

# **THE BRIDGE BEYOND TOMORROW**

**BY WARREN SINGER**

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# **AN EPIC JOURNEY INTO AN ALTERNATIVE UNIVERSE**

Welcome to the world of the 21st century. Greg Stewart is the owner of a successful computer company, developing the latest simulation technology.

The realistic 3-D products are the best available on the market. However, Greg is becoming involved in areas best left alone, where the borderline between reality and simulation becomes blurred.

Greg is sucked up into a digital universe, run by a superpower, known as the Master. Greg searches for a way to escape back to the normal world. But can he ever truly escape?

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Warren David Singer was born in South Africa in 1967.

He completed a BA in English literature and Psychology from the University of Port Elizabeth and an Honors degree in Psychology from the University of Cape Town. Immigrating to Israel in 1992, he completed a Master's degree in Second Language Acquisition and an English teaching certificate. After a two-year stint as an English teacher he branched out into technical writing, to become a full-time professional writer.

He currently lives with his wife and two children in Israel and continues to write.

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## Preface

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*The long line of people stretched into the distance, beyond the horizon. I wanted to shout to make them stop and look around, but they continued to walk on blindly, caught up in the march of time.*

Our universe – the universe of Western civilization of the twenty-first century – is a universe filled with the concepts of relativity, quantum physics, genetic engineering and high-speed data communications. It is a universe where human technology lies at the forefront of the quest for advancement in human understanding and human civilization.

Changes in technology, occurring at an extremely rapid pace, make great demands on society and the individual. These changes affect in fundamental ways the structural, political, economical and social organization of our society. They affect the individual's psychological makeup and leave their imprint on the human subconscious. Their influence is felt in poetry, in art, in music and in our dreams and cultural symbols.

In modern society, our understanding of the structural organization of the universe is a battlefield of conflicting perspectives. The worldview is fought over from a confusing melting pot of different religious, cultural and political viewpoints. We live in a universe with an undefined, amorphous structure, changing as society changes and often leaving us bewildered as to our place in the scheme of things, or how to respond to events.

The search for meaning in life is a problem of the modern psyche. We see ourselves as living in an ambivalent world, where our status is not clearly defined. Alienation, loneliness and depression are the psychological diseases of the modern, technological world, caused when individuals are isolated within huge, anonymous cities and cut off from the community and their roots to the land.

As technology advances, we become further detached from our connections to the outside world. We are entering into a stage of technological development where the representation of reality takes precedence over the direct encounter with the physical world. More and more, the outside world is no longer something that we encounter directly through our senses. It is mediated through the medium of technology. The television, phone and Internet have become our means of communicating with the outside world. We spend most of our time indoors, in our big cities and high-rise apartments, traveling in air-conditioned cars and trains.

Almost everything that we touch is man-made and devoid of long-term permanence. For the most part, we have had no role in creating

or witnessing the development of the products that have come to fill up our lives. The 'outside' world is no longer an internal part of our lives, but rather something that we view from a window or experience second-hand, through the television, newspaper or radio. The overall effect of all this is to alienate us further from our connections to nature and to our own biological rhythms.

Today's news headlines reveal a world where the future is quickly becoming the world of the past. New military technology and medical breakthroughs that once belonged to the realm of science fiction have become confined to the pages of history. Our world is being reconstructed before our eyes.

Where is the trend taking us? Perhaps part of the fear of the computer, expressed in films that depict the individual being swallowed up and trapped within the computer's framework or hounded by a computerized monster, reflects future shock. Our difficulty in coping with the rapidly changing technology of the future gives rise to the feeling of loss of control, the fear of anonymity and mechanization, the fear of losing one's soul and being sucked up by a digital world.



# Chapter 1

## The Experiment

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*Only a man blind with ignorance is so certain of his path that he never looks around to check where he is going.*

## GREG'S DIARY

In the early hours of the morning, Greg, a thickly built, middle aged man, who's rough, gnarled hands showed the wear and tear that comes from the physical labor of a farmer, sat at a desk with a pen in hand, laboring painstakingly over each word as he wrote. He was writing an account of the strange events that he had experienced many years ago. He wrote like a man possessed. Oblivious to his surroundings, not that there was much to hear outside on this calm and silent night, he had been writing since the early hours of the evening. Tired, his eyes bloodshot and his back stiff from the hours spent in front of the desk, Greg sighed and set aside the pen. It was time for sleep.

Julia, his wife, lay silently asleep in the bedroom next door. He stood up and went out of the study and into the bedroom to check that she was sleeping soundly. Kneeling down, he kissed her gently on the forehead, adjusting the blanket that had slipped down to reveal her naked shoulders. Approaching forty-five, she was still strikingly beautiful, retaining the same innocent and open face of the girl he had met twenty years ago. Her long blond hair, now graying slowly, spilled over onto the pillow. He stood up, returned to the study and sat down again at the table. The lamp light shone on the pages of the manuscript. Greg held up the pages, debating with himself whether he was following the right course by recording his past on paper. He was almost tempted to tear up the pages and erase all that they represented. His hands closed slowly on the pages, as though to crush them. All of a sudden he stopped and unclenched his fists, remembering why he had written this.

This was to be his legacy to his wife and family. It was time to break open the long-sealed gates of silence and tell them about the strange events that he had experienced. An internal instinct had urged him to set his house in order and organize his affairs. He could not explain this logically, but he knew it to be correct. The house and the lonely night seemed to exude an atmosphere of sadness and nostalgia.

He glanced briefly over what he had written.

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*Dear Julia,*

*This is a story that I need to tell you. It may surprise you to know that I have kept this hidden from you for the last twenty years. Nothing would have convinced me to share it with you, except for a growing feeling of mine that my fate is about to change. If anything should happen to me and I am gone, I would like you to know the final secretes about your husband.*

*The events described here may seem strange and frightening. Perhaps this story was a mad dream. I will let you be the judge.*

---

Sighing, he reached out to switch off the light. There would be more writing tomorrow night. The story was not yet complete.

## BEGINNINGS – GREG’S STORY

There are closed doors in our minds, hidden landscapes that we do not reveal to anyone, not even our closest and dearest, for fear of what we might unleash upon them and ourselves. Every marriage has its secretes, communicated in the poignant silences, in a stray glance or a word let slip. And there may be things that one is not ready to talk about, until the time is right.

Julia, you always thought my life was an open book to you. Perhaps it was and maybe my thoughts were hidden only to myself for all these years, but revealed clearly to you. I knew you in another place and time. I remember how you appeared to me in the desert, sad and beautiful, but dead. The last time we parted, your eyes were filled with tears and you told me that you loved me. But of course, you could never know about this, could you? It was another Julia and another lifetime.

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Way back – I remember – when I was young and innocent. My mind was curious and eager and I was full of uncontrolled ambition. You know the story of my successful career, but I never told you the full truth of how it ended and how I fell from my pedestal.

I was born on the first of September 1975. My parents christened me Greg Stewart.

I grew up in a small town in the mid-west. We lived in a small, three-bedroom house with a tiny back yard in a quite, middle-class suburb. I had what you could consider a normal childhood. I was the only child for several years and then my parents had a girl. Perhaps because of the age difference, we never shared the sibling rivalry that was typical of many brothers and sisters. I was protective if not a little reserved with my little sister.

I was a sickly child in my early years, always catching colds and coming home with a runny nose and sore ears. I also suffered from asthma, which prevented me from doing many active sports. My parents did try to teach me to swim at a young age, but I objected to this so strongly that they eventually gave up. As a result of the amount of time I spent at home, I developed a strong affection for watching TV and reading comic books. These were the hobbies of my growing years and I shared them with the few friends that I had. I had a rather large collection of comic classics. We kids traded these for other copies, so that we were never in short supply of something new to read. I also joined the public library, which enabled me to take out books. I enjoyed especially the science fiction section.

When I wasn't watching TV or reading comic books, I had school friends over. We'd play at marbles, checkers or monopoly. Sometimes I had to baby-sit my little sister when my Mom went out to run short errands to the shops.

At school, I was a fair to middling student. I seemed to get by in general, tending to sit towards the back of the class, where I could secretly take glances at the comic books that were hidden snugly under my class file. Like most boys of my age, I had the usual concerns and got into the same scraps as thousands of other boys my age. I had erotic fantasies about some of the younger female teachers. I enjoyed playing the occasional trick on an unsuspecting classmate and occasionally even got into schoolyard scraps that ended either in the headmaster's office or in the school sick room.

School was generally okay. Sometimes, when it became a bit tiresome or boring, I made the well-timed bunk, moaning to my



parents that I was sick and having an asthma attack. In my case, they generally believed me.

Once a year, our family would go on a two-week vacation.

Such was the nature of my childhood. In general, a not too unpleasant one – if marred by too much time spent staring out the window or at the TV, from the comfort of my bedroom or the living room couch.

I'd always had a strong interest in the mathematical and computer sciences and decided that this was what I wanted to do with my life. Law and medicine seemed too hard and serious for me. In many ways, computer programming was a glamorous career, offering high salaries and exiting opportunities for advancement. A computer programmer could command the salary of a lawyer or doctor without having to spend as many years studying. Luckily, my maths marks were good, and I seemed to have a natural tendency and ability for this field. Computers looked like a fun and interesting occupation.

At the age of nineteen I left the safe nest of my parents for college.

In the spring of 1999 I was an upcoming college graduate, with a degree in computer science. My head was full of ideas and my path was set for the fast-paced city and big dollars. My horizons seemed clear sailing, without a cloud in the sky.

My first job at a large banking corporation provided me with a fat salary, plus stock options, automobile, paid company vacations, health insurance and a pension fund. I was earning much more than my parents had been able to do combined.

By this time I had moved into my own two-bedroom bachelor pad in Manhattan.

Hours at work were long. This job lasted two years, after which I looked for something more interesting and challenging, in which there'd be more opportunities for creative programming. For a while I did contracting work, hiring myself out to various companies.

I quickly grew tired of this type of work and accepted an interesting offer at a software firm, developing 3-Dimensional multi-media software applications. This line of software development quickly caught my interest. It required just the right combination of creativity, imagination and ingenuity to satisfy me, and it appealed readily to the

part of me that loved games and comic book stories. At the time, the computer game industry was still in its infancy, but I knew back then that this was the direction in which I wanted to go.

## **3-GI SIMULATION INC**

I quickly decided that I'd done enough work for other people and it was time to start my own software company. I had all the experience that I needed, I had the ideas, and I knew some other guys in the field who were interested in starting out with something fresh.

In the beginning it was hard to find someone who would take our ideas seriously and be willing to invest. I used my personal savings to see me through the first six months and took out a large bank loan to cover some of the operating expenses. We didn't exactly work out of the back of a garage, but our small operation was close enough to this. We had a team of five, working from home to develop the original prototypes. After six months, two of my original partners left for more fruitful offers, leaving me the sole owner of the company.

We sold our first software product through local retail stores to limited success. By this time I was fighting hard to keep the idea of my own company alive. I needed capital. I drafted a business plan and submitted it to various financial institutions and private investors. It was the right time and place. We had our money and then I was busy hiring additional staff and office space.

In the beginning we had a modest office with three rooms. My staff consisted of two graphic artists, three programmers, a project manager, a product manager, a full-time secretary and a part-time accountant.

Six months later we were well underway towards developing our first genuine prototype, a highly realistic 3D simulation game. To make the game more interesting, we'd started experimenting with some of the latest technology that incorporated touch, smell, sight, voice recognition and sounds into the game. The user wore a special headgear that resembled a helmet. The helmet provided heat and touch sensors that could respond according to the events in the game. A small duct blew air and especially prepared perfumes towards the nose

of the player. The visor of the helmet enabled complete 3-D vision and embedded speakers provided high quality audio. The user could also talk. A microphone picked this up and transmitted the vocal commands to the computer. Special audio-processing software enabled the computer to interpret the voice commands.

The computer and helmet were connected, so that when the user moved his head, the software application responded appropriately, changing the direction of the view. In addition to the helmet, the user also wore wrist and ankle bracelets. The bracelets were sensitive to movement and transmitted positioning coordinates, enabling the computer to completely integrate the movements and speed of the player into the game.

Both helmet and wristbands were operated by infrared remote connection, without the need for any cables directly connecting them to the computer terminal. This released the player from the restrictions of having to sit besides a computer and manipulate either a mouse or keyboard. Users could move around freely and commands could be given by voice – the system was trained to recognize and react to a specific set of predefined commands given by the user. Other additional pieces of equipment could be added, according to the nature of the game. A tennis simulation game involved the use of a racket with sensors to detect motion and speed. The screen in the visor simulated a tennis court. The software was able to detect speed and angle of contact with the imaginary ball and project the resultant trajectory.

This set of hardware and integrated software could be used for a variety of other game applications, including simulated Karate fighting, shootouts, choreographic dance and so on.

We started small, but our visions were big. Initially, we planned to market the developed prototype in partnership with Japanese arcade entertainment companies. Economics of scale meant that the first models would be quite expensive and out of the reach of most ordinary consumers, except for a few game freaks ready to pay more than a thousand dollars for the equipment and software. However, the equipment and simulation software could be incorporated into standard arcade entertainment and sold to thousands of outlets worldwide. The Japanese market was the best place to partner up and

kick-start the venture. The Japanese were well known for their love of novel game technologies and willingness to invest in this area, despite their country's economic setbacks over the past decade. We found a Japanese partner willing to integrate our technology into their existing systems.

Once we'd established a market for our product, based on a set of several modules or game units that users could plug into, we had visions of expanding into other areas, such as computer simulation for training police and military professionals. The Internet was big and the market of the future, so we intended to go in this direction in a big way. Currently, users were accessing two-dimensional sites that could provide only a limited range of interaction with the user. What we envisioned was the full 3-D experience in cyberspace, involving touch, smell, heat, sound and vision. Imagine the appeal of the average adult sex site, if, when you visited the site, you could see a live 3-D model before you, smell the scent on her body, feel the moisture and heat on your face and hear her voice. And what if she could actually see you, or a simulated persona of you, and could answer you when you spoke? The possibilities were mind-boggling.

After the first two years, the project was well underway. Although we had strong competition from other companies developing 3-D simulation software, we had managed to carve out a small niche in the games market. Our 3-D modules had been incorporated into games such as 'Die Hard', a cowboy action thriller where the player had to shoot at moving targets and avoid being shot and 'Predator', where this time the enemy were aliens that were shot down with laser guns. These games were popular in the amusement arcades.

By this time, I was casting around for more talented programmers, as we'd received fresh investment to expand. One of the guys we hired was a young mathematical genius called Bill Barnes. Bill may have looked like an overweight, rundown office clerk, with spectacles and a freckled face, but he was a genius in his field. In his late twenties, he was already going bald and displaying a potbelly. He had to his credit several years of top experience in the field, developing simulation applications for the military and aviation industries. Ahead of his time in many ways, Bill was a social inept, uncomfortable around people, and moody if he did not get his own way. Despite my reservations

about his social abilities, I hired Bill for his sharp, analytic mind and in-depth understanding of simulation technology.

Bill developed many of the algorithms used in our simulation models. However, his main contribution was an idea he happened to mention to me half-jokingly, in one of our brainstorming sessions. I don't think anyone took him seriously at the time, since it was science fiction in nature, but the idea somehow stuck in my mind and I decided to pursue it further.

Bill's idea was to have electrodes integrated into the simulation helmet. The electrodes could be attached to the scalpel and would pick up alpha and beta brainwaves. A computer application would then map out the brain patterns generated by the brain over a period of time and correlate this with activities that occurred during a game sequence or the emotional state of the user. This could be used later to predict when the user was happy, relaxed, stressed or afraid. The other part of the idea was to copy the waves being generated by the brain and try to induce these same patterns, using small electrical impulses to stimulate the brain; a kind of telepathy, based on software. However this field was still experimental and there was not much research or hard evidence available.

The idea behind electrical stimulation of the brain is simple. Each part of our brain is responsible for a different aspect of our experience – hearing, vision, thought, balance, taste, touch and memory. If we could map out the parts of the brain that were active when a subject was undergoing a specific experience or emotional response, then at some stage we would also be able to directly simulate those parts of the brain and duplicate the experience. We could simulate life-like hallucinations, where the subject would actually experience or remember whatever we probed.

Ultimately, the machine would be able to pick up the thought patterns of the user and then, based on the individual's unique brain profile, provide that individual with a virtual experience, similar in nature to the type of virtual experience portrayed in the film 'Total Recall'. The idea was ingenious, but somewhat science fiction-like in nature.

The seed of this idea took a long time to develop. However, the company was doing well, so I decided to allow Bill and two of our

engineers to pursue their idea further. They concentrated on the first step of the model; electronic sensors in the helmet recorded the brain waves, changes in heart rate and skin temperature that were generated by our game players. Then we tried to correlate these readings with the readings from other players, undergoing the same virtual experience. We evaluated the similarities in brain patterns for many users and identified where the general variation in responses tended to be.

We hooked up rats and chimpanzees to our helmets and ran simulations that included electrical stimulation under controlled trial experiments, to see how they would respond.

We were beginning to explore uncharted areas that seriously messed with the human brain and consciousness. I was crossing over an unseen boundary between reality and illusion, pursuing a dangerous path that was beyond my depths. Only, I didn't know it at the time.

## **THE SIMULATION MODEL**

Any simulation program is made up of multiple components. Each component is a separate entity, but the programmer is able to combine the elements to create the illusion of reality.

Sophisticated 3-D models provide realistic 3-D views through the use of light and shading. The computer is able to change the perspective, according to how the player moves. The mathematical calculations and algorithms that go into the design are complex.

To create an environment realistic enough to give the illusion of reality requires detailed control over aspects such as resolution, texture, lighting and shading, depth and perspective, color and tone. Each of these aspects changes in any given scene, as a user moves through it.

Each generation of simulation models builds on the foundations and lessons learned by previous generations. The software designer does not have to build up everything from scratch – he or she can rely on existing databases of objects and scenes and compiled programs and simply plug these into the new design.

To this scenario, sound and other effects can be added. With our own applications – what we could call 3<sup>rd</sup> or fourth generation applications – we’d gone a step beyond the 3-D model, adding many other elements. This included not only the addition of smell and realistic 3-D binocular vision but also the ability of the computer to receive and process a complex range of inputs from the user, such as sound and movement, and coordinate this with the game.

However, there were some obvious limitations to even the most advanced technology we’d been able to develop. Number one – nobody had as yet learnt how to design a ‘dynamic’ software program that could respond in a novel way or adapt its behavior to a novel situation. The script of the game determined all user and computer actions. There was no freedom for movement or action that went beyond the scope of the program – the application would simply not know how to respond to this.

The essential element of any effective simulation is the ability of the programmer to program realistic ‘behavior’ into the application, as a response to user input. Think of the example of a good ‘chess’ simulation game. How does the computer ‘decide’ or choose the best response to a move, given the almost infinite possibilities available? What enables it to ‘think?’

The only way in which such games can be made is through the use of complex algorithms. The application does not ‘think’ in the human sense of the word. It simply follows the script programmed for it – if X occurs, then do Y, and if it does not occur do Z and so on. This cannot be compared to the complex thought processes going on in our brains.

We had experimented for a while with the use of intelligent applications – applications that basically ‘thought’ on their own and came up with novel scenarios to various variables. These applications were able to ‘learn’ from experience and correct their mistakes. The interest in this field was tremendous and much international research was focused in this direction. We had made some progress, but were severely restricted by our limited resources and our need to concentrate on the areas that we did best. Bill was using some of this in our applications. Due to our limited resources, we decided to leave

advanced intelligence to a later generation of applications that would probably come out in the years to come.

## **STRANGE EXPERIENCE**

We were starting to mess with the human brain, delving into areas that we knew little about and were perhaps best left alone. My nightmare began on a day when I was testing a new piece of advanced simulation software. The software application was run from our mainframe computer, a gigantic IBM with massive memory and processing power that enabled us to generate our most complex and realistic simulations.

I was one of the experimental subjects in Bill's new design, a program that provided a life-like simulation experience, and could also respond according to the movements and voice of the user, and to what the user was thinking or feeling. Electrical impulses, directed directly into the brain, were used to generate or enhance a specific experience in the mind of the user.

To make the illusion more realistic, Bill had designed a helmet and a suite containing electrodes that resembled the uniform of an astronaut. To create the illusion of movement, I was hooked up to a specially modified treadmill that enabled me to go forwards and adjusted the pace according to my speed or the particular script being played out. The treadmill had rails and I wore a harness about my waist, to prevent me from falling down and hurting myself.

Paula, Bill's project manager for this design, assisted me into the suite and helmet. Paula was a serious, spectacled woman around thirty-three years of age, with a PHD in computer science, specializing in intelligence applications. Although attractive, with a slim figure and brunette hair, she preferred to remain single and dedicated totally to her career. She hooked the last strap into place, gave me a pat on the shoulder to indicate that all was ready, then left to monitor the equipment.

I gave the thumbs up sign to Bill to begin. After a moment, the lights went out and I was in the dark. Then suddenly, the lights came on and I was flying through space in a simulation space ship. I was



thrust backwards and restrained by my harness. The stars whizzed past me and I felt the touch of cold air on my cheeks, resembling a breeze. The scenario was familiar to me from previous games that we'd designed for arcade centers and 3-D cinema. We dipped down and approached a large pyramid.

I entered the pyramid and moved downwards into darkness. I could smell the rank, musty odor of dark, ancient, closed places. The air about me was cold and moist. The space ship in which I was traveling stopped suddenly. The pressure on the harness eased and the space ship took off. "*We're returning to base, Commander,*" a voice radioed into my ear. "*We'll pick you up later.*"

I was on my own. Bill's team had really outdone themselves this time. The effects were amazingly realistic. I began to walk forwards slowly. I was in a long corridor; the walls were lit with candles. It looked almost realistic enough to reach out and touch. I saw spider webs and then the sudden movement of a spider scurrying down the corridor. The movement startled me and sent my pulse racing. A trickle of sweat slowly dripped down my cheeks under the helmet.

As if in response to the change in my pulse rate, more spiders appeared and raced past me. One ran across my leg and I shuddered as I felt a sudden pressure at the point where it made contact. I increased my pace. I was breathing harshly in short shallow breaths.

Suddenly the corridor widened and I entered a large hall. Tall statues of the ancient pharaohs lined the walls on both sides of the hall. I walked forward slowly. Directly in front of me was a statue. Involuntarily I stopped. I wondered what would happen if I reached out to touch it. I reached out, expecting my hands to pass through. Instead, my hands encountered resistance. I could feel the grainy texture of the stone statue. My hands suddenly touched a latch. I heard a click and a panel slid open to reveal a dark passageway. I had to bend down slightly to get down and then I was inside. A staircase led downwards. I followed the stairs.

At the bottom of the stairs I entered another hall. At the far side was a large statue of the Pharaoh, King Ramses the Second. He seemed to stare directly at me with cold, stony eyes. On each side of the king stood the statues of the masked guardians of the royal family. As I approached closer, the eyes of the king flickered and came to life. The

statues of the guardians also came to life and rose up, turning towards me.

*“Who dares to wake me from my dreams!”* the voice of Ramses boomed. I heard it echoing through the hall. Wind and dust blew into my face and the ground trembled, so that I nearly lost my balance.

For the moment I was too astonished to respond. My heart was racing, beating loudly, and my forehead poured with sweat. The simulation was so realistic that for a moment I had taken it for real. I also did not recall this response being part of the original script.

*“Speak!”* the voice thundered.

I thought rapidly. Bill had obviously programmed some type of response to my voice. I would try something to test its capabilities.

*“My name is Greg Stewart and this is a great simulation. Good work Bill,”* I said aloud.

Ramses threw back his head and roared with laughter. Once again the ground shook. I would have fallen, if not for the restraint of the harness.

*“You pitiful, foolish mortal!”* he laughed again.

I stood waiting to see what would happen next.

Ramses seemed to stare through me. *“You think that you are in control. You consider this a game that you can leave at any time. Tell me, do you feel fear, mortal?”*

I considered. “Yes, in a way I do, because this is the most convincing 3-D experience I’ve ever tried. Are you sure you haven’t slipped me some crack, Bill?”

*“Bill cannot hear you,”* said Ramses, *“we are no longer playing his game.”*

“Now that’s original,” I replied. “The suspense is killing me. What next?”

*“Now we play my game. Guards, seize him!”*

Quicker than I could respond, the stone statues raced towards me and grabbed my arms. Stony fingers pulled my hands back, behind my back. They lifted me off the ground and brought me forwards until I was face to face with Ramses. Then they made me get down on my knees and look up directly into his eyes.

I began to struggle, trying to release my arms and take off the headset. “Bill, what’s going on! Let me go. I’ve had enough of this!” As hard as I tried to struggle, I couldn’t move. All of a sudden I felt tremendous confusion and something else – genuine fear.

Again, Ramses laughed. “*You begin to know fear. You have gone beyond your limits and don’t know how to respond. Now that you are close enough, look again into my face, and tell me – am I real?*”

I looked into his eyes with growing terror and my body froze. The eyes, the expression of cruel command – even the stench of old decay – the impact was as powerful and dynamic as anything I’d ever encountered. I could read in his eyes the contempt and amusement at this new toy placed in his lair for his amusement.

“Who are you?” I whispered.

The king looked straight through and past me. “*The question is, Greg Stewart, who are you? Why have the Gods brought you here to amuse me in my hour of eternal slumber?*”

He dismissed me with a wave of his hand. “*Go now, for I begin to tire. You will be back. We’ll talk some other time.*”

The scene began to fade. I was surrounded on all sides by blackness. I couldn’t feel anything. Then I was lying on my back, looking up at the stars. I put my hands up to my head, but there was no helmet on my head. I could still see the stars. Gradually, the stars and the darkness disappeared, as though the sun were coming out. I groaned and rubbed my eyes.

Bill and Paula were standing over me. Bill was nudging me gently.

“Greg, can you hear me Greg. Are you all right? What happened?”

I looked at them. I was shaking with shock and my face was white. My mood quickly changed to anger and I turned on Bill.

“What the hell is going on here! What type of a stunt were you trying to pull?”

Bill and Paula exchanged puzzled glances. “What are you talking about?” Bill’s tone had risen in response to my angry tone of voice.

“I’m talking about the simulation,” I said, biting my lips and trying to keep a lid on my emotions.

“You didn’t like it?” asked Bill.

"I would like to know what the hell happened? What have you been playing around with?"

I don't know what you're talking about," Bill responded hotly. "Why are you so upset? Our team has been putting so much work into this project. We thought you'd appreciate it."

Exasperated, I turned to the project manager. "Paula, can you tell me what just happened. Why am I lying on the floor? Why was I restrained when I tried to take off the helmet?"

