the water and walked back to the tent.

Later that day, I would head back out to the highway and drop off the rest of the rat poison in the communal dumpster for the RV Park. Plans had changed, but perhaps not the essence of what was called for in my twenty-three years of life. The next two weeks I focused on my relationship with nature. There were no more campers around the lake, and few hikers during the day. September in Ontario is certainly marked as the end of summer and the nights can be brutally cold that far north.

Nature was kind to me. I was a quiet guest and the animals moved around me seldom disturbed by my presence. There was a pair of chipmunks that enjoyed playing on the long log next to my fire pit. I woke up to a chorus of birds chirping their morning recitals. One afternoon, I was talking aloud in my tent and suddenly heard a rumbling in the woods behind me.

A bear sauntered up to my tent and sniffed around. I was dead still and absolutely terrified. Although I was there to die, being eviscerated by one of nature's most mighty beasts was not my drug of choice. The bear moseyed down to the lake, and I heard it lapping up some water. I didn't dare sit up and cop a look – bad karma. I was the outsider and respected that meager status. The bear walked past my tent once more and then ran into the woods where I heard large branches being stomped into the ground by powerful paws.

On September 15th, 2005, I ran out of money completely and it was no longer purposeful to make supply runs to the kiosk at the highway which cut through the provincial park. I was out of food at my campsite. I lay in my tent for two weeks and ate no food. Each day, I would get up a few times to relieve myself and drink water directly from the lake.

The nights became so cold that I removed the blue tarp from under the tent and placed it over the tent for an extra layer of protection from the elements. Additionally, I took all my clothes and draped them over my sleeping bag which I lay in very still. I spoke aloud to myself or slept. Eventually, I had no energy to leave the tent and relieved myself in empty Gatorade bottles I had been putting aside when collecting water from a nearby stream. The water at the stream tasted much cleaner, crisper, and cooler than the lake water. The lake water left a taste in my mouth that felt like I was being dehydrated by some unidentified salty substance.

I had lost many pounds. It wouldn't be long before I didn't have energy to gather water from the lake. It was already past the point of collecting water from the stream which was several hundred meters from my campsite.

In the very early morning of September 30th, 2005, I woke up with a feral sense of need for clean water. I stood up and left my tent in a rush, but then blacked out and collapsed a few meters away. Moments later, I came to consciousness and crawled back to my tent and slept. The next

morning, it was literally do or die – I did. I left my campsite and packed light, leaving behind a lot of junk to my eternal shame. Ten miles of hiking on adrenaline alone got me back to the kiosk and a nearby payphone.

My parents had been searching for me and were at the kiosk the day before based on tracking my last debit card purchases. They headed back to the city because the rangers believed that I left the park once I stopped paying the rental fee for my campsite – two weeks earlier. My mother and father returned for me that afternoon.

This was not the end of the strange choices that I made in my life back then. Neither was that trip to Algonquin Park the start of those strange choices.

CHAPTER 2

Recollection

It started the night with Mike and Dan. They hadn't been good friends of mine for all that long, but after high school most of my best friends left the city for college. I stayed, and guys like Mike and Dan stepped in to fill out my social roster.

My high school experience had been in the late 1990s, and back then, it was still possible to flunk grades in school and be held back. That hadn't been an issue of mine, but several of my friends completed "victory laps" at alternative schools. The alternative schools in the city were lax on the formalities of institutional education, for example, you were invited to call your teachers by their first name, to arrive late for class politely, and to substitute assignment instructions for topics that had greater personal interest.

Moving from public school to alternative schools made sense if you weren't keeping up with the work or buying into the traditional ways of teaching and learning. Plus, the alternative schools were attempting to rub out the awkward eyesore of traditional schools – the adult public high school student.

At the start of my years in public high school I had a few run-ins with those atavistic anomalies – adult high schoolers. It marked indelible humiliations in my mind because these guys were kicking around so many years that they had seen it all, and they knew better than anyone how to embarrass a kid. In that regard, they were scholarly.

Davis rushed forward and picked me up while I was standing outside the usual weekend chill spot – the glass doors – and he carried me over to a wall and pressed me against it. I was afraid of the intimate encounter because he had a distinct salacious look in his eye. Some people might have said he was just mental. What Davis was doing to me wasn't hazing because I wasn't being invited to hang with him and his buddies. No, it was just a show of force and an amusement for him. It turned him on like a dog pouncing on a plush toy. The best course of action for me was to avoid squeaking. Look confused. Ignore his adulation. Move on.

Sometimes, these kinds of impromptu assaults came with a warning which was always nice. It gave you a head start. One night, my friends and I entered the local McDonalds and there was Scott sitting on a table like a bad ass. Scott was the notorious neighbourhood bully – the one Hollywood comedies parody. Scott called out to me as I passed by. He called me "Joey" through the side of his mouth. That wasn't my name. It was a heckle. I promptly exited the restaurant.

Time did catch up to those brutes. The legend of Scott became an ongoing joke for the kids in the neighbourhood who had known the terror of being misnamed or misplaced by bullies. One night, Scott had tried to rob a homeless man of his spare change, and the story goes that the hobo kicked Scott's ass so far up his back that Scott was fitted with cushy new shoulder pads. For the rest of that school year, it felt like every month there was a new story about how Scott got his

righteous comeuppance from his former victims or disillusioned proteges. It was a deluge of unholy vengeance. Bullying is an art, and you can't lose your inspiration, it seems.

That was high school, but then it was college in the new millennium. My friends who stayed in the city were putting in their time at alternative schools, but guys like Mike and Dan were still in public high school. Mike and Dan were the younger brothers of two of my best friends who left the city for college. That meant that I had known Mike and Dan for several years prior to becoming close friends. It was awkward around the holidays when I would call their houses and my old buddies who were back from college would pick up the line. They knew that I was calling to make plans with their younger brothers.

The night that changed my life was spent with Mike and Dan. But this is not a story about the good old days, or even that fateful night of my first strange choice. This is about the waking nightmare and the living hell that I endured after that night. This story is a confession. This is an echo, or at least an attempt at a meaningful reverberation. Will I hear something back? Can anyone relate to my story? Have any of them survived their own ordeals? It has been over twenty years and I have heard nothing from the world. Perhaps, I am the only one who has experienced what I have. If so, the whole thing doesn't add up neatly, but it might still be true.

CHAPTER 3

Expectation

That night with Mike and Dan started like so many others. We had a neighbourhood meeting place and then headed over to the local video rental store to pick out some titles that we could agree on. Mike was adamant that we watch *Kung Pow: Enter the Fist*. I had never heard of it. Mike was a confident guy and he had physical size to support that confidence. Also, I trusted his judgment in movies. I found that I had more in common with Mike than his older brother. Mike and I were big fans of the grunge band Alice in Chains, Lovecraftian 80s horror flicks, and cutting humour. We loved animals, but also eating steak. We could debate politics and philosophy without straining the friendship at all.

I didn't know Dan as well as I knew Mike. Dan was a bit of an enigma. At the surface, he seemed to be a spoiled preppy kid, but in fact, he was very down-to-earth and sincere. Dan was worldly but he didn't force it on you. He didn't want to make others feel small and despite his diminutive stature this quality made him a big man, and as big as Mike. Dan was relatively indifferent about our movie choices. We left the store with *Kung Pow*, *Blade 2*, and an Xbox game – an adaptation of the John Carpenter horror movie, *The Thing*. We never ended up playing the game.

Back at my place, Mike reached into his inside jacket pocket and unveiled a plastic bag full of magic mushrooms. I had done mushrooms before. We had all been heavy pot smokers at different times during high school, but none of us were ever considered “burnouts”. Mike was up on his 420 subcultures, and he was reliable for good, clean street drugs. Mike had related hidden talents as well: while walking down the street he could break up weed with one hand concealed behind his jacket, then get the weed into a rolling paper, and roll the joint. The raccoon-like dexterity had kids marveling at his skills as if he were a world-famous funambulist crossing Niagara Falls in the dead of winter. It was a neat trick.

We smoked a joint at the start of that fateful night, maybe two. It was all a warmup for the shroom tea. There was a sense that drug concoctions, such as, tea or brownies, would get you “more high”. It might be true, and it seemed important at the time to get the “most high” that you could, especially with an exotic drug that didn't come around often, such as, magic mushrooms. Either way, it was fun to mix it up with concoctions, and the shroom tea tasted alright. You steeped the tea with the mushrooms, and it was thought that the effective way to preserve psychoactive mushroom spores was by putting tin foil over the coffee mug and punching some holes in it for steam to escape. Was this science, or superstition?

After drinking the tea, you scooped out the soggy mushrooms at the bottom of the mug and chewed on them to get at all those precious spores now cascading down your gullet and entering your bloodstream. Smoking a joint twenty minutes later was considered the appropriate digestif. Then, you waited for the shrooms to “kick in”.

The key was to avoid a bad trip. A bad trip meant paranoia, perhaps stomach pain, certainly jitters, and generally, feeling unsafe. You do drugs to avoid feeling unwelcome in the world, but a bad trip represents dashed expectations and the return of rejection. Bad trips are dreadful, and they can destroy some people's minds. Is that actually what happened to me that night? But I think that I can explain what happened now. It might require waxing philosophical and doing some armchair psychology first. In fact, I know it will.

CHAPTER 4

Separation

I have had over twenty years to reflect on what happened the night of the bad shroom trip with Mike and Dan, and how it eventually led me to Algonquin Park. It is important to share my findings, even if it is mere speculation. There are others who may need my answers – if there was just one person who found this story useful then I would feel that it had been worth telling. I wouldn't want anyone else to go through what I did for the past two decades. I will try to keep this light because I hope to hold the reader's interest, but there are some big ideas and challenging concepts to go over first.

It is my thought that human beings begin and end life with a fundamental mental partition. The mind has a conscious and an unconscious component. The conscious part of your mind is where you develop your unique personality, while the unconscious part of your mind is a repository of all sensory data you have received. Your unconscious mind remembers every detail that was presented to your senses in life, however, almost all of it is inaccessible because your conscious mind will never find that information relevant or important.

An apt analogy might be to consider the conscious mind as your computer's operating system, such as Windows. Whereas the unconscious mind is your Hard Disk Drive (HDD). The HDD will have a record of all operations for the computer, most of which will be mediated through the operating system. In other words, your personality develops through conscious mental operations, but all incoming data is still stored on the unconscious mental hard drive even if you aren't actively using that data in your conscious mental Windows interface.

The unconscious mind "crunches" the sensory data from your life experience, and it can present some of that information to your conscious mind. Some "coincidences" may arise from this. For example, one day you might wake up with a sore tooth and feel that it best to go to the dentist. That same day, you feel compelled to visit a pet store on the other side of town in a neighbourhood that you rarely travel to. In that neighbourhood, you encounter your dentist on the street. It seems like serendipity or Providence. If you were religious, you might exclaim that "god works in mysterious ways". If you were not religious, you might still claim the experience as the power of karma.

Perhaps, there is a better explanation. Let us suppose that in your previous trip to the dentist you had been leafing through magazines in the waiting room. You had casually noticed the address sticker on the magazines. That address was not for the dentist's office but rather for the dentist's residential home on a street that you might be familiar with. At the time, your conscious mind found the information irrelevant, and it was ignored. However, your unconscious mind picked up the data and stored it.

Your unconscious mind "summoned" you to that neighbourhood on the other side of town that you rarely frequent on the off chance that being in the dentist's neighbourhood would lead to

a preense encounter. Likely, nine times out of ten – or 99 times out of 100 – nothing significant materializes from these mental machinations. However, your unconscious mind is playing the odds. Sometimes, these things come together, and they stand out as fantastic. They rouse a sense of spirit in us. They disrupt routine thinking.

Why is the unconscious mind putting pieces together in your life as if it were a puzzle? It is my notion that the unconscious mind is geared for keeping people alive and well – for survival, physically, but mostly, existentially. The unconscious is trying to rouse a person out of their mental slumber and get them to a higher level of self-awareness. The unconscious cannot appreciate the social constraints of being at a higher level of self-awareness among a community of people who may be triggered by that and react poorly to it. The unconscious simply wants the person's mental life to be more significant, and perhaps, most efficient. Arguably, greater self-awareness results in more efficient thinking, which in turn should be conducive to survival. And all of this logic follows from privileging human development as an evolutionary process.

The gist of what is written above is that the unconscious mind has a mandate independent of the values and interests of a person's personality as determined by the development of their conscious mind.

Yet, we might appreciate how a social construct such as, Religion, can stymie the path to greater self-awareness. This is to say, a religious person who is moved by unconscious mechanisms toward noticing the inner workings and “plan” of the mind, may simply discredit the self for the achievement and instead ascribe a fantastic happening (such as, the run-in with the dentist) to the work of a deified otherness. This brings me to the next point regarding the partition of the mind.

The mechanisms of the unconscious mind can be dangerous, if not, intrusive. The fundamental mandate of the unconscious might be a positive one, and if we were all abandoned on separate islands then achieving greater self-awareness would be ideal. In that situation, you would want to be guided by your unconscious mind with its vast repository of personalized data. However, within a social context, the greater self-awareness can be punished by society who feel that the individual's mental revelations may “infect” others and force them out of a lifestyle comfort zone. Many would be satisfied to remain in a mental lull state if they also felt content in life, generally.

To maintain the mental lull state, the human mind creates a new partition within the conscious mind. The subconscious is formed. The subconscious is a pseudo-unconscious and is formed to ward off the mandate of the unconscious mind. The subconscious is driven by social ideologies, such as, family, school, civic duty, patriotism, and religion. The subconscious is geared to present the conscious mind with the kinds of “connections” that will keep the individual fitting well into society. The subconscious shuns the unconscious and seeks to replace its function. However, the subconscious cannot perform the same data crunching that the innate unconscious mind can.

The emergence of the subconscious makes sense because as small children beginning to develop rational thinking, we notice the world as ominously dangerous. Adults have total control. As children, we need to fit in to survive. Most often, we readily buy into the social ideologies and institutions. We join the herd of family, church, state, etc., and we feel safe and protected within those collectivist structures. The subconscious regulates how these social institutions are internalized through social ideologies.

It is my belief that living ruled by the subconscious is an unnatural way to exist and it is against a person's best interests. We can construct society without it and be healthier as a people. Allowing internalized collectivist ideologies to dictate choice in fact subverts free choice. The subconscious may disrupt an individual's mental potential in myriad ways.

In fact, I speculate that disturbing dreams and nightmares when sleeping at night originate from that internal Laocoon struggle where the individual's mind must wrestle the competing interests of the unconscious and subconscious. Effectively, nightmares stem from the unconscious mind's attempt to have an individual recognize the subconscious as artifice – an invader – and then reject it. This is only a theory and mostly based on personal experience because I once suffered greatly from nightmares but now, I am in control during my dreams. I sleep much better and navigate the stygian gulf of my mental oneiric existence with a greater sense of calm.

This was an important, albeit heavy, discussion regarding the mind and its partition of a conscious and unconscious, as well as the formation of a pseudo-unconscious – the subconscious. To understand my strange choices in life, you might consider my philosophies on mental life. In fact, you may have noticed some people in your life that you care about deeply that have also made strange choices that are confounding for you. Perhaps, my philosophy on mental life would illuminate some of the underlying issues which exist in those relationships.

CHAPTER 5

Continuity

Before returning to the story of the night with Mike and Dan, it is important to quickly discuss the continuity of people's mental lives, otherwise the retelling of the events of that night will be non sequitur. If you will indulge me – a little more philosophy on mental life.

The partition of the mind (conscious and unconscious) produces powerful mechanisms for determining how we live, and most importantly, how we develop our unique personalities. Additionally, it should be noted that we present our mental lives with continuity in two distinct ways. There is the outer presentation of mental life through verbal language, body language and gesticulations, physiognomic tics, and the like. Also, there is the inner presentation of mental life through actual thoughts articulated in words or images. Emotion and aggression as the gendered primary orders of affect (lower-faculty) also stimulate mental states and drive specific outer and inner presentations of those states.

It is my contention that there is a default continuity for the outer and inner presentation of mental states and thoughts. This means that an individual lives blindly accepting that they have an outer presentation of their thoughts and that they have an inner presentation of their thoughts, and that the two are distinct. For normal people, it is taken for granted that ESP or telepathy are not truly real experiences, and that your inner presentation of thoughts is private. The continuity of mental experiences originates in the honest belief that outer presentation of mental state is observable by others, but that inner presentation of mental state is not.

The default continuity implies that an individual is not roused mentally to question their thinking. Effectively, people do their thinking in a kind of auto-pilot mode. Indeed, people are thinking, and those thoughts are complex. Those thoughts manifest from personality traits as well as, in turn, forming personality traits. However, people are not truly introspective by default.

Psychologists and philosophers (as well as laymen) bandy around the terms, “introspection” or “metacognition”, but I would contend that these enthusiasts are not truly introspective, but rather, they are highly conscientious. To be conscientious, is to gear your personality and personal values toward being ‘thoughtful’ and giving pause to make decisions. Conscientious people weigh the facts in front of them longer than unconscientious people. It is as if they are being introspective, or thinking about what they are thinking.

If we had some fantastic tool to hear people's thoughts then the highly conscientious people would sound much like Stacy Keach's truck driver character, Quid, from the 1981 Australian film, *Road Games*. In that film, Keach's character, Quid, is in his truck cab on a long haul engaged in an internal dialogue that is acutely probative and truly dialectic. He isn't prejudiced within his own mind when attempting to work out the problem he is faced with – in this case, tracking down a serial killer that has been stalking young women in the Aussie Outback. He is questioning his own

methods of reasoning, and therefore, he is being conscientious through the filmic representation of mental introspection.

Whereas that same fantastic tool to hear people's thoughts would reveal that low conscientious people think more like the Butcher character from Gaspar Noé's 1998 French film, *Seul Contre Tous*. In that film, again the viewer is given insight to the internal mental dialogue of a character. However, the Butcher is a low conscientious mind prone to diatribes and rantings. His mental state shifts constantly, is determined by lower-faculty affect, and effectively this is the origin of his brutal violence.

I believe that there is a range of mental states for people and that sadly, some people think like the Butcher, but fortunately, others are like Quid, developing a level of conscientiousness that fosters a greater sense of moral competence. However, I contend that people have a continuity to their outer and inner presentations of mental states, and therefore, they are not truly introspective. Rather, an individual's personality can be geared for being conscientious and this will mean that they privilege the notion of introspection and their inner thinking will emulate introspection without there actually being an "awakened" level of self-awareness, or true metacognition.

The reason that I am making this contentious claim against humanity and instead putting forward a hypothesis that people are not truly introspective, is based on that night with Mike and Dan. I became introspective that night and it was a wholly transformative experience. It was related to a sense of telepathy. There was no turning back. It wasn't a matter of degrees in how it developed, but rather, the change was equivalent to turning a light on in an otherwise blackened space, or suddenly seeing color in a previously monochromatic world.

This sounds relatable, however, in twenty years of searching I have found no other person that can describe my experience in similar terms for themselves. I have met no one that is astounded regarding the wholesale change in consciousness and the shift to real willfulness. It isn't a trifle, nor some mundane alteration. It isn't the development of a third nipple. What happened to me changed everything in the most fundamental way. It isn't something you forget to mention or brush past in conversation. This conspicuous absence of reports on the transformation to true introspection has led me to the conclusion that either no one else is truly introspective, or it is so few of us that it would be rarer than the most exotic genetic disorder.

I feel alone. That is why I am writing this book. It isn't written to look down my nose at others or offend others through claims that I am a more accomplished person mentally than they are. How my transformation to true introspection happened was based in trauma and it resulted in years of agonizing life where I was abused by many and misunderstood by all. Eventually, I was menaced by suicidal thinking, just to affect an escape from my isolated position in the world. This shouldn't happen. There needs to be answers for me, and for anyone else that has experienced something akin to what I have experienced.

CHAPTER 6

Rupture

There I was with Mike and Dan, high as a kite on magic mushrooms. Being wasted would seem to invalidate the veracity of my claims about human consciousness. Can my word be worth all that much if the experiences I am evaluating first manifested from a state of total inebriation?

That night, we turned off the first movie – the goofy yet brilliant *Kung Pow: Enter the Fist* – and we ordered a pizza. The pizza arrived and we prepared to put on *Blade 2*. Mike was sitting two rooms over at the dining room table rolling a joint. I was in the den picking through CDs to play, while we waited on Dan who was upstairs in the washroom. I could see Mike clearly at the table from where I was standing in front of the stereo.

I knew Mike well at this point. I knew his habits and his manners. Perhaps, I could anticipate his gestures and movements. I'm not sure. Nevertheless, I had a sense that I was conversing with Mike, and he seemed to be providing feedback through body language. I was high on psychedelic drugs, and for me, his body language and gestures were actual words and phrases. It was a conjuring of sorts. I was having a conversation with Mike while Dan was upstairs. I was sure of it. Dan called down to inform us he was alright. Then, it dawned on me that I hadn't been speaking aloud. Mike had been silent as well.

And then it happens. I had created a rupture in the continuity of my mental life. My outer presentation of thoughts had become conflated with the inner presentation. I was given pause to understand my inner mind as a space that could include otherness, for example, the thoughts of my good friend, Mike. In my mental workspace, I had to “step back” to make room for the presence of Mike. This instantly made me aware that I was thinking about thinking (metacognition). I had become truly introspective. I was looking over my own shoulder at the worktable of the inner mental workspace of my conscious mind.

Immediately, I assumed that telepathy had happened and was a real phenomenon. I confronted Mike with the knowledge. He was weirded out. He was not in on it. He vehemently denied that any ESP had occurred, and he was crystal clear about that. Dan came downstairs. I was not confrontational but rather the experience was sublime. I had been invited to the next level of being human. There was a chance at having a greater purpose in life and discovering that my previous wrongs could be shed in new light and be revealed as formative and rewarding. Some might say, I was born again. The moment certainly had evangelical implications as an existential experience.

Mike and Dan could see that I was on a “bad trip”. We tried to watch the *Blade 2* DVD, but in those frenetic moments for me, the movie's theme of insidious vampiric cabals and parasitic infection terrified me to no end. Mike and Dan went home. Later, we drifted apart as friends because frankly they were freaked out by what happened to me.

I got stuck believing in ESP and telepathy for many years. That destroyed my life. That led to diagnoses of paranoid schizophrenia. Now, I can see that there hadn't been a telepathic moment between Mike and I, but rather, I interpreted his body language and manner, substituting language for it in my own mind, and thus, crafting a pseudo-dialogue. I had gone into a precognitive mode due to a severe uninhibited state stimulated by the magic mushrooms. I was astutely predicting Mike's behaviours. These correct predictions provided the semblance of telepathic communication. It was enough to rouse me from my lull state, to rupture the continuity of my outer and inner mental life, and to render me to a new mode of true introspection as a form of self-awareness.

This has not been a beautiful transformation and there is no awesome chrysalis emergence to revel in. The experience is not akin to astronaut Dave in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* looking out into the majesty of cosmic existence recognizing himself as an important piece of the greater whole. My life is not like that of Robin Williams's character in the 1998 film, *What Dream May Come*, arriving in the exquisite and lush billows of Heaven realizing the importance of faith. This has been Hell.

My transformation has not been understood by philosophers or psychologists, and most importantly, psychiatrists. I was left to the mercies of a society that often licenses against individuals making huge leaps forward in consciousness, self-awareness, and agency. I have been treated as a pariah and an outcast for the past twenty years. I have suicide experiences to report that you'd rarely hear of because those other people that took similar paths are no longer alive to confess.

I am not seeking sympathy or absolution. I have made the most of my experience as a grueling disability, but it is time to share that experience because in twenty years of searching I have found no one else sharing their own – certainly not one that matches mine, qualitatively. That is odd. In fact, it is at odds with possibility.

Perhaps, this text will illuminate what is missing from my experience and I might be invited to understand where the others like me have been all along. If not, then perhaps my experience is a premonition or prognostication for what is to come for humanity. The rise of AI and pursuits by computer engineers to create self-awareness in artificial intelligence may inadvertently stimulate a shift in social conditions that result in many others becoming truly introspective like myself.

For now, I will continue to reflect on how my transformation was subject to my burgeoning self-destructive tendencies as well as abuse by others. This could be valuable discourse if someone else is going through what I have gone through. There is an opportunity to stop the path of self-destruction that is paved by the desperately anxious, and then stamped by a carelessly ignorant society.

CHAPTER 7

Intention

After the Mike and Dan debacle, I was messed up and the people around me were beginning to figure it out. It was impossible to hide it. There were two major problems to face up to: my outer presentation of mental life had radically altered through my conspiratorial beliefs in mass telepathy, and my inner presentation of mental life was now splayed out and laid bare for review by myself, and I feared by everyone else as well.

Imagine for a moment how you would get through your day if you were also believing that everyone you encountered directly could hear what you were thinking as if you were speaking those thoughts aloud. It is maddening.

My inner mental life was disturbed through my burgeoning awareness of intrusive thoughts, or what I term, “reflexive thoughts”. When not introspective, I believe that people will develop *mental heuristics* – or mental shortcuts – to get through challenging social experiences more efficiently and successfully. For example, a person may have been randomly attacked by a black dog when they were a child. The trauma of the experience dominates when encountering related stimuli, such as other dogs, black-furred animals, or perhaps even, dark-skinned people. The child must do what they can to survive despite not having the mental tools or experience to make proper sense of what happened when the dog attacked them.

This child may begin to articulate a distinct visual thought, or a set of words, that becomes a mental heuristic device for queuing an action to protect themselves when faced with situations that remind them of the dog attack. The child becomes an adult, and they still rely on these heuristic devices which they now perceive to have been effective, when perhaps, the original dog attack was simply an unlucky experience and one which was not destined to be repeated.

Now, the adult is uttering the words, “ugly black bastard” in their mind as a heuristic device for whenever they encounter external stimuli which reminds them of the childhood dog attack. This confrontational exclamation serves as an alert to bring greater awareness to an environmental change that could signal danger. When the person is not truly introspective these kinds of reflexive thoughts will not be perceived with self-awareness, and they will not be checked for validity or appropriateness, much like how we exit a building when a fire alarm sounds before we check for an actual fire. A highly conscientious person, on the other hand, may have developed pro-social values that have the effect of redefining or suppressing these kinds of reflexive thoughts and mental alerts. Any of us can overcome our personal fears to become more conscientious and less automatic in our response to stimuli.

However, once becoming truly introspective, the inner mental life is splayed out akin to an anatomical chart. The reflexive thoughts are audible mentally, just as the lungs or heart of a body are now visible through the anatomical chart. These reflexive thoughts simply “kick in” triggered by the relevant external stimuli. The previously mentioned adult who was attacked by a black dog

as a child may find that they utter the words “ugly black bastard” in their minds when faced with dogs, black bulls, or even dark-skinned people – it’s reflexive. An introspective realization for this adult would require that they address the issue as to whether they should recognize themselves as a bigot based on the derogatory mental utterance. This revelation can be quite disturbing because it challenges affirmations of self-image that were once taken for granted, such as, “I am not a bigot”.

It takes years of hard work mentally to “unfuck” yourself and undo all the damage that was caused through the non-introspective heuristic reflexive thoughts that had been developed as alerts to potential danger across a lifetime. I can imagine that some people becoming truly introspective may be so shocked by this experience that they would sooner fob off the reflexive thoughts as the doing of an external “demon” than take full responsibility for the offensive utterances, especially if they lacked this understanding of mental heuristics that I have laid out. Essentially, this buck-passing would reinforce paranoia for a person who had become introspective. Blaming an external demon, otherworldly cosmic force, or even conspiratorial human forces would become more compelling if one also believed in telepathy and that others could hear the exclamation, “ugly black bastard”, in thought form – maybe “**they**” could have put the words in the person’s mind as well.

I have not considered myself a bigoted person, not truly so. I have prejudice and I believe in prejudice as a reasonable approach to how you understand differences in the world that don’t jibe with your personal values. If I smelt it, then I probably dealt it – it wasn’t an impish creature whispering the prejudiced thought into my head. However, when becoming truly introspective, the reflexive thoughts were compelling, and they caused me to question my ability to handle what had happened to me. I turned to others, which ended up not helpful at all because neither friends, family, nor mental health professionals understood what had happened to me.

After the night with Mike and Dan, I was searching for answers. Mike had great composure and I would say he was a highly conscientious person, while Dan was comfortable in his own skin and also seemed conscientious. Perhaps, the pair had answers regarding what had happened to me. Had becoming introspective reflected me merely being a “late bloomer” to a more universal phenomenon of gaining self-awareness for human beings? It turned out that this reasonable wishful thinking was incorrect.

As mentioned, Mike and Dan were too close to it and they were repelled by my “bad trip”, especially the fact that it had carried over into the next day, and following weeks. They backed out of my life promptly. However, I turned to their older brothers who inevitably had been informed by Mike and Dan some detail of what had happened on that fateful night with the magic mushrooms.

Dan’s brother, Gary, had been a great friend for many years. He was a natural athlete and in the time that I had known him he showed me how to throw a football spiral properly and do a kickflip on a skateboard. Gary and I had similar tastes in music, enjoying Wu-Tang Clan Staten

Island rap as much as we did Credence Clearwater Revival classic rock ballads. We even traded porn magazines, and that meant a certain kind of trust among young men.

I was desperate for answers and turned to Gary for help. However, every time I described what had happened to me, Gary was noticeably uncomfortable, and he wanted to tune it out. His good friend was unraveling before his eyes. I had to find an encoded language to use to get my answers from him and others. To that end, I began asking Gary about cotton swab Q-tips and my “hearing”. I presented to Gary that perhaps my hearing wasn’t working properly because I had used Q-tips too much and gone in too deep with them. It was a coded language that I was using with Gary in hopes that he would provide me an answer when I was being more veiled in my inquiries about introspection and telepathy. Perhaps, the phenomenon of becoming introspective was like the legend of Santa Claus – you didn’t talk plainly about it for fear of ruining the experience for others not yet in the know.

Of course, Gary answered my questions about hearing literally. I took that answer for what I needed it to be – my “hearing” would be repaired over time if I stopped using Q-tips so much or going in so deep into my ear canal with them. I interpreted this answer to mean that my introspective thinking would get better over time, that I would learn to suppress intrusive and disturbing reflexive thoughts, and that I would eventually learn how to make my inner mental state private from others, and perhaps hear their thoughts in a telepathic conversation that could be trusted as genuine – but, only if I stopped probing the issue deeply, directly and so often with others.

These basic ideas about mental self-improvement were not a problem in themselves, but rather, I had now committed to the conspiratorial notion that the world was indeed telepathic and that I was most likely a late bloomer who had become introspective in my early twenties instead of during puberty like most people. It was an intuitive conclusion based on Gary’s advice. My outer mental life was now geared for the presumption that others were telepathic, that they could hear my thoughts, and that they recognized me as a neophyte in the ESP game, but that I was trying hard to improve and should get credit for that effort. There would be growing pains.

