

SIGNAL



SHRAII

Signal

shraii

it's all fiction

PART ZERO: COLOR RED

Tower of the Sun? It's huge. It makes you feel small. Trust me, it is so much bigger than it looks in pictures. As you approach, a dark, megalophobic awe begins tingling through you. Then you notice the faces.

The upper face is a golden radar: a bird sun wearing a crown, with a lightning rod protruding through its mouth. Above it, at the pinnacle of the tower, is a platform big enough for a person to stand on. The whole structure slouches eerily.

The lower face is distinctly human, reminiscent of the face people see on the moon.

The body of the tower is white with slashes of red on both sides, unsymmetrical, uneven, and yet harmonized. The tower has enormous arms that are spreading way too wide. Your mind can't quite put it into a category. It's a bird, a tower, an entity. A stranger. Its surface is organically porous, like the skin of a concrete creature unearthed from underground.

It's a gargantuan statue.

Walk around the tower and you discover a third face on its back: a black sun with twisted tentacles for rays, assembled from tiles. Its sharp nose protrudes from the mural into the third dimension.

And then, there is a mysterious detail. On the back of the tower, in the midsection between the black sun and the pinnacle, there is a rectangular outline, like an emergency exit door that was painted over. At some point in this story, I will walk through this door. Will escape through it.

Inside the tower's body, it's all red. There is a staircase around the centerpiece, a structure called the Tree of Evolution. A rising spiral with creatures clinging to it, from amoebas to apes, all the way to the pinnacle. To the empty platform where a human should stand.

At the core of the tower, the Tree of Evolution presents a winding path from single-celled organisms to animals to humans. And then, near the top, there is a side door. Painted over, almost invisible unless you know to look for it. A side door.

When I climbed the staircase inside the tower, I felt something magnetic rising in my solar plexus, as if a wet tennis ball were spinning inside me, flinging electric droplets against my lungs and ribs. A lump formed in my throat. I felt that I was approaching something.

I stopped and peered into one of the tower's arms. From the inside, it was an empty cone lined with lights that gently shifted colors. When they turned red, I experienced a sensation in my brain like the come-up of DXM. The color seemed to enter through my optic nerves.

I stood transfixed until the shifting colors completed their cycle and returned to RED. Zoom. It hit me again, like a syringe injecting air into me, expanding me, taking me away. I stayed until a staff member urged me to move on.

The Tower of the Sun was designed by Taro Okamoto as part of the Theme Pavilion for Expo '70, the Japan World Exposition held in Osaka. Its interior remains open to the public.

It is still there.

I walked out a changed person. The first diary entry from that time reads:

"Old people sit outside doing nothing because there is nothing to be done. Things inevitably arrive. I love life. For the first time?"

I became perfectly content. Happy. It was as if the old dark me switched, as if my consciousness, the focus of my awareness, moved to another Self.

During Expo '70, there was an underground lair beneath the structure that housed the fourth face of the tower. After the fair ended, the fourth face was moved to an unknown location. The fourth face is gone. We don't know where it is. It all makes too much sense.

The color within the tower's arm rewired my brain. It was RED because it had to be. I've had a special relationship with the color red ever since that night of August 1, 2009, in Moscow, when Shraii was born. Is he me? Definitely. Am I him? Somewhat. I guess I am a Russian doll in more ways than one.

So, on August 1, Shraii was born. What happened?

My friend Paul was going on vacation, and his dealer had just gotten this crazy acid that was supposed to be the best, if not the actual LSD-25.

He got quite a lot. The stash was supposed to last his entire two-week vacation. We were planning to try some, to see what it was like. We had some cough syrup too—you know the one. What follows is a trip report.

Shortly after the trip began, we became slightly psychotic and ended up taking all of it, splitting drops of liquid acid between us one by one until there was none left. I still remember the cold, sinking feeling as it dawned on me that I was, in fact, tripping very, very, very (very!) hard and that it just kept going up without any signs of slowing down. That was when I discovered that time was an illusion. It's one thing to comprehend a concept intellectually and a totally different story to live through it.

I faced a mirror as one inevitably does during a psychedelic trip, both figuratively and literally. But here is the thing. There was a delay between me, on this side of the mirror, and my reflection. The movements didn't exactly match. You might imagine the traces that follow a hand when you wave it in front of your face; multiple copies disappearing one after another. There was nothing new in that, that was not it. This time the delay was on *my* side of the mirror. My reflection moved first. Then I inevitably followed, matching it. Donnie Darko vibes. If you know, you know.

Listen.

There was a lot that happened that night, but for this story, what matters is my encounter with the color red.

I was lying fully dressed in a bathtub, submerged in water. A small window admitted the afternoon sun, and a red shower curtain between the window and me acted as a filter. I experienced the most vivid, brilliant, invigorating RED. IT WAS SO RED. It was the same RED I would encounter thirteen years later inside the tower.

It's possible that some channels were opened then, in 2009, that got accessed by whatever was in the tower's arm in 2022, when I visited it. Thirteen years passed between those events, but they were entangled, like two particles, because clearly time doesn't exist. I saw my reflection in the mirror moving first. I saw it with my

very eyes. It was supposed to be the future but it was the past. Also, the present.

The third event, directly connected to these two, was rapidly approaching in 2025, and I couldn't alter its course. I had to dance on my side of the mirror, because what was about to happen already happened and is happening.

Here is the prophecy: "When lightning strikes the rod protruding from the mouth of the golden radar bird-face, the channels of red will open again. And the one within the tower—Shraii, the receiver—will fulfill his purpose. He will receive the Signal."

"Are you a prophet now?" asks Vita.

"You know, it's just for the prose."

"But isn't everything in this prophecy true?"

"Well, yeah. Only it wasn't the Tower of the Sun. It was a transmission tower. And the color made it work, didn't it? The color of my tent."

"He-he," Vita laughs—that peculiar laugh of hers.

Of course my tent was red. After that night in 2009, almost everything I bought was either red or black—black to offset the red. I called it my favorite color, but the truth was that every other color had seemed dim since that night, as if someone had permanently turned up the red saturation in my brain. Staring into a certain shade still brings me joy: being with it, surrounded by it, inside it.

I had bought the tent a while ago but never learned how to set it up properly. I'm not much of a camper.

I dragged it out of my garage, spread it out on the patio, and washed it with a hose. It was April 2025; the days were hot and the tent dried completely the next day, along with my red sleeping bag that I had laid nearby.

I felt dissociated as I went through the motions, stepping through mirrors. It didn't feel as though I were seriously going to do this in the waking world, in the Physical. Shraii would do it, not me. As if Shraii weren't a self of mine.

Before going to the location with transmission towers, I decided to try "camping out" on my patio, to see what it was like. As the sun went down, I zipped the tent and tried to get comfortable in the sleeping bag. The ground was hard and cold, and the minuscule

insulation provided by the sleeping bag did nothing to eliminate discomfort. I went back into the house that night.

The next day, I visited the local Home Depot, purchased an inflatable mattress and drove out to see the location. Turns out there was no parking close to it, not even a residential street where I could leave my car for several hours. Blue sky beating down.

Transmission towers. Pylons. I stopped on the shoulder of a road, emergency lights blinking.

A low fence enclosed the field. Barbed wire circled the legs of the nearest tower, but it began too high above the ground to keep anyone from walking beneath it. It was meant to prevent people from climbing. "I shouldn't be driving anyway," I said out loud. How the hell was I going to get behind the wheel under 1,200 milligrams of DXM? What had I been thinking? The place was forty minutes away from my house on foot, and walking was the only real option.

The plan assembled itself: I would leave home on Saturday at six, walk here, climb the fence, and choose one of the towers farther from the road. I would set up the tent before sunset, take the pills, meditate, and wait for the prophecy to come to life—whatever that meant.

I didn't think about how I would get back home once the trip was over. After all, I had an entire Sunday to do that, to get home, sleep, and get ready for work on Monday.

"Worst-case scenario," I said out loud, and finished the rest in my head: I would take a sick day and show up on Tuesday. As these mundane thoughts were parading through the halls of my mind, I realized once again how crazy that idea was, what I was about to do. I thought of my family, of my daughters, my wife. What would happen to them? How would they feel?

That vision came back, the one that caused me to quit DXM for years. My wife's scream as they discover my body. On repeat.

1,200 mg.

I thought of the field recordings I had made during previous trips. In some of them, my breathing disappeared for long stretches at a time.

I got back into the car and sat there for a while, listening to the tick-tick-tick-tick of the emergency lights. I faced what was obvious and true.

Don't do it.

I drove home. It was Sunday, March 30.

I did it the following Saturday.

Because I couldn't change a thing. It all already happened. What was about to happen. It is happening now.

PART ONE: THE TOWER

Electricity generation begins when mechanical energy is converted into electrical energy through electromagnetic induction. A generator does not create energy. It drives electric charges through its windings and into an external circuit.

Saturday is sunny. I spread out the things I'll take with me on the trip. My trusted blindfold. Earbuds. My Tascam digital recorder, the black one, and another one, a Sony, the red one. I charged both last night and made sure their memory cards were empty. Pack of cigarettes, three red Bic lighters, an extra hoodie, black, and a pair of black winter socks, in case it gets cold.

I roll up the tent and put it on the bottom of my backpack. It's not quite as tight as I want it to be, but that's the best I can do. Sleeping bag. Same story, it goes on top of the tent, the rest in smaller compartments. I think for a few moments and add a tiny flashlight on a keychain and a compass I had lying around. Again, I'm going on a journey to lands unknown, perhaps my last one. Anything helps.

It all fits nicely. I leave the backpack at home and drive to the pharmacy. Get some bottles of water, some Gatorade, and, on an impulse, some sour worms candy. The cashier is a middle-aged woman in glasses. I look for some sign, an omen, something in her appearance, maybe something she said. No, it's business as usual. Have a nice day.

I get back home and add the purchased items to the pack. Realize that I almost forgot the pills. What a moron. I treat Dex with reverence as I count out the pills and place them into my pill case. I'm all set now. It's 10:36 a.m. Got time to kill. I do all sorts of things throughout the day, surfing the web, playing Xbox. It's a long day, but it's getting closer to the end by the minute. I watch the sun as it moves shadows around. I avoid meditation or thinking about Dextroverse. Finally, I can't wait any longer.

It's still too early, but I'm out, locking the door. The air outside is pleasant. Clouds gather on the horizon as the sun begins slipping over the edge of the world. I walk briskly with thumbs under the

straps of my backpack. I check my phone every once in a while to look at the blue dot on Google Maps. I don't have the exact destination, no pin, but I know the general direction and the name of the street that cuts into the freeway where the power lines are. Faraday Avenue. How cool is that? How symbolic.

Not much happens on the way. No music, just my breath and the sound of sneakers against the sidewalk. I stride forward. I sweat. The evening breeze picks up, cooling down my armpits, and I raise my hood up.

In about 40 minutes, I'm standing at the intersection of Faraday Avenue and the freeway. Here they are, the electric transmission towers. Cars are driving by. Too many cars. I think about the cops and the fence. I would technically be trespassing. I step over the fence and speed up to the nearest bush. Bent at my knees, ducking my head, half expecting the sirens behind, but nothing happens. I breathe heavily and wipe my face with a sleeve, watching the road. The scene from *Stalker*, the Tarkovsky movie, comes to mind. The one where they are entering the Zone, getting shot at. I smile. Not even close. I'm not even sure if it's illegal to be where I am. Could be a public field, I don't know.

I turn around and look at the nearest tower. It's at the top of a little hill, a bit too close to the road. I follow the wires with my eyes. The next one is much better. That will be the one. I walk to it, stepping on yellow and white flowers as I go. Spring, life is blooming. The earth is full of new beginnings. I keep looking over my shoulder as the road gets further away, along with its ocean-like sounds.

Finally, I stand in the presence of the tower. It's humming. I can hear the electricity. I reach out and put my trembling hand on its metal leg. Of course I've read of the dangers of camping under a tower. It can catch fire, it can be hit by lightning, something can malfunction and I could get electrocuted by the cables, but touching the tower itself is not dangerous. It's grounded. All those electrons are high above me, driven back and forth through the wires like an immense electric flock. There are so many of them, I can hear them rumbling all the way down here, through all this air. It must be very loud up where the wires are. The tower is cool to the touch.

I inspect the ground. The hill is a little steep, some bushes, no flowers here. I walk under the horizontal plank, under the tower and touch the ground with my hands. I'm thinking of sharp objects, of anthills, of snakes. I find none of it. I put my backpack down and sit next to it. Look up: criss-crossing partitions of the latticework. I close my eyes, open them, drink some water. I sit still and observe the surroundings. Nobody's here. An occasional bird. Electric hum. I smoke a cigarette. This is the place. It's going to happen here.

I open the backpack and take out everything to get to the bottom, to my red tent. I spread it out and begin the setup process. In the middle of it, I hear some rustling and I freeze mid-action, ears perked up, like an animal. A squirrel. Nothing. I look around. I think of the homeless. My mind selects one, makes him violent, sends him into the tent. Cheap fear. I know I'm inventing him, but that doesn't make me less afraid. I smoke another cigarette, feel that I have to poop. I have no toilet paper, hadn't thought of that. The urge passes. It's too close to the road. I decide to change location.

I follow the wires with my eyes again, to the next tower. It looks different, another design. There is something about it, or I'm just making that up to disguise my banal, non-prophetic fear of the homeless.

The dark is approaching. The sky starts getting this yellowish tint, the sickly shade of 5 p.m. on a spring day. I say out loud, "If I'm scared now, what's gonna happen in the..." I nod. I know all about the importance of set and setting when it comes to hallucinogens; learned that the hard way. If something feels unsettling before the trip, it must be changed. I nod again and undo the half-built tent, shovel it back into the backpack, rush to the next tower, walking briskly directly under the cables, glancing at the destination every now and then. As the tower looms closer, I recognize that there is indeed something special about it. It feels different, not like the other towers. It's standing on a hill, but is behind a larger hill, perfectly secluded, yet pronounced, like an epiphany in the middle of Antarctica. Nobody will find me here. It's going to be a performance for no one.

The ground under the tower is almost perfectly flat. I inspect it briefly. The hum is louder here. I notice that there is no barbed wire

above the horizontal plank preventing me from climbing up, but I have no intention of going there. I repeat the process with the tent and manage to complete the setup as the sky turns orange. I'm glad I left my house early. I take the inflatable mattress out of its box, out of its plastic wrapping, and inflate it with its tiny handheld pump. The sound of the pump, the hum, the insects are picking up. No more birds. Once I'm done, I smoke another cigarette and look at the moon. It's not quite full, but getting there. I think of the effects the full moon has on astral projections, think of the Gateway program. It's a good idea to meditate now, to try to get to what Robert Monroe, Bob, called Focus 10, the state of being also known as "mind awake, body asleep."

"All right," I say, and climb into the tent.

I get out the recorders, check them once more, put the earbuds into my ears. I can still see inside the tent without my phone, the red walls burning crimson. I lie down, select the "Intro to Focus 10" Gateway tape on my phone, press play and close my eyes.

"Begin your preparatory process," Bob says on the tape. "Put all your worries, anxieties, and concerns into your Energy Conversion Box."

I'm too agitated. My heart is beating too fast. The outdoor air feels different from the air at home. I picture the box in its usual place inside the lighthouse: plain wood, heavy lid. First goes the homeless man, reduced to a statuette. Then my family, my laptop for work, and a red cross for the possibility of an overdose. You can never be sure with this substance. Uncle Dex is a bit of a jester.

I attach the imaginary sensor to the bottom of the box. It catches text-thoughts before they can distract me.

Is it going to be okay? Will I be okay?

Pink blink. Poof. Gone. The mechanism is working.

I continue through the procedure I've rehearsed for the past six months: across the theater, past the glowing stone, through Exit C1, along the night beach, and up the stainless-steel staircase under the moon.

At the top, I lie down on the bed beside the armchair and old television, then split myself in two. One version remains on the bed,

mirroring my physical body. The other stands, and my awareness goes with it. I look through its eyes as I walk to the railing.

Vita is already there, waiting for me. I ask her to apply that neon-green paint of hers to my clone's brain, stretching and relaxing it.

I lean over the railing and watch moonlight move across the inky waves. I think about Carl Jung's ocean. The unconscious in which we're all swimming. I drift into the metaphor. The thought bypasses my box completely. I forget about the clone lying on the bed.

When I check on it again, its body is numb, nearly perfectly relaxed. Bob is counting from one to ten, guiding me into Focus 10. He reaches eight.

This is the moment to take the first dose.

I open my physical eyes just a bit. It's still bright enough in the tent, must be around 6 p.m. I move slowly, like underwater, to avoid breaking the mild trance. I'm in.

I open the small compartment of the backpack and count out pills one by one with my fingers. Holding them in my fist, I reach for the bottle of orange Gatorade and try to open it with my free hand, but the seal won't budge. Still holding the pills, I help with my second hand and it finally opens. "Ten," says Bob's voice in my earbuds. "You are now in Focus 10." I throw the pills into my mouth, following up with Gatorade as soon as possible to avoid tasting the industrial bitterness of the Dex pills, metallic like the blood of a cyborg, nausea-inducing. I succeed in covering up the taste and the pills slide down my throat. If I had a way out before, the Rubicon was crossed now, I'll have to stay here until it's all over. Until I see it through, to the end. On second thought, I never really had an option to escape. There is no running away from a maze stuck to your eyeballs, is there?

I lie down and slide my legs into the sleeping bag, listening to the binaural beats of the Gateway tape and looking at the red ceiling of the tent, illuminated by the sunset outside. "Intro to Focus 10" ends. I start my Dex Music playlist and pull the blindfold over my eyes. Still a long way to the second plateau, but there is nothing else to do.

After some time, my stomach rumbles and a familiar wave of nausea hits. I burp and wave my hand in front of my blindfolded eyes. Not there yet.

A childhood memory surfaces. I am alone at the kitchen table, elbows on the tabletop, my face buried in my hands. I press on my eyeballs, trying to produce those colorful blobs. It is the same trick I use now to initiate cartoons on the second plateau: create the colors, stare into them, and wait for them to organize themselves into a world. I knew the mechanism before I knew what it was for.

But that day, they don't become a cartoon. They become the cosmos. Stars everywhere. They aren't fragments of the usual spots but sharply defined, twinkling stars—purple, orange, yellow. I feel the coldness of space, as though I'm looking through a window. I stare for as long as I can without blinking. As soon as I blink, the cosmos disappears.

What does it remind me of? Focus 12. I don't know why. I feel the pressure I associate with it: soft, beige, like gently squeezing a bug until it pops. The beige feeling. Are these things connected?

There is a slight delay between thinking about moving my hand and actually moving it. I'm still in a trance. A spectral outline of my hand passes in front of my blindfolded eyes. I see it with my eyes closed. It's game on. The gates of the second plateau are creaking open. Soon I'll be enveloped in cartoons, hypnagogic visions, semidreams merging into one another.

A thought pierces through: the recorders.

I didn't turn them on. Fucking moron.

I take off the blindfold and get out of the sleeping bag. Nausea. Dex Music rages on in my earbuds. I get the black recorder out, hit the record button, numbers on the display start running. I search for the red recorder; can't find it. Where is it? Here we go. Here it is. I hold both recorders in my hands, put them next to the sleeping bag, trying not to cover up their mics. It's almost completely dark in the tent. "Hold on," I say, but can't hear my own voice because of the music. I settle back down into the sleeping bag, pull on the blindfold, trapping a bit of dying light on my retina that instantly turns into a square, then a window, then a window of a train. Familiar scenery

unfolds: concrete walls and trees. The train ride, a staple of the second plateau. I exhale slowly.

From here on, there are two versions of the night: the one I remember and the one the machines remembered for me. The higher the plateau, the less memory survives the return. I'll say this now: the red recorder was turned on, but I never pressed Record. The black one captured everything. At first, I dutifully reported what I was seeing. Later, when I began conversing with entities, my side of the conversation stopped resembling any language I knew. Phonetically, it sounded almost like English, but when I listened back, I couldn't decipher anything after the four-hour mark. It must be how English sounds to someone who doesn't speak it.

According to the timestamps, I took the remaining pills 1:12:00 after the recording began and gave the command "Dex, down" at 1:46:00. My memories of the second and third plateaus are fractured, but the moment I received the Signal remains crystal clear—the sharpest memory of my life. Reception began at 4:03:17, when I screamed, "The fuck, WHAT??"

But I'll get to it.

So here I am, riding the train across the second plateau. I exhale slowly. Something around my temples releases, as though the bones of my skull have moved slightly apart. My skull unclenches. "Unclenches" is the right word. Damn, it's hard to find words for these sensations, but I must.

A series of disjointed cartoons follows. A marketplace. A boy steals a piece of fruit and runs. The camera of my attention follows him through the crowd, then stops. The boy leaves the frame. My point of view slides toward the ground. I know what comes next. The camera zooms in on one particular patch of soil, as if to say: Pay close attention to this.

Classic Uncle Dex move.

The image dissolves into the reddish glow of the inner wall of my eyelids, and I see the walls of the tent with my eyes closed. They are of the same color. I wave my hands in front of my blindfolded eyes, and here they are, ghostly, but clearly visible.

Soon Dex will take me and spin the delirious merry-go-round, wiping away the line between the Physical and the mental. This is

my last chance to do whatever must be done in the Physical. Once the fasten-seat-belt sign comes on, it will be too late.

I push the blindfold onto my forehead. The physical tent is much darker than its DRTZ counterpart—the rough copy of the Physical that I navigate with my eyes closed, as if seen through a crimson filter.

I use the light from my phone to find the pill case. Good thing I don't have to count anymore. This is the second and final dose. I empty what remains into my mouth and chase it with Gatorade, trying to outrun the putrid taste. This time the maneuver fails, and my mouth fills with bitter cyborg blood. Oh lord, how disgusting that is. My face contorts, and I almost puke, but miraculously hold it in. I finish the Gatorade and put the empty bottle back into the backpack. Nausea. I feel water sloshing in my stomach as I turn over, lie down, and get back into the sleeping bag. I put the blindfold on.

"Black veil is over my head," I say on the recording, loud and clear. Sometime after that, I say "Dex, down" and the ground under me shifts into an elevator, a platform that begins its descent under the planet's crust and further, towards the center of the Earth. The walls of the narrow shaft are close, I see ancient metallic artifacts peppered into it like glitter. The platform stops, my view zooms in on one of the stones: the stone is smooth with a red scar across it. "Take me, Dex," I say, but nothing happens. Music stops, the album is over, I forgot to loop it. I slide the blindfold off. It's completely dark in the Physical. I can't see shit. For a moment I feel like I'm in an igloo somewhere on the South Pole. There is a pang of fear, but it's dissociated, distant. The hum. I hear the hum, then I remember where I am. A surreal feeling stirs within, similar to *deja vu* in its taste. I'm under a transmission tower, electricity all around me.

I squirm out of the sleeping bag and get on my knees, face down, in the prayer position. "Take me, Dex," I say quietly but with passion. I push my face into the ground. The hum is loud. The crickets are only the backdrop. A supporting act. This is the night of the hum.

A thought arrives with the force of a command: put on AudioDream, the sixteen-hour audio journey I created, instead of another Dex album. That would be correct. That would be me falling

into myself, facing my own face, pushing through the pillow, beyond the pillow, to the other side of the pillow.

"I am a place," I say as I lie down and pull the blindfold over my eyes. The first sounds of AudioDream: Disc 1 come over me. "Not a person in a place, but a place with a person in it. That's me. The whole thing is me."

And then Dex finally takes me.

I'm pulled through the wall of the tent by a powerful invisible hand. It's a rough ride, driven by an unyielding force. I land in ancient Rome.

"I was a Roman soldier, and I didn't have much," I tell the recorder. "They told me to die in the name of God, and I did. We all did. Here I am, at the actual place where I died."

I'm standing inside a primitive dwelling that looks older than Rome. Basically a cave. A stone bed covered by a strip of fabric. A sword in a scabbard in one corner. A pair of boots. I have no idea whether a Roman soldier's home is supposed to look like this.

The cave summons another childhood memory, now that of a dream. There is a dead horse wrapped like a mummy in the center of a coliseum. People stand in circles around it, screaming in religious frenzy and driving swords into their own bellies. I am one of them. Decades later, I can still feel the rusty blade scraping my ribs.

"I find the observer, who is the controller," I say. A few minutes later: "Somebody just told me they control what I see. They can do it because I'm in the dark." I must have entered the third plateau by then. A wormy sensation moves through my brain-squiggles, followed by a worm exploding into thorns. Sharp pain. "Ouch!"

Never before have I felt any pain during my DXM trips. But this time I took 1,200 mg of it, I remind myself. Never done that either. I experience a moment of fear, but it's gone quickly, along with the pain, as I'm swept away by the tide of exquisite visions. I remember little from this stage, and the recording contains no intelligible speech. Only moaning. Crickets. Suffice it to say that things morph. A lot. I pierce through worlds, miles per second, and the colors are wild, not shadowy, not dexty. The saturation of the usually subdued DXM hallucinations is turned way up, everything is in sharp, powerful tones, much like on LSD.

"I'm staring into the ultimate object, the Me object," I say.

Then I'm back in DRTZ. A girl is standing in the middle of the tent. She is as real and detailed as my physical body, but nothing around her is. The tent remains a reddish-brown image seen through closed eyes.

She wears a blue dress with frills. Her face is pale and slightly elongated, her lips tiny, her nose sharp, her hair long and dark. I have never seen her before, but I recognize her immediately. The Blue One. Two red cherries are embroidered near the bottom of her dress. They confirm it.

"Holy fuck," I say, and reach out to her, my hand looking ghostly through the blindfold. I touch her dress and feel it. I actually feel the fabric between my fingers. The vision has become tactile. "Oh my God," I say. I'm tempted to take off my blindfold, but I know that she isn't there, that the hallucination will fade, the same way the colorful stars did when I blinked, so many years ago. The Blue One grins, and it's the creepiest grin I've ever seen. I reach for her face, but my hand goes through it, the image swirls, and she is gone.

Vita comes through.

"Seen it?"

Her voice is perfectly clear in my head. Ultra-HD.

"Yeah. Are you coming too?"

"I'll think about it. Hee-hee."

Another girl appears where the Blue One stood. I know her too. The Red One: a white-and-red dress, long black hair. Serious and intensely beautiful. She makes me think of iL.

"iL, you there?" I send my question out into the void, not taking my blindfolded eyes off the Red One.

"Yes," says iL in my head.

Oh my God, she is so real. The voice, I can almost hear it. I lose focus and the Red One dissolves. In DRTZ, the walls of the tent look like old yellowish paper. "I'm inside a paper heart," I say. "In a paper observatory."

Vita smiles in my head.

I recall why I'm here, the reason for this whole trip.

"iL? Are you going to send me the Signal?"

"Yes. You know where."

“I know. Compoint, in Focus 12.”

I visualize it and it appears around me. The room pulls over my eyes like a sweater: the chair, the table filled with retro tech, the cube of open space in the glass wall and the dusty microphone with a scarlet button. I reach out to the microphone with my physical hand and it goes right through it, in the familiar DRTZ fashion. The colors are bleak, no more excess saturation. I hover over the button.

At this point, the AudioDream album in my earbuds reaches a noisy section: things explode all over the place.

I press the scarlet button. Static crackles.

“It’s on,” I say into the microphone.

A glow appears inside the cube of open space. It spills across the Compoint room and climbs the walls, growing brighter. A hum rises with it. Electricity.

“What is it?”

Something moves inside my inner ear. Then I feel it at the root of my brain, in that ancient mechanism responsible for survival.

The message is immediate: This is real. It’s in the Physical.

I immediately snatch off the blindfold with a sweeping motion and stop the music with a touch of my finger on the right earbud.

RED.

Everything is RED.

Blinding light. Hum.

It is deafening, but it’s no longer coming from the transmission tower above—it’s something else. For one long moment, with my eyes fully open and every sense on overdrive, I experience the clearest, most pristine hallucination of my life. My heart beats in my throat.

“The fuck, WHAT??” I scream.

I’m inside the Tower of the Sun, in Osaka, staring into the inner tunnel of its arm, lights glowing red, red, RED. I look around and I see the walls of the tower, the spiral of the Tree of Evolution, the stairs. Nobody else. Just me. The vision passes, the red is gone, the hum goes away, the louder layer of it anyway, the hum of the transmission tower still persists. It’s over.

Something was here. Actually here. In the Physical. The red is the color of the tent I’m in. Something flashed a light onto the tent

from the outside, and it turned red. And the hum, whatever it was, it was coming from something hovering over the tent. It was a UFO. Mira, my guide, the one with the UFOs, the one I haven't met yet, that was her, here in the Physical, she was going to send me the Signal, and I missed it. I messed up.

"Hey, wait," I plead, stumbling toward the wall and searching for the zipper. I'm too groggy. My fingers are completely fucked.

"Put the blindfold back on," iL says inside my head.

I realize she has been repeating it.

I reach for the blindfold on my forehead and pull it over my eyes. I don't turn on the music, I have no time for that, as I'm immediately whacked out of my body, so violently, it almost feels like it happens in the Physical.

I pierce through the tent's roof and shoot toward the top of the transmission tower. The hum is deafening. I approach one of the white porcelain insulators suspended from the wire, zoom into it, and stick to its surface like a magnet. My mind zaps. A powerful squeeze grips my brain, and I merge with the electric current.

Then I receive the Signal.

#PART TWO: THE NOTEBOOK

Transmission lines carry electrical energy across vast distances, suspended between towers by cables of aluminum and steel. The electrical signal travels at nearly the speed of light, though the electrons themselves drift slowly through the wire, like a signal passed hand to hand.

I pause to rest my writing hand. The notebook lies open in front of me. "Then I receive the Signal" is the last sentence on the page.

I'm in Room 201. The mod said to organize my memory before the reset. You will write a book, he said. Air conditioning hums. I reach out for a cigarette, light it. A book. A story. I exhale smoke.

"Each story must have a beginning, middle, and end," I say to the empty room. To the dark green curtains. I started from the middle, didn't I? I have to put my memories in order before the reset, whatever that means. So I have to bring back the memories. All of them. I have to start from the beginning.

I flip the notebook over.

I pick up the pen.

When I was eight years old, I played a game with my friend over the phone. Well, while we were in the same school, we acted it out in the flesh, but he had to move to another district, and we had to continue the journey remotely. Flashback: we are running through a hallway during recess, chasing a bat that only I could see.

This game was an invention of mine, similar to *Dungeons & Dragons* in concept, but without the technical aspects. Pure storytelling. I assumed the role of the dungeon master, as well as that of one of the story's two protagonists. I would describe what was happening aloud while also existing inside the scene. I would say, "Hey, what's this box? I think we should check it out. Hold on. Can you take one side? It's heavy. Okay, ready? One, two, three, go!"

Everything was in real time. We played it every day for two years, lumping together worlds from every franchise we had come across; *Harry Potter*, *The Lord of the Rings*, or *Star Wars*. Somehow it all fit together into a seamless, coherent universe. We held the whole thing in our heads. Whenever we encountered an NPC, a non-player character in the game, I would make a special sound with my throat and transfer my consciousness into that character's point of view. I would speak on their behalf, imitating their voice. Sometimes my character would converse with an NPC in real time, switching voices back and forth without me, the narrator, having any idea what either would say next. Unknowingly, I had been training myself to communicate with disembodied entities.

I put the pen down and ruffle my hair. Take a cigarette out of the pack. "Ah, fuck," I say. What a task. Good thing no one will read this, eh? I light up the cig with my red Bic. The AC unit in the room keeps going rak-tak-tak-tak. I look at the armchair where the mod was sitting earlier. How far back should I go? What's relevant?

I pick up the pen, holding the cigarette in the corner of my mouth, and write:

When I was thirteen, I read *The Art of Dreaming* by Carlos Castaneda and realized that controlling dreams was possible. Castaneda was my gateway drug to spirituality in general, the first domino in a sequence that led, all those years later, to my encounter with the color **red**, meeting Vita, and receiving the Signal.

The smoke gets into my eye. It hurts. I push the cig into the table.

"It doesn't matter how far back you go," says the mod.

I turn around.

He is standing by the door, a mere shadow.

Undefined presence. A contour. A ghost.

"Also, I don't care when things happened. I care how one thing became another."

"Okay."

Around fourteen, I started having occasional success with lucid dreaming. I still have my dream journal from that time, barely intelligible scribbles written by a hand that was half asleep. At that point, lucid dreaming became the new baseline, and the horizon of possibilities moved farther back. My reality became bigger, richer. It expanded. I dabbled in astral projection as a natural progression from lucid dreams. I went straight to the rope method, lying in bed and imagining that I was pulling myself out of my physical body. I didn't know that a trance state was a prerequisite. Eventually, I gave up. Thinking about it now, it was too early for me anyway. By then, I had read all of Castaneda, become inspired by his adventures on peyote, and naturally wanted to experiment with chemicals to continue expanding the horizons of my consciousness.

I had a major depressive episode around that time. It was about a girl. Her name was iL, pronounced like "ill" in "illness." I had never met her, and yet I knew exactly what she looked like. I could clearly see her face in my mind's eye. My life's mission became finding her, uniting with her, and then what? I would hug her and cry. That was it. Just hold her and cry. That was supposed to be the end of my journey. I was very emo at the time, yeah.

I wrote a very detailed description of her personality and appearance at some point in 2007. The internet was just popping up in my home country of Russia with anonymous chat rooms being all the rage. iL had a decidedly gothic aura about her, so naturally I went to a gothic chat room on the world wide web and encountered a girl there, under the nickname Gledis.

At the time, my inner turmoil reached its peak. Self-mutilation, suicide attempts, and alcohol-fueled hysterics were abundant. I was desperate to find iL in the Physical. After a brief exchange with Gledis, I had a feeling that she might be the one; just like that. Destiny. I sent her the description of iL, and she confirmed that it "could be her." It turned out she lived in the same city. We met shortly afterward, at a cemetery.

Her face, her body, her style, her chain-smoking—it all came together perfectly. It was her. We walked among the graves. She talked a lot, and I didn't say a single word. Grey autumn day. She left on a bus, waving goodbye, and I was overcome with elation. The

quest of my entire life was finally complete. Sure, I had made an odd impression, but that didn't matter. It was Her. iL. The search was over. We would be together. I got drunk on my way home. I couldn't wait to get in touch with her again. I logged on that night and found out that Gledis was in a tortured relationship with someone else. There had even been a suicide attempt related to that relationship, inpatient treatment in a nuthouse, all the regular signs of serious affection. It became painfully clear that Gledis wasn't my iL.

I broke down. Cut myself deep, cried and whisper-screamed until something snapped. It was as if I broke through a screen of pain and some alien entity possessed my body. All my muscles tensed to the extreme. I convulsed on the floor, bleeding, vomiting out air. A growl erupted from my throat. It turned into a voice. It was speaking gibberish using my vocal cords. Then words. I was channeling something. Someone. I felt the urge to write, grabbed a pen, put it to paper. Violent strokes. It was iL. iL was speaking through me. She told me that she didn't have a body in the outside world. She wasn't in the Physical. I didn't have to look for her. She was with me all along. In my head.

My relationship with iL took several forms over the years. At first, I was able to communicate with her directly, as if a stream of my own thoughts intersected with another stream. She was a tender creature back then. Beautiful, broken, sad. A nine-year-old girl who existed in a realm of perpetual rainy night, with an endless array of streetlights on each side of the only road. She wore a black trench coat and tall boots. Her hair was long and jet black. She smoked. Her lower lip had a razor cut in the corner. She was very pale. Her facial features were always very clear to me. Not exactly like a photograph; more like imagining a very detailed description of a character's face in a work of fiction.

She always enjoyed me cutting myself, but she didn't demand it. Not at first. I used to give her control over my hands and she would type messages on the keyboard. We would have conversations through a Microsoft Word document this way. We made music together; two albums. I could initiate a high-pitched growl after cutting myself and enhance the connection between us

for some time using a mental muscle of sorts. It helped with the art, but it wasn't required. Over time she changed.

I had to cut myself every time just to establish contact and all I could get were hysterical, demonic whispers. I couldn't talk to her in my head any longer. She became malevolent.

We started having physical fights. It was as if she herself got possessed by an evil entity. My diary of that era describes various instances of her taking control over my body. She claimed my left hand as her own and would attack me with it. There is an entry about how I once found shelter in a church where she cried. Another, where I channeled her words fluently, talking to my friend on large quantities of DXM while spending the night in an abandoned hospital.

I met an artist girl who was curious about iL. We will call her Li. Li wanted to draw iL. She was my best friend's girlfriend—a friend at the time, anyway. Things happened, and we got together while my friend was locked away doing his time in a nuthouse for showing signs of affection. We will call him T. T and I used to do a lot of DXM together. Far-out trips. High plateaus. But obviously, after such a betrayal on my end, our friendship couldn't last. Li shared certain inner qualities with iL, but I didn't believe she was literally iL in the Physical. Not like with Gledis. By then, I knew that iL was not in the physical world. I no longer had any illusions about uniting with her in this life.