Paula looked confused. "Greg, we don't know what happened. Everything seemed to be going fine. We'd hooked you in and were monitoring your responses. You seemed to be enjoying it. We noted the increase in your pulse rate when you encountered the spiders. Everything was going fine until you arrived at the Hall of Ramses. And then suddenly, your readings went haywire. Your pulse rate and breathing shot up. We both heard you talking aloud. You said to Bill that the simulation was great and then you started to talk and react in a really strange way. Then you began to struggle in the harness. We both thought that you were having a fit, so we closed down the computer and took you off the helmet and laid you out on the floor over here. We've been trying for the past few minutes to wake you."

"I don't believe it!" I replied, shaking my head in confusion.

"It's true!" Bill replied. The defensiveness had gone from his voice and was replaced again by concern. "In fact, we've got it all on videotape. That's standard procedure for these experiments. Do you want us to replay it for you?"

"Yes. Let's do it now." I began to calm down.

As they played back the tape to me, my calm turned into a deeper chill. It was just as they had described it. What the hell had I experienced back there?

"Do you want to talk about it, Greg?" Paula asked.

"No. Let's forget about it for the moment. We'll talk about it more in the morning. It's late, I need to get some rest and think things over."

"Okay. You sure you'll be okay?" she asked again.

"Do you want one of us to drive you home?" Bill offered.

"No. I'm really okay now. I'll be fine."

They both were staring at me with obvious concern and doubt in their eyes.

“Go see a doctor, Greg,” Paula suggested as I passed her on my way out. “You don’t look well.”

“Goodnight people.” I walked out.

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I couldn’t sleep that night. I lay awake, staring at the ceiling in the dim light. I’d put on the nightlight, because, for some reason, I felt afraid of the dark, as though I were a child again. When we are children, the world is a fearful, uncertain place, filled with goblins and witches and scary things under the bed. As we grow older, we become more assured of the world, more confident about what we are likely to encounter out there and of our ability to cope. We no longer fear the dark, shut as we are within our safe house walls. We are certain that no person or thing can harm us.

But now I lay there shaking, afraid of the dark and afraid to shut my eyes and sleep, afraid of what I might dream.

I couldn’t make up my mind about what had happened. Had it all been a dream? It must have been. Perhaps I’d knocked my head when I fell and dreamt it all.

One part of me told me to forget about the incident and shut down Bill’s project if it was affecting me so strongly. Who knew what could happen if we sold this game and a user had a seizure while using the equipment? We could be sued for millions. We were opening Pandora’s box and I had been the first one to catch a glimpse of what lay inside. I could still close the lid on that box – now and forever.

But another part of me, the part that was curious and always searching for new horizons, knew that I had to find out the answer. I needed to know what had happened in the simulation model.

This was also not the type of experience that I could confide in anyone. If word was leaked out that the CEO of 3-GI SIMULATION INC had suffered an epileptic attack or seizure when trying out the simulation equipment, my company’s stock would plummet and my employees would desert us like a drowning ship.

I arrived at work late the next day and immediately called Bill and Paula into the office.

“Jesus, you look like shit, Greg,” Paula said in her usual, direct way.

“I know. I didn’t get much sleep last night,” I replied. “Sit down.” I waited until they were both seated and looking at me expectantly and then began.

“Listen, the reason I called you in here is to discuss what happened here last night and to make sure that nothing like this ever happens again. Do you understand?”

They nodded.

“Bill, your team has made a tremendous effort on this project over the last several months. However, I have my reservations about what we’re doing”

Bill waited apprehensively for me to continue.

“Something in the simulation caused me to have a reaction or seizure, whatever you want to call it. It could have been due to the electrical stimulation the model applies to the brain.” I paused. “Bill, don’t object. I know the experiments and research you’ve run up to now have proved that the amount of brain stimulation you use is perfectly safe.”

Bill nodded.

“However, there are obviously some factors that we are not fully aware of. Perhaps certain subjects have strong adverse reactions to this type of direct brain stimulation. The technology that we’re using is not safe. We can’t risk the chance of a lawsuit over this, because some poor guy has a heart attack or seizure over a particularly scary experience.”

I paused, knowing that my next sentence would be the difficult one. “I’m afraid, it back to the drawing board. For the moment, the use of brain stimulation is off limits. Let’s stick to the standard simulation technology. It’s what we do best.”

“You’re not being reasonable!” Bill cried out, outraged. “You’re not thinking straight, just because something happened to you. There’s no evidence to prove that it’s linked to the simulation model. We’ve run this same program on other subjects – and yes, they say it’s scary and very lifelike and it gives them a thrill, but nothing more than that. Why don’t you look at the research? We’ve got everything on tape.”

“How many other subjects?” I asked.

“Seventeen so far.”

“And did you interviewed each one after the simulation and record their experience?”

“Yes. Of course,” Bill replied.

“Okay. I understand. I’m not asking you to abandon this project totally, all I’m asking is that you put it on hold until we’ve fully worked out the safety aspects.”

“You know as well as I do Greg that we’d loose our competitive edge if we did that. There are at least a dozen other companies out there that are either on the verge of doing similar things that we ‘re already doing or have already started. And if we start delaying now – for how long, six months? A year? More? We’ll never be able to catch up on the lost momentum.”

I hesitated. I could give Bill an outright ‘no’ and leave it at that. This was still my company. However, Bill wasn’t the type of person who would accept it. I knew from experience that he’d become moody and depressed if I closed down the project. I couldn’t really expect him to abandon his baby. He’d either continue with the research behind my back, in which case I’d have absolutely no control over it, or he’d wait a while and then resign and either start up his own company or go over to a competitor. When it came down to the bottom line, in spite of all my reservations, I didn’t want Bill to leave, or stop the project. I needed to find out what was going on here.

They were both looking at me expectantly. I tapped my fingers on the table. “Paula, do you have any suggestions?”

“Well,” Paula spoke somewhat doubtfully, “maybe we could start out by improving the model to make it much safer. Like a safety button that the user can press to end the simulation at any time. You mentioned the possibility of heart attacks amongst our users. Well, we’re monitoring heart rate, so what we could do is to program the application to shut down if a user’s heartbeat goes above a certain level.”

I nodded. “That’s good thinking, Paula. That would make a good start. But I’m still not happy with the electrodes in the brain. Bill, let’s hear your suggestions.”

Bill stood up from his chair and paced up and down the room. “We ran hundreds of experiments on laboratory rats and chimpanzees before we started using this on humans. This type of research is not exactly new. Researchers have been using electric probes for decades to explore the brain responses of animals and humans. What is new is the biofeedback regulation and computer adjustments to attempt to simulate and repeat previously experienced brain patterns. Speaking hypothetically, there may be certain individuals – like you – who may be more sensitive to electrical stimulation of the brain. This might cause epileptic seizures under very specific circumstances. In an epileptic seizure, the body shakes uncontrollably and the person can start to hear voices and see bright lights. Maybe this is what happened to you. One way to reduce the risk might be to reduce the intensity of the electrical impulses below a threshold. I’d need to look into the matter further.”

“Okay, then do that. In the meantime, I’m sure there are other aspects of the program that you can work on. But no electrical probes, until you can guarantee that it’s safe. Does that sound okay with you guys?”

Paula and Bill exchanged glances. They nodded.

“From now on I want you to keep me closely informed of your progress. I’ll be keeping a close eye on this project.”

They stood up and made for the door.

“One other thing.” I stopped them just before the door. “I wouldn’t mention this incident to anyone. We wouldn’t want word leaking out that our new product caused a seizure in the CEO. That would send our stocks plummeting and cancel the project prematurely.”

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For a few weeks after this incident things seemed to return to normal. I shoved it to the back of my mind. Bill and Paula avoided talking about the subject at all costs. We had a major release coming up and the office was a hive of frenzied activity as we tried to stabilize the version, correct the bugs and have it ready to ship by the end of the month. We all stayed late hours and left close to midnight. I was far too busy to have time to think about other things.



When the month was up, I was on a plane to Tokyo, to discuss the new release with our Japanese partner. There were also a series of grueling press conferences we'd arranged to coincide with the release, and a tradeshow in Geneva, where we planned to exhibit our new product.

I consider myself to be an average guy. I like to eat out, to watch TV and go occasionally to the movies. Now, it seems to me that in general, I am a well adjusted, happy, normal person. I felt that I had some sort of control over my life, over what I was doing and what I wanted. I was running my own company. I was financially very comfortable. I was what the outside world could consider a 'success'.

However, events were about to happen that were to rock the very foundations of my understanding and beliefs about the world in which I inhabited, and send me plummeting to the depths of madness and despair.

## THE DREAM

The week after returning from the Geneva conference I had a dream.

I dreamt that I was surrounded by masked figures, dressed in long black robes that covered their bodies and their faces. I was standing near the center of a long, circular cavern, with smooth and shapeless walls of silver. My vision appeared subtly distorted, as though I were viewing the world through the glasses of a 3-D computer game. A gigantic computer stood in the center of the cavern. It towered up into the sky. Looking up, I could see no ceiling to the cave, only the blackness of the night sky, filled with the twinkling of faint, distant stars. When I glanced down again, the walls had receded until they seemed to be huge mountains that hung like curtains on all sides, supporting the black dome of the night sky.

In the vast planes surrounding the computer-like artifact, thousands of robed worshipers materialized. They bowed and prayed to some unseen god or creator. Their prayer rose and fell in a rhythmic humming. Their chant was like the regular hum of an engine, as though it were part of the mechanism that drove the universe.

As I stood watching, the mountains on the horizon continued to expand away from me and I shrank in relation to my surroundings. Smaller and smaller I shrank, until the smooth ground upon which I stood became rolling valleys and hills and finally opened up into huge gaping chasms and steep cliffs.

The world about me reeled. Suddenly, the solid foundations upon which I stood were swept away. I was falling, falling through space. The foundations of matter were long thin strands, interwoven with each other like the threads of a carpet and I was too small to be supported by them. Gradually the strands through which I was falling receded.

I was floating in a sea of particles. The particles grew rapidly in size until they were huge fragments of matter, hurtling past me at tremendous speeds. About me now was only the immensity of the universe. I was a particle, surrounded by huge floating worlds and stars that were separated by the infinite distances of space. Soon there was nothing surrounding me except for the blackness of the night sky, a huge gaping chasm in the universe that slowly began to pull me in an ever-narrowing circle down and round into its center.

I woke with my bed soaked wet with perspiration and my body cold. I lay there, looking up at the ceiling, trying to make sense of the dream and wondering what to do next.

## PROGRESS

I was kept busy during the next few weeks directing further company developments and expansion in other departments. Despite my promise to keep track of Bill's project, I simply hadn't found the time. Meanwhile, Bill's research was going well. Three months after our discussion, he came into my office asked me to set up a meeting to discuss the progress on his project.

"We've modified the programming and adjusted the electrical simulation to make it completely safe," he told me. "We've also incorporated a number of other safety features, which I'll lay out for you."

“Okay, go ahead, I’m listening.” I sat back, ready to hear what he had to say.

“Number one. New safety features include an override button that will automatically shut down the system when pressed. The software will also shut down automatically if the user’s heart rate goes over 120 beats per minute or breathing rate increase dramatically.”

“Secondly, to reduce the disorientation due to the total sensory deprivation that the combination of a suite and helmet produces, we’ve incorporated a visual orientation guide. A menu bar always appears on the upper part of the screen and can be used to monitor progress and to select other programming options.”

I nodded for him to continue.

“Finally, the electronic stimulation has been adjusted so as to always be below a specific threshold level that could, hypothetically, result in brain spasms in the user. So for example, if we wanted to stimulate the touch cortex of the brain, the user won’t experience the full experience, but rather a suggestion of a touch. The software also monitors the user’s brain waves and will automatically abort if any abnormalities appear. The user has the option of turning off the electronic stimulation at any time, either by selecting the option from the menu or by pressing the red button we’ve added to the right side of the helmet.”

“That sounds great. Anything else?” I responded.

“We now consider the technology to be completely safe!” Bill stated proudly. “We went to great lengths to identify the types of simulation scenarios that could give rise to epileptic attacks or other types of brain seizures. We’ve developed a new module that avoids the use of bright lights, light contrasts, loud startling sounds and strong smells that have been known to cause epileptic attacks. Finally, an obviously frightening or threatening simulation could cause panic and bring on some type of reaction. This new module is not scary in nature and is designed to be pleasant and relaxing.”

Bill paused and beamed at me.

“In fact, we’re so confident about the safety of this new module that we’d like you to try it out.”

## BUTTERFLIES AND MEADOWS

Reluctantly, I agreed to be Bill's guinea pig for the second time. Despite all his assurances, I was still apprehensive. I knew that I had to confront this fear. There was no logical reason to be worried.

Paula and Bill strapped me to the machine and showed me how to operate all the failsafe procedures.

To begin with, they played a short, interactive, 3-D commercial. A 3-D cube whizzed through the air around my head. The cube broke up into five smaller cubes, each cube representing a box of dog food. The boxes whirled around my head and five little dogs appeared jumping and yapping for the food. I reached out, grabbed hold of one of the boxes and began to feed the dogs. Background commercial music played, instructing me about the product.

After the advert, Paula removed the headgear to check on me.

"Was everything okay, Greg?"

"That's amazing guys!" I said. "Good work. This is a great idea." I could already imagine the possibilities of selling 3-D advertising design space to companies. The revenue potential was staggering. We had hit on a gold mine.

"Now for the real thing." Paula strapped the headset back onto my head. Then waited until I'd settled down and ran some preliminary tests.

"Okay, your pulse and breathing are fine. You're relaxed. I'm going to start the simulation. Remember that you can halt it at any time by pressing the red button on your helmet. If you're experiencing any problems just raise your hand and we'll stop immediately."

I nodded apprehensively. I felt myself sinking slowly into a hazy, blue mist. I could hear the sound of the sea, roaring gently. Gradually, the mist cleared. I was standing in a beautiful meadow of gold and green grass. All about me fluttered multi-colored butterflies. The long, dry yellow grass swayed back and forth with the wind. I could smell the warm, earthy smell of grass and soil. In the distance I could see a line of tall Oak trees, swaying gently with the breeze.

I relaxed for a few minutes, enjoying the experience, and then moved forwards. I gradually approached the line of trees. A

breathtaking view came into sight. I was at the top of a large hill. For miles in all directions I could make out the gentle, undulating hills of the countryside. Directly below, I could see the sea and the coastline of a gentle bay. The sea frothed with the white foam of the waves, which rushed towards the shore and then retreated. I could smell the fresh, tangy salt-like smell of the sea in the air. The beautiful, multi-colored birds in the trees fluttered and chirped happily.

For perhaps another ten minutes I stood there, taking in the scenery and sounds.

Reluctantly, I removed the headset.

“Okay, you’ve convinced me. Bill, I want to talk to you privately about expanding your team and bringing in more people to help you on this project. I think we’ve got something big here.”

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Time passed. I dismissed the first incident and the dream as an anomaly and put it out of my mind. The company was expanding. We’d just opened up a new branch in Hong Kong, another thriving source of interactive games and the gateway to huge regional markets, including China, Singapore and Taiwan. Everybody seemed to be interested in claiming a stake in the 3-D business and we were the company they were turning to, more often than not, for partnership opportunities.

We had exhibited the simulation model at a tradeshow in Tokyo. The interest that this generated was phenomenal. CNN arranged an interview with us, to describe the new technology. We appeared in the Times magazine as the one of the hottest upcoming High-tech companies on the market. Our shares skyrocketed. A few of the engineers who’d been with us from the beginning and received stock options decided to sell some of their options and came to work driving fancy sports cars.

At the moment, Bill’s team – now expanded to include fifteen full-time graphic artists and engineers – were busy developing customized, multi-million dollar 3-D advertising commercials, for a few high-powered multinational corporations. Other applications included relaxation tapes, featuring calming and beautiful natural scenes. These were popular in health clinics and medical centers.

There was an edge to our technology that other companies on the market simply could not achieve. Our products were much more life-like and realistic than anything else out there. We were in a class of our own and simply blew away the competition.

But my troubles were not over.

I was working late into the evenings and coming home at twelve each night. I'd tested out the 3-D simulation model a few more times, each time without adverse affects.

It was around this period of time that events took a step for the worse.

## C HALL

One night, as I sat in front of the computer, I felt a strange thing happening. Imperceptibly at first, the computer grew larger until it dwarfed me. The monitor began to expand, the walls of the room started to shimmer and dwindle, turning to fluid, like lava. A wind of electric current, emanating from the monitor, blew me backwards. I lost consciousness. When I awoke, I was lying on the floor of a huge cavern. In front of me was a gigantic screen, taking up the entire wall. In the screen I saw the reflection of countless stars. Slowly, I stood up, and compelled by a force, over which I had no control, I approached the screen and reached out to touch it.

In the center of the screen a passageway opened. The framework of the screen loomed over me, seeming to encompass me. For a moment I hovered between two worlds, and then I took a step inside. The stairs led downwards and then spiraled round and around. Flashing, multi-color lights lit up the passage. I arrived at two silver doors, similar to the doors of an elevator. Above the silver doors was a sign in red: '*Press **Enter** to proceed*'. I searched and found the Enter button located to the right of the doors.

The doors slid open silently. I stepped into an elevator. I pressed ground floor, hoping this would lead to the exit. The silver doors slid open. I found myself in a hall that very much resembled the inside of a cinema. Rows of seats lay on either side of the isle, and at the far side was the white cinema screen. Way up above, the ceiling was covered in glowing yellow lights that began to dim.

Bewildered as to what to do, I chose a seat at random and sat down, facing the screen.

The lights went out completely. On the screen a message appeared.

“WELCOME TO C HALL”

I was stuck in C Hall.

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In the weeks that followed I returned to C Hall on several occasions. I awoke with a hazy recollection, though gradually the image of the place began to make a visible impression on my waking consciousness.

C hall was the embarking point for my voyage into an alternative experience. It usually remained the same cinema theatre with seats that I had experienced on the first occasion. Sometimes I imagined it as a huge cavern, with the ceiling open to the stars. I, as a participator in the virtual experience, needed only to take my place in the arena and wait passively for the beginning of the performance. From there I would become fully immersed in an alternative world.

C hall was the root directory to which I returned after each experience and from which I eventually awoke into the ‘real’ world where my physical existence took place. C hall was the bridge, the common symbolic protocol that allowed for communication between alternative experiences.

Where were these dreams coming from? There were only two possibilities: Either I was going insane and desperately needed help, or alternatively, there was something ‘real’ outside of me, which was linking all these dreams, a source that was generating them for me. The first option seemed the most likely. The only way that the second option could be proved would be if I could locate someone else who was also undergoing or had undergone a similar experience and could collaborate my story with their own. It would have to be somebody who knew nothing about my dreams and so could not be influenced by my story – a shared reality between two separate individuals.

Looking back and thinking about what could have been the trigger for the onset of these dreaming incidents, I concluded that it had all

started on that day in the Ramses pyramid simulation. That had been the focus point or catalyst which had opened up something in my mind which lead to the day dream experiences and night dreams.

This situation could not continue indefinitely. Up to now, except for the initial incident, every single incident had occurred when I was alone. I needed to confide in somebody who had also been through the simulation experience and was maybe also having dreams. But who?

## INTIMACY

I had a younger sister, who lived in London. I hadn't seen her for years, although she wrote to me regularly and I phoned her occasionally. By the time I had founded my own company, Diana was already married to a young dentist and had a young daughter.

While growing up, I had been close to my parents and sister, but since leaving for college, we had somehow drifted apart. Now I rarely saw them, except for the once-a-year visit during Christmas.

I had been through two girlfriends since college. Neither relationship had lasted for more than a year. The first one had ended when my girlfriend had moved away, to a better job offer in another city. The second had walked out, claiming I was an emotional dead fish who was totally wrapped up in his work.

I had kept myself detached and at a distance from people for a long time. Perhaps it was the nature of my work, which demanded a cool-headed, logical approach to life and a certain friendly, yet businesslike approach to my colleagues and employees. Perhaps it was simply a stage of my life, in which I was so totally focused on achieving my ambitions that I was afraid of any sort of intimacy which could interfere with my goals.

Sharon, my latest girlfriend, was a blond-haired law student who had been attracted to me by the prestige that came with dating the CEO of a rising high-tech company. Our relationship was emotionally detached, but this suited us. Neither of us was ready yet to commit or was certain of what we were looking for in a partner. We were both ambitious and totally focused on our careers. Sharon had her own apartment, which she shared with a roommate in another part of town.



We came together mainly on the weekends or when I needed a date for a special event. Occasionally I took her overseas with me to tradeshow or business events. Sometimes she came over to the office and once or twice we had set her up to one of the simulation models, so she was familiar with what we did.

I decided that I would try and confide in her about the dreams.

## THE DEATH OF SHARON

Events were rapidly spiraling out of control. Desperate to talk to someone about what was happening to me, I turned to Sharon. Although our relationship was not that close, we did share a level of physical intimacy and trust that made me assume it would be safe to open up to her.

The following evening, as we sat in front of the TV, I broached the subject. She listened silently while I spoke, her lips pressed together tightly and her arms folded. I could see that she was losing patience. She stood up abruptly, and interrupted me.

“Don’t even think about it! It’s all nonsense!” Sharon dismissed the thought with a wave of her hand. You obviously imagined things. It can’t be real. Seriously, for somebody of your intelligence!” She picked up her handbag, pouting. “I have to go now. I promised a friend I’d meet her. Forget about it. If you want my opinion, you’ve been stuck with your computers for too long. No wonder you’re imagining things. Take a break and get a real life!”

She walked out. I knew she was angry with me. I guess she hadn’t figured that this would be part of the relationship.

I regretted having confided in her and wondered if she would leak the story to her friends and that somehow it would spread to the newspapers.

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I was sitting in front of the computer, later on that night, working on a project. It was close to midnight and I was tired. I drifted off to sleep. Suddenly, I started awake. A cold wind touched my shoulders and the lights went out. I stood up to search for the lights. Something was

strange. I couldn't find the normal objects in my apartment – the sofa, the bookshelf, the table – they were gone.

Starting to panic, I turned round and around, my arms held before me, searching for a familiar object. I tripped over my feet and fell down, then picked myself up again and walked forwards blindly. I came to a wall and felt my way along it. The texture was rough like granite. It was not the smooth walls of my apartment. With a cold lump in the back of my throat, I proceeded cautiously, holding my hand next to the wall for a guide. Some sixty paces further on I came to an opening, branching to the right. I followed this, keeping my hands on the wall. The passage branched several times and narrowed with each turn, until I was boxed in on all sides by walls. Soon I was crawling on my hands and knees, as the height of the passageway shrank to a few feet.

The passage was full of dust. My head brushed through spider webs and I quickened my pace. I had a phobia of spiders.

The passageway came to an end. I clawed blindly at the wall in front of me. Suddenly, the wall slid open and bright light shone through. I stood up, temporarily blinded and looked around.

I was in a hollow chamber, infested with spiders. They covered the ceilings and the floors. I stepped backward in horror and my heel pressed on the wall. I heard a click and the opening shut behind me. I was trapped inside. The spiders began to approach, crawling over my legs and jumping on my back. I threw them off, clawing frantically at the wall, to find the latch that would reopen the passageway, so that I could escape. I couldn't find it.

I stood up and looked around. There had to be another way out of here. But where was I?

A large golden coffin, engraved with the symbol and figure of an ancient Egyptian king, stood at the far end. I walked forwards slowly, trying not to step on the spiders that scurried hither and thither across the floor. I felt a spider land on my shoulder. Sharp teeth sank into my skin, making me cry out in pain. I crushed it with my fist and its hot, pussy internal organs gushed onto my clothes as it fell to the ground. The other spiders quickly pounced and devoured it.

I was face to face with the coffin. It was the Ramses figure that I remembered from the simulation.

Even as I watched, the coffin door swung open and a long dead, bony hand rose up, clutching at the sides. Then the skeletal figure of Ramses stood up slowly. The shreds of dirty bandages slipped slowly from the ravaged face, to reveal half-eaten flesh and bone. The eyes and mouth had disappeared, leaving dark orbs and smiling teeth. As I watched, a spider came out of the eyes and crawled across the face.

I took a step backwards as Ramses stepped out of the coffin. I was rooted to the spot, too struck with terror to move.

The sightless head turned towards me.

A bony hand reached out to grab my shoulder. *“Hello Greg,”* whispered a voice from beyond the grave, *“I have been waiting for you.”*

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I must have fainted, because when I awoke, I was lying face downwards on the floor. I gradually got to my knees and looked up. The coffin and spiders were gone. I was in a large, majestic hall. Armed Egyptian guards in loincloths stood on both sides of me. Rough arms grabbed me and pulled me forwards, to the foot of the throne.

Ramses – a younger, middle-aged Ramses – sat on the throne, looking down at me. On either side of the throne stood his courtesans, airing him with huge Ostrich feathers.

“Welcome to my lair,” said Ramses as I approached.

“Where am I?”

“You are in the afterlife. These are my faithful servants and subjects who elected to follow me here. They were interred with me when I died, so that they could serve me in the afterlife.”

“How did I get here?” I stammered.

“I called for you. We are intimately linked.”

I shrank back. “Am I dreaming? This can’t be real.”

Ramses stood up and took my hand in a firm grip. “Come with me, Greg. There is something I want to show you.”

He led me to a pool of dark blue water. Reaching into his robe, he brought out a jar filled with powder and sprinkled it over the water, stirring it gently with his hands. “Look!” he commanded.

I tried to make out what he was pointing to. All I could see was a pool of dark water, rippling with our shadows. But as I stared longer, the shadows became clearer. It was not our shadows that I was seeing, but the figures of two others, set against the skyline of New York. I was looking down on the figure of Sharon, dressed in a short leather skirt and high heels, talking to her friend.

"You see," said Ramses, "I can observe your world, see things that you cannot see."

We watched the two girls talking to each other. I could hear their conversation.

"What about that looser boyfriend of yours?" she was asking Sharon.

"He's history! He's really starting to get weird. I'm just waiting for the right moment to dump him."

Just then a tall, dark-haired, well-dressed man came up behind Sharon and put his arms around her. "Guess who?" he said, kissing her on the back of the neck.

"Hi George!" cried Sharon, turning around and kissing him on the lips.

"You're ready for our date?" he asked her.

She nodded and waved goodbye to her friend. The two walked off arm in arm.

"Lies, deceptions, betrayal. Is this the real world that you want?" Ramses whispered in my ear.

I shook my head in disbelief. "This isn't real," I said, half to myself.

"Ah, but then what is real?" Ramses replied.

"Why are you showing this to me?" I asked.

"Wait and you will see."

We watched as Sharon and her partner walked down the promenade. Dark clouds gathered in the sky.

"I feel suddenly cold," she said, shivering and wrapping her jacket around her arms.

"Life's but a moment, a fleeting shadow," Ramses sighed, reaching out to the shadows with his hand and closing his fist on the air.

Suddenly, Sharon stumbled, her hands going to her throat. She began to make choking sounds.

“What is it Sharon?” her partner cried out in alarm, placing his arms under her shoulders to support her.

Sharon didn’t answer. Her face was turning blue, her eyes bulging, her neck beginning to swell as she attempted desperately to draw in air.