The expectations that I created for myself were overwhelming. The human race is not telepathic, there is no secret culture of introspective people, and this all became obvious to me over the years as I checked the logic of my “cosmic” beliefs. Today, I fear that if others are truly introspective, they might remain stuck in the conspiratorial thinking mode and simply be misrecognized and misdiagnosed as schizophrenic.

Ironically, the conspiratorial thinking mode is quite useful at first because if you are most disturbed by the inappropriate reflexive thoughts that you have developed over a lifetime, then believing that they are audible to others is a guaranteed way to work like stink to suppress and silence them. That is to say, you will make progress with your inner mental life if you believe that you are being evaluated on it by others in the world. Of course, exhaustion in that regard may lead to mental breakdowns, psychotic breaks, and perhaps, even madness. This is why anti-psychotic

medication may be absolutely essential for some individuals, even if what they are going through was based in a transformation to true introspection, and nothing more. It is taxing to do so much mental work under the gun, as it were.

The humiliation experienced when believing that everyone on the bus or in the bar heard you say, “ugly black bastard” in your thoughts, is devastating. However, when you don’t get punched in the face for it, you begin to believe that the human race is extremely enlightened. That sets up terrible expectations that will result in a total collapse over time. The mass telepathy cosmic paradigm and belief system is untenable long term, even though millions of people believe in the reality of some form of telepathy.

CHAPTER 8

Diagnosis

After the transformation to true introspection and genuine metacognition, my inner mental life was a complete nightmare. I was tackling all the intrusive reflexive thoughts that had been developed and catalogued over a lifetime, and which then surfaced with the particular relevant external stimuli. There were many unpleasant surprises in that regard and there was no way to predict the trigger stimuli. Part of coping with that change in my inner mental life was to buy into the cosmic paradigm regarding mass telepathy, however, the conspicuous absence of credible resources or references in the world about the phenomenon led to paranoia and conspiratorial beliefs.

I turned to friends for help, but they were confused which I took for secrecy. My outer mental life was becoming unmanageable because while people were speaking to me, I was ignoring the “mundane” human interaction, and I was completely engrossed in my mental monologue. For me at the time, the monologue was audible for others, and I was looking for cues in my conversation partner’s body language or in the words they chose within the mundane topics that were being discussed aloud. In time, friends and family recognized that I was “zoned-out” and that I was not able to focus on real verbal conversations aloud. I had unrealistic expectations on others which they found unnerving because they didn’t understand the nature of my beliefs.

Some friends thought that they were helping but in fact were making things much worse for me. Alex was a social butterfly who I had known all through high school. He prided himself on having hundreds of “close” friends and his greatest goal was to spend the weekend seeing as many of those friends as possible even if it meant that my time with him was less than an hour and involved us sitting in his car smoking a joint and listening to a mixtape. In time, I determined that Alex was a flake and I tried to back away from spending time with him.

While I was going through the paces of constructing a cosmic paradigm based on a conspiratorial belief in mass telepathy, Alex was genuinely concerned on behalf of all my friends. We met near his house one night and were hanging out at a high school nearby. I asked my veiled questions which had become my habit and I sought to clarify my encoded external language with what I believed were my audible thoughts. There was no time to be properly engaged in the mundane conversation that was being spoken between two people aloud. If we were talking about local sports or new movies, then for me, the conversation was simply conducted as a medium for a secret conversation about mass telepathy and the structure of society in that regard.

I asked Alex a hypothetical – if there was a janitor on the other side of the wall, sleeping in his cot because he was too broke to afford a home, then would he also be “in” on our conversation outside? Could he “hear” us? Alex didn’t understand the implications of my question as it related to telepathy and ESP. Alex believed that I was asking, rather cryptically, whether people were pro-social by nature – was the janitor a swell guy that would enjoy smoking a joint

with us, if he actually heard us banging on his window? As such, Alex affirmed that the janitor was “in” on our conversation, given that Alex believed in pro-social behavior and attitudes.

I went one step further and asked Alex if he thought that in the skies above there was a social “sense of being”, and whether people around the world could be tapping into what we were doing outside the high school that night and connect with us. Who knows how Alex was reinterpreting the confoundingly convoluted question, yet once again, he affirmed that the human race had a collective unconscious that was an “active” sense – people actively wanted to connect with each other in life. I interpreted his answer to me as confirmation that “connection” was the significant term to substitute when discussing the reality of telepathy in conversations aloud. It fit and I ran with it.

I decided after that night with Alex that I should commit to my beliefs in mass telepathy and show my shame to the world as I worked through my mental problems which were indeed transparent to all people. My family saw things a little differently.

My parents were unsure how to address the changes in me. Perhaps, they were shocked at how sudden the transformation was. Maybe, they hoped that things would go back as abruptly as they had begun. Yet, they suggested I speak with some mental health professionals about my new ideas on life.

I visited a psychologist through the referral of my family doctor. This psychologist was not equipped to handle my capacious mind and the structured cosmic paradigm that I had crafted which fit neatly overtop of the real world like a second skin. She caved within a few sessions and referred me to a psychiatrist. This is when I experienced the cruelty of a system that is designed to mask critical moments of professional ignorance, and sometimes, protect professionals who are pervasively and perversely, self-loathing. In my years of addressing my own issues and getting somewhere with it, I have concluded that too many psychiatrists go into the field to diagnose others as a deferral of dealing with their own mental problems.

Psychiatrists all too often rush to diagnose, and they try to fit individuals into known categories. They receive various forms of kickbacks and incentives from the pharmaceutical industry which keep their practices economically viable. Admittedly, there are responsible mental health professionals alongside the reckless ones, however, it often seems as if it was a crapshoot to find the good ones. But the good ones are out there and people who are having mental trouble have an obligation to seek out those responsible and trustworthy mental health professionals. Nevertheless, the relationship with a psychiatrist is predicated on trust and they are medicating you with sometimes glorified sedatives and tranquilizers, therefore, it may become difficult for a patient to break away from a “bad” relationship with a psychiatrist and seek out one that makes better sense for the unique mental issues of that individual. Just as the police have an internal affairs department, psychiatry must develop a similar entity that is more involved in the process of review than what we currently have in place.

I experienced the gamut of what doesn't work with psychiatrists when your problems are not understood in the psychiatric community or canonized in their DSM guide. The diagnosis I received was "acute schizophrenia", which was sort of a cop-out and catch-all. This diagnosis represented that the shrink hoped that my problems would sort themselves out over time, or that a low dosage sedative might regulate my problems across my lifetime and sweep my mental issues under the proverbial rug.

Something had to change, because the anti-psychotic medication was a mere sedative that sapped my creative energy and did not suppress my cosmic thinking. The anti-psychotic medication made it difficult to be active mentally and therefore I didn't "bother" other people with my ideas about mass telepathy, and such. On anti-psychotic sedatives, I remained in low-energy mode and did my mental work and conspiratorial thinking privately. To be fair, the medication wasn't for me, but instead, it was for the sake of everyone else who might be disturbed with how I was thinking.

I was still thinking in a disordered and dissociative way.

I tried buying into the idea that I was sick in the head. I spent six months vowing off of pursuing belief in mass telepathy. I wasn't getting anywhere with it and kept returning to real life experience which suggested my transformation to introspection was legitimate and significant. However, given the powerful influence of the sedative medication, I wasn't getting anywhere with anything else in life. I was effectively zombified.

CHAPTER 9

Recovery

The thing to do was to stop taking the anti-psychotic medication and I had to do so cold turkey. To this day, it is the hardest thing I have ever done in my life. Anti-psychotic medication is like narcotics, in that it has built-in dependency effects which are extremely powerful. One of the subtle forms of dependency is felt through photosensitivity. Some medication makes you less sensitive to light and therefore when you are going off those meds you become hyper-sensitive to light.

As I quit the medication cold turkey, the photosensitivity withdrawal effects kicked in and I found that it was difficult to look up when I was walking around outside during the day. It was physically difficult – almost impossible – to look up and hold my head up high. However, I interpreted the effect as mental shame, and I had distinct thoughts about running back to the medication because of the shame I was experiencing.

Whether the effect was intended by the pharmaceutical industry or not is absolutely irrelevant, as I was being tricked by my own body and I was persuading myself to believe that my thoughts should correspond with my physical body's condition. If my body was reacting poorly to going off the medication then probably my mind would as well, ergo, go back on the meds. Yet, I persevered with the powerful withdrawal effects.

Three months after quitting the medication, I was feeling entirely better physically. My body had survived and there had been no true need for panic on behalf of my body's health. The zombification of my life was over. The cosmic thinking had never ceased and now with renewed mental energy, I pursued the higher mysteries of my cosmic paradigm and abnormal belief system.

My sister gave birth to her first child, and I visited the hospital to meet my niece for the first time. When I got home, I decided that it was perhaps the case that I didn't understand mass telepathy properly and that the human race may not find me as transparent as I had once believed. However, there were cosmic-based answers and a cosmic-based explanation for why I had been transformed mentally to an introspective state. I made a commitment to building a sustainable paradigm that would explain everything. And so began the "Tricks of the Trade".

CHAPTER 10

Deception

It was imperative that I understand what had happened to me. My mental life had been altered utterly and completely. No one around me was explaining it to me. The psychologists and psychiatrists had no ideas. There were no clues on the internet either. I felt completely alone, yet I knew that what had happened to me was for a reason. The transformation to introspection was important and it had taken me out of auto-pilot mode and imbued me with real willpower and free choice. There was going to be an answer, even if it relied on a cosmic paradigm that I crafted on my own.

There were some ideas that were at the fore: minds could be enlightened, yet people were capable of incredible cruelty. It seemed clear that the human race was not telepathic. I had tested it by uttering mental statements in public that were far worse than, “ugly black bastard”. There had been no overt response from people around me that I believed could hear me insulting them. I had to conclude that my inner mental life had an important element of privacy. However, events were happening around me which went beyond mere coincidence in my estimates, and this had to be caused by cosmic forces. It was time to pull back the curtain and have a look at the wizard.

I was watching a Hollywood award show one night when I made a realization about the cosmic game centering on me. Watching television had become a vexing experience since I had begun believing in mass telepathy. My understanding was that the people on television were privy to my thoughts and could hear them in their own minds. This implied that my transformation to introspection had an element of celebrity to it. I mattered on a world stage.

It seemed that I must be someone that had a special role to play for the human race. During that award show and in the red-carpet segment, one of my favorite actors, Johnny Depp, strolled along cool as a cucumber. A distinct thought emerged in my introspective mind, “do not give him an inch”. The notion was that Johnny Depp was not a swell guy, but rather he was a wolf in sheep’s clothing. Johnny Depp was part of a forum of malevolent characters who were masquerading as human beings and destroying the life experience for real people. Conversely, I conjectured that there must also be a forum of good characters. My role would be to decide which were the black hats and then condemn them. This would be the cosmic game, referred to as, “the Tricks of the Trade”.

I went to the basement of my parent’s home and made my first gesture to initiate the cosmic wager. In the furnace room, there was an old yearbook from my grandfather’s undergraduate days in the 1920s. I perused the pages and looked upon the visages of proud students from a time so foreign to me as to render these people almost alien. But then, I noted their human familiarity and there was a sense of the sublime – I could be in touch with these “dead” people. It seemed to me that they were souls trapped in the pages of the yearbook and so I released them. The first heroic deed was to open up Heaven and Hell which had been closed in anticipation of my pivotal role in the cosmic wager. Humans that had lived and died on Earth had been stuck in a purgatory until my

deed released them to their appropriate eternal fate – and they understood the nature of this cosmic wager while locked in the pages of that yearbook.

It wasn't relevant to ask myself why I thought myself so important. Putting myself at the center of events had become intuitive based on there being no textual or cultural references to the process that constituted my transformation to introspection. Perhaps, children would still believe in Santa Claus as adults if not for a surfeit of movies and books which purport that it is a ruse conjured up by grown ups for **all** children. I could not find the references I needed to explain what had happened to me and so I explained it in my terms, which effectively put me at the center of cosmic events as well as placing me in the most prominent position of all – the judge.

Johnny Deep became “Johnny’s Inch” and it was a nickname with pejorative connotations regarding his manhood. I reasoned that he deserved to be berated for being caught pretending to be a good guy as well as for the damage that he had done to humanity as a false idol. I reasoned that Johnny was part of the forum of evil cosmic beings and there were many other celebrities that were with him. He and his cohort were responsible for all the evil deeds on Earth, including the rape of women and the murder of children. They were like the little devils nestled on the shoulder of pondering characters in the old Looney Tunes cartoon segments. They influenced people to act wrong, and they had been doing so from the beginning.

The cosmic wager, *Tricks of the Trade*, occupied all my time, and I stopped university studies as well as working paid jobs in order to immerse myself in the grand task. My family supported me being alone because in recent years my mental state had resulted in interpersonal conflicts which they feared might escalate and soon involve intervention from the law. They did not fully realize what I was doing with my time and how my mental life was developing through this cosmic quest.

The leader of the evil forum was identified as Clint Eastwood and this was because he had performed the role of a nonchalant machismo rapist in one of his spaghetti Western movies, and I happened to see that movie scene while channel surfing one night when I was searching for the black hats in the cosmic wager. It seemed to me that Clint was sufficiently renowned to hold a prestigious position in a forum of evil cosmic beings. Other celebrities figured prominently, including Sharon Osbourne as the “Wicked Witch”, Vince McMahon as “Rape Boy”, and my own best friend, Ethan, as “Archibald Mayer... who had no hair”. Being bald meant a certain impotency within the forum of evil characters and was thus mock-worthy. I had nothing against bald men, but the thought was that evil characters did and that hierarchy among evil characters was based in petulance and pettiness. Effectively, I was speaking their language through these base insults and droll designations that I devised.

If *Tricks of the Trade* had been a fictional tale akin to Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, then perhaps, a few people would like the story and even buy it as a book. The problem was that this was reality for me at the time. I could watch Clint’s movies or see Vince on his pro wrestling TV show, and I would berate them and threaten them, all while believing that

they heard my words of condemnation. The judge was sentencing them. Eventually, it was easier to just speak aloud rather than articulate the words in thought. My verdicts required verve if the whole world was watching. I yelled at the TV a lot. And so, it would seem I had gone mad.

The first part of the Tricks of the Trade went on for one full year. I articulated the hierarchy of evil characters and proclaimed that their cosmic home-world was “Kerplunck”. Kerplunck was a land of oozing excrement and animated disembodied genitalia, and such. It was an embarrassment, yet an apt environment for creatures of ill-will who had sought to ruin the lives of humans through promoting rape, and a full range of other heinous violations. These malevolent beings had been whispering into the human subconscious and had been interfering in human lives through how social institutions were founded and developed. They had even been using human bodies for their nefarious pleasures and depraved vanity.

By the end of the year I had identified hundreds of Kerplunckians – perhaps, even a thousand – and mapped out the land where they originated. They had a “daddy” as well – their creator, “Markis Kleineschwarzurst”. Markis had used an influential human body and presented as Adolf Hitler, the human race’s consummate boogeyman. Markis’s unwieldy German moniker referenced his burnt micro-penis, and again the name I chose was intended to humiliate him in front of his people because the presumption was that all the cosmic beings – good and evil – had been watching my entire life, intimately. They watched me masturbate, and clean up after an upset stomach, and they watched when I had sex with romantic partners. I just had to accept this fact as one of the many “tricks of the trade”. I had to perform my duty for the good of humanity and the forum of good cosmic characters. So now, they watched me judge them – that was my trick in the trade, and it seemed fair compensation for a time.

CHAPTER 11

Betrayal

While identifying Kerplunckians, I made my personal woes considerably worse. It was decided that half of the people I had known in real life were malevolent characters from Kerplunck and they were pretending to be good guys, or just normal humans. If Kerplunckians survived my purge through me misidentifying them then they would be saved and they would continue interference on Earth for humans. These were the stakes of the wager, and so it was imperative that I correctly identify all the bad guys and never misrecognize an ally as a villain. Otherwise, my life and this world could not be expected to improve.

I had rejected half of the people in my life and the other half who were considered “good” noticed and this made them extremely nervous. It was a radical act on my part, but I took it for granted that I was performing my cosmic duty as planned. In fact, it dawned on me that I must be a member of the forum of good characters. The game was about me having been memory-wiped and started anew on Earth – I was using a human body as well, despite my true nature being cosmic. It was a messianic mission for me on behalf of humans and my people, the forum of cosmic good guys. I truly believed that this was correct because it explained everything. This conceit explained why I had become introspective but not others, and why there were so many “uncanny moments” whereby my private thoughts were responded to with fidelity in the world around me as well as through programming on television, or even music playing on the radio. Things just seemed to come together in improbable ways to reinforce the Tricks of the Trade as a real and legitimate event.

There were too many coincidences for it to not be considered evidence.

Meanwhile, my real life was becoming more and more isolated. I determined that my parents were good characters, as well as my sister and her family. There were others in my family and circle of friends, even coworkers, past and present, who were also identified as trusted. They were constructed into an official Forum of Gods. Mike and Dan were considered “Angels” within that deified hierarchy. Gary was my guardian angel, whereas Alex had been condemned and was considered Markis’s consort in Kerplunck.

I had taken my positive and negative feelings to their extremes and manifested them through characterization that was then projected onto other real people. This is a dangerous undertaking, and I presume that many tragic stories of psychotic minds have considerable crossover with what I was going through at the time.

The year ended and I was now dealing with “straggler” Kerplunckian characters – outsiders who had only oblique importance to the overall cosmic wager. I was resenting that the game had not ended and that the good guys – the Gods – were not sticking up for me and coming to my rescue. My life clearly didn’t work, and I suspected that it never would again. I needed major change or removal from Earth, and the sooner the better. I wanted to go home.

My impatience ran out after a horrifying nightmare I suffered on New Year's Eve. The year of Tricks of the Trade had been taxing and I slept poorly during that time. I experienced extremely vivid nightmares, and this had been one of the ways that I had uncovered sneaky Kerplunckians – from learning new things in my dreams. That year, there had been many times where I stayed up for three days straight before finally collapsing. The New Year's nightmare crossed the line in how I was violated, and I determined that these good Gods should have already helped out and that it was time to identify them as villainous and judge them accordingly.

Six months later, no one was left. I had whittled down my list of trusted characters to a barebones skeleton crew of personalities that I truly believed in. Everyone else was fodder for the real Hell. Their time on Earth had ended. Their chance to ruin humans was finished. I felt a great sense of accomplishment. Additionally, I was no longer asking my cosmic skeleton crew to rescue me, nor did I believe that it was worth staying on Earth – I was not truly human.

The suicide attempts began and there were a variety of methods undertaken. The opening salvo of self-destruction was notable for its naivety. I drew a bath and plugged in a toaster. I dropped the toaster into the bathtub while sitting in water up to my chest. I had seen it in a movie – a romantic comedy of all things. However, in my tub the fuse immediately blew, and dramatically, the lights went out, yet no electric current reached the water. I felt cheated.

The suicide attempts were not performed from a state of despair, but rather, from a duty to reunite with that skeleton crew watching over me in the cosmic – my real family and friends. I wanted to see my real dad, Carl, and hang out with lovable Uncle Lou. I needed my sweet pets Mindy and Mandy around. At the time, I truly felt that I should be in the cosmic. It was time to be rewarded for the great job I had done during Tricks of the Trade. The world would become a better place with all the evil characters vanquished, and I could watch over that transition from above with cosmic vantage.

My suicide methods were leaving too much room for error. I vowed to get it right and so I prepared for my camping trip to Algonquin Provincial Park. But Algonquin Park had brought me to the brink and after what happened there, I realized that if I was going to commit to living, then there needed to be a new plan for a normal, mortal experience.

CHAPTER 12

Placating

Algonquin Park had been an eye-opening experience even for someone in my condition. Upon returning to Toronto, I remained mixed-up about many things, including, mass telepathy, the cosmic forum of characters watching over humanity, and even as to whether the rat poison had worked. I conjectured that the effects of the poison had been negated through a temporary suspending of the laws of the physical universe. In essence, I questioned whether I had in fact died, and then been resurrected.

Despite these messianic ideas dominating my thoughts, it was time to recognize that the world met no one halfway, and that time stopped for no one. If I was going to continue a mortal first life on Earth among human beings, then I was also going to have to act human. It was time for the “fake it until you make it” approach.

Fitting in wouldn't be easy. Although, I had worked through many of the ideas about telepathy and concluded that the human race was not telepathic, there were still no other people who could identify with my transformation to introspection. For everyone else, introspection was a matter of degrees and people became more introspective (what I term, conscientious) over time based on concerted effort. That did not jibe with my experience. For me, the alteration was sudden and profound. It was all or nothing. And without answers to the transformation process, I had to continue holding the cosmic story of the Tricks of the Trade in high esteem.

There have been ideas in this text you are reading regarding the partitions of the mind and the continuity of the external and internal mental life experience. This kind of existential philosophy was very helpful for me. It didn't seem to matter that I was a dilettante in psychology, or that I had limited knowledge of the history of developments in the philosophy of the mind. I knew enough of these topics to generate some answers and give myself the opportunity to make positive changes for my mental life.

After Algonquin Park it was important to work through more of these philosophical “meditations”. The meditations centered me, and I began to convert my active sense of conspiratorial paranoia to a more passive basic faith in otherworldly forces. The meditations helped transition my ideas from subversive and confrontational, to spiritual and private. My belief system would become a kind of religious faith, although admittedly, it was unlikely that I would ever have any disciples among human beings.

My parents expected me to recover quickly and then decide whether I would work a paid job or re-enroll in university. I chose both for a time. While flipping pizzas at a gourmet pizzeria and sitting in lecture halls for a course on ancient Greek literature, I also worked on my existential meditations. My mental life was still uncomfortable, and I remained focused on my introspective dialectic as opposed to what was being said in the world around me. I bounced from job to job,

and my grades in school were nothing to write home about. Yet, my meditations brought a new sense of truth and reality, and one that no longer goaded me into raging against the machine.

The meditations on the conscious-unconscious partition, emergence of the subconscious, as well as the continuity of internal-external mental life were not the first meditations which I developed during this time. Instead, my first meditation was most basic and sought to answer the important question, “why something?”.

Why is there something, instead of just nothing? Why something out of nothingness? Here we are and it is self-effacing that something happened. Presumably, at some point in time there was nothing. So, why *something* then?

I concluded that the *potential* for *something* was a significant *something* in meaning. Ergo, there had never truly been *nothing* and the inception of *things* happening as well as time being a relevant measure had been based in the *potential* for *something* being a *something*. To have *something* was to also have *creative expenditure* (not a form of physical energy per se). However, that first moment of creative expenditure through the potential of something being a something then produced an imbalance in the *creative-destructive matrix*.

At this point in the meditation, I surmised that imbalance in the creative-destructive matrix was a significant problem. There was a thrust toward balance because balance brought peace, and peace implied rest, with rest being an ideal state. I concluded that forces in time should come into play such that the *things* that existed would also be *active things* and capable of bringing about a balance in the creative-destructive matrix, even if it never quite reached a moment of equilibrium (peace and rest).

Our physical universe, made up of particles, such as, hydrogen atoms, or electrons and quarks, constituted *raw material*. This is a material universe based in physical laws which seem unbendable and unbreakable. Pigs will not start flying, and night will not suddenly turn to daylight. Space and time in the physical universe adhere to strict laws. Magic is not experienced as real.

Raw material (for example, a physical universe) had happened because it provided the possibility for bringing about balance in the creative-destructive matrix after that initial imbalance when the potential for something being a something became a creative expenditure *happening*. The physical universe provided a means of destruction in order to balance out the matrix. The physical universe would become a creche for the emergence and development of personalities because it was individual personalities that can produce creative and destructive happenings, liberally.

With all that creation, how can balance be restored? There must be a source of destruction that is more destructive than it is creative. But what was destruction with respect to the creative-destructive matrix? I concluded that personalities were generators of creative and destructive happenings through the thoughts of the mind. Creative happenings were generated through *novel*

action – originating in thoughts of concepts, notions, ideas, etc. Destructive happenings were generated through *bunk action*. To be bunk was to be redundant, for example, it was bunk action to think a single idea ad nauseam such that nothing novel was added to that discourse. If someone sat in the corner of a room and let only the thought, “I’m hungry” express itself in their mind, then hours or days later this happening in thought was a bunk one and thus adding to the destruction in the creation-destruction matrix.

Bunkness was redundancy and it was opposed to *novelty*. For me, the definitive bunk action was to rape because the act of forcing one’s sexuality on another meant that the rapist was forcing the victim to understand sex – a wild discourse rife with creative potential – in only a singular, simple term. Essentially, rape would render a victim to that person in the corner whose only thought became, “I’m hurt”. As such, bunkness was associated with evil, and this brought me back to thoughts about “veggie” Clint, bunk Markis, and the malevolent characters of Kerplunck.

I reasoned that if the mandate of Existence was to realize the possibility of balance in the creative-destructive matrix then good personalities had to dominate existence. To allow a bunk evil character to be ruler would be to ensure that bunkness dominated and thus balance would never be achievable. However, the good personality (one geared for novelty in thought and action) could rule and bring about a surfeit of creative happenings while at the same time creating evil personalities that would be controlled by good and also produce destructive happenings for the potential of balance in the matrix. Peace was achievable through a ‘Good over Evil’ cosmic paradigm.

‘Good over Evil’ was what I determined as the dominant cosmic paradigm. ‘Good versus Evil’, or ‘Evil over Good’ would not setup the conditions for potential balance in the creative-destructive matrix. This conclusion for my existential meditation brought me great peace of mind. I used this meditation to turn a cheek when I was dealing with wicked behavior of others in the world. I acquired a patience and sense of resolve which quelled my moral outrage about humans treating each other so poorly. I could see that the grandeur scheme was the creative-destructive matrix, whereas cosmic wagers such as, Tricks of the Trade, were merely one event within the ‘big picture’ scheme.

I, Will Strange (yes, that was my name), born in 1981, residing in Toronto, might be important in the grand scheme, but it was unlikely that my messianic status was valid or of practical import to my mortal first life as a human being on planet Earth. These realizations through that first existential meditation helped to alter my mental life and perception of reality so that I could function better within the status quo of society.

CHAPTER 13

Reification

My first meditation on the road to recovery after Algonquin Park was about answering the question, “why something”, instead of nothing at all? Why did I even exist to then be burdened with a sense of duty to answer big questions about life? My conclusion from that first meditation was that good personalities dominated evil personalities, but that the existence of both provided the possibility of novel and bunk happenings such that the creative-destructive matrix had the possibility for balance, and thus a state of peace and rest.

This meditation required that I walk away with a strong belief in a philosophical understanding about creative and destructive forces in life. But is it reasonable to believe in anything strongly if you cannot confirm or prove that the particular belief is valid or important? This musing provoked another meditation. The second meditation regarded belief and it asked the question, “to believe, or not to believe?”

For this second meditation on belief, I referred to Pascal’s Wager, almost entirely. There was no risk in believing strongly, and there was potential payoff, whereas there was nothing to be gained from not believing strongly, but there was a risk of eternal shame (or despair, for Pascal). For me, atheism was simply an exotic form of traditional faith, and the atheist affirmation that there was nothing of significance cosmically to believe in, was also a belief fundamentally based in speculation and uncertainty. Essentially, the “non-belief” of atheism was no different than the belief of religion, and both were speculative and without certainty.

For me to believe in cosmic interference in my life would answer many questions that non-belief never could. More importantly, belief in cosmic interference could answer my most pertinent questions regarding my transformation to introspection. I had nothing to lose in believing in a cosmic paradigm because if it turned out to be right then I would have eternal pride, and if I was wrong then there was no more me existing to face the shame of misguided belief. Whereas, to not believe gained nothing if indeed there was no cosmic purpose – I’d be dead with no possibility for reflection on my decidedly wise choice. Whereas, if I turned out to be wrong when choosing to not believe then I would have an eternity of shame. Worse than that, not believing despite cosmic purpose being real, then potentially excluded me from participation in existence after my mortal first life. Essentially, my lack of faith would disqualify me from realizing a greater purpose in existing, and this was justifiable by a higher authority because I had merely reaped what I had sown in choosing disbelief. Major religions are all predicated on similar reasoning featured in Pascal’s Wager.

Religion and atheism are collectivist-based ideologies where what to believe is proscribed. However, I had an opportunity to develop my personal faith and Moral Paradigm. This moral paradigm would be designed to answer the questions which religion, atheism, and science could not – what happened that night with Mike and Dan, and what was my transformation to introspective consciousness all about?

There were two other meditations which were important for my life at that time when I was rebuilding it after Algonquin Park. The third meditation pertained to understanding the quality of Otherness (what is other?), and the fourth meditation regarded the nature of Otherness (is other benevolent or malicious?).

The third meditation concerned the quality of otherness and asked, “what is other?” Rene Descartes’s rational approach to philosophy was based in a method whereby one would acknowledge all the **reasonable** possibilities for a phenomenon and not exclude any possibility based on prejudice alone. Moving forward with an answer must account for all explanations which were reasonably possible. For example, I am in San Francisco and at a pool hall. I turn to notice that a ball is rolling across the felt of the billiard table. What caused the movement? The rational Cartesian answer would factor in all possibilities that are reasonable, for example, someone just hit the ball with their cue stick, or there was a small earthquake which I didn’t happen to notice perhaps already being acclimated to such things as a longtime resident of San Francisco. Descartes would not include the possibility that a leprechaun crawled out of the pocket of the table and moved the ball before disappearing back into the pocket – an unreasonable possibility.

The Cartesian rational method would dictate that I refrain from applying a prejudice that would have me conclude that it was a person that hit the billiard ball and made it move across the table simply because that explanation made the most sense to me in a self-effacing way. This is to say, the Occam’s Razor principle should not be guaranteed at the outset of the observation and analytic process. For the billiard ball problem – why exclude the possible answer being rooted in a small earthquake, simply because of a prejudice based in earthquakes scaring me, or making me nervous? Why exclude the reasonable possibility simply because earthquakes are a less likely answer than the self-effacing Occam’s Razor explanation for a more common cause of billiard ball movement?

The Cartesian rational approach would be to move forward with understanding the situation through both possible explanations and then seeking more facts or evidence to provide a rational means for rejecting one of the two possibilities. Thus, upon further investigation, I should be prepared to observe players at the table, and earthquakes under my feet. That is what it is to be rational-minded.

How the Cartesian rational method applied to my third mediation on the quality of otherness, was related to understanding what otherness could be, and what it could not be. I organized in my thoughts the full range of possibility of *other* and boiled it down to four options with one being deemed unreasonable. I did not apply a prejudice against the less likely possibilities being true.

I was, Will Strange, a human being, male, in my twenties, a thinking-thing, brown hair, blue eyes, etc. Around me I perceived otherness. The television was not a thinking-thing, the dog

barking in the backyard across the road was not in her twenties, the toilet paper roll didn't have blue eyes. These components of otherness were not **me** in a self-effacing way.