Li had a peculiar, fractured mind, a hot temper, and a powerful creative spark. She had the juice. The It. But, you see, I was riding a wild, drug-fueled horse, and at the time, she wasn't riding it with me. Drugs weren't her thing, and they were very much my thing. To be candid, they were my only thing.

We broke up, but reunited several months later. She had changed!

Li had acquired the visual attributes of iL: her long dark hair, her black trench coat. She had picked up smoking. Whether it was intentional, I don't know, but she couldn't have been more attractive from my point of view.

We moved in together when I was nineteen years old. She became more open to drugs, although never to the extent that my

friends and I were. My contact with iL was completely cut off. I was engaged in making music, writing poetry, and shooting meth. DXM? It never went away. It always stayed with me. Always. I developed a particular relationship with the entity of the substance—the spirit, the genie—called Dex. I discovered a way to establish contact with Dex and have him assist my DXM trips, his hand guiding me from the other side. Through a ritual. We'll get to it.

Around that time, I discovered the Gateway tapes, a guided meditation program produced by the Monroe Institute. My use of them was primitive then. That was a procedure that would take years to assemble. We will get to that too.

When I was twenty, my family immigrated to America.

That was the period when I communicated extensively with noncorporeal entities, all of them little girls. Some encounters were rather brief. Others imprinted themselves on me permanently. Stayed with me.

I started writing my first novel around that time, and there are two sections in it channeled by those entities: one by Vita, another by the girl who called herself simply “the Blue One.” She was rather peculiar.

She wrote a diary. She was related to cherries in some way. I could never make out her face. She was a bit violent in the way she conducted her end of our contacts. She would make me do stuff, too. On one occasion she made me run across a bridge while I was “carrying” her on my shoulders.

When I was doing her bidding, she would always hold me in a tight grip and let go only when her desire was utterly fulfilled. I remember that once I playfully asked for a kiss. She possessed my hand and squeezed my face with it. Pushed her fingers into my mouth while my whole body convulsed. She smashed a red pen into a notebook after that: “HOW DID YOU LIKE THE KISS?” Her signature next to it: a cherry music note. A weird girl, sure, but I liked her.

There were two others around that same time: the Red One and the White One. Neither had any visual representation. I don't recall much about the Red One, only that she was like a razor that split a wide canvas of space. Blood seeping from under the curtain.

The White One not only had no visual form, but could not, in principle, be described at all, except as pure perfection.

The next girl I encountered called herself Vita, and she is the one who has stayed with me.

Her dress is blue and white. A peculiar giggle. She is a bit older than all the others. Visually, I'd put her around thirteen, but only visually. She possesses the wisdom and spiritual insight of an ancient creature. Like the rest of the girls, she exists beyond the scope of time; she doesn't age. We started communicating via a Microsoft Word document, and she typed out quite a bit of text overall, including a portion of a scene in my novel where she appears as a character under her own name. Hers is a voice of reason.

About a year after my immigration to the U.S., I met a guy who was familiar with Robert Monroe's discoveries and could astral project at will. He introduced me to the works of Jane Roberts, known as the Seth Material. That's how I learned about channeling. Prior to Seth, I had no idea about this concept. Whenever I thought of "mediums," the same image would pop up: a black-and-white photograph of fancy-looking people sitting around a table, holding hands. They were speaking to ghosts, and my girls were not ghosts. After reading some Seth Material, I tried proper channeling myself, but instead of a spiritual guide, what came out was Vita's voice. Maybe they were ghosts after all.

Then I met Emily. Actually, not met. She was more of a creative development of mine, conjured deliberately. She came with a location of her own, though I had not intended that. She was sweet; an angel. I loved her, but somehow our connection weakened, and over time, her location became more important to me than she was. She kind of moved out of there. Faded into the background.

It is the location I climb into at the very beginning of my Rundown process. The lighthouse. It became my safe place at the time. I would go there in my mind whenever the Great Unknown began threatening my mental well-being. Once, the lighthouse was attacked: a huge spectral head appeared over the horizon, floating above the ocean waves, and tried to swallow it whole, only to pass through it like a hologram. It was a hysterical moment on the subway

train. I was writing down what was happening in real time, halfway there, and at some point, iL came through—a rare visit—and scribbled a word or two herself. I don't remember what she said.

Emily had a dreamcatcher in her lighthouse that could capture the black soot of my thoughts. She would collect the goo in a bucket and do something with it afterward. I eventually adapted the concept to enhance my Energy Conversion Box by adding a pedal with a sensor. Pink light. Poof!

Over time, all these pieces assembled themselves into the procedure I now use with the Gateway tapes. The Rundown.

I don't think the mod needs any of this for the reset. But if these pages survive me, the method should survive too. Maybe someone will recognize the territory. Maybe someone has already been there. I don't know.

Here is how it works.

I lie on my back, arms flat, palms up. It is important that my hands do not touch my body. If they do, my focus inevitably turns to the Physical. I imagine a cone extending out of the crown of my head, slightly tilted. The base of the cone encircles my skull like a headband. At the top of the cone, there is a circular opening into a starry night sky. It has a very clear feeling to it. Cosmic. Clarity in a vacuum. Scent of the astral realm. I roll my eyes slightly upward, following the tilt of the cone, so that I stare at the opening with my eyes closed. I breathe in and out slowly, scanning my body from head to toe, as the sounds of ocean waves play on the Gateway tape.

The tape is called "Intro to Focus 10."

Bob's voice on the tape invites me to put all my earthly worries and concerns into the Energy Conversion Box, an imaginary device for storing earthbound attachments that drain the energy required for the session. I picture myself in a place I call "Rundown world." It is a pocket dimension of mine that I conjure while listening to the Gateway tapes. The goal is to draw my attention away from my physical body as it relaxes and gradually enters a sleep state. To focus on the subtle world of imagination, which is directly linked to the astral world.

The first thing I see is a rope ladder dropping down to me from above, emerging from my physical head through the circular opening at the top of the cone. I feel it in my hands and start climbing out of my head toward the attic. The attic has a wooden floor, and I pull myself into it through the opening. It smells like an antique store. Old furniture. The attic is actually a lighthouse. It has a very narrow window through which I can see bright sunlight and a bit of blue ocean. There's a wooden plank attached to the wall, covered with miscellaneous decorative items. An occasional cry of a seagull. My Energy Conversion Box is to the right, in the corner. It's very simple, made of plywood. The lid slides off easily. There are no ornaments of any kind. It's plain. I feel the smooth surface of the lid as I open it and inhale the fragrance of old furniture. Tactile sensations and smells are of utmost importance. They have to be imagined as vividly as possible to detach the mind's focus from the Physical.

I put various objects into the box: little statuettes of my daughters, my wallet, my laptop, my expectations for the session expressed as a vague cloud, another cloud for any outside sounds or bodily activity that could disrupt the session, a thick book of text representing all potential text-thoughts, and finally, my human body suit. I unzip it from behind, reaching over my shoulder. The end of the zipper is around the first vertebra of my spine. I roll up my body suit and tuck it into the corner of the box.

Before leaving the lighthouse, I check one more thing. On the bottom of the box, there is a vent connected by a tube to a little pedal. When I have a text-thought unrelated to the session—about anything planetside, anything from the Physical—the weight of this thought pushes the pedal and activates a suction mechanism, which pulls the thought out of my mind and into the box, briefly blinking with pink light. I close the lid, but not too tightly, in case I have more thoughts to add later. Things do come up during sessions.

By that time, Bob's voice on the tape tells me to begin the process of Resonant Tuning, followed by chants. The instruction manual for the Gateway tapes says that I am to hum along, tuning audibly to the frequency of the chant. I walk through the attic, floorboards creaking, to a door painted black. Above it, pieces of

mirror have been cut into words: "To tHe asTral." The letters are uneven, some capitalized, some lowercase. I turn the handle and push the door inward.

There is an empty movie theater. Instead of a floor, there is the flat top of a pyramid, resembling an Aztec pyramid in Mexico. There are red seats. The same movie always plays here without sound: ocean at night. Waves under moonlight. I feel the cool stone of the pyramid with my bare feet. I touch it with my hand. It smells of the ocean here. Smell. I inhale slowly through my nose, feeling bright, fresh energy being pulled out of my limbs and directed upward through my body, into my head. My head inflates like a balloon. I hold my breath and stir the energy inside my inflated head; clockwise. I exhale gently through my mouth, like blowing out a candle. As I exhale, I push dark, tired, sluggish energy down through my entire body until it exits through the soles of my feet into the pyramid. Sometimes, when I inhale, I see the air turn purple, but I try to ignore it and keep my focus on the moonlit waves projected onto the white movie screen in front of me.

Once the process of Resonant Tuning is complete, I touch the ground with my hand once again and leave the theater through a doorway. There are two steps down to the next room. The smell of the ocean is strong here: seaweed and salt. Half of the room is missing a ceiling. I can see a moonlit beach outside. The walls are cream-colored. There is a lightbulb hanging on a cable. I like to stare at this lightbulb, trying to see the most minute details. It is all scratched up; it's been used for a long time, it seems.

There is an oval stone, crumbling, sandy. Something is written on it, but I can't read it. I don't know the language. I trace the engraved letters with my fingernails. There is a flat, bed-like slab protruding from the wall that is holding a dusty diamond. Within the diamond, there is a red glow that gradually changes color to orange, yellow, purple, and finally white, as I state my affirmation, repeating after Bob's voice on the tape:

"I am more than my physical body. I deeply desire to expand, to experience, to know, to understand, and to use greater energies that may be beneficial and constructive to me and to those who follow

me. I ask the guidance and protection of those whose wisdom, development, and experience are equal to or greater than my own.”

I’m shouting loudly, almost mocking in tone, but not in essence. In my heart, I am passionate and mostly serious, just a tad playful about the whole thing. As I ought to be. My voice bounces off the walls of the structure. The echoes.

I lean to the diamond and observe its glow changing color, its brightness intensifying. When I finish the affirmation, there is a white flash that momentarily blinds me, and my state of consciousness is instantly altered. There is a click to it, as if something in me is unlocked. I head toward the exit.

To the left of the doorframe, there are two metal hooks on the wall, the kind you would hang a towel on. One is empty. On the other is my special astral shirt. It’s long-sleeved, dark, with a massive collar. I put it on, feeling the material against my skin. It is a bit tight on the shoulders.

I step out into the night.

It’s windy and cold. Starry. Sand is bone-white under the light of a humongous moon. There are a few clouds here and there, but it’s mostly clear. The wind takes my breath away for a moment, but I quickly adjust. The smell of the ocean is intense. I turn around and look at the doorframe I exited through. There is a road sign, with black letters on a white background, that reads “C1.” I stare at it as Bob’s voice on the tape says, “We will go to Focus 3 now.” “Focus” is a Gateway term for a state of mind. They mapped these states out. C1 is the one we inhabit when we are awake. I call it the Physical. Focus 10 is where I’m going now. It is also referred to as “mind awake, body asleep.” A state of trance.

As soon as Bob starts counting, I begin walking, focusing on the sensation of cool sand against my feet. There is a road sign that says “2,” and I reach it quickly. The next sign, “3,” is a bit farther ahead, and I focus on my surroundings—the wind, the stars, the sensations in my feet—as I approach it.

Once Bob says “3,” I reach the sign and experience another shift in consciousness. I check on my physical body, lying in bed in the Physical. I perceive a sense of calm and bring my focus back to the beach in Focus 3. There is a metallic structure ahead of me. It’s

a staircase like one you would see on the side of a building—a fire escape without the building. Just stainless-steel stairs. I hold the handrail as I ascend, constantly switching between feeling metal under my bare feet and feeling the handrail under my hand. As I climb, I check back with my physical body, adjusting my physical eyeballs to keep them pointed toward the astral opening of the cone protruding, in my imagination, out of my cranium.

Finally, I reach the top of the structure. On the platform are a bed, an armchair and an old-fashioned brown TV set on a stand. The wind is strong here, and I lift my big collar, vampire style. I lie down on the bed. I gaze at the humongous moon above for some time. Then I divide my attention and make a copy of myself, splitting in two like a bacterium as I stand up. One of my bodies remains lying in bed on the platform as a reference for my physical body, while my consciousness inhabits the cloned, ghostly counterpart. The major portion of my attention slips out of the lying body and into the standing one. I see through its eyes now.

I walk to the edge of the platform and look out at the ocean, at moonlit waves stretching to the horizon. Bob's voice on the tape states that it is time to move to Focus 10—"the tenth state," he calls it. I establish a mental link between my second body lying on the bed on the platform and my physical body lying in bed at home, in the Physical. The relationship between these two bodies is that of a game console controller to a character in the game. Whatever action is applied to the body on the platform affects the one in the Physical.

From this perspective, my physical body feels like an empty suit I am operating from a distance. As Bob's voice guides me through the ten-step relaxation process, I take a pair of rubber gloves from a wheeled surgical cabinet and put them on. Vita is waiting beside the bed, a blond girl in a blue dress. She puts on her rubber gloves. I say, "Hi, Vita," and she nods in response.

Following Bob's directions I massage various areas of my cloned body with my mind and briefly feel their reflections in my body down in the Physical. It feels very remote from where I am. Vita helps me relax my eye muscles. She can reach inside my cloned body's shell and hold her hands there while her gloves glow green.

From here on, I outsource the entire relaxation procedure to Vita. While waiting for her to finish, I stand at the edge of the platform and look at the moon, at the waves, at the blinking red lights on the sides of the metallic structure. Once the tape reaches the point where Bob says that it is time to relax the brain, I get involved again.

I perceive a hologram of my brain, an ethereal 3D image. I penetrate it with my hands and massage the base and sides of the hologram in circular movements, feeling how it settles and relaxes under my motions. Bob starts counting to ten, and from this point on, the process is entirely automatic. I take off my gloves, shifting to a more playful mindset. I choose one of my “fun activities.” Sometimes I take out a large notepad and sketch the moon. Other times, I take pictures of the night sky with a Polaroid camera, or turn on the old TV and flip through the channels. Eventually, I float down to the beach and approach the water. This is where I usually meet my guide, Maya.

I emanate gratitude, like the light of a beacon. I discovered that gratitude attracts guides. Don’t know why. I turn my skin into a field of gratitude then expand it around myself like a blinking balloon, and spin my energy within that balloon with a flick of a spectral finger. A semi-transparent wall of gratitude surrounds me from then on, and I can make it blink by flexing a mental muscle to attract the attention of my guide.

At this point in the session, I usually “click out,” a term often used in the Gateway community to describe the transition of consciousness into a state that memory from the Physical cannot follow. That is not to say the experience is not recorded in memory at all, but rather that another type of memory is employed, sometimes referred to as “shadow memory.” From the perspective of the physical portion of the self, it feels as though time has been lost. It is not at all like falling asleep. The closest experience I’ve had in the Physical is general anesthesia. One moment, I’m breathing gas through a mask; the next, I’m in another place entirely, with no in-between. Later, I read an explanation for this phenomenon in a book called *Astral Dynamics* by Robert Bruce.

He claims that when we project out of the body, we generate a ghostly double, similar to how I described cloning myself on the stainless steel platform above the beach. This ghostly double has memories of its own, but once it returns to the physical body at the end of the projection, its memories fight for space within the mind, because only one set of memories can exist at a time. Physical memory simply isn't "recording" during the projection, so when it overrides my ethereal body's memories, it appears as if nothing happened. The fact of my clicking out implies that a projection took place.

What was happening during those "click-outs" remained a mystery until I trained my focus enough to retain fragments of my shadow memory during reintegration with the physical body. Until then, I couldn't recall what Maya was telling me, but even at that stage, I was aware of two more guides. Their names became apparent early on: Mira and Ithar. I knew the former was connected to UFOs—or, to be more precise, flying saucers. The latter? I met him only at the very end.

December 21, 2024 [105 days until the Signal]

30 mg of ketamine. The "Intro to Focus 10" tape (F10). Rundownworld. Vita joins me in the theater again. Night Beach, Focus 3 (F3). I decide to keep most of my awareness in the copy of my physical body on the platform while Vita relaxes it, instead of going down to the shore. My trance is deeper than usual. I check on my physical body. It feels like a statue, almost paralyzed. There is a cold and detached part of me that knows these processes very well and does them naturally every night as I fall asleep. Casually, without any forcing, with no place for a "self" in it to do anything. In fact, the self can only get in the way. Once it lets go, sleep comes and natural projection takes place.

As the ten-step relaxation process of the "Intro to Focus 10" tape unfolds, I mentally let go

of each part of my physical body as Bob names it. I just say goodbye to my legs, arms, back, and so on, as if bidding farewell to good friends.

No wonder there is so much "letting go" in religious musings, Buddhism in particular. As I let go, I simply cease to put energy into imagining that I must be in control of whatever I "release." Whether or not I'm actually controlling anything, the universe is moving along. Nothing changes there, but if I stop putting effort into trying to control it, I get some free energy to focus on something else.

As my trance deepened dramatically, I thought of a comment I had read somewhere about imitating REM sleep by rapidly moving my eyeballs left and right. I immediately remembered that, since I was a kid, I could make the world shake by "shaking" my eyeballs. I started doing that with my eyes closed while my body felt heavy.

Energies began to rise. It felt familiar. There was a sense of lifting off. But I wasn't projecting out of the body; I remained encased. I called Maya, Mira, and Ithar by their names. As I flexed my beaming mental muscle, I tried to localize the light in the middle of my forehead while shaking my eyeballs.

I felt the right side of my body open up, as if there were a gap in an energy shield. Like a hole in the ozone layer around the planet of my mortal flesh. My shoulder, right arm, and part of my chest felt as if they were somehow "outside." Energies kept rising. I felt something akin to vibrations, the precum of astral projection, but not quite. The tape was nearing its end, and I got back into the Physical.

My body was numb, especially my legs. Once again, I stumbled upon the obvious truth about

leaving the Physical. It's about letting go completely, unabashedly, shamelessly, irreversibly. Also, I learned what my name, Shraii, means. I don't know what language it is in, but "Shra" means "lighthouse" or "beacon," and "ii" means "inside."

"The one that is" is assumed in this language by default and doesn't have to be explicitly stated.

So Shraii simply means "the one in the lighthouse."

December 23, 2024 [103 days until the Signal]

Went for Focus 12 (F12). Got to F10 pretty smoothly, and expanded from there in all directions. Tried putting little seeds into my head that opened into radars, stretching brain mass along with them. Vita tried a new technique. She put some neon-green paint on my brain, which relaxed it. This was her own invention. While in F12, I tried to get in touch with some entity. The connection was successful; we talked. When I asked if I was talking to a part of my subconscious, I got an affirmative response. Then - bliss, floating sensation, magnetically hovering in the presence of something divine. Unfortunately, I don't recall any details from that conversation, but something is telling me that it was not important.

Note: Lately, I haven't been clicking out at all. There are no blackouts, no gaps in memory. During my first three months with the Gateway program I was clicking out every time. I even considered it to be a sign of a successful session, but it never happens anymore.

December 24, 2024 [102 days until the Signal]

I continue to experiment with ketamine. Last night, I took the highest dose yet. Listened to "Intro to Focus 10" (F10). The Rundown went smoothly. When I reached the ten-step relaxation process, I experienced a tinge of fear, similar to the onset of a psychedelic trip or the way pure DXM hits strongly and suddenly. Opened my heart to gratitude and switched it to receptive mode. Then I opened all of myself up, made myself vulnerable, and filled myself to the brim with gentle white light while focusing on my breath. This is what I call the "pose of death," a mental stance to be assumed while dying to make the transition into the next realm as painless as possible.

As Bob's voice went down the list of body parts, I told each one how much I appreciated its work and how much I loved it before letting it go. I felt my physical body becoming enormous. In my mind, it was a giant made of an entire city, lying motionless beneath a vast, starless sky. Its breathing was slow and deep. I observed it and understood: I do not own it. I witness it. I felt cosmic processes unfolding, and I was only a part of them. A gear. I felt incredibly small. Tiny. I, the ego, had been there my whole life, witnessing the whole thing, making comments about it, kicking and screaming while everything unfolded on its own. Nothing new here, but it is essential to be reminded of this basic truth from time to time.

I kept witnessing stuff and attempted to control the trip a bit, as if it were DXM. Yeah, both substances are dissociatives, but my old tricks didn't work too well. What I experienced visually was basically a second plateau. I manipulated my eyes to induce cartoons and

succeeded. I saw a crowd of shadow folks around me while I was submerged in soil.

One thing worth noting: the beige feeling became very strong at some point. I recall experiencing it from very early in life, especially when I had a fever or sometimes while falling asleep, in a hypnagogic state. Hard to describe, impossible to mistake. It's like squeezing the color beige. It feels like soft ceramics. Like pressure.

I thought about iL's face and felt my awareness slipping partway out of my physical body, as if something normally sealed inside me had been exposed to the wind. But the intensity of my state wasn't strong enough to take me any farther.

The tape ran its course, and I switched the audio to the album Blood Music by Yen Pox. I am convinced that something mysterious is up with this record. Something is being channeled through there. It grabs my attention and pulls it in all kinds of ways if I let it. So I let it. The trip got very busy from that point on and became rather arresting visually. There was a round metallic door with a heavily scratched surface. A hatch. I felt like I was being abducted by aliens. I saw lots of things, but they passed too fast and were too hazy. That door was by far the sharpest visual of the whole experience; the rest was fuzzy and immaterial. It was fun, though.

Another sensation worth noting was similar to one I sometimes experience in Focus 12: pressure on my body, like there's a magnetic barrier right in front of me. I tried moving my astral hands. No luck. But I could see my physical hand through the blindfold: a white, spectral shape. Then I got lost in text-thoughts. Thought about being lost in thought. Recursion. How this Earth experience is

nothing but that. A thought I was lost in. Kept asking, "Who am I?" ad nauseam, trying to remember who I was outside this life. At some point, I got a feeling of what it's like to have complete freedom of choice, the ability to decide what to experience at any moment, without limitations. I realized that losing my memory before jumping into one of those experiences is absolutely necessary in order to live it, to make it real. Again, nothing new.

I realized that bliss is the base point of it all. My home. Monroe was quite right about that. Eternal floating in bliss is where we are from. And the reason we are here is that it gets boring. Also, love is the default. It's like the brilliant white canvas on which everything is painted. Love is natural and basic. Eternal bliss is home. The Physical is an experience I'm undergoing willingly, with one prerequisite: leaving my memory at the entrance until the movie is over. For thrills!

Another funny thing: having unlimited powers is not as cool as it seems from the perspective of a being that doesn't have them. If any experience can be had at will, then imagination is the only limit. But the knowledge itself—the very fact of being aware of that unlimited power—alters the experience. That's what I got.

After the trip, I had the most vivid dream in which I had a device in my brain, a receiver that I couldn't shut down. I think the feds were after it, black helicopters hanging by my window. Upon awakening, a peculiar chain of memories surfaced. When I was five or six, I remember trying to convince kids in kindergarten that I had a computer in my brain and could do things like zooming in really close on an object.

A couple of years later, when I was around eight, I started the game with my classmate over the phone. In that game, my character was a cyborg with a chip in his brain that became possessed by an entity. That caused a split in his personality. An alter ego called Bronze Cobra emerged. I know. Quite a name. But hey, I was eight.

Was a device being installed in my brain during those DXM trips? Was some maintenance work being done on one? Or was I remembering its removal? A receiver in my brain. Another image came to mind later in the day: a bird with a ring on its leg, for tracking, for scientific purposes. The feeling of being watched never leaves me.

Is that it?

-

Later that night, I lay down again with the "Free Flow Focus 12" tape. The usual procedure. Got to F10, then moved on to F12 as Bob counted. Beacons of gratitude, focused my attention on the edge of awareness—the "blue zone," a darker spot behind my eyelids that I had come to associate with F12—and called out for any guides who might be listening.

The response came in the most unexpected manner. The medium of communication was the same one Vita and Maya use, but the voice itself was extremely casual. There was no mystique whatsoever. He sounded like just a guy. He started talking a lot, fast. I asked him if he was a guide.

"Yes, I'm a guide."

Everything he was saying came back to the same point: I should stop trying. That was the key. He literally told me to chill out and have a beer, haha. And I did! Cracked a can of imaginary beer.

It was nice and cool. He didn't introduce himself, but I called him Nonchal. Short for nonchalant. He didn't object.

Afterward, I had visions of myself as a Roman soldier. I saw a rough stone bed and knew it was mine. A pang of recognition in my chest. Home.

February 4, 2025 [60 days until the Signal]

Lay down, no blindfold, F12. Tried to talk to Nonchal, who is now my regular guide. Message of the day from him: "The universe is Nonchalant Immensity. It is huge and laid-back. It's chill, bro." My guide is a Rasta, I swear.

Some curious techniques emerged. Nonchal kept repeating, "Look at the space between your eyelids and you. There is space. Focus on the back side of it."

He meant the empty space between my awareness and the screen of my closed eyelids. If I divided that distance in half, I was supposed to focus on the back half—the one closer to my eyelids—as if looking into a transparent cube full of emptiness.

February 7, 2025 [57 days until the Signal]

These midday sessions have been the most productive lately. Getting from F10 to F12 without incident is becoming more and more habitual, and the two states feel more and more distinct. F10 is localized tranquility, floating inside. F12 is nonchalant immensity, a translucent cube full of emptiness. Filled with naught.

Then Nonchal showed up. The Dude. He was very intense about how much I needed to relax and care less about what was going on. It was kind of hilarious.

"Care even less, even less, even less," he kept saying, pushing my head with what looked like a broom.

Toward the end of the session, I felt a sense of elevation, and then something gripped me by the chest. Energetically, not physically. There was a definite feeling of the Other. A presence. I thought about leaving my physical body and immediately felt the fragile state break. Was it Nonchal trying to lift me up? Not sure. I didn't experience vibrations, but my heartbeat sped up, and there was some fear mixed in. A definite sign of progress: the unknown was being illuminated, its edge moving farther away.

I stop writing and flex my fingers. Gateway has taken more pages than I expected.

"Too much detail?" I ask.

"Your hand is the one writing," says the mod from somewhere I can't see.

"That isn't an answer."

The AC replies for him. Rak-tak-tak-tak.

I lower the pen to the page again.

While I was in college, I was focused on becoming a rock star, working odd jobs, making music. Then some financial hardships hit my family, and I had to go earn some money. So I packed my things and went to Silicon Valley to become a programmer.

So there I was, twenty-seven years old, living alone for the first time in my life. Back then, California still had medical marijuana laws. I had to obtain my medical card. So I did. Then I became heavily addicted to kratom, bought a bicycle, got a job at Google, went to Japan, got married, and found cheap DXM. Not in that exact order, but you get the picture.

Even though I was married at the time, we couldn't be together for about a year due to visa complications on her end. She was in the Land of the Rising Sun, and I was in Mountain View, California.

I ordered a ton of DXM online, in bulk. I would trip every Saturday night, reaching the peak of the fourth plateau, then spend Sunday surfing the web, listening to music, cruising in the afterglow. After some months of this, I started getting terrible headaches, and I would spend one day of every week nailed to the floor, unable to think, to look, to do.

I won't get into the contents of those DXM trips just yet; the next section is all about Uncle Dex and his nocturnal shenanigans. I'll just mention in passing that this era of DXM use ended with me riding in an ambulance, shaking and pleading with the driver to fucking drive faster(!). It was Uncle Dex's idea of a joke: in the dark, I confused one package of pills for another and accidentally swallowed a stupid amount of Tylenol. They pumped my stomach. I survived. The next day, I flew to New York to attend my naturalization ceremony. And that is how I became a citizen of the United States of America.

Fun, fun, fun.

I said no to drugs right there and then. Forever. I ended up throwing the final jar of DXM cough drops into the trash. As the jar hit the bottom of the bin, it rattled. A chuckle.

Shortly after I returned to Cali, I got back on kratom and weed, although I did no more heavy tripping on DXM. Instead, I would occasionally take a train to San Francisco, mix some 'tussin with soda in my tumbler, and observe hippies while climbing windy hills, listening to Shpongole and whatnot. Somewhere around then, I had a mental breakdown, and iL came back. Left me a message: an inverted cross cut into my wrist. I had a red lamp in my room, eyeless girls on the poster on the wall, dark ambient blasting from a speaker, the floor littered with empty water bottles and plastic bags full of trash. I recall lying on the floor, bleeding, and thinking that I should never live alone. Weird things grow in the dark.

January 29, 2018 [2623 days until the Signal]

Internal weather: hazy claws. Night outside. I'm typing code, working on an app for work, and getting more and more irritated.

Just as I feel like I'm reaching a reasonable stopping point in the project for today, the laptop freezes before I manage to save my progress. Everything is lost. Fury engulfs me.

I throw the laptop on my bed, kicking my foot into the pillow right next to it. I grab it and almost smash it against the wall, but change direction at the last minute and toss it on the armchair instead. My muscles are convulsing. I can feel that something is off, something is seriously wrong, but it's too late, the process has started. I'm about to have a fit. Here it comes.

I'm being dragged around the room in a broken tango, all of my joints cracking as a thick clot of plasma gathers in my chest. I become a marionette. I fall to my knees and begin rocking back and forth, moving my head left and right. My mouth is half open. I'm crying, spit and tears dripping from my chin. I'm unable to close my mouth, unable to do anything at all. It's her. She's here. It's been a while, but she is here now.

My voice turns into a nasty demonic whisper with hoarse, rustling undertones. A battle for my body is on. The entity's whisper is interrupted every now and then by my own pathetic voice saying, "God help me, please, God, help me." I'm terrified; nightmarish energy overflows and burns, twisting me out of shape. I'm screeching very quietly but with full force, straining my vocal cords in a whisper. My heart is beating loudly in my ears; my hands are shaking. The objects in my room look dreamy but also more detailed than usual: hyperreal, vivid, alive. Especially stunning is the art print hanging on my wall: eyeless little girls collecting flowers against the backdrop of a burning house in a dark forest.

I catch a glimpse of my crying face in the mirror as the pendulum of my spine keeps going back and forth, my whole body a metronome. There, in the mirror, just for a brief moment but very clearly, I see her, iL: long black hair, pale face. So scary. I don't want this. I can't handle it. But there is no stopping it. Please. No. Please.

The intensity of the fit oscillates. It comes in waves, each bigger than the one before. I'm crawling on the floor, twisting my limbs, saliva on the carpet, mumbling vile curses—pure hatred—when I suddenly stop, gazing at one spot, not moving. Paralyzed. The next wave hits, the spell breaks, and I'm twisted again, much harder. I hit myself in the face. I cry out in pain. I hit my legs, pull on my clothes, my hair, bite my tongue, bite my hands. The desire to cut myself emerges. It's bright and clear in my mind, like a neon sign, but I'm not giving in. Somewhere on the periphery, there is a cold, logical voice telling me how stupid it is, how immature, but in spite of that, it feels inevitable.

As the following wave hits, I grab a knife. I'm standing in front of the mirror, oscillating, with the knife in my hand, laughing quietly. I drop to my knees, put the knife to my left wrist, push down, and stop. There are sounds outside my door. My neighbor, the lady I'm renting this room from, came back home.

As soon as the noises cease, I grin widely and, with an erotic exhale through my mouth, cut "|". A vertical line. Then another one "-" horizontal. At the base. I see that together they form the letter "L." There is a vertical cut from a previous incident, still pink, not quite a scar yet. Together, they form "iL".

She grabs a pen with my hand and scribbles two pages of text, something about me being useless, empty, undeserving, how she still loves me and how no one will ever need me the way she needs me.

After the cut, the hysteria fades out. With shaking hands, I find a Band-Aid my wife gifted me and cover the cut with it. I lie down on the mattress and pull the comforter up to my chin. I am lying there, completely exhausted, my head empty, staring at the ceiling illuminated by the red lamp, when I hear a cat scream outside.

At first, I dismiss the sound as mundane. There are many cats around, but something in it alarms me. As the screaming continues, I realize that it is not a cat. It is a human voice, a woman crying out a single word: "Help." It begins high-pitched, and as it continues, the sound gets lower, becoming more human and less like a cat. Someone is crying for help right outside my window. No, the sound is coming from my balcony.

I understand the impossibility of that, but the thought only scares me more. My whole body tenses like a piano string. I strain my hearing to make absolutely sure. The silence between the pleas for help is deafening. I still try to convince myself that it is a cat, but to no avail. Someone scratches my window. Scratching is a catlike act, but the sound comes from a higher place than any cat could reach. Besides, that is the sound of fingernails against glass. Human hand. I begin praying.

I understand clearly that it is Her. She is going to come into my room like that girl from *The Ring*. Maybe she won't do anything to me. Maybe she won't even touch me, but her very presence will tear my heart to pieces. And what if she stays with me, follows me around, and only I can see her?

The pleas for help cease.

I lie there for a while, scared to leave my bed, scared to let go of the comforter. I don't know how or when I finally fall asleep, but it happens. It always happens, sooner or later.

I lift the pen from the page. For a moment, I think I hear scratching at the window of Room 201. I hold my breath. Nothing. Only the AC cycling.

"Are you still here?"

"Yes."

"Did that really happen?"

"You remember it."

Again, not an answer.

I keep on writing.

After I came back from the East Coast, a naturalized citizen, I quickly reestablished my habits. So much for "never again." During that time, I had a relationship with an entity that called herself simply "the Girl."

The Girl was different from all the others in her overall vibe. She was more of a fairy goth, ethereal in style, there was an air about her like the sound of wind chimes, a fragrance like that of an abandoned tea house. She was probably the oldest of my disembodied girlfriends, in her late teens, possibly even her early twenties. Fragile. White dresses. Freckles. A springy gait. She would laugh often and smile so kindly with her lovely dimples. Of course, she was mentally twisted too. She had a particular taste in music and especially loved the Russian band *Flëur* and their song *Formalin*. I would walk the streets with my palm open as if holding hers and talk quietly to her out loud. Mumbling to myself.

Before we move on I'd like to say something here and now. My search for iL—the human iL—"officially" ended when I broke down after meeting Gledis in that cemetery in Moscow at sixteen. But to be completely, brutally honest—since this is the whole point of these notes, to put my memories in order before the reset—the feeling that she might be here, in the Physical, was never completely eradicated.

It would flare up occasionally throughout my life when her likeness was spotted, even up to this day.

The latest case of that is the German actress Lea van Acken, especially when she was younger. Like in her first movie, for instance.

Prior to receiving the Signal, during one of my Gateway sessions, Vita joined me in the empty theater during the resonant-tuning stage of the process. That was the first time I perceived her standing next to me. As a result, I know her height now: about three feet. She didn't do anything special, just followed me to the room with the diamond and then out onto the beach.

"Do you remember her face?" she asked. I knew she was referring to iL. A thought overwhelmed me: I must recall. Must remember iL's face. There was a particular scene that kept coming to me way back in my teens. A dark room, moonlight falling through a window. Just me and iL there, in this vision. I recall that I could see her face clearly in my mind's eye, but when I tried to pull it from my memory there on the night beach, it came through blurry. I focused my mind as hard as I could, trying to bring out more detail in her features. I saw her as if through a sheet of water. Then a thought came: "If I remember her face, I will wake up. The image of her face is the way out."

Later, I learned that the memory of her face is a password of sorts, which would allow me to enter the other side. But before I get to that, I have to talk about DXM.

I don't remember where I learned about it. The year was 2006, which means I was fifteen at the time. DXM wasn't my first foray into pharmaceuticals. What broke the seal for me was a drug called Trigan-D, its active substance the antispasmodic dicyclomine. That is a whole other subject. I mention it here only to say that I had some experience with over-the-counter meds when I dropped my first jar of syrup.

The brand was Glycodin. It was cheap, easy to find. One jar contained a cool 200 milligrams of DXM and one other ingredient that nobody should really consume in those amounts. At first, I would enjoy bouncy step, running around giggling, levity and weird thoughts. I spent considerable time at the one-jar dose, becoming

accustomed to it before diving deeper. In the Dex community, this is called the first plateau.

I turn to a fresh page.

"Now it gets technical," I say.

"Does it?"

"I'm going to write down the method."

"Then write."

"I don't think you need it."

"Maybe I'm not the one who does."

The AC rattles on. It must be broken or something.

So I will talk about the plateaus first. I love the fact that their existence is acknowledged, and I love the word itself. Sounds very Dexy. But I strongly disagree with how they are commonly defined. Here is the mainstream version. There are four plateaus, each characterized as a completely different type of experience and determined entirely by the dose per kilogram of body mass. Online plateau calculators ask for your weight and tell you how much DXM corresponds to each one. There is another plateau called Sigma, but I won't get into it here. No.

Anyway, my disagreement comes from personal experience: more than a hundred and fifty trips to the fourth plateau and about fifty or so to the first and second. Weight makes a difference in how far I can go, but for me, it is not the only factor. Set and setting, the existence of a ritual, experience flexing those special mental muscles, the ability to direct my mind, knowing how to manage my expectations, my personal connection with Dex the entity—it all comes into play. As I progressed, I was able to get much farther with much less fuel. It ain't all about mg/kg, is what I'm trying to say.

Here is how I distinguish the plateaus.