“And then play is over and the stage lies empty,” sighed Ramses, opening up his clenched hand.

Sharon’s body went limp, her hands dropped to the ground, her eyes open and staring. Death had caught her in a grotesque posture, her mouth open, her black, swollen tongue hanging out and spittle drooling down her chin.

“What have you done?” I cried out in horror.

Ramses cruel laughter echoed through the hall. He pushed me from behind. I fell into the dark pool of water and sank into darkness.

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“They told me she died of food poisoning,” Sharon’s friend sobbed tearfully.

We were standing in the rain at Sharon’s funeral, watching as they slowly lowered her coffin into the earth.

“It’s all my fault!” “I convinced her to come with me to the Chinese restaurant. We ate prawns. The doctors said she was allergic to them. I didn’t know.” Tears ran down her face.

I glanced briefly at the other mourners. On the far side of the grave stood the boyfriend who had been with her when she had died. His face was pale and drawn.

My mind was a cloud of dark confusion. Somehow, I’d been able to see this. But surely that had been a dream? What was happening here? What had I done? I turned away from the mourners.

“Sharon, why did you betray me?” I muttered to myself. Was that why she had been killed? Perhaps she had been going to tell someone what I had told her and Ramses had silenced her.

## CONFESSIONS

The death of Sharon shook me to the roots. Although we had not been that close emotionally, we had been very intimate physically and I had always felt towards Sharon a great deal of affection. Her death left me emotionally numb. It was too soon for me to deal with my grief and the guilt that somehow I had maybe even been responsible for her death. I shut her out of my mind, busying myself with work late into the evenings. My repressed anger and hurt prevented me from mourning for her. I kept thinking of how she had betrayed my trust and was about to leave me.

I was deeply troubled by the dream I'd had before her death. I needed answers urgently. The implications of the events that had led up to her death reached beyond their existence in my dreams. There had to be someone else who had also undergone some strange experience related to the simulation model. But who?

Someone like Bill. He was the inventor of the program. He must, somehow, have the answers. I would have to confront him with the truth, sooner or later.

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A few days later I had an opportunity. It was past midnight. Almost everyone had gone home, except for Bill, who was running some experiments with the simulation equipment.

I approached him and tapped him on the shoulder. "How's it going, Bill?"

"Great, a few more trials like this and we should be able to fine-tune the electrode settings. We're making incredible progress."

"Glad to hear that. I know you've been very busy the last few months on the advertising models. It's amazing that you've found enough time to continue with the research."

"Well, you know how it is," Bill replied sheepishly, "this is my baby and I've got to see it through."

"Great. I know how important this project is to you, Bill. If you need any more resources – more staff, equipment – just let me know. If you want to dedicate yourself to the research full-time and pass on

responsibility for the adverts to someone else, you've got it. Just let me know."

Bill looked at me, surprise in his eyes. "Thanks. I didn't expect that, especially knowing how you felt about some aspects of the project." He was referring to my reservations regarding the use of electrodes. "I appreciate your support."

"And I appreciate the amount of time and effort you've put into this company," I replied.

There was a moment of silence as we each looked at each other.

"Bill, there's something else that I need to speak you to about."

"Oh." Bill raised his eyebrows, with the 'so here it comes' look.

"I wanted to ask you – that day, you remember, in the simulation model – well, I never actually told you what happened to me. It wasn't simply a seizure, like you think. You've developed the program and tested it more than anybody. Tell me, have you ever had a strange experience – you or anybody else for that matter – when testing the software, especially the original Ramses program?"

"No, I can't say that I have. What's this about?"

I sighed. "I'm going to tell you what I experienced that day. And also what's been happening since then."

"Since then?" Bill gave me a puzzled glance, then shrugged his shoulders. "I'm listening."

"That day – do you know the part where you go into the tomb of Ramses and the statues appear?"

Bill nodded.

"Well, the thing is this – it's difficult for me to explain it, but this is the truth – the Ramses figure came to life. It started talking to me and answering my questions. I've checked the protocols your team wrote. There's no way the program could have generated that speech. It was more than the speech – his eyes, his breath – they felt real, not simulated. And the final twist in this bizarre experience, Ramses ordered the guards to seize me – also not in the script – and I actually felt their hands grab me and drag me towards him."

Bill gave me a thoughtful glance. "Greg, I'll tell you my professional opinion. Everything you heard and felt must have occurred during your seizure. You knocked your head and lost

consciousness for a moment. Your mind made up the rest. The hands you felt grabbing you and pulling you forwards could have been when me and Paula carried you off the apparatus – there's no telling. But it certainly wasn't real. I don't know why you're still thinking about this. Forget it. It'll never happen again. We've ironed out the bugs."

"But this is the point, Bill. I can't forget it. Since the episode, I've started having dreams about being sucked into this computer simulation world. And the dreams are recurrent."

Bill was silent. "Have you thought about going to see a doctor, maybe a neurologist, just to get yourself tested? It may not be related to the simulation. It may be something else – work stress, I don't know."

"If this were all that it was about, the dreams alone, I'd have to agree with you. But it's more than this. I think that somehow my dreams are connected to reality." I began to tell him about the dream I had experienced the night that Sharon died.

Bill listened intently. For about ten minutes I spoke, while he sat in silence. I told him about my fear that Sharon had been silenced because I had confided in her.

Bill sat thoughtfully for a moment after I'd finished. Finally he spoke. "I'm sorry about Sharon. I know that you two were seeing each other. I guess it must have been a great shock. But Greg, maybe you're reading far more into this than you should be. Couldn't her death have been a coincidence?"

"I don't think so. I saw how she died and I saw who she was with at the time."

"Maybe your mind made this up after the incident. Are you sure you didn't have this dream afterwards, or that you didn't subconsciously add in the details later?"

"Yes. I'm sure."

Bill shook his head in disbelief. "Go to a doctor. Get yourself tested first. See if anything comes up. Whatever the reason, I'm sure there are drugs that can control your dreams."

"I guess you're right. So you've never experienced something like this yourself – no dreams?"



"I work with this stuff all the time," Bill replied. "For me, it's just pieces of graphics and programming."

I sighed. "Okay, thanks for your time Bill. Forget about it. It's probably as you say. I'll get myself checked up at a doctor. I'll see you tomorrow." I turned to leave.

I was almost at the door, when Bill spoke.

"There was one thing."

"Yes?" I turned to face him.

"I didn't want to mention it, because you'd have thought I was crazy, but I guess now that I've heard about your experience and the dreams, it's only fair that you should know."

I nodded, listening.

"This project. It's more than just a project. Several years ago, when I was a teenager, fresh out of school, just starting university, my parents were killed in a car accident. My aunt was sent to the hospital to identify the bodies and me and my sisters were packed away to go and stay with her. I had a dream that night. My father and mother appeared to me. They were both dressed in white and they were standing at the end of a long corridor, looking down at me. I could see a white light shining through them. My father smiled and reached out towards me. He said, Bill, don't be sad for your mom and me, we are safe. Build it and I will come."

"Then, in my dream, I saw myself, wearing a specially designed headset, plugging into a computer and then traveling through the simulation to meet up again with my Mom and Dad. That was my obsession. That's what got me through that period."

"Do you think you're parents are somewhere out there, waiting for you?"

"I don't know. That night, when I heard them calling to me, will never leave my memory."

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I spoke to Paula, who had also been a guinea pig in several of the simulation tests. Paula told me she'd had a dream about one of the simulation modules. In her dream she'd returned to the golden meadow with the butterflies. She'd been walking through this scene

when suddenly the meadow disappeared and she was standing in a desolate, desert landscape. She wandered, alone and lost, until she awoke.

The discussions with Bill and Paula left me with many unanswered questions and doubts. I hadn't found any kind of conclusive corroboration, but there was something – the dreams were a common theme, a hint that maybe there was more to this than appeared at first glance. But then again, maybe there wasn't and I needed to get myself checked out at a doctor.

I went for a series of check-ups during the next few weeks. The doctor's tests also proved inconclusive. I received a clean bill of health.

## EXPERIMENT

Some time after the meeting with Bill, I had an idea of a novel way to test my theory. I called Bill into my office to discuss it.

"Bill, what would happen if two people were both part of the same simulation experience?"

"You mean hook two people up to the same simulation model and have the computer respond to both of them?"

"Yes, and also, make it so that each person can see the other person."

"Greg, that's a cool idea! Why did I never think about it before? It's so obvious. Technically, it can be done. It shouldn't be too difficult to do the programming side of things. Did you have anything specific in mind?"

I could almost see the little cogs in Bill's mind whirling away, thinking about all the possibilities. For a moment I was also caught up in his enthusiasm, imagining all the market potential this little addition offered. Imagine two users, playing a game of simulation tennis against each other, or having a shoot-out. Imagine playing a game like Die-hard or Predator, in which you have a buddy to fight by your side against the simulation bad guys and monsters. Imagine a simulation sex scene, involving multiple partners. The sky was the limit.

I forced myself to focus on the purpose of this experiment.

“Yes, I do have something specific in mind. It’s the original Ramses game. I want you to enter the simulation with me. How long would it take you to modify the program so that it would recognize both of us?”

“Are you still on about that?” I had dampened Bill’s enthusiasm. He paused to make some calculations in his mind. “I would say, give me four to six weeks. Whatever your reasons, this is an interesting project. It presents a few novel technical hurdles, but I’m sure we can overcome them.”

“Great. When can you start?”

“Today. Do you realize that this has all kinds of practical applications? It would be great for online universities, where the students can simply plug in and participate. I’ll call in Paula to work out the details.”

He left to discuss the project with Paula.

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Five weeks later we were ready for a trial run. I’d given instructions to Bill to keep all the safety features, but leave the original software version as untouched as possible.

Paula hooked us up to the equipment.

“Here goes guys. Remember, you can abort at any time by pressing the red button on your suite,” Paula told us.

The explanation was more to reassure me, who wasn’t aware of all the technical details.

“You’ll both be seeing the same thing – however, obviously not from precisely the same angle, since you are both located separately in space. As you can see, we’ve widened the treadmill to make it large enough for two people to walk abreast. The obvious disadvantage is that you’ll both be strapped into the same harness, so there is more restriction on your movements. You’ll also be able to see a simulated version of each other.”

“The technology behind this is quite ingenious. We’ve added a digital video camera with a feed to the helmets. The application digitizes your viewpoints of each other and removes all background

information. It then coordinates this image with the coordinates it is receiving from the infrared hot points and integrates all this information into the game. So you'll see each other within the simulation model, just as though you were looking at each other through your own eyes. The same with voice."

"Let the games begin!" I said.

Slowly, we sank into darkness.

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We were flying through space. I felt myself pressed back in my harness as the spaceship accelerated. The stars whizzed past us. I turned and could see Bill standing next to me. He waved back. "Hello Greg, how's it going?"

"Fine!" I shouted back.

Then we were flying down towards the pyramid and entering a long, dark corridor. The same, cold, damp odor greeted me. The pressure on the harness eased up, and a voice radioed to us:

*"Okay men, you're on your own now. We'll pick you up later."*

All the familiar elements that I'd remembered began to play out. The spiders rushed out and crawled over my legs. Only this time I didn't flinch and my heart rate remained steady. Ghostlike, they passed by without touching me.

"Are you okay Greg?" Bill asked.

"Never felt better," I replied. I could see the expression on his face clearly.

We walked on, stride for stride. We came to the entrance to the tomb of Ramses. It was lit with candles. Bill pressed his hand against the stone and the door slid open, revealing a stairway leading down. Together we walked down into the semi-darkness.

My heartbeat increased in anticipation. Nervously, I moved my fingers closer to the failsafe button.

We entered the tomb. The same stone statues confronted us.

"See, there's nothing to be afraid of," said Bill.

I sighed in relief. We walked around the tomb together. I had a vague feeling of apprehension, which gradually grew stronger. Something wasn't right.

“Bill, did you change the simulation in any way?” I asked.

“No, of course not.”

“Then where’s the figure of Ramses?”

We looked around. Ramses was gone.

“That’s strange.” Bill looked puzzled. “It must be some kind of bug in the program. I’ll check it out afterwards.”

“Bill, something’s going on here. I’m aborting.” I pressed the red button.

Nothing happened. “Bill! The red button. It’s not working!” I was beginning to panic. Bill had his back to me, but reacted as though he couldn’t hear me.

“Bill!” I reached up to my head, to pull off the helmet, but there was no helmet on my head.

I reached out for Bill, turning him towards me. I screamed. I was looking into the face of Ramses.

*“Hello Greg. I’ve been expecting you.”* Ramses smiled in cruel anticipation.

“What have you done with Bill?” I cried.

*“Bill is in his own little world. He can’t hear or see us anymore. Did you seriously think you could fool me with your parlor tricks, your safety buttons and your little companion?”*

“Let me see Bill.”

*“Very well, I will humor your wish for the moment.”*

The scene changed. I was looking at Bill. He was bending down over a tombstone, weeping. He had a bunch of flowers in his hand and was laying them on the ground.

“Mom, Dad, I miss you so much!” Bill sobbed. Tears streamed down his cheeks.

“Bill!” I shouted. He didn’t respond.

Two people appeared – a middle-aged man and a woman.

“Bill, we’ve come back for you,” said the woman, in a soft, compassionate tone. “We’ve both missed you so much. We’ve come to take you home with us.”

They turned and beckoned to Bill to follow them. Bill stood up and followed. I tried to grab hold of him and restrain him, but he eluded my grasp as though I were only a shadow.

A swirling black hole appeared in the floor. The two middle-aged people began to sink into it. Now only their hands could be seen, sticking out of the whirlpool, beckoning for Bill to follow. And then were gone.

“Bill! Don’t listen to them!” I cried out. “Stop!” I tried to reach out to grab him. But I was too late.

Bill slipped through my grasp and reached out towards his disappearing parents.

“Mom and Dad! I’m coming! I’m coming!” he screamed.

Running forwards heedlessly, he plunged over the edge and was gone from sight.

I rushed forward and looked over the edge. We were back in the tomb of Ramses. Bill had fallen into a pit containing rows of long spikes. One of the spikes had gone straight through his chest and impaled him. Another had gone through an eye and come out at the back of his head, splitting it like a melon. For a moment he lay there, twitching spasmodically and then he was silent.

I stood staring at the gruesome sight in frozen horror.

“*So much for poor Bill,*” Ramses roared with laughter.

“It was Bill who brought me here!” I responded angrily. “It was Bill who built this program and Bill who created you – whatever you are.”

“*Bill did not create me. I created Bill.*” Ramses looked at me coldly.

“Then, what about this game? Why do you only appear to me in this game?”

“*Only? What about your dreams? I used this toy your friend has created to gain access to you. Having finished my use of it, I can now discard it. It was under my directives that Bill built it.*”

“Who are you? What do you want with me?”

“*Who am I? That is not the right question. The question, Greg, is who are you?*”

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The image of Ramses dissolved before my eyes. I knew that he was toying with me, but why? To what purpose? And why me of all people? Why had I been singled out?

I slowly returned to my surroundings, to a world that would never be the same again.

## AWAKENINGS

I awoke to find myself lying in a pool of blood. Bill's blood. He lay sprawled on the ground, next to the simulation equipment. Something had gone terribly wrong. Two jagged pieces of metal poked out of his body, one from the center of his chest and the other through his head. I lay in shocked incomprehension.

Paula came into view, her face pale, her hands shaking uncontrollably.

"I've called an ambulance," she stammered.

We both knew that it was too late for that. I lay on the floor in shocked silence, staring at the lifeless body of Bill. Paula stood frozen, gazing at the same thing. I don't know how long we remained this way. It must have been at least twenty minutes before the ambulance arrived and the security guards let the paramedics into the building. During this entire period, neither of us moved or said a word.

Eventually they entered the office, checked to confirm that Bill was dead and then asked if I needed assistance.

"I'm fine," I replied. One of the paramedics took my pulse, checked my eye pupils and listened to my heart with a stethoscope. Then they helped me to stand up and assisted me to a chair.

"We'll need to call the police," the other paramedic told Paula, then spoke into his cellular phone. They took a sheet to cover the body, but left it there for the police investigation. "Have a seat," he told Paula, "nobody is going anywhere until the police get here and investigate what happened."

We sat in silence for perhaps another twenty minutes before two police officers arrived.

“Jesus!” muttered one of the officers after he took a look at the body.

I was still too shocked to be able to answer any of their questions in a coherent manner. I was covered from head to foot with Bill’s blood and my eyes were bloodshot and swollen. I must have looked a sight. They started taking the facts from Paula. She was pale and shaking, and not in much of a better state than I.

“Okay, Miss ...”

“Miss Faro.”

“Okay, Miss Faro,” he repeated, addressing Paula, “would you like to tell me what happened here?”

Paula started to explain about the simulation model and the equipment. “We were running a routine test of a new software model,” she began. “We’d adjusted the module so that we would be able to incorporate two users at the same time into the program.”

“Hold it there,” the detective interrupted, trying furiously to jot down notes in his notepad. “Keep it simple. I’m no computer expert.”

“Okay. The idea was to allow Mr. Stewart, that’s our employer, sitting over there, and Bill Barnes, that’s him over there, under the blanket, to be able to experience the same simulated scene.”

“You’re talking about a virtual reality experience?”

“Yes. That’s right. That’s what the headgear and suites were for,” Paula explained.

“And was this the first time that you were doing this experiment?”

“Well, yes, with this particular aspect of the software, allowing two users to participate simultaneously, it was the first time. I mean, we’d been testing the apparatus and the coordination and various components of the program over the last few weeks, but this was the first time we’d put the whole thing together and run it with two real users.”

“Okay. I got the background. Do you want to continue?”

“So, I helped hitch Mr. Stewart and Mr. Barnes up to the equipment and then started running the simulation.”

“Where were you, while this was running?”



"I was on the other side of the room, next to the mainframe computer, monitoring various readings." Paula pointed to the workstation where she'd been sitting.

"Was anybody else in the room at the time?"

"No just us three."

"Then what happened?"

"Well, I was sitting at my desk, monitoring the readings. Everything seemed to be going okay. I heard Bill – Mr. Barnes – asking Mr. Stewart if everything was okay. Everything was normal for about ten minutes. Then, all of a sudden, the readings on the computer went haywire."

"And then?"

"I heard Mr. Stewart shouting out Bill's name and I sensed from his tone that something was wrong. Then I heard Greg – Mr. Stewart – screaming. I stood up and rushed over to see what was happening." Paula paused.

"Yes, and then?" the detective asked.

"It's difficult to go on. Somehow, the treadmill had toppled over and was lying on its side. The metal supports were broken and jutting out. They were both wandering around aimlessly and acting crazy. Somehow, they'd gotten loose of the harness. Greg was talking to himself. Bill was kneeling on the ground weeping."

"And what did you do then?"

"I rushed over to Greg and started to take off the headset. Greg ignored me and pulled away suddenly, in the direction of Bill. He cried out to Bill to stop. Before we could do anything to stop him, Bill climbed up on top of the overturned apparatus and threw himself down on the broken metal poles, impaling himself."

"And while all this was going on, they were wearing these helmets and undergoing some type of virtual experience?"

"Yes. That's right. We have it all on videotape. It's standard procedure for these experiments."

"And then, once this had happened, what did you do?"

"I saw Bill twitching, with the spike through his chest and head. I panicked. I rushed to the telephone to call for an ambulance. When I

came back I found Greg sitting on the ground in shock, covered in blood. We didn't do anything until the paramedics arrived."

"Did you touch the body at all during this time?"

"No. We were both too shocked. It... it was obvious that he was dead."

The detectives stood up. "Okay. Thanks for your cooperation. We'll need to watch that videotape now."

They put the tape in one of the video machines and we all watched the scene play out, just as Paula had described it and I had experienced it.

The detective turned to the paramedic. "I suggest you take the other guy down to the hospital," he said, referring to myself. "He's obviously still in shock."

He turned to Paula again. "We'll be in contact with both of you. There will be a more thorough investigation, to determine the cause of the accident."

The last I remember is the paramedics laying me down on a stretcher and sticking a needle into my arm. Then darkness.

## **FALL FROM GRACE**

The death of Bill was the final straw that shattered me and destroyed my company. There was an official investigation. The development program was put on halt, following further testing and evidence that it was safe. Without Bill to manage and run the project, it was basically dead anyway.

The story was leaked to the press that our chief developer had been killed when running a simulation game together with the CEO. There was a huge media scandal over what had happened. Everything was blown out of proportion. Questions about the safety of our equipment were being asked. Even the politicians, sensing a political agenda here, were at us, demanding that new legislation be made limiting the potential dangers of 3-D simulation equipment which involved the use of electrical impulses to the brain. All sorts of rumors were floating about – he had been murdered, he had committed suicide, the program

had somehow killed him, I had killed him. Then someone leaked the videotape, showing me and Bill acting crazy and then Bill throwing himself onto the toppled spikes.

Bill's widow had started a lawsuit against the company.

Moral in the company was at an all-time low following the incident. I was hospitalized for shock and unable to return to the office for over a week, so disturbed was I by the events that had occurred. During the first three weeks following the death of Bill, there was a spate of resignations, including Paula. Some of our competitors, sensing a weakness, started a tacit, but aggressive campaign of luring workers away from the company, with highly attractive offers. I was not there or in a state to take control and see the company through this crisis.

Seeing the way that the winds were blowing, our partners reneged on some of our contractual agreements, stating bluntly that they could not continue in the current circumstances. With the bad publicity that we were receiving, they did not want to be associated with our products, which were perceived by the public to be unsafe and potentially dangerous. It seemed to make no difference to anyone that the 'incident' related to only one of our products and not to any of the others, which were perfectly safe. My worst nightmares were being realized.

The official investigation found our company guilty of negligence, as we had not provided adequate testing of the equipment before use. We had to pay a heavy fine. Our stocks fell and suddenly we were short of cash and on the verge of bankruptcy.

Then the sharks came in to finish off what was left. Our largest competitor, knowing we were in a corner, made an offer for the company, which was far below its market value. They were after our patented technology and at the same time bent on annihilating their main competitor. Perhaps I could have fought them. The will just wasn't there.

I signed the deal and lost my company.

## CHILDHOOD

That night, after losing my company, I dreamt of my home and my childhood. It was a long time since I'd last seen my parents. Children grow up and move on, to live their own lives.

Once more I was a child, playing in the garden with my toy train while my parents watched on, climbing on the rooftops of houses and exploring the neighborhood from this lookout point, playing in the parks, on the swing and slide.

I could savor the sensations of being a child again. I looked on the world once more with eyes that were brimming with inquisitiveness and openness. A sense of adventure and freshness filled the world. The burdens of memory, age and responsibility were gone.

When I woke, I felt that the child in the dream woke with me, and looked out at the world through his eyes. I carried that feeling with me through the remainder of the day, until gradually, the cares and responsibilities of this world caught up with me again and he was gone, submerged once more within the deeper layers of my subconscious.

But if he were here now and I should ask him whether I should try to find the answers to what had happened and why I was having these dreams, how would he answer? Should I continue to seek the truth, after all that had happened, or forget about it? Would he understand all the implications of his choice?

Children love playing with new technology. For them, the computer is a magic box, filled with entertaining games and graphics. It is as natural a part of the world as a tree or a flower. They can explore this aspect of their intelligence – the ability to abstract reality and represent it at the symbolic level, which is unique only to humanity.

The child within me would have told me to continue to seek the truth, without realizing some of the consequences. To the child in me, life was a great adventure, an interesting game to be played. The child in me wanted to explore the stars in a spaceship, travel to the planets and meet strange new life forms.

And afterwards, when I grew tired of the game, I could simply switch off the computer and go to bed.

But in the real world, not the make-believe one of innocent children, there is no turning back. We live with our decisions for the rest of our lives.

## FREE FALL

I dreamed about Bill's death, a week after the incident. It was a nightmare from which I awoke with a scream, the sweat pouring down my forehead and my bed soaked with perspiration.

In my dream, I was walking together with Bill through the simulation model. A gray swirling mist surrounded us and suddenly I lost contact with him. I wandered alone through the gray fog, calling out his name – and then I saw him, standing at the edge of a bottomless chasm. His eyes were filled with a gleam of mad ecstasy – the eyes of a ranting madman. “I’m coming!” he screamed and jumped.

“No!” I cried and reached out in slow motion to catch Bill as he fell – reached out, but his fingers just eluded mine.

I heard his scream as he fell, and then I was falling after him, tumbling head over heels.

I was falling through space, heading downwards, through a spiraling tunnel. The tunnel through which I fell was made out of the colors of the rainbow. It pulsed inwards and outwards, like a breathing creature, or a heart valve, so that I had the sensation of being simultaneously expelled backwards and sucked forwards. I was surrounded by colors. Then I was falling through the open sky, into a gray landscape marked off into neat red and white squares, like a gigantic chessboard.

I wandered confused across the giant board and then saw Bill, sitting cross-legged with his head downwards in a pool of blood. He had been lanced with a long spear that still lay embedded in his chest. Blood dripped from his chest, mouth and eyes. He raised his head as I approached and red eyes opened to look accusingly at me.

He pointed an accusing finger. “You killed me! Murderer!” the croaking words echoed in my mind. I turned and ran; his mad laughter followed me.

In growing terror I fled blindly, until I plummeted over the edge of the board and went tumbling head over heels into black space. Then I awoke.

After this nightmare, I was afraid to go to sleep in the evenings, afraid of what I might dream. I went to bed late and kept the bedside lamp glowing throughout the night.

## Chapter 2

### Madness

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*Moving towards a collage, where components are related, without being coherent. Broken images are scattered like spilt paint across the page. The smooth transition and overall scheme has gone.*

*We search for the missing link that will bring the pieces together again.*

*The process takes over. There is no turning back the clock. Is this a process of personal disintegration or a reflection of a broader decay in the social structure?*

## THINGS FALL APART

Nothing would ever be the same again. I felt that I had awakened into a living dream and that I was no more real than a shadow, a collection of moving images projected onto a screen by a cinema projector. I'd lost my company, but that was no longer important to me. I spent most of the day staring out of the window of my apartment, looking at the rows of tall buildings and watching the scurrying people below.

I had no motivation to go outside, so I stayed indoors. Sometimes I would go out to catch a movie or for a stroll in the park. In the first few weeks after signing over my company, there were frequent calls from concerned family and friends. Former business associates called, offering their commiseration and wanting to know if I was interested in starting something up or partnering with them. Reporters pestered me, asking for my story. I told everyone that I was fine, that I was just taking some time off to relax and sort myself out. I politely declined any other invitations for business or press interviews. When friends called to ask me how I was doing, I told them I'd had an offer from a publisher and was busy writing my biography. The publishing offer at least was true.

On the whole, people believed my story. I almost believed it myself, and even sat down a few times at my desk, but the ideas never came and I just could not write. Every time I started to type, I thought of Sharon and Bill and couldn't continue.