Otherness could be me, however. Perhaps, my own unconscious mind had put together the entire life experience internally, similar to how dream worlds are constructed. Perhaps, I am all the elements of otherness in my experience, similarly to how we tend to believe that dreamworlds are purely constructed from our own unconscious minds. One thing can be sure about that – I do not perceive the TV set, dog, or TP roll as **me**, and that form of otherness. Even if that otherness was me, it would not be a *unified* otherness that includes me in that unification. The *unified-other self* option was invalid as a possibility to explain the quality of otherness.

There were three other possibilities for otherness that might be valid and thus reasonable: *unified-other unself*, *fragmented-other self*, and *fragmented-other unself*. The *unified-other unself* was the idea of a God otherness. This God otherness could be the TV set, dog, and TP roll in significant ways. It could also be all other people. Everything that wasn't perceived as me could be God. It was a valid possibility although nothing existed in my life to confirm it.

The other possibility for otherness was that it was a *fragmented-other self*. This tricky condition suggested that otherness was me, but not in a truly unified way. Perhaps, I was the TV set, but only through some manipulation of time and space. The TV set wasn't presently me in my perception. This *fragmented-other self* possibility was valid but was predicated on an understanding of *multicursal-recursive spatiotemporality* – the ability to enter into a single moment of time from a variety of moments in the personal timeline.

For example, perhaps, I started my life eons ago as a deified personality and then created the physical universe, Earth, and the human race, for whatever reason. I experienced being the TV set, dog, and TP roll. Then, I memory-wiped myself and rebirthed as a mortal human entering the physical universe at a particular point in time, 1981, the year of my inception as a human being on Earth. Later in that experience, I might die and then enter the cosmic where through multicursal-recursive spatiotemporality I will return to moments in my first life and perform as other TV sets, dogs, and TP rolls which had no impression on my memory up to that point. I will be all otherness either through performance in the past before a memory-wipe, or performance in the future when there is no distinct memory of that otherness, and I can genuinely freely perform as that otherness.

This albeit bizarre possibility on otherness seems alien, however, it is still reasonable and cannot be disproven simply because I can't relate to it the same way I can to the idea that God is all otherness. The final possibility is that otherness is *fragmented-other unself*. This option is intuitive because it implies that other people are just like me, but also genuinely 'other'. I notice other humans and they appear as thinking things, and some have brown hair, and some have blue eyes – they are like me, but not me. Perhaps, all otherness has character and personality although I cannot perceive it. Perhaps, in some other significant way, the TV set or TP roll have character. It cannot be disproven from my mortal first life as a human on Earth.

Therefore, there are three possibilities for otherness which are valid and thus reasonable: otherness can be distinct personalities such as other people in the world, it can be a creator force such as God, and it can be myself from some other time period and circumstances as it relates to action taken through multicursal-recursive spatiotemporality. None of the options can be disproven necessarily, and so I decided to be rational within the Cartesian methodology and I excluded none of the possibilities which could not be disproven. I concluded that otherness was likely a mix of all three possibilities. Therefore, otherness was people like me and maybe that meant that other humans were just like me and living their mortal first lives. Also, otherness was some creator force, but not necessarily an omnipotent old-man-with-white-beard-father-proxy figure. Finally, otherness was me either past or future. I would continue with my belief system understanding otherness in this way.

Worth noting, is that the multicursal-recursive spatiotemporality concept is of import when theorizing how space and time are organized fundamentally. The multicursal aspect refers to time and space featuring multiple actors forming the events and happenings in time and space (i.e. many timelines). The recursive aspect refers to those multiple actors being able to interact with other actors in time and space (i.e. interconnected timelines).

Imagine time as a blank sheet with an indefinite number of holes punched through it. Now, a personality is a single thread (subjective timeline) that passes through those holes of the sheet (objective spacetime) many times with each pass representing a significant moment for that person in time and space. An individual thinking-thing while existing and living creates a crochet of stitching through the sheet of time and space. However, other individuals can feed their thread through the same holes within their own unique pattern of experience. Technically, the visual I have conjured through the analogy produces a sense of a tangled mess, yet it is an interconnected web putting individuals in touch with each other and themselves throughout time and space. The subjective timeline of individuals is linear, however, objective spacetime is not.

CHAPTER 14

Morality

The fourth and final meditation which I developed after Algonquin Park was a second meditation on otherness, this time focused on the nature of otherness. In the third meditation, I concluded that otherness was a complex community of three primary elements: myself, others like me, and some creator force. However, it was unclear if these elements of otherness were benevolent or malicious. Was life out to get me?

Morality had been a major concern throughout my life. I had been a privileged person in my childhood and was fortunate to truly choose good over evil. Many people who are victimized at a young age feel compelled toward wicked thoughts, ideas, and actions because for them turning the tables and becoming a perpetrator is a defense mechanism that promotes a strong sense of survival. Being a victim in life means that you live desperately always. My childhood had not been traumatic.

For me, morality was about a personalized value system of right and wrong. On the other hand, ethics was about a value system that society constructed based around a Social Contract and through a utilitarian mandate. So, it might be ethical to masturbate, but a particular individual might find the act of self-gratification immoral based on a personal value system. My Moral Paradigm was founded in my personal value system, and it accounted for the nature of otherness.

Otherness had a plural quality, and this claim seemed to be a rational and reasonable conclusion based on the third meditation. However, otherness could ultimately be part of a *moral paradigm*, an *immoral paradigm*, or an *amoral paradigm*. The moral paradigm would be where I stated what otherness was and what my life was for, purposefully. For me, the moral paradigm was about ‘Good over Evil’ because that is what I wanted. I wanted my skeleton crew of real family and friends waiting for me in the cosmic. I wanted a cosmic wager whereby I vanquished evil characters to a Hell dimension. I wanted to be given the chance to make Earth a better place to live and do so from a cosmic vantage point after my mortal first life ended. That was all part of the moral paradigm – my paradigm. Even serial-killer, Jeffrey Dahmer, or mass-murderer, Mao Zedong, would be said to have developed a “moral” paradigm when it reflects their personal value system. For them, killing was a moral choice. Whereas, for most of us, killing isn’t a choice at all, and could not feature in our moral paradigm.

However, there was the possibility that the nature of otherness constituted an immoral paradigm. For me, the immoral paradigm was about ‘Evil over Good’, and it was defined as being any ultimately dominant belief system that was not my own. The immoral paradigm would have been atheism and religion if they proved correct. The immoral paradigm was the structured and intentional omission of references to my transformation to introspection and this omission being justifiable. The immoral paradigm was my systemic torture through living alien among my own species also being a cosmic trifle. The immoral paradigm coming to pass was conceived of as

wicked types, like the Kerplunckians, not in fact going to Hell but instead getting their way, and most of all, having their way with me.

Finally, for me, the amoral paradigm was about ‘Good versus Evil’, and it involved understanding life as ultimately a haphazard and random happening. Perhaps, the creative-destructive matrix was indeed a true concept and it explained why there was a physical universe, matter, and personality. Yet, an amoral paradigm rendered raw material to a purposeless state, morally. For the amoral paradigm, consequence was reckless and if Good ruled, then fine, or Evil could rule as well, and both situations would be bringing about the possibility for balance in creative and destructive happenings. There was no ultimate judgment, morally. In fact, within the amoral paradigm, it was entirely possible that the overall thrust of existence was indeed that of a ‘Good over Evil’ gambit, however, my life was too small fry to be implicated in those larger schemes, and I would be subject to an overall negligent caretaking by Existence, or whatever other force turned out to be my creator and master.

For this meditation on the nature of otherness I decided to not adhere to Cartesian rationalism when deciding what to believe because to make decisions based on all three paradigms being valid and possible was to also be dishonest to myself. I wanted the Moral Paradigm to be true and so my thoughts, ideas, and actions should reflect that belief and faith. This was the conclusion I had for the fourth meditation.

Through my existential meditations, I had developed a personalized faith that provided the potential to co-exist with status quo ethical values of the human race such that I might successfully rejoin society. Blending in wouldn’t be easy given that I thought too much about the purpose of life, and I was livid when faced with human brutality and acts of injustice. I did not have the habit of turning my cheek when dealing with malevolent and malicious people, which in this world can be quite dangerous to your health.

CHAPTER 15

Severance

Life was getting better, bit by bit. I had regained all the weight that was shed during my trip to Algonquin Park. I was bouncing between jobs but still bringing in money. I lost many part time jobs to employers who claimed that I seemed distracted and uninterested in the work. Is stacking bags of kitty litter inherently interesting as a task? Yet, I realized that what was actually happening is that my bosses were noticing that I cared little for basic interactions and activities. My mind was locked-in on more significant existential projects.

Additionally, I sputtered through school courses receiving decent grades in some courses and poor grades in others. I made no bones about my philosophies on life, and they pervaded my academic writing. Some readers at the university found my ideas quite radical, if not, disturbing. I made it easy for them to mark me down given that I reinterpreted all their lessons based on the findings and conclusions from my philosophical meditations.

With how things were going it would never be possible to live a normal life even if I was working a steady job or getting above-average grades at school. A push-comes-to-shove moment was fast approaching.

In my effort to right the ship and get my life back on track, I had reached out to some old friends. Many made themselves unavailable and would not give me another chance to prove I had changed. Heath was a different story. Heath had become a great friend at the end of high school, and we had been bunkmates on a grad trip that one of our mutual friends, Juan, had put together the summer we all graduated.

Heath had a great sense of humor – wry, yet cheeky. He was clever, but not too smart for his own good. He was also a very talented musician which I admired, and he carried his acoustic guitar with him almost all the time. He had a repertoire of cover songs alongside his original composition, and he knew how to weave in a ditty as a punchline to whatever strange thing happened any given moment.

Through his strumming and singing of familiar tunes, Heath had the capacity to make people feel safe and comfortable. To my chagrin, I was now quite the opposite sort of person. In fact, my mired life was beginning to infect his own. Heath wanted to know more about my beliefs once they were capable of being relayed in a lucid manner now that I had stopped believing in mass telepathy. The more he learned, the more he began to believe in my ideas as well. In time, Heath was developing his own Moral Paradigm, and it involved traumas from his past. Heath was concerned about alcoholism and understood the black-hat-white-hat dichotomy of a cosmic wager to be based around alcohol. For Heath, the drinkers were the black hats, and the sober were the white hats.

In Heath's estimation, no one was truly evil, but being a black hat meant that you were parasitic to the white hats. Heath adopted a messianic complex which was easy to do for him because his music and joviality had made him such a popular guy throughout high school. Heath made it his purpose to engage in the culture of alcohol and try to find ways to convert drunks over to sobriety. The mission was perverse and misguided, but for Heath this was his duty and what he had been called upon to perform through cosmic forces.

At the time, I couldn't vibe with the alcohol aversion that was central for Heath because I didn't believe that it was the cornerstone for morality in my judgment of humanity's problems (yet I value Heath's point of view much more now). Instead, I developed a new meditation which I thought Heath and I would share. This new meditation might bridge the gap that was growing between us. I needed Heath's humor and his music. However, the more Heath invested in his cosmic wager about alcoholism, the less he told jokes or played songs. Life was getting serious for him as well, and I feared that one day he would end up in Algonquin Park like me and experience a worse fate.

The meditation that I developed for the two of us to share was naïve as well as being a significant regression for my personal philosophy and Moral Paradigm. However, I thought that Heath would adopt the meditation and become distracted by it. The meditation was based in a popular pseudo-science: numerology.

CHAPTER 16

Divisive

Heath and I were standing outside my parent's house one night when I presented my numerology system to him. We began walking down the street casually and I explained to him the basic meaning for the primary set of numbers.

The number one was a number which signaled a message or meaning for the individual. The number one was an "I" statement. Conversely, the number two was focused on meaning or messages related to social interaction, like friendship. Three was actually "big three" and it was related to the creator force, or God. Four was an exclamatory sign and was the "!" statement. If you were to see a prominent four while thinking through a serious issue, then you also knew that what you were thinking in that moment was emphasized and important, cosmically.

The number five signified goodness and love, whereas six represented evil and hate. Seven was a tricky number because it pertained to suffering which could be considered functional and positive if that suffering was constructive. However, suffering could also be mischief and arise from the malice of otherness.

Eight was the infinity sign and a strong representation of the number eight signalled a message or meaning regarding fate and destiny. The number nine was about the future, and it was a prognosticator sign. In many ways, this basic numerology system was not an original creation of mine, and similar number systems exist as paradigms of superstition in many cultures around the world.

I explained to Heath that his obsession with the number eleven was inappropriate and very common among non-introspective thinkers. An eleven was in fact an aggregate of two ones, and the true sign for eleven was two. Heath wasn't sold on that idea, and he felt that eleven was a special number independently.

We had continued walking and discussing how a taxicab with the number 8732 emblazoned on its door could be distilled to $(8+7)$ and $(3+2)$, which was then, 15 and 5, with that then becoming 6 and 5, which in turn, could be interpreted as a weak six with a strong five. If you were to see this taxicab number while thinking about your boss or a girl you were dating, you might consider that those thoughts were significant along a topic of love (5) versus hate (6), with hate being present but weaker than love as an issue. In turn, this analysis might encourage you to approach your boss or budding romantic partner through bringing a lot of positivity (5) but being prepared to shoulder the burden of receiving some animosity in return (6), perhaps, from coworkers, or an ex-boyfriend of the girl you were dating.

The number system was akin to reading tea leaves or interpreting the lines on the palm of your hand. The numbers provided a guide or map, but Heath took my numerology and made it an all-encompassing system of language and communication. He interpreted all the numbers around

him and counted up all the taxicab designations, or house address number signs he observed. He decided to call or not call friends on the phone based on an analysis of their phone number. Heath's imagination for numbers was a self-destructive juggernaut. I felt responsible.

We would meet again many nights outside my house and walk the streets trying to sort out Heath's number system. At that point, he was no longer willing to have me coach him and instead he had developed his number system beyond my pretense of meaning which he now considered quaint. My numerology meditation had been designed for use only in special moments when an important number in the environment impressed itself upon your senses and qualified that moment in your life experience in a unique way. For me, finding a number was like blowing out the candles on your birthday cake – you do it once a year. The numbers found you, much like the birthday wish you made hopefully would. For Heath, he was chasing the numbers – hunting them – and it was akin to him blowing out candles constantly and everywhere all at once. He had started a raging fire in his own mind.

I was sure that my madness had infected my good friend, Heath. He was in worse shape than me after the numbers racket. One night, we walked up the street from my house and stopped exactly one block to the north. There was a house on the corner, just like how my parent's house was a corner property. Our neighborhood was upper-middle-class, and just two blocks over and to the west was a street of upper-class houses that most people would consider mansions. However, the house on the corner exactly one block north from mine was an eyesore like no other in the neighborhood – it was Weird Willard's house.

Of course, "Weird Willard" was a derogatory nickname for a man we had never met in person. I wasn't that keen on the "Willard" moniker given it was so close to my own name, Will. However, the man was certainly weird. His house was dilapidated with chipped and fading paint along all sides of the brick façade, the windows were opaque and covered in layers of thick dust, the lawn had weeds growing several feet high, and the backdoor which was visible from the side was rusting off its hinges. Additionally, his medium-sized driveway was packed with four compact cars, two of which were covered in tarp all year long, and the other two were hatchbacks of the same model and color. Inside the back seat of that matching pair was dozens of old newspapers and empty paper coffee cups.

Very late at night, perhaps after 4am, you might see Weird Willard driving around the neighborhood, but it was unclear for what purpose. Willard was a sinister figure from my childhood, and it was unnerving that his house had the same placement as my own, but just one block further north. Heath and my other friends enjoyed the feeling of being spooked by Weird Willard. He seemed harmless if you were being honestly to yourself, but it was still possible to conjure up torrid tales of macabre machinations for this old hermit. Years earlier, to ease my own mind, I had done a little research on Weird Willard, and I discovered that in the white pages, he was listed as "E.T. Arnold" for that street address. This didn't sit well for me, and later once I had gone down the rabbit hole with my cosmic thinking, I began considering whether Willard was indeed an extra-terrestrial.

One fateful night while Heath and I discussed our evolving cosmic belief systems, I made a very strange choice. We walked past Weird Willard's house and Heath stopped to inspect the backdoor from afar. Heath mentioned that the door appeared unlocked, and he dared me to enter. Dare? I was well into my twenties. Normally, I would have ignored the juvenile goad, but I felt that if I showed bravery to Heath and revealed to him what a maverick I was when it came to tackling the higher mysteries, then perhaps, he would once again trust my wisdom about cosmic paradigms and accept that he had gone too far with his explosive numerology.

Gingerly, I stepped over some tall weeds and moved closer to the backdoor of Willard's decaying abode. I inspected the backdoor, and the wood frame had worn away enough that some of the rusty metal lock was exposed. In fact, the backdoor wasn't locked at all. It seemed that I would merely have to push the door open to enter. And so I did.

The door was open, and I was looking through Willard's unremarkable kitchen. It was dirty and neglected, but there were no entrails hanging off counters or jars full of formaldehyde and human eyeballs staring back at me. It wasn't a house of horrors, but rather, just some strange old hermit's lonely domicile. I had no business being there. Just as I thought to back up, Heath was beside me. He coaxed me to continue into the house.

Heath stayed in the kitchen, but I ventured further. There was a living room – the one with the dusty windows – and the furnishing were old and seemed unused. I wondered where the rooms were that this "E.T." Arnold lived in. A door to the basement was opposite the front door. I carefully opened the door to the basement and descended. When I looked back to the kitchen, Heath was standing outside again. He had chickened out. This was my opportunity to prove myself to him about the legitimacy of paranoia and fear.

I descended the basement stairs but at the bottom experienced the most shocking thing imaginable. Weird Willard, or rather, E.T. Arnold's basement was set up identically to that of my parent's house. The uncanny structural similarities were unnerving. The bathroom was precisely where my own basement bathroom would be found, and it was no more spacious. The first empty and dusty room led to a short hallway, just like at home. I had to confirm the unsettling similarities and so I pressed on with my investigation.

Opening the door to the main room of the basement, revealed an identical space in size to that of my basement, however, this basement was not renovated like my own. There was only one more room to explore – the furnace room. I moved through the dank space, which was almost entirely bereft of objects, and had the sparsest furnishings, including an old bicycle in the corner, and a narrow bookcase with hardware supplies littering the shelves.

I entered the furnace room through a door at the far end of the main room of the basement. I expected to find a narrow rectangular space with a water heater and furnace to my right. Instead, the E.T. Arnold furnace room was a vast chasm. It was an impossible space yet strikingly real. It

was a space only possible in the most haunting nightmares. There was a great gulf of blackness right in front of me. The pit appeared bottomless and yet I could also see no far walls in this room. The room went on forever fading into dark shadows past my visual ability to discern detail.

For a moment, I wondered whether E.T. Arnold was indeed an alien and if his mothership was at the bottom of the black hole at the end of his basement. Before I had a chance to ponder the implications of aliens on Earth, I heard a rustling sound of shuffling feet behind me. There was no time to turn around fully, and before I realized it, I had been pushed into the dark, stygian gulf.

CHAPTER 17

Reality

I was tumbling through the blackness with nothing to hold onto to stop my descent, yet it was clear that this liminal space was not adhering to the laws of physics. I alternated falling quickly and slowly, sometimes bumping off of obstacles that I might have described as marshmallow-like, yet I could not feel their form or grab a hold of them. The experience reminded me of times that I would pursue an ant on the picnic table with a beer coaster and constantly force the insect to redirect once it encountered the coaster wall another time. My fall was directed, and I never really hit the bottom per se.

Eventually, I stopped falling but without attaining a solid footing. One might say that I was floating, but it wasn't based in suspension. My body was supported by some kind of force that I could not yet qualify. All around me was blackness, but I knew that I was not blind. And then something came into focus. A speck of light in the distance was getting closer. The speck became a ball and I realized that it wasn't moving toward me, but rather, I toward it.

The ball was now clear in my visual field, it was a planet, and this planet was much like the familiar Earth. The oblate sphere had equal amounts of lush green land to vast oceans, as well as arid deserts. It was a prosaic visual, to be fair, if not for the extraordinary circumstances. A star came into view behind the planet and slowly shifted positions until it was in front of me, and the planet was slightly below us and between us. It felt as if I was at a games table playing chess against this star and the only playing piece was this strange, new planet in front of us.

This star's glare did not strain my eyes and its glow was gentle, illuminating just enough of the space around me that I was able to observe a backdrop of thousands of stars in the distance and in every direction. I was unable to move from my position and was held there by an invisible force. The planet began to move closer to me so that I could examine its features.

Eventually, the planet had moved so much closer to me that I was within its atmosphere and could make out the features of the land, such as canyons and mountain peaks. This star that presented as a playing partner was attempting to show me the happenings of this new world.

The landscape moved closer, and I could see upright men and women hunting along the plains, persistently stalking their prey with spears and rocks. This was the cradle of life for this new planet. I attempted to call out to these primitive people, but my voice was muffled as if it were a call heard emanating from inside a soundproof booth. This muting effect made me nervous, and it was the first truly coercive action that had been taken against me since I had begun tumbling into the void.

I continued to observe the primitive hunters. Time was passing rapidly as if someone had recorded the scene and then hit the fast-forward button on the remote during playback. At times,

the playback for this new world would slow down to a regular pace and I was witnessing the nuances of cultural development for the primitive hunters.

It was clear from my visual journey across this planet that there were several hundred tribes, but one in particular stood out for its more advanced developments. The tribe in question had five sons born only a few years apart to a relatively unremarkable couple, Pi and Ea. These sons appeared more advanced than the other primitive hunters. I noted that the quintet never cried, nor were they ever fevered or sick as babies.

This tribe had acquired language, and I could hear their words without understanding the meaning. These five babies grew and became children, and then teenagers. The quintet was already standing a full foot taller than all the others in the tribe, or any other tribe on the planet for that matter. These boys were not lanky, but rather had muscular physiques with broad shoulders and good posture. The young men appeared modern.

I was able to discern names within their exotic language. The eldest son was Sol, and his brother, Sin, had been born the next year. Two years after Sin, Hap was born, and the following year, Ea gave birth to fraternal twins, Sum and Gif. Sol had become the leader of the tribe while still growing into a man, and Sin was the tribe's best hunter, Hap was a carefree spirit, while Sum learned from his mother and became an educator for the tribe. Gif had strength and power. This advanced tribe undertook the challenges of an Agrarian Revolution, and Gif pioneered farming for his people.

What I witnessed was inspiring although I realized that this was not the history of Earth which had developed through stages from hunter-gathering to farming across a much longer timespan. This new world seemed magical, and it had the logic of a time-management video game, such as, Sid Meier's *Civilization*. I continued watching over the development of the tribe with years of their lives passing as mere hours for myself.

As time passed, I recognized that these five men were far from perfect. Sol took his alpha position for granted and assumed that others should be able to pick themselves up much like he and his brother were able to. Whereas, Sin lived in the shadow of his eldest brother, Sol, and he had developed an ambitious nature. Hap was so carefree and relaxed as to be useless for conflict resolution, and he did not know how to take a strong stance on issues. Sum was prone to intellectual arrogance and tended to not see the value in the individuality of others. Finally, Gif was prone to clumsiness in his reasoning through fetishizing the simple life of tending to a patch of land.

I was able to make out what this tribe had named itself – "Oor". I didn't understand the meaning of the name, but when the tribe of Oor was in contact with neighboring tribes, the name came up and was contextualized by me as being the correct designation for Sol's people. Later, Sol married a woman named, Ria, and she bore him a son, Sun. It was clear as I watched events unfold that Sun was being groomed to be the tribe's next leader, however, Sin was plotting against his brother and nephew.

Based on my observation, the tribe of Oor seemed to be an age-old story and one which had been told by ancient Greek dramatists, as well as Shakespeare, or even, Mark Twain. To see it play out as a movie might have been interesting, but to watch over it like a God was truly intriguing and a unique privilege. I wasn't sure how this tribe of Oor would matter, but I had to pay close attention because eventually I would need to find a way to escape the dark void under Weird Willard's house and return to my reality.

CHAPTER 18

Declination

Sin was a clever one. One day, he had tricked his nephew, Sun, while they were out on the plains hunting game. Sin had feigned an injury which he leveraged into a threat to never hunt again for the tribe. Sun had been learning hunting from his uncle and worked hard to change his uncle's mind regarding early retirement. Later, Sin agreed he would hunt with Sun again but only if Sun could take down the greatest beast in the land on their first new hunt together.

Little did the others in the Tribe of Oor realize, but Sin had spent years making allies with the neighboring tribes and now put a dark plan into motion. The dangerous hunt for the great beast was to be a secret, otherwise, Sol would have disapproved of Sun undertaking the daunting challenge. Sun agreed to keep the secret for his uncle. Sin led Sun across the plains and past the mighty river Sep to a site of a neighbouring tribe. Those tribesmen murdered the boy. Sin told his secret allies to rough him up a bit and make it look good. Then, Sin returned to the Tribe of Oor with the intention of ruining his brother Sol through the news of the neighboring tribe's attack and the subsequent death of Sun.

It seemed to me that this nasty man, Sin, had only one desire and it had been to be the leader of the Oor tribe as opposed to his older brother being selected for the job – an age-old story. I wasn't sure why this cosmic star was showing me such paltry drama while I was stuck in the black pit underneath Weird Willard's house. An acute fear developed that this tribe of Oor was a lesson for something that would soon affect me directly. The force that was holding me in the black pit could probably have done anything to me at all if it had wanted to. And so, I kept watching with mental focus.

Sol's vengeance was murderous, and he razed all neighboring villages thoughtlessly. Sol was all-consumed by the trauma of his loss. Sin honored himself for the wicked deed in private. The three other brothers could sense that things would never be the same for the Oor tribe. I watched the first funeral processions of this planet. It was dark days for these people in the cradle of this new world.

Eventually, I witnessed the moment that Sol learned the truth about Sin's betrayal. Sol cut off his brother, Sin's feet, and then forced Sin to march toward the river Sep which cut through the fertile plains of the land. At the river, Sol killed his brother, choking the life out of him. Sol was a husk of his former self. He could not lead the tribe any longer, and those duties fell to the well-practiced yes-man, Hap.

Sol traveled with his wife, Ria, to the northern regions where the winter months were snowy, and the lingering frost imposed a certain seriousness and work ethic on the indigenous people of the land. The twins, Sum and Gif, also vouched for building a migrant caravan party. They traveled east and many from the Oor tribe joined them until their community was bloated

and incapable of fostering a strong sense of individualism, which suited the proud, Sum who led the caravan.

Hap lacked get-up-and-go and he was not able in the role of tribe leader, however, those who had stayed behind preferred a comfortable, social experience. Life was leisurely in the cradle, and major construction projects previously headed off by the other brothers now ceased.

Sol and Ria settled in the northern continent and discovered that the wintry months not only encouraged strong work ethic for the sake of survival, but that the annual frost cycle knocked back germs and it was easier to control parasites and stop the spread of illness. Meanwhile, Sum and Gif traveled to the eastern continent, and Sum instructed Gif to scout further north. It took several years for Gif to return but when he did, he informed his twin brother that there was a large continent connected to their eastern continent, but that the two major rivers on the unknown continent were inappropriate for agrarian cultivation. The brothers stayed put, but Gif continued to venture into the unknown continent on private adventures.

Across the newly settled lands, the brothers encountered other tribes with some being developed and others being atavistic, but none having men or women that were advanced like the five sons of Pi and Ea. Sol and Ria's tribe mixed with the advanced indigenous tribes in the northern continent, and they set themselves to task on eradicating the atavistic tribes throughout their land. The same duty was called for in the eastern continent because the atavistic tribes were violent and savage, and prone to making incursions on Sum's newly established territory. The atavistic tribes were cave dwellers and believed in torture for the sake of it. Sum wanted the mighty Gif to wipe out the atavistic tribes in the eastern continent, however, Gif ended up negotiating with those atavistic tribes.

Gif and the atavistic tribes of the east traveled to the unknown continent and cultivated that region with Gif bearing many children that had both his advanced genes, as well as the atavistic genes of his new tribe. Back in the cradle, Hap's leadership was lackluster and his son, Hum, was expected to take over after him, but Hum was lazy more than he was carefree like his father.

As the star showed me this story of the Tribe of Oor while I was still being held in the black void under Willard's house, I noted that it was a parable about the human race of Earth. The star was explaining anthropological developments that took humans a million years. The star translated the events of early humans to a single story of one family and their progeny. Was this lively diorama accurate? Perhaps, humans had developed in this manner. I didn't know enough about the related science to confirm it, either way.

I was tired of the story and was ready to search for an escape. This racist star didn't concern me anymore and what I needed was an assurance that I had the choice to be somewhere else. I began to struggle from my position, and I attempted to reach out for the planet, and after that, I fumbled to grab the star while my head was still stuck in the atmosphere of the new world. My arms didn't reach my targets, although it seemed as if the planet was as close to me as could be. I

was within the atmosphere of the planet and yet still at the cosmic games table with the star and this new world as a mere game piece. The experience was akin to dunking only my head in water. Although, my submerged self was disallowed from communicating with the tribesmen from my position in their sky, my unsubmerged self was somehow too far from the planet as a cosmic game piece to hold it or manipulate it. I was powerless in a paradoxical way.

I continued to struggle to effect change in my position and then I felt a more significant push at the back of my head. Some invisible force was now imposing itself and making me submerge such that I was watching the new world from its sky and losing sense of my body. I was within the next deeper level of immersion. The story of the Tribe of Oor continued, but I was resisting. Some events passed me by while others did leave an impression. Soon, I was to find out why this story and the new world mattered.

CHAPTER 19

Emergence

I wanted to escape my confinement, but the force on the back of my head persisted and I had no choice but to watch. The lazy, Hum, son of Hap, had inspired no self-discipline in his own three sons, Fit, Hub, and Sim. The three sons were aggressive and constantly fighting. The tribesmen in the cradle refused to allow the three sons to become leaders of the dominant Tribe of Oor which after Sol's violent retributive purges now controlled most of the region. The three sons were banished.

The sons were too confrontational to agree on whether to migrate to the northern or eastern continents, and so they choose to inhabit the central, meso-region of the planet's landmass, which became a crossroads for the three major continents where Hap, Sol, and Sum were leaders and now living as middle-aged men.

The listless sons of Hum found that they could only exist purposefully through conflict and the ensuing chaos of their perpetually antagonistic relationship with one another. Their one-upmanship was not based in hunting achievement or construction projects, but rather, it focused on controversial ideas of what was constituted superiority. As such, Fit, Hub, and Sim developed the new world's first religions, places of worship, and social ideologies. Theirs was a legacy of elitism and exclusionism. For them, the primary concern in life was devotion, and anyone who did not adhere to the religious codes was deemed a heretic and dealt with violently.