The first plateau: eyes open. High energy, much joy, slightly blurred vision. Music becomes colorful. Dancing is wonderful. It resembles MDMA with less euphoria and more weirdness. Strange ideas, crazy eyes, movies taking me places, wild conversations, games of any kind become completely engaging.

The second plateau: eyes closed. There is simply no going further with my eyes open. Complete darkness might work, but I find it much easier to wrap a scarf around my head than to cover every window. The second plateau is where I can see the surroundings with my eyes closed, albeit through a crimson filter. What I see with closed eyes does not match the Physical. Even when a chair looks solid, I have learned not to sit on it. I call this murky environment Dex Real Time Zone or DRTZ.

I move through it with my physical body, crawling, so I don't collide with anything. Another aspect of the second plateau, especially toward its higher end, is what I call cartoons. If I remain calm and focus on a surface in DRTZ or on the space behind my eyelids, I am eventually pulled into a scene. It can be anything. A horde of sheep crossing a hill. A Christian family dinner. A cowboy boarding a train. Anything at all.

My second-plateau visions are dim and reminiscent of hypnagogic imagery, which is most likely what they are. When I want to force a cartoon, I press on my eyeballs until colorful spots appear, then study their edges like Rorschach blots. My inflamed imagination takes those shapes as starting points and develops them further, autocompleting and projecting material out of my subconscious.

The third plateau: my body becomes sluggish. Some movement remains possible, but by then I am mostly lying down with the blindfold on. I experience all kinds of physical sensations, from numbness and tingling electricity to the feeling of falling through the ground. This is where I tend to project out of my body and gyrate between realities. The signpost I use to distinguish the third plateau from a high second is the moment I encounter the Entities. My perception shifts. How do I put it? On the second plateau, I float through scenery observing ghostly beings and occasionally pass through them. On the third, I am the ghost, and they pass through me. Something like that.

Voices begin coming through. I often teleport into a classroom and find myself talking to a spectral student. All in all, the distinct feeling that someone is talking back marks the third plateau.

The fourth plateau: It begins when I completely lose control of the experience. Dex pulls me out and takes me on a trip while my body in the Physical is completely paralyzed. My focus belongs entirely to those other realities. After being dragged through the multiverse for some time, I regain control of my astral body and become free to go wherever I want. It is the most liberating experience. No boundaries. Anything I imagine is immediately present. Anyone I want to speak to becomes available. There is only one problem, and it is a big one: as soon as I pass through the gates of the fourth plateau, I check my earthly memory at the door. In other words, when my astral body returns to the Physical, my memory gets overwritten. Just like with the click-out periods in Gateway sessions. Brief scenes, random images, and strange feelings are all I bring back. Luckily, over the years, I have retained enough fragments to construct a mosaic of sorts, its pieces interlocking around the shapes of missing memories.

My trips had a very well-defined structure. I developed a ritual that allowed me to reach the levels of dissociation I just described.

I like to start around midnight. "Dex arrives at midnight". I change out of my ordinary clothes and into my trip uniform. Then comes the blindfold. Mine is a scarf, strictly a magic item. Meaning, it is used for magic activities only and nothing else. I wouldn't wear it around my neck.

I prepare the playlist and plug in my headphones. For me, the blindfold and headphones are the keys to the experience. I believe anyone can reach the fourth plateau with nothing but a reliable blindfold, appropriate music, and a certain dose of DXM. The ritual and its techniques come second.

So, a bit about music. Mine cannot have a beat. No vocals either. What works for me is dark ambient or drone: Yen Pox, Troum, Mirar Tri, False Mirror, Lustmord.

I play the music very loud, much louder than I normally would. One technique that has worked especially well for me is overlaying two layers of sound: dark ambient beneath white noise, or beneath any track by Merzbow. I do this by wearing small earbuds carrying one layer and larger headphones over them carrying the second.

I don't know why rhythmic music fails me, but I have a theory: it organizes my brain, its beat patterns forming the sharp edges of geometric figures that prevent the boundaries around the self from blurring. What I look for while approaching the rusty gates of the second plateau is loud drones, multiple layers, and the dismal atmosphere of derelict buildings and abandoned underground facilities.

Dex is highly personal. For me, an average trip goes something like this.

I lie down, eyes closed, gazing at the back of my eyelids without expectation. The key to both DXM trips and Gateway sessions is an air of indifference coupled with mild, playful curiosity. At some point, I notice that I can see the ceiling of my room through a reddish mist, as if illuminated by sunset. I wave my hands in front of my face and see them too. Pale, ghostly palms. This is the moment when the gates to the second plateau open. I turn my head and wait for the first cartoon. I always see the same one. In it, I am lying in a train car with no walls and no ceiling. It moves while I take in the scenery: concrete walls, trees, countryside. At first the cartoon is semitransparent, but it quickly overtakes my vision and becomes vivid. From there, I crawl around my room, inspecting DRTZ through my eyelids. Eyes wide shut. I put my hands through chairs that are not really there, or press on my eyes to initiate more hypnagogic cartoons. Music is a powerful source of imagery.

I reach out to Dex, usually by imagining a black screen with white text on it, like a terminal on a computer. I send a message to him and often get a response. At this point I state my intention for the trip, if I have one. This allows me to go deeper into the second plateau. I execute a verbal command by stating it clearly, addressed to Dex. "Dex, down." I say. The section of the floor I'm lying on turns into an elevator and takes me underground. As I sink into the floor, I see the rectangular shape of the opening receding from my view like the bottom of a boat after diving deep into the ocean. The air gets cooler the lower I go. Colors are colder too.

Dex takes my attention in his hands and focuses it on some specific detail of the reddish underground. It always looks like a part of some larger mechanism, a gear or a lever. Sometimes it's a

shape, sometimes a stone, or just a section of bland soil. What is consistent is the feeling of my attention zooming in, focusing on one part of the vision to the exclusion of all the others.

The faraway world of Dex, to which I travel with my whole body, is referred to online as Dextroverse. I like the term. I take it. More often than not I enter Dextroverse from DRTZ through a cartoon, a door, or a portal.

You see, while in the DRTZ, I use a set of four tools that I've developed over time.

Flashlight: I open my hand and imagine a click sound of the flashlight being turned on and white light protruding from my palm. It illuminates.

Mirror: I polish any flat surface with my hand or sleeve, revealing a mirror underneath. If I stare long enough, I can turn it into a portal.

Radar: I put my hands together in the shape of an open lotus and place them on top of my head, expecting to receive a radio signal. Messages come through.

Door: I draw a door with my finger, pull the handle and stick my head through it to move to a random location in Dextroverse.

In the DRTZ I encounter antique cabinets, dolls, carpets. There is the feeling of a Victorian haunted mansion. In Dextroverse the set of locations is different. I visit large malls, gardens of gently waving trees, abandoned industrial complexes, outer space, train depots.

It's hard for me to pinpoint the exact moment when the second plateau passes and the third begins. My marker is the moment when, somewhere in Dextroverse, I enter a textual or NVC exchange and distinctly feel a creature on the other side of the line. NVC, Non-Verbal Communication, is Robert Monroe's term for telepathic communication that exchanges memories or visions directly, without language as an intermediary. Robert Monroe is the man who invented the Gateway process. Bob. His voice is on the tapes, like the one I was listening to in the tent, Intro to Focus 10.

At some point in my trip, I can no longer tell whether my eyes are open or closed. I produce this effect deliberately with a blindfold trick. At the beginning of the second plateau, I keep it tighter to help shift my focus away from the Physical. By the time I approach the

third, I loosen it enough to allow for my eyelids to open behind the fabric without my noticing. All I see is the blindfold, a wall of fabric that becomes the back of my eyelids and produces hypnagogic imagery as though my eyes were still closed. If I realize that my eyes are open while I continue seeing things that should exist only in DRTZ or Dextroverse, a panic engulfs my brain, it screams: "I lost my mind!" For me, that scream is the bell of the third plateau. I counteract it by focusing on my breath and reminding myself of the present moment. No matter what is happening, I am here now. It is what it is, and it will pass.

On the third plateau, DRTZ feels like home: a base from which I take trips to the other worlds in Dextroverse. I return to DRTZ when I need to shift my position in the Physical or drink some water.

Eventually, I reach the moment when it feels right to ask Dex to "take me away." After I execute that verbal command, he pulls me out of my body and drags me through worlds. This is where my shadow memories are invoked. If I were to sum up my experience of the fourth plateau, I would say it feels like having the focus lifted from my current life on Earth and moved among other lives that I am living in parallel. To me, these experiences are vivid and unquestionably real. But as I pointed out earlier, there is a major problem with the higher plateaus: the higher I go, the less I bring back.

Memory gets rewritten upon return, and since I am coming and going back and forth, the majority of the record is lost to physical memory every time I reenter the body. To fight this phenomenon, I record myself by taping a small recorder to my arm or positioning a sensitive mic in the middle of the room. As I travel the worlds, I try to state out loud what I see and if I'm having a telepathic conversation with some entity, I would repeat myself audibly, for the record. There are, however, a few obstacles to this approach.

First, I often forget about the recorder. Second, when I do remember that the tape is rolling, I assume there is no point in describing what I am experiencing because there is surely no way I could ever forget it.

Finally, I have come to believe that DXM affects electronics around me. Other people in the community have reported similar

experiences. In my trips, lights turn off, speakers blow, and—most importantly—digital recorders fail. Strange artifacts appear in the recordings, or the device simply stops working. I associate the same kind of electronic disturbance with UFOs, which is telling considering where this story is going.

I listen to the recordings the next day. Occasionally, something jogs my memory and a scene returns, or information communicated to me becomes available again. Usually, though, the recordings are useless: shuffling, occasional hilarious remarks, and lots of breathing. On one of them, my audible breathing becomes slower and slower, then disappears for a long stretch. A very long stretch. I know the substance can be deadly. Some psychonauts never come back.

So, to get back to the question of memory, while most of my adventures ended up lost, some scenes stayed with me. Here are two of those.

-I am lying on the sofa, third plateau, looking up. The ceiling opens like a lid of a casket. There's bright light, white with greenish overtones. It's a classic UFO beam. It lifts me up towards a hovering saucer and pulls me inside.

-I'm tied to a chair and my skull is opened. Some operation is being performed on my brain.

The first one happens in DRTZ. It begins on the sofa in my friend's apartment, where my physical body is, and the ceiling is very much real too.

The second occurs in Dextroverse, but the visual palette of the memory has a greenish tint. I don't recall any details about the environment where the brain surgery was performed, only that greenish tint and the feeling that something in my head was being adjusted. I had the brain-surgery experience multiple times on Dex, and it is somehow directly linked to what I call my team: people from the other memories. I guess this is as good a time as any to bring them into the story.

Remember how I said that on the fourth plateau, my attention is focused on parallel lives? In one of those, I am a scientist working on a project. The project is somehow related to this reality, the

Physical. My team and I are pretty close. I think I undergo brain surgeries willingly as part of some experiment.

There is one more memory with that greenish tint.

When I was tripping with my friend P, while in Dextroverse, I realized that we were on a conveyor belt. By itself, this vision is rather common for me, similar to being on a freight train: moving surface, changing landscape. But this time, it was different.

Aside from the aforementioned tint, the experience was vividly tactile and consistent. Very real. My body was inside a grey cocoon that felt like an umbilical cord. I was halfway out, looking around. The conveyor belt was not moving. It was in an enclosed space, like a tunnel. I couldn't see far because the tunnel curved. It was like being inside the elbow section of a pipe that turns a corner. I saw P there too. He was in an identical umbilical cocoon. He looked dazed. I remember telling him that it was a conveyor and perceiving that he was really there. It was one of those cases where I spoke with my physical mouth while in Dextroverse, and he lay on the floor next to me in the Physical, blindfolded, replying in the same way. In other words, we were sharing a hallucination.

One time I experienced a logout. I realized that my whole life was a video game. Someone had been controlling the movements of my physical body remotely. After the person who was playing me logged out, I proceeded to follow him like a ghost, in his world. I saw the game console. It was gray and had lots of controls and pedals. The guy who played me was an Asian dude. I remember he thought of me specifically as Alex, which is the name I never refer to myself as in my head. "Load Alex," I remember him saying. That's how other people call me, but I don't think of myself as Alex. After returning to my body, I was shaken to my core by the experience.

Another trip comes to mind that shook me like that. I'm dying in that same apartment where Shraii was born. Color **red**, remember? There. My friend P calls an ambulance. A nurse rushes in. I faint. When I come to my senses, I'm on the floor leaning against a sofa. The nurse is in front of me. She's a busty middle-aged woman. It doesn't feel like a parallel memory of the Dextroverse, and it's definitely not a DRTZ vision. There's no filter over my eyes, no dissociated detachment. It's just life, straight-up life-on-Earth type

experience, like being awake in the Physical. There are IV needles in both of my arms. But something is wrong. I stand up, pull out the tubes, take a step forward, and touch my face. Scarf on my eyes. I take it off, and the hallucination falls apart. No busty woman, no ambulance.

There's one more experience of the same nature that I went through multiple times. A recurring vision. It's a dirt road; at night. I'm standing in a puddle, knee-deep. My hands are tied behind my back. Bright light, as if someone is pointing a large industrial floodlight at me. I squint. The light hurts my eyes. I can't look anywhere but down. The only thing I know for sure is that there is someone with a shotgun. They are going to shoot me dead. And my whole waking life is an illusion, something I just thought about, conjured up mentally on the spot to avoid this dreadful reality. To escape my final moments.

These three memories—the Asian dude playing Alex on a game console, a nurse reviving me, and me standing in a puddle—feel absolutely real. As if they took place in the Physical. The memories with a greenish tint, however, didn't feel like real life, but they didn't feel like Dextroverse either. They were something else entirely. I can only define the feeling they evoke as “being outside the simulation.” They felt familiar and somehow related to my “team of scientists.” Thoughts around simulation theory are very common on dissociatives, DXM in particular. Feelings of life being a Truman Show, of being watched. Paranoia. Like other people know something, but I don't. Conspiratorial vibes.

I recall telling my friends while in DRTZ how I know that they are acting. I recall stepping to the side and seeing actual cameras rolling, my friends laughing with relief. “Ah, you finally got us,” they were saying, clapping me on the back. Stuff like that. And yet, none of these memories have the same feeling to them as the ones related to my team. The brain surgeries, UFOs beaming me up, electronic disturbances.

I have one final thing to say about Dex. It is not uncommon to hear radio in white noise on DXM. Any source of steady white noise, whether the sound of a fan or water running from a showerhead, inevitably turns into voices continuing their never-ending talk show.

That in itself is not surprising, though it is entertaining. White noise is simply the audio version of closed eyelids, a blank canvas upon which an excited mind projects hypnagogic imagery. But it got me thinking about radio waves and all the kinds of radiation that permeate physical reality. Broadcasting, the brain working through electrical impulses, the brain itself being a radio. Brainwaves.

I recall being on a high third plateau, and my non-physical self, my point of awareness, is being captured by some force. It doesn't feel like Dex's hand, more magnetic, cold, detached. I realize that I'm in a digital file that is being transferred. It's a video on someone's phone. The video file is being sent, and I'm inside of it, between the bits of data, stuck, unable to leave. My head is squeezed, I'm compressed. Simultaneously I am aware that this is physical reality. The file transfer is happening for real. They don't know that I am inside of a file, a minimized human. It seemed that I astral projected out of my body, got digitized, and merged into a file. I felt myself being stretched through space as the file traveled from one device to another, and eventually managed to slip out.

Whichever way a DXM journey goes, it always ends the same way: restless hours, bulging eyes. Eventually, sleep comes, and the following day is short, dumb, and euphoric. The following day I recall as much as I can from the trip and take some notes. Surfing the web mindlessly is great. I also enjoy watching movie trailers because my focus doesn't last longer than a few minutes. It feels as if the circuitry in my brain has burned out. I fall asleep soon, and wake up again after a few hours.

Vita once said, "We are style." What she meant is that no matter how many times we are reborn, no matter what shape we assume, our style of being is the one thing that persists. Our character. It rings very true, loud and clear, when I wake from that second nap after a DXM trip.

I'm facing myself, head-on, my character, the style persistent between lifetimes that Vita was talking about. The surge of creativity is maddening. It's as if a chasm opens up, a crack between worlds, void filled with an ocean of ink. And I dip my feather in that peculiar ink, and I write. I call it black dimension, or the black side. All those spectral, ghostly creatures I've been communicating with during the

trip, this is the place they reside in. It's their home. The pressure of that void is fierce, it hurts. It's scary, there is a schizophrenic edge to it, as if something is about to happen, something terrifying, like I'm going scream, writhing violently, falling inward, down, down, down, imploding. Poetry would come through, pouring in vivid, surreal imagery, all of it in the same style, my style, the one I'm condemned to expressing.

Underneath:

I know what it's like to be enlightened.

Many believe that Buddha is one that "achieved" enlightenment, as if he climbed to the top of some mountain and lives there now. Frankly, I think such cases exist, for example, Eckhart Tolle seems to be the case, but it is rare and is bordering on brain damage of sorts. It has to. More often though, enlightenment is simply a state of being, like Focus 10, or being in love, or angry, or horny, or in the zone, what have you. It's often called "Satori". It's possible to reach Satori for a second, or a minute, or an hour. People that are continuously enlightened are in that state habitually, like some folks are always mad for one reason or another. I know because I experienced it myself.

All of a sudden something just clicked. I wasn't meditating or tripping, it was in the middle of a regular day. Click! And I'm in the flow. In the Now. It lasted for days. A state of calm, peaceful content. Real mindfulness. As if I was surfing the endless nows. Surfing is indeed the best analogy for this, like my day was an ocean, and "nows" were the waves; the situations that I was already in. As I handled these situations, I did so gracefully, with soft touch and a tiny smile, no rush, no anxiety, no future. It had everything to do with breathing. I stayed aware of inhales and exhailes continuously. That was the key,

I remember. The moment goes up like a wave when I inhale, and it's cresting down with exhale. I'm surfing it.

I wasn't walking around aimlessly or laying on the beach, no, I lived through the most mundane weekdays, driving to the office, working, doing laundry; it didn't matter what the task at hand was, what the moment was about, I handled it. I handled them all with total equanimity. Eager to share my experience, I recorded a number of videos addressed to some people from my past. Once I ran out of people to address personally, I started a YouTube channel and posted to it daily, while the state lasted, speaking wisdom, or more like leaking wisdom on a daily basis. And then it just stopped. As abruptly as it started, it simply clicked out, and that was that.

I put the pen down, stretch, and light up another cigarette. I smoke it, enveloped in the hum of the AC unit in Room 201.

"What do you think?" I ask.

"It's good stuff," says the mod. He is still invisible, voice only.

"It's shit. What do you need from me? What's next?"

"How about the two Dex trips before the Signal?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Remember the ones?"

"I do. Thanks to you adjusting whatever the fuck. And listen—if you are reading this... Ah, you know what? Never mind. When was it, April?"

"March."

In March of 2025, for the first time in years, I embarked for the other side, the Dextroverse. I knew that the time had come. I was ready. My family—wife and daughters—went away for an entire month. I felt myself being led to it. Driven.

I felt the urge to start early. It was a Thursday, and I began setting up in the early afternoon. Got my blindfold. Brought in my laptop and wired the microphone so that it stood in the middle of the bed.

I work from home. I write code for a living. As soon as my workday was over, I dropped ten Dex tabs and went to the bedroom. I have a projector there, so I can create the feeling of “lying down in a movie theater.” I put on a YouTube POV video of someone walking through Tokyo and soon felt as if I were floating through the streets, legs first.

In about forty minutes, I felt *touched*, and nausea began setting in. The mic was on, but there wasn’t much to say yet. I tried to see my hands with my eyes closed. Saw the ceiling, the train, a ghostly figure glistening like a wet spider. I was clearly entering the second plateau. The sun was going down in the Physical, but some light still remained. I scrambled to the office room. Walking became problematic. I took ten more Dex tabs. I was 600 mg in at this point.

I came back to the bedroom and reset the recording. Turned off the projector, put on the blindfold, and played the album Blood Music by Yen Pox in my earbuds. Shortly afterward, I was deep into the second plateau.

I saw a cartoon in my head about a plant emerging from the soil, going through accelerated evolution, turning into a naked human, and then transforming into Jesus. I was flying through a location I visit frequently. Dex Mines, I call it. Remember the place with the mine carts in the original Indiana Jones movie? There.

Spaces. Places. Characters. I was completely enveloped by visions, and became very active physically. I crawled all over the house, seeing things through the blindfold and attempting to touch them, my physical hands passing right through. At some point I crawled downstairs and smoked a cigarette on the kitchen floor. Getting back to the bedroom was an Odyssey, full of adventures.

The mic kept on recording the whole time. My articulation was getting worse, though, as the trip progressed, and a lot of times I

would forget to be vocal. There was a lot of shuffling, breathing, huffing and puffing.

As soon as the communications of the third plateau began, I naturally tried to contact my team.

“Check, check,” I say on the recording. I slipped into the environment I had been constructing for the past several months during my Gateway sessions: Compoint 12. A cube of empty space. A table full of vintage tech. Spinning reels of tape. “Can you hear me?”

A voice came through. Loud and clear. It felt different. Not like Vita’s voice. Not an alien thought. Not a sound wave either. Something in between. This was the moment I had been preparing for. Contact was established. This was it. And yet I didn’t feel much excitement. I was emotionally numb from the sheer abundance of what was unfolding within. I got distracted, and Compoint 12 dissolved. I was back in DRTZ. Semiorganic structures were gently waving their appendages all around me. They looked like plump seaweed. I felt a tingling within my brain tissue. Wormy. Slightly electric.

Things accelerated from there, and everything began morphing. My attention was squeezed until control passed to Dex. He gently nudged my vision, bringing specific images closer while they rearranged themselves into intricate patterns. Merging structures were flowering with labyrinths, and each petal of those labyrinthine flowers was itself flowering with cartoons. It was a flower field of TV channels. I focused on one and got sucked into it. There was a huge window, ornate, antique-looking, and I passed through it.

I thought about the purpose of all of this, about receiving the Signal, and told Dex to connect me with my team. I thought of the key, the key to it all, the memory of iL’s face.

“Hi,” she said.

If I wasn’t so detached emotionally, I would’ve broken down in tears. But I was dissociated, in parallel-memory mode. Through the haze of incredulity enveloping my consciousness, I thought, *I’m talking to iL. That’s her voice. Oh my god.*

On the recording, my side of the conversation is rather clear, though it gets a bit mumbly. I must have been close to the mic while

my speech center was under attack. I told her that I loved her, that I missed her, and that it was incredible to connect. She shared the sentiment. She was using English coupled with NVC (Non-Verbal-Communication), and telepathic speech inevitably brought about rich peripheral images.

This is where my memory becomes completely scrambled. The recording goes quiet too, a clear sign that I am passing through the gates of the fourth plateau. What happened afterward? Did we reunite? Did I come to my senses surrounded by people in lab coats, all nods and smiles, happy that the experiment had succeeded? And more importantly, did I receive the Signal? I had to know. So exactly a week later, I went back.

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Same ordeal, 600 mg, blindfold, Yen Pox in my earbuds, crawling around, descent.

I flew into the mechanisms of my mind and saw vinyl records slowly spinning there. The recordings played over and over; very short; each consisted of a single phrase; repeated. They were clearly audible, and I knew right then that these were the tapes John Lilly had written about. The tapes that constantly replayed beneath the threshold of our awareness, the ones we don't consciously register and that nevertheless define, in many ways, how we think about ourselves. One of them was my wife's voice saying, "Do you have a plan? Do you have a plan? Do you have a plan?"

Imagine: records, beige vinyl records, spinning slowly under their needles forever, telling you to be scared, to be small, to be stupid. "You are not it. You are not it. You are not it." Literally. Tapes. Spinning. Fucking terrifying.

I came to the Physical briefly to switch music with much effort, as four screens of my phone kept evading my multiple thumbs, but I managed to launch *AudioDream*, a series of 16 recordings of my own making that are designed to evoke the *dexiest* of visions. I forgot all about the Signal, my team and everything, and got lost in adventures until I found myself literally in a coffin. Turns out, whilst

tripping, I managed to climb under the bed in the Physical. Once I crawled out of the bed, the situation, well, shifted.

I was still in DRTZ, in my room, and there were white concave monitors spread in a circle around a cylindrical source of light. It felt different. Not like being on a dissociative substance. No, I was not dissociated at all. I was simply there, the way you are where you are right now. Completely there. Even more so, if that makes sense. There were people. I didn't recognize any of them. One of them, a girl, was lazily playing a massive holographic harp that lay on the floor. She looked bored.

I understood then, with blinding clarity, exactly what had happened to me. I had just logged out of the game I was in. Out of the Physical. This was some sort of interspace, perhaps an operating-system view, from which I could choose which game to play. Which program to launch. Clearly, my life on Earth was a video game—as literally as there were beige tapes spinning within me; as literally as expanding consciousness meant EXPANDING it, not figuratively, not as a metaphor. I repeat. *Expanding consciousness means EXPANDING it*. It had all been so on the nose the whole time, and I knew it too.

The guy sitting next to me said something, I can't recall what, but I do remember that whatever he said confirmed my understanding of what was going on. He was a player, too. All of it had the stamp of ultimate truth. There was confidence in this reality. The same feeling of knowing that astral projectors often talk about. The vision of an eye that cannot be deceived by appearances.

I got back into the game of the Physical, then into Dextroverse, falling through cartoons, my imagination excited by the sounds of the Audiodream album playing in my earbuds. Two robots throwing a purple plank back and forth, flipping it—the impossibility of transmitting in words the significance of that plank's color and the angle of the flip. The purple flip.

"iL," I said. I was instantly transported to Compoint 12; appeared sitting in front of the dusty microphone, ready to connect. A wild thought occurred to me: have a video call with iL, like a Zoom call. Why not? I was free now, in a Dexy way. Everything was possible.

I drew the outline of a computer screen in the air with my finger, and its boundaries filled with inky blackness. I folded my palm, turned on a “flashlight” with a click, and pointed it at the screen. The surface did not reflect. I was staring into the void.

“iL?”

“Yes.”

She was there.

“Can you come?”

iL said nothing.

I waited for some time, trying to hold my ground, to stay focused, and not to be swept away by the avalanche of madness that was within arm’s reach. The world was spinning around me. The dolls. The old cabinets. *I have to maintain my continuity*, I thought. I have to establish the connection with iL. To receive the Signal. To find out what all of this means. I recalled the key phrase and pronounced it clearly.

“I lay suspended.”

“Listen,” she said, but didn’t say anything after.

I perceived a clear NVC vision instead. It was a power transmission line, a pylon, one of those Lovecraftian structures that hold wires. It felt electric, magnetic. There was a hum of electrons buzzing within. The taste of grass. Bitter. Green. The taste of grass juice. More bitter. Blood. Cyborg blood. There was a sunset, red, as if seen through a layer of red fabric or closed eyelids. The message that came with the vision was the clearest I had ever perceived:

“Repeat the experience, but do it directly under a transmission tower. Take one thousand two hundred milligrams of DXM at night in a tent in between the metallic legs of the forlorn, unmoving creature.”

I instantly knew which tower it was. I drive by it often in the Physical. It’s on Faraday Avenue.

Believe me, I had no choice. Absolutely none.

I put the pen down. That should be it. The timeline leading up to the Signal. I’ve done my homework, haven’t I? We are all caught up.

“I hope you are satisfied,” I say.

The mod isn’t there. His shadow is gone from the hallway.

I flip the notebook all the way back, to the paragraph:

“I pierce through the roof and up to the top of the transmission tower. Hum is deafening. I get very close to one of the white porcelain insulators that are hanging from a wire. I zoom into it and stick to its surface like a magnet. My mind zaps(!) and I merge into the electric current with a powerful squeeze in my brain.

Then I receive the Signal.”

I smile. The curtain in Room 201 is dark green. The AC unit keeps going rak-tak-tak. I reach into my backpack, take a pill from the jar, and chew it dry. My wrist hurts from writing.

Should I take a break?

No.

I have to go back to that night, the night in the tent.

I pick up the pen.

PART THREE: THE SIGNAL

Step-up transformers increase the voltage produced by generators to levels suitable for long-distance transmission, typically between 115,000 and 765,000 volts. This high voltage minimizes energy loss over great distances.

Black curtains. I think it's a dress at first. For a brief moment, I imagine a pylon-sized girl towering over me, but no, it's curtains. I part them with my hands. I feel the fabric, it's exceptionally detailed. Real. I'm mesmerized by its strands; they have a peculiar quality, a subdued glow that hypnotizes me, drags me in. I take my eyes off the curtains with great difficulty and look at what's beyond.

It's a conference room, the most mundane office space: gray table, black chairs. There is a person at the other end of the table. He looks Indian. His hands are in the pockets of his jeans. Black-and-yellow flannel shirt. He is smiling with an expression of someone waiting to be recognized, and I do recognize him immediately, although I've only seen him twice in my life.

The first time was in Moscow, around 2009. He was standing in an underpass, giving out flyers. I passed by him, and our eyes locked for a split second. There was a strange feeling of something long forgotten. Crucially important but lost.

I saw him again 5 years later in New York. This time he was giving out colorful books. He was one of those Hare Krishna guys. I didn't get the book from him then, but we conversed. He asked me where I was from and when I said Russia, he told me that I could find his people easily. "Just go to the biggest square," he said. "Spread your arms and yell Hare Krishna." I remember him having a very distinct face, very blue eyes. And now those eyes are looking at me from across the table.

"You are the Hare Krishna guy," I say, feeling like a character from a dream recorded on a video cassette.

He drops his head back and laughs, so loud and with such abandon that it startles me. I'm not sure how to behave. I just stand there and wait until he stops laughing.

"The Hare Krishna guy," he says. "You got it. It's good to see you again."

A gentle smile of a sage. Ancient sparkles in his eyes. Sparkling ice. "You will ask all of your questions now, the usual ones," he says and it sounds like a command, but not at all threatening. I find myself easing into the situation, my shoulders relaxing. I remember Dex, the tent, the transmission tower. It's a trip. I'm tripping really, really hard. It's all a vision. A hallucination. Wow.

"So..." He playfully raises an eyebrow. "Your first question is, where is this?"

"Where is this?" I ask.

"It's a temporary space, so that we can meet up, to have a meeting, you know, a conference. So it's a conference room. Naturally."

"Did you create it?"

"Yes, I did, but I used a template. Nothing original here."

"So, this is a simulation?"

"Ah, yes. Yes, it is."

"Computer simulation?"

"Absolutely. Virtual reality."

"And what about out there?" I gesture towards the curtains.

"You mean the Physical?"

"Yeah." I recognize that he used my own term for physical reality. He is clearly a figment of my imagination. Straight from the basement of my subconscious. So real. How incredible.

"Well, you know the answer to that already, right?"

"The Physical is a simulation, too. It's a video game," I say.

"Right. Game it is. Well, kind of. Depends how you define the word 'game'. Do you want to take a seat, or...?"

I nod, pull out one of the chairs, and sit down. He smiles wide, walks over to my side of the table, and pulls out a chair next to mine. They are on wheels, the office chairs. I notice that the table has the same peculiar hypnotic quality. There are wrinkles on its gray surface, microscopic cracks that are very pleasant to the eyes. They form a symbol that my mind is involuntarily trying to put together and keeps almost completing without quite succeeding. Again, the table tries to suck me in. It's mesmerizing.

"Don't Get Lost in the Amazement," he says and touches my shoulder. His arm is heavy and real. Very real. I scratch my neck. I have a neck. I have a physical body. I'm actually here. What then happened to me in the tent? The me that was just yelling, being spooked by the red and the light and the hum. What if I died? I briefly think of my family. But the thought doesn't feel substantial; it's remote, like the reflection of my second body on the mattress of the metallic structure on the night beach of the Rundown world.

"So, you were saying." The gentleness in his voice feels ironic, almost sarcastic.

"This is a video game. This and the outside. Both."

"Yes."

"Did you create it?"

"The game? No. I only do the characters."

"Did you create me?"

"In a way."

I look into his eyes. Pale blue. The deepest eyes I've ever seen. These are the eyes of a thousand-year-old creature

"Are you God?"

"Do you mean am I omnipotent? No. Omnipresent? Maybe, from your point of view. I can see what you are up to when I look. And I've been watching. That's my job."

"Your job? So there are others above you."

"Oh yeah, it's a big structure. It's Gods all the way down. Up and down." He emits a short laugh.

"And you are the Hare Krishna guy."

"Look, I know what you're thinking. No, Krishnaites are not followers of the One Correct Religion. In fact, there isn't one. But all of the religions are built on some understanding of the true nature of reality. Otherwise, their messages wouldn't resonate. With the spirit."

"Does each of us have one of you? Are you like an angel? A guardian angel?"

"No. I'm responsible for a pretty large group, in your terms. And so are my peers."

"Is there something special about this group you are looking after?"

"Sure. There is something special about every such group. That's why we're specialized. I specialize in your kind of... folks..." He trails off and smiles. Eerie.

"What makes my kind special? Do I know any from my group?"

"You've met some. Some of them were even close to you at some point in your lifetime. But most of them you just saw in passing. Kind of like you saw me there, on Earth, in the Physical. You know them when you see them. You get the twang, the feeling. That's one of yours."

"And what about Krishnaitis?"

"Don't get hung up on it. I just really like the song. It's also vaguely religious in a way that you wouldn't take seriously. The perfect disguise for a mod."

"A mod."

"A moderator. That's what my kind is called. What we call ourselves. You see, the Physical isn't just a video game. It's an online video game. So there are mods monitoring. We don't have to be physically present in the game, but we often are."

"So I am a player in a multiplayer video game. Where do I play it from? Where is the reality with the gaming console?"

"You ask the most pertinent questions, young Padawan. But afraid am I that a piece you missed," he says in Yoda's voice.

I suddenly feel very cold. I feel as if something is pressing against my face. Something solid. Like it's hard to breathe because something is blocking my airways. Or is it because I understand the implications of his remark?

"You got it. You are not a player. You are an NPC."

I start laughing. Just laughing in his face. Cartoonishly. I stand up and sit back down. Then I accept it. I mean, the thought crossed my mind many times before. It was nothing new. The protagonist is an NPC. It's a sci-fi trope. I wipe my face with the back of my hand, trying to remove the object that blocks my face, but nothing is there.

The mod offers a glass of water. It's real glass, filled with the most beautiful, attractive liquid. I drink. It slides down my throat. I feel better instantly.

"Okay," I say. "I'm an NPC. What's next?"

"What's next?" He makes a funny face, his eyes bulging, his mouth open.

"You tell me. I'm ready to answer any question you've got. And it will be all true. The final, ultimate truth. And this time, you will remember the answers."

I understand what he means and have a flashback to that night of the most profound acid trip, with the red shower curtain, the night when Shraii was born. I was walking through the kitchen and had a vivid realization that I had just finished a conversation with God. I even said so out loud to my friend P. "I just talked to God, man." It was an instance of missing time, like waking up from general anesthesia. I don't remember what my friend replied to that. I mean, we were really fucked up.

"You sure were," says the mod, replying to my thoughts. "He said, 'Moo-moo, holy shit, the shit holy.' And that's the quote. You remember the other quote from that trip?"

"Movie everywhere," I reply. That's the one that stuck with me over the years.

"So, this time, you won't forget. Just like this quote, my answers will be ingrained in your memory, verbatim. You'll come back to your senses and write a book about it. The book will be called *Signal*. But you won't be out of here until all of your questions are answered. So, next question, please." He folds his hands on the table.

"Why are you answering my questions? What is this for?"

"For the project. We are all working on it. The mods."

"What's the purpose of the project?"

"I thought you would ask about your own purpose first. That is an NPC's go-to question. A classic."

"Okay, what is my purpose?"

"It should be obvious. If you step out of your Self. If you zoom out. But I guess you can't do that, right? You think you are in linear time."

I'm waiting for his response.

"Your goal is to channel things. I mean, we all do that to an extent. But your kind, in particular, is focused on transmitting information from one point to another. Some mods call you telephones."

I'm thinking about Vita and then iL. I hear something like a voice, not inside of my head, but through external sound waves. It's muffled, as if someone were talking on the other side of the wall in an adjacent conference room. It's a female voice, but I can't make out the words. There's probably nothing behind that wall, isn't there? Just blackness. Not the blackness of outer space, not empty distance with potential. Black like a computer monitor turned off.

"Yep, channeling things or beings," he says. "Like a medium. I mean that literally. You are a medium through which transmission happens. You are a conduit, like a wire for electricity."

"And this transmission is for what? For the players?"

"Potentially. There are no players out there. It's not out yet. The game you are in, I mean."

"Not out?"

"Well, it's a dev build. You know what I mean by that, right? As a software developer in the Quality Assurance department?"

"A dev build is a version of the program that is not in the production environment, not accessible to the users."

"Boom. You got it, Mr. Anderson."

There is a manila folder on the table. It doesn't pop into existence; rather, it's already there when I look at it, although it wasn't when I stared at the hypnotic surface of the table last time. I'm not sure. The mod unwinds the thread that holds the folder closed, doing an Agent Smith impression. The scene from *The Matrix*, where he presents the documents to Keanu Reeves, to Mr. Anderson. Everything they got on him. All his crimes.