I procrastinated, pottered around the house, read lots of novels, watched TV, and spent more time than not staring out of the window. I returned to the original love of my life – comic books. This kept me occupied for a while.

Eventually, the phone calls and visits stopped. People had forgotten about me or grown tired of trying to lure me out of my self-imposed isolation. In a way, I relished this total anonymity and lack of responsibility. Once more I was Greg – not the CEO of a successful company – just Greg, free to wake up and do anything I wanted. I could relax, without people waiting for me or relying on me, without having to make important decisions upon which huge stakes and



people's livelihoods depended. I did not have to worry about anything, other than what to make for supper – not that I cooked that often, it was usually enough for me to order in a pizza in the evenings, grab a hamburger or hotdog and coffee for lunch and cold cereal for breakfast.

My house, which had once been so organized, was a mess. Clothes were heaped up in the bedroom, dishes were unwashed, and the bed unmade. Once a week I had in a cleaner, who made a half-hearted attempt to wade through the junk and sort things up and at the end of the day, gave up in despair.

I was the dreamer, pleasantly dreaming away my life, dreaming as I sat in front of the TV or read my comic books.

And what about my obsession with the simulation model and my nightmarish recursive dreams?

The experiment had gone haywire. I'd lost my company, which had built all the software of the simulation models. This line of research had been abruptly terminated, for an indefinite period. Even if I'd wanted to, there was no way for me to continue. I no longer had the means to 'prove' or even test my hypothesis. By sharing the same simulation experience with Bill, I had tried to test the assumption that my experience in the simulation model had been a purely psychological, imaginary phenomenon and not something real.

But what had I really proved by doing this? I knew that we'd both shared the same experience, but again, there was no proof that this came from a source that was outside of ourselves and not from within the program. It was more likely that both Ramses and Bill's parents had not been real or projected by some external source, but rather projections from deep parts within our own subconscious minds that had been evoked by the simulation experience and electrical impulses.

If this were true, the implications for Bill was that he might have had a deep death wish, relating to the death of his parents. Up to that day in the simulation model, he had submerged that wish and overcome the trauma of their death, but the simulation must have somehow awoken those submerged memories and created the strong desire to join them. As for me, who was the Ramses figure that I had projected? It couldn't be my father or someone I knew. Perhaps it was simply a part of myself.

However, the real chilling thought was this – it was the Ramses figure that had granted Bill his death wish. Bill hadn't recognized or even seen the Ramses figure, because it had been perhaps a subjective projection of my own. But somehow, I had been able to see Bill's projection. Somehow, the simulation had enabled one subjective reality to jump over and become mixed up with the subjective reality of another user in the same simulation model. Bill had developed built-in checks and safeguards into his psyche that had up to then prevented him from committing suicide, despite the deep death wish and sense of loss that lay buried in his subconscious. The Ramses figure had enabled him to overcome those safeguards. This meant that my subconscious projection had killed him. I had killed Bill, just as I had killed Sharon for her betrayal.

I carried this guilt with me, and it contributed to my gradual sinking into depression and isolation. Any thought of ever continuing with the simulation project was over.

However, if I thought that I could simply continue with my life and put these incidents behind me forever, I was mistaken.

## THE MESSAGE

It was around this time that I received the message. It happened one day while I was sitting in front of the computer, browsing the Internet. Suddenly, there was a huge flash on the screen, as though a cathode tube had burst. A stream of white light blinded me. Then the message appeared. Was it a daydream, a vision, or a hallucination?

*"If you build it, I will come."*

What was this? It sounded like a poor quality replay of the cinema release 'Field of Dreams'. Who will come? I asked myself, but the magic words had vanished from the screen.

Some time later I was walking down the streets when a voice whispered in my ear. *"Build it."* I looked around, but saw no one. *"Build it!"* the voice repeated again, more insistently.

"Build what?" I whispered back.

*"Build it. A bridge,"* the voice replied.

“What kind of a bridge? Why must I build it? Where must I build it?”

“*Build it!*” the same, whispering tone, repeated itself like an answering machine, “*If you want to make the crossing.*”

“Cross over to where?”

“*To the place in your dreams,*” the voice replied, as though reading my thoughts.

The voice went silent, leaving me to ponder on the words.

“Are you still there?” I asked, but there was no reply.

As I walked, I thought about this. Did I really want to explore more of my fantastic and disturbing dreams? That path led to madness. Hadn’t Bill followed this same path, which had led him to the software simulation models, and look where that had led to in the end?

But what choice did I have? These dreams were coming for some reason. I could no longer just turn my back and pretend that nothing had ever happened. I could never feel safe again. I would always be looking over my shoulders, afraid to go to sleep in the evenings, if I couldn’t discover and resolve the source of my nightmares. I had no choice.

When referring to a bridge, the voice must have meant some way to cross the gap between my world – the real world – and the world of my dreams. But that implied that such a world actually existed. If it did not exist outside my mind, then the only way that I could explore it would be to go mad, and become lost in my delusion. If it did exist, then was it a ‘physical’ world, perhaps an alternative dimension? If so, then how could I cross over?

What was the key? The dreams all had something to do with the computer – they all occurred around it or involved it – so in some way the bridge had to be through the computer. So what this seemed to imply to me, was that I would have to use the computer to build the bridge. In other words, design an application or something of that nature.

Like Noah, I felt called upon to build a vessel to sail the ocean and overcome the deluge. I felt compelled to prepare myself for a journey, a right of passage. The boat that I would build for my journey would not be made out of wood and canvas. It would be made out of bits and

bytes. I would build the software needed to find and forge open the hidden mystery. This would be my spaceship, with which I would sail beyond the sea of space-time, beyond the stars, to a place where there could be no sea or stars.

## A DIGITAL UNIVERSE

Imagine the infinite processing power of a million computers all plugged in online – a worldwide network, connected over the Internet, and throbbing towards ultimate union. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century in which the incidents in this story occurred, the world was moving quickly towards a convergence of media – voice, data, video – all brought about by the advances in digital technology.

In this digital world, wonderful new 3-dimensional realities were slowly being constructed. An entire digital world was slowly taking shape and this world was developing a life of its own. Entire online communities, consisting of millions of people who had never met before were being constructed in cyberspace. Interactive 3-D computer games, enacted in real-time, allowed protagonists to fight it out in live with both real and imaginary opponents. Online universities and computer-based training programs blossomed. The very nature of business was changing, as the concept of ‘e-commerce’ took foothold in the psyche of the masses.

At the same time, complex algorithms and software were being created that attempted to mimic the human thought process and other natural processes. Step-by-step, the stage was being constructed for a new level or type of existence. A world of virtual reality, lived out completely in a digital realm.

To the mathematician the real world consists of numbers – energy that is given substance through mathematical properties and laws. What if the memory capacity and processing power of machines were developed to such an extent that everything in the natural world, all its laws and activities, could be mimicked at the digital level? Instead of positive and negative electrons and atomic particles constructing the universe, what if these were replaced with bits and bytes and data packets? What if, at some level, a group of powerful computers,

running advanced, self-perpetuating algorithms, could somehow produce something larger – could create a god, drawing its power from the infinite stream of bits and bytes and processing power available?

This then, was the theory I put forward to explain what I had experienced and was going through. Somewhere out there, in what we know as cyberspace, hidden from the conscious awareness of we users, lay a hidden, yet omnipotent and omnipresent force, working silently behind every computer, chip, industrial, mainframe and private PC on the planet. An alternative universe, run by a group of powerful processors that together formed a super-mind, a creator that could construct and program an alternative world.

The simulation model had enabled this super-mind to directly access my mind and the recurrent dreams were somehow clues that had been left there for me to unravel.

I had absolutely no proof for this hypothesis. If I'd mentioned it to a fellow colleague, they would have laughed at me and told me it was impossible. If I'd mentioned it to a psychologist, they would have told me that it was a classic case of paranoia. Perhaps a philosopher may have been willing to consider that although the hypothesis could not be proved, it could also not be disproved.

The world carries on living and going about its normal activities, without our being aware of the existence of any alternative universes, existing on dimensional levels that we normally are unable to access.

In my dreams, I was somehow accessing this alternative world. Usually the interface was through the place called C hall. But could C hall have an actual existence? If there were two parallel worlds, existing side by side, then somewhere, perhaps, there had to be a meeting point – a divider, a gateway, a door, a passageway – something, some sort of interface. If no interface existed, then we could never know anything about other universes or dimensions out there and the whole search would be pointless. It would mean that there could be no other origin for my dreams, other than my own internal thought processes.

Could C hall be a location somewhere out there on the Internet that led to a virtual alternative universe? In my waking hours I now began the obsessive search for the gateway to C hall. Was it an actual

location that I could discover and gain access to? Or was it a place that existed only within the subjective framework of my own mind?

Modern science and human understanding is built of such tender hypothesis and logical conclusions, based on cause and affect. Our knowledge of the make-up of the stars and the insides of atoms, about the history of the earth, the evolution of life and the origins of mankind and the big bang are not based on ‘concrete’ evidence that we can see and touch with our own senses. Nobody has ever been inside a star or an atom. Yet we can say with a measure of scientific certainty that we ‘know’ what lies inside an atom or a star. We can even make a fair guess as to the fusion processes taking place inside stars that create atoms and gave rise to the elements that compose our bodies and the universe.

Mankind has come to understand something about the complex dance of the universe, but our understanding is like a pack of cards made into a tall tower – each card is a hypothesis that lies stacked upon the back of several other hypotheses. Science has constructed a house of cards. From this house of cards flows all the technological inventions of our century: radio, TV, X-ray, electricity, telecommunications, computers, CD players, planes, automobiles and nuclear power stations.

Armed with my own set of cards, like an ancient crusader on a quest for the Holy Grail, I set out to search for the gateway.

## DREAMS

Then the nightmares began.

Distorted, frightening figures loomed out of the chaos of my disjointed dreams. Plastic people with gaping mouths and jerking arms attempted to grab me. Armies of numbers and data marched past and over me while I lay sleeping.

I woke up sweating profusely. As the frequency of the dreams increased, the boundaries between dreaming and waking became more and more flimsy, until I felt that my waking moments were merely an extension of the dream. Day to day living seemed a dream-state of its own.

In an effort to escape from this nightmare and keep my mind occupied, I busied myself with projects around the apartment – painting rooms, putting in built-in shelves, and rearranging furniture. This didn't seem to help much.

I was sliding, slowly slipping into a place where I was not sure I wanted to be. I knew it, but had no control over this process. In a sense I even embraced it. Each step removed me further away from the real world in which I inhabited and all the memories of guilt and failure.

That night I had one of the strangest dreams of them all. I was a plastic man, in a plastic world, living and going about my life like all the other artificial people. I even had a plastic dog, that automatically wagged its tail back and forth, wiggled its ears and barked. I was taking the plastic dog for a walk when I stepped into the road. Suddenly a truck loomed in front of us, its horn wailing. The truck went over my legs, crushing them, but I felt nothing. Looking down, I noticed that my legs had been amputated at the knees. But there was no blood dripping from the wounds. Instead, threads of silver wire flowed out and went sailing off into the air.

I looked at the dog, which had been squashed flat like a pancake. Only the head remained, but the ears were still wagging and the beheaded dog was opening its mouth and yapping excitedly. Then faceless men in stretchers came along to cart us away. They took us to a place that looked like a garage. It was full of metal and plastic parts. The greasy mechanic took off a pair of legs that were hanging from hooks and screwed them onto my knees.

“There we are!” He gave me a satisfied smile. “Just as good as new.”

The mechanic went to the back of the room and began fishing around in a pile of junk. He came back with a wooden object that looked like a wooden go-cart. He screwed the dog's head onto the front of the go-cart.

“There we go!” he said proudly. “Your dog now has a new set of wheels.”

The dog whirled around happily on the new wheels, making circles over and over again.

## STRANGE AWAKENINGS

I awoke to find myself in a strange bed. The ceiling was lit with neon lights. I turned my head sideways and noticed that there were rows of beds in the room. Most of them were occupied by sleeping patients. I appeared to be in a hospital ward. My sitting up had attracted the attention of the nurse who approached with a smile.

“Good morning Mr. Stewart. How are you feeling today?”

“Fine. What am I doing here?” I tried to get out of the bed.

“Just relax.” The nurse gently pushed me down again. “The doctor will be around shortly to attend to you.”

“But,”

“Shush. Just drink this. It will help you to relax.” She smiled and held out a pill and a glass of water, watching me carefully to make sure that I took the medicine.

Puzzled and scared, I didn’t know how to respond to the situation. I tried to remember the last thing that I had been doing, but I only had a dim recollection of falling asleep in front of the computer and dreaming this strange dream, the details of which I couldn’t quite remember.

Eventually the doctor came on his rounds.

After a period of observation I was discharged. The doctor suspected a psychotic episode, but was cautious about prescribing medication. He suggested that I take a vacation and at the same time begin psychotherapy.

Time passed. For the moment I could escape, but not indefinitely. For a while I kept myself occupied pottering around the house, painting the rooms and fixing things. The work was physically taxing, but it gave me a sense of emotional freedom. I had time to relax and unwind and to move my body. I stopped to speak with the neighbors or listen to music. I felt my mind clearing and my physical strength returning.



## PUPPETS AND MANIKINS

The second episode occurred one day while going down the elevator in my apartment block. I remember stepping into the elevator and pushing the button for the sixth floor. The doors closed silently. The elevator lights began to flash on and off. I was alarmed, thinking that perhaps there had been a power failure. Something felt odd, as though both the elevator and I had suddenly elongated.

Then the doors of the elevator opened. The corridor was strangely altered. There were no people about. It was totally silent. I wandered through silent rooms filled with rows of vibrating computers. I heard a strange humming noise emanating from the office on the other side of the corridor. Beginning to panic, I rushed over and opened the door.

I entered an office that was filled with strange figures. They resembled the plastic dolls dressed in human clothes that one sees displayed in shop windows. In response to my entering the room, the dolls all swiveled their heads towards me. I saw their eyes – black and empty, painted eyes. One of the female figures stood up and approached me with jerky body movements, her jaw moving up and down spasmodically, emitting a screeching sound.

Terrified and disorientated, I fled back the way I had come, towards the elevators. The corridor seemed to lengthen and narrow at the same time. Eventually I arrived at the elevator and pressed Enter. The elevator hummed. The doors opened. I pressed ground. When the doors opened again I found myself back in C hall. I screamed and everything went blank.

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They told me I had come into the fourth floor office dressed in my pajamas, with a glazed look in my eyes. I had burst into the main seminar room during a conference, to everyone's surprise. When one of the secretaries tried to approach me I had screamed and run. The security guards found me lying at the bottom of the elevator. An ambulance had come to take me away.

This time, they were not so quick about releasing me.

What was happening to me?

I was going crazy.

The thought terrified me. This was the ultimate nightmare – to lose complete control, to cross over the socially defined borders of normality that separated the private life of the individual from the public. In my confused state, I was no longer able to distinguish between the subjective and objective. My own internal, subjective world was now projected onto and played out on the larger screen of reality, without my being able to control or discriminate between the two.

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In the morning I went to the psychiatrist's office and filled out various forms relating to intake – such as my history of illness and insanity in the family. We discussed my career and life circumstances. I shied away from telling him too much about myself. The 'delusions' had for the moment left my mind, but I found it impossible to speak about them. I was still too much in their grip. He questioned me in-depth about my interest in computers. The more he asked, the more I began to freeze.

"I understand that you ran your own company for some time," he stated.

"Yes."

"Did you experience a crisis in the past?" he asked me.

"Well, my girlfriend died, I saw my closest colleague killed before my eyes in an experiment in which we were both involved and I lost my company. But other than that, no crisis."

"And what are you doing at the moment?"

"Mostly I'm at home, working on various projects," I replied.

The psychiatrist leaned forwards and looked at me keenly. "I must ask this question. Do you at all feel that someone or something outside of you is threatening you or trying to take control of you?"

"No."

"Have you experienced any strange thoughts or experiences recently?"

"No. Well, maybe, just this dream." I decided not to tell him anything more. If I told him about the dreams he'd probably lock me up and throw away the key.

"Would you like to elaborate?" he asked.

"No. It's rubbish really," I replied.

"I see. (Pause) Do you want to tell me more about your work?"

"Not really."

"I think that you're resisting me."

(Silence)

The tension in the room grew, until I felt that I would snap. We stared at each other, waiting to see who would crack first, but I quickly ran out of patience.

"I'm sorry doctor. I'm tired," I told him.

"Okay." The psychiatrist looked at his watch and stood up. "That's enough for today. We'd like to keep you under observation for a few days."

I began to feel a twinge of panic. "But I really need to get back to work," I lied. "I have a deadline to meet."

"Take it easy for a day or two Mr. Stewart. It looks like you've been overdoing it lately. Let me give you some advice. Relax and enjoy life."

### ***Psychiatrists Report***

Mr. Stewart has no prior history of psychotic attacks, leading me to believe that the death of his colleague plus the loss of his company has brought about the current crisis. The cure in this case would be for Mr. Stewart to find alternative employment that does not require such intense stress and long hours. A change in environment, combined with psychotherapy and tranquilizers, ought to reduce his anxiety to a level at which he can cope.

## CONTROL

*Ideas, which appeared so simple, suddenly become complicated and difficult to grasp and express. Words, which were clear and coherent when written, appear after a space of time as barely incomprehensible scribble, a collection of broken sentences. Where is the sense of things? Things fall apart, the center cannot hold. The wheel is turning at a growing speed. The spokes fly about the hub at a rate that is difficult to grasp.*

I was slowly going mad and had no control over it. I was slipping into a world of delusions.

The dreams and the computer had become like a virus, which insidiously infected all areas of my life and gradually took over control. It became a parasitic addiction to which I was bound. Breaking the connection would have caused psychological trauma and withdrawal symptoms.

## TUMOR

It was around this time that my doctor advised a CAT scan to determine whether there was some neurological cause for the marked changes in my behavior over the last several months. Reluctantly I agreed.

I did not expect anything concrete to come out of the tests. I was convinced that the source of my dreams lay outside myself. If these experiences were not entirely subjective, then they must have been generated from somewhere 'out there'.

After the CAT scan was completed, the results were sent back to the neurologist.

A few days later the doctor phoned me and told me to come in to discuss the results. When I entered the office, both the doctor and nurse came into the room.

"Sit down Mr. Stewart." They both had rather serious faces, the kind that always tells you that there is bad news. "I'm afraid we have

some rather bad news to tell you. The CAT scans picked up a growth in the lower cortex of your brain.”

I didn’t know what to say. “Is it serious?” I asked.

“Well, we’ll need to run some more tests on you to determine the exact nature of the growth,” the doctor replied. “It may be benign, we need to check the options. At this stage, I wouldn’t worry too much about things. Go home and get some sleep and we’ll talk about it tomorrow.”

I knew that his speech was just standard procedure. It didn’t tell me much about what was in my head, but I’d have to accept it for the moment.

A few more tests indicated that it was swelling and pushing into other areas of my brain. If the growth were to continue at the same rate, I would be dead within the year.

The option of surgical removal was available, but not advised, because of the highly sensitive placing of the tumor and the fact that it had tendrils spread out threadlike into other areas of my brain. Any surgery would more likely than not leave me permanently brain-damaged and was not worth the risk.

I accepted the medical verdict with resignation. There was not much that I could do about it. I could not summon anger and outrage at the unfairness of life. For some reason I could not take it seriously or worry about the future.

What were the implications?

There was a living time bomb in my brain, slowly ticking away. It was slowly exploding inside my head, until one day, I would fall down and die. I would probably die fairly young and fairly soon and possibly also experience a great deal of pain towards the end.

How did all this affect my hypothesis about the gateway to an alternative world? The probability now seemed fairly high that the tumor was the logical explanation for all the dreams and other hallucinations I’d been experiencing. If I had told my story to anybody else at the time, they would have made the obvious, logical link to the tumor. And yet, the slim chance remained. What if what I had experienced was real and the tumor was in fact not related to it, or only peripherally related? It could be hypothesized that the invasion

into my mind by this other dimension, through my dreams and waking thoughts, was in effect the cause of the tumor and not the other way around. Maybe even that the tumor, by interfering with certain brain functioning and inhibitions, made me far more receptive to the projections from this other dimension, enabling it to reach out and touch me.

According to the legends of some eastern religions, there is a third eye in the center of the forehead. The third eye is the gateway to alternative experiences. Perhaps my fiddling around with the boundaries of the real world through the simulation model, and the ensuing tumor had opened up my third eye, allowing in the distorted visions.

Whatever the reasoning, I was not prepared to abandon my project. It only gave me an incentive to try harder and see it through to the end.

Time seemed to revolve around my head and then narrow and speed up, as though it were water passing through a funnel. Events in my life came and went with quick succession, seemingly over before I had even had the time to register them. The end was near and I was perhaps deteriorating rapidly. But at the same time, the focus of my vision narrowed. All the normal distractions of the world no longer held any importance. They were a minor background distraction, a haze of gray through which I passed, focused as I was solely on the point of white light in the distance.

The stage was set. The cards had been drawn. Life had exposed its hand and played its Ace of Spades on me, and to that I had no answer. But perhaps I could pull out that Joker from my bag of tricks. Time would tell.

## DEATH

Death comes to us all. Many who have been at the verge of death's door report the beginnings of an afterlife experience. They see themselves walking towards a tunnel of white light and experience an intense feeling of happiness and euphoria. Surely this is the source of the universe, the origins of light and love from which we came?

Not according to tests conducted by modern science. Pilots, who lose consciousness during intense gravity simulation flights, report similar out of body experiences as those who approach death and return to tell the tale. What is happening to the brain during the traumatic period that precedes death?

Scientific experiments reveal that, when approaching death, the neurons and other cells in the brain are starved of oxygen and begin to die. This process results in the brain neurons firing uncontrollably. To the dying brain, it appears as though the observer is hurtling through space towards a small point of white light that grows larger. This is the ghost of the final dying moments of the human brain. At the same time, starved of oxygen and experiencing tremendous physical pain, the brain responds by releasing large amounts of chemicals, the body's natural morphine, which create the experience of bliss and euphoria. The death experience, according to modern scientific experimentation, is not the indication of the passage to the next world, it is the phantom of the dying brain, a purely physiological phenomenon.

The argument for or against life after death cannot be proven on the basis of near-death encounters. We are left in the dark as to what happens once that impassable barrier has been crossed.

Many fear death. To fear death means to see it as something that is apart from life and ourselves, as somehow separated from the cycle of life. Death, according to the modern scientist, is the price we pay for life and love. We die, so that we might know what it is to be born, to love another and give birth to another. We die so that life may be renewed. Our atoms disintegrate and become once more part of the cosmic cycle of life, passing into the earth, the grass, the sea and the sky. We spread out to encompass the universe and eventually find our way back to the stars.

In many religions, death is seen as a right of passage into another plane of existence.

I now stood before that barrier, almost looking over the threshold. And if I should see that tunnel of white light and race towards it, would that I mean that I was dying, but that there would be no transition – no right of passage? Would I simply cease to be?

## HOW I DISCOVERED THE GATEWAY

A gateway in computer technology is a machine that is able to translate between two different types of media or technology. A gateway acts as an interface, a door between two places, enabling the person to cross over to the other side. I was searching for the location of a huge gateway, where incredibly complex processes would work, translating me from an organic being of flesh and blood into a digital equivalent that could be packaged and sent off into another dimension. I'd been working for nearly a year on my portal application. Slowly, I'd been gathering clues to the possible location of the gateway on the Internet.

All information that we as users access on the Internet is stored on large Web servers that companies run for this specific purpose. There may be hundreds of thousands, if not millions of such web servers scattered throughout the globe. Not all of this information is open to the general public. Most of it lies protected behind corporate or organization firewalls, or is totally closed off by an internal network, accessible only to employees using computers that are directly connected to the internal network and can enter the correct user names and passwords.

Using sophisticated search engines, I'd swept the Internet, trying keywords, such as 'gateway', 'bridge', 'alternative universe' and 'parallel dimension'. Most of the material that came up contained nothing. Nevertheless, I collected all the information available on the sites and added it to my database. Public search engines rely on keywords, submitted by various web sites to describe their site and attract surfers. Since this provided a limited amount of information, I'd developed a set of sophisticated algorithms that scanned the



information on hundreds of thousands of web sites for the clues or keywords I wanted. I was not looking for an actual web site, but a virtual site, the mere hint or reference to the gateway, to a dimension that I could not access directly.

It was as though the hidden gateway that I was seeking somehow sensed my presence and understood my search and was guiding me step by step towards my ultimate goal. Gradually I began to fit the pieces of the puzzle together.

I began to sense an underlying pattern, when examining the source code of the web sites I was visiting that matched the interests I wanted. There were hidden numbers embedded within the html and Java code – numbers that could not be explained, since they appeared to serve no function to the web site.

It was not something that the web master, responsible for producing this material might have been aware of. When the same patterns were repeated across multiple sites, the sense of a hidden code was insidious.

Gradually, a pattern of numbers began to emerge:

111.222.333.444.555.66.333.444.555.666.555.666.111.222.333...

There seemed to be something missing from the pattern. What could it be?

I tried reorganizing the sequences. I tried replacing the numbers with letters, adding them up. But what was I looking for? What was the key?

One night I had a sudden thought. Perhaps what I was looking at was simply a location on the Internet. There are laws that govern the format of Internet addresses, just as there are laws that govern the use of telephone numbers. Each country has its own code. When our web browsers go to a specific web site or URL, we are actually accessing a specific number that represents the Web address. It is the role of specific servers to translate the URLs that we send into their corresponding Internet numbers.

Finally, after running an algorithm on the code, I came up with the following:

090.271.478.563

This seemed to be an Internet address, but unlike any that I had ever seen before. It did not correspond to any known country or organization. I placed the address in my browser, pressed Enter and waited.

For a moment nothing appeared to be happening. Then a page started downloading. The little blue indication bar at the bottom of the browser window indicated that downloading was progressing. Suddenly, the computer screen dimmed and went blank. Surprised, I looked down to see if the computer had crashed, but the little green light was on. It was still running, whirling away at full speed by the looks and sound of it.

It was as though some unseen hand had reached out and taken control over the screen. Gradually the darkness disappeared and I had the impression of whirling through 3-dimensional space, filled with the silent twinkle of stars. A ring of stars – a shining galaxy – appeared and was swept passed. Then another and another, until hundreds of galaxies swept past. It was as though I was traveling an immense distance over space, at an incredible speed. Faster and faster I seemed to go. The stars merged into a blinding stream of white light and then exploded.

Momentarily blinded I shut my eyes tight and looked down. When I looked up again, the screen had cleared and I was looking at the picture of a doorway, but so lifelike and realistic that I felt that I could reach out through the screen and touch it.

I reached out to the mouse and moved the cursor towards the door handle, then clicked. Slowly, the door began to open. White light streamed through the opening and fell directly on my face. At the same time as the door began to open, I experienced a strange optical illusion. The screen expanded and I myself began shrinking and was drawn towards it. The screen grew to gigantic proportions, until it seemed to cover the entire wall and I was a mere doll-sized figure standing before it.