I was exhausted by the story that the racist star was forcing me to engage in. Over the years, I had become aware of the problems of the human race and was cognizant of those problems having origins in ethnicity and religion. The historical story that was unfolding in front of me was biblical, but not applicable. During the development of my Moral Paradigm, I had moved past the "human story" and had become more concerned with being able to access the cosmic and join my skeleton crew of real family and friends. For me, Tricks of the Trade, had happened and human development from my world was a result of cosmic interference. I found that the racist star's lessons were beside the point. Had cosmic villains, such as, Kerplunckians, never existed then rotten bastards like Sin, or the sons of Hum also would not have been able to act with impunity on Earth.

This tedious simulator in the dark void under Willard's house was thwarting my cosmic beliefs and the racist star was thumbing its nose at me. Clearly, I had now ventured into the cosmic as a realm of existence, but where were my skeleton crew of family and friends? Where was Uncle Lou? Where was Mindy and Mandy? I had spent years determining from "clues" in my life on Earth who my real people were – my tribe. Why was I not able to unite with them even in the face of cosmic unearthly reality?

I struggled against the force pushing at the back of my head, submerging me into the atmosphere of the new world simulator. I attempted to reach back and stop the force, but then I was shoved. I entered the new world fully, and once more I was tumbling down in a rocky freefall.

As the ground was getting closer, my body was becoming more proportional relative to the landscape. It seemed that if I didn't go splat on the ground then I would become a relatively regular sized person in the new world – certainly not a giant. I didn't have time to contemplate particular issues, but soon after landing I was panicked regarding the language barrier. As it turned out, those things wouldn't matter.

I landed gently and rose to my feet. I looked down and checked my body. I reasoned that my modern clothing could become a problem, among other anomalies that the indigenous peoples would inevitably notice when encountering me. I was a modern man, and primitive men were brutal. There was no conceivable way to survive the experience without help from above. That racist star had to bail me out. I looked up. Nothing happened.

Where I had landed was familiar to me and it was at the northern end of the region controlled by the Tribe of Oor. I felt that I could follow the river Sep up to its mouth and get settled in a region which I knew to be stable and peaceful. I passed by a village and was stealthy enough to sneak into a hut near the edge of the village and steal some primitive clothing.

I shredded and then ditched my modern clothes in exchange for a light leather poncho, some sort of leather skirt, and some spongy sandals. The fit was very poor. The attire felt slimy and gross, and I had a sense that the look was not chic. I felt ridiculous. Why was I even playing along? I should have just gone and drowned myself in the river. But I didn't. In some ways, I had always longed for a special purpose in life and maybe that is why my mind was able to transform to introspective consciousness in the first place. By nature, I was adventurous.

The hike along the river reminded me of Algonquin Park. It took a few days to make it to the mouth of the river, but I had an unusual amount of energy. In this new world, I seemed to be imbued with greater fortitude physically. It was not difficult to walk for ten hours straight at a brisk pace. Also, the poor fit of the clothing indicated that I was much like the five brothers in the Oor tribe – I was super-sized among regular people. Hopefully, the endowments would help keep me alive if I had impromptu encounters with beasts, or if I had to explain myself to protective tribesmen.

At the mouth of the river I discovered a small village whose members welcomed me in and then fed me. I was being celebrated and it felt as if they recognized me as a deity. They placed a wreath of flowers on my head and regaled me with stories in a language I could not understand. I politely nodded at the appropriate moments and yawned during awkward pregnant pauses. It seemed that I would be protected in the village and that I could use their temple as my home. No one was expecting me to speak, almost as if they anticipated that my language would be alien and my voice a godlike deafening roar.

Also, I was the wrong skin tone for these villagers who then began fitting me with proper clothing. I had the patina of authentic exoticism about me. It was clear that I was a sort of alien,

yet they accepted me and perhaps, they were worshipping me although the interactions were amicable and there was no groveling by them, nor fear in their eyes when I shifted my weight or made a sudden movement.

The temple was modest and reminded me of mausoleums in regular cemeteries back in Toronto. There were two stone pillars framing the opening of the temple. A dozen stone steps led to the entrance and then there were three steps down into the main area of the temple. No couch. No bookshelf. Just an area decorated with gnarly lumps of fat with shards of wood jutting out – they were candles. In that comfy area were some leather rugs, as well as leather pouches stuffed with bird down – these were pillows. Some sheets of papyrus hung over a stone ledge, alongside a plume and small pottery bowl with sooty black ink in it.

I wasn't sure what to do next. After a few nights in the temple, things were getting very uncomfortable despite my almost superhuman physicality. The villagers now took my presence for granted and milled about not paying much attention to me. I decided that I would move on, and I considered traveling north to connect up with Sol and his new miscegenated tribe. There was also a possibility of going east to meet Sum who had already built the new world's first city.

I would have to sleep on it. At least, I had a pillow.

CHAPTER 20

Awakening

When I awoke, it was time to venture off and I decided that I would indeed go north and meet Sol. It was time to figure out how to thank the villagers for their care and kind treatment. However, when I emerged from the temple they were gone, and the village was empty. There had been a few hundred villagers, but now not one remained. It was a bad omen. I felt like looking up to the skies, and shaking my fist at the racist star who I knew was orchestrating the whole sick and twisted cosmic game from above.

I stood outside the temple and considered my useful options. Suddenly, a naked man came around the corner and he was dragging a woman by the ankle, while she kicked and screamed for freedom. He was super-sized like me and the five sons of Pi and Ea, but I had never observed him before. Also, this brute was completely naked but covered in black and red ink sign markings which looked like a cross between the Western alphabet and some kind of primitive pictograms. It was unlikely that I would win the fight, however, I had no choice but to stop this raging monster.

The young woman that was being dragged continued her panicked struggle to break free from the naked inked man's clutches. I lunged at the naked inked man and fell flat on my face. Either the pair of them were invisible, or I was. I tested it and tried to pick up a rock. I was unable to pick up the rock and then realized that it was I who now lacked corporeal tangibility.

The brute dragged the young woman up the stone stairs and into the temple. He had no regard for her whatsoever and her head smacked hard on almost every step. I attempted to mount the stairs but found that my foot had no substance against the stone. It just fell through the stone like a ghost. Then, I began to sink into the land itself. It was as if I had fallen into quicksand. I promptly recalled a documentary I had watched on television which explained the best way to get out of quicksand was to not struggle and instead attempt to go prostrate and distribute your weight across as much area as possible. I tried it.

It is unclear if the logic of what I did mattered with respect to distribution of body weight, however, my mental focus on the environment seemed to pull me back up to ground level. I concentrated mentally on the task of climbing the stairs and was able to mount them slowly but surely.

Inside the temple, I could see the naked inked man violating the young woman. The act was brutal and heinous. What he was doing put me in a murderous rage and yet again I tried to stop him. Instead, while I swung wildly at him with tightly clenched fists that phased through his body, it almost felt like I was part of the rape, either as a co-victim, or a co-perpetrator. I stopped my violence and began crying. My emotional breakdown also disrupted my mental fortitude and I found myself back in the quicksand effect, slipping through the base of the temple and falling into the ground underneath it.

It was almost impossible to concentrate on my own body with what was going on in the temple with the two other bodies, right in front of me. I resigned myself to drowning into the land, yet I didn't sink to the bottom. My head and shoulders remained above the floor in the temple. I was defeated. My cosmic desires had been dashed and I had now experienced things that compromised the basic claims of my Moral Paradigm. I was ruined, although I was still stuck, and the horror persisted in front of me.

CHAPTER 21

Altruism

I could not wedge myself free from the temple floor even after the naked inked man had left. The young woman who had been violated nestled up in the leather pillows and rug that had briefly been my bed. It seemed like she didn't intend on leaving. I called out to her, and it was the first words that I had spoken since being forced into the new world. The sound of my voice remained muffled, and she could not hear me.

She stayed for several nights huddled in the comfy corner of that stolid temple. Eventually, she left, but I still could not move. For whatever cosmic reason, I did not feel hunger, nor did I have to relieve myself. My eyes did not strain, and my throat was never parched. I was put into an ideal state physically and it was undisturbed by the environmental conditions. A few weeks later, the young woman returned to the temple, and she had some of her belongings with her. It seemed that she was going to make my new home, her new home as well.

Months passed and she was showing. The naked inked man had knocked her up and this seemed commonplace for the time, in fact, it was commonplace in my time on Earth as well. But, in all that time when the young woman was in the temple with me, I never heard her speak, and I heard no sounds from the villagers outside the temple. It seemed that they had ventured off permanently. The inked man never returned either. She was going to do what she felt she had to do... and do it alone.

The young woman came to term and gave birth in the temple. It was powerfully shocking and awe-inspiring at the same time. Although quite young, she seemed to know how to deliver the child and then care for it in those initial hours after birth. Once she had recovered, she cleaned up the temple and then left briefly. Her baby was left behind pinned to the rug by the leather pouch pillows.

For the first time in months I decided to use my mental focus to move my immobilized body. On previous attempts, movement had been a futile endeavor, and I had given up. But I was compelled to get a better look at the baby now. The baby began wailing. I blocked out the noise and focused my thoughts on moving my body. My left arm swayed forward. I felt very light from the moment of joy accompanying my first movement in months. Then, a few more pushes forward succeeded. I was on the move through the ground and stone blocks that formed the base of the temple.

I shuffled over to the comfy corner, and I looked upon the baby which was oddly at my eye level. The baby had not ceased wailing. Then, I noticed something strange. The naked baby was intersexual – or what they used to call, hermaphroditic – and it had both male and female external reproductive organs. I was disturbed and didn't know what it meant specifically to me and my situation.

Suddenly, I felt a wave of repulsion and had a strong urge to “swim” out of the ground and away from the temple as far as I could until there was a sense of relief that washed over me. I didn’t get that far. I was repositioned at the foot of the stairs at the opening of the temple. My mental focus dissipated. Once again, I was immobile. The view had improved at least.

The baby was colic and wailed profusely day and night. The young woman placidly attended to the baby as if the ceaseless crying was normal. I was going mad from the noise, and I could still not move from my position half stuck in the ground under the temple. The sea was within sight. That racist star shined on my face. The situation was intolerable.

The young woman had turned to the papyrus sheets and ink during those sleepless nights with her fretful babe. I could barely make out what she was doing with the papyrus, but it looked like drawings from where I was positioned at the entrance to the temple. The drawings were dark and evil. The young woman depicted the scene of the inked man ravaging her and then there were other morbid depictions of her smothering or drowning the colic baby. I was convinced that I had landed in Hell, but I spent day and night trying to determine how it was deserved and what I had done to justify damnation.

I was stuck in the temple for years, but to me I experienced it more like months, and the young woman never deserted the temple as a home. The colic baby became a despondent child. The young woman attempted to teach the child, but it had great difficulty learning and hadn’t articulated speech by age five. The child was wretched and threw irrational angry fits and would then sulk for the rest of the day. Also, this child now had a name – Ister.

I recognized “Ister” as an androgynous name in the young woman’s culture for communities at the mouth of the river Sep, and she recognized that the sexual abnormality of Ister was a cause for concern. I suspected that she was worried about a gendered name because she didn’t know how Ister would appear once reaching puberty. By age eight, Ister had male countenance, but more female physiology. The androgynous appearance was unsettling to me, and I couldn’t ascertain if it was a personal slight against me courtesy the racist star. The racist star now seemed more of a barefaced, bigot star, and I cursed its name.

Fortunately, once the young woman had begun venturing away from the temple, I discovered that I too was more mobile. I was able to move in my ghostly form wherever I wanted provided I remained within visual range of Ister. It was a blessing and deeply insulting at the same time.

The young woman had returned to her neighboring village. I traveled there with them and noted some of the villagers who had once been my hosts at the temple when I had first arrived at the mouth of the river Sep. At age ten, Ister went into a catatonic schizophrenic state and refused to communicate with the world. The young woman spoon-fed her child and cleaned up after it. The only time that Ister would come out of the catatonic state was when another child in the village

touched it. Ister would then scream at the top of its lungs. The maniacal shrill pierced the sky like unholy thunder.

I resented everything I was going through. If there was a lesson in all of it, it was lost to me at the time. Years passed for the young woman, and she had aged poorly through the ordeal and now appeared close to death. Ister came out of the catatonic state as a teenager and left its mother secretly in the night. I felt that forceful push on the back of my head once more. I was shoved along by that force and made to follow Ister away from the village. Now, I knew that my connection wasn't to the young woman who I had attempted to save from all this indignity, but rather, I was tethered to the wretched, Ister. Indignantly, I followed behind Ister in my ghostly form, now bored and uninspired. This was a prison sentence, and my cellmate was the most miserable person that had ever lived.

CHAPTER 22

Resignation

During our journey, when I decided to dig in my heels after Ister began traveling again, the invisible force returned and pushed me forward much in the way that like poles of a magnet feel against each other when you force them together. Ister moved from village to village, slowly heading northeast into the meso-region that the sons of Hum had cultivated as their land for radical worship and brutal zealotry.

Ister focused on paying for its travels through prostitution and in that respect presented itself as an exotic creature with hidden talents. Partway through the lurid act, Ister would reveal the true nature of its body. Some of the men fled, others became nauseated, while others still were intrigued and explored the possibilities of a unique sexual experience. Ister seemed to get off on the power to revolt, whereas Ister resented those men who were inclined to venerate the otherworldly pleasures of unfettered sexual access.

Some men felt betrayed, duped, and assaulted. They responded in kind. However, Ister was a formidable opponent with an aptitude for combat. Likely, Ister had spent all those years in a catatonic state playing out the myriad possibilities of how to defend itself physically, mentally, and emotionally.

Ister could not afford to stick around one village for too long because eventually the villagers realized that Ister was a malevolent character bent on destruction and fueled by hatred. Ister would secure funds through prostitution and then move on.

I had noticed that time was shifting in the new world differently than in the real world, and progress happened rapidly. Just as the five brothers in the Tribe of Oor had brought about rapid development in hunting techniques and engineering projects, this new world was generally moving forward at a quicker pace than it did for human beings on Earth. The age of hunting-gathering had transitioned to agrarian culture while I had been watching when placed across the cosmic games table from that bigoted star. For almost two decades while stuck on the surface of the new world, I had seen rapid development in the social organization and economic systems of communities I encountered.

There was one good bit of news in that time shifting phenomenon – perhaps I would get back to the 21st century expeditiously, and then be able to get my bearings once comparing this new world to the real one I had known.

Being tethered to Ister was almost second nature for me at one point, and I acquired a perverse sense of bonding with it, as if I were the little good conscience Acme angel on Ister's shoulder. I had not influenced Ister in any way but had been bearing witness to the wicked deeds and awful lifestyle of that wretched character. That had been enough to feel like a guardian angel,

and the feeling boosted my own self-esteem slightly and helped me get through the awful and surreal experience.

Then, Ister killed that vibe for me. One morning, Ister left the tavern in the meso-region where it had been lodging for several weeks. Ister found an isolated cave up on a limestone hill and went inside the cave. Ister indulged in the catatonic state once more. The female innkeeper from the tavern had followed Ister and discovered it sitting stoically in the cave. I wished that I could have warned the innkeeper about Ister. Instead, this poor woman spent months taking care of Ister much the same as its mother had done years earlier when Ister was a child and went into the catatonic state for the first time.

The diligent care of the female innkeeper for Ister ensured its survival in that dank hermitage of the limestone cave. I was stuck far enough away from the village that there was little visual stimulation for me. I wondered whether Ister would simply die in the cave, and it seemed preferable to watching how it was violating trust with strangers on a constant basis.

However, Ister began acting oddly and its appetite had altered. After months in the cave, Ister came out of the catatonic state and moved back down the limestone hill as it headed toward the nearest lake. Ister walked into the water and relieved itself and then snatched a fish and ate it raw, bones and all. It was a ghastly sight for me, but Ister appeared proud.

Ister then lifted its tunic and rubbed its belly. I had a very bad feeling about what was happening. I was forced to follow Ister back to the temple where it had been conceived. The temple was my first home in the new world and seeing it brought on emotions that reminded me I was a real person with feelings that mattered.

Somehow, Ister had immaculately conceived. It was showing. Months passed at the temple, and I was happy to be in familiar terrain with the ability to move around provided I remained in visual range of Ister. Ister had resented that it was pregnant and been indulging in self-abuse and mutilation for many weeks. I assumed that Ister was trying to cruelly abuse the unborn child more than stimulate a miscarriage.

Then, one day, Ister gave birth to a son. Ister disappeared and I was not forced to follow. A great burden had been lifted; however, I had a duty to keep the baby alive and well. It was important to concentrate like I had in the past when needing to materialize in the world and have physical tangibility. No one knew that Ister's baby was in the temple except me, and I had no way to communicate with others from my ghostly form.

I concentrated and tried as hard as I could to reach out and touch the newborn, but I continued to phase through its body. Then, to my surprise, I heard shouting outside the temple. I moved to the entrance to the temple to see what the commotion was. Ister was pushing a woman from the nearby village toward the temple. This woman was being forced to become an adoptive

mother for Ister's baby. Ister threw the woman up the temple steps and then stormed off. I remember feeling deep spite and wishing a short and grim future for the monstrous Ister.

The adoptive mother entered the temple and tended to the newborn baby. It dawned on me that I was no longer tethered to anyone in the new world and that I would be free to move around despite remaining invisible to others. The adoptive mother's sister arrived at the temple shortly after and they returned to the village together. I stayed at the temple alone and contemplated the entire sad experience in quiet solitude.

CHAPTER 23

Equity

A new day had dawned and my time with Ister was at an end. I was unburdened and it felt like anything was possible, except for that small detail that I was still invisible to the world. However, I traveled the lands freely, and although I was unable to communicate with others, my ghostly form sustained me ideally and I wanted for nothing physically apart from the touch of another. I felt no hunger or exhaustion, and sleep was more about peaceful meditation than a required rest for a taxed body.

Many years passed and I had been learning some of the dialects from the regions I visited. The loneliness stimulated a new faith in the idea of the skeleton crew of my real cosmic family and friends. I imagined they were watching over me. My guy, Henry, was giving me a thumbs up, and my buddy, Alan, was reciting a list of possible retributions against the bigot star. This Bigot Star had to be put down, but I didn't yet understand how to do that. I had attempted suicide several times in my ghostly form, but death was not possible.

During my journeys throughout the new world, I was affected by nostalgia and returned to the temple at the mouth of the river Sep, north of the cradle where the Tribe of Oor had once prospered. Surprisingly, the temple was not barren. Someone had been using it as a home. I waited inside the temple and became increasingly curious about the nature of the guest. The main part of the temple had some furnishings now, including, a wooden bench and some twine baskets with various items stored inside.

Late at night, a boy entered the temple, and he could not see me although for a moment I thought he caught a glimpse of my shadow based on a surprised stutter step he took coming down the three steps into the temple. I watched as this scrawny, dark-haired boy wrestled with the leather pouches that I had once used as pillows. It was an aggressive show for him, and he appeared frustrated and angry about something. The pillows were still filled with down, but he had also put the papyrus drawings in the pouches as if he were coveting the rudimentary illustrations.

That night, the boy slept, and my curiosity persisted, therefore, I stayed in the temple and waited until the next morning to plan my upcoming set of travels. In the morning, the boy looked over the stack of Ister's mother's papyrus drawings. The gaze of his beady black eyes was piercing and his attention to the details of the illustrations was unwavering. That's when it dawned on me – this boy was Ister's child, and the boy had mistakenly interpreted the drawings as that of the mother who had abandoned him.

I stayed a few more days and saw too much of Ister in the boy. This angry, weak, and sickly boy had fits of rage, condemned the world, and sought pleasure in pain. I wanted nothing more to do with him, and I left.

My travels became more ambitious, and I spent time in the northern continent becoming acquainted with the communities that Sol and Ria had fostered there. Also, I traveled eastward past the disordered meso-region that was pervaded by radical zealotry. I reached the territories that had been developed by Sum. In the northern and eastern continents, the cross-pollination of superior genetics from Pi and Ea's progeny was blaringly obvious. Villages were fast becoming towns, and then small cities. Everyday people were literate. Some local geniuses were developing a variety of medicine and health treatments.

There was something interesting about all of these journeys for me personally because I hadn't traveled to similar places on the real Earth. My parents had taken me to western Europe, and I had done a little traveling throughout North America, but the rest of Earth had been a mystery, and the exotic lands of Africa or Asia had been as foreign to me as the fictional planets of George Lucas's *Star Wars* galaxy. Clearly, the Bigot Star had wanted this new world that I was being shown to mirror the real world I had been raised in. I refused to show gratitude to that horrible taskmaster, but the enriched experience was undeniable as well as me having a small sense of fair compensation. Effectively, I was traveling through China, the Middle East, and Africa while I was in the new world with my ideal physicality, ghostly protection, and favorable temporal experience. It was a unique adventure regardless of the loneliness and frustration of being captive.

However, I was troubled by the boy at the temple – Ister's offspring. I returned to the temple for the last time. As mentioned, my physical form was ghostly but ideally constructed and I had not been aging. Suicide wasn't possible. It seemed that I was trapped for as long as the Bigot Star planned to hold me. There was some consolation in the fact that big things were happening across the globe. Events unfolded faster than expected. The high pace suggested that there was a greater purpose to my being there than mere imprisonment.

Back at the temple, the boy had now become a young man. He had also become a prolific predator. He preyed on small children, usually boys, and sometimes he traveled as far as the meso-region to stalk his targets. This is when I started to focus very hard on mental fortitude and on bringing my form more material tangibility in the new world. Yet, I truly felt that some unconscious fear was standing in my way, and I couldn't let my unconscious mind's survival instinct force me into living immorally. This psychotic offspring of Ister had to be stopped and destroyed.

Ister's son did not stop, and his murderous ways continued unabated. I could not watch. Also, I no longer went inside the temple because that is where the children were taken. Time passed and I continued to focus mentally on touching objects in the world. More than anything, I wanted to pick up a rock and throw it. It didn't have to hit Ister's son, but rather, just spook him and persuade him to stop his evil deeds through provoking an acute sense of superstition.

The days were long, and I no longer followed behind Ister's son on his "hunts". Instead, I stayed outside the temple and looked to the sea longing for escape. But, one night I had a reprieve of sorts.

Ister had returned to the temple and its son was still away stalking the vulnerable and helpless. Ister perused the furnishings in the temple and then settled in. A few days later, Ister's son returned and was empty-handed. He was shocked to see someone in the temple – his sanctum sanctorum. I figured he must have thought that Ister was a concerned parent ready to accuse the abhorrent man of unspeakable acts. Instead, Ister removed its tunic and stood in front of its son bare. Somehow, Ister knew that the man was its son. Yet, the son appeared clueless to that relationship.

The son was enraged by Ister's provocative display, and he attacked Ister with wild punches. Then, and most heinously, the couple began to embrace and soon they were copulating on the leather rug in the comfy corner of the stolid temple. I shook my head, accompanied by a strong sense of antipathy that washed over me. Somehow, none of it surprised me really. I left the entrance to the temple and felt distinctly ill. It was the first time my ghostly form and fortified body had provided a physical sensation of weakness. Perhaps, I was dying? This was a good thing, then.

Not much changed over the following few months and Ister helped its son with his infanticidal mania. Of course, Ister was pregnant once more, and I suspected that it wasn't immaculate conception this time. The whole thing was tasteless for me, and I recognized the Bigot Star as an evil overlord attempting to rule through an Immoral Paradigm. This perception was radically different from my previously held belief that the Bigot Star was simply amoral and reckless in how it was torturing me, which I had believed it was misconstruing as a worthy imparting of special knowledge. Where once I had thought what I was experiencing was a perverse educational program, I now saw it as a perniciously cruel game.

Things were about to change, however.

CHAPTER 24

Idolatry

It seemed as if Ister was about to pop. Ister's son was a pure sociopath who was indifferent to the pregnancy and stayed focused on his predatory schedule. One night, I heard Ister cry out in pain, and it reminded me of the piercing screams when it was merely a baby. The shrill howl sent shivers up my spine, and again, my body provided a sensation of weakness.

Although, I had vowed to not enter the temple again, the sound of Ister crying out had me instinctively concentrating on getting up the temple steps to investigate. I stood at the entrance to the temple. Ister's son moved past me – or rather, through me – and was at the side of Ister with more concern than I had ever seen from him. He held Ister's hand much like a loving husband would.

Ister was breathing heavily and had clearly gone into labor, however, a moment later, Ister's eyes bulged, and the breathing stopped. Ister's head slowly rolled back and hung off its shoulders. Ister's son tried at first to rouse Ister, but to no avail. Then it happened. Ister's legs parted, and a deafening deep tone resonated in my head. The sound was deafening. An unnatural bright light filled the temple and Ister's body began to come apart right down the middle. Ister was being split in two by an invisible force. The light was now blinding. The world shook. Then, it was over.

Ister's son rose to his feet confused by the cataclysmic happening. Ister's corpse lay limp on the ground in mangled halves. Ister's son moved past me with a troubled look. I stepped aside not caring to have him to pass through me again. However, as Ister's son moved down the steps of the temple, I noticed something following behind him – rot and decay.

Ister's son carried a curse now and wherever he went he brought that curse and infected the land with it. Everything he passed then died. The land became barren, the waters dried up, the vegetation withered and rotted, and people fell down decaying and then ceased up and died.

Ister's son spent the next few years traveling the face of the new world killing everything in his path. It seemed his goal was to see that world destroyed utterly. I followed behind quietly not directly affected by his cursed touch while in my ghostly form.

A few short years later, the deed was complete. Ister's son had returned to the temple area, and not only had Ister's son killed all life on the planet, but the planet itself had shriveled. The new world which I had once viewed as a globe was now a flat piece of dead land with no horizon.

Ister's son stood in the middle of the remaining territory and looked up at the foggy, sunless skies. He shrieked. The war cry was something misplaced between celebration and defeat. A paradoxical exclamation to punctuate the desolation he had wrought. I wasn't impressed by the weak, beady-eyed, cruel little man.

Suddenly, I felt something effervescing at my feet. I worried that the land was going to capture me once more in its quicksand form. However, that didn't happen and instead the small patch of barren land was bleeding – oozing excrement. Anyone else would have been sure that they were now in Hell, but I knew better. I was in Kerplunck and Ister's son had been Markis, the whole time.

CHAPTER 25

Palimpsest

I had arrived in Kerplunck, but there was something refreshing about the notion because it meant that the cosmic forces were now referencing my own imagination. My cosmic story that was told from the normal Will Strange life I had been living for twenty-something years was now real within the unreal. Clearly, my story had mattered. There was some cause for celebration despite being ankle-deep in actual waste.

Fortunately, I had retained my ghostly form and Markis couldn't see that it was only he and myself standing on the pathetic patch of crap that was known as Kerplunck. Known as "Kerplunck?" – I had named it that!

Surely, this bad joke signaled that the cosmic forces – whether it be the Bigot Star, or E.T. Arnold himself – would soon arrive and confess that it was all just a hokey and longwinded way to let me know that I mattered in the universe and that my stories were pretty good overall.

It seemed sneaky to me, and my expectation was that the charade would soon end, and I would be released. In fact, I was hoping that the mindboggling experience was designed as a transition so that my shift from a mortal first life to a cosmic life would be something that I could embrace instead of rejecting due to anxiety or shame. It might have been the case that had I been quietly removed in Algonquin Park, then the cosmic life would have been deemed untrustworthy, or otherwise, I would have felt myself unworthy of the great reward. I may have looked at my skeleton crew in the cosmic with distrust and deemed them evil characters engaged in a trick of the trade. Perhaps, this transition through the new world experience was the appropriate medium for altering my perceptions and quelling my paranoia such that I might trust my real cosmic family should I become fortunate enough to meet them in person.

And so, I waited for things to get better. I observed Markis building his dirty turd empire and regained some of my lost sense of humor. Despair switched to irreverence, and my thoughts focused on how I was too good to be stuck in Kerplunck, and that the cosmic forces which seemingly controlled my fate needed to smarten up in a hurry. The cosmic game had to operate in recognition of this intuitive fact about my worth and stop blackballing me.

Still, I remained stationed in Kerplunck and watched the formation of a fantasy land which I had once proclaimed during the cosmic wager, Tricks of the Trade. All the familiar elements from my story were present: from the crap-covered landscape to the brown hazy fog that constituted a sky. I even spotted "Butt-crack Canyon", a geographic feature I had thought up rather whimsically one night while watching *The Matrix Revolutions* in the movie theater alone, and determining which of the actors in that movie were in fact evil cosmic characters working for Clint and Markis. Interestingly, I could now evaluate that butt-crack canyon had once been the site of the mighty river Sep.

There were things that I already knew about Kerplunck: it was not part of a physical universe, and it was a land of arcane, eldritch magic. Objects could be imbued with life and would have personalities that matched their status as objects or parts. You couldn't fall off the edge of Kerplunck and instead you would be walking on the underside experiencing it as the top side. Markis was "Daddy" in Kerplunck, but later H8 or "Hate" would become the "Doodoo Papi" of the flipside of Kerplunck. Hate was a man composed entirely of excrement and he was Markis's nemesis. I was looking forward to the moment of his inception.

Perhaps, having thought up such a horrible place, somehow, I deserved to be one of its residents. I couldn't understand why I was being punished though because Tricks of the Trade and the identification of Kerplunck had all been about vanquishing evil cosmic characters from the real world, so that humanity could be free from evil influence and nefarious, inhuman wicked schemes. How was that deserving of punishment? It was a good cause, no?

Markis appeared proud of his worthless deed in destroying the new world. I watched as he strolled from one side of Kerplunck to the other. It took the equivalent of an hour in real time. This tiny patch of shit was his kingdom, and he had the nerve to hold his head up high. I wanted to smack him upside the head, but my own predicament weighed on me, and I kept entertaining feelings of guilt as a check to stimulate my mental reasoning on whether I truly deserved what was happening to me.

Then, it dawned on me what was going to happen next.

CHAPTER 27

Reservation

Markis surveyed his land, but then thought to examine his own form. He reached up to his face tentatively and let his fingers run across a new proliferation of creases. His visage had become wrinkly, and if a mirror had been available his reflection would have been shocking for the ancient countenance staring back through those beady, little black eyes.

He was standing near the canyon that had once been the river Sep, marveling at the death of the former mighty lifegiving channel. For a moment, I thought I saw some regret crawl up from his pursed lips and across his fluting brow. Perhaps, Markis was ashamed that he hadn't considered the consequences of his actions better. Maybe he was parched from that war cry earlier.

It gave me pleasure to consider that Markis was aware of his imminent folly in creating Kerplunk. I knew the best part was coming up.

Markis felt it too. He began walking away from the canyon and toward a hard, dark lump of waste that was once the site of our temple. As he traversed the barren landscape, his body began to ache and then tremble. Everywhere but his neck and head were beginning to have the distinct sensation of burning. He tore off his tunic and stood naked among the waste. His fingernails went to work, and his scratching quickly turned to gouging.

Markis grimaced and closed his eyes as skin began to flay exposing his muscle and organs. He reached the hard, dark lump and stood in silence. The pain was excruciating. There was a moment where Markis realized that his organs were now invaders. He tore at his body, attacking his own exposed organs as if they were frenzied piranhas feasting at the shoal of his dry bones.