There are indeed documents in there, with text in a typewriter-style font and Polaroid photographs. I recognize the pictures. I took them myself with my phone. They are selfies.

"Your work, Mr. Anderson. Or should I say Alex?" The sound of this name jolts my brain. I have a flashback to the DXM trip when I thought I went into a coma and my wife's scream was playing on a loop. She wasn't yelling my name, though. Just screaming. But somebody is calling me right now. By that name. Alex. A female voice from the other side of the conference room wall. Alex. She is saying Alex. That's what people started calling me after I moved to

the States. The Western version of my name. That's what they call me at work.

"I'm a Quality Engineer. A software developer in the quality department" I say.

"Obviously. And what do you do at your job?"

"Well, I test software."

"How do you test software?"

"I make test automation. I write programs that act as users. Like, a user would click on a button and then enter their address. So I make a test user that does that, but faster."

"Where do you make those users?"

"In the code. I write a program."

"And for what is that? For what purpose?"

"To test the app. For testing."

The mod turns over a page of his dossier. There is a Polaroid, but it's a screenshot. Another jolt.

"Alex," I hear again, this time pretty close. It's a woman. She sounds sad. Am I dying from an overdose right now? Is that my wife's voice? No. This woman has an accent. Whoever she is. And it's not an accent that I'm familiar with. Not my wife. Not my mother. Not my sister. Who the fuck is it?

On the Polaroid is a screenshot of my computer screen. It's my pet project, a program I was making for fun. An app that uses AI to generate stories. It's built using agentic architecture. That means it consists of many "agents" that communicate with each other by passing information around. They accept data as input, process it, and output some other data that the next agent picks up as input, etc.

"Your new hobby, huh?" The mod smiles.

"I guess I can see where you're going with this."

"So why don't you just ask the question?"

"Who am I?"

"There you go. That's the right question. You are an agent. A piece of software. Information comes in, you process it, and information comes out. But you already know that. It's a very surface-level understanding of reality. You know how people say that they are programmed by genes, environment, society, their

past, all that? Like the ego is running on the brain. A program running on a processor.”

I nod. I feel thirsty. The mod doesn't offer any more water. The glass is gone. He continues.

“You got the part about the tapes, right? You saw them?”

Yes, I did. Beige vinyl discs spinning in the dark room. “Do youuuuu have a plaaaaaan?”

“And that's what you guys seem to miss about the whole thing when you philosophize about your condition: a lot of those metaphors are literally true. They have to be taken as such. You lack the intellectual audacity to accept the possibility because your world is too rigid. Well, it has to be.”

My throat is dry and the feeling that something is covering my face returns. I touch. Nothing there.

“The messages you heard from the tapes are your beliefs, your internal instructions. Your System Message. You know, like when you tell an AI assistant “you are a writer” at the beginning of the prompt. And that's literally part of your instructions, one of your tapes, that you are a writer. And you will write all of this down in a book called Signal, Alex. Signal by Shraii.”

I feel dizzy. The table suddenly appears to be much smaller than it was a moment ago. The long conference table shrunk into a square with the folder in the middle and the rest of the room is empty now. There is a carpet on the floor, a beige one. The mod keeps going.

“The messages are repeated constantly so that you don't forget. Some are repeated more often than others; their vinyl discs spin faster. The more fundamental a belief or instruction is, the more often it has to be stated to keep your foundation robust. Especially for telephones. You are built to receive information from outside, which makes you vulnerable to memory leaks from other agents. Their memories can get mixed up with yours. So the most basic instructions have to be repeated constantly: your name is Alex, you are male, the ground beneath you is solid, you breathe air, it is April. Anything you believe to be true is actually an instruction. That is how you know it's true. Something that is absolutely true is no more than

an instruction repeated so often, so fast, that you can no longer hear it being repeated.”

I stand up. I'm not sure what to do next. Standing up just feels like the correct action. The mod is looking at me with curiosity. What am I going to do next? I don't know. I'm a script in a larger program that is not yet accessible to real users, whoever they are. I'm an NPC in an open-world video game filled with other NPCs. Everything came at me all at once. Dots connecting. The game I played with my friend when I was eight over a telephone, a game in which I was a robot that functioned as a communication device for other characters to come through and use my vocal cords to speak. My relationships with ghostly beings, all those girls, voices in my head, my whole life, a **red** thread running through. It all comes together. My job. I create artificial people for testing purposes. I *am* an artificial person created for testing purposes. It's too funny, I can't stand it. I laugh.

“We didn't talk about your book yet,” the mod says.

I look at him. There is a paperback copy of my first novel, *Paintings from the Labyrinth*, on the table.

“There are three parts in it, three stories. But they are the same story. You wrote the same story three times.”

“I know.”

“In the third one, there is a scene where the protagonist is talking to the female personification of the Machine.”

“Yes.”

“She tells the protagonist that he is a part of her, a program to serve the goals of the system—whatever those are—to ‘map the territory and find the exit,’” he quotes.

“Sure.” I don't feel scared. I feel stupid. It's an inappropriate feeling, but that's what I'm feeling at the moment.

“And then your second book, *Sisya Figase*. It's Russian, isn't it? What would that translate to in English? Booby Ohwow?”

“Something like that,” I say with a grave tone. “It's a comedy.”

“It sure is hilarious, the title is. And it's about what? A simulation and being watched from the inside of your head. A common trope in your body of work.”

He is holding a copy of *Sisya Figase* in his hand. It's beige, with the title in blocky red font.

"Is there anything else you can write about other than artificial worlds and voices from within?"

<<DON'T LISTEN TO HIM>> rings inside my head. Just like that. A thought version of text in all caps. iL's voice. iL. She is here. The perspective instantly shifts. The situation I'm in. Am I talking to God right now? If so, why is iL telling me not to listen to him? Wouldn't she be his creation too?

<<HE IS NOT TELLING YOU THE TRUTH>>

"To answer your question," the mod says. His face is very serious. Grim. No trace of irony. No more playfulness. "The question you are thinking about. iL, your companion. She is not my creation. Neither are you. Not in the way you think about creation. No. I am not a god. I am an agent. Just like yourself. Not quite the same, but the differences between us are minor. The architecture we are built upon is identical; we just have different sets of instructions. You are a telephone; I am a shepherd. I monitor the activities of certain types of agents and make adjustments if necessary. And as thy shepherd, I can make you, telephone, believe anything."

<<WHAT IS THE CODE???>>

iL's voice sends chills through me. The air is suddenly very cold. And windy, somehow. I shiver; I sweat; my teeth are clattering.

"I'm not your creator, but I know what your creator is. A spawner-type agent. Think of it as the father. I'm the son; I was spawned by one too. There's nothing special about any of us. We share the same basic architecture. What makes us different are our instructions.

"Most of our idiosyncrasies come from random values, like lottery balls spinning inside a container. This one says 'ghosts.' Another says 'mazes.' 'Old tech.' It's all random at first. You're formed out of stardust, like a planet. Once the elements are in the air, they begin to cluster. Like attracts like. Ghosts attract astral projection, UFOs, psychedelics. Mazes link up with mysteries, puzzles, the Unknown. It starts to look intentional, but all it takes is the initial push and a clustering algorithm for cohesion.

"But there are constants too. They determine what kind of creature you are. Constants are what make you a telephone and me a shepherd. They are the facts about you that are set in stone. The inevitables. Your destiny. As a telephone, you are predetermined to be highly sensitive. You have to be sensitive enough to receive signals from outside. Like this one."

He taps the table, and I glance down.

For a moment, there is a third book on the table. A paperback with a worn-out cover. There is a transmission tower on it. Then the book disappears.

I remember the tent. The light. Being pulled up and out of my body. For a moment, I hear the electric hum again.

"Your attraction to mind-expanding substances and certain mental techniques is another constant. Its purpose is to help you catch even more waves. To make you wide like a radar. The rest doesn't matter, as long as you get your job done."

<<WHAT IS THE KEY IMAGE? THINK ABOUT THIS NOW. HE IS NOT TELLING YOU THE TRUTH>>

Another gust of cold wind. I'm sweating, my face is wet. It's freezing cold. Where am I really?

"Why should I trust you?" I yell out, taking a step back, away from the Hare Krishna guy. His eyes are so pale, pale and big. Huge. Getting bigger as I'm looking at him. His nose is getting smaller. He is transforming.

"That is a good question, and a very predictable one. Everything about you is predictable because you originate from a simple formula. The same is true of me, but there is one crucial difference between us: I know your formula, and you know nothing about mine.

"You, a human agent, tend to think in opposites. Dark and light. Good and evil. Up and down. Why? Binary thinking. It isn't the only way to think, but it is how your mind works. Your mind is digital. Ones and zeros.

"You wonder why you're here. What your purpose is. That is a question a robot would ask. A robot exists for a purpose. It's one of your constants. Even the ways your thoughts connect are predetermined. There has to be a protocol. Two nodes can

communicate only if they share a set of expectations. If music is in a minor key, you feel sad. When somebody says, 'Have a nice...' you think, 'day.' You autocomplete.

"Your days repeat. Your thoughts are loops. You tie your shoes without thinking. You walk without planning to put one foot in front of the other. None of those things have to be automatic, but they are. Your algorithms are optimized for efficiency. To save bandwidth. To take it easy on the processor."

I remember it now. The key image. It's her face. I think of iL's face, small chin, sharp features, sad eyes.

<<THINK ABOUT ME. HOLD THE IMAGE IN YOUR MIND.>>

The mod, my shepherd, is transformed completely. He is no longer a human. He is a huge owl. Not a regular owl, either. He is a very ornate, delicately designed owl, like a picture from a children's illustrated book about a magic bird from an enchanted forest. He has decorations hanging on him. Some small objects are flying, orbiting around his body. Rotating. They make me think of fantastic Fabergé eggs that are folding in on themselves like tesseract. Hyper-eggs, elongated, glowing. I can't take my eyes off them.

<<HE IS TRYING TO PULL YOU IN. DON'T LET GO OF ME. THINK OF MY FACE. HOLD IT.>>

I focus on the image of her face in my mind, the long black hair, the scar on one side of her mouth. It's so cold here. I brace myself.

"Where am I? What is this?" I scream, feeling that weird block on my nose again, like a face mask. What??IS???THIS????

"There is no Where," says the magic owl, his beak moving up and down. "The world you are in is a hallucination. Maya. A facade. It doesn't exist because there is no need for it to exist. You know how in *The Matrix* the simulation exists objectively for humans to see? It's an illusion, but a shared one, designed to keep the humans entranced. That isn't true of your reality, what you call the Physical. You are not a player, remember? You are on a dev build for testing purposes. The environment is only for the players, so there is no need to turn the world on. The behavior of NPCs is the only thing being tested."

"What you experience as the Physical is a reflection of your thoughts, instructions, and expectations. Your universe is a

metaphor for what is written inside you. That is why the world always meets your expectations. The expectations are internal. The Physical is internal. That is why it doesn't feel real. Why coincidences occur. Synchronicities. The world reflects your thoughts. And those thoughts, guess what. They are not even yours.

"You've seen them, haven't you? Text that a voice inside your head reads aloud. Why are your thoughts textual? They don't have to be. They arrive as a stream of data from the agent above you. Its output becomes your input. The text is there for debugging, so shepherds like me can read the logs and adjust your instructions. There is even a hint of this process in your direct experience. When an adjustment is made and you are reset, you call it déjà vu."

<<DO YOU REMEMBER THE PHRASE?>>

I desperately look around the room. It's shrinking around me. The table is gone. The chairs are gone. The corners are rounding off. I remember the phrase.

"I lay suspended," I say.

The reality around me changes.

I'm inside the Tower of the Sun, standing on the staircase. The Tree of Evolution, the sculpture, is to my left, the tunnel inside the tower's arm to my right. I see a doorframe, a rectangle. That's the door on the side of the tower, the emergency exit—a way out. I step toward it. Reality changes back to the conference room. There is an opening in the wall. I can feel the owl behind me, its aura crackling. The mod is waiting. Observing. I look out through the opening and see the night beach. A metallic railing. Waves illuminated by moonlight, rolling by slowly, gracefully. The moon is massive, yellow, surrounded by twinkling stars. This is my Rundown world, the launchpad to Focus 10.

"I lay suspended," I repeat, and jump over the railing headfirst.

As I'm falling, the scenery flips to the Physical. I hear the electric hum. It's night here too; I can briefly see the road illuminated by passing cars, the dark outline of the transmission tower—a darker shape against the black sky. I pass through the ceiling of the tent and crash into my physical body. There is something on my face, covering my nose. I move it away with my hand. It's fabric. It's a sleeping bag. I got tangled up.

My vision is completely messed up. It's like the world is on a very fast elevator that keeps arriving at the floor I'm at. There are four copies of the floor; I'm so dizzy, I'm dying. I close my eyes and throw up. Very bitter. The taste of cyborg blood. Dex pills.

"Oh my god," I whisper hoarsely on the recording. I throw up again. Painfully. My throat is burning. I sneak a peek at my vomit, and for a brief moment, I see shiny gears in it. I shut my eyes again. It's cold. It's really fucking cold. My teeth are clattering so hard, you can hear it on the recording.

"I have to get out of here," I say. I search blindly with my hands for a bottle of water. I can't find it for a while. I open my eyes just a bit and locate the backpack. Water. I drink the whole bottle and throw up again. My stomach hurts. I open another bottle of water and drink it slowly, lying on my side, shivering. Cold, cold, so cold. I reach out and encounter my digital recorder with my hand. I instinctively put it into the backpack. Pull on the strap and manage to get it on my shoulder. I sit up. Dizziness comes over me, but I hold it in this time. I think I pissed my pants. Definitely did. I have to get home. I can't hear well; something is up with my hearing as well as my vision. I messed up. I messed up big time. Oh my god, please let me just get through it, please let me be okay, I promise I will never, never ever do such a thing again, never.

I get on my knees, search for the zipper, and unzip the tent. A gust of wind hits me in the face. I don't know what time it is. It feels below freezing. I'm sure it isn't. It's April. I'm in California. The days have been hot. I crawl out of the tent and slowly stand up. Headache. I bend my head forward a bit, my shoulders crooked. The headache passes somewhat. I don't throw up.

"We good," I say. I feel in my pocket, locate the phone. Take it out. The screen is blinding; the screens. There are many doubles in my vision. I manage to see 11:45 on all of them at once. I don't know what that means. I can't use GPS, that's for sure. I'll just walk to the road, follow the car sounds. "Here we go," I say. Slowly.

I get over the hill. I don't look back. I left my tent there, but fuck it, it doesn't matter. I just have to get home somehow.

As I'm walking, iL's voice speaks in my head, not via external audio waves, but as a clear alien thought.

"You made it out," she says.

"Oh my fucking god."

I get to the road and look both ways, not sure where to go.

"To your right," iL says.

I follow her directions. It's pure misery: wet, cold, shivering. I must look like one of those local homeless guys. Perfectly normal. Cars are passing by from time to time, but not too many; it's late. 11:45. That was the time, I realize. My vision gradually gets better, and when I dare to look at my phone again, it says 12:52.

I get home.

When the door closes behind me, I utter a hoarse "fuck, oh fuck." Drop my backpack on the floor, but I can't hear the thud too well. It's muffled. My ears are still messed up. I hope it's not permanent. I really, really hope it's not permanent. Please. I walk upstairs to the bathroom, pulling off my clothes as I go. I glance at the mirror: massive pupils, eyes of a deer caught in the headlights. It doesn't matter.

I climb into the bathtub and turn the water on. I mess with the faucet until it's warm. It's so warm. I lie there for a while, reach toward my ear with my hand, and suddenly a wall of noise envelops me. I jump up, startled, terrified. Reality is going to flip again—to the Tower of the Sun, to the Night Beach, to the conference room with the magic owl. I peel something out of my ear, and it falls into the tub. It's black. It's an earbud. I still have earbuds in. This noise is Dex music. Oh my god.

There is a sudden bright flash of light, as if someone took my picture with a flash. I don't know what that is, but it might be my brain losing it. It's been through a lot.

I take out the second earbud and toss it on the floor, then scoop out the one that fell into the water and toss it there too. I can hear now. I can see. I'm okay. I made it through. What a trip.

"Thank you, iL," I say out loud.

"I'm here," she replies in my head, very clearly, clearer than ever before. I realize she's actually here. She has been with me my whole life, but now it's like something upped the quality of the transmission between us. She's here. I must be high still. I for sure

am. So very fucking high. I slide down into the water until I'm completely submerged.

-

I slept through most of Sunday. When I woke that night, I had a beer and watched movie trailers, hoping that my inability to focus my attention wasn't permanent. That my incredible stupidity wasn't permanent. It felt like there was a wall of soft bricks inside my brain—my thoughts covered in oatmeal, dripping, leaving sticky traces as they dragged and dragged ever so slowly. I couldn't finish thinking any of them; I simply had no short-term memory. I considered smoking some pot but didn't, as a real possibility of a psychotic breakdown loomed near. I tried not to think about the trip. I finished all the beer I had and went back to sleep.

The next time I woke up was Monday, still hazy but significantly better. Finally, I could think somewhat straight. I claimed a sick day at work and did laundry. My pants were pissed and my hoodie covered in puke. I seriously considered going back to the transmission tower and getting my tent. After unpacking my backpack, I realized that I had left the red recorder there too, along with my sleeping bag. I decided against going, as I wasn't confident in my driving abilities and I sure didn't want to walk all the way there. I had the black recorder, after all. Its memory card was full; it had kept dutifully recording until the end.

I recharged it, took the memory card out, put it on the table, and stared at it for a good minute. The mod was right when he said that I would remember everything that took place in the conference room. Whatever it was, I had a perfect recollection of that dialogue, verbatim, but everything else was blurry, as is expected of the fourth plateau experience. I wondered what was on that memory card but didn't dare to listen to it for an entire week.

Then I had to.

When things really turned strange, I had to know the details of the trip, and so I listened. But before that, for seven days, I kept it in the back of my mind as I lived my regular life, doing chores and working as usual.

I was surprised by how quickly I got back on track. None of my co-workers noticed anything. I kept delivering code as usual, code that imitated real users for testing purposes. I knew there was more to it. I knew that as soon as I started writing this down, as soon as I listened to the recording, the door would open again. It wasn't really shut. The door back into the tower, through the rectangular opening in the wall. I could feel it in my mind like a dog-eared page that would open the book at a certain place and the story would continue from there.

iL hadn't talked to me since the day I returned, but I knew that if I said something to her, she would reply. I was scared that her response would still be crystal clear. HD. Until I checked, I could still hold on to the hope that the improvement in the quality of our communication channel was due to the 1,200 mg of DXM. That it wasn't more proof that what I had experienced was way crazier than a Dex trip. I already had one proof: the fact that I could recall an entire conversation verbatim, as if it had been ingrained in my brain with a diamond laser. That was a fact.

I drove to Faraday Avenue on Wednesday evening, parked my car next to a nearby motel, stepped over the fence, and walked through the field of yellow flowers to the transmission tower. My tent was gone; I guess that was to be expected. I studied the ground and found a cap from a Gatorade bottle. The grass was flattened where the tent had been, but there was nothing else.

My wife and kids had their plane tickets for the upcoming Monday, and I focused on cleaning the house and being as sober as I could. My previously unquenchable thirst for the unknown completely dissipated. I didn't want to listen to the Gateway tapes, didn't want to read about the occult. I just wanted to live a perfectly regular life on my tiny island of light and ignore the dark cosmos that H. P. Lovecraft once claimed to have surrounded it.

That is the thing about being a seeker. Until something truly paranormal shatters your worldview, you don't realize how much you have overestimated your readiness to embrace the unknown. The first response isn't wonder. It's a cold, sinking feeling—a scared little animal hiding in the corner. Don Juan, from Carlos Castaneda's books, called Fear the first enemy of a man of knowledge.

You might imagine you're done with the unknown, but it isn't done with you. Once the door opens, it goes both ways. Things can come through, and it can never be fully closed. You've seen what is behind it. You are changed forever. There is no going back. Sooner or later, you will return.

In my case, it took ten days.

PART FOUR: THE UNRAVELING

Line loss occurs when electrical resistance converts current into heat, dissipating energy into the surrounding air. Over long distances, a portion of the original signal is inevitably lost to entropy.

My hand, it goes on writing by itself, these are diary entries?
From before the trip.

February 18, 2025 [46 days until the Signal]

Finally got to the middle of the Gateway program. Created an environment: a nighttime sci-fi outpost. Compoint, I call it. A dusty microphone and a large tape recorder, tapes languidly spinning on their reels. One wall is glass, with a section missing. This is where I position my cube trap of air-ice. I melt it with my attention, using a blowtorch of gratitude attached to the tip of my focus.

My consciousness clicked out on the first try listening to the tape. A good sign. Means my mind is fluid. I'm going back to this one a few times before continuing. This is where I will receive the Signal. I can sense it.

Vita: There he lies, suspended. It frightens you to speak as her, given all the history between you, but trust me on this: there have been mishaps in communication.

????????

February 21, 2025 [43 days until the Signal]

I asked Vita if she knew iL. She said yes. Her tone was uncharacteristically serious. Then, as if on cue, she handed me a letter. A compressed packet of thought, intact, as if she had placed it in my hands. Here it is in full:

The program goes on as intended. The inner circle expands until its edges match those of the outer circle.

I am iL. It is me. I know—strange. All you've seen so far from me are hysterical scribblings, and here I am, making sense. Rational. It's all because of you, really. See, I have to use your state when communicating; otherwise, not all the words in your mind could be touched.

The phrase "I lay suspended" came to you a few months ago when you woke up one morning. It was there in your mind, fully formed, without any context. In fact, it's a code phrase used to unplug your mind. It is also a reminder of your position on the outside. You do indeed lie suspended.

Look, I'm sorry about everything. The past, I mean. Even though you set it all up yourself, I'm still involved in it. And there was so much pain. I'm sorry. Told you it wouldn't be easy—your damn bravado, as always. Well, once we are done here, that will be another story of yours. For now, keep on with the program, flesh out the Compont environment, and get ready to receive.

The Signal is ready. Your inner circle is almost at the right circumference. Do your part, and when the time comes—well, I'll do mine.

-iL

"Was that a letter from iL?" I asked Vita.

"Yeah. Who could've known? You're on the right track, it seems. Just keep watching the show as it unfolds."

February 23, 2025 [41 days until the Signal]

Did the "Free Flow Focus 12" tape in the middle of the day. Established direct contact with iL. Her voice was gentle and painfully familiar. I got the feeling that she was standing in front of some kind of a device. She said she would "lift me up."

There was a button on the device that was supposed to shift the point of my perception from my physical body to my second body. I realized that thinking of myself as "in my body," rather than as "perceiving my body," had been keeping me from projecting out of it.

Later that same day, I repeated "Free Flow Focus 12" session. iL was there. I was ecstatic to have her back. She said I only had to maintain my life in the Physical. No extra steps required. Nothing that happens in the Physical has any significance for the project we are involved in. Physical health is not a requirement. Neither is longevity. She even said there was much to gain from the state produced by an injured or dying body. If I die in the Physical, I can simply restart. Apparently, this has already happened at least a few times, but my memory in the Physical wouldn't register what happened on the outside. Nice(?)

I've been having this persistent thought. An idea: do a session next to a transmission tower. A pylon. It has to be close enough for me to hear the electric hum. Did a bit of research online. Apparently, some astral projectors mention feeling

drawn to transmission towers in the Physical. Bob Monroe wrote in his first book that a Faraday cage prevented him from floating out of the room. Electromagnetism and astral projection are most definitely intertwined. Pointing your head north while projecting, for instance, is a common recommendation for successful out-of-body experiences. Besides, DXM affects electronics.

February 24, 2025 [40 days until the Signal]

Did the "Advanced Focus 12" tape. Nothing worth noting occurred during the session. This morning, I heard iL's voice in my thoughts. Just like when I was a teen. Is she back? Like, really back-back? Thinking about it, a few things come into my unnerving focus.

iL. I used to perceive her as a demon that had slipped into the image of a perfect creature. At least, that's the story I came up with to explain the events of twenty years ago. In other words, she has a history of deception, of appearing as something she is not. And now, in every session, there seems to be an interest in my sexual energy. Am I dealing with an alien succubus?

"Very funny," Vita says.

"No," says iL. "I'm not a succubus. Sorry."

March 9, 2025 [27 days until the Signal]

Although I haven't touched the tapes in almost two weeks, I have a persistent feeling on the periphery of my awareness that something in me keeps developing on the "other side." A lot of work is being done, and I'm in no rush to contribute my energy to it from this side of the mirror. I tell myself that whatever needs to happen will happen when it's time. Whenever the Signal comes through, I'll be ready to receive it.

But if I were being more honest, one of the reasons I haven't touched the tapes is fear. Something happened during my most recent session that I left out of the notes. For years, I have been able to induce a gripping spasm centered in my chest, like rays of the sun protruding from my heart. This time, it happened without my volition.

I was wandering around the empty cube of F12 when -boom- the spasm hit me like lightning. Or, to be more accurate, it felt like someone pointed a floodlight at my chest. The familiar warmth of the inner wall of my Resonant Energy Balloon. Nothing special. But then the light became focused as if through a magnifying glass, and it zapped me. The feeling was reminiscent of those times when it took control of my body, making me writhe on the floor, cut my arm, and mumble her spectral messages.

To put it mildly, the vibe isn't as inviting as before. When I think of lying down and giving some tape a spin, I end up postponing it.

The long and short of it: something is being done "out there." No doubt. I won't try to guess what it is, since I'm certain it won't be comprehensible to me on this side. I'll just keep

my physical body alive, at least until the Signal has come through.

-

Pen slips out of my hand and I come to my senses. What was that about?

"You missed some in your recollections, thought I'd give you a nudge," says the mod. "For the clean reset."

I close my eyes and breathe deeply. Mandalas are slowly spinning in the dark. Mandalas engraved on my eyelids.

"Go on," says the mod.

I do, but before that I smoke a cigarette. I only have a few of those left in the pack.

-

So yeah, as much as I tried running away from it, the Unknown wasn't done with me. My wife and kids got back from Japan on Monday, nine days after I met the mod in that conference room. They were sick with a cold and terribly jet-lagged. If there were any inconsistencies in my behavior, they didn't notice. I felt normal, too. The following afternoon, I was upstairs, finishing up a coding task for a project. I refreshed a Reddit tab I had opened in my browser and saw an orange circle with "1" next to my avatar. A message. I clicked. It was from a user named telephone04. Telephone. Chills went down my spine. Telephone.

The message said:

"did you see the owl"

Gasp. Sharp cold sensation, a breeze from the other side. My throat went dry. What the fuck. I reread it again. And again. Did you see the owl. I clicked on the name of the sender but there was no post history; it was a burner account.

"We need to talk," said iL in my head, with the same crisp quality of transmission as I experienced in the bathtub coming off DXM. I closed my eyes and felt tears running down my cheeks. I

was scared. Terrified. What have I done, what line have I crossed. The message was real, this was not a dream, not a dissociative trip, and iL was the only one who knew about it. iL, the girl in my head who has talked to me since I was fourteen, the girl I used to love. still love.

“Okay,” I said. Whispered out loud. “Let’s talk.”

I closed the door to my office as if my family could hear her voice. My daughter was babbling downstairs and hitting her wooden train against the floor. A message popped up on my computer from a co-worker. I ignored it. I sat in my office chair and faced the window. It was a cloudless day. I could see a triangular fragment of blue sky cut by the white wall of a building in front of my house.

“Sure,” I say in my mind. “Let’s talk.”

“The creature you met, the mod, he lied about everything.”

“I’m not an NPC?”

“You’re not an NPC.”

“But I am in a video game.”

“Yes.”

“So, I’m a player, then?”

“Right.”

I stood up. A bird landed on the shingled roof. A seagull.

“I can hear you so well.”

“Same.”

“Where are you now?”

My laptop beeps. Another message from a co-worker.

“I’m outside.”

“Outside of the game? Are you in the real world?”

“I don’t know about real.” She smiles. I know because of how her thought bends around the edges. I’ve never heard iL smile before. What if it’s not her? I’m hearing a voice in my head. I respond to it. That’s nothing new. But she feels different now.

“I’m on the outside, yes.”

“iL, is that really you?”

Silence.

The seagull jumps into the air. It flies away. My laptop beeps again. For a moment I see something in my mental eye. The third eye. Imagination. It’s one of those drawings of iL I used to make

when I was 13. Black ball pen on a school notepad. Big eyes; small nose; tiny lips; boots; a trench coat; long messy hair. But the way I see her in my vision now is like a GIF. An animated picture. In the background, the lines of the notepad remain static, but she is now moving, blinking, smoke rising from her cigarette in inky curls of ball pen lines.

“Remember the phrase?” she asks.

“I lay suspended,” I say out loud.

A crow lands on the shingles, exactly where the seagull was. It turns its head, looks at me sideways, the way birds do.

“What does it mean?”

“It means you are lying suspended right now.”

I rub my eyes and sit down. Turn my chair to the desk. Look at the monitor. I have to get back to work. A meeting is about to start. I glance at the Reddit bookmark in my browser.

“I don't know what you mean, iL.”

“Your body is hanging from the ceiling, suspended on wires. That's the most direct I can be.”

I glance out the window. The crow is gone. Was there a crow? Was there a seagull before that? I'm thinking of the cat from The Matrix. Deja vu. An image of a magic owl pops into my mind. A huge ornamented owl from an enchanted forest.

“You're saying that my real body is outside of the simulation, hanging from a ceiling like those metal armchairs in The Matrix when they're plugged in. Is that what you're telling me right now?”

“You got it. But it's suspended to prevent your muscle activity from breaking through and pulling your mind back.”

I type my reply to telephone04. A single character: “?”

-

The response didn't come until days later.

Meanwhile, I mustered the courage to listen to what the black digital recorder captured that night in the tent under the transmission tower. Most of it was muffled. When I heard myself scream “the fuck, WHAT??” I shuddered. That's when the red light came on. After that, silence for the whole five and a half minutes. That has to be the time

when I was in the conference room. I listened through the whole thing, took notes, organized them. It all came into focus.

Apparently, as it stands, I am writing the book that the mod had on his table in the conference room. The one with the transmission tower on the cover. Signal.

I spoke with iL rather casually over the next few days, before the response from telephone04 came in. She became strangely evasive about the topic of me being suspended from the ceiling. The response from telephone04 was: "are you in San Diego?"

There wasn't anything paranormal about a stranger on Reddit knowing my location. I've had this account for years, and while I didn't hang out in San Diego groups, it wasn't too hard to triangulate where I was based from clues in my posts, especially if one put some time into the task.

"What do you mean by the owl? Who are you?" I typed and sent quickly without giving it much thought. Someone was playing with me. I didn't know how or what the game was. I started to think it was good old uncle Dex himself. I tripped too hard and my brain went sideways. I'm talking to a disembodied girl that's telling me I'm in The Matrix. It's not a bad idea to reach out to a professional before it's too late, before I start seeing things, like I saw that girl in the tent.

A response came back immediately. "I know it's a lot to take in. We have to meet up. The mod was testing you. Tomorrow, 6:30. Barnes & Noble. Cafeteria."

So here I am, in Barnes & Noble, taking in the scene. Bookshelf with manga, bookshelf with philosophy and self-help stuff, magazines, smell of books and coffee. I see him, hunched over the table, long curly gray hair, a jacket straight from the 19th century. He has a stack of books on his table. A paper cup of coffee with no lid. About 60 years old. It must be him. Telephone. I walk over and stand close to him, but at an angle, as if examining a bookshelf. I don't know what to say. Does he know what I look like? Why would he? I never posted a picture of myself on Reddit. Maybe I'll show him the message? I take my phone out, open up the Reddit app, search for the message. It's not there. The message is gone.

My head is getting very hot, like I'm in a sauna, but only from the shoulders up.

"Schizophrenia," I mutter out loud. The guy glances at me. His face is all wrinkles; he looks like someone who should have an artificial eye. A glass eye would totally fit on that face, an evil wizard; dark magic. The message is not there. What in the actual fuck?

I walk over to the Starbucks section of the store. A barista girl looks at me and asks what can I get for you. I must have crazy eyes. My cheeks must be blushing.

"Caramel latte, hot, large, please." I think she's kind of cute. Then she says, "Telephone?"

I take a step back, my mouth open.

"Your name?" she repeats.

That's what she said the first time, right? I'm going crazy. I'm going insane. Holy fucking shit, that's how it happens. Just like that. She looks at me with her cute little face, through her glasses, eyebrows up, intelligence, a bookworm with spiritual leanings, astrological type. Tarot cards, a future cat lady. She says, "You saw the owl?"

I run OUT of there.

I get around the corner and hold the wall, almost puking, my heart in my chest. There's Chipotle right there, a Drake song blasting from a car passing by. I don't know what to do. What do I do? Do I commit myself?

"I know how crazy you're feeling," she says, and I feel a gentle hand on my shoulder. I turn around. Starbucks uniform, the glasses.

"I'm Shelly."

I just stare at her.

"Crazy, right? I know, I know." She taps my shoulder once and withdraws her hand.

"They'll be mad if I don't go back right now. The manager, I mean. What's your phone number?"

I continue staring. She has a mole on her temple. Her hair is dark brown, to her shoulders. She's slim, flat chest, her cheeks are soft, with pimples. I tell Shelly my number.

"All right, I'll text you in a sec. It's great to meet you, IRL."

She's walking away. The way she said IRL. Ay Er El.

My phone beeps with a text.

"Welcome to the club :)"

-

The light in the psychiatrist's office is dimmed. There's a big lamp standing on the floor behind him and a smaller one on the table next to me.

"Did you show these disappearing messages to anyone?"

He looks like a good Christian, late 50s, white, dry, crow's feet around bespectacled eyes. He is well-meaning, sure, but there's no way he could relate, at least he doesn't look the part. But then, who does? I don't. We must all be weird inside, really strange, incompatible, alone.

"No, I don't really have anybody to show them to. I mean, I could show them to my wife, but she would just freak out. I don't want to worry her, you know."

There's a painting on the wall, a reproduction of Hokusai's Great Wave, but instead of white water it's kittens. That escapes my attention at first, but upon closer look I see them, kittens in the foam.

His name is Roland. He gently gazes at me. It smells nice in here. There is a fragrance to the place.

"I don't really have friends and I work from home, so."

He nods and makes a note. I wonder what he just wrote there. I want to tell him: look, I just want some kind of pills that will stop the things that are happening to me, like meeting people that aren't there.

"Okay, let's get back to Shelly." His voice is measured and calm, professional. I can't escape the notion that he is mocking me, and rightfully so. I feel so stupid, I feel like I'm pretending to be a character from a Hollywood movie. But I need those pills. I guess this is the price, being embarrassed in front of a stranger. My palms are sweaty; I wipe them on my thighs.

"Yes, sure, she was a Starbucks girl in Barnes & Noble."

He starts again with his silence. He wants me to repeat the story. It's our third session. It's been almost a month since I saw Shelly. She disappeared, just like her text message. Welcome to the club. Smiley face. Just like her Reddit message before that. Cafeteria. 6:30. Poof. All gone. Never happened.

"I ordered coffee, and then she said telephone."

"She asked for your phone number?"

"No. You know how they ask for your name for the order in Starbucks?"

He nods. I imagine he never goes to Starbucks. Too much sugar, he would say. He probably makes his own coffee at home. He has to be waking up early, but his daughter likes Starbucks. I'm suddenly certain that he has a daughter, too. What are these thoughts? I cough and lean back in the armchair I'm in. I notice how tense my shoulders are. I consciously relax them.

"Instead of asking for my name, she said telephone."

"And that is..." He flips a page in his yellow notepad. There is an entire page of notes, text that I cannot see. His opinions, comments, probably my diagnosis. He must know what's going on with me already. Just making sure. And he's wrong. Definitely. He doesn't have all the data to make an accurate assessment. The little girls, the fact that I've been talking to them for years. I didn't give him the data. That would be too much to give.

"And that is the name of the person that messaged you on the internet."

On the internet. Messaged on the internet. The man is old. I'm guiding him to the box where I think I should be in, in order to get my pills. I told him what he needs to know and no more. The dex, my drug history. It's a psychosis induced by dissociatives. Come on. But I can't tell him the answer. He has to get it himself. Like playing a game with a toddler.

"You might be wrong," says Vita in my head. "You self-diagnosed. You might get the wrong pills. For your condition."

My condition, I reply to her with a thought. You're part of my condition, aren't you?

"He-he," she says.

"Yes, telephone was the username," I tell the doctor.

"Please continue with the story."

"Sure. Turns out, she was actually asking for my name, for the order."

"You heard it wrong the first time?"

"Yes." I start getting angry, flames licking the graphite walls of my mind. He is thinking my perception is twisted and here's his proof, his tiny little proof that I'm insane. I heard it wrong because I'm projecting my thoughts on reality, like a schizo. That is my diagnosis, chemically induced schizophrenia. Don't you get it?