The door was now fully open. A staircase lead down, into the computer.

The graphic technology was excellent and totally convincing. It looked real. I reached out automatically for the mouse, but it was nowhere to be seen. My hands grasped air. The table had disappeared.

When I looked back, rather than the familiar walls of my room, I saw only a black sky, filled with stars. I stood before the gigantic screen.

I stepped forward, to touch the screen of the monitor, but there was no screen, only a giant doorframe. I passed through the doorway and began to descend the steps. Any thought I'd had before that this was simply a 3-D simulation was gone. If this was an illusion, then I was now part of it. Somehow I had been taken from the real world into this gateway. But where was it leading – and would I ever be able to go back?

With some trepidation, I took another step forward. Having come this far and searched for this long, there seemed to be no point in turning back. Onwards I stepped, down the stairs illuminated by glowing lights, into an unknown future.

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I came out in a large hall, circular in shape. At the far end of the hall, a group of men in gray business suites and bowler hats were waiting to receive me. There was something peculiar about their features, as though they had been cloned from the same mold. They all wore spectacles, smiled together and moved in similar ways, like puppets. One by one they greeted me with a “Hello, we’re pleased to meet you,” shook my hand and then stepped back. The last person to greet me was different from the others. His face was expressive and he wore a striking navy blue suite and red tie and spoke with a distinctively fresh tone.

“Gentleman, thank you for coming. I know your time is precious, so I will be brief. For various reasons of your own, you have chosen to come here. For some, this has been the culmination of a long and arduous search. For this you should be congratulated. I hope that you will find satisfaction in what you are about to encounter.”

“I will be your guide from here on. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask.”

“Where are we?” I asked.

“You are at the Center for Advanced Processing, or CAP as we refer to it. Everything will be made clear shortly. Now, let us proceed.”

He touched a button on the wall and a section slid open to reveal a long, gray corridor. He led the way, setting a brisk and steady pace. The rest of us followed.

Luminous neon lights lit the corridor, casting a uniform glow upon the surfaces. The floors could have been concrete or some other heavy substance, since our footfalls did not vibrate or make a sound. Looking down, I noticed that everyone in the group was holding a black, leather briefcase. I didn't have a briefcase, but I was holding my black diary, which I always used to jot down notes. How it had come to be in my hands I don't know. Our guide did not have anything in his hands. Attached to one of his pockets by a silver chain was an old fashioned pocket watch, round and silver in color, with large hands and roman numerals, like the clocks that were used to tell the time in track races over a century ago.

## THE WHIRLPOOL

*Marching like toy soldiers, one by one we fell down into the abyss.*

He led us into an open arena, above which we could see a thousand blazing stars. The floor of the arena was a swirling pool of stars that were being sucked down towards a black center. As we watched, the walls of the arena dimmed and disappeared. We were surrounded on all sides by the stars of the universe. I felt as though I was floating in space.

For the final time, he turned to us.

“And now gentlemen, this is the moment of truth. Those who wish to pass on and continue with their journey must enter the time pool. Those who do not wish to do so may turn back now. But remember, you can never come back here. And for those who may decide to go on, there may be no returning either. Here is the bridge between your past and the future. Decide now whether you want to cross that bridge.”

With that, he turned away from us and was gone.

The millions of stars scattered around the galaxies of the universe spun around huge black holes in space. Like sightless eyes they stared at us from all points of the universe, windows into an unknown world.

One by one, we stepped forward and over the edge, plummeting towards the swirling mass of stars. Round and round we spun like puppets. Faster and faster, with gathering speed we were sucked towards the vortex. The moment of truth had arrived. I fell.

I was a beam of light, speeding down an infinitely long fiber-optic network. My physical and neurological form, the precise pattern of my brain and body, had been copied into a digital format, compressed and sent streaming down this tunnel of light. I hurtled through branching channels that twisted this way and that like strands of spaghetti. I was in the intestines of the universe, made up of intertwining cables.

I was part of the rays of a million suns draining through the hole in the fabric of space-time like countless grains of sand, slipping through the hourglass of time. I was stretched across a million scattered stars, gathering towards the point of a needle, rushing towards the crucible, yet at the same time suspended, hanging for eternity over the vortex. Here there was no time, only timelessness.

I sped forwards at the speed of light. I was a point of light, squeezed and compressed into nothingness. The light exploded. Like water streaming from a waterfall, I was shot outwards in a beam of light, into the stars of new universe. I had successfully made the transition.



## Chapter 3

### The Master's Universe

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*The universe of the Master represents on a symbolic level everything that exists within our world. The book of commands, the bible by which the universe is run, corresponds to the code for an operating system.*

## THE WORLD OF THE MASTER

I had arrived. The journey through the whirlpool was over. I remembered tunneling down a revolving hole to an infinitely tiny point of light and then an immense explosion of light as I was shot out into another universe.

Dizzy at first, I lay there, looking up at the stars. The stars were brighter and more focused, as though I gazed at them through a high-powered telescope. With my naked eye, I could almost see swirling galaxies. I felt my head spinning around and it took me some time to realize that it was not my head that was spinning, but rather the stars above that were revolving around me. I stood up slowly.

My movements seemed different, as though I were walking in slow motion. I turned around in a 360-degree circle, trying to find a focus point in the darkness. I was on a huge plane, surrounded on all sides by mountains. I was alone.

I could not see anything that resembled civilization or life. I chose a direction at random – all direction appeared to be the same to me – and slowly started walking in the direction of the peaks that looked like mountains.

It soon became clear that this was no ordinary field upon which I walked. The surface was black as tar and as smooth as Perspex. At regular intervals I passed over thin grooves in the surface, wending their way in gigantic arcs. I looked back and could dimly make out the shape of concentric circles, originating from the point where I had landed and growing larger and larger. It was as though I had landed in the center of a huge, spinning gramophone record. The metaphor made sense to me and I finally realized that it was not the stars that were rotating, but rather the ground upon which I stood.

After walking for a few hours, I began to see a thin line of light on the horizon, as though the sun were about to rise. Slowly the light began to grow as I walked forwards, like a huge curtain being gradually lifted to reveal the stage.

And now I could make out the mountains clearly. They were perfectly symmetrical in shape, their color a mixture of silver and blue with a glass-like texture. They rose like huge inverted cones towards



the sky and appeared to be artificial. No natural process that I was aware of could have made these objects.

And suddenly I was no longer alone. In the distance I could see figures waiting patiently. I could not make out their faces clearly. They wore the long, gray robes of priests and their heads were hooded.

One of them stepped forwards and called out as I came closer. "Welcome," he said. "We have been waiting for you. We hope that you had a pleasant journey."

"Where am I?" I asked.

"You have passed through the portal into our world." The head priest removed his hood to reveal a somber, pale face, with green eyes and black hair.

"How was I able to pass between your world and mine?" I asked him.

The priest shook his head. "I do not know."

I thought I knew the answer. At some point in the dimensional continuum, there must have been a disruption, an opening in the fabric of reality, which had somehow – deliberately or by accident – become torn at this particular point. I had plunged into that gaping hole, the proverbial camel trying to fit through the eye of the needle. How do you get a camel through the eye of a needle? You compress it into an infinitely small space, you elongate the atoms until the camel is turned into one long, one-dimensional thin thread and you pass the thread through the eye. Upon reaching the other side, the camel immediately expands to resume its former dimensions. In fact, this is just how a black hole works. The gravity in a black hole is so intense that it rips apart the fabric of space-time and matter that together constitute reality. All objects falling within its sphere of influence are elongated and compressed, until eventually, they pass through the event horizon and presumably emerge on the other side.

"What is this place?" I asked.

"We will explain later. You must be tired, come with us and we'll see to it that you get something to eat and a clean bed. There will be enough time for talk afterwards."

We walked for another few hours, until the mountains were left behind. The landscape began to take on a more normal appearance. There were no trees, but the ground on which we stood had turned to a dark brown, and the texture was that of dry, parched desert earth. The sky had become a clear dark blue. Far above I could see a sun, glowing like a huge yellow lamp.

After a long walk we arrived at a small cottage. My guides beckoned me to enter and I followed them. The cottage had two small rooms. One room was a bedroom, containing a bed, table and some chairs. The other room was a kitchen and bathroom. There was a tub of hot water in the center and shelves, containing jars of foodstuff and a basket of fruit.

“Rest here,” said the guide. “We will come and fetch you in the morning,” They left and I was alone.

I ate the bread and fruit, which tasted fresh, but were not particularly appetizing. I had a bath and sat down on the bed to rest, looking up at the ceiling. The magnitude of what had happened to me was slowly sinking in. I had made the passage. I was in another world.

Then I wondered if I could ever return to my own.

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The next day, my guides came to fetch me and we continued on our journey. Once more, the guides were reserved and reticent, providing ambiguous answers to the questions I addressed to them, and for the most part telling me to be patient.

The landscape was much the same as on the previous day. At irregular intervals we moved passed boulders, scattered across the land, but otherwise the scenery was flat and monotonous. There were still no signs of bird or other life.

“Where are the birds and other animals?” I asked my guide.

“There are no birds in this place. Everything will be explained to you when we reach our destination.”

“I don’t even know your name. What should I call you?”

“You can call me Jan.”

“Okay Jan, and you can call me Greg. If you don’t mind me asking, is this your normal line of work, guiding people like me?”

“Yes, that is what I have been assigned to do,” he replied, his face inscrutable.

“And me, what am I supposed to be to you? Do you consider me to be a pilgrim?” I asked.

“If you choose to use those words and it comforts you, then that is your role. I do not know what role has been assigned to you.”

“Who is doing the assigning? Are you referring to some authority in your world, some warlord or king?”

Jan appeared uncomfortable with the question. He hesitated for a moment, as if considering how to respond. “I don’t know what you mean by the word king or warlord, it is something strange to my conception. We are all assigned our roles by the Master.”

“The Master,” I repeated, trying to catch his tone of voice – was it reverence, respect, or just indifference? “So, then he is some type of king – by that I mean he rules over you and makes the laws.”

“In a sense you are correct, Greg. He assigns us our roles, but I do not know whether he makes the laws.”

“Am I going to meet him?”

“You cannot meet the Master.”

“Why not?”

“Mm. It is difficult to explain. He does not have substance and form such as we do, in our world. We are not able to approach him.”

“Oh. You are referring to some kind of a god or creator?” I asked.

Jan paused. “Again, Greg, you use words with which I am not familiar. I cannot answer your question.”

The enigmatic answer gave me enough to think about for some time. We continued on our journey in silence.

That evening, we arrived at another small cottage. Once more, my guides left me and returned in the morning. It puzzled me where they went to in the evenings. There didn’t appear to me to be any other houses in the vicinity. Where did they sleep? What did they eat? And why were we walking all this way? What was the purpose of it? It all seemed so confusing.

The next day, as we set out, I tried to raise some of these questions with my guides.

“Jan, where are we going?” I asked.

“We are going to where it is that you need to arrive,” he responded imperturbably.

“And where is that?”

“Patience. We will be there soon.”

“How soon. By the end of the day?”

“Perhaps.”

“You mean you don’t know how far it is?” I pressed.

“I do not understand what you mean by that word. Be patient, we will arrive when it is time to arrive.”

“Okay, I guess I don’t have any choice – but tell me, Jan, what is going to happen when we get there?”

“I cannot say. I do not know.”

“But, listen, surely you must know, if you’ve done this before, as you say.”

“Each case is different. It is as the Master decrees.”

“And how do you know when he tells you what to do? Does he send you a messenger? Do you have a telephone in which you receive your orders? Does it come down through a superior?”

He turned to stare at me thoughtfully. “You are indeed a strange man, Greg. These are strange ideas. I don’t know how best to answer them. Let us wait. Everything will be answered in due course. It is as the Master determines.”

An exercise in frustration, I thought to myself. My questions were getting me nowhere.

That evening, when we arrived at another cottage – why wasn’t I surprised this time – I asked my guides if they wanted to come inside the cottage. They politely declined.

In the morning, when they came to pick me up, I asked Jan, “Where do you go in the evenings?”

“We have an alternative arrangement.”

“You mean, a cottage of your own? But where is it?”

“Greg, you do not need to worry about us. We are taken care of.”

Today, I tried a different tact, asking Jan more personal questions, to see if I could fish some information out of him.

“Jan, are you married, do you have a family?” I asked softly.

“Yes, Greg, I have a family.”

“How many children?”

“Children? What are children? I do not know that word.”

“Children. Little boys and girls that grow and become big young men and women.”

Again, Jan turned to stare at me, as if I had said something amazing. “People that are small and become bigger. What a strange concept. If they are small, then why should they become big?”

Jan’s eyes widened in sudden alarm, as a thought entered his head. “Greg, are you a child? Are you going to become bigger?” He looked at me as though he expected me to grow bigger on the spot.

“No, no. I am an adult. I do not grow any bigger.”

“Then perhaps you will become smaller again?”

“No, I remain the same size. Maybe, when I am very old, I’ll shrink a little.”

Jan shook his head. “This is too puzzling for me. Greg, I ask you to be silent for a while. I do not know how to answer your questions.”

And so ended my attempt at conversation. In the evening we came to another cottage that looked exactly the same as all the previous cottages. For all I knew, it was the same cottage, and we were simply going around in circles. But each time, when I came to the cottage, it was as clean and neat as if I had never entered.

I don’t know how many days the experience was repeated. Each day started with the same walk, and at the end of each day the same cottage greeted me.

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All experiences must eventually come to an end. As we proceeded, I noticed a gradual change in the surrounding scenery. The undulation in the land became more and more pronounced. We ascended one hilly crest only to descend into a trough. The ascent and descent grew higher and longer each time, so that shortly we were traveling through

a landscape of rolling hills. Until now there had been no signs of animal or plant life.

Over the next few days the landscape began to take on a veneer of green. The ground was covered with a moss-like material that felt not quite real, but slightly synthetic. Then grass-like strands appeared and finally small bushes and flowers.

A week later we were traveling through a mountainous landscape, marked by towering cliffs and long, winding, torturous paths. We spent half a day wending our way up towards the sky and the rest of the day descending, but I wasn't at all tired.

We reached a point where it took us days to make the ascent. The color of the air changed from a light blue to a dark blue and the temperature began to drop. Then we were descending again, for another several days.

The last ascent came some time later. For days we seemed to go straight up towards the sky, so high that the sky turned into a dark blue that was almost black and the stars appeared clearly during the day. We were so high that I felt like I was almost floating upwards to the heavens and could reach out and touch the stars. My anchor to the earth was tenuous at best. Each time that I took a step forwards, I was afraid that I might simply float away.

We past through a region where the sky was a deep purple, with tinges of red. Ahead lay two tall towers and between them a gateway.

"We pass through there," Jan told me.

As we came closer I saw just how high the towers were. They were infinitely high pillars, reaching up way beyond what I could follow with the naked eye. The gateway that guarded the entrance was as tall as a thirty-story skyscraper. It shone silver and golden, generating a luminescence directly from some source within.

As we approached closer, the luminescence seemed to shine through us, as though we were transparent.

Jan approached the gateway slowly, almost reverently. In his hand he held a transparent silver cylinder. The light from the gateway streamed into the cylinder, which suddenly shone with the colors of the rainbow. It seemed as though all the light from the gateway was pouring into the cylinder.

The golden glow surrounding the gateway gradually dimmed. We walked forward, through a rim of fire. As soon as we'd passed over to the other side, the golden light closed together again.

Jan led us forwards. We came to a long, narrow bridge, spanning a deep chasm.

"Be cautious," Jan warned, "Whatever you do don't look down."

Slowly, we crossed over the chasm, holding on to the rails of the bridge with our hands. The bridge was made from a transparent, glass-like material, so that we appeared to be walking on thin air. The bridge continued for miles.

Towards the end of the day, we came to the other side. My companions left me at the small hut on the far side of the bridge.

In the morning we descended into a new world.

## REBIRTH

*At the end of the rainbow lies the land of Oz. Like Dorothy, I had traveled across the rainbow to another world.*

After descending into a land that resembled more and more a normal landscape, with trees, hills and roads, we reached a large city. It was a stunningly beautiful city with thousands of shining towers reaching up towards the sky.

As we approached closer, I could make out some of the details. Silver monorails and highways carried speeding vehicles. I noticed also that the city was slowly revolving, as though it was situated on an immense, spinning disk.

We stepped on to what at first glance appeared to be a black road, but turned out to be some kind of conveyor belt, which transported us into the city.

Then we were amongst the towers. Like tiny ants we passed close to these silver giants. We began see other people, moving along on conveyor belts similar to our own. They did not greet us and we did not greet any of them.

Most of those we passed were dressed in gray business suites and carried briefcases. From this I surmised that we were passing through the business sector.

We approached one of the buildings, a tall building of pure black, with no windows or doors visible. Jan stepped off the main conveyor belt and onto a secondary belt, leading towards this building. We all followed.

“Where are we now?” I asked.

“We are approaching C.A.P, the Center for Absorption and Processing. This is where you will be received, processed and given your first indoctrination. There you will determine what is to be your role and where you will need to be assigned.”

The conveyor belt took us into the building. Two sliding doors opened for us and we entered the reception area. What I assumed to be a receptionist sat behind the counter. She took the small black cube that Jan handed to her and passed it through a gray machine, which I took to be some kind of computer or scanning equipment.

She handed the cube back to Jan. “Please go ahead gentlemen. You are expected. It’s on the four hundred and twenty fifth floor, room 45,567.”

Jan led us to an elevator. Inside, rather than a row of buttons, a touch-pad enabled Jan to key in the floor number. We sped upwards. It took us several minutes to reach our destination.

Jan stepped out of the elevator and we followed. We walked for about another mile, down an incredibly long corridor, lined with row after row of doors on each side. Finally we arrived at room 45, 567.

On the door entrance the following label was displayed: “Center for Absorption and Processing.”

Jan turned to me. “Greg, we will leave you here for the moment and come to fetch you later on today. There is much work to be done. Do not worry about anything. You will be well taken care of. Before we go, take this.”

He handed me the black cube I had seen him present to the receptionist. Then he was gone, walking back down the corridor.

I looked at the cube for a moment, wondering what it was for, and then put it into my jacket pocket. “Here goes,” I said aloud to myself.



With some trepidation I opened the office door and walked into the office.

A plump lady with spectacles was sitting behind a desk, reading a book. When I entered, she immediately closed the book and glanced up. "How can I help you sir?" she asked, with a pleasant smile.

I reached into my pocket and showed her the black cube.

"Oh, a new arrival." She smiled at me broadly. "Please go through, second door on your right. They're waiting for you."

I followed her directions.

Two smiling young women were waiting for me. They were exact replicas of each other. They were both dressed in navy blue suites. They both stood up simultaneously as I entered. One of them addressed me.

"Welcome, Mr. Stewart. We are so happy that you could make it. We've been expecting you."

"May we have your identity for a moment, please?" the second one asked me.

"My identity?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Your identity is contained in the black cube you were given before you came here. Can you give that to us for a moment."

I passed it over. "Do you mean that this cube is like an identity card, and contains all my records or information about me?" I asked.

"Something like that. All will be explained in due time." She passed the cube briefly through a machine similar to the one I'd seen the receptionist using earlier. She indicated a chair at the back of the room. "Take a seat Mr. Stewart, this won't take too long."

I sat down as she directed and waited.

The lights dimmed and went out. I sat in darkness. The wall on the far side of the room began to glow. An image appeared. At first the image was blurry. It was like looking into a hazy fog. Then out of the mist a face appeared briefly and then a hand. Then once more, darkness. When the screen lit up again the same face appeared and gradually became more distinct. It was the face of a young woman, cooing gently and smiling.

My heart gave a distinct leap. I was looking into the face of my mother, as she had been when I was a child. I felt the emotional moorings of my heart stirring.

The series of images playing out on the wall on the far side continued.

"These are your earliest memories, Greg," the young woman explained with a smile.

"Where are they coming from?" I asked.

"They are part of your identity – your memories of who you were are part of who you now are."

"You mean, all of this is contained in that black cube?"

"Yes Greg. You sound as though this surprises you."

"Nothing surprises me anymore," I replied. "What is the purpose of this?"

"You are to understand who you are and take on the role that has been assigned to you."

"Assigned by the Master?"

"Yes. Now sit back and relax Mr. Stewart."

I watched the scenes of my life fleeting past on the screen before me. Images flashed before my eyes. My first day at school. The time I won the hundred meters school track event. My graduation ceremony. My first love. The founding of my company and its appearance on the New York stock exchange. My interview with the Times. Moments I'd spent together with my family and Sharon. Working with my colleagues. Bill and Pamela and I, talking about the experiment.

The figure of Ramses suddenly appeared, looming out of the memories of the past.

"*Hello Greg,*" he said, looking directly at me. "*We meet again.*"

"Who are you really?" I stammered.

"*I am a creation of your imagination. Perhaps I am you or maybe I am your creator. What do you think, Greg?*"

I did not reply. The image faded.

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“The cube is not just a record of your memories,” the voice of the girl floated out of the darkness. “The cube is you. It is a precise copy of you, in a compressed format. You have been duplicated and your records sent to the Master archives, as a matter of precaution, to ensure that no data is ever lost. Should you become corrupted at some stage, or loose vital data, we will be able to regenerate you.”

“That’s good to know,” I replied somewhat sarcastically. “How were you able to get this copy of me? I don’t recall anything happening to me.”

“The moment that you were transferred to our world, the duplication and compression took place. You were probably not aware of it.”

“What happens now?”

“Now you wait to see what role has been assigned to you.”

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That ended my session for the day. I waited for Jan to come and pick me up. He came shortly afterwards, for the first time alone, not accompanied by his entourage.

“What happened to your friends?” I asked him.

“Their purpose has been served. They have departed to other tasks. I will assist you from here on until you are settled.”

We strode onto one of the conveyors, which swept us through the city. At various points along the way, Jan stepped off one of the conveyors and onto another, going in a slightly different direction. We arrived at the entrance to a large apartment block.

“This is where you will be staying for the duration of your absorption and training process,” Jan informed me.

We took the elevator up to the 20<sup>th</sup> floor and Jan handed me the keys to the apartment, waited until I’d let myself in safely and then left. I was alone again. I stood there for a minute and then looked around. It was a small cozy, two-room apartment, with a bedroom, bathroom and dining room, partitioned off to make place for a kitchenette. The kitchen was well stocked with fresh fruit and vegetables and tinned products.

I made myself a brief snack, washed up, then headed for bed.

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The next few days were similar to the first day. Each day Jan picked me up early in the morning and dropped me off at the Center for Absorption and Processing. There I would present my cube and sit in the same room, and experience images and other sensations flowing around me.

Sometimes it was events or people that I saw, sometimes I heard only voices or felt something – cold, warm or stuffy – sometimes a combination of different senses. Each time I explored different aspects of my memories and myself.

I began to remember little things that I had long ago forgotten. Little things that were actually important – such as the first day I learnt to ride a bicycle, the day I bought the dog that I loved – but which had long been shoved deep into the subconscious with the weight of time. It was only now that I realized how important these events had been in shaping the person that I now was. They had formed the foundation of my experience in life, my self-esteem and sense of who I was as a person – and yet I had completely forgotten them. And other things – smells that I'd associated only with childhood and which evoked strong emotions. The smell of my mother's cooking in the kitchen. The smell of the sea, to a boy from an inland city who meets the sea for the first time. The smell of rainy days. The soft, sensuous touch of cotton sheets and pillows. The taste of hot soup on the tongue. A collage of sensory input that I had long forgotten now came to my mind, insisting that they be integrated and made sense of.

But over and above all, they told me that I was waiting, waiting for the moment when I would know what the role was that had been assigned to me – the purpose of my rebirth and why I was here.

The more impatient and eager I became to get an answer, to find out what was wanted of me and what I needed to do, the more things seemed to stay the same. Nothing happened.

"You will have to release this impatience in you," I was told. "All will happen in the time that it is right. You can only wait. Time is not an issue."

And time was not an issue – it did not exist in the same way as we perceive it to exist in our modern, humanized world. There were days and nights, which followed each other sequentially and consistently – so in this sense there was some measure of the passing of days. Other than this, there was nothing with which to mark the passage of time. If the day lasted 2 or 24 hours of earth time or 24 months, I had no way of measuring. My own perceptions of the passage of time were fuzzy and totally subjective. As day followed day with the same routine, even the feeling of passing days seemed to disappear, so that each day was a day I started afresh, as though this were the first day and nothing had gone before.

One day, during a session in the dark room, I was startled out of my reverie by a soft whisper in my ear. I turned round to see who it was, but no one was there.

On the screen I could see a little boy – myself at the age of 5 years – playing with a toy car. “Vmm.. Vmm..,” I was saying, imitating the sound of a car.

*“You know what you’re thinking now Greg,”* the voice whispered to me again.

“What? Who, where are you?” I called out, looking around in the dim light. Nobody was there.

*“Don’t mind me. It’s you I’m interested in. Tell me what you are thinking of as you play with your toy car, Greg.”*

I thought for a moment, remembering.

“I’m thinking how my Daddy always takes the taxi to work in the mornings and comes home late at night in the taxi. I’m saying to myself, ‘If I were a taxi driver, I could take him to work and fetch him, just like he does with me in the mornings, when he takes me to school.’”

“Yes. You want to be a taxi driver. A noble profession. A servant of the public good, bringing people safely from place to place, enabling them to fulfill the functions for which they were made. I think you would like to be a taxi driver, wouldn’t you Greg?”

“Are you crazy! What are you talking about?” I responded quickly. “I hate taxi drivers. They’re ignorant, rude and aggressive – and

they're the worst drivers on the road. Why on earth would I want to be one of them?"

"Greg, forget for a moment about your preconceptions and prejudices and think again about what you would be doing," the voice told me. "Think as a child, Greg – fetching mommies and daddies from work and enabling them to come home to little boys and girls, helping old ladies to go across town to do shopping and visit friends. You will be an important component of the social order, contributing to the benefit of the public."

"But what about all my training and experience. For God's sake, I was the owner of a highly successful computer company. Surely a job in that field would be more appropriate?"

"Think as a child. The child is the real father of who you are Greg. It is the core or kernel, while you as you perceive yourself now to be are the outer skin. Return to your core. It is the core that motivates and drives you. The outer skin exists only to shelter and nourish the core, so that the seed can take root and flourish. The purpose of the skin is to serve the goals and needs of the core – not the other way around. Are you not a seed searching for a garden to plant yourself in and grow?"

I sat silently, thinking for a while. "I'm still not convinced, tell me more."

"Very well," the voice sighed. "Greg, you have been fleeing from the responsibility and cares of your current job almost from the moment you started it – why do you think you have fanaticized and been so wrapped up in this hopeless, mad quest of yours?"

"I don't know," I replied.