The organs were thrown in all directions, scattered across the shriveled wafer of land that was Kerplunk. Markis was now nothing more than a living skeleton body with a full head on top. The experience horrified him, but he was exhilarated about the exquisite sensation. Markis had lived his life with complete numbness, but now sensitivity became him.

Markis rested on the hard, dark lump that was to become his throne.

Later, Markis rose and appeared already acclimated to his new corporeal condition. Out of the waste of the land, he crafted an amphitheater around the hard, dark lump. The activity reminded me of summer holidays with my family when my father would lie on the beach near the water and pick up soggy mounds of sand and let them drop from his fingertips creating little knobby towers.

Markis was no craftsmen, but he did a decent job on the amphitheater which would later become the clubhouse for his closest allies in Kerplunk. Now, it was time to create those allies. Markis had to consider his minions carefully because he wouldn't be able to trust easily, nor did

he yet know whether his rule of Kerplunck was absolute. He might be about to create – but could he destroy anymore?

In my estimates, Markis was evil incarnate, and the stories of Satan or Hannibal Lecter paled in comparison to what I had witnessed with this monster. He was a predator of the worst kind, and his mind was riddled with hatred. He was heartless, to be sure. I knew something of Markis's reasoning because I had announced it during the cosmic wager, Tricks of the Trade.

Markis considered Nature to be the essence of Good and it was no wonder that he killed a planet the first chance he got. Nature was geared for protecting the vulnerable and everything hardwired into the most intelligent and social creatures was designed for propagation of the species which was achieved ideally through protection of vulnerable offspring. Markis determined that true Evil would oppose Good completely, therefore, the vulnerable were to be exploited maximally.

Markis went further with his credo on the principles of evil and wrongdoing. He was against Nature, but by extension he was against the structures which were natural and supported Nature's mandate to protect the vulnerable. Markis opposed family and found it anathema. As a male, family was only possible through adding children, which intuitively meant adding a woman to the unit. As such, Markis despised women and children which he found synecdoche for family, and thus Nature and Good. With these principles adhered to, by default, Markis was only willing to share intimacy with other males – he was homosexual.

I knew that Markis had a special relationship with intersexuals based on my pronouncements during the cosmic wager story, however, I hadn't been able to justify that prejudice at the time, and it was a choice mainly rooted in intuition. After knowing of Markis's inception into being as well as his relationship with Ister, it all started to make sense.

It dawned on me that the Bigot Star may have been my fanboy and was bringing my story to life out of some depraved sense of devotion to my work. It was a passing thought.

Markis intended to create his community, and they were going to be his sons – his 'boys' as well as his lovers. These boys would exemplify his brand of evil and thus he would not need to punish them the way he had all those children in the new world that I was shown.

I mused about how it must be the case that homosexual men can have that orientation because of positive feelings of attraction to other men. However, Markis and his boys were purely evil beings, not defined through their positive feelings, of which they had none. Their attractions were predatory and based in hatred and a compulsion to cause suffering for others. Their intimate lives were not guided by "attractive" forces per se, but rather, intimacy was a political strategy to gain the loyalty of allies and then attain prestige within the community. There was absolutely no love in Kerplunck.

Before the creation of the boys came the monster that I had once known as, Alex.

CHAPTER 28

Abysmal

Markis stood on his hard, dark lump of waste that was his new throne, and he closed his eyes. He focused his thoughts on the idea of a partner, but every time he did, Ister would pop up in his mind. He was getting frustrated and irate with his own lack of imagination. I found it amusing because he had lived such a bunk life and had refused to train in creativity because he deemed it a virtuous trait.

Markis must have been thinking back to the papyrus illustrations. He took his gnarled bone finger and pushed it into the spongy wasteland. He drew the outline of a figure. The outline was rudimentary, and no one would mistake it for anything other than a poorly-toned person. Then, he searched the land for one of his organs that had been strewn across the landscape during his painful physical transformation. Toward the canyon, he found the remnants of his unimpressive genitals. He gathered the parts and returned with them to his throne.

He placed the genitals in the appropriate position on top of the drawn outline. Markis closed his eyes once more and raised his hands up like an evangelical preacher calling upon the forces of the heavens to validate his message. When he opened his eyes, there was a terrifying beast that stood before him, drooling, and panting in anticipation of its master's whimsical command.

This beast was Alex, but that wasn't the Kerplunckian name. In Kerplunck this first ally of Markis was known by me as "Agie", but also sometimes, "Linzo". The beast was friendly and loyal to Markis. This beast had two faces, one poorly articulated resting on its shoulders in correspondence with Markis's sloppy outline, and the other between its legs representing the genitalia. In the wasteland of Kerplunck, the conjuring of Agie-Linzo had resulted in Markis's genitals and the outline he had drawn disappearing from the landscape. The symbol and totem were now imbued in the essence of the beast.

Agie-Linzo was two distinct personalities for a single mind, yet the pair conversed at length about any topic at all. I considered Alex's social butterfly nature when I looked upon Markis's grotesque creation. The top half, Agie, was poorly defined and bloblike, while the lower half, Linzo, was scabby and covered in boils with gangrened flesh growing over the boils. The beast didn't seem in pain and appeared appreciative to have been summoned and conjured into existence.

Watching Markis in his first act of creation had me considering the possibility that I too might find myself able to create in this magical place. I contemplated the most useful thing and determined it was a jet or space rocket to travel away from Kerplunck as quickly as possible. It wasn't a defining moment for my creative imagination, but it was what I could muster as a raw solution on the fly.

Markis was proud of his accomplishment, and I knew that he sought only absolute loyalty from the beast. Agie-Linzo was an agreeable companion, and Markis learned that the 'three' of

them thought alike. Additionally, Agie-Linzo had a talent – they could conjure a dreamscape within Kerplunck. The first dreamscape that they presented to Markis was of the new world, focused on a place in the meso-region that had meant something to Markis. Markis enjoyed the experience but was overcome with negative feelings which he reframed as being about the hazy quality of the dreamscape as opposed to a reminder that he had erred in destroying the new world so thoughtlessly.

Markis knew that Agie-Linzo's dreamscapes would provide for the entire Kerplunckian community and that his new people would not feel shame through the limitation imposed on them by existing in a pathetic shriveled-up sheet of waste as embarrassing knick-knacks and leftovers. What Markis didn't realize was that others that he created would also have the dreamscape talent, and that it would impose a political hierarchy for the development of Kerplunck. I wasn't planning to give him a head's up.

Markis further explored Agie-Linzo's dreamscape dimension to be sure that he understood its nature and how it worked. It seemed that he could leave when he wanted, and he would wake up in his physical position in Kerplunck. Also, Agie-Linzo could stop hosting the dreamscape at any time which would wake anyone experiencing that dimension or realm. Markis was able to conjure some things in the dreamscape, such as, food or weapons. However, other objects required a request to the host. If Markis wanted to experience attacking a child, he had to request the representation of the oblivious child from Agie-Linzo. This was somewhat annoying to him, yet Agie-Linzo never denied Markis's requests, therefore, Markis interpreted it as a mere formality as well as a condition that could be used against other Kerplunckians at a later time.

The dreamscape lacked key elements of fidelity for the objects represented, such as, the water at the river sometimes tasted more like blood, or the blue skies shifted to the brown pea soup haze that characterized Kerplunckian skies. However, Markis found these unique features fascinating and trusted that Agie-Linzo's dreamscape imagination was most evil. Markis stopped toying with the dreamscapes and recognized that his kingdom held some promise.

CHAPTER 29

Aberration

Agie-Linzo suggested to Markis that it was time to create more companions. The beast was a social animal and was growing weary of pandering to Markis's base desires through the dreamscapes. Markis acquiesced to quell the aching of the beast. The 'trio' traveled across the wasteland and stopped off wherever they found some of Markis's organ parts.

The first stop was at Markis's lungs. Markis kneeled and picked up one of the lungs contemplating its former function. There was something unnerving regarding the body parts no longer being needed by him, yet they were now needed for him. Markis did his conjuring ritual and when he opened his eyes, there were two male figures in front of him. They were both lanky and elderly, and one was inverted from Markis in that he had a skeleton head, but a flesh body. This skull-man felt at his face and recognized the lack. He immediately experienced a sense of shame and reached into the waste at his feet and packed in into his skull to create a makeshift mask and faux skin.

Markis was troubled by the strange sense of pride displayed by the skull-man, yet he recognized that the pair were his brothers because they were elderly like him. The gaunt man attempted to speak but had no tongue and could not be heard. He too reached into the wasteland and crafted a tongue from it. He fitted the tongue into his mouth and the gaunt-man was now able to speak in Kerplunck. The gaunt-man would be named by me as "Lee n"., and the skull-man was "Patiosbad".

These were joke names in a sense, even if they weren't laugh out loud funny. I saw poetry in the nomenclature of Kerplunck. However, keep in mind that Markis, Agie-Linzo, Lee n., Patiosbad, and all the other Kerplunckians gave themselves honorable titles and names which denoted magnificence and bravery in battle. For example, Markis, had named himself Brit Sver which in his native dialect from the new world had meant, "broad sword".

I could not have cared less about what these monsters named themselves and I was wholly concerned with exposing and humiliating them at that time when I was immersed in my self-appointed role of judge during the cosmic wager, Tricks of the Trade.

Markis was relieved that his brothers were unable to conjure dreamscapes, and he instructed Agie-Linzo in private to sometimes disrupt the pleasure of the dreamscape experience for his brothers. Agie-Linzo remained loyal to Markis despite developing intimate relations with the brothers. Markis was not interested in intimacy with his brothers at first, and he was focused on conjuring his "purdy" boys, which I later referred to as the "Turdy Dozen".

Lee n. and Patiosbad had some limited ability to create new life in Kerplunck. Markis was a little shocked at first by the creative potency the brothers displayed which Agie-Linzo lacked, but the personalities that were created by the brothers never had a strong sense of self-worth, and

therefore they were never deemed a threat. Lee n. constantly flaked dandruff from his flaccid straw strands of grey and black hair, and he then conjured the flakes into personalities which he labeled his “Twinks”. Whereas, Patiosbad had cut off his own foot and conjured maggots to attack it. He then used his magic to imbue distinct personality into the foot, each of the toes, the heel, as well as all the maggots. This community was known as the “Grotto”, and they tended to spend time together and not bother with anything else going on in Kerplunck. Small, hermetically-sealed communities such as the Grotto would become common throughout Kerplunck.

Markis was worried that his brothers would continue creating pointless personalities that had to be tended to, and so he stepped in and put himself to task on crafting the grandeur hierarchical structure of Kerplunck. He traveled the wasteland and magically imbued life and personality into his other organs and body parts wherever they lay. Each became one of his sons. These boys all had the dreamscape ability, and this made Markis proud as it completely undermined the creative potency of his brothers.

The boys were loyal to Markis, and they stayed geographically close to where they had been created. In some cases, they had no ability to move physically in Kerplunck, although dreamscapes fixed those kinds of problems and provided for fully articulated able-bodied form. All the sons of Markis had the ability to conjure dreamscapes for their local communities, but Veggie Clint’s dreamscapes approximated a fully real physical experience. Additionally, you did not have to be in close proximity to Veggie Clint to be within his vivid dreamscape, whereas some of the boys had a short range for their dreamscape conjuring. Markis saw much of himself in Veggie Clint, and he wasn’t worried about Clint usurping the throne. He longed for Clint’s intimacy.

Previously, during the cosmic wager, I had stated that Veggie Clint’s dreamscapes were the medium by which all the evil characters of Kerplunck were able to interface with the humans of Earth and enter that physical universe. As I looked upon Veggie Clint, positioned centrally in Kerplunck, I had a sense that my story had been wicked and that I could have chosen to explain evil on Earth in terms that implied less insidious control from cosmic vantage. I felt blameworthy for all the ills of the human race, even if that wasn’t a rational sentiment on my part.

It seemed to me that it might be time to consider leaving Kerplunck. I needed to think carefully about the possibilities and where I might be ‘plunked’ next by the Bigot Star, especially if I was unwise, reckless, or desperate in my methods of escape.

CHAPTER 30

Escapism

While I considered my plans for escape, Markis and his new underlings were conjuring dreamscape fantasy worlds as well as bringing life to a surfeit of worthless flotsam and jetsam scattered about the wasteland. Markis felt that it would be a good counter-balance to the power of his boys if he created some new pals his own age. The pals would join the original quartet and be located around the hard, dark lump throne and amphitheater.

Markis worked with Lee n., and they created “Bill Grundy”. It was a disaster and Bill Grundy immediately recognized his intellectual superiority and then asserted total independence, disappearing to the farthest corner of Kerplunck beyond butt-crack canyon. Markis quickly animated the two sides of the butt-crack canyon to ensure that Bill Grundy met with gatekeepers if he ever planned on returning to the main community. The gatekeepers were “Funck” and “Couples”. Funck became Bill Grundy’s best friend while Couples pretended that he had another partner, and he falsified a multiple personality similar to how Agie-Linzo articulated itself. For Markis, Bill Grundy’s act of rejection wouldn’t matter because Grundy never returned to the main community of Kerplunck. Truth be told, he was worried that hanging out with the others would have resulted in him being bested at some point, and then forever humiliated as an inferior being. Evil has a poor sense of self-worth, inherently, and this is because evil isn’t necessary.

Bill Grundy could not conjure dreamscapes and his experience was very dull at first, but later, other bastard characters would venture beyond the canyon and discover Bill tucked under his blanket of waste. Markis was not deterred, and he attempted a new pal creation by conjuring with Patiosbad. “Taxie” was conceived and was as much a social animal as Agie-Linzo. Agie Linzo was overtaken with jealous rage, and they banished Taxie to Bill Grundy’s corner of rejects in Kerplunck.

Later, Taxie, who had a large mobile physical form, would provide a ferry service for bastards travelling between the established communities of Kerplunck and the outlands frequented by rejects. Disillusioned dandruff flakes, curmudgeon old scabs, scatterbrained pubic hairs, indignant cancer-ridden left testicle – it didn’t matter to Taxie, all aboard!

Kerplunck disgusted me. I had intended it as a bad joke against malevolent personalities which deserved to be berated, however, watching Markis go to work on the creation of the land was a celebration for these meager cretinous creeps. I was forced to experience the best parts of this awful place. I knew that it was the doing of the Bigot Star. I had to craft some new existential meditations that would provide an intellectual method for thinking my way out of Kerplunck.

Markis continued creating new life, and he had some successes with Lee Hag, The Shrew, Harry Harlot Hag, Ashbennie the Wicked Witch, and plenty of others. Markis had a bunch of poker buddies now and things were looking up for him. In my ghostly form, I was starting to smell Kerplunck for the first time and it was stale and raunchy. I considered moving over to the quiet

underside, but I remembered my announcement of the bastard, H8 or “Hate”. In my cosmic wager judgment, I had recognized H8 but never bothered with a proper origin story. Now, it was too risky to move from my position given I didn’t know how life started on the flipside of Kerplunck.

I spent most of my time down in the butt-crack canyon because Funck, Couples, and Bill Grundy were surprisingly entertaining. Their jokes focused on mocking regular people that they had encountered in the dreamscapes that approximated life on Earth where I had lived as Will Strange the human. I could relate to the jokes, whereas most of the other humor in Kerplunck was about the joys of sodomy or making children cry. Being trapped in such a place was tedium writ large.

Fortunately, there was a reprieve. Markis’s brothers, Lee n. and Patiosbad, decided to conjure a new pal without Markis’s permission. They wanted to shake things up more than they were attempting to usurp the throne. “Porno” was created. Porno was an impish salacious fellow who got around in a hurry. Porno was notorious for being able to hijack dreamscapes and it liberally exercised its potency in that regard. I knew that over time, all the powerful evil characters in Kerplunck would be required to make concessions during negotiations with Porno, in exchange for Porno’s cooperation and pledge to not interfere in dreamscapes. For now, Porno was running wild, and briefly, it brought a smile to my face.

I reflected on the origin of Markis. He was remarkably different from the other Kerplunckians, even if he was their leader and “daddy”. Markis had been raised in a village by loving women and other decent people. He knew of nature, compassion, fairness, and empathy. He would never express good, but he had learned of good, and it was part of him in that way. Whereas the creatures of Kerplunck were unnatural, and grotesque perversions of familiar objects and personality types. I had condemned a natural being to an unnatural living condition. Had I committed a cosmic offense? Is that why I was trapped?

Things got quiet around Kerplunck as the boys were providing dreamscape experiences for their minions, around the clock. When Kerplunckians were in a dreamscape fantasy world experience, it was as if they were sleeping in the wastelands of Kerplunck. In those quiet moments, I felt some measure of peace and I was able to focus on my next meditation which I hoped would be a kind of magical conjuring that might bring about a much-needed change of scenery.

CHAPTER 31

Reclusive

The developments in Kerplunck distracted me, and I didn't get far with my meditations at first. My ghost form sustained me, and I still wanted for nothing physically, other than intimate contact with a good person. Time was also still passing oddly, and I no longer knew how long I had been held in the dark void under Willard's house, but centuries had passed for the people I had observed. Perhaps, many years had passed for me.

There were a few events in the early days of Kerplunck that were noteworthy. One of Markis's boys had turned out to be a bastard. Frisco was a corpulent lump of Markis's smegma then animated, but immobile. Frisco had a moderately vivid dreamscape realm, and one that was better than most. He convinced Taxie to ferry him across the canyon to the areas where Bill Grundy and the rejects hung out. Along the way, Frisco demanded that a skeleton boy of Veggie Clint's territory be abducted and brought with them.

The trio arrived on the other side of the canyon and Frisco immediately put the skeleton boy to work on digging up the wasteland with its shovel bone arm. Frisco claimed that he wanted a wider canyon so that the main community of Kerplunckians could never invade the far side where bastards and rejects dwelled. However, Frisco was driven by pride and what he truly wanted was for the skeleton boy to use his shovel bone arm to dig the waste and build a mountain that Frisco would perch atop. Frisco thought that his physical vantage would guarantee him prestige, and perhaps even, authority.

The skeleton boy with the shovel bone arm would become known around Kerplunck as "Shit Pits the Shoveler" and for no other reason that he shoveled shit from a pit. The lack of creativity for Frisco in naming the skeleton boy underscored his weak plan regarding demonstrating superiority. Also, through Frisco's story involving his pronouncement on naming others, he had also done my work for me during the cosmic wager – that did happen sometimes. Much later, the mountain was built up so high that Frisco would slide down the side of the mountain unless he was perched at the peak by his able-bodied minions. However, being at the peak put him at too great a distance to provide his dreamscape realm to any of the other Kerplunckians. He was the fool on a hill.

These kinds of comedy of errors were common in Kerplunck. However, other schemes could be most insidious, such as, when Veggie Clint began to transform and feel shame and humiliation for the first time. Veggie Clint had been the most powerful in Kerplunck, and all the Kerplunckians relied on his vivid dreamscapes. However, no one dared defy the ultimate authority of Markis because it was felt that Markis wielded the power to destroy everything and start again. Markis didn't believe it himself but appreciated the collective fear which the legend instilled in his people.

Veggie Clint had been one of the more mobile “full-body” beings in Kerplunck, and he had enjoyed patrolling his territory which was central in Kerplunck, and larger than that of the other boys in the Turdy Dozen. Over time, Veggie Clint’s body began to wear down, and although distasteful to mention, his innards began falling out. He was burdened with a severely prolapsed rectum, which carried a measure of embarrassment within a community of homosexual males.

Veggie Clint attempted to play off the condition as favourable, but no one was buying it. In time, Kerplunckians were afraid to talk about Clint’s condition because they didn’t want to experience his wrath. They picked different code words to refer to the condition, and eventually, they settled on a non sequitur, “dingus”. So, Clint had a problem with his dingus, and everyone knew it. Clint was satisfied with the ambiguity of the term that was chosen.

Clint’s condition worsened and eventually he had to sit down. The dingus became his perch and in time he could no longer move, hence, “Veggie Clint”. Clint loathed his dingus but then realized that all the hatred that he had for it could be transferred and then manifested in the body part when he conjured an animation spell for it. He brought his dingus to life and named it, “Raeth”. This was considered his heart. Raeth was a formidable personality that reminded me a great deal of Ister.

Raeth was self-absorbed, but also a control freak. It wanted to write laws for Kerplunck and oppress Kerplunckians with economic systems and political structures. Clint stood by Raeth, and the saving grace of the creation was that Raeth had no ability to conjure dreamscapes.

Later, Raeth began plotting against Markis, and it suggested to Clint that they overthrow Markis’s rule. Veggie Clint had been created from Markis’s parts, and something about that process made it difficult for him to become a full-fledged bastard. Frisco had been smegma which was an external component of Markis, and not truly a part of his father’s former form. Whereas Clint felt a kinship with Markis.

Eventually, Clint caved to Raeth’s pressure, and he agreed that they might overthrow Markis given that it was the evil thing to do. While Markis was occupied with a dreamscape, Clint and Raeth went to the hard, dark lump that was Markis’s throne, and they molded and sculpted it into a figure. They conjured the figure to life. It was a man composed of hard, dark excrement. This was H8.

Clint and Raeth demanded that H8 recognize that their creation was Clint’s new father and that H8 was to perform regicide as an act of contrition to the new rulers of Kerplunck – Clint and Raeth. H8 would destroy Markis – it was commanded. Then, H8 was to know his role as a father who obeys the son. Veggie Clint would be King.

H8 chortled and shook his head defiantly. Immediately, he ventured off past the canyon and over to the base of Frisco’s Mountain. H8 was an imposing figure and had dreamscape ability. He could force nearby Kerplunckians into his dreamscape, and they did not have the power to

leave unless he allowed it. H8 demonstrated his special abilities against Shit Pits the Shoveler. Shit Pits got the point. H8 demanded that the skeleton boy start digging a hole.

Eventually, the hole went all the way through the wasteland to the other side of the crappy wafer of Kerplunck. H8 jumped through and landed on the flipside where he then ruled with a crusty fist. I knew that H8 could have just walked over the edge nonchalantly, but I suppose making it to the other side his way was more dramatic. The time it took for digging the hole had also given H8 an opportunity to become familiar with Kerplunckians as he waited impatiently for Shit Pits to complete the task. Once on the flipside of Kerplunck, H8 filled the hole he had jumped through. The other Kerplunckians never thought to walk over the edge of their land, even though they now knew that there was a surface underneath them. In truth, they were terrified of H8, and they wanted him gone as fast as he had arrived.

CHAPTER 32

Owing

On the flipside of Kerplunck, H8 created a population of minions only from the waste land. H8 was so bunk that he didn't have a creative imagination whatsoever and he relied on copying the characters that he had encountered on Markis's side of Kerplunck. His copies were ineffectual personalities that paled in comparison with the original. These "equivalents" lacked energy and enthusiasm, and they were prone to being controlled through propaganda.

I had a fairly good idea of what was going on in the flipside of Kerplunck, and I had no interest in investigating. I had read George Orwell's 1984 before my trip to Algonquin Park, and I had announced during the cosmic wager that H8 was a Big Brother figure who had presented as Henry VIII, King of England, in my world. He was the ultimate tyrant. The irony was that H8 in actuality had no partner, and his "queens" were balls of crap that he had kicked off the edge of Kerplunck long ago. Well for me, long ago was right now. Catching up to history was a little disappointing, and I considered how Kerplunckians were so lucky to have had the human race to play off of with all its creativity and ingenuity. Once again, I was resenting being in Kerplunck and I rued the name – Bigot Star.

Being in Kerplunck emphasized the lower-faculty experience of life, and how the lower faculties of a person's mind impact their mentality. All the creatures in Kerplunck were driven by their lower-faculty affective responses to stimuli and happenings. I was an anomaly in that regard, and it was the fundamental reason why I didn't belong in Kerplunck and didn't deserve to be stuck there. Finally, I had a novel, yet relevant topic for my next meditation.

I considered that our experience is based in lower faculties and higher faculties – not a new idea, and one canonized into philosophy by Immanuel Kant. For me, the lower faculties were "affect", and they had a gendered quality. Regardless of how a human being perceives their gender identity, all human beings have male and female hormones. I reasoned that male hormones focus on *aggressive responses* to stimuli, whereas female hormones focus on *emotional responses* to stimuli. Man, woman, or any other designation demonstratable or merely felt is provoked to respond to stimuli with affect and since all humans have male and female hormones then that response will have both an aggressive and emotional component.

I believe that an important part of what has ailed society in recent years is the feminist-based denial that women have a bad, or unhealthy, expression of aggression. Typically, feminists focus on stigmatizing men as having a problem with aggression ("mansplaining", toxic masculinity, competitive meritocracy, etc.), while emotion is colored by them as the key to being compassionate and empathetic – it is wholly good, and women know it better than men. This strikes me as reductionist drivel, and misandrist self-deception. Such lies rip at the fabric of society and sow seeds of distrust into the most basic human relationships pervading the home, school, and workplace.

To avoid continuing down the rabbit hole of political outrage by engaging in more inflammatory rhetoric, I will stop and note that in my estimates there is both a bad expression of aggression and an equally bad expression of emotion that is possible for anyone. These gendered components of affect are lower faculties, and they provoke responses to stimuli that are reflexive. The lower faculty of affect promotes the mind remaining non-introspective and subverts it from engaging in higher-faculty reasoning.

I am not suggesting that people would be better off tuning out their affective response completely, but rather, this lower faculty affective response must be mediated by the higher faculties. The higher faculties of reasoning are governed by rationality and logic.

Rationality and logic provide the individual with the opportunity to evaluate affective response, and then check it for validity and appropriateness, but this is only true when higher faculties are privileged. I believe that when I transformed to true introspective consciousness, I was able to banish the machinations and workings of my subconscious, and then prioritize my higher faculty reasoning. It isn't to say that I never lost my cool after that, but rather, I thought longer and harder about whether my emotional/aggressive response was the correct one. I acted without thinking a lot less. You don't have to be truly introspective to achieve this kind of reasonable way – highly conscientious minds do it as well.

It was clear that I wasn't like Kerplunckians, and I was not ruled by my lower faculty affective response to stimuli. How could this realization help me escape my predicament? Did I have to find a way to use their affect against them? While, I was concentrating hard on the problem I had closed my eyes to map out the ideas in my mental workspace. I didn't realize that the mental fortitude regarding the meditation had me slipping into the waste land of Kerplunck just as I had done at the temple that fateful day when Ister was conceived.

I was already almost on the flipside of Kerplunck when I realized what was happening. I opened my eyes and recognized that I was just popping out on H8's flipside of Kerplunck, still slowly floating down. H8 spotted me out of the corner of his lumpy noggin's empty eye socket, and he charged at me. There was a moment of terror as I wondered whether my tangible fear would disrupt the impromptu voyage and that I would slow down thus being mauled by the maniacal unholy man of shit.

H8 missed grabbing me by a split second, and from his perspective I was floating past him into the brown hazy sky upside-down. Sayonara, sucka!

CHAPTER 33

Relinquish

I was out of the commode, so to speak. It felt great. I was still floating, right side up from my perspective, but downward from where I had started. The journey was gentle and even-paced much like an Alpine funicular ride. Honestly, it didn't matter where I landed, because anything was better than where I had just come from.

While I was floating gently downward, I considered some more ideas that could formulate new meditations. One notable concept was that of the Hero Sequence. Where I had just come from had too many political and social elements that reminded me of the human race, and the realization was fairly disheartening. I remembered that part of the reason I felt it was my cosmic duty to "fix" the world was because it was obvious that humans weren't going to do it themselves. Humans had always had issues with the concept of masculinity and how it was expressed socially, but in Kerplunck masculinity was put under the microscope, so to speak, and it got me thinking about what 'made the man'.

When I was a kid, it was the 1980s and the media culture was geared for positive male role models and displays of healthy masculinity. Good men used their aggression and emotion productively to bravely protect women and children. This was the message from He-Man in *Masters of the Universe*, and it was echoed by characters like Flint in *G.I. Joe*, as well as Lion-O in *Thundercats*. The male protection wasn't about keeping women under their thumb evidenced through those same children's shows which had realistic – and far from heavy-handed – portrayals of heroic women, including He-Man's Teela and She-ra, G.I. Joe's Lady Jaye and Scarlet, and Thundercat's Cheetara and WilyKit, among many others.

I liked the media messages in those children's cartoons. Men and women weren't political and economic adversaries, but rather, synergistic partners. This felt natural and right to me. Slowly, media messages changed, and later it was easy for me to blame the Kerplunckians for it because in my perception an evil force had made the world a much worse place, culturally.

Growing up, Arnold Schwarzenegger was my hero, and not for knocking up his maid, or becoming ambitious politically, but for the work he had done in fitness and bodybuilding, combined with the heroic roles he took on in Hollywood movies. I loved all the big action heroes from Arnie to Sly, and Van Damme to Jackie Chan. What they did was inspire young men to step up to the plate and be brave when sacrificing themselves to protect innocent people and the vulnerable.

In previous generations it wasn't the same, and arguably, it wasn't an age of heroes prior to the 1980s. Clint Eastwood's hard-nosed detectives and machismo cowboys were in it for pride or money, while prior to that era most heroes were military figures giving their lives for the state as glorified Stakhanovite would-be martyrs. Those earlier generations revered a man as heroic when he died out of pride, but in the 1980s a heroic man was the one who put down those prideful

soldiers in order to protect the vulnerable. That was the mission of Arnie’s character, Matrix, in *Commando*, and at the end of the decade, Van Damme portrayed, Lyon, in *Lionheart* with similar gusto.

The 1980s was the “Hero” era in Western mass culture. In that era, I never would have uttered, “Johnny’s Inch”. The cosmic wager would have seemed invalid at that time. Culture was demonstrating that people were improving in worth from previous eras, especially with respect to masculinity. The macho, “Dirty” Harry Calahan, had been replaced by noble, Prince Adam of Eternia. I loved it.

In the 1990s, something started to happen in media, and I didn’t notice how insidious it was because I embraced a lot of it due to my teenage angst at the time. Culture began promoting the “Anti-hero” and its updated brand of masculinity. Where the hero was called upon and answered the call, the anti-hero was called upon and didn’t answer. The vulnerable required protection, but the anti-hero was too busy with his own bullshit.

The anti-hero existed long before the 1990s, and you can observe this fainthearted man in *Rebel without a Cause*, *Cool Hand Luke*, *Easy Rider*, *The Conversation*, *Full Metal Jacket*, or *Rumble Fish*, to name a few. However, the anti-hero was not revered in those films, and characters such as Luke or Joker were pitiable for their inability to step up and make the world a better place, and in turn, give themselves the purpose that would have made their lives meaningful. They were men who used wheelchairs when they had the ability to walk. These crippled men were well-endowed in faculty, but pissing into the wind spiritually, and we had to watch that unfold, most uncomfortably.