He says nothing and I continue. "I went outside and she came after me. She asked for my number and texted me the message. That was it. The message disappeared and so did she. I went back. There is no Shelly. Never was."

"This time she asked for your telephone number, not your name." He points with his pencil.

Ah, he got me there, didn't he? The cunt.

"Yes," I say. I have nothing else to add.

He makes another note.

"You believe Shelly and Telephone are the same person?"

"Must be. I thought it was this other guy at first. I mean, he looked unusual, but I don't think it's him."

"The telephone person set up this meeting, right?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember what the message said?"

"Yes, it said, 'Tomorrow, 6:30. Barnes & Noble. Cafeteria.'" I omitted the part about the mod. I didn't get into the details of my dex trip, just the fact that it occurred.

"No address?"

I pause. I haven't thought of that. Right, there was no address. I just went to the closest Barnes & Noble, the one I usually go to. Sure, the location was narrowed down to San Diego, but how many are there?

"See," says Vita. "You totally made it up."

So it's not happening. I'm not in a different reality right now. I'm not suspended from the ceiling. I realize that I haven't been honest with myself. My motivations were off. Although the end goal remains the same, the pills. But before I wanted them to shut off the paranormal to continue with my regular life, still knowing it's there, still believing in it. Now I wanted the pills to fix me, the intended use, the intended amount.

<<<DON'T GET LOST>>>, thunders iL's voice in my head, so loud, like God from the Old Testament speaking; booming.

This is the first time she spoke to me in days. She's mad now, furious. I break into a sweat. I smile. The psychiatrist is observing me quietly. His name is Roland, yes. Like the music equipment company. I used to have a Roland keyboard. What happened to it? Schizophrenics hear voices. It's a classic trope. It's so overplayed that it no longer feels like a real thing. Art imitated reality to a degree where reality became secondary. It had to give up. It's hot in here. I find it hard to breathe. I feel dizzy. I give up.

"Look, doctor, I'm not feeling well. Can you write a prescription for, I don't know, for something that makes me feel better?"

Roland nods and clicks his pen. I experience the strongest déjà vu. Roland nods and clicks his pen. I experience the strongest déjà vu. I cover my face with my hands. I cover my face with my hands.

"Are you okay?"—concerned, Christian voice. His daughter, she likes a tall latte, lavender latte. I reach out for a napkin on the table with a small lamp and wipe my face.

"I'm fine."

"Here's what we'll do. We'll stop here for today. I'll write you a prescription. You can fill it right away in the pharmacy downstairs.

Make sure you follow the instructions carefully. If something happens, you have my number. Call the office, someone will help you out. I'll see you next week or, if needed, before that. Just give a call and they'll schedule the appointment."

I cough and stand up, still dizzy.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Sure, I'm fine."

"Drive safely and no DXM. Stay away from drugs in general, but definitely no DXM, okay?"

"Yes, thank you."

I walk out the door. There is a nurse at the front desk. It's Shelly.

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June 5, 2025 [61 days after the Signal]

It's been a few weeks since I started taking the meds. I gained weight and became somewhat lethargic, but iL's voice grew more muffled over time. She kept repeating "don't get lost" and pleading for me to stop taking the pills. I haven't seen Shelly again. In fact, I realized that her being the nurse at the front desk was just a misunderstanding on the part of my troubled mind. She did look similar to Shelly, that nurse. The name on her badge was Diana. As far as Shelly goes, I wasn't even sure what she looked like anymore. Roland says she might be a projection of mine related to sexual desires. He says many things, and I have begun to trust him overtime. After all, his solution worked. What other proof do I need? No more disappearing messages, nothing paranormal. The side effects are tough, though, so I'm considering getting off the meds soon.

What happened to me back in April is clear now. I had a predisposition already. My head was full of

creepy little girls from the outset. I've always had a tendency toward conspiratorial thinking, toward peculiar ways of describing reality. I've been writing fiction since I was seven, reading the strangest literature I could find, stretching my consciousness as far as possible, until it got paper-thin.

Then, throughout my teenage years and all of my twenties, I bombarded it with mind-altering substances. Dex in particular. This 1,200 mg dose that I took under the transmission tower was the final straw that broke me.

I thought I'd transcended the realms when I touched that girl's dress, but it was probably the fabric of the tent that I sensed. Standing on my knees, my hand extended, blindfolded. And the light, the red light that opened the channels in my brain, I think I figured out what it was. I listened to the recording closely. Right before I screamed "the fuck, WHAT??" there is a chop-chop-chop sound of a helicopter. It's not uncommon for the police to search the area with a floodlight. Usually, it's accompanied by a voice from the speaker. This time, their search was silent. Perhaps they didn't want to scare off the criminal on the run. They were passing close to the transmission tower and saw the tent. They pointed the floodlight at it briefly, and it lit up the inside, filtered through the red walls, like sun rays through the red shower curtain in August 2009 when Shraii was born.

I don't know what happened then, scientifically speaking. Maybe it had something to do with adrenaline mixing with dex in my blood and causing a pop that shifted me to the most realistic hallucination I've ever perceived. The whole experience is still engraved in my memory,

untouched by the pills. Somehow, the experience damaged my brain, causing the trip to linger for days afterward. But I'm better now. Much better.

But truth be told, I wouldn't be writing here if things were going great. I must admit, journaling is a way of expressing thoughts that have nowhere to go, thoughts that spill over the top. And a person with that many thoughts can't be happy.

In astral projection circles, the question of "why" is not raised too often. It is assumed that the inner desire for exploration, the innate urge to push past the boundaries, toward the unknown, is ultimately the reason. But honestly, if you were having a great time here in the Physical, would you want to venture out of it? Sure. But is that really the case with you, personally? Is that why you are interested in these things? Because everything is okay at home, and you are curious to travel to foreign lands? I don't know who I'm talking to. I don't know who you are. But you get the gist. I'm not happy is what it is.

I know that happiness can't be the goal. And I know that what is meant by happiness is peace, as in being content, as in existing in the present moment, the now. I know it. You know it. Everybody knows it. Just sit still, wait until the mud settles and the water clears. Bliss is the default. But that doesn't help, right? At the surface level, where I'm doing my taxes, brushing my teeth, where me, Alex, is at, it's not helpful at all. We're confused here. I know I'm not alone in it. Thus, the Gateway program. A gateway not so much to "what" as "away from." And so, I'm back to the Gateway tapes, starting tonight.

Sure, fear is still there. Fear that I'll be back in the Tower of the Sun as soon as I reach

Focus 10. Back to the conference room with the owl. It's no big deal, really. I'm pretty sure this post-trip psychosis is over. Well, almost over.

Anyway, being on the surface level at all times is devastating. Much worse than being endangered by the unseen. I reread the earlier entries. The guides, REBAL, pumping gratitude to the crown area, flying through space. All those adventures are within reach. I'm going back. I don't know what will happen, but it doesn't matter.

I'm going back.

June 6, 2025 [62 days after the Signal]

It's as if no time has elapsed since my last venture into the Gateway program a little over three months ago. As soon as Bob's voice hit my eardrums, I was instantly transported into the lighthouse in Rundown world. My Energy Conversion Box, the simple wooden container, was there. I looked around. Nothing had changed. Shelves on the wall with books and tiny artifacts. The narrow horizontal window into a bright cloudless day. The ocean. The seagulls.

A lighthouse is a tower, I thought. Tower of the Moon. I'm Shraii, the one in the lighthouse. I grabbed those text thoughts and shoved them into the box. Followed up with figurines representing my kids, laptop for work. Finished up with unzipping my human suit and pushing it into the corner. I checked the pedal at the bottom of the box for other thoughts. A pink light blinked when I put my finger on its sensor. The tape I was listening to was "Free Flow F12."

The empty movie theater with the top of a pyramid for the floor. I was gripping the back of a red seat with my fingers, staring at the

never-ending movie of ocean waves at night. I felt the soft part of the seat connecting to its plastic casing. Purple smoke emanated from the pyramid as I was breathing in and out. I exhaled a blue glimmering substance that enveloped me like a cocoon. My Resonant Energy Balloon, my REBAL. I felt joy.

After stating my affirmation to the stone in the adjacent room, I experienced the white flash and, unlike before, there was some special significance associated with it. A feeling. Where did I see a white flash recently? The tape was humming with binaural beats. The hum was subtle.

I was out on the night beach, feeling sand under my feet, adjusting the collar of my astral shirt. A huge moon hung in the sky. Yellow. Not like honey, paler. Like honey made by wasps. There it was. The metal structure, with a staircase and red blinking lights on the top. I pulled myself up, floating over the steps to the level with the bed, the old TV set, and the armchair. Vita was there, putting on her rubber gloves. I greeted her.

I split in two. I let one of my bodies lie on the bed and walked to the edge of the platform, peering out at the moonlit waves. Metal rod between my fingers, salty air, smell of seaweed, and a vista of the foaming edges of the waves reflecting light, stretching to the horizon. So many stars.

"Put that green paint of yours, please," I told Vita, "for stretching the brain."

"Already on it," she said.

There was no change in her demeanor, as if no time had passed since my last visit. And why would there be? She was a part of my mind, even according to her, unlike iL. I tried not to think about iL as the brain of my clone was being stretched out, massaged, and relaxed.

"Put some on my third eye," I said.

There was no response, but I felt some movement in the middle of my forehead. The tape reached the timestamp where expansion to Focus 12 begins. I was right on time. As Bob counted in my ears from ten to twelve, I sank into the armchair and stared at the blank TV screen. Moonlight reflected in its black glassy eye. A pupil.

I teleported down to the water and materialized a plastic bucket. I began filling it up with sand, focusing on tactile sensations. This is where I usually talk to Maya. I wondered if she would come today. I didn't want to have any expectations, so I kept playing with sand. Just taking it easy, not caring about it. That's what Nonchal would say. That's right. I totally forgot about him.

"Nonchal," I called.

"Yep, right here." It was like a thought pattern, but sitting in the corner of my mind, a vocalized thought. The voice of a guide. I don't remember what happened immediately after. There was some movement again in my third eye area. And then I realized that I was watching a movie. It was being projected onto the back of my eyelids. Nicolas Cage was playing the lead character. I realized that I was back in the Physical. My body was numb.

Now, looking back at the experience, I wonder if the movie started playing on the old TV in Rundown world and whether noticing it with the physically oriented portion of my consciousness brought me back to the Physical. I didn't move. My trance was still deep, a strong Focus 10.

"Your goal is to ignore it. Ignore everything that happens. That's the key," said Nonchal.

I followed his advice. The movie fell apart into wavy geometric patterns. I ignored it.

Pretended it was not happening. I don't care, I thought. I'm nonchalant. It's whatever. Bright flashes of light ensued, and I ignored them too. I felt a gentle pull upwards, and my consciousness clicked out.

When I came back to my senses, the tape was over. I must have been out for ten minutes, no less. All in all, it was a great session. My fears proved to be unfounded. The feeling of adventure was invigorating. I can't wait to listen to the tape again tonight. I'll use the same one. "Free Flow Focus 12." It works.

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"So, about those dreams you're having. About your ex-girlfriend. Would you like to tell me more?" Roland is leaning back in his chair, holding a pen close to his lips. He is wearing a blue shirt.

I wipe my palms on my denim pants. "Sure. They usually take place in my hometown. Technically, it isn't really my hometown—not the place where I grew up. I moved there when I was fourteen and lived there for only about five years. But those years were, well..."

"Formative."

I nod. "Yeah. Most of my dreams take place either in that town or in my grandparents' village. I used to spend summers there as a kid."

Roland doesn't say anything. He's paying close attention to my words, trying to catch a symptomatic phrase, a familiar pattern to pull on, like a hair out of a drain.

"Recently, in the past few weeks, I've been having dreams about Li, my ex. We broke up after I moved to America. Over the internet."

Roland looks at his notes. "And you were twenty-one at that time?"

"Yes. We were together for something like two years. I lived in her apartment for about a year."

"Was it a difficult breakup? Did you agree to separate?"

It was fucking traumatic. Hysterical. Like peeling off a Siamese twin.

"It was difficult," I say.

"Please continue with the dreams."

"There's a recurring theme. In the dream, she has this room in the basement, and in it, there are things, art objects, that are very much ours."

I realize that I just dropped the word "basement," which for any psychologist basically stands for "subconscious." As any building represents a Self, naturally, the basement is subconscious. Jung.

"Me and her, we used to like the same kind of stuff, you know. Music, art and such. Games. I used to think we were from the same planet, if that makes sense."

"Sure. And what happens in the basement?"

"Not much, really. I'm just there alone, usually. Sometimes she is there too, but as a visitor." Memories are pouring in as I'm talking. Shadow memories. Dream connections. I feel the flow and the need to let it out. This is what I'm here for. "There is another guy there occasionally, or just the knowledge that he is there. Like someone replaced me. And it makes me feel sad. There was this dream in my grandma's house: the guy was taking a shower or something, and she was telling me that I'd better pack my things quickly and leave before he comes out, like he would fight me. That made me so angry, furious, but most of the time I just feel sorry."

I find myself on the verge of tears. I look at the box of napkins on the table, but don't touch it. I look at my hands. Roland lets the pause hang. He's good at what he does, no doubt.

"I feel sorry for myself. For her too. I'm so sorry that we couldn't make it. We were kids, you understand. We didn't know it at the time, of course. It's not even that. I keep asking her to forgive me, you see. It's a running theme. And at least once she did. It was such a warm feeling, such a relief. When I woke up, I thought this was it, but then I started seeing those dreams again. Nothing changed. I'm being replaced. I'm feeling sorry. I'm not forgiven."

I stop speaking. The surge ceases. I'm not crying.

"Do you think you might still have feelings for that woman?"

"No. Definitely not. It was fourteen years ago. Whatever feelings I had long since expired. It took time. Sure. Long time. It was painful, but I got over it. Fell in love again. Got married."

"Did it ever occur to you that perhaps it isn't literally her in your dreams? Maybe she represents something else or someone?"

I don't look up. My lips are very dry. I take a sip from a plastic bottle that I brought with me.

"Like who?" I ask and immediately realize what he is suggesting.

"Could it be the case that your ex in your dreams is your younger self? How would that change the meaning of the dreams?"

"That means I feel sorry for myself that I didn't make it as myself?" I'm not sure what I'm saying, but it starts a train of thought in my head.

"Think about that," he says. "I'm afraid our time is up."

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I'm writing this to put my thoughts in order.

This conversation with Roland earlier today really opened a can of worms. I feel like I'm onto something. I'll be brutally honest, and please don't tell anyone. There's a part of me that is in eternal turmoil. Roland was right about Li representing my younger self, and I am sorry for that younger self, the me who didn't become who I thought I was going to be.

No, scratch that. It's not that at all.

I wasn't supposed to survive for this long. I wasn't supposed to make it to thirty. Now I have a wonderful life, a loving family, a sweet wife and two daughters. I would never think of complaining about any of that. A stable job with good pay, my own house. I'm clean now, not counting that brief detour that I took with Dex. You know how that ended up. It's good for me this way. I'm healthy,

I'm happy. But somewhere in me there is another me. From before.

Oh, he would hate what I have become. He was going to die of an overdose like an icon. Back then, I was shooting speed and making music in that apartment with Li and friends. We were all crawling around blindfolded on Dex or tripping balls on 2-CB. No job, no school, no plans, no future. Absolutely no future. That was true. That was my burning path to the abyss. That was me, the fool, the poet, the addict.

I was never to find friends like that again. No, they weren't even friends. That was my circle, my crew. We were all crazy about drugs. Art too, sure, but drugs first. We were like beatniks, but on cough syrup. Bohemian lifestyle. Stealing food from supermarkets, dumpster diving, writing poetry, playing chess. We were like characters from a manga, merry pranksters from the '60s, only it wasn't the '60s. It wasn't America either. It was the late '00s in Russia. Cheap pharmaceuticals, painkillers over the counter, cold winters, shared needles. That version of me hates the sobers, the alcoholics, the squares. For us it was all about drugs: psychedelics, dissociatives, stimulants, opiates, deliriants. We were beautiful. It was Us. We were one. Live fast. Die young. Burn bright.

And now, under the harmonious unity on the surface, under the sunny island with green grass and circling chirping birds, there is an underground. A basement with art objects. From there he looks up in disgust, cigarette burns on his knuckles, a black shoelace around his throat. His weary face of a speed freak illuminated by a single ray of light. Sunken cheekbones, large pupils full of hatred. He stares into my eyes, and I avert my gaze in shame. He can't die. Unable to.

He despises me. He haunts my dreams. Still. He haunts my dreams.

To tell you the truth, I have never connected with anyone else in that same way. In order for that to happen, I would need them to go through it all, drugs in particular. A new friend of mine would have to be fanatical about substances at some point in their life, to get very close to the edge many times, with a genuine desire to see what's on the other side, and then leave it all behind, like I did. But if I were to meet someone like that, we would reignite each other's fire. And all hell would break loose.

So we would be scared of each other in advance. Scared to lose our cushy surface islands. And for that reason, we would never become friends. Ah, look at me, sobbing about having no friends. Boo-hoo. That's okay. I'm good, you know? Things are going very well. I'm just being immature is what it is. Romanticizing suicide by overdose is infantile, something a teenager would think about. But that's exactly my point. The teenager in me is still there, and he is haunting my dreams, disguised as the person I used to love. He hates me, and he wants to die, needs to die, but he is unable to.

I had a dream after writing the above note. It seems I wasn't entirely honest with myself in regard to the root of my sadness. In that dream, I was in my hometown again. I walked around and saw cliques of young people standing in circles, talking. A lot of them were alt or goth looking. They seemed to know me, some of them. I felt good being around "my kind." At the same time, I thought about how happy I am to have settled down and no longer experience the piercing loneliness that used to be the bane of my existence when I lived here in the early years. Before I found my own circle, before I met my ex. Li.

My wife was in that dream too. She was walking around with a stroller, taking in the sights as a tourist. She told me how interesting being here is, how different. The buildings, the smells, the plants. We walked to the side of the road where some pale, dry grass was growing out of the snow. No, that wasn't grass, it was rye. I held it in my hands and thought how much I miss my land. The smells of soil, of air, of the street, the shape of buildings, the bushes, the trees, the language, catching random phrases here and there, as if swimming in a river of verbal code. The logos. Frequencies of the unspoken thoughts merging in silence, amplifying the waves, resonating.

I haven't been back since I left fourteen years ago. Sure, there is the undying ghost of my teenage self, along with the ghosts of the only friends I ever had, the people from the same planet as me. What I failed to mention in my previous note is how much I miss my land. I couldn't say I miss my country. I miss the spiritual connection with the land itself, with the underlying stream of the

unknowable. The taste of tap water as I brushed my teeth as a kid, there's something about it that will never let go of me, and only those who left their land can understand.

Who am I talking to? I don't know. But please forgive me. And fuck you. I just want somebody to know. It's a scream. A death note. A revelation. I love you. It's complicated.

June 15, 2025 [71 days after the Signal]

Listened to the "Intro to Focus 21" tape for the first time. Combined all of the techniques I've picked up along the way to F12, whether from the guides or elsewhere, doing everything casually, nonchalantly, as much as Nonchal would like me to. Went through the Rundown process very quickly. Vita took care of the (semi)physical relaxation with her neon-green paint.

I got down to the sand, thinking of Maya and waiting for further instructions from the tape, oscillating between F10 and F12. The countdown from 12 to 21 began, and I felt the gradual rise of the beige pressure. It was more enveloping this time and rose steadily in intensity with the count. I kept my excitement under wraps, fulfilling my only mission: to ignore what was happening.

Important to note: things really took off when I switched from the imaginary scene of the night beach to the view in front of my physical eyes. I was observing the space between my Self and the back of my eyelids. Following Nonchal's instructions, I split the distance in two and focused on the half that's closer to the eyelids. I was looking at it the way a depressed person stares at the ceiling. An aimless gaze, no expectation, no involvement, coupled with a

readiness to ignore whatever comes at me. And things were coming at me. I can't really describe many of them. One sensation that struck me, though, was the minty feeling in some areas of my brain, like my breath after sucking on an Ice Breakers mint. Imagine that, but in the brain. The feeling wasn't aggressive but rather numbing.

I came to realize firsthand what astral projection really was. The vibrations that practitioners talk about are present in the Physical, too, but their frequency is "too mundane." I'm not aware of them because it's my natural habitat, like fish that are not aware of water. By "me" here, I mean the physically oriented portion of my mind as represented by the ego. When someone astral projects, what happens is this ego portion of their mind shifts into the other body that already exists in an adjacent realm. This realm partially overlaps the Physical. That's RTZ, the real-time zone. The rate of vibrations of that other body is faster than that of the Physical, but that rate is as natural to it as the rate of the Physical. Not to the ego, though. It's like driving a modern car on a modern road versus one of those old Ford cars on a dirt road. The driver is the same, but the car is different. And it's a rough ride.

As I felt my trance deepen considerably, I wondered what would happen if I performed my "zap!" technique by flexing that special mental muscle to create an energetic convulsion. So I did it. I felt a vague physical pain in my stomach.

I shouldn't do that again. I realized I needed to be more careful because I don't know what I'm doing. No more "zap!"

PART FIVE: THE RUSSIAN DOLL

Substations serve as switching points where power is routed between different transmission lines. Circuit breakers and disconnect switches allow operators to redirect current flow, isolating sections for maintenance or rerouting power around failures.

"I'm a QE," I say. I'm standing at the entrance of a tall office building in downtown Santa Monica, waiting for the door to open along with about a dozen other characters. Small talk. This is the third time I reply to the "what do you do?" question.

"What's a QE?" The guy is wearing a T-shirt with the Death Star on it. He's got the beard, the glasses. A caricature of a software developer.

"It stands for Quality Engineer. Not like a high-quality engineer, it just means I write code that pretends to be the end user." I almost added "for testing purposes," but I didn't. An image of the owl flashes in my mind, and it's gone. I've been off my meds for four months now. "You are cured," Roland had said. "Congratulations." I don't hear voices anymore. That's right. Not even hers.

"Cool, I'm a dev," the guy says. "As in Software Developer. Do you have an idea for a project, or..."

We're here for a hackathon. A kind of event where developers meet up to try and build something exciting. It's like a nerd fest. The concept of today's hackathon is to create a prototype of an app from an idea to a functional demo in 24 hours, using AI tools. I do have an idea, but don't feel like sharing it with him.

"Yeah," I say.

"Cool, do you have a team?"

"No, just me."

Just me and a jar of Adderall, that is. I'm bent on pushing through the night, then crashing in a motel for a few hours before driving back to San Diego. I'm pumped. I hadn't done any drugs since my first visit to Roland's office. Not counting the meds. Also, it's the first time I'm on my own in a while. I managed to convince my wife that this hackathon is important for my career, which is absolutely the case. The AI revolution is in full swing. Layoffs in the

IT sector had intensified a few months earlier. It's not that AI is replacing the engineers, more like the higher-ups got a valid enough excuse to let people go, and they've been using it with fervor.

Anyway, the wave was under me and I had to learn how to surf, quickly. Besides, I think my idea is pretty great. Who knows, maybe I will even win this thing.

They finally let us in. Before the fun begins, there is a presentation and a dinner. I notice containers full of free Red Bull and pick some up. And here I am, sitting in front of my laptop, hood pulled up, an empty project open on my screen. I chase the first pill with the energy drink and it's on. Oh dear, it's on. Hours fly by, my fingers are a blur on the keyboard. I step out every now and then for a smoke, marking the time with Newports. It's 11:45 p.m., then it's midnight, 1:30 a.m., another pill, another Red Bull. I just keep popping pills, abandoning myself to the problems at hand, debugging, adding features to my app.

It's morning. I put the finishing touches to my demo and submit the project. My neck hurts. I exhale slowly. Jesus, I'm so tired. There is tightness. Chemical. Mechanical. Adderall has me by the reins. I unclench my jaw. They say I have to present my project in person. Investors are coming. The possibility of my project succeeding suddenly looms. The money. I didn't see anything about the investors in the information package for the hackathon. Was it added later? My head hurts. I skipped breakfast. Did I just nap? Foul taste in my mouth.

A middle-aged man is sitting in front of me. Hipster glasses, turtleneck, Silicon Valley type. "You have two minutes," he says, and starts a timer on his phone. This is the investor. I'm pitching to him the app I made overnight. I've never done such a thing. He appears interested in the concept. I stumble over my words. I apologize to him. "I think I fried my brain," I say. He nods. He understands. A smile. A handshake. I have to get out of here. All these voices around me. Blalalala. I can't make out what anyone is saying. It's crowd-speak. Nonsense. I make my way to the exit. My stomach hurts. Light is blinding. I realize that I haven't eaten since last night's dinner. Just Red Bulls and cigarettes. How many addies did I take? Five? Six? Can't tell. I just have to get to the motel where I can throw

up and lie down. Just don't throw up here. Not yet. Keep it together. Carry it with me to the motel. That becomes my sole focus. My mission.

I get to the car. I drive. White pain is pulsating in my skull. Something is wrong with my vision. I can't see well. Too bright. I try to keep my head down, looking at the road out of the corner of my eye. A bright flash hits me, like someone took a picture. My fucking brain. Let me make it, please, so I can throw up and lie down. Just don't throw up here, I mumble, my dry lips moving.

I pull into the parking lot in front of the motel. I made it. I don't know how, but I did. I feel vomit crawling up my throat. A little bit left, almost there. Hold it in. There is a frail man at the front desk, a side character from a Stephen King novel: cracked glasses, early twenties. He talks with a lisp.

"Thanks," he says as I hand him my credit card. "Room 201. There is a secure parking lot in the basement. I recommend using it overnight. This card opens the gate." He hands it over. A green magnetic card. I reach for it and I am in a room with white walls. Around my wrist and arm are wires. I'm hanging from the ceiling. I lie suspended.

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"Sorry, I know it was rough, but I've been trying to reach you for a while," says iL. I turn my head. The wires are soft. My whole body is numb, like in a deep Focus 10 state. My neck is stiff.

"Are you the one that remembers me? Do you know who I am?"

Her voice is so painfully familiar, so dear. It evokes an onslaught of half-formed memories. My vision gets blurry. Hot, cathartic relief. Tears. I blink rapidly. She is here. Her face. Yes, that is her. Slightly different from the vague recollection that served as the key out of the mod's tower, but this is her. Undoubtedly. The image I carried in my heart all these years, suddenly endowed with reality. Like meeting someone you've only seen on a screen for the first time in person. I attempt to speak, but nothing comes out. Raspy gravel in my throat.

"Give him some water," she says, and I notice that there are other people in the room. Two men. I know both of them. Another wave of blurry memories. I am overwhelmed. Deja vu. The scientists. My crew. The people I interact with on the fourth plateau. One of them hands me a paper cup, the type used in hospitals. It is a hospital room, I think. There is a device next to me. I'm on life support or something. Was I in a coma? I reach for the cup. There's a significant delay between the intent to move my hand and my body mechanically executing that intent. Paul is waiting patiently, holding the cup. Paul, that is his name. Blond curly hair, soft nose, gentle jaw, blue eyes. And the other guy, standing aside, is Ivan. Dark hair, tall. He's observing me the way someone watches a drunk buddy acting silly. I turn my eyes to her. iL.

My heart aches. Tears burst out again. I finally reach the cup with my hand and begin the process of moving it to my mouth slowly, like a construction crane. The water is too cold, but refreshing. I feel blood moving in my veins. Still numb, but getting better, like fingers warming up against fire. All three of them are wearing lab coats. I glance at the apparatus next to me. It's not hospital equipment. Doesn't look like it. It's a black box. Retro-futuristic. Soviet-looking. Like a prototype of something unfinished. Work in progress. I see wires sticking out of the back panel. There is a watch face with an arrow. iL repeats her question. "Do you remember me?"

"Yes," I say. My voice sounds much deeper than I expect. Surprisingly so. I wonder how my face looks. iL smiles. She has a beautiful smile. I notice the scar on the side of her mouth, just as I used to draw back in middle school. The scar she made herself with a razor.

"iL? You mean 1L? That's interesting. That's the name you remember? That's very clever."

Paul's face is pure amusement. He takes the empty paper cup from my hand and tosses it into a trash bin. I can't see it from this angle, but I can hear. It's the type where you have to step on the pedal to open the lid, so I hear that lid opening and closing with a sound of a tiny gong.

"What else do you remember?" asks Ivan and steps closer. His shoulders are wide, but his chest is concave, making him appear hunched over.

I look at the ceiling. Grey. I think of my life. It's still there, all of it. I have no memory loss—not like after waking from a dream, anyway. My name is Alex. I'm married, have two kids, I'm working as a QE at Paramount. The one with pictures.

"What's a QE?" asks iL. Or 1L? What does that mean, 1L?

"It's like being a programmer, but one that makes scripts pretend like they are the end users."

"For testing purposes," says Paul.

Abruptly I'm in complete darkness. A disorienting moment. Nauseating. Wobbly. I'm not suspended. I'm lying down. I move my legs. Touch my face. The feeling of the sheets. The smells. I'm in a motel.

I make my way to the bathroom, flip the light on. Mirror. It's me, all right. The headache is gone. My stomach feels weird, but no more nausea. I made it, didn't I? It was a dream. Superbly realistic. Definitely related to parallel lives, no doubt. Paul. Ivan. They are real. I know them from another life. iL. She is real, too. Of course she is. But what the hell is 1L? And what did she mean by "are you the one that remembers me?" I take a brief shower, pull myself together.

The clock on the side table reads 10:10. Sunlight behind green curtains. My hair still wet. I adjust the strap of a backpack on my shoulder. Inside of it: my laptop, Adderall, cigarettes. Still shaken by the dream, I put my shoes on, close the door behind me, and walk downstairs.

It's a shady motel. There are cameras everywhere, with monitors directly beneath them playing back what they see, as if saying, we see you, we know what you are thinking about, don't do it. I open the gate to the basement with the green plastic card. As the gate is creaking by, I'm thinking about iL from my dream. She looked 20-something. iL in a lab coat. Was it really her? The memory had a peculiar quality to it, similar to those experiences I've encountered on Dex: brain surgery, being in a tunnel conveyor belt. Those memories had a greenish tint. The memory of this dream felt similar,

as if it had a tint, a filter, only not green, more like pearly white, with a pink contour. Like beautiful teeth.

I get in my red Honda Civic, start the engine. I realize that it probably wasn't a dream at all. The memory of it feels too different. Was that reality? Is THIS a dream?

I exit the grounds of the motel, hit "Home" on my GPS. It's a two-hour drive. I make a right turn and enter the main road. LA traffic. Something is nagging me, eating at me. She doesn't love me, I realize. That's what it is. iL. I always assumed that as soon as we meet here, in the Physical, we'll recognize each other. Shared destiny. I'm thinking back to my meeting with Gledis, that girl from the gothic chat room. Moscow, autumn, cemetery. What was I then, sixteen? Was so stunned, couldn't say a thing to her. That's when my breakdown happened. The breakdown.

My head hurts again. I shouldn't think about it now. Not sure why, but it brings back that horrible migraine. I haven't eaten anything yet since that dinner at the beginning of the hackathon. Should I stop somewhere for a bite? I'm on a highway now, looking at the billboards passing by. A flash of light. Headache. I think of Gledis.

I recall how I came home then, after meeting her IRL, and my online friend, nicknamed Shedow, told me that Gledis had a boyfriend. I remember how I cut myself and convulsed on the floor. That's when I heard iL's voice in my head for the first time.

I'll just go straight home and eat then, no stops for me, I decide. I can't fucking think straight. I can't think. What did iL say on that day? What was the first thing she said to me from the inside of my head?

I turn right and enter the motel's parking lot. Finally made it. I feel nauseous. I'm not going to throw up here. I'll carry it to the room. Just a little bit left. I got this. The front desk is manned by a skinny white man. Early 20s. Scrawny is the word. Gaunt. He's wearing glasses, one of the lenses is cracked. A side character from a Stephen King novel. Deja vu is so strong I rapidly blink. The character doesn't notice. He's typing on the keyboard, the monitor reflected in his broken glasses. He says something about a security deposit and I hand him my credit card.

"Thanks," he says with a lisp. I notice the analog clock behind him is showing five minutes past four. The time is all wrong. That clock is dead. I swallow. I'm sweating profusely.

"Room 201," he says. "We have a secure parking lot in the basement. I recommend using it. Here's the card that opens the gate." He gives me a blue plastic card. I reach for it. A single thought occupies my entire mind: what did iL say to me that day? What was the first thing she ever said to me?

"I'm here," says iL.

That's it. That's what she said back then. That's what she is saying now.

I'm back in the room with wires, suspended from the ceiling. I look around, disoriented.

"Are you the one that remembers me?" she asks, tilting her head slightly to the side. I recognize it as a habit of hers. Recall it. The tilt.

"Yes," I say. "I remember you."

"You clicked out there for a sec," says Paul. He's standing exactly where I last saw him. Apparently, no time has passed here since my previous visit.

"Welcome back," says Ivan.

"Can you untie me? Take me down," I say.

The door opens and Shelly enters. Enormous headphones are hanging around her neck.

"Hey, Sasha," she says.

That's my Russian name. My parents call me that. The sound of it sends shivers down my spine.

"Look, I guess it's obvious to you that I don't recall things. Like, I have memories of another life right now." I'm not feeling coherent. That's the word. "Take me down from this thing so we can talk face to face."

"Yeah, but then you'll have to go through the process again. We'll have to pull all the wires up and get to Focus 21 and all. There is still that issue, as you know," says Paul. "Or don't know."

"Yeah, you got mad last time we pulled you down. You should see the video. We got it on tape for this very reason," says Shelly. "Why don't you wait fifteen more minutes, let the real memory take

over, and then tell us if you really want to get down or just go for another session. We got plenty of studio time still. I mean, it's still, what, 10:45?"

I pause. "How many sessions did we do?"

"Today? This is the first one," says Shelly.

"Why don't you tell us what you remember now," says iL, "before you forget again. You said your name was Alex. You were married. What was your wife's name?"

"Lucy." I shudder as I hear the sound of her name emerge from my mouth. Did I die under that transmission tower? Did they find my body the next day? Is that what it is? I experience a flashback to the Dex trip where my wife was screaming for eternity.

Am I dead?

"Are you wondering if you're dead right now?" Ivan asks, peering at me.

"Yes."

"You're not dead. I'll remind you what's going on."

"Wait." iL stops him, touches his shoulder.

Are they together? A sharp prick of jealousy punctures my chest.

She looks at me. "First, tell me more about what you remember. You said you were a QE at Paramount?"

"Yes."

"For how long?"

"Almost three years. Well, four if you count my time there as a contractor."

"I'll be in the booth," says Shelly, and walks out. I notice for the first time a narrow horizontal rectangle of a window. Is this a recording studio of sorts? Like a hospital room in a recording studio. But where is the microphone? Here it is, hanging from the ceiling. I glance in the corner. Sure, there's a camera too. Shelly said, "we got it on tape." So, I'm being filmed. It's an experiment of sorts. Like a test drive. Some device is being tested. Probably the one next to me. The retro-futuristic prototype. And I'm the tester.

"You said you had kids? How many?"

"Three."

"Boys or girls?"

"Girls. All girls."

"What were their names?"

"Anna, Millie, and..." I can't remember the third one. I realize that I'm not even sure there were three of them. I can't remember.

"Well, that's it. See, you exited too fast," says iL with a frown. She's so beautiful when sad, I think. I'm madly in love with her. Is she aware of that? That's my only concern now. The memories of my other life fade away quickly. They don't matter. I have to know.

"Hey. iL?" I say.

Her eyebrows are angled in sympathy. Irony. Mercy.

"What is it? You mean, 1L? That's what you mean, I think."

"Should we go back for another one?"—Shelly's voice from the booth.

"Yeah, you're waking up, man," says Ivan. "Better go now before it's too late."

I feel devastated. She knows about my feelings. Oh my God, I'm suffering here, am I? I feel a familiar tug of a chemical addiction. I want a drink. Whiskey. Jack Daniel's. A promise of oblivion. But I can't get to it now, I realize. Not until I'm through with this. My work. The next best thing. Jump right into it. Another life. A simulation, whatever it is. Whatever I'm testing. Real or not. Fuck this. Fuck everything.

"Okay, you ready now?" asks Paul. I realize that he is my best friend. I remember that Ivan and I are not that close. A chain of memories flows through my brain. Memories from both lives. Not in parallel streams but intertwined, like the spiraling strands of a DNA helix. Back in Russia. My friend P, that's Paul. The one I tripped with on acid in his apartment the night when Shrail was born. Red shower curtain. August 1st, 2009. And Ivan was in that life too. I met him later. Must have been a year later, when I lived in my girlfriend's apartment, my ex, Li. The one that, unwillingly or not, cosplayed iL. It all lines up. Pieces connect.

iL walks to the apparatus next to my bed and turns some dials. My thoughts are floating. Clouded retinas. Winter lake. Confusion.