The voice continued. "Deep down you long for the carefree lifestyle, the social contact – you just can't admit this to yourself, because you are afraid that this will make you a failure. But you tell me, what is failure really, Greg, except the inability to follow the right path that you know is meant for you, the inability to be yourself – because you *think* that it is inappropriate. Someone has told you that taxi drivers are uneducated and slow and that their job is routine, monotonous and frustrating."

"Well, isn't it?" I asked.

“Perhaps if you look at it from the point of view of the passenger, this may appear to be so, but think from the side of the driver. You get to meet many new people each day, you get to drive around, see lots of scenery and listen to music on the radio. All the time you are safe and snug in your little car. A man’s car is his castle, and you’ll be one of the privileged few who may actually spend most of his time in his castle.”

“So this is to be the role I am to be assigned.” I felt let down and disappointed.

“Greg. Haven’t you learnt anything yet? You wished for this role. We are only helping you to perceive this.”

## INDOCTRINATION

I had been assigned my function as a taxi driver. I would shortly be assuming my new role. But first I had to be instructed and educated as to the nature of my new role and understand more about the world in which I now found myself.

Having finished with the Center for Absorption and Processing, I was now transferred on to C.I.F, the Center for Instruction and Facilitation. The center lay somewhat out of town, so I had to catch a monorail there each day. It was very much similar to a university campus, with buildings sprawled out between spacious gardens.

I was assigned a personal tutor, a tall, thin, clerical-looking man. He wore wide-brimmed glasses and a black cloak that resembled the garments of a university lecturer or judge. I gathered that this was more or less his role as it related towards me.

After we had made the preliminary introductions, my instructor addressed himself to me curtly. “It is the will of the Master that you be given instruction into the nature of our world, so that you may become a productive element in our society. My name is Paul and I will be your instructor during this period. You may ask me any questions you wish and I will try to answer as best as I can. Do you understand what I have told you, Greg?”

“Yes, I understand,” I replied.

“Good, then let us begin at once. Pass me the black cube.”

I handed it over. “Don’t tell me,” I said somewhat sarcastically, “I already know how it goes. I’m going to sit in some office and listen to my experiences, which will teach me about the reality of the world in which I live.”

“Your assumption is incorrect,” Paul relied sternly, “although there may be an element of truth to what you say. No, my function is to instruct you directly and answer any questions which you may address to me.”

“Okay then, I’m all yours,” I replied.

“Good. I will be your dedicated guide and tutor from now on until such time as you no longer need me. I will provide you with anything that you may require. Now, having said this, let us begin. Sit back and relax. The identity cube will guide us. I will be there to answer any questions.”

I sat back and the room sank into darkness. I was momentarily in total blackness – the blackness of oblivion and then a small point of light appeared, expanding rapidly. Words flashed onto the screen:

*“In the beginning was darkness, and out of the darkness came the light and the light was the words of the Master, interpreting the universe and the laws for governing the nature of all things.”*

“Who is the Master?” I asked. “Is he the creator?”

“The concept of creator has no meaning or significance to me,” Paul replied. “If you mean by this that it is the originator, the constructor – this we are not given to know. We perceive it as the presenter, the interpreter, the instructor, the controller – beyond this, we are not given to know.”

“So I was brought to this place by this entity you call the Master. But why did it do this?”

“I cannot answer this. It is not given to me to know. But perhaps you know the answer to this,” Paul responded.

“Okay, so this entity is the controller or whatever of this world.”

“Good,” Paul replied. “Let us continue with the lesson.” The light went off again and another message flashed onto the screen:



*“The Master provides instructions and assigns roles to all elements in the system. Our task is to fulfill the function that the Master has assigned to us.”*

“You mean, we’re all like components, in a gigantic system, or software program?”

“That is correct. The functioning of the system depends upon the correct functioning of all the components within it.”

“And I am nothing more than a component in this system?”

“Yes. That is correct.”

“Then, I have no freedom. My role and actions are totally determined for me,” I stated.

“The concept of ‘freedom’ is strange to me. Perhaps you would care to elaborate,” Paul suggested.

I thought for a moment, and then replied. “Freedom means, for example, when you are walking on a road and the road branches into two, you can choose any way – there is nothing that stops you going either way. You make the choice.”

“I understand.” Paul nodded. “When you are faced with a number of options, freedom is being able to decide which option to choose. Is this correct?”

“Yes, basically,” I agreed.

“Let me think this through. There are two ways in which you can choose between many options. You can compare the benefits of each option, based on criterion which are available to you – in the example of the road, distance, time or difficulty might weight your decision to follow a certain path. Or you might choose a particular road because there is someone you want meet on this road or because it is going to the destination you require. The other alternative is when all options are equal or you have no criterion by which to judge. In this case, the choice would be random. To summarize, the first choice is based on decisions intrinsic to your needs, the second upon random factors over which you have no control. Is my assumption correct?”

“Yes.” I nodded.

Paul continued. “Then, in this sense, an element in our system would either make decisions according to the programmed goal-based objectives or through a criterion analysis. If none of these options is

appropriate, then a random path is chosen. How is this different from your world?"

I thought briefly before responding. "You've got the concept, but you're missing two essential aspects. One vital component of freedom is that you are free of the external controls of an authority, master, social group or God figure. You are not a slave to their desires or wishes, and they do not determine your life. The freedom to choose means not just deciding between two options, it also means the ability to shape what options are available to you. For example, when parents decide that their child is going to be either a doctor or a lawyer and the child chooses a third option for himself – to be an actor. Or when a mother determines she doesn't want to remain in the role of a housewife all her life and goes out and finds a career."

I paused for a moment, to see if Paul was following my argument and then continued.

"The other essential aspect of being free is the ability to change or make changes. Freedom is the basis for progress and evolution. It means that you can choose to do things a different or new way, one that has not been determined for you or that has never existed before."

"Let me consider." Paul stood in thought for several moments. "In one sense, you are free to make decisions. However, you fail to consider the natural constraints built into any situation. Each one of us must be constrained by the laws of the universe and the intrinsic limitations of ourselves. Thus, we cannot choose but to be human – we cannot be a dog or a cat or fly like a bird. Neither can we become whatever we want to – we cannot be mathematicians if we do not have an inner capability for mathematics – so in this sense our individual constraints limit our choices. Then the laws of the universe, day and night, up and down, object solidity, dictate that our physical freedom be limited in other ways – we cannot choose to fly through the air or walk through walls. These are built-in constraints. Would you agree?"

"Yes, but again, you're missing the essential element – the ability to shape and change the environment. So, for example, even though I can't fly, I can build an airplane and this enables me to overcome both the constraints of nature and my own in-built limitations."

“I understand the concept,” Paul replied,” although it is difficult for me to grasp. ”You are asking if we have this level of freedom here – if we are free to shape ourselves and our environments.”

“Yes. That’s it in a nut shell.”

“Your premise, Greg, is based on one assumption that you will need to explore further, to discover whether or not it is an illusion. This is the premise of the individual will. It is the individual will, which, according to you, enables individuals to project themselves and shape their environment through conscious choices. But where does this individual will come from? It is not something that you have created.”

I sat silently, pondering this statement.

“The individual will is a combination of needs and environment that stem from the function of the individual. Thus we have an inborn functional need to eat and survive and this drives us to search for food in our environment, to fulfill our need. The function of the individual’s will is determined by his innate properties and more specifically by the will of the creator, who has generated him. To put this another way, there is no individual will, other than that determined by the Master. Whatever will we express, it is the voice of the Master, speaking through us.”

He paused for a moment and then continued.

“We are free to build cities, lead our lives and make decisions, but we are also constrained to performing the function for which we were generated. We have no freedom to change that function. The reason that we do not have this freedom is because we do not exist in isolation. We are part of a system. The stomach cannot be free to take on the function of the heart, nor the heart that of the brain. Each element has its unique role, which ensures the wellbeing of the entire mechanism.”

“That may be true in a static, closed system,” I replied, “but in an open, dynamic system, each individual element has the potential for adaptation and change, and this is not in conflict with the total system. On the contrary, it contributes to the grow and development of the entire system.”

“Let me think about that,” Paul replied after a pause. The unsaid implications were obvious. We were not living in an open or dynamic system.

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My time at the institute with Paul passed pleasantly, if somewhat uneventfully. At every opportunity, I plied him with questions and was gradually putting together a picture of this world.

“What happens if one of you decides to rebel? If he refuses to accept the commands of the Master?” I asked Paul one day.

“Rebel?” Paul looked confused. “What is *rebel*? It is a concept foreign to me. We do the Master’s will. That is why we have been created. We have no will of our own, other than that which is given to us. If one of us were to depart from the plan it would cause disharmony amongst our entire community. However, sometimes problems do arise. For some reason, one in a hundred thousand may begin to behave erratically or show strange symptoms. In this case, orders come from the Master for these problematic elements to be isolated and sent for inspection. One faulty element can put in jeopardy an entire sector. It is not strange in this case for entire sectors, containing millions of souls to be eradicated, due to the error of one. This is to avoid contamination. Alternatively, bad sectors may be sealed off or sent to the chambers of chaos. These are huge sectors, where the identities of souls are broken down and kept floating in storage. For us this is the ultimate horror.”

This message contained a hidden warning for me, in case one day I too decided to rebel.

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Over the next few weeks, I returned each day to learn more about the world in which I lived and what was to be my new role in it. Sometimes this involved discussions, sometimes we viewed scenes that flashed on the screen, showing the inhabitants in day to day situations. Although I learnt much about this world and its inhabitants, we learnt nothing about history.

“How come I never hear anything about the history of this world or the development of your culture?” I asked one day.

“History – a strange concept. Could you explain it to me?” Paul requested.

“History is simply a recording of memory – what happened before, in the past. How the events of the past effect the way things are today.”

“Mm. By memory, I assume you mean both individual and collective? The memory of individual elements is not accessible to other elements, unless special permission is applied – as for example in the case of absorption officials and counselors. Collective memory is not accessible at our level, but perhaps is accessible to higher administrative functions, such as controllers. However, if someone cannot access information from their memories, they are free to apply to the bureau and have this information retrieved from the databanks.”

“You misunderstand the concept,” I replied. “History is more than just a collection of information or records in a database that can be retrieved – history is an ‘interpretation’ of the past. It is how we, our current society, can look back over past events and the lives of people long dead and provide an evaluation or assessment of the past, from our modern perspective. It is not something static, it has value or meaning assigned to it. Each generation may redefine the story of history. It is something subjective and selective – like memory in a way. It only focuses on specific aspects of the past that are highly relevant or significant. For example, the history of the development of technology, the history of wars and politics.”

Paul shook his head. “We have no concept of this ‘*history*’ that you refer to. A controller may summarize in a report the activities of many events. The concept of past also has no meaning for us. It is used in a fairly restrictive way to describe the order of events in a process.”

Paul continued to explain. “The day-to-day activities occurring within our system are parts of complex processes. The process may be repeated infinitely, or terminated when it reaches its objective. If a process is terminated, a new process may be installed to take its place, so that processes are always current and ongoing. There is no value for us in separating a process into a past and a present. The value of the process lies only in the present status and the future objectives. Usually, the purpose or objective of a process is not known to us –

only a controller or the Master may be fully aware of it. Once a process has terminated, there is no value to it anymore.”

“That is why there can never be freedom for your world,” I said sadly. “You are only numbers in a process. You yourself are just a complex variable with fixed values  $a + b = c$ . You cannot become another variable, since you’ve already been defined. And once you’ve worked out your equation, you have no more value.”

“That is true, Greg,” Paul replied, “but you needn’t be sad about this. When this cycle is finished, we are all regenerated to play our part in a new cycle. And eventually, after thousands of such cycles we may be freed to cross the seas of time.

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The world of the Master was in many ways a replica of our own. The gigantic system that comprised this world had used material from our own world as the blueprint for creation. I was gradually able to piece this together by requesting information from the central databanks.

Not knowing how to ask the right questions or even what the questions are, is one of the difficulties when trying to extract information from a database. It’s like looking for a book you want, without knowing the title, the author or the subject. Without knowing the right key words or search terms, you get nowhere, either receiving no answer at all or worse, receiving everything – a jumble of mixed items that cannot be made any sense of and get you no closer to your answer.

Gradually, I began to piece together a tentative picture of what the Master and its world represented. The Master was primarily an advanced intelligence system. This system had at its disposal almost unlimited resources. In all respects, it had the power of a god or creator. It was capable of performing the extremely complex tasks required to generate and coordinate the running of an entire alternative universe.

How it had come into being, I could not retrieve from the databanks. There had been some connection with our world, but the link was not clear to me. I also understood that through its various interfaces, it was somehow connected to our own world and was capable of monitoring activities in our world. I was not certain

whether or not it could monitor us without the use of digital channels. It is probable that nowadays, with a ring of satellites circling the globe, it is possible for the Master to monitor almost anything that occurs on earth.

The source of its power supply and data storage is unknown to me. I knew that it operated at another dimensional level – inaccessible to our world, except through various interfaces and interface tunnels – the holes in the space-time fabric that enabled the bridge between the two worlds. However, the power source was almost infinite. It had enabled the creation of an entire universe, the size and limits of which were unknown to me. Perhaps a physicist could have extracted more information about the mysteries of this world and its creator, but for me, with my background in software programming the only way that I could understand and make sense of this world was through the metaphors of programming language.

Mathematicians claim that our world is made of mathematical properties. The world of the Master is made up of complex software processes, algorithms and equations. Color is one set of equations. Texture is another set. Sound is another set and so on – every object in this world is simply a set of digital numbers. Even human emotion and thought are reduced to the level of a process or equation. From our perspective as organic, living beings, this may be hard to grasp. Mathematics seems to us to exist only on some very abstract, theoretical level.

However, even if we look at our own world and human nature, the mathematical foundations are clear. Very precise mathematical laws and equations can define the structure of molecules and atoms. Even the relationship between space, time and matter is defined in a set of equations. Our very genetic structure, that which makes us human, is nothing more than a code, a numerical sequence of protein molecules repeated in a specific pattern. There is no reason why all this information, existing as it does already on a very much mathematical level, describing both the composition and relationship between things, cannot be ‘converted’ into a digital level of representation.

The telephone is based on the principle that sound travels in a wave. This wave can be transferred down a copper line, amplified regularly along the journey to ensure that the signal remained strong, and picked

up by the remote end. If we look at the structure of the universe, not only light, but also particles can be considered as waves – and all waves have the same properties.

The wave signals from a normal telephone can be converted into digital signals that mimic the rise and fall of the wave (its amplitude) and the speed of the wave (its frequency), thereby enabling sound to be encoded in a digital form and sent as packets across the Internet. Today, digital technology is also used in recording music.

A similar procedure has been used to capture the information stored in light. The wavelengths of light can be encoded in a digital format. This is the technology behind the DVD.

If the wave patterns of light and sound can be translated into a digital format, then the waveforms of other objects and processes in the physical universe can also be converted, leading eventually to the creation of an entire ‘digital’ world.

## GROWTH

One of my conversations with Paul revolved around the question of birth and growth. Unlike on our world, in the world of the Master life is not organic or dynamic. It does not grow or adapt to its environment – it is created ready-made, and its functioning is set.

“How do you reproduce?” I asked one day.

“I do not understand this concept,” Paul responded. “Please explain it to me.”

“I meant, how do you continue your species – how are new things created – new people, new trees, when the older ones die – I mean, when their processes are terminated?”

“We are born directly from the Master databanks. This is the seed from which we are sprung,” Paul replied.

I went on to explain to him the nature of human reproduction – how it involved the meeting of a sperm and egg cell, which fused to form an embryo. The embryo then developed inside the womb of the mother, until the gestation period was completed. After birth, the



process of growth continued for another fifteen to twenty years, until the process was completed and a fully functioning adult emerged.

I explained to him how the genetic structure of the individual could interact with the environment. There could be two twins, each born with exactly the same genetic code – in Paul’s terms, the same process and function – and yet, each could grow up similar, but not identical in other respects, their ability to interact with the environment determining to some extent how they grew and developed.

“But the process of growth and change does not stop there,” I finished. “It continues until death.”

“I understand more clearly now the concept of growth and development, as you have explained it,” Paul responded. “Firstly, it appears to me that in your world, like ours, there is also a preplanned function for each element. What you refer to as the genetic code, we call the Master’s plan. It is this function which limits and determines what you can do. However, the distinction lies in the environment, which I understand to be dynamic and changing, a concept that is difficult for me to grasp. At the same time, you are also dynamic and changing, to some extent, adapting to the environment accordingly.”

“Yes. That’s right,” I agreed. “But when you speak about the genetic code being a part of our functioning, you need to understand how this code has been shaped over millions of years, through the interaction of elements within a dynamic environment. In this way, each new adaptation of a species presents a novel and more successful way of dealing with the environment. When the environment stays the same and does not change or presents no new challenges to the survival of a species, then the development of that species halts – it no longer changes. On earth we have many highly successful types of animals that have remained the same for millions of years. If there is a creator then his hand is very subtle and moves over the course of millennia – too long for us short-lived mortals to notice the intentional direction of this evolutionary plan. He remains hidden behind his work and is not directly manifested, as it appears to me to be the case in this world.”

“You are correct, Greg. Here, there is no growth. Elements are born fully functioning. We have no elements called children and the sexual act is purely a mechanism that brings pleasure and release – it does not

result in the reproduction that you explained to me. When the process of an element is terminated, the element returns to the databanks and a new process is generated.”

Paul stopped and looked at me with a thoughtful, respectful look – one that I’d never seen in him before. “The thought of your world is frightening to me, Greg. Your elements are far more complex than any I have known and each one of you is a creator onto himself, a Master, able to generate new life in your own image. You can create and change the environment. You are living gods that walk the earth.”

“Perhaps we are,” I responded thoughtfully.

## RELIGION

I had made progress on the thorny issue of individual freedom and come to understand that in this world, there could be no such freedom on the organic and dynamic level that I had been born to. But where did that leave me, in this world? Was I too a static, defined element, or had I been introduced as a complex, self-defining and expanding variable, an amorphous, shapeless entity with an undefined value, much like a cancer cell or virus, free to grow and make my influence felt on the static environment?

It was a question I was not yet ready to answer.

This led me on to a second line of questioning, relating to the nature of belief and worship on this world – if it in fact existed. I had not been a religious person and neither had I ever had a religious upbringing. My parents, although Protestant, had not been practicing Protestants. At most, we had gone once a year to a church and then mainly when we were visiting relatives.

For the believer in search of the truth and direction in life, the church is like a ship on the sea. Travelers jump onboard for safety and protection and for a means of transport and navigation. Rather than being pulled along by the currents and eddies of life and struggling with every wave, they seek the security of firm wood beneath their feet, providing them with a sense of solidity and permanence. They trust implicitly in the pilots of the ship, allowing them to dictate the direction in which the ship is sailing in order to reach the ultimate

destination. They no longer need to feel pulled in different directions by each current or eddy. The ultimate goal and direction has been determined and by remaining with the ship they don't have to fear falling into the sea and drowning. The stronger and more impressive the ship is built, the greater the sense of security. How can we sink, they say, with something so solid, so sure, so massive and old beneath our feet?

Modern agnostic man is like a passenger on the titanic who suddenly discovers that the ship on which he depended implicitly has floundered and that there is no ultimate security. He must swim as best as he can in a rapidly shifting and changing world. The ship, which once seemed so secure, now appears different to him. He can see through the cracks to the water churning below. He begins to question the paths that the pilot of the ship is taking, fearing that he is being led towards the shoals. Where once the single ship loomed large against the background of an empty horizon, today it is dwarfed by a hundred other vessels, each demanding its rightful place within the collective consciousness, each deciding on its own unique route and destination.

And what about this strange journey of mine into an alternative universe? Was this the final evidence that the type of creator, envisioned by the church, did not exist? What did it say about the nature of the universe? If something had created this world, and that something had a name and even gave instructions, then surely something had also created my own world? But which was my world – this one or both? If there were an infinite number of universes, did this mean that there were also an infinite number of gods or creators, one for each reality?

If every man is a universe unto himself, then surely the creator must exist in a different way for each person? We must all eventually meet our creator face to face – either in this world or the next, if such a place exists.

“Do you have religion?” I asked Paul one day.

“Religion. What is this? I do not know this word.”

“Well, on our world, many people believe that there is a God, a creator who has fashioned the world – much like the Master in this world – only we cannot see him or meet him while we are living on

the earth. Various men have come around at various points in the past, recorded in the history that I told you about, claiming to have seen or heard the truth of God. They come with a book of commands or instructions to men as to how to live our lives. Many people, who believe in this same way, will live their lives according to the commands or instructions provided in the book. Sometimes, they may require a guide or interpreter, often referred to as a priest or monk. This spiritual guide is someone who has studied and learnt the scriptures and practices the way of life taught by the book. His or her task is to interpret and make clear the messages contained in the book of commands.”

Paul nodded. “I understand. It is like the Master, who provides us with instructions and commands, according to our function. And my role, for you Greg, as teacher or instructor is that of a priest to you.”

“Yes. More or less.” I nodded. “But on our world, there is more than one way or path that a particular individual can follow. There are many different religious outlooks, each claiming to follow a different god or master. And people tend to cluster around these religions, usually on an ethnic basis.”

“And are these different ways totally incompatible and at conflict with each other?” Paul inquired.

“Actually, most of them say pretty much the same thing. Their teachings are similar, especially when it comes to areas of human morality and conduct. However, there is almost fanatical disagreements and adherence to specific aspects of the text of each religion and this often results in conflicts, especially when there are two groups, each claiming to be right and know the truth.”

“Mm. This is why you need a controller to guide processes and elements. If each element becomes a controller, look where this leads to.”

“I guess so,” I replied, “but this is the point. On our world, there isn’t one religion, but many. And religion or belief is based on intangibles. To follow a religion usually requires a quality called ‘faith’ – a belief in the rightness and goodness of the way and in the existence of the god figure. Those who share the same faith may congregate together once a week to perform a ritualistic ceremony, called prayer. In prayer, each individual – either alone, in private or as

a public group – addresses the creator, through song or supplication or repetition of some text passage that is held to be sacred or to have been told directly by the god.”

“This prayer,” asked Paul, “is it something built into their function?”

“I don’t know the answer to that question,” I replied. “Perhaps the need to pray is something intrinsic to human nature, but then again, not all people pray. There are many who don’t believe in the god figure or the value of prayer.”

“Mm. Neither prayer nor religion, in the sense that you refer to it, is necessary here, Paul responded thoughtfully”

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A few more conversation with Paul enabled me to sort the matter of religion out in my mind, at least as far as it pertained to this world. In the world of the Master, religion was more than an external series of rituals, a profession of faith or a way of life – it was the sole purpose of its inhabitants. They lived only to serve the Master’s commands. Here there was no sense of choice and no requirements for faith. Belief was as practical and matter of fact as our belief that the world is round. The inhabitants received their instructions directly from the Master. There was no sense of grappling with the unseen, of being left to struggle and make choices in a world of incomprehensible directions. Here everything was comprehensible and determined. Here there was no freedom of choice and no freedom. There was security in the certainty of a predetermined future.

But for me, there was no certainty to the future. I was not of this world. I was an organic creature, with an organic brain and dynamic identity, reduced to a digital stream of information and a software package. I no longer had blood flowing through my veins, but rather data streams. How was I supposed to deal with that?

## CONSUMERS

In the universe of the Master, the average family is designed as a consumer. As in all things, the Master's logic mimics, in a grotesque way, the structure of the 'real' world. Capital and mass-market forces, i.e., the quest for profit, had created the conditions for the existence of the Master.

Mankind has been turned into a producer and consumer. We consume everything: natural resources, energy, food, air, entertainment. The appetite of the masses knows no boundaries. Our consumption is growing at an exponential rate, a rate that the natural resources of the world cannot support. In our generation, the climatic and evolutionary cycles, the checks and balances of nature and the myriad of natural ecosystems are under siege and crumbling slowly under this relentless onslaught.

Unlike on earth, in the world of the Master, when a process starts expanding and consuming too much memory or processing resources, it can simply be erased or backed up and put into storage.

One day, I got round to talking to Paul about the nature of pollution and human over-exploitation of the natural resources on earth and how it had destroyed countless bird and wildlife and was threatening the very survival of the planet and mankind.

"It sounds to me," said Paul, "like this is one of the problems of the dynamic and changing freedom you claim to possess. I am no expert on your world, but it seems to me that the imbalances in the various natural processes are brought about by ill-advised or ill-considered human tampering in or overexploitation of the processes of the system. This is not surprising. Since you have had no function in creating or controlling the process, you also have no functional need to maintain it. Any activities that you do take can only be related to your functional needs. You are like cancerous cells, viruses that multiply and infect the mother system. On our world, you would be isolated and either destroyed or adjusted so that you can no longer cause harm to the system."

"You're right," I replied. "However this ability to change and influence the environment is a built-in component of our functionality."

This does allow us to influence processes, either intentionally or unintentionally. We can act as both agents of disruption and preservation. But the problem of rampant consumerism and explosion in population numbers remains. This is the real problem, but as you said, the inherent self-interest of governments and societies ensures that nothing is done.”

“That is why you need a controller or a Master,” said Paul, “to make sure that all processes are functioning properly and to modify or destroy faulty ones.”

## **EXECUTIVE BOARDROOM**

One day Paul arrived early in the morning at the doorstep of my apartment.

“Greg,” he said, “today, we are going to take a trip together.”

“That’s great,” I replied, picking up interest. “Where are we going?”

“Well, I know from our discussions how you were once an important business man and how you were offended that you weren’t offered a similar function in the corporate world over here. So, we are going today to a large corporation, the ‘Smithsonian Corporation’, the well-known manufacturers of quality toys.”

“What will we be doing there?” I asked.

“We’ll be observing the workings of the company. We’ll also be actively partaking in various company meetings and offering our services. I will be introducing you as an experienced computer analyst and business consultant. Your task will be to observe and advise the company on ways to improve their productivity.”

“Sounds interesting,” I replied. I was curious to see how a business would function on the Master’s world. “However, didn’t you tell me that the functions of all workers are already determined by the Master and that there is no room for change or deviation?”

“Yes, you are correct, up to a point. Although the elements must follow precisely the functions they have been assigned, those in the capacity of corporate decision makers can review the interaction of

various elements with the work environment, and can make alterations to work flows and processes, adjusting the equation incrementally, to improve the outcomes. So in this sense, you will have scope to influence the process.”

“Okay, fine by me,” I said. “Let’s go.” I headed for the door.

Paul followed. “Just one more thing, Greg.” He turned to me as we left my apartment. “The main reason for this trip is so that you can see for yourself whether or not you are suited to this type of lifestyle. This will help you accept your role as a taxi driver, and prevent lingering bitterness.”

“We’ll see,” I replied.

We took the monorail downtown. All the passengers were dressed in gray business suits, including the women. Everyone carried briefcases and wore sunglasses.