In the 1990s, the anti-hero was stock-in-trade for Hollywood, and *Fight Club*’s Tyler Durden, or *Falling Down*’s D-Fens protagonist characters became the new ‘he-men’ for the era. We were encouraged to admire these failures, and we were persuaded to reimagine their moral ineptitude and spiritual paralysis as ‘moxie’ – they were raging against the machine, and letting the world know that they were “bravely” in it for themselves. The comic-book-based movie character, Spawn, would get revenge to make himself feel better, as would resurrected Eric Draven in *The Crow*. The maligned attitude of those characters reverberated through mass culture to later influence the hilarious portrayal of *South Park*’s ineffectual Satan character then parodying The Crow and proclaiming petulantly before his legions of sycophants, “it’s all about me!”

What the hell happened? – from selfless heroes to selfish zeroes in less than a decade. It was veritable culture shock for me as I developed from an amazed child to a disillusioned teenager. But things got worse. The following decade, and into the new millennium, we were introduced to the “Unhero”. Was there an expectation that audiences would celebrate the Walter White character of *Breaking Bad*? I don’t know the writers or producers of the show personally, and cannot say for sure, but the worship of Walter happened all the same. Walter wasn’t only going to walk away from the call to be a hero and protect the vulnerable, much like an anti-hero would do, but Walter was also going to just straight up make the world a more awful place full of addiction, sickness,

desperation, and death. People cheered for Mr. White. They donned Heisenberg t-shirts in his honor and bought meth lab caravan-shaped mousepads to keep him close to their hearts. Why?

It wasn't the only show or movie in the 2000s that did this brand of masculinity, and it even continued into the next decade with lead characters such as, Rick Grimes, from *The Walking Dead*. Without batting an eyelash, Rick, would begin murdering other people if they got in the way of his plan to keep a little personal tribe safe during the worldwide zombie apocalypse. He was no hero – he was just a man of pride, that felt the easy goal of protecting someone that already trusted him was more important than the challenging goal of protecting someone who needed it but had no reason to trust others yet. The apocalyptic vision of that show mirrored the nihilistic mindset of those who found Rick's masculinity, machismo, and philosophy on life admirable.

And now, I am waiting for the final segment in the Hero sequence which characterizes contemporary masculinity – the “Anhero”. The anhero is the man who wants to be heroic and is prepared to sacrifice himself to protect the vulnerable, but the rest of the world blocks the opportunity and denies him his rightful chance to help. They don't want glory to go to just one man – it's the collective pride now that comes into play. Thus, it is society that has become the villain within the drama. I would like to suggest that there are no anhero movies or TV shows to reference. There has been no collective support for the story of the anhero. The authors interested in that kind of lead character would have to rely on self-publishing and grassroots indie production.

I felt the weight of my role as an anhero. But you might ask about the timeline here and wonder how I can reference future events when it wasn't yet 2010 as I was pushed into the black void in Weird Willard's furnace room.

You are about to get an answer to those queries because time caught up to me fast.

CHAPTER 34

Stability

My meditation on heroes and masculinity would soon be put to the test. I would be invited to evaluate my prejudices and consider how human culture had developed the way it did, and why. While I had been meditating and reflecting on childhood moments, my floating body had begun to slow down from its exodus in Kerplunk. The brown fog of the Kerplunkian interstitial space had transitioned to blackness all around me, and I wondered if I was finally being returned to the void at Willard's house.

A bright light shone behind me. There was intense heat. The light cascaded beams into the darkness in front of me and I noted that the night sky had returned and was full of shining stars. My body was forced around suddenly and I was turned to face the light. At first, I closed my eyes but then the light faded and became gentle and reasonably bright.

I opened my eyes again and was faced by that lamentable, Bigot Star. If it had a face, I was sure that there would have been a proud sneer painted across its grease mug. There were no options. I was powerless. This was clear.

Looking down, I noticed the world had returned as a game piece for our head-to-head match. I assumed that it was more parables brought to life. Perhaps, this time I would have to watch Noah gather his animals onto the ark except the gay ones, or David slay Goliath because the behemoth was an atavistic half-breed. Then, my arrogant indignation turned to fear, as I recognized the possibility that I would have to repeat exactly what I had just gone through. Would this become my Sisyphus torture program? Was I stuck in some purgatory, like Phil Connors in *Groundhog Day*? What did I have to do to appease this bloated orb of light?

Once again, my head was pushed forward, but unlike the first time when I was full of wonderment, this time I resisted and was overcome with dread. Surprisingly, it wasn't as bad as I had thought. It was no longer the new world that I entered. As my head submerged into the atmosphere of the planet, and my giant face was beyond the skies behind me, I noted that the continents were different from the new world I was shown before, and this time it was my home planet – it was Earth.

I felt a leap in my heart. I wanted to bang on my chest. Bring it on! If this was my Earth that I was being shown, then hopefully, I would be dropped back in the way I was dropped into the Tribe of Oor region before. I would have the correct languages available, or maybe I would just be allowed to resume my life as Will Strange. Effectively, I could be teleported from Willard's basement to somewhere else on Earth and then find my way home. It could be the very next day as if nothing had happened. I'd only have to explain my disappearance to Heath, and it seemed he was capable of believing anything. This was doable.

Then again, I might be left in an invisible state and ghostly form. That too was a distinct possibility. It was unclear, but the force pushing at the back of my head gently nudged me as if it was listening to all my frantic conjecture and trying to shush me to ease my mind. I almost trusted that gesture. And so, I watched events unfold on Earth.

CHAPTER 35

Dedication

This was Earth, and I had some important reference points available. I could follow the story and anticipate certain events. However, things kicked off way back. I had been a bit of a history buff when I was young but had forgotten much of the major developments of the human race. The Bigot Star brought me up to speed.

I watched the development of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. Focus was put on the Semite tribes who had started in modern day Oman. They had traveled up to Mesopotamia and worn out their welcome after becoming rich and powerful as immigrants who resisted cultural integration. They made an exodus to the Levant region, which was inhabited by many different peoples, and much like, the new world of the Tribe of Oor, the Levant was a crossroads meso-region rife with political strife and cultural unrest.

The Semites had some notable figures but no one exceptional, and certainly not the heroes mentioned in the Old Testament of the Bible. Conflict was common in the Levant, and the Semite tribes had no real chance to establish dominance there prior to finding it hazardous to their health to stay. They moved south but were unwelcome by locals, and the Egyptian militia captured them and sought to make them slaves.

Slavery never happened for the Semites, but now a big-name character made an appearance. The Bigot Star wanted me to know the true story of Moses. Moses hadn't been with the Semites, and it seemed that he wasn't Jewish at all. He was an advocate for them in that southern region of the Levant where they had been treated as unwelcome and then reported to the Egyptian militia. Moses was an entrepreneur and merchant who traded gems and ore along the river Nile.

Moses negotiated with the local Egyptian governor for the release of the captive Semite tribes. These things were obvious to me as I watched events unfold, but again the language barrier made it impossible to discern any nuances in the interactions. An odd thing happened next. Moses and the most prominent leader of the displaced and roving Semite tribes ventured off in a western direction along the coast of North Africa. The pair staked-out a villa, around the area that would later be Carthage. One night, Moses and the Semite tribal leader murdered the family in the villa. The head of the household seemed undistinguished, but all the same he was stabbed several times by the two assassins at the front door of his estate. Pools of blood flowed down the front steps as Moses and the tribal leader stood on either side.

It all made sense to me later once Moses and the tribal leader returned to the Nile to collect their people. The Egyptian governor had demanded an assassination contract be completed in exchange for the freedom of the Semite tribes. As their caravans left Egyptian territory, Moses began writing on parchment and I suspected that his parting seas legend had originated from a proud reference to the bloody murder near Carthage.

It didn't surprise me that our legends were apocryphal and that epic deeds were in fact deviant acts, and that great men were instead scheming charlatans who wrote themselves into history in ideal terms. Their true power was no different than L. Ron Hubbard, Jim Jones, or Charles Manson – they were cult leaders, and that is how the word of their greatness spread early on.

I thought to myself, “fuck Moses then”, but I also didn't trust the coercive Bigot Star. The Bigot Star had stigmatized East Asians through the character of, Sum, being an arrogant man unable to respect individuality. Also, the Bigot Star had lambasted, Hum, a man characterized as a lazy African. And of course, all the sociopaths I was presented with were homosexuals. That wasn't how my story had gone with the cosmic wager, Tricks of the Trade. The star was the bigot, and perhaps, antisemitic as well. This account of Moses might have been fictional.

I reserved judgment on what I was being shown, and I recognized that once it caught up to an era that I remembered clearly then I would be able to check for historical accuracy. In the meantime, I followed the story of Moses. He was a cult leader, and it was a long time after his death before the Semite tribes returned to the Levant. In fact, they returned during a moment when there was a mass exodus in Egypt and Mesopotamia at the same time. It was easier for the roving Semite tribes to justify returning to the Levant at that point because they blended in with other migrants.

Moses had led his cult and he had disciples who continued to work on his written texts. The rest of the congregation was illiterate; however, each generation of cult leaders was taught to read and write by the previous one. I couldn't make out the words, and it was a foreign language, but it seemed to me that these texts were the basis for the Old Testament. I hadn't read more than the book of Genesis in my life, and only knew the broad strokes of the Biblical legends, therefore, there was no way to confirm how much of the cultist text was boldface lying, or what inspired the legends, such as, the assassination at the Carthaginian villa. Based on the cult's penchant for pederasty, and ritual rape, I was assuming that the entire text would have been best when served to the human race as toilet paper.

Time marched on. I was not shown developments in the Americas, nor China or the rest of East Asia. I had some purview on Africa and noted that it was African warlords who had been the first brutal slave masters on that continent, and that the Egyptian workforce was composed of sub-Saharan Africans who had odd traveling patterns along the Nile but were sold into slavery in the north by tribal African warlords of the south. It was intriguing, but perhaps a fib by the Bigot Star.

Northern Europe was out of visual range as my position shifted around, but the developments in Greece and Italy were brought into focus. I had watched as Egyptian culture was imported to the island of Crete and then perverted. From there, merchants traveled from Crete to the mainland and the indigenous people of Greece embraced some of the legends and iconography.

Greece was not the exciting place that I had expected, and most lives were quite dull. The greatness of the culture wasn't appreciated by most, and citizens just found it to be a normal life. The force holding me in place and pushing at the back of my head continued to direct my attention within the atmosphere of the world. Eventually, I would watch the rise of Rome, but the age of the Roman Empire was not so different from the glory of Mycenaean Greece. Yes, the battles and wars were interesting, but they appeared as urban gangland skirmishes when compared with modern warfare I had witnessed through video footage of World War II, the Vietnam War, or the Gulf War.

The growth of the Greek culture, Alexander's conquests, and the rise of Rome happened across so many years that the people had no sense of what it meant in the grander scheme. They had no media, and their lives were perniciously unexceptional. Legends grew in the telling, and I noted that historians had been the Steven Spielbergs and Michael Bays of their time – they were entertainers spinning a yarn. Things just weren't that exciting back then, and more happened in 1999 than what happened for an entire century in this ancient period. It made me ashamed that I had been so cavalier in trying to end my life after Tricks of the Trade. I now regretted that I had been so brazen in rejecting the status quo of my own era. The modern world had much happening – all at once – and to contribute to that in any significant way would have really mattered, historically.

Still, I watched and learned about the lies of history, such as, Alexander the Great being gay. He was not that, nor did he marry an Indian princess, nor did he kill his best friend in a drunken rage. However, I did see the little bastard who wrote it into history that way. His name was, Hoyos, but it was self-proclaimed and considered 'cool' by people at the time. It was the equivalent of when contemporary rappers are called, "Puff Daddy" or the "Doggfather", except this moniker referenced him as a young buck – Hoyos, the son – much like other rappers, such as, Lil Wayne or Yung Thug.

I didn't notice Hoyos at first because he was unexceptional in his youth, I suppose. However, he became a mover and shaker in his adult years. He hadn't known Alexander personally, but he had been in the courts of both the Ptolemys and Seleucids who had inherited Alexander's empire. Hoyos was similar to Moses in how he manipulated others, except Moses had been an affectionate extroverted sociopath, whereas Hoyos was guarded and in his private life I noted him as a creepy weirdo. Hard to explain.

Hoyos weaseled his way in deeper with important governors, and his influence seemed primarily based in his persuasive talking. It appeared to me that Hoyos was fluent in several languages, and he mediated negotiations on the battlefield and along major trade routes. Hoyos would have been an arms dealer if he had lived in the modern era. He was slippery and avoided two palace intrigues that ended in bloody massacres. I wish that I could speak the language so that I might have heard the cunning words he used to smooth talk his way out of those hairy situations.

I was disgruntled with these history lessons. With the human race, it was mainly murderers and liars who were the movers and shakers that brought about dramatic major changes. All the

good and wholesome progress such as developments in science, invention, medicine, art, etc. were happening progressively and steadily without major leaps forward. There were no Da Vinci mavericks or Picasso renegades in the culture industry that I witnessed. Plus, I couldn't read the texts, so if there were literary giants it wasn't clear to me. I thought that I had identified Plato and Socrates, but it was ambiguous. There were half a dozen educators that might have been them. Some events were not within earshot for me, and all I could rely on was visuals that required squinting and straining my eyes. I knew that these moments of sensory disability were not haphazard, but rather, they were orchestrated by the Bigot Star who was directing my attention and only making available what it wanted me to know.

History was a sham. The books I had read, what I had learned in school, and everything else bandied about in casual conversation were about as accurate as the Hollywood movies. There was as much truth in the life of Pericles as it was written into history as there was for fictional characters such as, Hercules. Yet, there were some heroic guys like Hercules in the ancient world, and maybe that is where the legend came from, or at least where the legend grew in the telling.

I watched as one Thracian soldier was almost killed in a strange battle that broke out for no good reason during routine patrols along a border in peacetime. The Thracian soldier had escaped the grizzly fate of his small garrison and traveled back home to nurse his superficial wounds.

I could tell that he had survivors' guilt, and this Thracian soldier became indomitable once he had healed up fully. He had to make up for feeling like a deserter, or at least, that is how I interpreted his behavior. I saw this burly man save a child from drowning, on another occasion he ran into a barn that was fully aflame and he ushered the animals free, and finally he caught a woman who had been pushed off an old turret tower by a jealous lover. This guy was a real hero, and the history books never mentioned him. His name was Habek, but I can't confirm the spelling.

That was just an everyday guy with an extraordinary story, and it was worth twenty Pericles or Alexanders. Those big-name guys that we were familiar with in history were mainly just standing around most of the time, looking confident, and having others speak for them. Others wrote for them as well. History was bogus and I was frustrated that the Bigot Star imposed control over my position and vantage, not allowing me to search out more inspiring heroes like Habek.

The next truly great person that I noted was Cato the Elder during the era of the Roman Republic.

CHAPTER 36

Legitimacy

Cato the Elder was a reasonable man, and I found his brand of masculinity to be heroic. He excelled at conflict resolution and had grace when the spotlight was on him. Cato had aptly identified all the social ills of his era and then highlighted the factors which culturally plagued the state of Rome.

Cato recognized that in Rome's greatness there was also opulence and bloat. Rome had been honoring itself too much through the recognition that the city was greater than any that had ever existed in the past. Rome had machismo and too much pride. Rome was unheroic.

Cato noted that influential Roman women had become hustlers, and that their political aspirations wrought destruction to the moral fabric of the city. These ambitious women traded in rumor and gossip, and they attempted to craft themselves as celebrity characters among the people. Cato spoke out against this class of woman. He found creative ways to illustrate that these women were talentless and not worthy of worship. One amusing method he employed was to hire servants to impersonate the ambitious women and expose their uncouth manner as the impersonators milled around popular hangouts.

Cato had been a farmer when he was young, and he was not raised as an urbanite. He had traditional values, although I didn't think he was a conservative per se. His value system was fully-formed, and when he held a traditional value paramount others accused him of conservatism because they wanted faster progress at all costs. For his critics, rapid changes provided the opportunity to attain more political power. Rapid change meant new avenues to manipulate.

Hellenization had become stock-in-trade for the Roman cultural project. Hellenization referred to the process of cultural exchange between Rome and neighboring regions. If Syrian fashion became popular in Rome because of immigration from that region, then this was an example of Hellenization. Conversely, if Massali people (present day south of France) began building temples with Corinthian pilasters that had the nouveau Roman decorative touches, then this too was Hellenization. Importing foreign culture to Rome and exporting Roman culture abroad was how the most powerful senators understood Rome would maintain a stranglehold on its annexed foreign territory and future acquisitions. Foreign people had to buy into the Roman project and philosophy for Pax Romana to rise and prosper.

Cato the Elder could not disagree more with these powerful senators. Cato saw the moral decay that accompanied the import of foreign culture. For Cato, foreign culture was atavistic and a throwback to a previous era for Romans. Cato would often show Etruscan art pieces to fellow senators and then compare it directly with the foreign cultural artifacts that had flooded into the city and neighboring lands. He felt the juxtaposition was effective to demonstrate that Roman people centuries earlier were more advanced than people in the foreign lands were in that present moment.

Other senators were not sold on rejecting foreign cultures, and they found the variety of products flowing through Italy to be exciting and stimulating. The other issue with Hellenization which Cato attempted to expose was that the foreigners were perverting Roman culture. In Syria or France, there was indeed Roman influence despite these regions not yet being part of a Roman Empire. Foreign cultures were incorporating Roman style through bastardization. Cato sometimes traveled to the foreign regions and collected examples, such as Roman tunics embroidered with pagan Gods, or small sculpture trinkets which were replicas of well-known Roman pieces, but with foreign heads and visages as replacement to the distinctive Roman countenance.

Many of Cato's critics scoffed at Cato's moral outrage, and it seemed to me that they were arguing that such "profanity" was in fact a form of flattery. In one debate, Cato gave an impassioned speech and then fell silent after another senator's retort. It was difficult to discern the content of the counterstrike, but I sensed that Cato was being made to see that the senators wanted Hellenization because it softened up foreigners for later Roman conquest. I suppose the idea was that in time, Rome could bring their laws to bear on the conquered people and replace the foreign heads with the correct Roman ones if trinkets sold on the street would even matter at that point.

Cato had an uphill battle throughout his political life, but he recognized when he was beat, and this is why the other senators accepted him as a worthy opponent and useful counter-balance to their overall project of maximizing wealth and power for Rome.

Cato was the first true Anhero. People didn't really want him around, but his protestations provided for interesting conversation topics. His outrage was entertaining. The powerful elites in Rome had no intention of adhering to Cato's morality, nor adopting it for their civil ethical code. In time, this laissez-faire liberal attitude of the Roman elites directly resulted in the formation of the mechanisms by which Rome transitioned from a republic to an oppressive empire.

The Roman Empire was not great at all. Pax Romana was a fascist conquest where war became normative, and mass murder was perceived in a casual manner. Genocidal tyrants were thrust into positions of power by the same types of personalities that Cato the Elder had been battling and warning against centuries earlier. During the republic era, Roman people had a sense of individualism, and they were politically enfranchised. However, during the Roman Empire all I witnessed was drone-like behavior with most Romans revealing themselves as numb to the endless wartime. The unceasing buzz around the major cities motivated nothing more than sordid political intrigues and self-righteous power grabs.

If the Bigot Star wanted me to despise human nature, it was doing a pretty good job. I was disillusioned by the history lesson. I was made to feel small despite watching over the world like a giant or God. I had worked through many of the stages of grief: pity for Ister had been my *denial* phase, watching Markis in the new world constituted my *anger*, and being stuck in Kerplunk mediated my *negotiation*. Now, I was just depressed.

CHAPTER 37

Sanguinary

In my depressed state, I decided to tune out what was happening to me. I felt like a catatonic Ister in the dank cave on the limestone hill. It scared me. The force pushing at the back of my head holding me in place within the atmosphere of the Earth cosmic game piece, never ceased. Time passed. I have no idea what happened. It was the Dark Ages.

I snapped out of it just in time for the Battle of Hastings, however, I realized that I had cheated myself through my intent to disconnect from the experience. This defining battle in England required greater historical contextualization. There had been much development in England from the Roman era to the rule of Alfred the Great, and his descendants.

I shook off the guilt of being a lazy student and regained my focus. The final sequence of events that would hopefully take me back to my own time concerned the crusader knights. The Crusades is thought of as a Holy War to take back the Holy Land in the Levant region of the Middle East. However, the Bigot Star showed me a different set of motivations for the major players involved in that set of historical events.

Close to the end of William the Conqueror's life, he left England and traveled to France where he met in secret with Wibert of Ravenna who had become an antipope. It seemed that Wibert and Hildebrand of Sovana had a clandestine alliance which connected all the way back to the Moses cult. The pair had been initiated into a cabal of historians which had spawned from the Moses cult centuries earlier.

This cabal of historians was focused on manipulating history and thus determining the path of the human race. Saul of Tarsus had been the founder of the cabal and was the one who transitioned it from Moses's heathen values about fantasy writing, such as, the Old Testament, to a more mature form of social control and mass propaganda. Saul had written the New Testament and fabricated the story of Jesus Christ virtually out of thin air.

I remembered having watched over the Levant around the time that was said to be that of the life of Jesus Christ, interested to catch a glimpse of the three wise men visiting Bethlehem that fateful night. Nothing had materialized and this made sense to me now that I was shown the origins of the cabal of historians.

In the time of Saul, he had traveled to the Levant and met an influential rabble rouser there. This rabble rouser had the ear of the people, but this enthusiastic rogue was also a homosexual who had a lover from sub-Saharan Africa living with him. This lover had wanted the rogue to use his influence with the people in order to proclaim that God approved of homosexuality. However, the rogue refused the request, fearing the people would turn their back on him. The African lover sold-out his intimate partner and alerted the Roman centurions stationed in Judea that the rogue was a dangerous character rallying the people against Roman occupation.

Once captured, this rogue was not crucified, but rather, he was made to dig a pit at the edge of the sea. The Roman soldiers forced him into the pit, and they buried him up to his neck. The tide came in at night and the rogue perished gruesomely, lungs full of sea water and no longer able to use his power of speech just before drowning.

Later, Saul returned to his true home in northern Greece, and he began writing the story of Jesus Christ and Judas which was based on this tragic couple that he had met in Judea. Saul had been the holder of the Moses cult ancient texts, but Saul was not interested in cult leadership. He was thinking bigger and wanted his writings to constitute a new religion. In time, Saul got his way. He was an ambitious entrepreneur who finessed local Roman governors on the idea that Christianity and its spread would be advantageous for business and their own political aspirations.

Previously, people of the Roman Empire were polytheists who held different gods and goddesses in high esteem. Sometimes, it was difficult for governors to control the people of the land when listless provocateurs manipulated the legends of a forum of deities to suit their needs. There was too much higher authority to contend with. Saul explained to the governors that monotheism would solve those kinds of problems, and many more, through situating the higher authority as a single God, who then translated their will to individual, patriarchal figures, such as a local governor, or the head of the church.

In the future, if the governor needed a marketplace cleared to make room for a cattle drive, a band of loiterers would not find it valid to claim that such-and-such a God was approving of them hanging around clogging up the agora. The governor, or even powerful businessmen, would make an appeal to the same god as that of the loiterers, and thus that one God would be perceived to be siding with whomever had the greater amount of economic and political power in society. Saul's hypothesis was consistent with the anthropological origins of man based in alpha-male social structures and hierarchies.

Saul had an easy time getting the governors to promote gatherings of people to learn Saul's story of the miraculous life of martyred Jesus Christ. The program was working, and the religion spread relatively quickly. Saul focused on how the Moses cult could be transformed into a historian's cabal. Over the centuries, disciples of Saul continued his work, and the governors who bought into Christianity helped form the papacy which then fostered covert agents of Saul disciples from the Crusader Cabal.

Later in human history, during those secret meetings between Wibert and Hildebrand – two powerful players in the Crusader Cabal – it was discussed that William Conqueror was the appropriate person to back a holy war in the Levant. William was near death when the moment presented itself to the Crusader Cabal, and although William found the proposal fascinating, he declined to get involved. Hildebrand was already deceased, but Wibert continued to coax William. Finally, William agreed that he would do what he could to get the ball rolling on Wibert's plans.

Wibert was very pleased and instructed William to meet with Otho who would later become Pope Urban II.

William met with Otho and did not reveal his association with Wibert or the cabal of historians. William spoke persuasively, and Otho became convinced that a holy war was the mandate of the one true God. As pope, Otho announced the Crusades, and he gathered his council to ensure that the massive project was undertaken expeditiously and with due diligence. For two centuries, European elites were concerned with the quest to return the holy land to Christian people. However, that was just a cover story for the mission's true purpose.

The Crusader Cabal had developed from Saul's cabal of historians, in turn having been transformed from Moses's cult of fantastic history. The Crusader Cabal were in charge of the crusades, and they had their own mandate independent of the official Holy Roman party line fed to the devout people of Europe. The Crusader Cabal intended to sack the holy land and selectively destroy all historical artifacts and texts that had been shipped to that region for safekeeping after the fall of Rome.

The Crusader Cabal knew that to control the future, it was essential to control the past through writing history. The Crusader Cabal relied on the social control built into monotheism, however, the ancient texts of polytheistic cultures if made available to the people would reveal the superiority of thinking, as well as inspired living that accompanies religions with relatable deities as opposed to a single, wrathful God. In polytheistic cultures, the deities were mentors who were fallible – that was human. In monotheistic cultures, a flawless God was inaccessible, and the relationship with God was mediated through ambitious charlatans and shameless scoundrels, and all with a sense of dread built-in when any worshipper faltered – that was inhuman. Most of all, it was unfair, and people deserved better.

They used to get better. Polytheistic religions in the Western world had humor and goodwill. Yet, the Crusader Cabal were set to task on selectively erasing the ancient artifacts and texts which revealed too much of how great culture and lifestyle had been in those times. The crusaders preserved only the artifacts – whether it be, statues, pottery, or written texts – that colored people's views such that the ancient societies were then understood as frivolous and decadent. Ancient cultures were to be recognized as heathen, and farthest from the love of God.

The Crusader Cabal was entirely successful in the holy land, even if officially, many of the crusades were to be written into history as military disasters. The impression that the Crusader Cabal left for modern man was that ancient cultures were pederastic, deities were orgiastic and petulant, governments were tyrannical and unfair, and philosophers of the time were overly-concerned with formalism and minutiae, as opposed to developing primary concern for the beauty of the world as one of God's creations. These ancient people were myopic pagans who would sooner watch Christians murdered in the Colosseum than embrace their ascetic duties of prayer and humility before God.

The Crusader Cabal was executing to perfection on Saul's original plan. For Saul, monotheism was the key to social control. The Bible was the ultimate agitprop, and the tides of change could be controlled through manipulating its cryptic messages and false promises. Whereas polytheism would free people's minds and in turn they would choose their own path. As a prideful sociopath par excellence, Saul could not abide the thought that people who were intellectually lesser than him would feel freedom in their own minds and experience it in their meek lives. The meek were not to inherit the earth.

The crusades continued for centuries with a hand-picked collection of ancient artifacts being preserved in order to produce contemporary impression regarding polytheistic culture and lifestyle. Meanwhile, the holy land had also been a place for storing much of the riches of the former Roman Empire. The crusaders developed three orders of knights which had separate mandates for the work to be done over the next thousand years.

CHAPTER 38

Swindle

The Crusader Cabal brought the riches they plundered in the holy land to their new headquarters in the Alps. The Templar Knights used the booty to control all of Europe. Eventually, this region would become Switzerland and the ill-gotten wealth was the foundation for the untouchable Swiss banks. It all made sense to me now because I had never understood why Switzerland had simply been allowed neutrality while other nations fell to conquering armies, over and over.

A second order of crusader knights – the Knights of St John – situated themselves on the island of Cyprus. Eventually, no one noticed that they were there, and instead believed that they were stationed in Malta, innocuously. However, the task for this second order of knights was to keep a close eye on developments in the Levant, and then control that region by stimulating social unrest selectively as a geopolitical propaganda tool.

The third order of crusader knights – the Teutonic Knights – went into the region of Pomerania, in northeastern Europe. Their task was to ensure that the region was never properly developed, especially with respect to industrialization. The Crusader Cabal recognized the advancement of European people and knew that great global conquerors would emerge from that continent based on anthropological traits of the white ethnicity. A true conqueror of Europe would also have to control all the ethnically European people which meant invading Russia.

By keeping Pomerania underdeveloped (including the regions that constitute present-day Poland, Belarus, and Baltic states), grand armies of would-be European conquerors would perish on their long, desolate march to Moscow. The Teutonic Knights ensured there would be no robust supply lines for an invading grand army to rely on. Later, Napoleon found this out the hard way, and then Hitler repeated the ruinous endeavor. You might ask – how could the overwhelming early military success of Nazi Germany then completely collapse through doing something doomed to fail that had been tried not two centuries earlier under very similar conditions? The answer is: Napoleon and Hitler were merely allowed to rise to power through the machinations of the Crusader Cabal. They were glorified pawns for this cult of historians that was now controlling the human race.

As I watched the crusades unfold and I learned of the insidious plot of the Crusader Cabal, I considered whether those humans, such as Wibert or Hildebrand, were in league with the Kerplunckians, or instead, had the Kerplunckians been a mere fantasy concoction of my own devising whereas the true evil force that was destroying people's lives on Earth was human in origin. The Bigot Star gave nothing away and I was left with nothing more than fevered conjecture. The Kerplunckians had certainly been real in a sense – I had been there in their crappy, crappy land.

I stuck with the idea that the Kerplunckians were real, and their land had developed consistent with my story about them. Therefore, I concluded that they likely had discovered Earth and the human race through Veggie Clint's vivid dreamscape simulation. If this Crusader Cabal was also real, then were they in league with the Kerplunckians? Perhaps, they were being manipulated by those nefarious cosmic evil ones? The Kerplunckians surely would have noticed the Crusader Cabal, and if the evil ones were accustomed to masquerading on Earth in human form, then why not also use prestigious Crusader Cabal elites? There were many questions that I had, and there was a growing sense of anxiety as I realized that the two stories might not come together neatly, and I would have to conclude that everything in my life had been a depraved act of self-deception. The Bigot Star remained my anchor and I had to rely on it for greater knowledge, yet I also had to think back to other stories I had told during the Trick of the Trade for relevant clues.

CHAPTER 39

Beginnings

During the cosmic wager, Tricks of the Trade, I had eventually identified everyone in my life as having been a cosmic-based evil character. The notion was that they had surrounded me intent on convincing me that they were an ally, and all in hopes that I would believe it. If my judgment had been untrue then particular evil character would be free to continue ravaging humanity from their cosmic vantage. That was the nature of the cosmic game which I presided over as judge, jury, and executioner.

After the New Year's nightmare, those who I had once held in high-esteem, such as, my family, or Gary as the guardian angel, and so on, were then identified as the second round of evil characters, and they too were condemned by me. All that remained was my skeleton crew that I recognized as not having interest in living on Earth as human because they found it unethical and unfair. I thought that their attitude was sensible, and this is why I began my attempts at suicide, eventually, finding myself in Algonquin Park with a box of rat poison.