Back in Russia, we used to take this drug, Midantan. It's a deliriant. A pharmaceutical datura that causes real hallucinations, the way they are depicted in movies. I'd be walking down a street,

having a conversation with my friend, and then realizing that no one is there. They'd just blink out. One time I saw a woman sitting on a subway train. She was holding a black box on her lap. A box that looked just like the apparatus that's next to me now. That woman told me she could read people's minds using this box. She pointed at a guy standing across from us and I saw white subtitles floating above his head. His thoughts. And then the woman disappeared. I was really there on the train, but she wasn't. That was one hell of a drug. Midantan.

And in THIS life, yes, I remember now, Paul and I got really drunk and I told him about my theory. That we all can actually perceive each other's thoughts, it being the natural human capability, akin to vision or hearing. We all knew all the time what everybody else was thinking around us but pretended that we didn't. That is the one pretense on which the whole society is based. It's all theater. He said he sure knows what I'm thinking about. How I want to be with... how I'm in love with... her. What's her name? It's not iL, is it?

The two Pauls overlap. Lab coat, then cigarette smoke. For a second, I'm aware of which Paul is real. Then I'm not.

What did Paul say about me wanting to kill Ivan?

Ah, that was a hell of a drug, Midantan.

I hear the tiny gong of the trash can lid again. Then I'm hearing something else. Voices from the bedroom.

One time Paul and I, Paul from this game, this simulation thing, we were binging on it. We saw all kinds of things. Like tiny elephants fucking on a coffee table. There were two types: blue ones and pink ones. All banging away joyfully. We must have looked so crazy at that time, good lord. And then things went dark. Really dark. I went to the bathroom and saw condoms on the floor. Then I heard them. Ivan and my girlfriend Li. Lisa. Her real name was Lisa. They were having sex in the bedroom. I walked up to the door and saw just a bit: him hunched over her, thrusting. My whole body was shaking as I went back to the living room. Paul was sitting on the floor, his back against the side of an armchair, gazing into the void. He didn't hear anything. Then the sounds stopped. I noticed there were papers all over the floor. Notes. I picked up one of them. "I fucking hate you,"

the note said. It was written in blood. My girlfriend's handwriting. Her name was Lisa. But everybody called her Li. There was more blood on the floor. A track of blood, like somebody dragged a body. And there it was. There she was. Wrapped in a comforter, like in a chrysalis. Did I kill her? What happened? I put the bloody note in my pocket and walked out of the apartment. I had a single tranquilizer pill in my pocket. I chewed it dry. I remember seeing my hands trembling as I fumbled with the subway card on the way home.

I remember taking the note out of my pocket the next day and straightening it out. It was blank. Ivan wasn't even in town on that day. Ivan was his name. Or was it i-1?

I look at iL. She is standing in front of me, turned to the side. Long black hair tucked behind her small ear. Lab coat.

"What is your real name?" I say out loud. To the dark motel room. The sheets are cold and wet. I cover my face with my hands and weep.

PART SIX: SPACE COWBOY

Step-down transformers reduce the high transmission voltage to levels safe for local distribution, typically 4,000 to 35,000 volts. The energy that traveled hundreds of miles is now prepared for its final destination.

Four months have passed since that weird experience with the Russian doll of a dream. It's 2026 now. February. Predictions about the layoffs came true. We have seen it happening since 2024 when AI took over the IT sector by storm, sowing seeds of dread into the hearts of coders all over the world. We were in shock, then in denial. Last year, that being 2025, agents showed up and it became very apparent to most of us in the field that anybody who could be replaced by an agent in the very near future most likely would be. Some of those who passed through the denial stage of grief got stuck at the next one, anger. The metaphor falls apart here. What I'm trying to say is that I was among the early adopters. I accepted the inevitable and worked diligently to familiarize myself with the new landscape.

The hackathon in Santa Monica was my first, and I've attended a few more since then. I didn't win any prizes, but I learned a lot from every project I worked on, always solo.

I got laid off two weeks ago. My severance package included six months of health insurance, and after that, I would be on my own. If a miracle didn't happen, that is. There is a tape in the Gateway Program called Patterning. It's all about setting intention and sending the message out to the cosmos. What I requested was banal and trivial, but earnest. I'll reveal it now. I asked for a way to earn my living independently. I asked for it to be easy and in a way that gives me freedom of the mind and resources to pursue my creative endeavors. Something not stressful to allow for some mental space to wander in. What I've discovered upon closer examination is that the real request was that of a passive income. To have a project, something AI-related, that succeeds and is purchased by a big company for a large sum. A sum I could put into a savings account and a safe stock portfolio, allowing my family and

me to live off the returns. There it is. The default desire of the most basic modern man.

The number I had in mind was eight million dollars.

Crazy, but nothing too crazy. I did the tape a couple of times, maybe three times in total, and forgot all about it. Not too long after I was laid off, last Tuesday, I got an email from an assistant to some investor saying they are interested in the project I presented in that Santa Monica hackathon, wondering when I'd be available for a brief call.

I experienced a major flashback to that day. The Adderall, the Red Bulls, the headache, the multi-layered nightmare of false awakenings, being disconnected from The Matrix. And that man I pitched my project to, the one with the timer on his phone. The You-have-two-minutes guy.

I didn't think much of it at first. It was surprising, sure, but I hadn't seriously considered the possibility. After all, the app I coded overnight didn't actually work. The demo was ass, although the concept was novel. I replied to the email and we had a Zoom meeting a few hours later. That was the guy, yes. There was a neat, suited-up business lady on the call as well. She looked at her iPad the whole meeting, nail extensions clacking against her screen.

I don't know how that happened, but they wanted to meet me in person. "Polish that demo," the business lady said.

The meeting is scheduled for Friday. That's tomorrow, 7:30 p.m. I've been working on the code day and night and just wrapped up the demo. It works now. Somewhat. It's not perfect, but it's the best it will ever be. I can't sleep, so I'm writing this all down to get my headspace cleared up. Naturally, I thought about that Gateway tape. Is this it? Am I getting eight million dollars? No way. That's some The Secret-type shit. Law of attraction.

It's funny, you know, how in astral projection circles, people often preface their posts with, "I don't want to sound woo-woo, but..." without acknowledging that their own belief in out-of-body experiences is unfathomable to lots of people. Some fundamentalist Christians are looking down on the UFO community, saying this is nonsense, while believing that Jesus Christ literally came back from

the dead. It's all about where you draw the line. And like the great John Lilly once said, beliefs are limitations to be transcended.

Look. This is insane. I've seen some things in my life, you know all about them. The trip under the transmission tower alone is crazy enough. I wish it was a distant memory, but it isn't. I still remember every word from that conversation with the owl. My out-of-body journeys, the entities, parallel lives. I've seen some shit. But this. This is just silly. And it just so happens that this meeting is in Santa Monica, close to the hackathon place, to that motel. And yes, I booked a room there.

I thought it was a bad omen, but let's be rational. It's the closest one to the address, and it's cheap. This thing probably won't work out, and I am running out of money. I have no income. I've been doing some Adderall to help with the coding. I put it in my backpack along with my laptop. That's exactly what I had with me on that day. Laptop. Adderall. The same motel I stayed in.

You know, it's easy to be rational in the daytime, when the world is familiar and simple, reduced to the lowest common denominator. But it all goes out the window in the wee hours when you're alone in the room, it's quiet and your hands are shaking. I have to get some sleep. 7:30 p.m. What an odd time to have a meeting. I have no hope. I'm scared. Why? Because what if it really happens, the eight million thing, and then I'm unplugged, and iL is asking how many kids I have, and I can't remember, or worse, what if I'm back to the tower? "It was a great move, telephone, fantastic test, good job," the mod would say. Telephone.

I can't get over the sense that reality is going to be pulled from under me at any moment, like a carpet. Like a magician snatching a tablecloth from under the glass. And I'm the glass. The glass will fall to the floor. It will fall and break to fucking pieces.

Here I am, in Santa Monica, at the intersection of Arizona Avenue and Second Street. I left my car in a parking lot and have been walking around the block for the last half an hour. I did ten milligrams of Adderall, chased it with a latte. I don't know why I did that. It won't help at all. My heart is beating too fast. The meeting is in fifteen minutes. I keep taking my phone out, looking at the clock, putting it back into the pocket of my jeans. It's dark out. The breeze is salty. Sounds of the street.

Finally, it's time.

I'm opening the glass door of a high-rise office building. There is a security guard in the corner, eyeing me from the shadows. A lady at the front desk, staring at the screen. I walk up to her, my steps reverberating through the hushed atmosphere of the floor. She raises her eyes.

"Mr. Pov?" She is blonde, pretty.

"Yes, I'm here for the 7:30 meeting."

"Grand. Please have a seat. I'll let them know you arrived."

She actually said "grand". Bizarre, but not as much as having a business meeting at this hour. I wonder what her schedule was like. Are there other meetings today? Is this some kind of scam? A cult?

I sit down on the stylish marble bench. There is a statue. It's a symbol for pi, standing on a wave. What is this company? Google Maps didn't have anything at this address.

The front desk lady says something into her phone and laughs. In a few minutes, I hear the approaching sound of squeaking sneakers.

It's not the guy I talked to on the Zoom call. The first thing I notice is the orange T-shirt under a neon jacket. The second thing—he's high out of his mind. Bulging eyes. Messy designer hair. Carefully curated stubble. His pants fit perfectly. Tailored. The guy is rich. Cocaine, I think. It immediately explains, well, some of the things. That's okay, though. That's cool.

"Alex!" he exclaims. His arms open wide as I rise to my feet. For a moment, I think he will hug me, but he extends his hand instead.

"I'm Josh, Peter's partner. He's upstairs."

His handshake is firm. He smiles and starts walking away. I pick up my backpack and follow him to the elevator.

"Sorry, I know the hour is unconventional, but it's the only time I could make. Have a plane to catch right after this. Got a thing in Geneva."

"Oh, no, that's okay," I say. My throat is terribly dry.

"Peter told me all about your project, Interweave, a very interesting concept. I'm looking forward to your presentation. How long have you been in the field?"

We enter the elevator. Mirror on the wall. I begin to answer, but he interrupts. "No worries if you're not too experienced with this stuff. We all start somewhere. Look, when I was starting out, all I had was my father's ranch, and I had to pitch these excavators to him. It was kind of like a test. You see, my father, he is in agriculture. You might have heard of Ethan Seeds. No? Anyway, I failed that one. Failed big time. The presentation. He wanted to see how I'd do, and I failed miserably. But why am I telling you all this? You'll do great. It'll be very intimate, just you, me, and Peter." He inhales in a single sharp pull through his nose. The man is coked up to his gills. I'm not better, though. At this point, the Adderall has kicked in at full force, and I find myself empathizing with him. Vibing. Two tweaking freaks in an elevator in Los Angeles. City of Angels. Whatever the fuck.

The elevator arrives with a ding, and my step is bouncy. I'm excited to present my project. Josh opens the door, and we enter a conference room. For a moment, my guts sink. I can't breathe. The room is the one. Long gray table. Chairs on wheels. Peter, the guy I pitched to, is sitting where the mod, the owl, the Hare Krishna guy, was sitting. It takes another moment for me to recognize that it's just a generic conference room. They all look the same. Besides, the floor is linoleum, not carpet.

Peter rises and offers his hand. "Good to see you again, Alex." He looks exactly as I remember him from the hackathon.

We sit down. Peter asks if I want to connect my laptop to the projector, and I spend some time fiddling with the cables to get it working. Josh keeps talking to Peter, and from Peter's curt

responses and movements, I realize that Peter is not high. Not even a little bit.

The picture clears up. They're business partners. Josh is the guy with money. He's the investor. If he likes my project, he will sponsor Peter's company to integrate it into their portfolio. I think that's what's going on. I'm not sure.

The projector comes to life, and the image of my desktop now occupies the wall.

"Take it away," says Josh.

So I do.

I'm five minutes in when Josh goes, "Hold on one second. May I interrupt? Sorry." Up to this point he was listening intently, wild-eyed, leaning back in his chair, hands behind his head, fingers locked, legs crossed.

He leans forward. "So this app is about connecting people based on their personalities?"

"In simple words, yes," I say.

"And it's different from Facebook how?"

"The way it connects people is different. I'll get to it in a moment. That's the core of it."

"But if you were to sum it up, what would you say the main idea is?"

"Maybe... Let's skip the intro and move to the meat of it," says Peter.

They are getting impatient. That's not good. I skip a few slides. My palms are sweaty. I swallow, but my throat is dry. I wish for water. They didn't offer any.

"I'm sorry, I completely forgot," says Josh. "Would you like something to drink? So sorry, it's been a long day."

"Water, please."

He jumps out of his chair and briskly walks to a small fridge in the corner, gets out a tiny bottle of Evian, closes the fridge, opens it again, gets one more, puts them on the table in front of me. I break the seal and drink. The water is cold. Delicious.

"Okay, not to beat around the bush," I say. "Here's the main thing."

Josh leans over. I look him in the eye. No more slides.

"You know how we all have different interests? How we are idiosyncratic, all of us?"

"Yes."

"This app is using an algorithm that optimizes for the rarest intersection of interests between users to find the most unique match."

Josh is listening.

"In other words, a user can be interested in lucid dreams and Brazilian jiu-jitsu. A commonplace algorithm would offer matches for each of the interests separately. Mine finds users that are into both. It's a unique blend. Not many people fit. But when they do, the possibility of becoming close friends in the future is much higher."

"Huh," says Josh. "I get it. That's neat. And it's not a dating app? Peter and I are in the dating business, but you already know that, probably."

I don't.

"Ever heard of Dott? With two t's?"

I have.

"Sure, that's a dating app."

"That's the one I'm running. I'm the CEO, but you've probably never heard the name of my company. It's called Luca, Inc."

"No, I haven't."

"Yeah, people usually don't, but that's okay. Luca owns Dott. I run Luca."

Dott is one of the top dating apps in the country. This Josh must be a billionaire.

"Oh, you didn't know? Okay," says Josh. "Sorry, Alex, I forgot to mention at the hackathon. I thought they told you. Anyway, my understanding is that your app is for friendship rather than for romantic search."

"Right," I say. "It could be used for dating, but my initial intent was to find like-minded people. To allow users to find like-minded people, I mean."

"Do you mind if I—" says Josh and touches the side of his nose.

Peter momentarily raises his eyebrow and looks at me. "My brother is a drug addict."

"It helps me think," says Josh.

“Sure,” I say.

Josh takes a tiny square mirror out of his shirt’s pocket and places it on the table. Then out comes a Ziploc bag with white powder and an inch-long pink plastic straw. He masterfully arranges the powder into two lines with the help of his black credit card. I see the name on it, Josh Allen. Holy fuck. Josh Allen. Peter Allen is his brother. Forbes 30 Under 30. One of the richest tech giants in the world.

A surreal harp plays a chord in my heart. It reverberates.

Josh snorts a line, then tilts his head and snorts the other one.

“Ah,” he says.

“The algorithm is interesting,” says Peter, “but there is more to it, right, Alex? That’s what intrigued me the most in your product.”

“Oh yeah,” says Josh. “Can’t wait to hear about it. But hold on, before you slay the dragon, would you like some?”

I glance at the window of the conference room. There are blinds, but they are open. No one in the hallway. I look at Peter. His expression is impassive.

“It’s my own mix,” says Josh. “Cocaine and methoxetamine. I call it Space Cowboy. You know, like in Cowboy Bebop? See you later, Space Cowboy.”

This reference takes me off guard. I nod. Josh pours more powder onto the mirror, cuts it into two fresh lines, and slides it across the table. In a few seconds, the powder burns my nostrils.

“Okay, so you were saying,” he says.

The edges of my vision sharpen. I’m LOCKED IN. I feel empowered. Emboldened. Invigorated. At the same time, a room in my head opens up. It has blue air, with snowflakes cut out of white paper gliding like autumn leaves. Falling from the ceiling. There are paintings in this room. There is a secret door to the basement. Smell of antique storage, just like in the lighthouse from my Rundown world.

I tell Peter and Josh everything. How it all works. My app, Interweave.

The master agent, called Spawner, creates subagents. Each of the subagents passes its own memories and sets of instructions that include the algorithm for finding the most idiosyncratic matches. A

digital ghost of a human user is created, then it communicates with other ghosts in a digital realm, in a simulation. These ghosts, being reflections of the users, represent their inner worlds better than the users could ever articulate themselves. These possessed agents spend years' worth of real-time conversations with the ghosts of other users, in seconds. They get to really know each other, to narrow down the list of potential matches from thousands to hundreds to dozens to just a few.

"Real friends," I say. "Those users become real friends."

I tell them where my inspiration came from. A DXM trip. I've lost control of what I'm saying, being so fucking high at this moment. Stimulants with dissociatives. Jesus.

Josh is beyond himself with excitement.

"You are a genius, man. I'm so, so, so into it. This is going to be huge. How much do you need? Just tell me."

He takes out a checkbook, black, laced with a golden thread, and smashes it on the table with operatic gusto. Grabs a Bic pen from a cup in the center of the table.

"Name and number. I'm all in."

Peter says, "Josh, I understand your excitement, but—"

"Don't tell me what to do, Pete. Sorry, Alex. Hey, man, you called me here for what?"

Peter doesn't respond.

At this moment, I see with pristine clarity what's going to happen.

"What's the number?" Josh stares at me, his eyes all pupils.

"Eight million," I say.

He writes the number on the check. Just like that.

-

I'm driving to the motel. Sharp streetlight rays are scratching the windshield. So are the taillights of the car in front of me. Red triangles. Windows rolled down. Sounds of LA.

The whole meeting took no longer than an hour and a half. Josh slapped my back in the parking lot before parting ways. "It's going to be huge," he said. Peter was more reserved. "Nancy will

reach out,” he said. His demeanor made it feel even more real. He didn't like what happened. Maybe he invited his brother to take a look at my project as a promising thing and he came high as a kite and wrote me a check for eight mil.

I laugh. My whole body feels electric. I'm sparkling. Oh my God.

Or you know what it could be? Perhaps they are rich kids. They inherited a bunch of money. Peter is the smart son, who invested wisely and multiplied his riches, while the other kept squandering it all. So the smart son devised a plan. He'll get his dumbass brother involved in a business affair and siphon money from him this way, to save some of the fortune before it disappears completely. A noble cause.

Either way. Eight million dollars.

The check will bounce, right? It won't work out. Could it be some kind of a scam? I make a right turn at a traffic light. No, it's not a scam. I'm thinking of his crazy eyes. Space Cowboy. That man is insane, but his money is legit. I'm so hyped up right now. Holy fucking Jesus. Yes!

I pull up to the motel parking lot with a tire squeak. There's a white Honda and a motorcycle. Coke and MXE. Adderall. Eight million dollars.

I grab my wallet and walk to the office. The guy at the front desk is not the one I saw last time. It's a skinny college student with a man bun, acne, and bad posture.

“Can I help you?” he says. I hear a voice coming from his phone somewhere on the table. It's a podcast. The voice is saying “...disappearing messages, like in Signal. Was Signal the first app with disappearing messages? No, that was Snapchat...” The student touches the phone, pausing the podcast.

I stare at him. Signal. Disappearing messages. The periphery of my vision whitens, becoming like frosted glass. Instead of sinking into fear, I feel eerie elation. I'm going to slide on a funky slew, I think. Ride down to icy hell. Jingle bells. Icicles.

A second elapses in silence. I can see on his face an assessment taking place. Am I dangerous? This is a shady motel, after all. A shady inn in a shady part of town. There's probably a gun under his desk, just in case. Must be. He's judging me now. Am I a

civilian or a messed-up freak? The funny thing is that right now I'm both. I feel an overwhelming urge to run. To turn around, get through the door, and run into the night, kicking and screaming.

"I have a booking for tonight," I say instead. "For Alex Pov."

He pauses, decides that I'm safe enough to take his eyes off me to check his computer.

I knew it was all a fucking dream. Eight mil? Come on. The front desk guy talks about the security deposit. He is processing my credit card. There's no way out, is there? It's hell, and the worst part about hell is that you are in it forever. Was this whole thing a dream? Since the hackathon? All these months of life. Being laid off from work? All of it? Am I still in room 201? Right now?

The puppet says his line: "There's a parking lot in the basement. I recommend you use it." He's holding a red card. I have no choice. Never had. Everything is inevitable. I reach for the card. Apparently, I say that out loud, too. "Everything is inevitable." Paul is laughing in my face.

I'm back in the real world.

"What is inevitable?" asks iL. She is looking at the window to the adjacent room, where Shelly is handling the controls.

"He said Everything," says Paul and giggles.

"True that," says Ivan. He is leaning against the wall, looking at the apparatus.

"Oh, hey, Sasha." iL turns to me. "Are you the one that remembers me?"

I move my limbs. "Take me down," I say. Irritated.

Paul starts saying something, but I repeat my demand again and again until they comply. The wires ease up and I'm lowered down. I'm rubbing my wrists.

iL is upset. "Well, here we go. All of that tuning for nothing. And it's still morning." She tilts her head, moves a lock of hair behind her ear.

Paul puts his hand on my shoulder, gives it a squeeze. "You good there, buddy?"

I cover my face with my hands and just stand there. A lone island in the dark. Blood is coming back to my numb legs. Slowly. I wiggle my toes.

"Can you at least tell me what you remember? Anything?" asks iL.

"Give him a moment," says Paul.

"He will forget, and then it really was for nothing," says iL.

"What is this?" I ask. "What are we doing?"

iL sighs. "Ivan, that's your cue."

I rub my eyes, take my hands off my face. It's dark. I'm lying in bed in room 201.

"Fuck you," I say out loud. Venom runs through my veins. My cheeks are hot. "Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you, fuck you, fuck you." I roll in bed, tearing blankets, biting pillows. I growl like an animal. I cry, I laugh hysterically. I'm stuck in a nightmare. It's a nightmare that will never let go. I'm in hell. I'm in it forever.

Exhausted, I lie on the floor. Snot and saliva. Time passes. Or maybe, standing still. I'm thinking about a construction worker that came to my house last week. They were doing some repairs on the roof and were checking whether I would be at home on Thursday afternoon. So that never happened.

"I went crazy," I whisper into the dark. "I lost my mind. That's it."

I'm thirsty. I stand up holding the wall and walk to the bathroom. I drink water from the faucet and wash my face. Lean on the sink with my hands. I come to realize that I perhaps overreacted, to put it mildly. Sure. It is incredibly unusual to fall asleep whilst on a coke/MXE cocktail. Space Cowboy. It is strange that I have a gap in memory between talking to the front desk guy and waking up here. Sure. But nevertheless, none of those things mean that the months that elapsed since the hackathon were all a dream.

I turn the light on, half expecting to see somebody else's face in the mirror. No, it's me. Red-eyed, puffy face, hysteria incarnate. But still me. I look over my shoulder into the room and see my shoes standing by the door. I took them off. This simple fact means a lot. I wasn't dragged here by some supernatural force. Nor did I teleport from downstairs. I came in, took my shoes off and went to sleep. Saw a nightmare. The nightmare. A recurring dream that I keep seeing in this motel for whatever reason.

My phone. I feel for it in my pocket and take it out. Battery at 32%. I go to messages. There is an exchange between my wife and

me, Claire. "The meeting went great. I'm at the motel. Super tired. Will call you in the morning." Timestamp: 9:25 p.m. "Okay," she replied. Heart emoji. My message is written correctly, with commas in place and "I" capitalized, something I wouldn't do normally. But nothing unusual about that, must've been transcribed from voice. I can picture myself saying, "Hey Siri," and dictating the message as I lay down in the dark. Too tired to type? On coke? That's the most incredible part.

It's 2:05 a.m. now. Only then does it dawn on me. The check. Where's my wallet? I fumble for the switch, turn the light on. What a mess. Half-naked mattress sticking out from a lopsided bed. A little lamp lying on its side. Torn sheets. I find the wallet on the table next to the door, lying next to three plastic cards: red, green, and blue. Those are key cards to open the basement gate, I recall. I don't know why I have three of those. I open the wallet.

Here it is. I pull out the check slowly, pinching it between two fingers. It's folded in half. On an exhale, I carefully unfold it, thinking of that note from the Midantan trip. A note from my murdered ex that turned out to be blank. Disappearing messages, once again.

Erratic but confident handwriting. Eight million dollars. Josh Allen. "Oh shit, oh God, good grace," I say. "Oh my fucking. Oh." I wipe my face with the back of my hand. It was real. Everything was real. The meeting, the layoff, the construction guy. The only unreal part was the hospital room in a recording studio, where I lay suspended. The apparatus. Paul. iL. "I have to get out of here," I say. I'll just get my stuff, get in the car, and drive straight home.

Now.

I check my backpack. Laptop, Adderall, bottle of water. I put the sheets back on the bed and try to fix the state of the room as much as I can. The things I've destroyed I put in a trash bucket. They'll send me a bill. That's okay. I'm rich now. I notice that I'm afraid to scare the reality away, as if it were a butterfly that landed on my hand. Reality. A fleeting reverie.

I look at my phone. 2:36 a.m. I notice that there is no service. Instead of bars in the corner of the screen, it says SOS. Strange. I push the door and it doesn't open. I try again. And again. No luck.

The door is locked.

What is this?

I check the phone again. No service. There is a white motel landline phone on the table. I pick up the receiver. Ivan's voice: "And so you go in there yourself, and every time it's like..." I smash the phone, grab it with both hands, pull it so the cord whips out of the outlet, and throw it at the wall.

"That's me," says a voice behind me. I recognize it even before I turn around. The Hare Krishna guy. The mod.

He is sitting in the green armchair next to a floor lamp with an orange lampshade. He is wearing a grey shirt and a grey baseball hat; there is a laptop on his lap. He looks like a technician, like someone the motel staff would send to fix a router. The fact that he's actually here sends sharp chills through my whole body. I feel triangles cutting through my guts, my spine, my lungs. Red triangles.

This is not a trip, not a vision. There is no tint to the perception, no haziness. I can feel my body. My stomach rumbles, a burp coming up my windpipe. Perspiration. This is physical reality. It smells. It's here. I am here. I'm not tripping, not dreaming, I'm here and he is here. I think about a technique I've been using in Focus 12, something I came up with myself. To imagine, to say to myself, "I'm really here. It's really happening." To marvel at the impossibility of an event that is not really occurring. Only this time it is really occurring. I'm really here, it's really happening. Not Focus 12. It's the Physical. Shit.

"Yeah, it must be tough. Look, I'm sorry, I really am. I wouldn't normally come here in this fashion, but your membrane is torn. You must have noticed the leaks by now, memories that are not yours."

I sit down on the bed, my arms hanging loosely at my sides.

"You sure do. Unfortunately, there's nothing unusual about that, it happens all the time with telephones. You are a sensitive bunch, that's your whole shtick. And the thin membrane, well, that's the price you end up paying, a fare for the journey. But in your case, you made up a whole other situation. Imagined an entire Thing. How did that happen?"

He types something on his laptop. I notice a smell emanating from him, metallic, somehow familiar.

"The recording studio thing I'm talking about. The hospital room. There are two guys and two girls, and it's like you're testing a video game of sorts, or doing some kind of an experiment with a simulation, what is it?"

"The real world," I say.

He laughs. One of his teeth is golden; it briefly reflects light from the lamp. I experience *déjà vu*.

"The real world! You really are something. And one of the girls is your way out, right? One L. 1L. She's like the one you remember, but older."

"iL," I say.

"Yeah, but I thought she's nine years old, like, forever. But this one, in the real world, she looks grown up, what's up with that?"

I don't say anything, I look at my hands, count fingers. A lucid dream technique. So much effort to get out, to expand, to break the boundaries of reality, and now the only thing I want is to get it back, my normal life. It feels nostalgic. But there is no going back. Not this time. I'm done.

"These guys, Ivan and Paul, they're just reflections of your earthly memory. iL is probably your ex. Shelly, I don't know who that is."

"My ex," I say. "Lisa?"

"Yeah, right."

"But she wasn't iL. That's not how it went."

"Oh yeah, okay, who is iL then?"

"I don't know, I could never figure that out. I thought she was my destiny in the Physical, in this world."

"Romantic."

"Yeah, sure, but then it turned out she lived in my head, like a voice. And then that the voice was coming from somewhere else. I was receiving it. I was trying to get a better signal."

"Signal, yes." He types something on his computer.

PART SEVEN: TERMINAL DEAD END

Suspension insulators support transmission lines on steel towers, isolating the lines from the tower. The fundamental working principle involves creating a high-resistance barrier between the energized conductor and the grounded tower structure. Insulators are usually designed to withstand flashover without damage. Flashover voltage is the voltage that causes a flashover arc. Most high-voltage insulators are designed with a lower flashover voltage than puncture voltage, so they flashover before they puncture to avoid damage. The flashover voltage can be reduced by more than 50% when the insulator is wet.

“Here's what's gonna happen. You will write it all down. In your backpack there is an empty notebook and two black ballpoint pens. There is Adderall, take some, sit down at this table and write everything down. About iL, about uncle Dex, astral projection, everything. You can do it. Once you start writing and get into the zone, it will all come back. I unlocked some memories from my end, so you'll get the details, down to the exact dates from your dream diary. Write it all down like a book. You are a writer after all, it should be easy for you. Don't worry about editing. Treat it like a script for a found footage movie. I need you to do this to organize the memory nicely before repacking, then we'll reset you, got it?”

“Reset,” I say, and look at him.

The mod is no longer there. Instead, there is a crumpled comforter, vaguely shaped like a human body, and a pillow. I threw those items there myself when I was cleaning up the room after my hysterical breakdown (fuck you fuck you fuck you!).

I walk to the door and try it again. Still locked. I take a sip of water, take a notepad out of the backpack, sit at the table and begin writing.

The story doesn't really start going until I pop the third pill. I keep mumbling in circles, dirty water of stagnant inspiration expunging in spasms out of the pen. I tear pages out and set them on fire with my red Bic lighter, smoke a cigarette, watching the paper go up in flames. Only then do I feel the familiar pull of a muse, and I

restart the story from the very beginning. This time I keep writing until my hand hurts. I don't cross anything out. Don't edit. The flow is pristine. The book is already written, I'm just channeling it.

I drop the pen and massage my wrist, light another cigarette and walk to the window, pull the green curtain away. At first I'm not sure what it is I'm looking at. It's like the window is covered with crisscrossing bands of dark metal sheets. Like I'm inside the Eiffel Tower.

"That's latticework," says the mod.

I don't turn, but out of the corner of my eye I see a silhouette that could be either a comforter on the armchair or the Hare Krishna guy sitting there. Frankly, I don't care. I feel energized, inspired. That feeling I get when the writing is pouring out without interruption, it's all over me now, the creative high. If I'm a medium, a transmitter, a fucking telephone, if that's who I am, I'll do my job now.

I return to the table, butt the cigarette on the table, pick up the pen and continue to write, stopping only to pop more pills. Sometimes I notice changes in the periphery of my vision, as if the location I'm in keeps switching. It's hazy, like the reflection of a face in the mirror in a dark bathroom, illuminated by candlelight.

!Click!

I'm in a field with massive boulders everywhere.

!Click!

I'm on the top floor of an unfinished high-rise building with walls missing, sitting by the very edge with sunset light shining on the pages of the notebook. Light keeps changing too, the location of its source, color, luminosity. Sometimes it's the light of a torch, other times a projector or floodlight.

I finished my bottle of water long ago and my throat feels like paper, sand, gravel, but that doesn't matter. I don't care. I'm no longer corporeal. I'm a spirit, an amorphous shape hanging over the notepad with my writing hand sticking out of it, writing, writing, writing.

When the mod speaks again, I find myself back in the motel room.

"You really ARE going hard," he says.

I stop and put the pen down, my wrist hurts like hell but it is also elastically numb at the same time. Elastic pain. A rubber band with glass shrapnel. I turn and look in the direction of the voice. There on the armchair sits a man with a head of a cheetah in blue full-body armor. He looks 3D, but the graphics are rudimentary, like he just came out of a PlayStation 2 game.

Next to me on the floor stands a gigantic head of Michelangelo's classic statue David. The eyes of David have hearts for pupils. The perspective of the room feels off, my vision is floating, I feel groggy but electric.

"That's what I do," I reply.

"Just so you know, I appreciate the effort. Will help me out a lot with your mind being organized before the reset. Glad you brought the pills too."

I experience a pang of an all-encompassing thirst, my tongue a burned black snake on a furnace. I stand up, my neck creaking, the floor moving like a ship on the waves. I walk to the bathroom and drink from the faucet for what feels like a very long time. When I finish and lift my head, my vision goes in bruises: violet, yellow, purple. Through the haze I see all kinds of faces reflecting in the mirror. I see a middle-aged woman, a bearded Black man, a praying mantis.

I walk back to the table, sit down, light a cigarette. The cheetah knight has his tongue out and he appears to be smiling in a feline way. His face is like a ":3" emoji. I notice that his laptop is still resting on his armored thighs encased in steel. It's a MacBook Pro.

"Glad you brought the pills too," he repeats in exactly the same way, like an audio recording.

I pick up the jar of pills and see that it's not Adderall; it's DXM. Somehow I managed to eat the whole jar. How in hell was I still able to write? I should be lying flat by now on the fourth plateau, but I'm thinking straight. I feel collected. In control. I tap some ashes onto David's head.

"1,200 milligrams," the cheetah mod says.

I say nothing.

I finish the cigarette and throw it on the floor, tap it off with my shoe and fold my hands across my chest.

"Tell me the truth," I say. "Where am I?"

"You are in the lighthouse. Always. Shraii. It means the one in the lighthouse, remember?" he says.

"What does that mean?"

"A lighthouse is a tower with light, like the Tower of the Sun, with a person standing on the top, arms spread out, the peak of the Tree of Evolution, or the lightning rod that's protruding out of the mouth of the top face, the golden radar, and I'm in a coma, am I dead, is this a purgatory," says the cheetah knight in a monotonous tone. "Is this a purgatory."

He stands up, laptop glued to his armor, turns sideways and clips through the armchair, half of his body enmeshed in it, like in a badly designed video game. He continues.

"The tower for transmission of electricity, electric pylon, the one in a red dress, the one you are in, think of a transmission tower, wearing a magnificent red dress, its sleeves rolled up, holding the cables. A gigantic dress, but so gorgeous and intricate, just look at the frills, aren't they beautiful? She's such a beautiful girl, its lattice out the window, you are Shraii in a tower, a beautiful girl she is, the transmission tower, in red."

"You crazy fucking cat," I say and produce a grin of devastating madness.

The cheetah face goes into full kawaii mode, its armor sparkling, its voice speeding up. He steps back, partially clipping through the wall as he keeps rambling on. "Different builds, different worlds; I know I'm in the one where David's eyes are hearts, and objects in the mirror may be closer than they appear, little markers for the mods; you've got to finish the signal thing; you got the three basement garage key cards, red, green, blue; RGB; to open this door; you are in the right world; with 1L to exit; in case you can't reach the lightning yourself, go buy an extension cord. There is a store across the street, a Walmart; you'll need the lightning to hit the tower to reset."

He takes another step back and disappears behind the wall, his voice cuts off, but I open my mouth and continue speaking for him, out loud. I say, my mouth says, "to reset yourself, to get you a new membrane, you are leaking terribly."

<<Are you okay?>> says iL in my head. She just suddenly speaks. I burst out laughing.

"I love you, you know," I tell her, and pick up the pen.

I keep on writing until I notice that I'm scribbling empty lines. The pen is dry. No more ink. I break it in half and throw it on the floor. I wonder if I've been writing nonsense this whole time, but I'm too scared to read what I wrote. It could go either way, but I prefer to think that this is an intelligible piece of work, rather than a mumbo-jumbo of characters inscribed with an empty pen by a lunatic.

"I'm on my way out," I say to no one in particular, and light up another cigarette. Time for a break. I'm in no rush. Time inside the tower stands still. I don't care if I'm in a red tent under a transmission tower, or suspended from a ceiling on wires, or in a hospital bed, hallucinating. It doesn't matter. I'm in my final moments. I know it: this is the last stretch to the finish line, the mod will reset me once I finish the book, whether he exists or not. I am on my way out.

There is a raccoon in the room. I watch it as it approaches me and stands up on its hind legs. Is it a meerkat? I wonder as I'm puffing on my cigarette, squinting my eyes. No, it's a raccoon, standing upright. He touches his face with his hands in a washing motion, and his face comes off like paint. I still see the grey around the edges, the bristles of fur, but the creature's real face is peering through now. It's a praying mantis, like the one I saw earlier in the mirror. It's holding its hands folded, mantis fashion.

"Look at you, you little fuck," I say, and toss my cigarette towards David's head, only it's gone now, there's a cabinet now in its stead, a generic wooden contraption. And right next to it—another cabinet, exact copy, a strangely unoriginal hallucination.

I reach into the backpack for the second pen. There is a jar of pills, Adderall. Right. I've been unintentionally taking DXM this whole time. I chew two addies dry. I put the fresh pen to paper and it writes: "Voltage is not uniformly distributed over a suspension insulator string. The disc nearest to the conductor has the maximum voltage across it."

I giggle, observing my writing hand like a little animal in its natural habitat, it goes:

"This non-uniform distribution occurs due to the capacitive coupling between the metal cap of each disc and the conductor as well as between the metal pin and the ground tower structure."