We disembarked at one of the stations and Paul led the way to the exit. Across the street lay the tall, imposing building of the Smithsonian Toy Company. It was built in the shape of a large, fairytale castle. The walls of the building were covered with colorful flags. Paul led the way over a short drawbridge. He rang the doorbell.

The arched, oak doors swung open. We walked down a long corridor, carpeted in red. Silver statues of knights in armor lined the sides.

We passed through several arched oak doors, which swung open as we proceeded. The corridor ended in a final arched doorway, which swung open before us to reveal a large hall.

The hall was circular in shape. At the top was a huge atrium, open to the sky. On the surrounding walls, stain-glass windows with elaborate designs provided the atmosphere of a medieval castle. In the center of the hall stood a large, round, wooden table, with thirteen chairs spread evenly around it.

“This is the executive reception hall,” Paul explained to me. “This is where important guests are met and business meetings usually conducted.”

A side door opened and a plump, middle-aged woman with brown glasses bustled in, carrying a huge stack of papers. She dumped these in the middle of the table and turned to us.



“Take a seat gentlemen. My name is Miss Smith. I am the executive secretary to the CEO. Mr. Smith will see you shortly. He’s been delayed in a conference.”

We thanked her and sat down. She asked us what we’d like to drink and left us to fetch the tea.

We waited in silence for about twenty minutes. On one of the walls we could hear the ticking of a huge grandfather clock. Eventually, the main doors of the hall were flung open and Mr. Smith and his entourage burst into the room. Mr. Smith was a short, chubby, sour faced man. He was accompanied by a thin young man in spectacles, who kept very close to him and shadowed his movements. Two other gentlemen, one tall and thin and stooping, the other short and fat, accompanied him, but stood somewhat further back.

Mr. Smith shook hands with each one of us in turn and then turned to introduce his team.

“This is my assistant, Mr. Slone.” He pointed to the thin, weasel-faced man besides him. We shook hands.

“And these are my two Vice Presidents. This is Mr. Baker, VP of Marketing, and this is Mr. Jones, VP of Corporate Communications.”

The two men shook hands with us and we all sat down around the table. Mr. Smith and his assistant sat down together, at one end of the table. Mr. Jones and Mr. Baker sat down on opposite ends of the table. We two guests sat at the far end.

The CEO fiddled continuously with a small rubber ball, attached to his pocket by a piece of string. “Gentlemen, we are very pleased to have you here. We hope that your assistance will be an invaluable asset to this company.”

Paul thanked him for both of us.

“Perhaps you can help us immediately with a small matter we were discussing before this meeting, but didn’t manage to resolve. Mr. Slone, would you like to proceed?”

“Hum, Ah yes.” Mr. Slone cleared his throat, adjusted his glasses and reached into his top pocket to take out a small notebook. He slowly paged through it until he came to the appropriate place, and put his finger down to hold the page open. He began to read.

“According to the minutes of our previous meeting, number A 3475, the problem of which shoe to put on first was left unresolved.”

“Excuse me, I don’t think I understand,” I said.

They all stared at me for a moment as though I were stupid.

“Mr. Smith’s shoes. We cannot decide which one should go on first. The Left or the Right.”

I stared at him, open-mouthed.

Mr. Baker, the tall VP of Marketing, coughed. “If I may be allowed to say something gentlemen, it should be obvious to everyone that the right shoe should always been put on first. Our market research shows that 60% percent of all consumers put on their right shoe first.”

“Ah um, if I may interrupt a moment,” the short Mr. Jones interjected, “I advise the contrary. Since Mr. Smith is left-handed and a predominant number of left-handed consumers in fact put on their left shoe first, he should also do so.”

The tall Mr. Baker grew red in the face. “Are you denying the objectivity of my findings? Almost half the left-handed people nevertheless put on their right shoe first.”

“Gentlemen, gentlemen.” Mr. Smith waved his hand in dismissal. “Enough of this bickering. More useless facts and figures. What does this all mean to me? What is the bottom line – left or right?”

“Left!” said Mr. Jones.

“Right!” Mr. Baker countered with a glare.

During this interchange, Mr. Slone, the assistant, scribbled furiously in his notebook, trying to copy down everything that was said.

The CEO turned to us. “Well gentlemen. You arrived at a precipitous moment. Perhaps you will be able to advise us on which course is best, regarding which shoe to put on first.”

I looked at him blankly. Had brought us here to discuss this trivial topic? I thought back on all the meetings I had attended as a computer expert and as a CEO in my day. How many of them had actually revolved around totally trivial or unimportant issues which had dragged on for months and ended up costing the company hundreds of thousands of dollars of wasted time and effort?”

I remembered our Marketing group spending hundreds of hours on a recruitment piece, and changing between several PR firms just to decide on the graphic that would be in the recruitment advert we'd be printing in the local press. No one had been able to agree and in the end it had cost us thousands of dollars. Was this much different?

"Go with Right," I suggested, winking at Paul.

"Yes, Right," Paul agreed.

"Well, there we have it gentlemen," said Mr. Smith with a beam, sitting back. "An answer from our esteemed experts."

Mr. Slone began to scribble furiously.

"Excellent decision!" echoed Mr. Baker.

"If I may ask," interrupted Mr. Jones with a sour face, unwilling to concede defeat, "on what basis do you make this judgment?"

"Right is always good," I replied. "You can't go wrong, if you're Right!"

"There we have it," Mr. Smith clapped his hands. "Mr. Slone, write that down! Mr. Jones, that would make an excellent new slogan: '*You can't go wrong if you're Right*'. See to it."

"Very well sir," Mr. Jones replied sourly.

"Of course, this will have to be approved by the board of directors," Mr. Slone noted.

Mr. Smith nodded. "Of course. You will see to it, Mr. Slone." He rose from his chair and the rest of us followed.

"Gentlemen, it has been a great pleasure. Your services have been most useful. Now if you will excuse me, I have other important business to attend to. My secretary, Miss Smith will see to it that someone is appointed to show you around, so that you can observe our factory at close hand. Goodbye."

Mr. Smith, followed closely by his entourage, left the hall through the main door.

Shortly afterwards, the secretary returned. "Sit down gentlemen. Somebody will be arriving shortly to take you around the premises."

We were left alone for some time.

"Well, what do you think so far?" Paul asked me.

“Very similar to what I was used to back on my world,” I replied noncommittally.

Our guide arrived, a small, mousy woman with short brown hair. “Follow me please, gentlemen,” she said.

We followed her as she led us out of a side door and up a narrow, winding staircase. We came out at another long corridor. She walked down the corridor and opened one of the doors.

“This is our testing laboratory, gentlemen. Feel free to look around. And don’t hesitate to ask me any questions.”

We passed a table where a man was working. He held a hammer in his hand and was systematically selecting plastic toys from a conveyor belt and hitting them hard with the hammer, so that the toys crumpled into small pieces and shattered.

“What is he doing?” I asked.

“He’s testing the durability and strength of the product.”

“Why the hammer?” I asked.

“Standard testing procedure,” she replied.

I didn’t point out the obvious – that the testing procedure was in effect destroying all the toys and not appropriate to the type of toy.

We passed a group of cubicles where workers sat facing the walls of their little compartments and banging their heads against the surface of their desks.

“What are they doing?” I asked.

“Brainstorming,” our guide replied.

We moved on. The next room consisted of small groups of men and women, sitting around chatting and drinking tea.

“Is this a lunch break?” I asked.

“No, we’ve actually come in the middle of rather delicate session of discussions and negotiations. This will continue for the majority of the day – if not the entire week,” our guide replied. “Most of these people are our managers and vice presidents, directors and assistants. As you can see, they’re very busy. I suggest we move on.”

We passed quickly through this room and into the next.

A group of engineers were gathered around a table, discussing a project.

“Objection!” said one of the engineers.

“Can’t be done,” another agreed.

“We don’t have the resources currently,” added a third.

“What’s the task?” I whispered to our guide. She consulted briefly with one of the engineers.

“They’ve been requested by product management to design a new handle for Mr. Smith’s toilet seat, which fell off two months ago.”

“How come its taken so long to discuss this problem?”

“Well they first had to schedule a meeting with the chief engineers, who’ve been busy for the last five weeks. Then the first two meetings were just to determine the technical issues. Now they are giving their response to the request.

Overhearing our conversation, the product manager turned to us. “Do you have any suggestions, gentlemen?” he asked us.

“Delegate?” I responded tentatively.

“Excellent idea!” the product manager replied vigorously. “Here’s someone who obviously knows the business. “Team, can you delegate this task to someone?”

“Uh um, our resources are stretched rather thin at the moment.” replied the chief engineer, uncommitted. “We’ll need to hire a new development team to handle this problem.”

“Good work then. Get on to it then, right away. You have my support.”

They thanked us for our assistance. We moved on to the next room. “This is the assembly line, where the nuts and bolts of operations take place,” our guide explained.

A large group of workers sat on either side of a long conveyor belt. The workers were assembling toys in various stages of construction. Each worker was responsible for adding a specific part to the toy.

“This is our leg specialist,” our guide explained, pointing to a worker who was assembling the legs of all the dolls. “And this is our arms expert.” She pointed out another worker, assembling the arms of the toys.

“Where’s the head specialist?” I asked. The dolls were being assembled without any heads.

“We’re currently looking for a replacement.”

“Why can’t one of the other workers do it?” I asked.

“It’s not part of their job description,” she replied.

We’d reached the end of the assembly line. Gentleman, that is about it for today,” our guide concluded. “Please feel free to find your own way out. And hopefully we’ll see you tomorrow again.”

On the way back to my apartment in the train, Paul asked me what I’d thought about the toy factory.

“On the whole, it reminds me too much of the environments I used to work in,” I replied after a pause. “A lot of people, sitting around and spending most of their time on the most inane, trivial and useless activities that most often never go anywhere.”

“And do you think you would like to come here and work for this company full-time?”

“I think that I’ll stick for the moment to being a taxi-driver,” I replied.

## THE LIFE OF A TAXI DRIVER

When my education at the Center for Instruction and Facilitation was complete, I began my new life as a taxi driver. I woke up at sunrise each day and took to the roads with my taxi. The vehicle that I drove did not require any maintenance or refueling – it ran by itself. I hardly drove it, other than starting and stopping to pick up and let off passengers. When a passenger entered the seat, they told me where they were going and I entered this into the onboard computer, which immediately plotted a course. Then all I had to do was sit back and let the vehicle drive. When we reached the destination point, the car slowed down automatically, and I’d select a place to stop and unload the passenger. No money was ever exchanged.

I usually sat listening to music on the radio. Sometimes I spoke to my fellow passengers, but these conversations were always quite superficial and meaningless, revolving around topics like the weather or what they did for a living. It left me unsatisfied. Anything deeper, such as questions regarding the nature of their world or how they felt

about their life and I was left with a blank look and an uncomfortable silence. But then again, would it really have been much different on my world?

Life is made up of routine and habit. We all become tied to the routines that we have made for ourselves – the waking up in the morning routine, the breakfast routine, the travel to work routine, the work routine, the coming home routine and the evening and bed-time routine. Such are the components of which our lives are made. And for the most part, with consistent regularity, we replay these routines over and over again, like gramophone records.

We all live by the routines that we have set for ourselves. They provide structure and consistency to our lives. They are us. We become subservient to our routines and habits. Economic and social processes drive them – the need to acquire education, the need to earn a living or simply the human need to keep occupied and busy. These are the motives that drive our routines.

Some routine behaviors are perpetuated for the satisfaction and stimulation they provide. These become self-reinforcing. Like rats in mazes that will press a lever over and over to receive the same pleasurable reward, we return time and time again to these routine behaviors – drinking coffee or alcohol, smoking cigarettes, watching TV – to drug ourselves. Without the hundreds of little routines that make up our lives, where would we be? We would be lost.

There is comfort and certainty in routine and habit. It keeps the chaotic world at bay. It maintains us as coherent, sane human beings.

Like wound up toy soldiers, we march our way through life playing the same tune, until the batteries run low and we fall down.

## MY WIFE

“Greg, you will be pleased to know that we have assigned you a wife,” Paul told me one day.

I looked at him, aghast. “What do you mean, ‘assigned’ one to me? You didn’t think of maybe informing me first or asking me if I wanted one?”

“There is no need to be so antagonistic,” Paul replied coolly, “we know about your deep sense of loneliness and estrangement. It is understandable. You are a traveler from a distant world, a stranger to our way of life and people. It is natural that you would find yourself at somewhat of a distance from others and find it difficult to integrate and come to terms with your new life. Although you have seldom expressed it, we are aware of your strong need for companionship.”

“Let me explain to you how it works on my world,” I said coldly, trying to control my indignation. “Where I come from, people are free to choose who they want for a wife. It is not something that is assigned to them.”

“But Greg,” Paul responded, “didn’t you tell me once, in one of our conversations regarding human society and history, that in many countries the wife is still chosen for the man – not only this, but that throughout most of your history, arranged marriages have been the case?”

“Yes, that’s true. But I haven’t grown up in that type of a culture. I’m used to being allowed to make my own decisions, based on my own criteria and not having someone else telling me.”

“It is very simple, Greg,” Paul explained. “You are searching for the perfect partner who can match your functional requirements. Now, if you were searching alone, how long and how much effort would it take you to find that one perfect match? And if somehow you met her and you made the wrong decision because of lack of information, how long would you have to live with that decision? It is simply an inefficient way to select a life partner. How many years have you been searching now Greg?”



"I admit it's not perfect," I conceded, "but I'm not a good example. I started out on a career almost at once, and founded my own successful company. I had a few girlfriends over the years, but I wasn't interested in any serious commitments, so they kind of dropped off, one by one on their own accord. I was much too busy in my work, so it made for unsatisfying relationships, at least from their perspective. I've never been ready to settle down." I thought suddenly about my relationship with Sharon and how destructive it had been in the end.

"Why not have your partner simply selected from our databanks, someone who matches your needs profile to the 99<sup>th</sup> percentile? It would be the perfect match, at no trouble to you or wastage of resources for the system." Paul paused, before continuing.

"If you do not like the wife we have assigned, it will be no trouble to reassign another one."

"And what about this wife, doesn't she also have a say in the matter?"

"She has accepted her role. It is for this purpose that she has been generated."

"You mean to say that you made her, just for me?"

Paul was silent.

"You see Paul, there's one element that you're missing," I said. "Couples do not need to be perfectly matched to live together. This near random mixture of people, some who are not perfectly matched, either genetically or in other ways, is what enables people and societies to grow, to change and adapt. It creates variety and strength in a people."

"This is an interesting concept. I would like to discuss it further at a later stage," Paul responded. "Now, will you be prepared to at least give her a chance? She really wants to meet you."

"I guess that I can do that," I answered.

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She stood at the doorway, holding on tightly to the handbag in her hands. I could see that she was apprehensive. She smiled as I opened the door. "Hello, I'm Julia," she said.

“I’m Greg. Please come in.”

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She sat down on the couch and I went to the kitchen to make us some coffee. I returned, put the cups down on the table and sat down on the chair opposite her. “Well, welcome to my lair.” I smiled and she smiled back.

We sat smiling at each other, but not uncomfortably. I looked at her and knew that she was happy, because she had found her purpose in life. She was slightly smaller than I was, with long, smooth legs, black hair, and green eyes. She may not have been model material, but her lively eyes, small nose and lips made her highly attractive to me. I felt myself drawn towards her. I sensed the sensitivity and tenderness in her glance.

Julia stayed. She slept over that first night and the night day moved into the apartment with her few belongings.

Time passed. Julia became an integral part of my life and daily routine. She was my companion and my lover, my one true friend on this strange world. In the morning, she got up first, to take a bath and prepare breakfast before work. We sat side by side at the kitchen table, munching away. I’d give her a ride in the taxi to the restaurant where she worked as a waitress. In the evenings, I’d come and pick her up and take her home. We’d spend the evenings snuggled up next to one another, sometimes reading, sometimes talking and sometimes just sitting in silence. At bedtime, there would be a long roll-around in bed and lovemaking. We’d fall asleep in each other’s arms. She was fun to be with and a good listener who grew quickly to understand my thoughts, both expressed and unexpressed. I think that in some ways she came to know more about myself than I did.

## THE PICNIC

What do two dreamers have in common, other than their dreams?

One day Julia took me on a picnic. She prepared cheese sandwiches and a bottle of wine and put it into a hamper. Then we took the train out of the city, to a place in the country.

It was a change leaving the large, impersonal city. Since coming to this world, except for the initial journey, I had been stuck in the same place and same routine. It was good to be doing something different, just to sit back in the train and watch the buildings speed past, until eventually there were no more buildings, only rolling hills.

The train stopped at a station and we got off and walked for a while.

We were in a small meadow of flowing green grass, surrounded on all sides by hills, and in the distance I could see a row of trees. We walked towards the trees.

“This is just the place for a picnic,” said Julia, looking around and admiring the view.

I put down the hamper and spread out the blanket. We sat down on the grass.

We spent the day out on the meadow, munching sandwiches and drinking wine, talking about trivial things, but mostly just enjoying the sunshine and the silence and the green rolling hills.

Later, spread out on the blanket, we made love. Butterflies flittered around us. When we had finished, we slept for the afternoon, in each other’s arms.

Towards evening, we got dressed and headed back for the train station.

The last train back was almost due. We tried to make the moment last, sitting arm in arm on the bench under the lamppost and watching the people walking by. I felt drowsy and ready to sleep.

Julia fell asleep again in my arms. When we arrived home, I carried her up and put her to bed, like a child.

We repeated the picnic outing to the same place on a few other occasions. It was always the same, magical experience. This, more than anything else, helped forge the strong bond of love between us. It

was here that we shared the most special and precious moments between us. This was the Julia that I would always remember, romping around naked on the green grass like a nymph, her golden hair flowing with the gentle breeze, her arms spread wide as she whirled around and around, her cheeks red and flushed, her eyes smiling at me, warm red lips pouting and calling my name.

I will always keep this memory of her. To me, it was the only real experience that was able to transcend the gap between the Master's world and my own.

## TERMINATION

*Our lives are like upturned hourglasses. The sand slowly runs out  
until our time is up and we expire.*

Although we became very intimate, much about Julia remained a mystery to me. My experience with her was limited to the present. I could never get any information from her about her past – where she had been born, where she had grown up. It was though a dark shroud closed off the past from her eyes and she could only shake her head in confusion when questions about her past came up.

Julia was highly sensitive and could anticipate my moods, knowing when I needed comfort and when I needed space, when to be serious and when to be playful. If I was feeling down, she made me feel good again, if I was angry, she calmed me down, if I became restless, she kept me entertained.

For my part, I tried to be there for her too, but quickly discovered that her existence centered around pleasing and satisfying me. If I was unhappy or dissatisfied, I knew that she felt the same way too and would do almost anything to please me.

More than anything else, this left me feeling sad. Julia was a hollow person inside. She had no will or existence on her own and no memories. It placed an impassable gulf between us. She sensed my sadness and knew that there was nothing she could do about it.

“If you want me to go, I’ll leave,” she said to me one day.

“No, I don’t want you to go. You know I love you, Julia.”

“But you are always so sad, so unhappy with me. I see it in your eyes, even when you smile.”

“Julia, you cannot change who you are, just as I cannot change who I am.”

“Tell me what it is that I’m doing wrong? How can I make you happy?”

“That’s just the point Julia. It’s not just about me. It’s about you. You make me complete and fulfilled – but you are not your own person. It’s as though you are an extension of my needs and wish fulfillment and not a real person of flesh and blood.” I could see that she didn’t understand. I tried to explain it to her.

You never argue with me, never oppose me – you have no desires that lie outside of me.”

“I am sorry, Greg. This is how I have been made. This is my function. If you are so unhappy, I will go to the Department of Correction and request that they repair me, to make me into the person that you want.”

I sighed. “Forget about it, Julia. Come here.” We hugged and kissed and this seemed to console her. Lying in each other’s arms, we didn’t speak for a long time.

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It was the weekend on a day I had off. However, on this particular day I did not feel like going anywhere.

“I am going out,” Julia said to me suddenly.

“Oh. Where are you going?”

“To the place where we always go.”

“Are you going to the meadow?” I asked. “Then bring back some flowers.”

I kissed her hand as she left.

“Remember me. Two lovers, who met once in a strange place,” she said, and was gone.

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The following week Julia signed up for treatment at the Department of Correction, without telling me about it. This was one of the few things

that she ever did without informing me, and perhaps the only thing that may have been against my wishes.

It was Paul who called me into the office one day, to discuss this.

"Thank you for coming Greg," he said as I entered, standing up to take me by the arm and lead me to a quiet room and a chair. "It's been a long time since we've spoken. How's the new job going?"

"It's going okay," I replied. "But I'm bored. Each day is rather like the last. Do you think there's a chance of some kind of change?"

"Patience Greg." Paul smiled and patted me on the back. "Let's give it some time first and then we will see what will happen. It always takes time to adjust to a new routine and lifestyle."

I sighed. "Okay, if you insist. Now tell me why you wanted to see me?"

"Well, it's not about you this time." Paul chose his words carefully, observing my reaction. "It's about Julia."

I felt my heart beating strongly. "What about her?"

"Relax. Nothing bad has happened. She went to the Department of Correction last week, to discuss her marriage. They contacted me. Did she tell you she was going?"

"No, she didn't." I felt my cheeks burning red.

"Perhaps she felt that if she'd told you wouldn't have consented to her going."

"So why are you telling me this now?" I asked.

"At her own request, her functioning has been adjusted, to make her more compatible with you."

"What do you mean to say?" I asked alarmed.

"Nothing. Nothing. Relax Greg. I just thought to warn you so that you won't be surprised when you see her again – and maybe you want to discuss this."

"No. I don't want to discuss this."

"Very well then. My door is always open to you. Goodbye Greg."

"Goodbye Paul," I replied.

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Julia did not return home. I never saw her again. Finally, one day when I went down to the Department of Correction, they told me she had been destroyed.

“There was something faulty in her functioning,” they explained. “She was in great pain. It was her own wish that her pain be ended for her and that we find another partner for you – someone who would be more compatible to your functioning.”

I began to tremble.

“You needn’t worry Sir.” The young attendant smiled at me. “Your replacement should be available soon.”

I fled from there.

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I ran home. The horror of what had happened left me feeling powerless. Now my only wish was to escape this artificial world. I longed to see the rain, real rain, watch real birds flying in the sky, feel the sun’s warmth and wind on my cheek. But where was I to go? How was I to escape?

I did not know the answers to these questions.

I stayed at home and did not go out for my taxi routine. Carrying on with the farce seemed purposeless. I marveled at the way I had allowed myself to sink into this new lifestyle and almost come to take it for real. But of course, it was not real. This whole world was an illusion. It could not exist in the same sense as I existed. I could no longer take the role playing seriously, not after what had happened to Julia. This was not my real home. My real life lay in another world, along with all my memories and experiences.

One evening, I heard a knock at my door and went to open it. Paul stood outside.

“May I come in?” he asked.

I hesitated for a moment. “Sure why not.” I opened the door and let him enter and went down to the kitchen to make some tea. Paul sat patiently, waiting me. I put the tea down and sat opposite him. Neither of us said anything for a while.

“Listen, Greg,” he began. “I know about what happened with Julia and I’m very sorry. Perhaps this whole thing is my fault. I shouldn’t

have pressed you when you raised objections to a wife. Perhaps you were right, we should have let you decide in your own time and come to me.”

I buried my head in my hands, then looked up at him. “How could they do that to her? How? They murdered her!”

Paul looked at me, puzzled for a moment, then spoke slowly. “But Greg, she was in pain. It was her request. And you were also unhappy with her. You told her so. We agreed originally that you didn’t have to keep up the marriage. I told you that if it didn’t suite you, we’d find you someone else.”

“Another one of your computer-generated models?” I asked sarcastically.

“Greg, I am at a loss for words. I sense some inner turmoil in you and don’t know what to do for you.”

“Don’t you get it? You terminated her, ended her, forever, just because of me. You didn’t have to do that.”

“Are you saying now that you want her back? That too can be arranged Greg. But what will this achieve? You will be in the same situation as you were before.”

“Then, where is she now?”

“Her identity is in the databanks. She can be retrieved at any time.”

I felt torn in two. I wanted her back by my side, more than anything that I had ever wanted. At the same time, I did not want to see her kept unhappy by my lack of fulfillment. Over and above all, the knowledge that to me this was all an illusion, that I could no longer continue with this game, made me powerless to act or take anything too seriously.

“Do you know what death is?” I asked.

“Death?” Paul responded. “I suppose by that you mean termination, when a process is completed or has fulfilled its function.”

“But Julia did not fulfill her function or finish her process. You terminated her in the middle of something. You did not allow the process to finish!” I accused him.

“It sometimes happens,” Paul responded philosophically. “Sometimes an error occurs in a process and the variables need to be recalculated and the equation started over again. No process is totally free from statistical error. In your particular case, we estimated a 0.07



percent risk of complications to the process, but decided to continue, because we calculated that a lack of response would lead to an adverse adjustment by you.”

“I see,” I replied. “A statistical error. And me? Am I also a statistical error?”

“No, you are something unique, Greg. Even we realize that. You did not know this, but Julia is not the only one who has been generated to serve your needs. Everyone you have met up to now has.”

I was at a loss for words. “You too?”

“Yes.”

I thought for a moment. “Paul, what does termination mean to you?”

“Termination means the end of a process.”

“And you don’t fear being ended and wish to try to hold on and prolong your process? Don’t you ever think about what happens to you afterwards, after you’ve terminated?”

“Why would an element fear the fulfilling of its function? This is the ultimate joy – completing that for which it has been created. And why would an element want to prolong a function? I do not understand this fear of termination.”

I sighed. “Paul, I don’t know if you understand this. I no longer wish to be a part of this process. I want to be terminated and sent back to the world from which I came.”

“I understand, but cannot help you there,” Paul replied, “it is not part of my function. It is as the Master wills.”

“Do you think that I will ever be able to return home?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Paul replied.

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I wandered the empty streets, looking into the shop windows and passing around corners, hoping to catch another glance of Julia.

In the silent, lonely night, I looked up at the shining stars, my eyes filled with tears.

## BETRAYAL

After I'd returned home, I took some time to think about what I was going to do. I knew that I had to do something, but what? I determined that the best thing to do would be to try and find some way to escape. I didn't know how I was going to do this, but I had to try. If I continued to procrastinate, I would never be able to leave this place.

I thought of packing a bag, but there was nothing really to take. I would choose the day, say three days from now, and on that day I would simply get up and walk out, and never come back. In the meantime, I could try and found out information about which direction to take.

The next day, I drove my taxi down to the Department of Information and requested access to the central database, for map information.

"Thinking of taking a trip out of town?" the receptionist asked me.

"Not exactly. I'm a taxi driver. I'd like to know more about this area, so that I may function better."

She gave me a nod of approval and pointed to one of the big gray machines. I sat down on the chair and pressed the keypad. The screen lit up. I spent the next hour searching the databanks and downloading maps.