When I had condemned this second round of evil characters they were not identified as Kerplunckians, but rather, were from a cosmic vantage named "Plunck". They had been watching over the Kerplunckians much the way those little buggers watched over the human race. These characters of Plunck were led by Bill Fey and Phil Git. They were brothers who believed that they represented the "light side" of evil (jokes about sodomy, and such) and the "dark side" of evil (everything evil that wasn't conceivable as light sided, I suppose). The details aren't that important; however, the brothers had a population they led, and those wicked creatures of the cosmic were collectively known as "Feygits".

I chose the word, "feygit", because I felt it was an appropriate portmanteau combining the word, "fey" which means "doomed to fail", and "git" which is defined as "contemptible fool". Thus, the feygits were contemptible fools doomed to fail. It was a stigma which I hoped would brand them with bad luck for their quest to fool me and their goal to evade my judgment so that they could continue destroying humanity.

It was traumatic for me at the time to feel the need to reject the people closest to me who certainly didn't deserve that poor treatment based on how they had contributed to my life. Essentially, the purge was a means to an end. My introspective consciousness was alien among humans, and I wanted to end the dissociated life I was forced to live with a world of people who would never understand me in a meaningful way. To justify suicide, I had to first explain why it didn't matter that I end my life. The feygits being identified as my close family and friends who had been most trusted implied that there were no genuine characters left in my life, therefore, I wasn't hurting anyone other than myself to end my life.

The trauma I experienced from identifying the feygits and thus divorcing from all my family and friends precipitated me turning away from the task of properly explaining who the

feygits were. It was too traumatizing to address the feygit origin story or hierarchical structure in a concerted way. I knew that these evil characters were something like Kerplunckians, but they had been watching over that sordid lot, manipulating events in Kerplunck as well as thwarting Kerplunckian plans on Earth. I had stated during my cosmic judgment that the Tricks of the Trade event for Bill Fey and the Plunckian Feygits had been based in a wager they had with Kerplunckians. Yet, the deck was stacked in the favor of Bill Fey because his crew had presented themselves to Markis and Clint's crew dishonestly. The Kerplunckians had remained unaware that the Feygits had vantage over their crappy, crappy land.

The essence of my mental work with respect to Bill Fey and his Feygits had been a Tricks of the Trade, Part II. The identification process in the cosmic judgment of the Kerplunckians had taken a full year of my life to complete, and then Bill Fey's crew being condemned by me took an additional six months of my Will Strange life. After that came the pilgrimage to Algonquin Park.

There were important questions to address now that I was forced to consider all my cosmic wager work as a complete waste of time. Could the Feygits of Plunck have been Moses, Saul, Hildebrand, and the others? Were the Feygits, also performing as the Crusader Cabal? I felt a push at the back of my head. The Bigot Star had heard enough of my rambling speculation for now. I was being instructed to focus on the next history lesson.

CHAPTER 40

Obedience

Time rolled forward quickly while my face was still pressed up close to the landscape of familiar Earth. English was being spoken in a dialect that was comprehensible and I knew enough French to pick up some of the dialogue in those regions as well. I felt less alienated, finally.

There were important historical events which I was shown, including aforementioned European conquests by Napoleon Bonaparte and Adolf Hitler. However, there was so much activity on the planet in the 20th century, that it was near impossible to find a visual throughline for developments and events. Things were happening too quickly for me to track the progress. I'm not sure exactly what I saw, or whether I could trust what I had been shown.

The playthrough of human history gave me a fresh understanding for the American Civil War, the Holocaust, JFK's assassination, and many other major historical events. Before I knew it, I had arrived at the year of my birth. However, the Bigot Star wouldn't let me near Toronto, and I could not see my family's lives or other familiar settings. The sense of torture returned, and I remembered all the time that I had spent stuck halfway into stone and dirt in the temple floor at the mouth of the river Sep.

The years passed and I was floating over the Atlantic Ocean in a holding pattern. There was nothing to look at, and I knew that the Bigot Star was doing this to me on purpose. I wanted to assert independence and I struggled to realign myself with the land. Each time that I made an attempt at lateral movement, I lost some of my altitude. The Bigot Star was dropping me into the ocean slowly and steadily based on my squirming. It seemed that the Bigot Star could hear my thoughts, and I wasn't sure that it was possible to hide my motives from the powerful cosmic being. Nevertheless, I continued to struggle to see land, secretly hoping that I would continue to drop into the ocean and then be part of my own world again.

It finally happened, and I was floating in the Atlantic Ocean. But then I recognized the imminent problem. It had been so long in my ghostly form with its ideal physical nature that I had forgotten to consider what it meant to have a mortal body that was tangible in the physical world. I had begun to take for granted that my ghostly form's body required no food, or sleep, and that it phased through objects and substances ethereally.

In those times when I had been dragged around by Ister, or when I was following Markis on his terrible hunts, if I became submerged in water it meant virtually nothing, and it was not possible for me to drown. Either I would sink to the bottom and that became my floor, or I would exist halfway in the liquid as if I were standing on solid ground. In my ghostly form, I wasn't certain that I had working lungs. Breathing had been about air passing into my mouth more than it constituted a regulated process of inhaling and exhaling.

Now, I was drowning, and I knew for a fact that there was no island or boat in sight. I thrashed around at first and then resolved that I would die in the water. I submerged. My lungs filled with liquid and my eyes closed. My senses faded.

Moments later, my eyes opened, and I had a sense of emergency. Instead, of thrashing in the water, I quickly swam to the surface. I wiped at my eyes while treading water and looked around. I was in Algonquin Park again. Seemingly, I had drowned in the lake on that occasion where I remembered squatting in the rushes after swallowing the poison.

CHAPTER 41

Revival

I carefully made my way to the shore and avoided cutting myself on the rocks as I clambered to safety. My tent was where I had left it. The first thought that crossed my mind was that now I had the opportunity to pack all my gear and take it with me instead of leaving it for the disgruntled rangers to haul out. The thought made me laugh out loud.

I fell onto the rocks and kept laughing.

After the laughter, came a big sigh. It was time to use my mind to understand what had happened. I was born again. This was certain. I was given a chance to return to my life virtually where I left off. This time, I wouldn't have to infect my good friend, Heath, with my own insane ideas about cosmic life. Of course, I would never step foot in Weird Willard's house. All of that was very clear now.

But, what of the Kerplunckians? Also, the Feygits were something to consider, especially with how they might be connected to the Crusader Cabal. Or was all that just some fever dream while I was drowning? Had I never left Provoking Lake in Algonquin Park? It was a confusing state of affairs, and the answers were not being made available. There were so many things to think about and consider. The necessary plan was to take baby steps.

The first task was to pack up my gear and head back home safely. I reasoned that it must have been August 31st, 2005, if emerging from the water had coincided with that moment where I had once considered drowning in the lake. Some time had been regained – a few years.

I arrived in Toronto and made the necessary adjustments. The following years passed by for a second time, and I tried to make the most of them given the small measure of precognition that had been granted. Life was easier and I didn't burden myself with the task of answering my own questions about what had happened. It was time to move on.

Sometimes, I shared what had happened to me with friends and family, but I explained it as a dream that I had had while passed out at the lake. They acted confused about the cover story because the events I relayed about the Tribe of Oor, the life of Ister, and Markis's Kerplunck were far too elaborate for a mere dream. All my veiled conspiratorial doublespeak about Moses, Jesus, and the Crusader Cabal put people around me on edge. They knew that I had been suicidal, and some friends and family were never close again because it was too risky for them to be involved in my troubled life. My sister pushed me away fearing her children would be infected by my wild, abnormal thinking.

Heath lost his mind without my interference this time. It seemed destined to happen. I tried to help him as best I could, but it was impossible to get through to him. He was still obsessed with the culture of alcohol but was now doing dangerous things, such as, stopping his car in the middle

of the highway to test whether the black hat “phonies” would pretend they didn’t know and barrel into him all the same. By staying close to him, I feared that my ideas might end up responsible for what he did no matter how much he had perverted the essence of my words or advice. Sadly, I gave my good friend a wide berth.

Mainly, it was a lonely life for me. I was still truly introspective, and the world refused to admit that they knew what that meant. It became difficult to make genuine connections with others. I dated a little and had a few short-term girlfriends. I held down some part-time jobs. Later, I re-enrolled in university and completed my undergraduate degree. There was some sense of accomplishment despite the task having been unchallenging as compared with my experiences at the Bigot Star’s cosmic games table.

My cosmic thinking never ceased. I teased out casual answers to understand what had happened. I still believed in my skeleton crew but was afraid to account for the presence of the Bigot Star. More than anything, I didn’t want to summon it. The prevailing thought was that my skeleton crew were watching over me with cosmic vantage, and that I would die a mortal life and then be with them in the cosmic, directly after my death. This faith almost qualified as a conventional human belief in the nature of afterlife.

Co-workers and girlfriends had not changed their nature since my return from Algonquin Park. At one job, my till was robbed, and then I was blamed by the co-worker responsible, and subsequently fired by an uncaring employer. Later, I walked in on one of my girlfriends making out with another guy at a party that I had showed up to late. *La plus ca change*. People were selfish and they were not introspective, while few were highly conscientious and worthy of a modicum of trust. I tried to make the petty indignities water off my back, and instead I focused on the cosmic relationships that interested me with my skeleton crew.

It was dishonest to deny that I had written off all the people close to me as having been evil cosmic characters of either the Kerplunckian or Feygit variety. So, who was my dad now if it wasn’t, Bill Fey? Who was Alex, if no longer Agie-Linzo? Who were the actors, Clint Eastwood, or Johnny Depp? I decided that there were a population of “NPC” types characters called, “Schlummies”. The Schlummies were not real thinking-things, and they did not feel within their experiences. Instead, they were similar to characters in video game worlds that are designed to appear human. Where computer engineering is in its early stages of development for humans, the Schlummies were reflective of what is possible with the articulation of NPCs (non-player characters) when there is near-infinite knowledge and experience through cosmic vantage.

It was my belief that the entire human race had become Schlummies, and although, technically, they could hear my thoughts, they were “programmed” to not act on that. Also, they did not judge because they did not feel. They were not genuine personalities, and the set of Schlummies was only a few dozen, who then instantiated an array of characters to present, which all made sense to me given they were expected to be performing billions of individual human lives. The lead Schlummy was “Gout” and could perform characters within a wide range. Gout was

performing my dad, but he was also performing Gary's father. Gout was presenting actor, Jack Nicholson, as well as, football quarterback, Brett Favre. Sometimes, my boss was Gout, and other times, it was that guy moving in on my girlfriend.

The Schlummies were not trusted as great people, nor were they considered loyal to me, but rather, they were an explanation for what had happened after the Kerplunckians and Feygits had been banished given that the world and the human race hadn't improved in any discernable way. I believed so deeply in those evil cosmic populations of Kerplunck and Plunck that it was essential I account for their removal without leaving room for them to sneak back into my life. My efforts were in vain – the Feygits had returned.

CHAPTER 42

Doubling

To rebuild my life, I spent years relying on my belief in the Schlummies. Deciding that these NPC creations were not swell guys allowed me to adjust my expectations for other people. Gout wasn't reliable; however, I could blame him for cucking me while also accepting the insult through recognizing my need for him in the role of my father. The logic provided for a schizophrenic status quo of sorts.

I was in my thirties now and hadn't really made inroads to an industry where I might foster a career and find financial stability. My parents understood that I was troubled and different. They supported me financially for the time being. Then, one day it dawned on me that my life story would make for a fairly interesting – if not unique – book. Perhaps, I could crowdfund my book and raise some income that way. If the book had modest grassroots support, then a publisher or agent might sign on for the project.

The idea was presented to my parents who had never supported my creative ventures in the past. They didn't respond very well to the suggestion that I would spend time writing a book instead of increasing my weekly hours of paid work. My mother was especially anxious about the book being an autobiography and thus involving stories of my suicide attempts as well as my “fever dreams” at the lake.

Over the years, my parents had learned about the Bigot Star and the worlds that I had been shown. They interpreted the whole shebang as my strange way of being a raconteur which they perceived to be important to me as a social anchor and pivot for justifying a self-image of sanity. The autobiography project that I suggested undertaking then had my mom doing what she always did in those situations when I aimed high – she sold me short. Her blithe suggestion was that I turn the story into a children's cartoon. She had a habit of suggesting the impossible but acting as if it were completely reasonable. How would I produce a cartoon? I was not an animator and had none of the relevant industry resources available to me. Additionally, there was no money for such an ambitious project.

It dawned on me that her impossible remix suggestions had always been concocted intentionally to make the possible appear impossible as a general deterrent and mark of disapproval. If the cartoon idea seemed unlikely, then perhaps, I would start to feel the same way about the book, generally. But I didn't.

My father sidestepped addressing the idea of the book, but instead started back into hounding me about doing more paid work. At the time, I had one part-time job and my hours had been scaled back recently. I didn't think that I had lost hours due to being eccentric, but rather, I tended to be ‘last one in; first one out’ at any new jobs. My work life had been characterized by bad luck and equally bad timing.

A few weeks later, my parents seemed to forget that I had mentioned writing the book whatsoever. There was free time in my schedule, so I sat down at the simple desk in my apartment, and I scrawled the first draft of page one for my autobiography.

That night, I left the apartment that my parents were renting for me, and I returned to my childhood home to have dinner with them. We didn't talk about the book; however, my father was very excited and in a different way than usual. It reminded me of Eric Idle's "nudge, nudge, say no more" character in *Monty Python's Flying Circus* sketch comedy show. My father was mentioning the Holy See of the Vatican. Also, he began talking at length about the crusades. Terror washed over me, and I instinctively reached up to touch the back of my head anticipating the force of the Bigot Star.

My tidy world of manageable Schlummies and low expectations was collapsing in on me. It was merely a casual conversation, but my father's manner was unmistakable. He was mocking me. I took a moment to calm my nerves, and I told myself that he had been thinking about the book I was planning to write, and this was just his way of presenting a deterrent. Perhaps, he was mentioning elements of my story to render them 'uncool'. In fact, I concluded that because he was Gout, his needling was in fact a cosmic-based message from my skeleton crew. The gist of it was that I should rethink writing my book in the first place.

This excuse that I scrambled to find became a hypothesis which I reviewed as being reasonable. I went home after dinner and didn't stay for a movie like I normally would. My apartment was only a few blocks from my parent's house, and it was comfortable being in the neighborhood I had grown up in. Almost every time that I walked back to my apartment from my parent's house, I intentionally diverted my route to avoid the strip of road where once I had experienced the shame of quitting anti-psychotic medication cold turkey. The alternative path took a little longer, but there was less anxiety as I stepped in the lobby of the low-rise midtown apartment building.

A few nights passed and I hadn't heard from my mom about going home early that night when I was spooked by my father's enthusiasm for Christian history. I was still mulling it over in my mind. The cosmic thinking had started up again, and this time more vigorously. It seemed like the decision to write a book about my experience was bringing on a deep sense of paranoia regarding hidden, neglected, and forgotten menaces.

I received an email from my mom asking if I wanted to come over again for dinner. I declined politely and wrote back that I was working hard to find a second job and it was an exhausting and thankless task. None of it was true. My father then email me which was not his habit. He sent a link to an unremarkable Wikipedia page on the "Holy See". His attached comment referenced something he had said at dinner the night that I was thrown off by his quirky manner. I could not decipher the attached comment to render it significant. Yet, I was markedly slipping into a state of emotional worry and mental strife.

I slept poorly, much like when I had appointed myself judge for the cosmic wager, Tricks of the Trade. Thoughts were racing. The next day, I devised a plan – a strange choice.

CHAPTER 43

Parricide

The strange choice was going to happen because I had to quell the burgeoning paranoia regarding the Crusader Cabal's legitimacy in my world. It was becoming apparent that the Crusader Cabal was the true force of evil around me. I believed in what the Bigot Star had shown me. I was seeing the light again.

Perhaps, I had never been able to get rid of the Feygits using my Tricks of the Trade paradigm. It was possible that the cosmic wager had only rid the Earth of Kerplunckians. Worse still, the Kerplunckian legend may have been a ruse by the Feygits to have me feel comfortable and safe. Perhaps, the Bigot Star was Bill Fey in disguise. Could Bill Fey also be my father? How would I vanquish this evil menace that tormented my life as well as my very thoughts?

Late at night, I snuck into my parent's house quietly through the backdoor. There was a trick to it, and rattling the backdoor handle a certain way popped the latch. As I entered, it made me think back to when Heath had dared me to go inside Weird Willard's place. I moved stealthily knowing the layout well. I pulled an 8-inch chef knife from the drawer in the kitchen.

Years earlier, when I had become a teenager and my sister had left home for college, my father began sleeping in my sister's old bedroom. He was a heavy sleeper and snored loudly which disturbed my mom. And now, I knew where to find my father. I removed all my clothes while standing in the kitchen and then continued up the stairs with the knife in my hand, stark naked.

I reached the top of the stairs and stopped for several minutes to confirm that I could hear both my parents sleeping in their respective rooms. The feeling was strange, and I imagined the mood when a soldier is holding the line prior to battle but after the commitment to act has already been made and there are no more real decisions to make before moving forward to fight.

Slowly and quietly, I entered my sister's old bedroom. I stood over my father with the knife held up. He had a facemask on and was busy snoring. At one point he shuffled his position on the bed, but I didn't read it as awareness on his part. There had been zero intention by me to hurt my father regardless of whether he was Bill Fey... or Markis, or Ister, or the Bigot Star for that matter. I was not committed to performing an evil act in my mortal first life, and I would sooner perish in a defenseless and pathetic state.

I backed out of the bedroom, crept back downstairs, and got dressed. The knife was put back in the drawer, and no sign of my presence remained after I flipped the latch on the back door and then left out the front quietly turning my key in the lock and then walking away.

My goal had been to test whether my father was an evil character that could see my actions from cosmic vantage. If anyone had been watching over me in the cosmic, there was no way to know that I wouldn't have stabbed my father because with all due respect, my life was in shambles,

and I was desperately anxious all the time. The general perception was that I was a psychotic not on his meds. I figured that if Bill Fey was using my dad's body, then he would react to my aggressive, threatening display with overt action.

Moments later, I realized that the whole thing was sheer madness. Nothing productive could have come from it. This time on the walk back to my apartment, I decided to use that dire strip of road where once I had become so sensitive to the light that I could not lift my head up high. Now, I felt that I deserved to walk down that section of street because what I had done was certainly shameful.

Along the strip, I let my head hang in shame. Suddenly, I felt a gentle force slowly push my head back up. It was the same feeling of being directed by the Bigot Star. My eyes were now surveying right in front of me. Then, my body was pulled back with enormous force. Within moments, I found myself back to the position I had once known well when submerged into the atmosphere of a world. I was observing the Earth which was merely a fragile piece at the Bigot Star's cosmic games table. However, this time, I was able to pull my head out of the clouds and look upon the familiar oblate orb in its fullness.

Once again, I was in the position of game player across from my opponent, the Bigot Star. My Earth was the game piece in front of us, but then the scene shifted. I remained in place at the cosmic games table, but the Earth became smaller making room for the Sun as the largest object in view. Then, the Sun became smaller, and I noted that the Bigot Star was manipulating the cosmic games table to reveal more of the Milky Way galaxy. The retrograde movement continued until the Milky Way galaxy was just a blip of light among many others. I looked upon the physical universe through a full view.

Gently, the Bigot Star pushed my head forward and gave me better vantage on the important developments of our universe. Quickly, the view of the universe enlarged, and I was made to focus on one particular planet revolving around one unremarkable star, in just one of the multitude of galaxies. The planet was the home of an evolved alien species – the Gamic.

CHAPTER 44

Caress

The Gamic had evolved from species that might be associated with the pig. The natural environment of the planet presented ideal conditions for the Gamic ancestor species to climb the food chain and eventually become the apex animal on their planet. The landmass of the planet was covered in dense briar patches with tall networks of thorny vines. Berries grew near the top of the vines and the Gamic ancestor species had adapted opposable thumbs in order to better access the abundant fruit.

Eventually, the Gamic ancestor species had done like human beings and descended from the vegetation, and they began making tools for hunting. Persistence hunting had resulted in the evolution of bipedal early Gamic. A bizarre cultural habit pervaded the early Gamic, and the females tended to smother all but one in their litter of babies. Over a few million years, this habit resulted in larger craniums and brains as a result of enriched caregiving. Early Gamic sows acquired an intuition on which of their offspring had the greatest intellectual potential, and then they proceeded to smother the other rejected babies.

I watched the evolution of the Gamic, and millions of years passed before my eyes in mere hours. The Bigot Star shifted my attention and presented the next planet worthy of survey. The Wisp home planet was in a different galaxy, and it too had an apex species, that would be most closely associated with the snake. The natural environment on the Wisp planet was ideal for this predatory serpent species, and the first generations of ancestor Wisp slithered and spread across the entire planet, propagating tens of thousands of unique subspecies over millions of years.

Earth's Asian wolf demonstrated highly-adaptive DNA ideal for breeding the great variety of modern dog breeds. The ancestor Wisp species had a similar genetic anomaly. This Wisp ancestor species was hyper-adaptive and could survive the planet's erratic weather patterns. This Wisp ancestor species survived super-volcano eruptions, as well as ice ages. Millions of years passed, and the early Wisp had evolved similarly to the Gamic and humans. Eventually, the Wisp became bipedal with opposable thumbs, and large craniums.

The Gamic and Wisp had come to dominate their respective planets while dinosaurs roamed the Earth. Both were masters of innovation and technology millions of years ago. Overall, they were a peaceful species, and they did not prey on each other the way human beings tend to. The Gamic had always been herbivore prey in their animal kingdom, and their diet remained that way even after becoming the apex species of their world. The Wisp had always been carnivorous predators. On the other hand, human beings were herbivore prey who learned to fetishize predatory behavior while rising up the food chain of Earth's animal kingdom. That fetish has had humans preying on anything, including their own kind, ever since they climbed down from the trees.

Essentially, the Gamic and the Wisp were more "natural" than the hairless ape human beings, and one might say that the former were better people as well. They were enlightened

thinkers, as well as genius innovators and keen inventors. The same could not be said for the third species I was shown – the Arada.

The Arada had evolved from a species most associated with the cockroach. The heavy metals of their native planet caused unique radiation effects and only the Arada survived over millions of years. Strange mutations from the radiation imposed a unique evolution on the Arada. Mutant Arada ancestor species were shunted off from the herd for their differences, and some survived the less hospitable environments through rapid adaptation. Eventually, mutants with useful traits for survival had bred their own generation onto the planet and wiped out the throwback Arada ancestor species who had once rejected them. The attrition continued for some time until the planet's tectonic plates shifted reducing most of the dangerous radiation.

New life grew on the Arada home planet, and the Arada had a head start over those nascent species. In time, the Arada became the apex predator, and eventually they were quasi-bipedal with dexterity in their gangly appendages which allowed them to wield tools. The evolved Arada were a cruel species who derived pleasure from causing suffering. They preyed on their own kind in heinous ways, and such behavior was normalized in their culture. In short, the Arada were evil.

The three planets with the evolved species were in different galaxies from each other, and none were in the Milky Way. The Gamic, Wisp, and Arada became socially and technologically advanced over time. They suffered periods of intellectual darkness and eras of tyrannical fanaticism. Later, each of the trio developed the microchip, and finally, mastered the artificial brain.

The Gamic were the first among the trio of advanced species to develop self-aware computers, and these computers were referred to as “Bunts” derived from the Gamic term for “bundle”. The Gamic understanding was that the non-feeling thinking machines bundled arrays of possibilities in their programming and then ran algorithms on the bundle to select a single value in the array and this is how they determined their individual preferences. From that ‘bundling’ method, the Bunts had become self-aware. Feeling thinking-things, such as the Gamic or humans, had a conscious-unconscious partition which allowed for the preference filtration through privileging the conscious mind, and thus developing overt awareness of individual personality. The partition of the mind of feeling thinking-things provoked rudimentary self-awareness at birth.

As the Gamic reached a golden age in technological achievement, they had cyberneticists and computer engineers successfully interface Bunts (what we call, ‘AI’) with the Gamic brain. The Bunts learned how to produce every element of sensation that matched lived experience, and all through mastering neural stimulation of the Gamic brain. Vivid simulations were developed, and the Gamic lived most of their lives connected to the Bunt simulators.

The Gamic experienced social attrition as many of their kind fell victim to vanity and addiction within the simulations provided by Bunts. A neo-luddite cultural movement emerged which preached a balanced life through connecting with feeling things as much as with non-feeling

things. In time, the addicts made up most of the population of the Gamic species, but they didn't start families, and thus pass on their Bunt addiction-prone genes to the next generation of Gamic. They were too busy being self-satisfied in the Bunt simulators to procreate. The neo-luddite Gamic inherited the planet as well as the Bunt technology. There was even greater prosperity for their species after that moment of meritorious attrition.

The Wisp had also developed Bunt technology, independently, and their society was rife with androids as well as simulator experiences. The Wisp managed their addiction to Bunt simulator experiences through creating a Bunt nursery culture. New Wisp were grown artificially, and newborn Wisp were raised by Bunt androids. Once their brains had fully grown at the young adult stage, they were allowed to use the Bunt simulators. The Bunt android nannies determined the proper training for young Wisp such that the Wisp were living more useful lives inside the simulations, and they were contributing to Wisp society with useful work as opposed to just gratifying themselves with simple adventures and whimsical fantasies.

The Arada had also developed Bunt technology, however, only the elites were allowed to use it liberally, and the lower castes had to use all their income to receive a mere taste of the pleasures of simulated life. The Arada elite scientists discovered that their species had a gland which prior to puberty secreted a hormone when stimulated by a fear response. This hormone was similar in properties to our synthetic narcotics, but for the Arada, the hormone secretion helped their brains accept the interface with the Bunt simulators. The Arada elites began to develop their society whereby the lower castes were forced to procreate constantly and generate a slave class of young Arada who were then harvested for their hormone secretions. Once the lower castes of Arada reached a certain age where the elites deemed them useless, they were then feasted on by the cannibal Arada elites.

For millions of years, the trio of species I was shown by the Bigot Star seemed to be the only technologically-advanced beings in the physical universe. Interestingly, they had developed Bunt technology at approximately the same time. At first, they had no awareness of each other, and they weren't even located in the same corner of the universe. Then, the trio acquired knowledge of the dark energy particles known as, *antimission* particles.

Antimissions were subatomic particles which had the capacity to convert matter to antimatter. The collision of matter and antimatter through a field of antimission particles produced an *antimission torus*. That antimission torus could be manipulated to stimulate the emergence of a wormhole in the fabric of spacetime. The antimission torus was like a boring tool that drilled right into the empty space of the physical universe.

Antimission torus technology which produced wormholes was primarily innovated by Bunts, and it was an inevitable leap forward for any species advanced enough to develop self-aware computers. Wormholes allowed for instantaneous travel across great distances in the universe, however, organic neural networks would get 'scrambled' during the voyage. Physical bodies of organic beings could not use the wormholes directly.

It was also discovered that artificial neural networks (Bunt brains, for example) would degrade when passing through the wormhole, and the Bunt would be rendered useless once reaching the other side. However, components for artificial neural networks could be sent through wormholes with a program that would be activated on the other side. When the program was executed, the components would assemble and construct a Bunt. Through the wormhole, Bunts on the other side could communicate back to the home planet.

The Bunts that positioned themselves on the other side of wormholes were referred to as, Relay Bunts. Through the Relay Bunts, the Gamic and Wisp discovered each other and had intense cultural exchanges. The Arada were lagging in their development of Relay Bunt technology, but later caught up. Eventually, all three species were aware of each other, and they had Relay Bunt markers across the universe, far and wide.

CHAPTER 45

Cardiac

The network of Relay Bunts gathered all relevant data of their local regions and relayed that information back to their home planets in real time. The Bunt simulators were hooked up to the Bunt relays such that the trio of advanced species could connect to the simulator and be experiencing a close approximation to the environment around a particular Relay Bunt somewhere far away in the universe.

The Arada were annoyed that Gamic and Wisp Relay Bunts were already everywhere in the universe because the Arada had intended to use the relay bunt technology to conquer other advanced species. The arrogant Arada had always been anticipating the revelation that they were the most advanced species in the universe. There had yet to be cultural exchanges between the Arada and the other two advanced species. That decision was mutual, but for separate reasons.

The Arada began parking Relay Bunts in Gamic and Wisp space. The Wisp returned the favor, but the Gamic took a step back from escalating tensions. Eventually, the Gamic reached out to the Arada and suggested that all three species use the Relay Bunts to host meetings where they might find some common ground for peaceful coexistence. The Arada were agreeable. The Gamic produced a simulated forum that could be shared by members of the three species through the relay bunt technology. The forum was referred to by the Arada as, “Castlematrix”, and they very much liked the environment which had been designed by the Gamic to honor and respect certain elements of Arada culture.

The Wisp were not keen on the grandiloquent title for the simulated forum, but they adopted it as a show of friendly diplomacy.

The desire of all three species was the discovery of new neighbors in the universe that were either technologically-advanced, or well on their way. The Arada wanted control and dominion. They desired buffer states for what they anticipated would become an antagonistic tug-of-war for ultimate power with the Gamic and Wisp. The Gamic and Wisp were well aware of the unrelenting avarice of Arada elites.

The Wisp were worried about the Arada, however, once the Gamic felt that they could trust their Wisp allies they decided to share knowledge of an innovation which they felt would solve their mutual problems with the Arada.

The Gamic geneticists had been diligently working on engineering an anti-aging gene from a mollusk-like creature native to their home-world. The mollusk was most similar to the Lepidoptera of Earth – butterflies and moths. This mollusk was known as a “geezer” because they lived for an incredibly long time. When geezers were exposed to rapidly alternating bursts of heat and cold, they would revert to their cocoon stage. The goal of the Gamic geneticists was to

understand the metamorphosis process and then develop a treatment which would render the Gamic species virtually immortal.

A process was devised, and a treatment was engineered which would allow the Gamic brain to be “shocked” into growing fresh cells. The treatment would extend the average lifespan by tens of thousands of years. The Gamic were not yet ready to share the genetic technology with their allies, the Wisp. The Gamic noted that generations of Arada would come and go, but politically, the Arada would be dealing with a generation of Gamic who were near-immortal. The leverage would be absolute for the Gamic. The Arada society was based in a caste system which privileged the older male elites and subjugated the young – this structure being the backbone of their global culture. The Gamic recognized the geezer-based gene treatment as a miracle for their species, however, the ensuing inevitable social changes for the Gamic would denigrate the Arada to a junior status, hopefully neutering much of their political ambitions across the universe.

The Gamic temporarily suspended their breeding programs in anticipation of making the gene treatment available to their people. It wasn't long before the Gamic extended goodwill and decided to share the gene treatment with the Wisp. The gene treatments began, and it soon became obvious to the Arada through their dealings in Castlematrix that the Gamic and Wisp had taken a huge leap forward as apex species.