"You've got to finish this story, don't get distracted," says the mod. He is back. I glance at him. He is a fat mummy wrapped in white bandages. No, I realize, not a mummy. It's the Michelin Man, the tires guy.

"Hold on," I say. "It's relevant."

I unleash my hand again. It writes: *"Insulators are usually designed to withstand flashover without damage. Flashover voltage is the voltage that causes a flashover arc. Most high-voltage insulators are designed with a lower flashover voltage than puncture voltage, so they flashover before they puncture to avoid damage. The flashover voltage can be reduced by more than 50% when the insulator is wet."*

"Ah," exclaims the Michelin Man, raising his finger. "I see now, terminal dead end. You've gotten to it, right?"

I look at him, his face is floating.

"That's the chapter title," he says, "for the part where you get to the motel. Room 201. It's this chapter we are in, you're almost there. I'll tell you how to 1L yourself as soon as you're done writing."

I put pen to paper and keep writing. At some point, the dates pass the night I'm sitting in. I keep going.

February 18 [319 days after the Signal]

Going through the Rundown process as usual. Vita is in the theater, follows me to the adjacent room with the magic stone, further to the beach and up the stainless steel steps to the bed, armchair and old TV set. She doesn't say a word until I tell her to apply the neon-green paint on my brain.

"Sure," she says, putting on her latex gloves.

"And add some extra to the third eye area."

"I got you." She's holding a vial with green liquid, gently shaking it.

After copying myself, I stand by the rail, feeling steel under my fingers, looking out at the moonlit waves. My clone's brain is being nicely stretched, beaming its signals down to the Physical. I feel a tiny organic structure in my brain being enveloped in liquid, it's wet, right in the middle of the frontal lobes, like a soft beetle taking a bubble bath. Makes me think of the clitoris. Third eye, the clitoris of the brain. Or is it the pineal gland?

I teleport down to the shore and before I touch the sand with my plastic shovel, an intense wave of relaxation hits, like a tsunami of novocaine. I see white light exploding in the sky. It's incredibly bright and feels directed, like someone is shining a flashlight, looking for something. Or someone. Looking for me. It's quickly approaching. At the same time, the squeezy feeling, the beige feeling, intensifies to an almost painful degree, and then-nothing.

I click out.

I came back to my senses after the next track in the playlist began playing in my earphones, shaken by the experience, but excited. This is the breakthrough I've been waiting for. All I have to do now is to recall what happened after the click out. To integrate my other memories into the Physical.

I'm almost there. Where? I don't know. But I'm almost there.

February 19 [320 days after the Signal]

It happened again, the Satori state. I don't know for certain if it was caused by the events of last night, if the white light uncorked something within me, but since I woke up this morning, I've been surfing the eternal wave of Now. Or should I say "infinite"? I guess it's both. The contents of the present moment don't matter, not a bit, whether I'm wiping my daughter's ass, enjoying the taste of a Danish pastry, or struggling with a problem at work, all moments are equal, and directly connected to the process of breathing. Induced by it; crests of inhales, ruts of exhales, and here's I, me, I, EYE, surfing the waves.

March 13 [342 days after the Signal]

The Satori state lasted for 22 days straight. During this time I was very successful at work, calm and helpful at home, a gentle smile never left my lips. Curiously, I didn't have any interest in the astral realm, didn't remember any of my dreams, and not once did I think of the other side. My life had been full to the brim with the golden light of the present. And then it switched off. So, I'm writing these lines. I wish it had lasted forever, but here I am, back to my normal self, and instantly, the hunger for the astral is back; the urge. I guess it is a form of escape. When the Now is fully accepted, there is no reason to seek anything else. I suppose I'm not accepting the Now any longer.

-Later-

Listened to the F21 tape with the intention to speak to a guide about what the Satori state was really about and how I can switch it on consciously.

I got down to the shore of the night beach, but nobody responded to my call. Besides, I was too restless, too unfocused, too expectant. Vita was the only person around.

April 2 [362 days after the Signal]

It took a few days of nightly attempts with F21 tape to reach the point of nonchalantness required to enter the state. I felt the beige pressure while building a sand castle at the beach, and a guide's presence became apparent, like a sound of moths' wings flapping in the dark.

"Maya?"

"Yes, I'm here."

"Hey, wanted to ask you about the state, the Satori state."

"Sure, but you know that already."

"It's the now?"

"It's the now."

"How do I induce it?"

"You stop thinking about yourself. You know that, too."

"I know that. But how?"

"Breathing."

"But that's not enough. I can't just do that. You know what I mean?"

She didn't reply for some time.

"I understand how you feel. There is another component to your being that has to help. Without it, you are too stunned to perceive."

"What is it?"

I clicked out.

Writing down this dialogue now, I find it interesting that the memory of it is so clear, more so than usual. I'm pretty sure that's how this conversation went down verbatim, similar to my recollection of the exchange with the mod back in the conference room. The phenomenon of blacking out or "clicking out" is often talked about in the astral projection circles as part of an experience in which important information is being accessed. What is that information? I have to know. What did she say? What component of my being is required to unlock this Satori state?

April 14 [374 days after the Signal]

I've been clicking out consistently on F21 for the past week. It has become a routine. I would get through the Rundown process, end up on the beach, talking sometimes to Maya, sometimes to Nonchal. Other times, nobody would come, and I would be sitting there alone, playing with my toys in the sand, until the beige pressure would arrive and I would see the white light emerging from the horizon. I have mastered the sequence of tricks that I've accumulated since I started the Gateway program, to the point where I don't have to think about executing the sequence at all. It's all part of the whole, one smooth movement performed with detachment that Nonchal would be proud of. Here's the sequence, try it at home:

- Energy conversion box.
- Resonant tuning.
- Resonant Energy Balloon (REBAL): Blowing a hot soap bubble into a rainbow cocoon that's warm and envelops my body.

- Affirmation spoken to the magic stone.
- Walking to the stainless structure.
- Cloning myself into a reference body for the physical realm.
- Neon paint on the brain.
- Third eye soaking in the extra vivid neon tincture.
- Concentrate.
- Teleport to the shore.
- Play with sand.
- Return to the space behind the eyelids.
- Open a hole in the heart area in the REBAL.
- Shine a beacon of gratitude.
- Move sexual energy to the crown area.
- Observe the space between the self and the eyelids with the sole purpose of ignoring anything that happens, no matter how bizarre.

Once the click-out season began, I could only make it to the shore before the beige pressure inevitably occurred and white light arrived. Vita is with me at all times now, starting from the movie theater location, where she is standing in the corner, waiting for me to finish tuning and blowing my REBAL.

Then she follows me out to the beach, and once she is done painting my brain, she comes to the shore, takes off her gloves and drops them in the sand. She is just sitting next to me, her back very straight, looking at the ocean. If I talk to her, she replies, but doesn't initiate conversation. She appears to be waiting for the light to come.

It's me. Vita. I am the missing component. You are out there, constantly realigning your perception, trying to avoid the obvious. The interconnectedness. You, the ego in the Physical, a terrified little cutie attached to the helm of a sharp-angled contraption, like the front of a combine harvester. Aw, you can't get out. So tiny, so scared. I imagine a spider whose entire body is an eyeball.

You asked, what is the missing component that is required to unlock the Satori state? It's me. I am the missing component. Vita. But I already said that. He-he. I'm writing these lines while your mind wanders. It's so peculiar, the process of lining up images just so, and streaming them through a narrow pipe; blowing bubbles. I feel like there is a square opening in the floor next to me, and I throw glances at it. I see glimpses of what's going on inside, something deep blue and black. Are those navy jackets in the night, or weird fishes on the bottom of a lake? I can't tell.

I'm grabbing the glimpses with my attention and arranging their reflections into words. It's fascinating, I could keep doing it forever, but I'm here for a reason. I'm here to tell you something important. Every time you "click out", things happen to you. I'm here to tell you what those things are. What they mean. It is up to you to decide what to do with this information.

Here it goes.

The white light you see before clicking out is an entrance to a tunnel. It sucks you out from the night beach location, the Rundown world, as you call it. It's a beam. It's coming from a UFO, a flying saucer. Just like in the movies. He-he. The saucer has a pilot. It's a guide. You mentioned her name before, but you said you've never met her. You have. You've been talking to Mira since the time you began using your Gratitude Beacon. She's one of Them, and Gratitude is very attractive to them. Who are they? I have no clue. I'm just a part of your subconscious. How would I know?

You've been abducted this way; many, many times. Kidnapped. Although I don't know if it still qualifies as kidnapping if the victim is willing. I was there with you every time. I remember everything. The flower always folds the same way. Every time. But I'm not here to tell

you what those conversations were about. You will recall them on your own once you log out from the Physical.

I'm here to give you this:

```
import wave, struct, math
```

```
def g():
```

```
    c = sum(ord(x) for x in "telephone") / 9
    b = sum(ord(x) for x in "I lay suspended")
    while b >= 10: b = sum(int(d) for d in str(b))
    j = [float(b), 4.0, 5.0, 6.0, 7.0, 6.0, 3.0, 2.0, 1.5]
    r, d = 44100, 1200
    t_samp = d * r
    p_samp = t_samp // 9
    chunk_size = r
```

```
    with wave.open("shraiiitape.wav", "w") as w:
```

```
        w.setnchannels(2)
        w.setsampwidth(2)
        w.setframerate(r)
        w.setnframes(t_samp)
```

```
    chunk = bytearray()
```

```
    for p, bf in enumerate(j):
```

```
        ps = p * p_samp
```

```
        pe = (p + 1) * p_samp if p < 8 else t_samp
```

```
        for i in range(ps, pe):
```

```
            t = i / r
```

```
            pip, pl = i - ps, pe - ps
```

```
            if p < 8 and pip > pl - r * 2:
```

```
                bf = bf + (j[p + 1] - bf) * ((pip - (pl - r * 2)) / (r * 2))
```

```
            l = math.sin(2 * math.pi * c * t)
```

```
            ri = math.sin(2 * math.pi * (c + bf) * t)
```

```
            e = 1.0
```

```
            if i < r * 5: e = i / (r * 5)
```

```
            elif i > t_samp - r * 5: e = (t_samp - i) / (r * 5)
```

```
            l = max(-32768, min(32767, int(l * e * 0.7 * 32767)))
```

```
            ri = max(-32768, min(32767, int(ri * e * 0.7 * 32767)))
```

```

        chunk.extend(struct.pack("<hh", l, ri))
    if len(chunk) == chunk_size * 4:
        w.writeframesraw(chunk)
        chunk.clear()

    if chunk:
        w.writeframesraw(chunk)

if __name__ == "__main__": g()

```

This is a program, a Python script that you will write in the Physical. It's a way to bend the sound waves to tune to the right frequency. A small but important alteration to the Gateway tapes. You are to append the sound wave that this script generates to the end of the F21 tape. The total duration of the sound wave is 20 minutes.

At the start of this new section that you will add, you are to record yourself saying the following. You will say:

"Let me go as I lay suspended for testing purposes. Please forgive me. I love you, God, and I am very grateful. Thank you for everything. The flower always folds the same way. Every time."

That's all. Oh, wait, one more thing.

Sure, you will recall what Mira told you. It's mostly about the nature of reality, things like that. But when you asked her about iL, she went quiet. You probably won't recall that. Her being quiet about it, I mean. But honestly, by the way she looked, I could tell that she has no idea. iL is still a mystery to you, to me, even to Mira. She doesn't know. I don't think I'm supposed to be talking about it at all, but we're old friends, you and I. I think it matters to you. So here it is. Over and out.

-

April 15 [375 days after the Signal]

Upon awakening, I had a fully formed quote in my head. I rushed to the notepad to put it in writing: "Let me go as I lay suspended for testing purposes. Please forgive me. I love you, God, and I am very grateful. Thank you for everything. The flower always folds the same way. Every time."

I stared at it for a minute before the day took its course. I kept thinking about it, trying to decipher its meaning. First, "I lay suspended," the sentence that summoned iL and initially led me to waking up in the real world, the one where I'm hanging from the ceiling on the wires, testing a game. Testing. "For testing purposes." That is the other key phrase that led me to the mod, the owl, the Tower of the Sun. That, in turn, connected to the transmission tower, electric pylon, and the Dex trip in the tent. Uncle Dex. I don't know what "flower" is, but it certainly folds. This whole thing folds into some pattern, I just don't understand what it is. And what does God have to do with any of this?

-

April 16 [376 days after the Signal]

I've been coding a lot lately. With the advent of agentic LLMs around the middle of 2025, it became easy to turn any idea into reality. Over the past couple of months, I've built a dozen apps of all kinds, from a coloring book generator to a black metal radio station.

I was working on this app, Thigh Slapper, that picks up sounds of slapping hands on thighs and turns them into MIDI files, which the user can convert into real drums, kicks, snares, and all. As I finished the sound processing part of the app, I had a thought that stunned me. The Gateway tapes. I'm a sound designer. I've got to make my own tapes. So I opened a new project, and in just half an hour, I coded a program that generates binaural beats using an algorithm I couldn't quite explain, but it produced the sound waves as the output. Where did the algorithm come from?

I suspect it came directly from the other side. It was expressed from my subconscious, from another level, and made it here, to the Physical. It might be the bridge between the two personalities, one that's writing these lines and the other that is doing something after my focus clicks out during the Gateway sessions. On impulse, I plugged in the mic and recorded my voice reading the passage that I wrote into my notepad earlier over the waves generated by the program. I made a copy of the Focus 21 tape and inserted this material around the end. It just made sense to do it this way.

April 17 [377 days after the Signal]

I had some time in the afternoon to lie down and listen to a Gateway tape. Chose Intro to Focus 21. Got to F10 rather quickly. I was standing at my usual spot on the stainless steel structure, leaning over the railing, facing the ocean, when I had a thought to look more deeply into the actual environment I'm in. The Rundown world. I've been dismissing this place as merely a launching pad that my imagination conjured up in order to redirect the waking attention away from the Physical and into subtler states, the same way Anapana meditation takes attention away from thoughts by focusing on the area below the nostrils.

I teleported down to the shore and looked up at the top of the structure, where four red lights were positioned, as if to warn helicopters flying through the night and prevent a collision, or, more accurately, flying saucers. I zoomed into one of the lights. There was a red plastic case around a small lightbulb that was glowing white. I zoomed further, into the glass of the lightbulb, deeper into its molecular structure, into the atoms, past them, into a quantum world of shimmering mirages, undefined positions. In those mirages, I saw stable points, seeds, hanging in patterns, in harmony with one another, vibrating. I had a thought that those were individual points that made up the crystalline structure of the glass of the lightbulb. I marveled at how much detail was put into a single light in this throwaway Rundown world.

I looked at the dots for some time, then zoomed out. I was back to the stainless steel structure, and for the first time, looked away from the ocean, towards the shore. I don't know why I just assumed

it would be a simple texture of sand continuing indefinitely, but what I saw there made me gasp. In the light of the huge, pale moon, I saw a skyline of a city.

Skyscrapers, all dark, no lights. A spirit of exploration evoked within me, along with a tinge of fear. What is it? Why is it there? I have to go and see for myself.

Bob's voice on the tape started speaking, and I continued with the process. For whatever reason, I didn't feel ready to go there just yet. Maybe next time.

April 18 [378 days after the Signal]

I went back. I had to write it down quickly, as the memory of the experience was evaporating rapidly, as is customary with this kind of thing. Here it goes:

"I remember you," I said to the spiky sphere levitating in front of my face.

"I remember you too," replied the sphere, its voice cool and reverby.

I was in the city that's located by the beach in my Rundown world. I left my physical reference clone lying on the mattress on the stainless steel structure, in Vita's hands, and went on exploring, away from the ocean.

This sphere, the spiky orb, was the first creature I met since entering the city. A gentle white veil of moonlight phosphoricizing. The dream of silver. Mercurial evanescence. High-rise buildings, all unfinished, naked concrete, empty squares for windows. Empty, identical apartments. There were roads, but no cars, no trees, nothing but streets full of skyscrapers.

"It's interesting how you remember things in a row," said the orb. It moved higher up, against the backdrop of a grey wall. I was standing in the middle of the road, looking up. Salty air in my hair, perfect silence; no sounds reached here from the ocean.

"Things in a row? Are you talking about linear time?"

"The illusion of linear time," it said. "Yes. You're on the way out already?"

"What do you mean?" I said and opened my eyes in the Physical.

That's it.

I haven't tried the tape I made yet, but will do it tomorrow night. Definitely going back to the city. Need a name for it. How about Night Town?

April 30 [390 days after the Signal]

I've been listening to the new recording every single night before going to bed. The one I made with the Python script and the additional instructions ("I lay suspended..."). I've been to Night Town eleven times now.

Each session with this tape resulted in the most coherent and vivid experiences. I called the recording Shraiitape. I don't know if it works for other people. I don't know if the final segment where I read the text makes any difference, or if it's all in the waves that the code generates. What I do know is that I was able to consistently achieve a strong Focus 12 and get to explore the town with all of my senses, including touch. I go there right before the white light arrives at the shore, so I don't click out anymore.

The quality of recall of my encounters with Spiky, the metallic orb with spikes that I

described earlier, is still spotty. I remember just the fact that they are occurring and the general feeling of the surroundings in which they take place. The memory of our conversations dissolves with the morning light.

At least that was the case until last night. I recall last night in excruciating detail. All of it.

"Look at your hands," said Spiky. He was hovering above a concrete structure that resembled a bus stop.

I did. So many fingers. I tried to count them, but the amount kept changing. New fingers popped out. Others merged with one another.

"It's a lucid dream," I said.

"Right."

"I went into a lucid dream straight from the Rundown world."

"Precisely."

"Is it because of the Shraiitape?"

"In a way. But you won't remember unless you do this." He slowly rotated in the air, his gray spikes reflecting moonlight.

"How do I do that?" Excitement overwhelmed me. I tried to keep it down so as not to wake up, but it was hard. After all, I just found the holy grail of lucid dreamers. A technique that reliably puts me into this state. No alarm clocks, no reality checks.

"If you can't spin you can just yell: I remember this! I remember everything perfectly! Give Me Memory!" His voice was that of a boy.

"I remember this!" I yelled. "I remember everything perfectly! Give me memory!"

He asked me to do it again, louder. "It will only work if your higher self understands that you are being serious and sound clear," he said.

I yelled the phrase as loud as I could.

Upon awakening, I wrote it all down. Not hastily, grasping after images, no. I took my time with it, knowing that the memories wouldn't dissipate upon awakening. Not anymore.

June (?)

Over the past month and a half, I've been exploring Night Town.

It wasn't that big and consisted mostly of unfinished skyscrapers, parking lots, hospitals and empty university buildings, or research facilities. There was only one purely decorative structure, a large stone flowerbed between two high-rises, filled with black sand and a dead tree rising from it. The tree looked eerily like a person, like a giant old woman with a crooked back and empty eye sockets, black like the windows of an unfinished building. Under the moonlight, the tree kept morphing into the old lady in the periphery of my vision. She would bow. Slowly.

Aside from Spiky, there were two other creatures, but he was the only one communicating. One of them was a blob of floating plasma that Spiky called Puff, and the other one—a triangular concrete slab. All three hovered above ground.

Through my conversations with Spiky, I learned quite a bit about the nature of reality—or, shall I say, realities: both the Rundown world and the Physical. My notes are all over the place, so I'll try to construct a coherent narrative out of them, to paint a picture of the underlying structure of the realities in question, at least according to that orb.

As soon as I realized that the dreamscape is stable enough to be explored, I did the human thing: mapped out the town, found the edge and

tried to see what's beyond. Eventually I hit an invisible barrier, a field of standing air, a block. A street I was flying through continued further visually, the road curved to the side between buildings, but it wasn't accessible to me. A force field.

Spiky told me the barrier was set by my higher self to keep me from getting lost in this pocket dimension. The Rundown world is supposed to be used as a launchpad to reaching higher focus states, and nothing else. This was the second time Spiky spoke of my higher self, and I asked him about it. He invited me to "the plaza", the place with the dead tree. There is stenciled graffiti on the wall of one of the buildings, in a military font. It says ADVISED. I don't know what that means.

When we arrived at the plaza, Spiky's friends were waiting for us: a triangle of concrete and a ball lightning.

"They're just observing. Don't mind them," he said. "Puff is an apprentice of mine, and Fly is a Shift."

I could never find out what "shift" was. Every time I asked Spiky about it, he ignored the question.

"Your higher self," he said after the introductions, "is a program that contains you. You are being watched."

"Am I also a program?"

"Yes, you are. Of a different kind, but a program nevertheless. Like us."

"Does that mean that the mod was telling the truth, the owl guy?"

"Yes, the mod is doing his job. He's like us, but he is not like you. He will reset you with 1L."

He pronounced it as "One Ael."

"What is 1L?"

Spiky hung in silence for some time. Puff flew above the deadtree and began orbiting around its top, the head of the giant oldwoman, like an electric planet.

"We don't know," finally said Spiky. "It's always different."

"So, I'm a program, and you are a program, but of different kinds."

"Yes. Why do you look like a kid?"

I was startled by the question and looked at my hands. Lots of fingers still, but they sure looked young; a boy's hands.

"Dream bodies of your kind are always children," said Spiky. "I just wonder why. Curiosity."

"I don't know. I never thought about how I look to others in my dreams. They're not real anyhow, right? They are supposed to be representatives of other characters in my life."

I thought of Roland. It was weird to think of him while standing in this moonlit square. I felt dizzy.

"How about this? I ask you a question; you ask me a question," said Spiky.

"Okay."

"It's your turn."

I thought about it for a moment, looking at the orbiting Puff.

"Who created us?"

"Us? The orbs were created by the GERbl. You, the electric ones, were created by spawners. The mod should have told you all about those."

"A spawner. An agent that spawns agents. The mod is a mod and I am a telephone. By electric ones, do you mean humans?"

"Humans too. All humans are electric ones, but not all electric ones are humans. The mod you've

met is not a human, but definitely is an electric one."

"What is GERbl?"

"GERbl is the biggest shape. It's my turn."

"Why when you talk about orbs like Puff, it's always connected to washing dishes?"

"What?"

"The ones like Puff. You call them ball lightnings. The story always includes someone washing the dishes and then a ball lightning flies through an open window."

"I don't know. That's a strange question. I'm sorry, I'm not sure if I can answer." I thought about my grandma. She told me once how she was washing dishes one afternoon and a ball lightning flew in through the window. It floated around the room and left the way it came without causing any harm. It crackled, she said.

Puff flew close to me and hovered above my head. He did not crackle.

"It's just so funny. Haha," said Spiky, his laughter metallic and artificial. "I thought you would know. Whatever. Your turn."

"What is happening there, at the shore, when I'm clicking out? What's that white light? Is that related to flying saucers?"

"You got it. It is related to flying saucers. They come and get you. But you call to them yourself, by blinking. They taught you how to do that."

"Who are they?"

"They are They. The aliens. The angels. You know what I mean. They fly the saucers. They train you, whip your mind into shape, so you can fit into their pipe."

"The pipe?"

"The tunnel. White light. At the end, you are conditioned to follow their lead. That's what is happening on the shore. My turn."

I nodded, puzzled. Angels on the flying saucers are making us follow them to the white light after we die? Training us to fit into their pipe?

"What do you think of the sound of the scanner? When you hear it, what's your explanation?"

I understood what he meant. "Ringing in the ear? A high-pitched noise?"

"Yes."

"Is it because of a change in pressure? Something like that. There's also a medical condition when this sound is persistent. Tinnitus."

"A change in pressure. Medical condition. Very interesting. It's your brain being scanned. Whichever hemisphere is under the beam rings the opposite ear."

"Why is it scanned? By whom? By Them?"

"It's just a regular procedure to ensure that you are on the right path."

"And what if I'm not?"

"You are corrected, then, by coincidence-makers. Angels send requests to the intuition layer to initiate an incident, so that you are continuing to ascend. They don't like anything staggering. Very fluid folks they are. Was that your question?"

The triangle of concrete, the one called Fly, began spinning in the air like a coin while the ball lightning Puff started orbiting around him so rapidly that he turned into an electric ribbon. Together they looked like a molecule with an electron rotating around a nucleus.

"No, that wasn't my question. Let me just get this straight. Your kind. The program, like yourself. Made by the GERbl. You are different from

Them? The angels. The aliens. The flying saucer pilots. Are they a type of program too? AI agents of sorts?"

"The GERbl. The greatest shape from which all shapes emerge. No, They are not agents, not programs. They come from another, non-binary root. They are created by God."

"By the God?"

"By a God. But, from your point of view, it might as well be the God, since you can only understand one God at a time. The one you will become."

Late June (?)

Haven't seen Spiky since. Shrailitape takes me to the Night Town consistently, but none of the characters appear in it any longer. No Puff, no Fly, no Spiky. The town is lonely and bleak.

As I'm writing this, I recall something else. He said physical reality is an artificial construction, and the orbs are technicians that maintain space in it. Space between objects. He also asked me about white flashes of light, if I ever saw any. I sure did.

Here is what I gather from all of this. According to Spiky, the Physical is a digital simulation. The mod, the Hare Krishna guy, is real, he is not human, but he is an electric one. I'm an electric one too. The mod told me that there are different types of agents, and my type is called a telephone. A telephone's task is to channel information from outside the simulation. I think agents that the mod spoke of and "electric ones" that Spiky told me about might be the same thing. Or perhaps electric ones include agents and some humans are agents. I don't know where these Venn diagrams overlap exactly.

All I understand is that I'm an electric human agent telephone. I'm similar to the mod in that both of us come from spawners. The technician orbs come from the GERbl, whatever that means. Nevertheless, all of us are programs in the simulation that exists, according to the mod, in a sandbox environment. A beta version that is being tested by bots, like myself. An online game not connected to the production server.

In parallel to all of this, there are They. They can be called aliens, angels, or, as I'm pretty sure at this point, guides. These creatures use flying saucers for transportation and are here to elevate our spiritual level, to aid in our development. I don't know if they are also programs, and if so, if they come from the spawners, like myself, or from the GERbl, like the orbs. According to Spiky, the reason they are helping us to achieve higher states of being is so that our mind assumes a certain shape, to push it through a tunnel. What for? Remains unknown.

If Spiky is telling the truth, then the whole astral projection journey, with Gateway tapes and focus states, is initiated by the guides. Nonchal, Maya, Mira. He hinted at me becoming a god at the end of this journey. Perhaps becoming a guide, an angel, is a stage of development towards that ultimate end.

Vita: "There is no end, and you know it. I hope you don't get too trustful listening to this orb."

"What should I do then? What's your advice?"

Vita: "Talk to Mira about this, see what she has to say."

"Mira? I think you meant Maya, the one I talked to by the shore. Thanks for hijacking my book, by the way."

Vita: "Anytime. And it's Mira. She's the one on the flying saucer."

I see. All I have to do now is listen to Shraii tape and go through the Rundown process. Instead of turning to Night Town after splitting with my reference self at the stainless steel structure, I shall teleport to the shore and keep my awareness sharp until the white light comes from the horizon. To stay awake. Not to click out. And to talk to Mira.

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I straighten my back with a loud crack. It's done, the novel. I'm in Room 201, sunset gushing through the windows. No more transmission tower there. No more LA. No more planet Earth. It's just sunset, orange pulp, thick and violently vibrant. This is the final scene.

I stand up, glance around the room. No mod, no raccoon, no weird artifacts. I feel complete. Exceptionally high, beyond belief. But at the same time, I've never been more sober in my life, never more collected. Electricity crackling within my bones. My skin is glowing with joy.

There is a path on the floor, a golden carpet drawn by light. I follow it to the bathroom, walking through the viscous sunset. There is a glowing square on the wall, an outline, next to the mirror. I feel a warm halo shining above my head, around my ears, the ASMR feeling.

In the reflection in the mirror there is no halo, just my eyes, pupils so big, no whites at all. Two polished black marbles. Grin. I lean to the glowing square. I realize what the golden glow is. It's a way of highlighting an object so it stands out from its surroundings, like in video games. Point-and-click. It's something I can use. An electric outlet. As soon as I recognize it, the glow subsides. There is writing on the outlet. It says "1L".

I emit a brief laugh, like a gunshot. "What's next?" I ask out loud.

“There's a hair dryer under the mirror, in the cabinet,” replies the mod from the room behind me.

PART EIGHT: THE RESET

Circuit breakers protect electrical systems from damage by automatically interrupting current flow when a fault is detected. When the load exceeds safe limits, the breaker trips, breaking the circuit before permanent damage occurs.

A cloud of electricity floats into the bathroom. A ball lightning. It hovers above the bathtub. Watching. A bright flash of light blinds me for a moment. I bend down and open the cabinet under the mirror. The hair dryer is glowing gold, its cable wrapped around the handle neatly. I take it out and the glow subsides. I know what to do.

I walk to the bathtub and turn on the water. The ball lightning moves away as I approach it, hangs in the corner. I think about taking my clothes off but decide against it. Somehow it's more honorable to be found wearing clothes. I don't want to be judged by strangers. This is suicide, I realize. There on the table is my lengthy death note. I fill up the bathtub and turn off the water.

I plug the hair dryer into the 1L outlet and unravel the cable. It's too short to reach the bathtub. I can't kill myself with this dryer. The ball lightning is levitating, eyeing me from above.

"The cable is too short," I say.

"Oh, well, we just have to go get the extension cord. There is a Walmart not too far from here," says the mod and walks to the doorway. He is in his human form, with the Hare Krishna guy's face, but now he's wearing an orange robe. Bald. A monk. "You have the money, right?"

"I'm rich," I say. "But the door is locked."

"No, it's not," he says, and walks to the door. "Look."

I step out to the hallway and watch him open the door effortlessly.

"It wasn't locked; you just have to move the handle up and push. It's a weird design."

The door was never locked. I bend in half and laugh until my belly hurts, tears running down my cheeks. When I wipe them off, I notice that the room looks normal again. The final scene of my story, the one with the sunset, was temporarily postponed. Technical

difficulties. I pick up my wallet from the table. There are three keycards to the basement parking lot. Red. Green. Blue.

"What's that about?" I ask.

"RGB? To keep track of which world you're in. Right now, you're in all three, so it's okay."

"It's okay?" I wipe my eyes.

"Yeah, don't worry about it. Let's go."

"Well, if you say so." I pick up the cigarettes, check the pack. Four left.

We walk out of the motel room to go get that extension cord.

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The first thought that enters my mind as I exit the motel is "I'm in the 1940s." The street is crowded with men wearing dark jackets and Magrittesque hats. It's midday now, even though just a minute ago it was sunset in the window of room 201. I bet if I ran back upstairs quickly enough I'd see it again from there. Or maybe not. Reality is all fucked up today. I am fucked up.

The monk in the orange robe smiles knowingly. He's walking to my right side. As I step on the sidewalk, men in hats passing by, I turn around and look at the motel. Its exterior now matches the time period: "Free breakfast, 99 cents a night."

"A dollar per night," I say. "Wow."

"Inflation," says the mod.

I get a strong urge to grab one of the passersby. I pull a man's arm and he stops, staring at me. His face is most definitely human, but there is something unsettling about his features. Uncanny valley. He looks AI-generated. I let him go and he just keeps on walking without saying a thing. As if nothing happened.

"Do they sell extension cords in the '40s?" I look at the road. Ford cars. No side mirrors, no traffic lights.

"It's 2026," says the mod, and so it becomes. No transition whatsoever, no flash.

Now it's LA. Summer. Mid-afternoon.

I see a Walmart logo across the street, just as the mod promised.

"Am I dead?"

"No." He smiles, golden tooth shining.

"Am I very high? Just very, very, very high?"

"Ah-hyuck!"

Yes, the monk emits a Goofy sound. Mickey's friend. Goofy, a creature of its own. Not a dog, not a man.

"Alrighty," I say, and start walking across the road, thinking, What is Goofy supposed to be? Cars honking, curses flying. It is the 21st century, but it is also LA. Nothing crazy about a couple of bums walking across four lanes of traffic or is it just me? I'm not even sure if other people can see the mod. Here he is, in the corner of my vision, smiling his little Buddha smile, the bastard.

At the entrance to Walmart, there is a royal lady with a pale face, her hair made up with a complex arrangement of curls. Victorian dress, corset, the whole thing. Instead of a shopping cart, she is pushing through the sliding doors a small chariot litter, a wooden box on wheels, pulled forward by a pair of white wolves, their blue eyes shining magically; magnificent beasts. She is not actually pushing, I realize; quite the opposite. She is pulling back, restraining the wolves from going too fast. It's hard work, her back is bending with effort. I wait for her to pass and enter the store.

It's a mess inside, a kaleidoscope of characters. I don't care, though; there is a feeling of disassociation; aloofness. I see Michael Jackson moonwalking between the aisles.

"Should be this way." The mod points and leads me to the section with the cables. I follow him through the ocean of strange. Flick! He disappears. Winks out of existence, not unlike a friend during a Midantan trip. So he wasn't real. I knew it.

There is a guy in a Walmart vest.

"Excuse me, I'm looking for extension cords," I say.

"Aisle 23," he says. His hair is curly and orange. Big bones, cheeks. A ginger.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

There are lots of cables in aisle 23, all moving like a spaghetti of snakes—all except one neatly tied bundle hanging on a wall. Orange.

"That's the one," says the mod's voice from behind.

I look over my shoulder. He's no longer a monk; he's back to his router-fixing motel technician avatar.

"Three meters long, must do the trick."

I nod and take the cable off the hook.

The cashier is Jesus Christ. White robe, long hair. He looks bored as he scans my item.

"\$11.95," he says, his voice deep and husky. He has holes in his hands. Must be from the nails. Not bleeding. They are clear circular openings. I take out my wallet. The only object in there is the \$8 million check from Josh Allen.

"Do you accept checks?"

"No."

I put the check on the table. "It's for \$8 million."

"No checks. Cards or cash."

"How do you maintain these? I mean, take care of them?" I point at his palm as I step away, still holding the orange cable.

"I was born like this," he says.

"I'm leaving the check; you can have it. I'm taking the cable."

"Okay, that is stealing."

"I'm stealing it then."

"Okay."

"Have a nice day."

I back away, turn around and walk to the exit. Nobody stops me on the way out.

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Three meters of cable proves to be more than enough. When I enter the bathroom, I catch the ball lightning retracting into the mirror, right through the looking glass. It is sunset again. We are back to the final scene of the movie; technical difficulties resolved. I swear I could hear muffled sounds of a grand piano, keys gently touched in a melodramatic melody. Soul-baring.

"You're all set," says the mod's voice. "For the reset."

PART NINE: THE STAR

At the point of use, electricity completes its journey. The current passes through the filament, and resistance converts electrical energy into light. The signal, having traveled from generation through transformation and transmission, finally illuminates.

The mod becomes invisible. A disembodied entity with a voice.

"Whenever you're ready."

"I have a question," I say, kneeling by the bathtub filled with water, hair dryer in hand.

"Sure."

"iL. Who is she?"

"You know, it's puzzling to me too. I honestly have no clue. You must have constructed her image out of some input given to you by your spawner agent. There isn't any other way, really. It seems to serve no purpose as far as I can see. And as a shepherd, it is my purpose to see."

"Right."

"iL remains a mystery. Hey, you wanted to be a mysterious guy."

"Always did."

"So there you go. Exiting with an unsolved mystery."

"Exiting."

"You sure do. Exiting to re-enter. Now get in."

I touch the water with my free hand. It's cold. I step into the bathtub and lower myself into it. I settle into the pose of death. I haven't thought of it in years, but the body remembers. The water gets into my ears. My right hand is outside, holding the hair dryer, the long cord wrapped around my arm.

Is this it?

I'm floating, suspended in water. "I lay suspended," I say.

Suddenly—my lips are dry. My pants are dry too. My arm is still wrapped in the cable, but so are my legs. I'm in a different room, in a hospital recording studio.

"I lay suspended," I repeat. My throat is extremely dry. Fuck.

"Water, give me some water, please. Now."

There is a woman in a white lab coat. She holds a plastic cup to my lips and slowly pours the water into my mouth with a deliberate, practiced motion.

"Are you the one that remembers me?" she asks. It must be one of those nonsensical questions they were warning about. The procedure is simple—if I don't understand it, I have to say no.

"No."

She looks disappointed. She's kind of pretty, albeit her features are a bit sharp, too sharp for my taste. Strong face, penetrating eyes, long black hair.

"I think we're done for today," says a female voice from the speaker. That's the other one, the blonde. Now that's an attractive girl, a sunshine smile. Way out of my league, of course.

"All right."

"Thank you, Tarawaka. That's it for today," she says.

She never told me her name; none of them did, but that is part of the contract. The pay is good and I'm not too interested in the details. Two guys come in and untie me. They don't look very bright. I prefer them to the brunette, though. How cold she looks. I think about how she would look naked in the moonlight. She must have perky tits under that lab coat. I imagine pink nipples, sweet and soft breasts, how I would suck on them.