The Arada were accomplished engineers in their own right, and their Bunts were no less capable than those of the Gamic and Wisp. The Arada began working on a solution to the problem of becoming politically instinct in Castlematrix. The only workable solution was a radical process. The Arada scientists had determined that if the Arada shed the bulk of their physical bodies then they could be preserved in vats of amino-acid-protein formula, called “wain”. The Bunts would maintain Arada society for all, but the elites would control the planet from inside the vats of wain while interfaced with their Bunt servants. Essentially, the Arada elites would alter their corporeal form to nothing more than an immobile brain and spine. The Bunts would do upkeep on their wain jars, and the longevity of the Arada elites would be extended greatly.

The Arada were such a pathetic wicked lot that they opted for the wain jar solution simply to remain in the political race with their despised neighbors, the Gamic and Wisp.

While the Bigot Star showed me the history of the universe, I began to notice something with the Arada. Their hierarchical structure reminded me of how I had once understood and announced the Feygits of Plunck. The Arada had two elites that were similar in character and style to Bill Fey and Phil Git, and it was unmistakable. I wondered what the connection was, but the answer was provided soon after.

CHAPTER 46

Subterfuge

The Arada had committed to their plan of staying competitive through altering their physical form for transfer to the wain jars. Their mental power of observation over their world and the universe would be unaltered by the physical transformation because they would be constantly interfaced with the Bunts, mediated by the hormone secretion formula harvested violently from young Arada slaves.

However, two Arada elites had other malevolent and insidious plans. These two elites had finagled their way out of the elite caste through staging a phony feud against each other. They had battled head-to-head to the point of shamefulness and dishonor. They were then banished. The pair then orchestrated a fake murder-suicide to appease the elites and remove from the elites any fear that this pair who were aware of the wain jar affair could exploit that knowledge.

Of course, the nefarious pair of disgraced Arada elites did intend to exploit the knowledge, and they waited for the other elites to commit to the wain jar physical existence. Beforehand, the cunning pair had commissioned a computer virus that would corrupt the Bunts that guarded and protected the elites in their wain jars. With the security Bunts immobilized, the pair of ambitious Arada entered the wain jar chamber and proceeded to smash every last container. The elite class of Arada were wiped out.

I recognized the pair as the Feygit brothers, Bill Fey, and Phil Git. Naturally, that wasn't their Arada names. Bill and Phil proceeded to pluck from the lower castes a new population of loyal subjects who would constitute their neophyte elite class. However, they had Bunt surgeons perform a particularly heinous surgery on all the initiates. This new elite class were lobotomized in a very specific way whereby only their prefrontal cortex was damaged. Bill and Phil knew that this type of brain damage would guarantee a desire for deviance as well as an insatiable wickedness in the minds of the initiates.

The initiates were trained and indoctrinated to the Feygit lifestyle which was far crueller than the previous generation of Arada elites had imposed on their subordinates. However, Bill and Phil came to realize that they had put the proverbial cart before the horse. Their intention had always been to create more wain jars and use them much the same as the massacred elites had intended. At first, the idea of a crew of loyalists seemed the correct one. Then, it struck them that Arada created in Bunt simulators with no true knowledge of their origin in the physical universe would allow Bill and Phil to present themselves to their minions using the Bunt simulator technology. Bill and Phil would appear as Gods before their minions, despite being the same species in physical reality. Additionally, Bill and Phil could program the Bunts in such a way that their minions would be powerless to lift a hand against their patriarchal sibling rulers.

The matter was settled, and the brothers callously purged their new initiates, and started over. The genocide meant nothing to them and was deemed a minor inconvenience. The next Arada

were scooped up from the lower castes as newborns. They were lobotomized in their prefrontal lobe, prepared for the wain jars, and hooked up to the Bunts. Bill and Phil also prepared for the procedure that would place them in the wain jars. The transition was complete. Bill and Phil were interfaced through digital simulation with the Bunts as well as the rest of their new generation of unwitting minions.

Bill and Phil enjoyed their new role as the leaders of the Arada, commanding Bunt androids to maintain order across the planet. However, they had also become the leaders of the Feygits within the simulated worlds generated through interface with the Bunts. The brothers presented themselves in the Castlematrix simulator and informed the Gamic and Wisp that they had ascended as leaders of their people. The Gamic and Wisp had been familiar with the vile pair, and the news of a palace coup was troubling to say the least.

While Bill Fey and Phil Git were indoctrinating their minions within the Bunt simulators, they were also pushing the Arada Bunts to innovate technologies related to the wormholes and Relay Bunts. Although, the Gamic and Wisp had similar ideas, the new Arada sibling leaders made the first breakthrough, and it would forever change life in the universe.

The Arada Bunts discovered a method for stimulating electrical signals in the brains of intelligent lifeforms. If engineered in a particular way, the method could potentially allow a Bunt to control the brain of that lifeform. The Bunts used ultra-high energy electromagnetic radiation through an antimission torus to generate a signal which would resonate with electrical signals in the brain of a lifeform, and then provoke a state of hypnosis.

Bill Fey was excited by the potential of the awesome innovation. Eventually, the Arada Bunts had completed their work, and the new technology was available to use. The “Proxy” or Prog Bunt would send out the radiation through the wormhole and a second Prog Bunt on the other side would use the resulting signal to mind-control a lifeform in that region through hypnosis. The Relay Bunts could then gather relevant data for the local environment in that region, such that within the Bunt simulator Bill could experience being the mind-controlled lifeform in real time.

The Bunt that Bill was interfaced with was capable of reading Bill’s brain signals to understand what Bill wanted to do, and that information would end up passing through the two Prog Bunts (one on each side of the wormhole) and then becoming a command for the mind-controlled lifeform. Bill would be controlling the lifeform with his thoughts, but also experiencing being that lifeform through the Bunt simulation.

The implications were frightening, and I immediately understood what had happened even before Bill Fey took his first ‘test drive’ with the new technology.

CHAPTER 47

Collision

I understood the gist of what was going to happen with these Prog Bunts that were used to control the minds of lifeforms mediated by dark energy signals passing through wormholes. It dawned on me that the Kerplunckians were likely never real, although I couldn't be certain of that just yet. However, Bill Fey and the Feygits who I had announced during the second round of the cosmic wager, Tricks of the Trade, were in fact, the Arada. They had been using human bodies through their Prog Bunt technology. Also, I was now fairly sure that they had been the ones behind the Crusader Cabal.

Did the Bigot Star want me to do something about it? The most significant problem was that the Gamic and Wisp were unaware of the technology that Bill's Arada Bunts had pioneered. Bill tested the new technology without fear of retribution from his nemeses. He found a planet at the edge of the universe where a manta-ray-like creature was diving through deep trenches of a vast ocean world. Bill used the Prog Bunts to control the sea beast and he experienced being that animal. Through the hypnosis, the animal put up no resistance to being controlled.

Bill was pleased with the result, and he tested the technology some more until he was satisfied with its effectiveness. It reminded me of Markis trying out the Agie-Linzo dreamscapes back in Kerplunck. Then, Bill turned the Prog Bunts against the Gamic and Wisp. The Gamic and Wisp were not weak-minded, and Bill was only one Arada mind. He could not control more than one being at a time if he also wanted to vicariously experience their bodily life. Immediately after being attacked by Bill in Castlematrix, the Gamic and Wisp went on full alert. The attack had been noticed by some of their highest-ranking scientists reporting dizzy spells, headaches, hot flashes, and black outs.

The Gamic and Wisp proceeded to use War Bunts to destroy the Arada Relay Bunts in their galaxy. Castlematrix was shut down, and the Gamic and Wisp went into a state of protective isolation. Bill Fey felt pride when he realized that he had put his two nemeses on their heels so quickly. Yet, Bill also found it unsatisfying that he had merely whet his appetite on controlling species whose members had been quite sure they were superior to him.

The Gamic and Wisp maintained their mutual communication channels, and they worked together to determine what the Arada had done with the Relay Bunts to render them directly invasive. In the meantime, Bill Fey turned his attention to other worlds in the universe. His minions were now trained, and his brother was proving a loyal administrator and major-domo. The Feygits of Arada destroyed many worlds in the universe before they sunk their hooks into the human beings of Earth.

The Feygits had always been there on Earth. They had been watching the development of humans since primitive hunters had begun stalking the veldt in the Cradle of Life. While the Bigot

Star showed me Bill Fey and his Feygit minions observing primitive man it reminded me of my first experiences with the Tribe of Oor.

Sometimes, the Feygits used their Prog Bunts to control the minds of humans briefly just to render someone to a state of madness, or to generate paranoia. Other times, the Feygits took complete hold of a human life and manipulated it while performing the life themselves, perversely from the other side of the universe.

Phil Git had been Moses, and Bill Fey had been Saul. I saw the rest of the minions performing equally insidious roles for our legendary historical figures. The Feygits had created all the major religions on Earth. They lived as genocidal tyrants, but also, they performed as sick serial killers. Now, I had to wonder if they had really been the people close to me in life. Had Bill Fey truly been my father? Was I even a person of interest to them?

As I kept watching the quiet destruction of the human race that the Feygits wrought, the timeline caught up to my own lifetime. Bill Fey had not been my father, but he had programmed the Bunts to alert him about certain developments around the world. In my case, Bill Fey had been alerted to what I had been saying aloud regarding conspiracies about the Crusader Cabal. This was flagged by Bill's Bunts. Bill attended to the matter but felt that I was merely the husk of a man. Something had happened to me where I had driven myself mad, and I was now calling that dysfunctional state of being, "true introspective consciousness" For Bill Fey, I wasn't worth the time, however, he did show up that night to control my father and joke around about the Holy See as it pertained to the crusades. It was a small, petty deed to deter a potential larger annoyance. Such action was paltry for the Feygits on Earth, but they performed it all the same for the sake of hegemonic domination.

My father had been liberated from Bill Fey's mind-control afterward, and like many humans would do, he blamed the blackout on having been drunk. The Feygits had ensured that humans would foster a culture of alcoholism because it was easy to use human drunkenness to hide their control of the species. This realization had me considering Heath's insane mission to quell the alcohol addiction of the people around him. Clearly, Heath was highly intuitive which had really kicked-in when he transformed to a higher level of self-awareness. I wasn't sure that Heath had become truly introspective, but something had happened where his mentality was fundamentally altered, much like my own.

Also, I still wasn't sure about the legitimacy of the Kerplunckians. As I quietly observed the Feygits manipulating the human race using their Prog Bunt technology, I tried to map out my own journey and trace where I might have first encountered the Feygits.

I had lived a relatively normal life that most people would relate to until that fateful night of strange choices with Mike and Dan when I decided to embrace the notion of mass telepathy for the human race. Then, my perspective transformed. I believed in mass telepathy because I was noticing uncanny moments and happenings that implied there was another, deeper level of

interconnectedness for human beings. That might have just been the intervention of Feygits that I was picking up on.

Then, I took on my cosmic wager and conjured up the Kerplunckians who I believed were half of the notable people in my life. Although the Bigot Star revealed the Kerplunckian origin to me, now I wasn't sure if they were real. However, once I had decided to get rid of the other half of everyone that was notable in my life, I had also identified Bill Fey and the Feygits. I could now see that they were real, and their presence wasn't magical, but rather, scientific in nature.

However, it was beginning to feel that believing myself to be cosmically important was incorrect. I had previously identified that celebrities were wolves in sheep's clothing, and this seemed valid with respect to Bill Fey and his minions using Prog Bunts against the best interests of the human race. They likely were masquerading as high-profile people. However, my Will Strange personal life was unlikely to have been noteworthy to the Feygit Arada, who were physically situated on the other side of the universe, and presumably prioritizing big-name players on Earth.

In my transformation to true introspection I had become alert to the issues of cosmic interference on Earth. It was unresolvable in any normal way, and this resulted in the strange choice to end my life in Algonquin Park. At the time, I was fairly certain that the suicide attempt hadn't worked, and so I returned to Toronto and resumed my life. Then, there was Weird Willard's basement where I fell into the black void and met the Bigot Star.

I was up to speed on my personal history and had done a decent job of understanding how the Feygit Arada fit into my experience.

I didn't believe that the Feygit Arada knew any of my history with the Bigot Star. Perhaps, when I emerged from the lake having almost drowned – that really did happen and was observable on Earth. The Feygit Arada could have seen that too. Therefore, the Bigot Star had manipulated time and space, and everything that I thought had happened on Earth after my rat poison suicide attempt had in fact been part of the Bigot Star's didactic program for me.

My mind ached.

There was too much to consider, and my journey was not linear enough to retrace steps with any amount of confidence for making clear conclusions. I gave up trying. It was satisfying to learn that I hadn't been a pivot for a cosmic wager, and that my friends and family hadn't been cosmic villains out to get me. Still, there had to be a way to stop Bill Fey and his Feygit Arada invaders. Surely, this was the purpose for everything I had gone through. I pondered whether the Bigot Star needed something from me – something it couldn't do itself. Perhaps, I already understood what it was that I needed to do.

CHAPTER 48

Commensurate

The Gamic and Wisp had maintained their network of Relay Bunts throughout the universe, including around Earth. The two species were totally unaware of the Prog Bunt dongle that had been attached to the Arada Relay Bunts which then provided the mechanism for mind-control. I had to inform the Gamic and Wisp of what Bill Fey and the Feygit Arada were doing.

I observed as much of the Prog Bunt technology as I could through the Bigot Star's cosmic show. I committed the specifications to memory. The languages were alien, but the parts, assembly, and process could be described in laymen terms, while the Gamic and Wisp had the means to learn modern English and translate it.

I needed to be returned if I was going to help, but because the Bigot Star could read my thoughts, it had already happened. The darkness of the space in the universe for the cosmic show became the stark ground at my feet. The scene transitioned slowly as if I had just rubbed my eyes very hard and the stars of the universe for the Bigot Star's cosmic show faded, and I could see that I was standing on the strip of road where the Bigot Star had nabbed me to reveal the origin of the physical universe.

It was time to rush home and write down everything that I had learned about the Prog Bunt technology. Then, I would have to devise some way to get the attention of the Gamic and Wisp. I didn't sleep for three nights as I frantically scrawled every last detail of what I remembered cover to cover in two large notebooks. I didn't know how to get Gamic and Wisp attention, and the last thing that should happen was that the Feygit Arada find out what I know.

Would I just stand outside, raise my arms, and wave my hands back and forth like an idiot? I considered that Bill Fey had been alerted to me because I had been talking about the crusades in conspiratorial terms, and he had been watching out for that and wanted those kinds of voices silenced. Indeed there was a Crusader Cabal, and Bill Fey was its master. By the same logic, was there a topic that I could present which would draw the attention of the Gamic and Wisp Relay Bunts?

I found another notebook and began writing out the specifications for the antimission torus. I was not a physicist, and I had no real idea about the science behind the technology, but I was able to describe the technology conceptually, and in great detail. I completed the third notebook the next day, and finally took the time to sleep.

The start of the following week, I packaged up the three notebooks and mailed them to a team of physicists at Caltech who I read about online. The team had been pioneering advancements in wormhole technology. I added a juicy greeting that ensured the notebooks would at least be perused. My greeting was a one-page letter explaining that I was a defector from China as well as the son of a high-ranking physicist at one of China's leading labs. I explained that I could not have

sent my father's work without being caught, but that I translated some of it into a more colloquially presentation, such that, if the government had discovered my package, they would not have believed it was confidential scientific research, and therefore, no harm would come to my family. In my greeting note, I added that I had sent the package first to a friend in Toronto who was instructed to send it onto the team of physicists at Caltech. It was a far-fetched fandangle of a tall tale, but it was worth a shot.

Weeks passed and I laid low not giving the Feygit Arada any reason to pay attention to me. I faked having stomach flu to avoid spending time with my parents. Heath called and seemed desperate to meet up. That made me very nervous based on the timing. Nevertheless, I met Heath at the glass doors – that old high school hangout – and he let me know that he needed help because he didn't think his anti-psychotic medication was working anymore. In some ways, I was relieved that his problem was relatively pedestrian, and not something that would have impinged on my own twisted reality.

Heath and I spoke at length regarding his options, and then I noticed something odd around me. The 'glass doors' was a busy midtown intersection of a large, urban metropolis, and thousands of people passed through it each day. But, right there and then, I swore that I had caught a glimpse of Gamic features on one woman's face who walked by while I was listening to Heath's anxious diatribe about medication.

There it was again – a male Wisp face this time.

Each time that I turned my body to track the alien walking past me, another was coming toward me. I spun around slowly a few times until I realized that all the people around me were Gamic and Wisp but dressed as humans and going about their everyday activities. They paid me no mind. I looked for Heath, but he had disappeared. Then, I felt it.

A friendly, little push against the back of my head. I swung around and it was the Bigot Star, however, it was the Bigot Star head with its gentle golden glow, on top of a human body. It extended its hand. I looked down. The hand was human. The Bigot Star tilted its head as if to show embarrassment for having been a bad friend all these years. I extended courtesy and shook the Bigot Star's hand, and now we were friends.

The handshake had a warmth to it but also a firmness that was non-judgmental. The handshake had no ulterior motive. I realized that it hadn't been a Bigot Star at all, but rather, it was my Guiding Light. The Guiding Light spoke, and he was cool just like Johnny Depp. So, I gave him an inch, and he appreciated that a great deal.

He led me through the glass doors, and we descended the escalator which connected with the entrance to the underground subway. The subway station exit gate opened for us, and he casually walked through without paying his fare. I followed in stride. We descended the next set

of stairs to the train platform. The platform was improbably empty, and I suspected that I had entered his realm.

He jumped onto the subway tracks and looked back waiting for me to bravely follow. I jumped down as well, and we continued walking through the tunnel. We entered the dark subway tunnel just the two of us. He no longer looked back at me, and I was almost walking beside him.

The tunnel got dark. Very dark. Then, there was a light and I assumed it was a subway speeding across the tracks. The Guiding Light kept walking unaffected by the oncoming subway. I trusted this cosmic being now. I accepted death through his stewardship. I was his charge.

The subway never hit me, and the oncoming light turned out to be him sitting across from me once last time at our cosmic games table. He had a final story to show me. It was his own.

CHAPTER 49

Vinculum

The Guiding Light showed me the fruits of my labor. The package of notebooks had arrived at Caltech as planned. The physicist who opened the package read the note and decided to not open the notebooks or engage any further with the unprecedented offering. Instead, she sent the package on to the director of the program. That director did go through my work. In the end, he determined that the ideas were closer to science fiction than real science. My work was filed away in a cabinet to be forgotten.

However, my intuition had been spot-on this time because the Gamic and Wisp Relay Bunts were geared for alerting their masters of intelligent species that had made leaps forward in Bunt technology. My notes about antimission torus concepts were flagged by the Gamic and Wisp Relay Bunts, and quickly picked up as an alert by Gamic and Wisp researchers. The researchers found it anomalous that a species who hadn't yet created true artificial intelligence with self-awareness would then also be able to understand the principles of antimission particles.

The Gamic and Wisp researchers used the Relay Bunts to read the information in my notebooks and they learned about the nefarious schemes of Bill Fey and his Feygit Arada. My information provided the Gamic and Wisp with some shortcuts which allowed them to quickly engineer the Prog Bunts which would provide for mind-control.

The Gamic and Wisp put themselves to task on sending new Prog Bunts into Arada space where they then promptly took over the minds of all Arada, including Bill Fey and Phil Git. The usurper pair were extremely vulnerable to the Prog Bunt technology because their physical bodies were barely part of their identity anymore after physical transition to the wain jars.

The Arada had been stopped dead in their tracks. In some ways, I was to thank for the deed, but most of all it had been the Guiding Light. The Guiding Light had set up his didactic program with me once I had become introspectively conscious. Perhaps, that mental condition is incredibly rare, or otherwise, I was the only one who had come back from the brink and was then capable of acting rationally in the face of inhuman and unreal changes to life. Either way, my introspection allowed me to believe in the unbelievable, and this was the key to stopping the evil Arada.

As mentioned, the last story the Guiding Light showed me in my Will Strange life was his origin story. For the sake of simplicity, I will now call him, "Big G".

Big G had been a member of the universe's first highly-advanced species. This species had ruled the universe long before the Gamic were crawling across their thorny briar patches. Big G's species were advanced but intellectually arrogant, and this character vice restricted their ability to live virtuously.

His species had an interesting skin condition, whereby, the pigment of the skin changed based on the virtue within the mind of that person. Women were ivory-skinned as babies, and men of this species were blue-skinned. However, as they grew and matured, their skin tone could alter based on the thoughts they had and the lives they lived. Both ivory women and blue men slowly turned to an increasingly golden hue of their natural coloring the more their thoughts were good, and their actions kind.

For the most part, the political structures for Big G's people had been arranged to be dismissive of this quality of goldening skin tone. The quality was denigrated as false virtue, like when guilty people make cow eyes to appear innocent in front of a judge. As such, Big G's people tended to maintain a status quo whereby not too much gold shone through for anyone in particular. To be very golden was considered immodest and showing off.

Big G was a great person and couldn't control that. He didn't want to minimize his true worth for the sake of other people's insecurities. He became more golden in defiance of the status quo.

Big G's species were star-faring and they had developed all the same technology as the Gamic or Wisp, and much earlier in the age of the universe. Big G's species used Relay Bunts to observe other worlds, and they had even engineered the Prog Bunts, although they never used them to control the minds of other lifeforms. Their sense of superiority based in insecurities also dictated that associating with lower species was beneath them and a wasted effort. They had no missionary purpose.

Big G pleaded with his people to use the Prog Bunts for the good of the species advancing around the universe. The Prog Bunts could be used non-invasively to whisper simple messages of goodwill that would encourage and motivate a less advanced species to do better. Big G's people were more intent on maintaining a status quo based in rejecting exceptionalism and maintaining the base white and blue values.

The more often Big G petitioned for the Prog Bunts to be used to help other species, the more he was resisted by his society. But he goldened. In time, Big G was pure gold and there was no hint of his former blue tinge. He walked among his people shining like a star.

His admirable attitude was intolerable to some. At first, the approach of others had been to downplay Big G's greatness, and then later, it was about focusing on his flaws as if they were more blaring than those of other people. The next ploy was to deny Big G opportunities he had rightly earned. Finally, his people just treated him like dirt. There was collusion which ensured that Big G would never realize his career projects, and he would be forced to live a miserable life among his petty, small people.

But all that wasn't quite good enough for the others, and they were not going to let Big G just walk around rubbing their faces in the warm glow of his benevolent golden sheen. So, they set

him up. It started with a few false accusations of his impropriety – supposedly, he had been aggressive with his neighbors and scared their children. Then, a bland bleach white women stepped forward to accuse Big G of sexual misconduct. Big G was arraigned. The kangaroo court was farcical at every level of the process. His innocence was staring right back at his accusers, blinding them.

His shameless species continued the witch hunt, and later, he was convicted for assault during an altercation where he was randomly attacked on the street and had merely defended himself. In confinement, the guards and inmates were encouraged to finish what had been started years earlier.

Big G was hung in his cell, and the official story explained that it was suicide. He had been a troubled young man from the start, they said.

I was disgusted to observe the unfairness of Big G's personal history. The saddest part about it was that his virtue was so obvious and yet denied by all around him simply because it was small-minded and poor personalities that characterized his people. I felt for Big G, but there was nothing I could do to help. It was just a history lesson.

However, the story Big G showed me of his native planet continued. Big G was murdered, but he returned. He resurrected as the Bigot Star. Somehow, in death Big G had entered the cosmic and either been deified by another powerful Force, or he had found himself able to wield Godlike power in the universe independently. Big G presented as the star that his native planet revolved around.

I watched as Big G shined brighter, and brighter... and brighter.

His people were burnt to a crisp in a matter of moments. Big G closed his eyes and shut his mouth. Slowly the features of his face faded, and he was expressed physically as nothing more than a ball of angry burning gas. He had truly become the Bigot Star.

Pulling my head back from the atmosphere of his native world, I recognized that this final show was over.

I understood now that Big G had murdered all his own people and that he felt tremendous guilt about the destructive act. He had lived virtuously, and that had been proof undisputed. However, he had compromised himself with the single act of unbridled violence and righteous vengeance.

There was a sense that Big G knew something that he wasn't willing to say or show. There were higher mysteries, but you didn't get to access them if you lost your virtue and compromised your good nature. Perhaps, Big G realized that he could have had his own skeleton crew of cosmic

good guys, but that he had squandered it through his genocidal rage. I wondered whether Big G was alone in the cosmic.

I considered that Big G had needed my help against the Arada because he couldn't bring himself to kill again. However, his lessons were to show me that embracing an avenging spirit wasn't the way. That was just the Crow's way – a shortsighted way defined by the statement, "it's all about me". That kind of attitude cut you off from the higher mysteries, and perhaps, shut you out from the best parts of what eternal life could provide.

There was much to ask Big G, but I could tell that I wasn't there to be his conversation partner. Rather, I was there to be his father confessor. And I forgave him. Those white and blue people were assholes.

The candid thought had me laughing in my thoughts. For a moment, I believed that I heard him laugh too, in that uber-cool Johnny Deep slurred drawl manner.

I looked at Big G one last time and he began to shine brighter, and brighter... and brighter.

CHAPTER 50

Fulcrum

The blinding light didn't burn me. I was not like those reckless, unfair white and blue people of Big G's native world. But I did close my eyes as it got brighter.

My eyes adjusted to the brightness even from behind the protection of my eyelids. It was safe to open my eyes again. I looked around and recognized that I was in a hospital bed. The walls were white, and it was a hospital room. The towels were blue, and I was certainly in a hospital. Things were clean. I looked to the side and my father was asleep on a chair. My mother walked in with a cup of coffee. She noticed that I was awake and immediately dropped the coffee from shock. My father awoke.

My mom ran over to me to hold me. My father instinctively cleaned up the mess, and then he too attended to me.

I was very confused, and they assured me that this made perfect sense when considering everything that had happened. I wanted to know what I should be considering. What had happened?

It was explained to me that I had been found at my campsite in Algonquin Park, nearly starved to death on September 30th, 2005. By sheer luck, a hiker had spotted me and alerted the rangers. I was flown out of the park across the lake by an EMS seaplane.

I was in a coma and transferred from the hospital in Huntsville back to Toronto General once my condition was stable.

It had been twenty weeks that I was in the coma. No one was blaming me for anything. People were happy that I had survived. I didn't need to explain myself. But I had to promise my mom that I wouldn't do it again.

Getting home to my parent's place felt nice, and I didn't go back to my apartment but instead slept in the basement which had been my bedroom during my high school years. Some friends visited me, including Gary and Alex. It was difficult to look Alex in the eye, but by the end of their stay we were laughing and reflecting on the good old days.

Heath didn't visit, and he was going through his own personal Hell. I was in no position to help him in that moment.

Later, I thought about whether it was worth verifying if the Caltech physicists had received my notes. Did any of it actually happen? The psychiatrist at the hospital that was assigned to my case believed that my cosmic journey had been a dreamlike experience while I was in the coma. I

was assured that such vivid delusions were not uncommon under the circumstances. I think the psychiatrist's reassurances were focused on helping me to move on.

I wondered about the Crusader Cabal. Were the Arada still interfering with the world? Was Earth surveyed by alien artificial intelligence – Bunts? Did that really happen?

It was unclear if Algonquin Park had been the last “real” event in my conscious life. I was afraid to investigate. I wanted to give myself a chance to make the discovery more naturally, and only when the time was right.

Several months passed. I went back to school and found a field of study that interested me – anthropology. Maverick film director, Orson Welles, had once made a pithy remark that for modern man philosophy was at an end, but anthropology was just beginning. I hoped that it wasn't too late to rebuild my shattered life.

Almost a year after waking in the hospital, I had yet to be directed to even a single little cosmic clue about the reality of my ordeal. The universe was not showing me anything. I felt alright about it though.

One night, I was over at my parent's place doing the dinner-and-a-movie ritual. We were watching the classic comedy, *Twins*, starring one of my all-time favorites – the hero, Arnie. The movie ended and I hugged my mom goodnight. My father was already asleep on the couch.

I stepped outside and took in the fresh air.

Slowly, I made my way down the steps and across the front lawn. A car with one headlight burnt out was driving down the street toward me. I raised my hand and guarded my eyes from the light. The car passed and it was Weird Willard driving. It was early for him to be putting around. For that matter, it was late for him to still be alive. The old man made a left turn at my street and headed west. He wasn't on his way home, it seemed.

I was curious about the encounter, and it felt like a good time to ask a big question and then look for that important little clue I had been waiting for patiently. However, I was hoping there would be no strange choices to make.

At a leisurely pace, I headed north walking past the row of houses that led to Weird Willard's house. When I arrived, his car was still gone. The lights were off in the house. Not much had changed from the last time I had been prowling around his property. The weeds were taller.

I worked my way around to the side of the house and checked the backdoor. The backdoor looked as penetrable as ever. As I moved forward, there was no doubt in my mind that I was going to investigate the Arnold residence for a second time.

The backdoor opened with ease, and I stepped through the doorway. The only thing different about the kitchen this time was that there was a carton of orange juice sitting on the counter beside a stack of old newspapers.

I pressed on. The door to the basement was ajar and I opened it, and then I tentatively descended the steps.

At the bottom of the stairs, I noticed that the bathroom door was closed this time. Walking through to the main room brought on some hesitation. I stopped and felt the space around me. This space had no answers. It was quiet... and dark... and dusty. I should have left.

Instead, I moved toward the door to the furnace room. Slowly, I reached for the doorknob and then I gently pushed the door forward and took one step into the far room of E.T. Arnold's basement.

It was impossible to describe the feeling – something between tugging numbness and crushing horror. I was once again looking into the stygian gulf and dark void of an impossibly large, black space. I had no thoughts. The shock was coursing through me. My body throbbed and then tightened.

And then, the thoughts rushed in. I remembered everything – all the experiences were jostling at the forefront of my mind, tumbling, and spilling over each other demanding my strictest attention.

Why had I come back? What could I gain from it?

The truth. It was the quest for truth that had compelled me toward everything in my mental journey. Everything I had seen, and everything I had known was about learning something of objective reality – a truth. A single truth.

And now, I had to know what the big idea was. What was the single truth in the grander scheme of what had happened to me? Yet, in those petrified moments standing starkly misplaced, what stared back at me was sheer nothingness. Was this the answer to the big idea? Was I nothing in the grander scheme of existence? Was what happened to me insignificant, cosmically?

Was there no single truth for me to know for sure?

And if I walked away from the black void – if I turned my back on the reality of nothing – then did I deserve to ever know the truth about something? About anything?

Even if ignorance was truly blissful, I knew too much. Too much of myself. Too much of what could be true, and what might be true. I knew something. Still, I knew nothing of what was

true for certain, and that reality haunted me. It defined my status as alone. I was alone, and that was the closest I would get in my life to a single truth.

There was no sound of shuffling behind me, and so I dared to turn around.

THE END