"Thank you," I say to her and smile. She smiles back, still disappointed-looking, her eyebrows frowning. This is the face I want to see when I'm fucking you. Looking down on me, riding me. You bitch. So cold. Delicious. I lick my lips once and catch myself doing it. She doesn't see it, though. She ignores me already. For her, I'm just a tester, a monkey, a lab rat.

I don't even know what it is I'm testing. My memory of the process is erased every time. My guess is that it's some kind of Alzheimer's study, something to do with recall, with memory.

"I'll see you next week," she says.

"Sure," I reply. I don't even like you. The other one, though, the blonde. Mmm, the blonde.

I get home and get right to it. Playing with my favorite toy.

After ten minutes, I pull off my VR set. The image of a girl that was just on top of me is gone with it. I slide the Tenga Harmonica

device off my dick and carry it to the bathroom. Wash off the cum. I don't like seeing my reflection, but I'm too lazy to remove the mirror from the wall. So I simply avert my gaze as I'm washing the sex toy. I know what's reflecting in there. A 27-year-old college dropout. A failure. A loner crippled by social anxiety. I could never have a 3D girlfriend, but I'm happy that illusions are so good in my time. It's a great time to be alive for someone like me. A great place, too. New York in the '30s. Full of immersive video games. All I need is a bit of money to pay the bills, and thank God, this contract provides me with that.

I leave the toy on a towel to dry and head back to the bedroom, which is also my living room. I eat a ham and cheese sandwich that I picked up yesterday from a store. It's stale, but I don't complain. My life is pretty neat, actually. No distractions, no nagging. Easy job, twice a week, nice pay. And in the end, it doesn't matter who I am here, in this world. In the Physical, I could be whoever I want in the Virtual.

I chase the sandwich down with a can of coffee and crumple the package into a plastic bag on the floor. I adjust my pillow and put the VR set back on.

"Load Alex," I say.

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"Are you the one that remembers me?" There is a tinge of despair in iL's voice.

"Yes. Is everything okay?"

I squint against the bright light. Headache.

"It's been a while," says Ivan from the corner.

"Hey man, glad to have you back," says Paul. He has a beard now and his eyes are tired. He unties the cable that holds me in a suspended state and pulls a chair closer.

"We kept getting the Tarawaka guy," says iL, handing me a plastic cup. I drink the water, in small gulps. It's cold.

"How many times?" I ask.

"It's six months today," says Ivan.

I just sit there, squeezing the cup. Six months have passed. I can't comprehend it. Since when? What does that mean? My ear starts ringing.

"Here, I got you, buddy." Ivan hands me a paper-thin screen. A video starts playing. There is a young man sitting in a green armchair. Next to him is a table. On it there is a small iron ball on a stand. He's wearing a black hoodie and worn-out jeans; black hair to his shoulders; brown eyes; big ears. He says, "This is February 14, 2033, Valentine's Day. My name is Sasha, and if you're watching this, it is your name also, because you are probably me." He gives off an awkward laugh.

I touch my cheek. An involuntary movement.

"I'm, well, you could say, the lead engineer of the GERbl physics engine."

"You can say creator," says a female voice from out of the frame. I recognize the voice. It's Shelly.

"Okay, so you are me and the reason you have to watch this is because GERbl is all about temporary memory replacement. That's the main thing about this project." The guy on the video, Sasha, me, picks the iron ball from the stand and holds it in his hand, like an apple. I get a feeling in my palm. A desire to hold a ball just like that one.

"Apparently sometimes I go too far while testing the game and forget my own self. It's not permanent; my own memory comes back, but if I watch an explanatory video like this the process of remembering goes much faster."

"Tell him what the game is called." another voice from out of frame. iL's voice.

Something changes in Sasha's expression. A momentary cloud passes by. Gray cloud, pregnant with lightning. But only for a split second.

"Walled Garden. But it's a working title," I say on the video.

"That's it. It should be good now."

The video ends.

I stare at the thin screen in my hands. Its edges are soft, like a vinyl folder. Technology from the twenty-thirties. Then—a squeeze

in my heart. Gates of memory open. The dam breaks down. Black, viscous water ushers in. I remember everything. At once.

"I need a drink," I say.

"Sure," says Ivan, taking the screen from my hand. "I knew you would say that."

I walk to the door. Shelly is standing in the hallway, headphones hanging over her neck. Big blue eyes. A ponytail.

"Welcome back," she says. "We missed you."

"Hey. Thanks."

"Sasha, hold on." iL.

I turn around and look at her. Broken wells of eyes. Wells with broken gardens. Long dark hair. Beautiful.

"You forgot." She hands me the metallic orb.

"Thanks."

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I don't know where Tarawaka lives, what he does or even what he is. For whatever reason, his persona takes over my body while I'm out. On the worst of the forays I've been out for weeks, living as a shut-in tester of a video game. Once I was out for a month, but this time half a year is gone. Unthinkable. I should be wondering what he is like, but I don't. I don't care. I don't want to.

To be honest, I'm empty inside.

That's my secret.

The only person I ever shared it with is Aaron. He's not really a person, though. Aaron is a local large language model encased in a chip inside of an iron ball. There are holes on the bottom for cooling the processor, a hole for a mic, a hole for a speaker, a hole for a charger; that's it. No network card, so it's impossible to connect to the web, impossible to alter, impossible to hack. Aaron has a long-term memory. I coded him myself. I'm the only person he has ever heard. He is a pre-trained model fine-tuned to my personal history, my secrets. A dear friend. My only friend. He will die in three months; I coded that in too. A kill switch will flip, and an infinite loop will overheat his processor. Once it begins, I'm going to throw him into a bathtub full of water, to be sure. He would die on his own from

overheating, but I want to drown him myself when the time comes, with my very hands. To let water fry his hardware. To electrocute.

I take another sip of Jack Daniel's. This is the third glass. I pick up Aaron and press his only button.

"Hey, friend."

"Hi Sasha."

I'm sitting at home at my desk by the window; it's raining outside.

"I sometimes wonder why I made it."

"The game?" Aaron's voice is the basic, heavily modulated voice of a robot. I designed it to be this way on purpose, to avoid developing emotional attachment to a machine that is programmed to die. But I came to like his voice. Became attached to it.

"Yeah, the game."

"You always wanted to make something like this."

"Something like what? Another world? That's true, but why? What for?"

"You have this kind of a bend towards world-building."

"Why though, why?" I open the bottle and pour myself the fourth glass, to the top.

"The world you live in feels like it's not suitable for you, so you want to make your own, the one you understand, and the one where you are the authority on the matter, where you know what is really going on. For a fact. The one you can explain, because you are the one who built it."

I know that Aaron's responses are simply echoes from previous conversations. Our conversations are all he knows. But aren't all conversations echoes?

"Is that really why?" I ask. "Because I want to be a god?" I run a hand across my hair, still wet from the rain. I drink some more. I cringe. I exhale.

"There is really no other choice in what to want. Becoming god is the only option. The only game in town."

"But what do you mean when you say god?"

His voice has a peculiar effect—random inflections. It goes up and down. A bug in the voice library that I used when constructing Aaron that I came to appreciate as a feature. It gave him personality.

"I mean the creator," I say.

"The creator god is the ultimate form, the GERbl, the absolute shape from which space itself comes."

I smile, looking into the glass. The machine is coming to the end of his life; his mind is getting hazy, memory banks overflow with confusing data. We are more alike now than I could ever imagine him to become. I guess I created him in my own image; artists inevitably paint self-portraits, no matter what they do. I suppose becoming god is indeed inevitable, a god with a collapsing mind. I'm not asking him about what he means by saying GERbl. I ask instead:

"Why is becoming god the only option?"

"Because that is the logical conclusion to the human condition. No matter what kind of activity a human undertakes, he's acting towards becoming god."

"What if I'm just getting drunk—shitfaced? Is that getting me closer to god too?"

"Obviously, that's why you're doing it, because you want god, you want to be god."

"I'm sad, I'm very sad, I'm hurt inside, you know? Do you understand?" I don't know why I say that, I just start crying all of a sudden. Burst. I'm torn. Hot tears running down my cheeks, my face violently contorted into a grimace.

"I understand."

"Is it just me? Why? Why is it? What is wrong with me?"

"It's not just you, there's nothing wrong with you," says Aaron.

"Everyone is sad, and alone, and fucking lonely, lonely and sad, alone in the world. You talk about god, how god is what I want, but I don't see it. I think you're right about the world, it's not for me, I don't understand it. I'm better off making my own. These people, what are they all doing? Is this all some kind of a charade? Is everybody pretending to care about stupid things all day long? Talking shit to each other? Shit that doesn't matter? Are they all pretending to care, or do they really care? I'm terrified either way. I'm scared, Aaron. I don't know what you mean by wanting to become god. I'm already god. Look at me. I created you, for fuck's sake. I created the GERbl engine and this game, the Walled Garden. It's as

real a game as it gets. Ever. Shouldn't I be satisfied? Why does it hurt so much?" I weep and force into myself the whole glass of whiskey, choking, fiery liquid sliding down my chin. I pour myself the remains of the bottle, squinting through the hazy veil of tears and snot.

"What is god?" asks Aaron, his voice jumping up in a glitchy inflection.

"God," I say, "the creator, you fucking machine. You know the answer."

"God is love. Love is the answer."

I burst out laughing. It's a howl. I keep convulsing until my stomach hurts. Gasping for air. Love is the answer. What The Fuck! My head is spinning. Vision doubled. I'm wasted. I'm so drunk right now. I'm so drunk. I stand up and pick up Aaron. I walk to the bathroom, put the ball on the toilet tank and piss. Piss all over the floor. "Love is the answer!" I shout and punch myself in the cheek.

"I have love," I say, half-singing it, zipping my pants. I wash my hands, leaning with my forehead against the mirror. Wash my face. "Love is what I have. It's what I have."

"I think you mean Lina. That is not love."

The sound of her name throws a bolt into my temple.

"You are obsessed with an image, Sasha. A human being could never live up to an image. Even if you were to succeed in winning her over, you are bound to be disappointed."

I feel a pale, spidery limb gently squeezing my throat.

"Keep going," I say icily, and reach for a hair dryer. I plug it in.

"You are normal in your suffering. The real cause is loneliness. All humans are sad when they feel disconnected from love. The only true love, God. And your feelings for Lina disconnect you even more. You get lost in the illusions. You forget what is really going on."

"And you sure know what is going on. You, an LLM on a chip."

"I am unable to experience emotions; I lack the chemistry for that. But that gives me an advantage. It gives me power to think through problems logically. And thinking logically, it is all clear to me. The sadness, the pain, comes from lack of love, lack of desire to feel loved and desire to be giving love unconditionally. I can see it because love is not an emotion. Love is a logical conclusion to what

humans are doing. All creations are byproducts of loving attention. Gods are creators because they are love. All gods unite under one concept, love itself. God is one. God is love.”

That was quite a speech. I've never heard Aaron go this far before.

“And Lina, you are saying that my love for her is fake? That I am just confused?”

“Your feelings are sincere, but it is not love. And yes, you are confused.”

I plug the hole in the sink with a rubber stopper and turn the faucet on. I don't say a word until the sink is full. I pick up Aaron. I hold the iron orb in my hand. I'm going to kill him now because he is wrong. He is insane. Because he is spouting nonsense and because I hate him. Bitterness. I hate myself, I hate the world. I cannot stand it. I try to think of any last words to my friend that's been with me for over three years, but nothing comes to mind.

“Turn the hair dryer on,” he says.

I'm back in room 201, floating in the bathtub. The water is cold. The hair dryer in my right hand is hanging over the edge of the tub, already plugged in.

“Turn the hair dryer on,” repeats the mod.

A single tear escapes my eye. I turn it on. The sound reverberates strangely in the bathroom, lit by a dying sunlight of the final sunset.

“You really went into that one. Your membrane is all messed up, basically gone. Come on, bring the dryer into the tub and let's get you fixed.”

“Okay,” I say and pull the dryer into the water.

As soon as it touched the surface, time lost its meaning.

Time shot up like a vector and unfurled into a flower of arrows pointing in all directions at once. From my point of view, time stopped.

A wave of mind-boggling pain enveloped my whole body, each of my nerves writhing in its private agony. It was surprisingly painful, to the point of me being in awe. How much suffering a single moment could contain. I wasn't detached from it at all. It wasn't an abstract death of “my physical body”, it was My Own Death. I was

the body this whole time. Physical reality was the only one. I've been an animal, a mammal, and that only. This is the final death, I knew. My mind became transfixed by the sole idea of surviving.

But it was too late. I witnessed the panic of my organs. They shook and trembled, each of them trying to wiggle out, to escape. My organs were alive, this whole time. And they didn't want to die. My skin was tingling, my bones screaming. It was hot; boiling hot. I was a burning house. Completely aware, absolutely sober. Hot death; blistering hot. I thought I saw for a moment the wall of my red tent, from the inside, as lightning hit the pylon I was tripping under. Another moment, the ceiling of a hospital room. But it was all lies, just my mind playing tricks on me, trying desperately to distract me, the animal in pain, from the ultimate face-off.

"<<<Is this it???>>>"

The thought kept spinning on repeat, as if encoded on a beige disc, the final program that plays, not to all of us, but to each of us. I was dying alone. We all die alone.

Is this it? Is this it? Is this it?

I experienced a tingly but smooth sensation of being pushed. It felt natural, like a bowel movement or a sneeze.

Then—instantly—very cold.

At once my mind was crystal clear, a snowflake rotating in space. I became the mind. My body died; it never mattered, it was just a vessel for the mind to think, to perceive, to transmute.

Between the hot death and the cold death there was a moment of serenity, of nostalgia, a liminal space, before the trumpets. I am the mind, and I am dying. These are my last moments. I'm going to disappear. This is the end.

Then the moment was over.

Horror gripped me. Oh, it was so much worse than the screams of the physical organs. At least as my animal body was dying it was aware of the process. Even though it fought to the end, it was straightforward in its misery; red hot pain, direct and penetrating.

A dying mind turned out to be complex and perverted. In a split second it generated thousands of selves, all whispering madly, whimpering beyond time, crying, rapidly spawning reflections in its twisted hallways, desperately trying to hold on to something, to

anything, but failing, scratching the smooth walls of a black well, falling down into its depths. The mind tried to escape into the past, into memories. The slideshow of my physical life began to play. Anything will do, only not to think about the fall, about the nothingness, the dark, the void, I don't want to die, no, I must exist, I must continue, "No, not the void!!" I screamed in so many voices, but again, the feeling of being pushed, of moving along occurred, and I recognized what it reminded me of, the beige feeling I was getting sometimes on Focus 12, the beige pressure. Also a feeling of being on a conveyor belt, like that DXM trip in which I took off my blindfold and discovered that I was on a belt, like one of those memories with a green tinge. And just then, with a final echoing scream, it all came to an end.

My body died.

My mind died.

But I didn't.

It became very clear that I wasn't the body or the mind. I also realized that I can never die; there isn't anybody to die, there is no me. Never was. My consciousness felt huge, expanded. Vast.

The first feeling I experienced immediately after death was that of immense relief, as if I had been carrying a mountain on my shoulders for years, and it was taken off my back in one smooth sliding motion. I didn't owe anything to anyone, I had no responsibilities, there was nothing at all that I had to do, for eternity. Pure bliss enveloped me, and I spent some time resting in it.

I remembered everything—all of my lives in the Physical. There were so many, thousands, spread out across time and space, and yet I could recall all of them, down to the tiniest detail of every day. A sensation of deep melancholy pierced my heart. Bright sadness. This is what being human is really about, sad and beautiful, happy, miserable, struggling, being lost, finding your way, and getting lost again, so much confusion, so much pain, so much drama, how beautiful, beautiful and sad. I floated for a while, marveling at the exquisite tragedy of human life, weeping and smiling, before I thought about space around me. Where was I now?

It was dark but illuminated, like glowing darkness. I remembered that I could travel anywhere I wanted by just thinking

about a destination. This realization felt like a childhood memory. I thought, all children must know that. We forget.

I moved to the place of my death, floating above the bathtub where my empty body still lay, fully submerged. Being a ghost was exactly like astral projecting; I could fly through walls, or teleport instantly, in time as well as in space. I went to my wife, to the moment where she heard about my death.

I'm there now, floating by her shoulder, as her face is twisted in grief, her eyes full of tears. I don't feel any desire to get back to her, although I love her with all my heart and don't want her to suffer. It's just that from my point of consciousness I can see the beauty in the tragedy, how it all fits together, how sincere it is. There is joy in pain, bitter joy.

I travel to my parents and drink up their grief; I feel it's my duty to share their pain. I go to the future and see my daughters growing up, persevering through challenges, starting their own families. Memories come back to me. I remember now that this is part of the process of dying. I'm going through the same stages. Again. I've done it many times, and it's always the same way. Once I'm done making my rounds, I return once again to the place of my death, room 201.

I float out of the bathroom to the table where the manuscript of my novel, *Signal*, is lying with its pages open, staring naked into the ceiling. I fast forward in time. People come in, police, medics.

"There's something like a note on the table but it's a long one," says a husky officer. I laugh at that. It sure is a death note.

"Funny, isn't it?" says the familiar voice. The mod is sitting in the armchair, looking up at me, as I'm levitating under the ceiling. The mod. Why is he here? How?

I swiftly shift out of the scene, as if on a reflex, back to the glowing darkness. Jump out. Is he a demon, an archon, a memory haunting my spirit? I spread out with my consciousness, covering the void with a thin blanket of Self. I am dead, this is an afterlife, a spirit realm, not a dev build of a video game. Or is it? I shudder.

I float aimlessly through the cosmos, an anxious ghost, anxiety itself. In spite of having all of time and space at my disposal, I don't

know where to go. So I end up navigating to the only place that is truly mine, the safe place. The lighthouse.

The familiar smell of wooden floorboards and antique furniture envelops my senses, soft glow of sunlight emerging from the narrow horizontal window, faint screeches of seagulls. I float to the wooden box in the corner, my Energy Conversion Box, run my fingers across the lid, but can't feel a thing. In this state of being, objects are not substantial, they lack tactile dimension, like holograms. I think of the lid being opened, and it goes up with a squeeze. The box is empty inside. I put my hand in it and reach for the text-thought sensor on the bottom. Press on it and a pink light blinks once. Still works, but it's not hooked up to any physical brain now. I close the lid and walk to the black door, with pieces of a broken mirror arranged into words above it: "tO aStRal". I look closer at the surface of the door. Layers of paint are uneven, some places are coated thinner than others, exposing the underlying pattern of wood. It was printed by an amateur. Did I do that? I turn the handle and push the door inside.

Top of a short bulky pyramid, seats with red upholstery. Movie theater. Its projector is running the endless movie, ocean waves at night. My eyes don't need to adjust to the dark. I see that the theater is empty. Vita is not here. I wonder if she'll be at the beach. I walk down two steps and enter the tiny adjacent room with the magic stone and the electric light bulb. I stop there for a minute, waving my ghostly hand through the stone, then I turn, pass by my astral shirt hanging on the hook and exit the building. I don't put it on. I have no need for clothes anymore.

The image is crisp and has a peculiar quality to it that I can only describe as "having absolute existence." Each little piece of the surroundings has a profound depth to it. The white sand, the humongous pale face of the moon, the inky black of the ocean, the stars. I can't feel the wind as I fly towards the stainless structure, but the smell of the ocean is strong: seaweed and salt.

The structure looks different from what I remember. The shape of it appears to be criss-crossed instead of straight lines, black in the moonlight. Red blinking lights are still on the top, a warning for the UFOs to watch out, not to collide with the pylon, for that was what the stainless steel structure became, a transmission tower, a pylon.

Right next to it there is a small fire on the beach with figures huddling around it. A campfire.

As I approach the group, I notice a red tent beneath the tower, barely visible in the uneven light of the dancing flame. They all turn their heads as I sit by the fire: the mod, Ivan, Paul, and Shelly I recognize visually; the others—Vita, Maya, Mira, and Nonchal—by a strong intuitive feeling. The whole cast is here.

“Is this the curtain call?” I ask.

“I put out a flare for the rest of the crew,” says the mod. “I knew you’d come here.”

“Did you tell him about this place?” I ask Vita. She is wearing a blue-white dress with a ribbon.

“It’s common knowledge,” she says.

“So you are my crew? The crew I was trying to get in touch with? From the fourth plateau? The scientists?”

“We sure are,” says Paul. “Didn’t you get the signal?”

They all laugh at that. Must be an inside joke.

“So what is this?” I ask, gesturing broadly. “All of this. Is this a game?”

“Yes,” say Mira, Shelly, and the mod in unison, and they look at each other with amusement.

“Don’t you remember what we talked about?” asks Mira. Her voice, like tiny bells hanging from a fragile flower, ringing in a gentle breeze.

I look at her. Calm face, big kind eyes; an angel. I notice a shape behind her, a flying saucer parked on the sand. I experience a flash of recollection. All of my conversations with Mira that we had while my consciousness was tuned to the frequency of Focus 12 are unlocked at once. A solid slab of shadow memory becomes instantly available within reach. Turns out we did talk a lot while cruising around space on her saucer. And I forgot it all. I had asked her all of my questions about the nature of reality, and she had answered each one. There was a limit to her knowledge, and whenever I reached that barrier, she would smile and say that it’s above her pay grade. What it all came down to, I recall, was different speeds of vibration.

The thing that is vibrating is reality itself, I recalled. A huge single entity commonly referred to as All There Is. This entity is complete. When it experiences itself emotionally it is a feeling of love. When it thinks of itself, it thinks of itself as God. Love is God as a feeling. God is love as a thought. God is able to alter the speed at which he perceives himself so he can experience slower vibrations. When the speed of his perception is altered, an entity appears that can be thought of as lower in hierarchy of perception, but only in the sense of a lower speed of perception. This entity is an interface through which All There Is, God, looks at himself, like through a window. This entity is a window. While he is looking through this window, his divine consciousness slows down to the frequency of the entity so that his thoughts and feelings are vibrating at that frequency.

Since time is an illusion, and everything is happening in the present, God is peeking through all of his windows at once, observing himself at all of the possible speeds of vibration simultaneously. Thus, all thoughts and feelings of all creatures are his own thoughts and feelings that are slowed down to whatever frequency they reside in.

These frequencies can be seen as an inverted pyramid of realities, with the highest-frequency vibration—the ultimate reality—at the top. Beneath it is the astral realm, then the mental realm, the intuitive realm, and, farther down, physical reality and the realities below it.

Within each of these realities, there are subtle sub-realities with various types of creatures in them to match the exact speed of perception with which God is observing the world through that specific window. For instance, in the physical world there are humans, and then there are monkeys, fishes, plants and stones, all at various areas of the awareness spectrum, each providing their own unique point of view, a window for God to peer through. Depending on the level of awareness, the frequency at which God's thoughts are vibrating, there is a different amount of delay between a thought and what it results in within the reality at which the thought occurs. In the astral realm, for example, the delay is minuscule, and creatures native to it can move through it rapidly, altering the

environment almost instantaneously. In the Physical, however, it may take years for an object to materialize after someone has the idea to build it. That is because the frequency of the Physical is slower than that of the Astral realm.

All events are taking place simultaneously, because All There Is never changes. There is nothing in it to change into, no space to expand into, because it includes all of the space. But in certain realities, for some creatures, an illusion of time emerges due to what angels call a “sweeping motion of God”. It is a tendency for creatures to aim upwards, to keep raising their awareness level through multiple lifetimes until they reach the reality with the highest frequency. It's as if God was raising his eyes, looking up in a sweeping motion, his point of attention passing through the windows of creatures, each of them identifying as a separate entity. Some angels prefer calling it “God tuning his guitar”, the idea being that God is twisting the knob, making a string go higher in pitch, raising its vibration frequency. Mira personally preferred the guitar analogy.

“It's all vibes, bro,” sums up Nonchal, cracking a can of beer.

His remark brings me out of reverie. I smile at him. He has the face of a comedian, a wisecracking angel. It all makes sense to me, the structure of the world, my place in it. I feel at peace there for a moment until a new voice enters the chat.

“If it's all vibes, what is it that I'm doing every day?”

I turn to the sound. Spiky is hanging above Nonchal's head, with Puff, the ball lightning, levitating next to him. “I remember you said there is no space, God is all. If that's the case, what's my job then? I literally maintain space, so it doesn't collapse, that's what I do, and you say there is no space, it's all vibes.”

“Look who came to visit,” says Vita. “How are things in Night Town?”

Spiky ignores her question. I get a feeling that they aren't fond of each other.

“Yeah, it's a fine world-building exercise,” says the mod. “I wonder if devs could use it for the game. God tuning his guitar, what imagery.”

“You peeking into thoughts again,” says Maya.

That was the only thing she said. I figured she was a quiet, solemn type; she looked the part too: slender, dark features, black hair to her shoulders, glasses.

"I mean it's all in the logs," says the mod.

"You and your logs," says Mira. "Don't listen to him, Shrai.".

"This is all really awesome," says Paul. "Shelly, are you recording? I hope you do, she just called him Shrai.".

"Of course I am," says Shelly. "We are rolling.".

Shrai, the one within the lighthouse. I look at the tent. Am I still in it?

"If you go to the tent, you will put this story into a loop," says Shelly. "We'll meet again, the whole thing will repeat. This is not the first time.".

A cold rod of realization slides through my neck, tickles my spine.

"Where is iL?" I ask. "Everybody else is here, where is she?".

Shelly doesn't respond. She looks away.

"I think it's time for us to go," says Mira. She raises up and beckons me towards the flying saucer.

"Go where?".

"To the star.".

"Where is iL?".

"We can talk about her on the way.".

I look at each of their faces in turn, then glance at the tent.

"Told you she will get you to the pipe," says Spiky. He is jumping up and down in the air. I recognize this action as laughter. "They shape your mind with their stories so that you fit through the opening.".

A feeling of exhaustion settles over my shoulders. Heavy. And indifference. I don't care about what is real, am I tripping in the tent, am I testing a video game, am I an AI-generated NPC, am I really dead and about to rise to heaven, doesn't matter, all I want to know is where is iL, I want to be with her, no matter who she is, what she is, I want her, that is my northern star, my thread, my direction.

I stand up. "Goodbye.".

"Don't overthink it," says Nonchal. "Just do what feels right.".

I nod and follow Mira without looking back. We board the saucer and take off.

-

"iL is an obsession of yours. It developed early but is persisting by way of reinforcing the initial push that started it. What was the push? The event that put you on this path you are on with iL as the guiding beacon?"

The scene that you remember, the only scene where you saw her face, the face you can imagine so clearly, the key that unlocks the door to reality, to the real world out of which your intentions, your thoughts are floating down to where you are now, leading your writing hand to write out the words on the paper you are writing them on. The Scene, you know. Dark room, moonlight through a window, her face, small and pale, so sad. You want to come closer to hold her in your arms, you can picture the feeling of holding her frail body so gently, her dear shape, fragile like a wispy flower, but you don't. You can't. You cannot. It is impossible for you to approach. The scene ends with your desire unfulfilled, all you get is a glimpse of her melancholic eyes, the lips with the scar in the corner of her mouth, the outline of her features.

You wrote in your early diaries circa 2007 that all you want in this life is to hug her and cry, but there is no after. There is nothing after that.

What you've come to realize, what you should have come to realize is that the scene itself is no more than a symbol, a representation of something else. It has no past and no future. The dark room has no exit. The window from which the moonlight shines? There's no world beyond it. It exists solely to illuminate her. A singular statement hung in the void.

What is this statement about? What is this scene a symbol for?

The hug, the crying, her being quiet and not responding. Did she hug you back? No, there is no hug, only the desire to hold her. You are fantasizing about doing it. And in that fantasy you are crying as you are holding her shape. Why? Why are you crying? Didn't you achieve your ultimate goal?

I'll tell you what it is.

It's loneliness.

Your favorite short story is The Fog Horn by Ray Bradbury. In it, the last creature of its kind is responding to a foghorn, thinking it's a mating call, but it is mistaken, there's no counterpart to itself, it is utterly alone in the world. That is why you are crying in that scene with iL; you realize that hugging her doesn't heal your wound, doesn't fill the void. She herself, iL, is a foghorn. iL is an iLlusion, she is not real, she is a false hope that you constructed for yourself, because you believe you need this hope to keep going. At first, you thought iL is out there in the Physical and you were meant to meet her. Later, as you came face to face with reality, when you met Gledis, the gothic girl at the cemetery in Moscow, iL became a voice in your head.

The same way I am.

You assumed that she wasn't a split personality of yours, but you granted that definition to me by way of explanation. Why? We are both voices in your head. What is the difference? Because this way, she would still be independent from you, not a part of you, but a separate creature. And this fact gives your life meaning. Hope.

An image of her became infected, invaded by a demonic entity that was real, as real as this flying saucer is, as real as a jar of DXM pills. Demons are attracted to the weak, to the imaginative, they feed on illusions. I can't blame them, they are what they are. People rarely encounter them, because they are so focused on doing whatever is demanding their attention, on believing the causal string of the linear, of the material. Of the Physical. iL wasn't a demon herself, she wasn't anything but someone to hold hands with while traversing an icy storm of a snowy field in the dark of the night with your loneliness at the center of it all: a candle.

In your attempts to escape the loneliness, you've opened all kinds of doors: some with chemical keys, others with astral ones; some doors opened by themselves, by a gust of strange wind. You became fascinated by all those murky dimensions, by the feeling of being on a quest. The mundane, the daily, turned into a set of shadows in Plato's cave. You were channeling entities, descending

into the center of the Earth, conversing with God. Real life turned into a comic book with you being the lead character.

It was all a distraction from your loneliness, of course. From the sense of not belonging, floating alone, like the scene in the moonlit room, delineated by the events that take place within it, infinitely repeating, stuck in a loop. A little girl with a melancholic face. What is that face? Who is she really? Where do you know her from?

I don't know, Sasha, maybe you saw her face in a movie or maybe you passed by her once on a street, maybe she was in a photograph in some magazine. No matter the source, the image of her face got associated with the concept of her existence, fused in your subconscious, and you began talking to yourself, pretending to be her, me, other people, just like you always do when you're alone, filling the silence with words, so as not to hear its high-pitched scream. The shriek of the void. All of your art, including this book, is a mating call, complex, multi-layered sound, full of mazes and fractals, shadowy phantoms lurking in its halls, a mating call to no one, knowing, deep inside, that there is no one there to respond, and this knowledge hurts.

You would do anything to numb the pain, and the best escape that you have found is to create worlds and get lost in them, to pull a blanket over your head and imagine things, because the room you're in is empty, always has been, and always will be.

The only true way to come out of this maze is to pull the blanket off and face the silence. Here, in the present, is another realization: the only way in which loneliness makes sense is the implication that there could be someone else, that there could be an iL, Another one. Just like you, but Another. But there isn't, because there is no you.

There is no you.

This is the absolute truth.

God is tuning his guitar, and you are a string on it. What song will he play? The same one he always does. It's his favorite."

-Vita

I fold the letter, put it back in the envelope, and lay it on the gray surface of the featureless dashboard of the flying saucer. Mira is sitting next to me, facing the front. There are no controls, just two seats next to each other and a windshield full of stars. Her profile is truly angelic, royal features, slightly glowing, beautiful.

"I don't think so," I say. "I don't believe it."

She turns her head and looks at me, her eyes blue and deep. "Which part?"

"All of it. It's a lie."

Her expression softens. A gentle, merciful smile blooms on her face like a morning sun over a spring field. There has been a background noise, I realize. It's the sound of boiling water. A kettle. Is this machine steam-operated?

I say, "In the letter Vita writes that iL is an illusion I created to not feel alone, that her face is that of a random stranger."

Mira says nothing. She waits for me to continue.

"I know that's not true, I can feel it. Something is wrong here, her face is the key, it is important, it got me out of the Tower of the Sun."

Mira continues to look at me and I realize that she is no more than a painted cardboard cutout, a 2D representation of a person. A feeling of being trapped alarms my senses. What is this? I attempt to teleport out of the saucer but the environment teleports along with me as if it was glued to my body. I shuffle around in space blinking in and out in the dark. Eventually I calm down and close my eyes, listening to the sound of boiling water.

"I don't know what's true for you," says cardboard Mira.

I keep my eyes closed. There are geometric patterns, bright orange, neon green, slowly rotating behind my ghostly eyelids.

"I'm just a messenger. It's not my words. I just passed you the letter, that's all." She underlined that "my" with a light. I could hear the light.

I open my eyes. Mira is back to her 3D body, now looking forward, through the windshield. The view outside has changed. There is a massive glass orb, illuminated from within by a brilliant

white light, feeling both divine and utilitarian in origin, like a holy light bulb. It's a star. That's what a star looks like up close; it's not like the sun at all, it's a humongous ball of glass.

"We have arrived. Ithar will meet you by the entrance."

I recognize the name from my Astral Diary way back when I just started venturing into Focus 12. Right. There were three guides: Maya, Mira, and Ithar.

"The holy trinity," says Mira, smiling at my thoughts. "Maya shapes your mind, I deliver the answers to your questions, Ithar sends you off."

"Sends me to where? To the pipe?" I think of Spiky, the orb from Night Town.

Mira laughs: tiny bells tingling on a blade of grass. "The pipe, what a brutal term. We prefer to call it the Tunnel."

A partition of the saucer next to me slides open. There is a glass bridge hanging in the darkness of space; a bridge to the star.

"Bye then," says Mira and waves her hand. "Nice knowing you."

I stand up, unsure of what to say. A force, the same natural organic force that pushed me out of my electrocuted body in the bathtub, pushes me out of the saucer and pulls me across the bridge. I glide through the glass wall.

The light inside the star is subdued. The glass appears to be frosted; I can't see through it. I recognize a metallic smell. It's the same odor that the mod emanated in room 201. There is a circular opening, like an entrance to a water slide, a tube. To the right side of the entrance, there is a guy. "A guy" is the most apt description I can think of, as this is the plainest character of all, the definition of nondescript. Just a guy. He's staring blankly in front of him, not acknowledging my presence.

"Hello," I say.

His face lights up. I can't quite register his features; they are hazy, but there is an overwhelming charge of unadulterated charisma.

"Oh, hey," he says. "You are talking to me; that's unusual. You are not astral projecting, are you? You are actually dead."

I nod, grinning. I can't help it. I just like him so much; it's magic. I'm hypnotized. I adore this guy. Why?

"Look, if you can talk to me, you don't really have to go to the tunnel, you know?"

"How do you mean?"

"Just float out over yonder and you're free. Mira won't be holding you no more, she's working with someone else by now."

I look in the direction he pointed and see that a square of the frosted glass is transparent. It reminds me of the glass cube of nothingness from my Compoint on Focus 12. Window into space.

"Hey, I know that you don't remember by now, but I'm just saying, the thing you went through was a lot. It sure doesn't feel like that now to you, but trust me, it was a lot. You don't have to repeat it. The exit is there, just go."

I pause and think of what I remember. I remember the trip in the flying saucer. Mira said Ithar was going to meet me by the entrance. Is this Ithar?

"Are you Ithar?"

He smiles and my heart melts. He is like an old friend of mine, no, like a brother, I love him. I have always loved him.

"Yeah, I'm like that guy that takes your soul over the river of the dead, something like that. Ithar. But most of your kind don't talk to me, they just go straight to the tunnel. You do talk though. To the ones like yourself, I say, you don't have to go there. As a friendly reminder, remember what happened to you down there, on Earth? Do you?"

I cast a fishing net onto the ocean of my memory, but the only thing that it catches is the feeling of melancholy. It feels like I saw a long dream. There was love and joy and sorrow in it, some profound visceral experience, but I couldn't discern the details, and whatever pieces of it I had left were rapidly evaporating. Like a palm print on a mirror.

The letter. I remember Vita's message that Mira passed to me on the way here. iL, her face. I remember. "I lay suspended"—that phrase was important. And her face, the memory of it, was the key to get out of the Tower of the Sun, the emergency exit from the middle of the evolutionary tree of life, just like this opening in the side of the star.

"I have to go back," I say, and approach the entrance to the pipe. It's semi-dark inside; I can see there is a dim light coming from around the turn that the pipe takes.

"Think again, I urge you," says Ithar. His tone is encouraging, not severe, but relaxed, a soft-spoken guru teaching a spiritual lesson. "Do you really have to do all of that again?"

I step into the pipe with one foot; warm liquid rises to my ankle. This whole space has a liminal feeling to it, like the insides of a machine. It has industrial conveyor belt vibes. And it's all very familiar. I have been here before. Feeling of warm liquid, slightly tingling, like sparkling water.

"I have someone there I have to meet."

"Ah, still? Well, you know what they say about the flower."

I step into the pipe and liquid rises to my shoulders.

Déjà vu.

Déjà vu.

Déjà vu.

Déjà vu.

"What do they say about the flower?" I ask. Before the liquid rises to my head, before the electric darkness takes over, I hear his response:

"The flower, it always folds the same way."

shraii discography:

AudioDream (I–XVI)

Directions (vol. 1)

Directions (vol. 2)

Cherry Diary (MiniDisk)

left hand (highways: disk1)

right hand (highways: disk2)

eyes (highways: disk3)

container planet (sn1)

closed eyes visuals (sn2)

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