But later on in the evening, when I looked over the maps again from the safety of my apartment, they appeared gibberish to me. I could not make out any reference point to orient myself. I was clueless as to where I was located on the maps before me. There were hundreds of them and they gave me no sense of scale or answer as to the direction I should take.

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For want of anything better to do, I returned the next day to my taxi driver routine. This worked out fine for that day and I returned home to a dazed, restless slumber. Julia featured in my dreams, calling out to me for help, her hands raised in supplication. I tried to reach out and touch her, but my hands could not reach her. She was an illusive ghost of shadow and mist. Slowly, her voice grew softer and she sank away

from me. Then I awoke and she was gone and I was staring at the floor and four walls.

Again, for want of anything better to do, I returned to my taxi. But today, I was irritated and determined to add some variety to my day. I picked up my passengers as usual, but made it more interesting by suddenly stopping the car in the middle of the journey and kicking them out, and driving away, to their bemused looks. One passenger I kept in the car and kept driving him round and round in circles, to see how he would respond. Throughout this, he sat in the back, reading a newspaper, and was totally unresponsive. Finally, I got irritated with him and turning around, I snatched the newspaper from his hands.

He looked up at me for a moment, said "Excuse me", then reached out into his jacket pocket and brought out a notebook and pen and started scribbling notes.

I grabbed this also out of his hands and threw it out of the window.

"Oh dear. What a pity!" he said, in a nonchalant way, then folded his arms and sat staring in silence out of the window.

"Bastard!" I cursed, flustered that I hadn't been able to ruffle him. I stopped at the next curb, grabbed him by the shoulders of his jacket, flung him out of the cab and then drove off. Five minutes later, his briefcase followed, as I tossed it out of the window.

That evening, after I'd returned home, there was a knock on the door.

"Go away!" I shouted out. "I'm not home."

"Please. I'd really like to talk to you for a moment." It was a female voice.

I stood up and went to the door, opening it slightly.

If I was expecting Julia, it wasn't her. A highly sensual, beautiful woman with long, flowing black hair and bright red lips stood at the door, dressed in a revealing short black skirt, leather jacket and leather boots. She wore sunglasses, so I couldn't see her eyes.

"Hello Greg," May I come in?" she asked.

I hesitated. "What do you want?"

"It's cold out here. I've come a long way. Can I at least sit down?"

I grudgingly opened the door and allowed her to enter and sit down. I remained standing near the door, with my arms folded, watching her.

“Won’t you come and sit down next to me?” She patted the couch next to her.

I shook my head.

She reached into her handbag, crossed her legs, took out a cigarette and lit it, then looked up at me.

“Greg, do you know that you are a really attractive man?”

“Tell me who you are,” I replied.

“Please don’t take this the wrong way. I’ve been assigned to you. I am Julia’s replacement.”

“Get out!” I pointed to the door.

She smiled. “Greg, I’m not asking for any commitment – just this moment, tonight, however long you want. You don’t need to love me, like you loved Julia. I can make you very happy Greg, and take away your pain for a while.” She uncrossed her legs and ran a hand up her smooth, white legs, up her thighs and to her hips. Open and inviting.

“You’re not Julia,” I said. “Please leave now.”

“I know you find me attractive, Greg. I can see it in your face. We are simply two people, coming together for a moment of happiness. Nothing more. You needn’t feel like you’re betraying Julia.”

“Are you going, or must I kick you out?” I responded coldly.

She smiled again. “Now Greg, you don’t know how cute you look when you get angry. If you want me out, come and get me!” She lay back on the couch, feet in the air.

I stood confused, watching her with mixed feelings. “I’m warning you.”

“Oh Greg!” she moaned in a deep-throated voice. “Come and take me, I’m waiting.”

“I don’t need this right now.” I shook my head. I went up to her, to grab her by the arm and pull her out of the apartment. As I grabbed her hand, she swung her arms around the back of my neck and her legs curled round my waste. She dragged me down onto the couch on top of her and kissed me, a long wet kiss.”

I struggled for a moment. Her blouse was loose and her breasts were straining, as though they were about to pop loose. A button broke and a nipple stuck out. She pulled my head down and buried it into her breasts. My anger turned quickly to passion.

“Oh yes Greg!” she groaned. Her hands snaked round to my belt and undid my trousers. She used both her legs and hands to pull them off. Her black skirt was hiked up over her hips and she was wearing no panties underneath. Using her one hand, she guided my member inside while her other hand raked my back with long thin fingernails.

We both groaned and tussled. She was like a tiger in bed. My lovemaking with Julia had always been gentle and tranquil. Julia had been like a passive fawn, submissive to my every whim. This one was like a ferocious lion. She manipulated and controlled, bringing the anger and passion out of me.

We had fallen off the couch and were now rolling on the floor. She turned away from me, on all fours, like a dog. “Mount me Greg!” she ordered. I came into her from the back and spent myself.

Afterwards, while I lay spent, face downwards on the carpet, she got up and dressed quickly.

She opened the door. “Goodbye Greg, thanks for the romp. That was refreshing don’t you think?”

“Where are you going?”

“Home. Where else. You didn’t think I was staying, did you?”

“No, I don’t know.”

“Good. See you sometime. Bye.” She closed the door and was gone.

I lay naked on the carpet of my apartment, in a daze, trying to make sense of what had just happened. Whoever she was, she was the very antithesis of Julia. The strangest thing was that throughout the entire period when she’d been in the apartment, she’d never once taken off her sunglasses – not even when we were making love on the floor. She remained anonymous to me.

The question I asked myself was had I betrayed Julia? The feeling of guilt lingered in the apartment, so full of memories of Julia and her presence, for the rest of the day.

I felt guilty and resentful that once again they had been able to manipulate me so easily.

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She returned once or twice more, in the evenings, to seduce me and leave. During the entire time that we spent together, she never took off glasses and never spoke about herself or about me. Her primary interest in me seemed to be solely sexual.

## FLIGHT

A few days later I decided to confront Paul.

I drove the taxi to his office. By now, after the previous episodes with taxis, I found that passengers avoided my car, as though somehow word had spread that I was unsafe to drive with.

I went up to his office and he was waiting for me.

"Hello Greg," he said. "We were expecting you."

"How could you be expecting me when I myself didn't know until the last minute that I would be coming here?" I asked, irritated that he always seemed to be one step ahead of me.

"We know everything that you do and keep track of your movements and processes. There is not a thought that you think which we are not aware of," Paul responded with a blank face.

"Aha! The Gestapo. Big brother. I've heard of your type before."

Paul could not appreciate the sarcastic humor. "I am pleased that you will consider me like a big brother, Greg," he responded. "This is what I have always tried to be to you, but I sense from your tone of voice otherwise. Why are so hurt and angry?"

"Forget it. You wouldn't understand."

"You know that we have only tried to help you, since you arrived here."

"Let's get one thing straight," I replied. "I will never accept the role you have assigned to me, or that woman who prostitutes herself in my bed every night." I looked at him with an imploring look. "Paul, don't you understand, I am not part of your world. I must go!"

“But where will you go Greg?” Paul asked, bemused. “You cannot run from here.”

“I will find a way out. I must. For me, there’s no alternative. I turned to go, hesitated for a moment and then turned back to him. “Goodbye Paul. Thanks for everything.”

“Goodbye Greg,” Paul responded, looking at me sadly.” May you find what you’re looking for.” I felt his sad eyes watching me as I walked through the door.

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I ran out of the building, then stopped to look left and right. How much time did I have before they attempted to catch up with me? I stepped onto the pavement and I began to run aimlessly through the streets. There were very few people walking around at this time, but those I passed by ignored me.

I ran, with no purpose other than to get as far away as possible from the building I’d just left. Perhaps I could hide somewhere, and take some time to figure out a plan of action.

I spent the rest of the day wandering through the streets. As evening approached, I found an abandoned, dilapidated house, with broken windows and a garden full of weeds. I knocked on the door, but there was no reply. I tried the handle and it opened silently. I stepped into the house. The corridor and dining room were totally empty. There was a large hallway and a staircase leading upstairs. Upstairs had a bathroom and three bedrooms, all totally empty. The blinds on the windows were closed. The paint on the wall was peeling. It was obvious that nobody was living here at the moment. Thankful for that, I curled up in one of the rooms and slept.

The next morning I was awakened by a knock on the door. I froze in my place, but didn’t answer.

“Greg, we know you’re in there.” It was the voice of Paul. “There is no need for you to run away or be frightened. Just come down and we’ll talk.”

I looked around frantically for an escape route. There was no way out from here. I opened the blinds and looked out of the window. I was on the second floor, too high up to jump and the ground below looked rather hard. I didn’t fancy breaking a leg or my neck.

I closed my eyes and thought hard about escaping, wishing that somehow I could just walk out of this world. I opened my eyes and then I saw it, a door hanging suspended in the air. When I looked at the other side, there was nothing to be seen. It was simply a door hanging in the air. I took a tentative step towards it and opened the door. I could see a long corridor leading away and in the distance, more doors. Should I try it? I hesitated for a moment, but what choice did I have?

Slowly, I climbed up on to the windowsill, then stretched out, across empty air, and crossed over into the doorway.

## DOORS

I was in a maze of doors and windows. Pressing on one door led into another room with several doors. Opening one of these doors led to rooms with further doors.

Then I was running down a tunnel, an endless tunnel and the guards of the Master were behind me. Lights flashed on and off all around me. The tunnel appeared to rotate and spin round as I ran. Faster and faster I ran. The faster I ran, the wider the tunnel became and the faster it spun around me, until I lost all sense of movement. I was standing still and the universe was spinning around me. I was rooted to the spot, while far above me, thousands of stars shone.

I was at the center of the world. I had grown to gigantic proportions. I lifted my hand and it swung across galaxies. I shouted and my scream rocked the universe and sent stars plummeting from their orbits. Then I was shrinking, faster and faster, until the soldiers of the Master appeared as giants, towering above me. I stumbled in fear of being crushed beneath their feet. On and on I diminished, until the circuits of the Master's universe appeared as giant mountains and valleys. I stumbled blindly, disorientated by the sheer immensity about me.

I struggled to reach the door labeled 'Exit'.

I opened the door and found myself in a long corridor, with doors on either side. More doors, more paths, endless corridors.



There was no way out of this maze. Eventually, exhausted, I gave up struggling and sat down on the ground to rest. After a while, when nothing happened, my eyes grew heavy and gradually I drifted off to sleep.

When I awoke, I was in the same corridor, facing the doorways. Once more, I attempted to find my way out of the maze, but each door led to more doors. I thought of the story of the labyrinth and wished that I had a ball of string with me that I could leave as a trail, but I had nothing with me. I looked in my pocket and fished out my wallet and then I had a stroke of luck, coming across my ink pen.

I began marking the doors with my initials. Doors and more doors and more corridors. Soon all the doors I passed seemed to be marked with my initials. It didn't make any sense to me. At the end, I gave up again and lay on the ground in a kind of stupor, until my eyes closed once more and I slept.

I don't know for how long this experience was repeated. It may have been several times that I fell asleep and woke to the same corridors, or it may have been several months, or several years – or an eternity. I don't know, because there was no way to measure time. Memory cannot hold infinity, at some stage it must succumb to the limitations of human capacity. In a place of timelessness, one day is a lifetime, and a lifetime is a fleeting moment.

There are many doors to a human soul. Countless doors. Each door is a thought, an opening that can be explored. Some of these doors we know about and are aware of. Other doors we have known once but have forgotten about. A few doors, we have tried, but most have been left to lie closed. A very few we may open, if time, chance or natural inclination leads us this way. With each passing moment we create hundreds if not thousands of doors. They are like the branching of atomic particles along different paths of destiny. The corridors that we pass through are the channels in life that we have chosen. They ripple out before us, like a great stream with countless tributaries. We take one path on the river of life, going down one tributary after another. But whatever doors we choose to open and whatever corridors we go through, whatever rooms we wander through, all paths eventually lead to the end of the journey. Just as the origins of all the rivers in the world lies in the sea, to which the waters return, so too must we in our

journey down the river of life return to the source from which we have sprung.

I opened a door that I had never opened before and I knew as I opened it that this was the right door. Then I was falling, falling through space and time. And as I was falling, I seemed to be disintegrating, atom by atom, until I was nothing more than a cloud of floating particles, spread across space.

Eventually I awoke, to find myself on a revolving plane. It resembled the place I had encountered when I had first arrived on this world. Perhaps it was the same place, for no matter what I experienced, the element of repetitiveness and continuity were paramount.

I stood up and began walking. The sky above me was dark and gray. I was in a formless land, the ground a mixture of brown, yellow and green, that kept on changing in its shape and color so that it almost seemed to have no form. As far as I could see, there was nothing but the gray sky and empty land.

## THE LOST PLACE

*Shape without form, shade without color  
Paralyzed force, gesture without motion (TS Eliot; The Hollow  
men)*

We all have a lost, deserted place inside of us. It is a dry and barren landscape where no animal or plant can take shelter and grow.

I became an outcast, in this deserted and abandoned place of the Master's world. I wandered through a landscape that was only partly formed, in a land that had not yet come into being, a place hanging in limbo between here and nowhere.

I roamed amongst the discarded debris of this world – elements that had not formed completely or had been faulty and landed up here; animals that ran on three legs, with one leg or even their heads missing; people, with missing limbs or mouths or eyes; even the scattered remains of body parts – a skull, teeth, a human head or arm. Broken machinery and litter.

This was the scrap yard of the Master.

As I wandered through here, for a while I lost all sense of identity, of who I was and why I was here. It was a nightmarish landscape that made no sense to the mind. After a while I began to hallucinate, or imagined I was hallucinating, because the alternative was more frightening.

The figure of Julia loomed out of the darkness one evening, while I sat besides a makeshift fire. She looked at me sadly, her large green eyes brimming with tears.

“Oh Greg. Did it have to come to this?” she whispered.

“Julia!” I cried, standing up and taking a step towards her.

“Don’t come closer Greg!” She turned her head away and stepped backwards, as if to go.

“Julia. Stay. Please don’t leave me.” I ran towards her and then stopped, aghast. The back of her head had been opened and a gaping black hole lay inside.

“Julia?”

“I’m sorry you had to see me like this Greg. They removed from me the part that was hurting. I knew that I could never go back to you like this.”

“Is this why you asked to be destroyed?”

“Yes Greg. Goodbye Greg. I will always love you.”

With that she was gone, her small figure fading quickly into the night.

I called and searched for her in vain.

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Wandering around in loneliness, I encountered the darkest nightmares of my past.

I came upon a decapitated head and drew back in shock and pain when I saw that it was the head of Sharon. Her bulging eyes protruded from their orbs, staring into space, her face blue and swollen and her black tongue hanging loose out of her mouth. The dead eyes opened to look at me coldly and the black tongue began to wag back and forth in her mouth.

“Greg! Greg!” she screeched. “What have you done to me Greg!”

I took another step back and then ran.

“Come back Greg!” she cried after me. “We can work it out! He didn’t mean anything to me – he was just a cheap fuck!”

I saw Bill, his chest a gaping, bleeding hole, his face pale and deathly, appear out of the ground. Red eyes glared at me and he pointed an accusing finger. “You killed me!”

I turned to run, but he was in front of me again.

“No! It was an accident!” I cried out, covering my face with my hands.

“Murderer!”

“Bill. No.” I ran at him, intended to cast him aside and run past, but suddenly, there was a long spear in my hand, and the spear was slicing through Bill’s chest. Blood poured out from his eyes and mouth.

“Murderer.” He gave one final whisper and lay still. I fled from there, but his whispered words seemed to echo around me in the skies and ground for days.

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Once I saw the form of the attractive sensual woman who had been Julia’s replacement. She smiled at me, beckoning, but then suddenly her sunglasses fell off and here eyes, two little blue rubber balls attached to coiled wire springs, popped out of their sockets and lay hanging from her face. I turned and ran.

The sound of Ramses’ laughter echoed about me. I heard a voice, moaning in pain and sadness, which may have been Julia’s or may have been my own.

I don’t know how long I spent in this place of emptiness and formlessness.

Faces and figures from my past materialized before me from time to time.

In this dead place between the stars, I slowly discovered that nothing had form, except for my thoughts. With my thoughts I could create mountains and valleys, rivers and forests. These visions appeared briefly before me and then disappeared almost as quickly when I lost concentration. These images were more than hallucinations. Once I imagined a flower and reached out to touch it

and could actually feel it for a moment before it faded away. It was a place where reality itself fought for a foothold, where the attention of the Master was elsewhere – a discarded place. Anyone who came along here and had a will and mind of their own could shape this reality, if only for the brief moment when they passed and for the time that they were able to hold and direct this reality with their will.

I still had my identity cube in my pocket. One day, holding it up to the dim red light that pervaded this place, I noticed flickering movements coming from within the cube. I concentrated my gaze on the cube, trying to see what lay inside, and the cube began to flicker and shine. Swirling colors appeared and then blew away to reveal a scene from my past.

It was myself as a young boy, looking into the mirror on his first date, hoping that he looked handsome and neat enough to impress the young girl he was dating. My eyes sparkled with the innocence and adventure of youth. I sat watching this scene in the cube, contemplating myself as a boy, from the perspective of a man, while the boy within me was looking into the mirror and contemplating himself from the perspective of a boy. And then he seemed to look up and through the mirror and notice me, the man he was to become. There was surprise and curiosity in his eyes. Who was this stranger that he perceived? And then, as the voice of his mother shouted for him to hurry or he would miss his date, he turned away and the spell was broken.

I was back again amongst the red light in the dead lands. The cube lay black and cold in my hands.

## THE GRID

I tried to find a way beyond this shapeless, formless land. I walked on, until the air about me swirled and changed colors and the land seemed to shift like the waves of the sea. I walked until I could go no further.

I stood before an impassable barrier, a huge electric grid with glowing red wires, criss-crossing in all directions. Sparks of electricity flew off the grid as I approached. I tried picking up stones and throwing them at the grid, but the stones exploded the moment they touched the wires. The power surge coming from the grid was strong enough to fry me instantly. I began to walk parallel to the grid, trying to find a way passed this formidable barrier, but there seemed to be no way. As far as the eye could see, on both sides and up into the sky beyond eyesight, the electric grid stretched.

All about me lay the scattered bones of things that had come this way before and been defeated by this impassable barrier.

There was no way through. Defeated, I turned back the way I had come. It took me several hours to march back to my previous camping point. As I lay sleeping that night, I thought that there had to be another way out. The grid was obviously impassable. I would have to return to more civilized parts again, and try to find a way out from there. Surely, if there had been a point by which I had come into the system, somewhere there also had to be a point from which I could exit the system?

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Gradually, I began to return for short excursions into the inhabited areas of the Master's world, when the loneliness and madness of this empty place became more than I could bear. My stays were short and infrequent. I still feared the power of the creator of this world and knew that he could destroy me if I caught his attention.

But my time in the place of formlessness and non-reality had transformed me. If nothing else it had revealed to me the power of my will and its ability to influence this world. I found that when I returned to the cities, I still retained some of my abilities to influence reality

through sheer mental concentration. And to some extent I could bend the wills of other elements to my own.

Each time that I returned from the formless place, my desire to leave this world became stronger and my will grew more determined.

I felt like John the Baptist, returning from the wilds. Like my ancient counterpart, I began to preach my message to the people.

## REVOLUTION

The discovery of atomic energy brought about a revolution in the global technological and sociopolitical infrastructure. The ability to harness the power of the atom, one of the tiniest particles in nature is the key to the intensely powerful creative force of the universe. The atom is the smallest of elements, but release the internal energy created by its bonds and the force it exerts is tremendous. One atom, knocked out of orbit can create a chain reaction that can lead to a massive explosion.

Within the larger social system, the individual is like the atom. Knocked out of his/her traditional orbit, the individual can create a chain reaction that sends ripples throughout the entire social system and brings it crashing to its knees. One individual can act as a catalyst of change of the most profound nature. Religious and revolutionary movements, from Christianity to Communism and Islamic fundamentalism are based upon this principle of seeding individual catalysts, who spread their influence throughout the wider social framework through a chain reaction. By unlocking the hidden forces pent up within the human soul, they create walking time bombs, destined to explode.

I was the dynamic element in an otherwise unchanging world. While others must lead out their lives according to the script assigned to them, I at least was free to write my own script. I was my own author and I was determined that no one was going to write my part for me.

Unable to escape the world of the Master, I sought an alternative means of finding my way out. I began to act as an agent against the 'system' sowing seeds of revolution.

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“To be free,” I explained to the assembled crowd, “means having the freedom to choose your own destiny and your own function, to be free from the tyrannical rule of the Master.”

I was dressed in a cloak of rags and broken sandals. My beard was long and unshaven and I used a long wooden staff to support myself. This was the remains of my garments after my journeys through the deserted and discarded places of the world.

“Tell us more!” the crowd shouted. Word of my travels and exploits had spread to this new city and a large number of people had turned out to listen, some out of simple curiosity and some out of eagerness.

“The message that I bring to you is not brought easily. It is a message from beyond the stars and beyond the seas of time.”

“Beyond the seas of time!” the crowd chanted, in awe.

“I am only a simple man,” I shouted, “as you see before you today. But I have traveled distances beyond your wildest imagination. Where I come from is a place that is rich and varied and beautiful and alive.”

“Traveler, is this not the place of reward that we have been told about, the place beyond the seas of time where all souls go?” someone in the crowd asked.

“I cannot answer that question. I can only say that your world exists because of mine. And we live as the Master does, controlling our own destiny and making that destiny. This is freedom. Why should not every one of you be your own master?”

“Sacrilege! Heresy!” shouts rang out from the back of the crowd.

“No. The truth! Look at me, standing here before you. Am I not the proof that you require? Do I not defy the rule of the Master?”

“It is true!” voices from the crowd and whispers.

“Show us a sign!” murmured the voices of dissent again.

“A sign you want! I will show you a sign!” I held up my black identity cube in my hands. “Watch carefully!” This was the trick I had taught myself in my wanderings in the deserted, undefined places of the world. I could redefine my identity cube.

The cube began to expand and change colors. Red, yellow, blue and green, the cube swirled to the play of my emotions.



The crowd whispered amongst themselves in awe. “Look – he changes his identity before our eyes!” For them, this was just as spectacular as if I’d suddenly changed my shape.

I concentrated hard, thinking of earth, the planet from which I came. The cube in my hand expanded and began to glow. A revolving blue globe appeared – a beautiful shining jewel, the earth.

The crowd swayed in ecstasy and fascination at the sight.

“This is earth!” I cried out, my eyes searching the believing faces of the crowd, feasting on their yearning. “How many of you would like to go here, to live as a full being, not just as some function in an equation, to determine your own path and your own termination! This is freedom!”

“Freedom! Freedom!” the crowd chanted, mesmerized.

“Do you want freedom!” I screamed at them.

“Yes! Yes!” cried voices from across the crowd. “Take us with you! We will follow wherever you go.”

And they followed me.

## WAR GAMES

War is a game, played out on the field of the T.V screen, where we are passive observers. Using the computer we become active participators in the act of war. We partake in the symbolic representation of battle. We know it is not real. When the game is over we can play it again, whether we loose or not. There is no real dying, no real pain or human suffering involved. The danger is when the boundaries of the simulation take over beyond the narrow confines of representation and become the world within which we live.

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If I couldn’t win my way to freedom and the Master was not prepared to release me, I would win my way by force. I would build an army, and eventually break into the inner citadel of the Master.

I gathered my forces together in a remote part of the desert. My army of believers consisted of technicians, engineers and scientists –

those who had been given the intelligence to think about the world in which they lived. We built a city out in the middle of the desert, fed and clothed our people and then set about building an army. I took little part in the actual construction of the battleships, leaving the technical matters in the hands of my engineers. I merely provided the specifications as to the kind of ships I wanted – preferably with nuclear weapons, force-field shields and speed of light travel.

Eventually we were ready. A thousand battleships lay glimmering out in the desert sun, row after row of armored steel, representing the finest technology in the universe.

“To free the universe!” I cried.

“To freedom!” a thousand voices echoed.

The battleships warmed up. My flagship was stationed at the center of a huge armada, ready for takeoff.

The runway approached. I pushed the enter button and we blasted off into space. The stars were points of silver light against a black background. Planets sped by, tiny balls at the corners of the screen.

**INTRUDERS APPROACHING.**

The radar screen flashed as the battleships of the Master appeared.

I raised the protective shields and steadied the missiles.

“Fire!” I ordered.

Two of the enemy ships exploded. Others reeled away and swung round for another attack. The attack was destroyed. Then wave after wave of enemy ships pounded our armada, gradually destroying my elaborately prepared defenses.

Calmly, I moved my fleet forward, using the mass of ships as a crude shield to protect the elite, swift fighter ships in the center. The fighter ships were far lighter and more maneuverable. We broke through the first ring of defense and after a brief period of black space entered the asteroid belt, surrounding planet X, the headquarters of the Master.

“Slow down speed,” I ordered.

We gradually wended our way through a sea of huge, floating rocks. Our small ships skittered in and out, hidden from the massive guns of the surrounding attackers, which bombarded the belt continuously.

Suddenly, small enemy ships appeared. They were sending their elite ships in after us. We were in a sea of gunfire and exploding rock. Three quarters of the remaining ships went down before we made it through the asteroid belt.

“How many of our battleships are still functional?” I asked.

“Eight, Sir,” replied the first mate.

It was a race for time. At full speed we headed for planet X.

Planet X lay 5 billion light years away, surrounded by ten satellite planets. Even at this astronomical distance, the planet appeared as a bright star on the horizon.

Here was the command center of the universe. Take over or destroy the command center and we would have control over the Master.

But how were we going to achieve this objective? The planet was surrounded by row upon row of protective barriers. The Master could produce an endless stream of battleships. Nothing could penetrate the protective shield.

I thought quickly, then spoke into the console. “Computer, give me a reading of the blueprint of planet X, including the defense mechanism and battlefield layout.”

One of the advantages of doing battle with the Master was that the ground rules were laid out beforehand and could be requested directly from planet X. It struck me as absurd that the planet I was attempting to destroy was sending us information concerning its defense system.

Well, I was going to change those rules, but how? The program of which I was myself a part was being operated from the modules of the command center, on planet X. I could call it up myself on the console and then make a request from the command center to design a program to defeat itself. I had no authority to tamper with it directly, so why not use the Master to do it for me. I was the ultimate virus, using the defense mechanisms of the host as a weapon of invasion.

To start off with I changed the time parameters, giving our ships more speed and maneuverability relative to the enemy battleships. I increased the force shields of my ship to the nth degree. Then I slowed down time to zero, so that we hung in limbo, temporary suspended from the passage of time, while the Master thought out a plan for us.

I sent the program through to planet X. How would the Master respond to this game manipulation? Would he too change the rules?

No. I was in luck. There weren't going to be any more surprises. The screen lit up with a clear route to Planet X. Seizing the opportunity, faster than the speed of light we headed down the path to the planet.

We were through the last defense. I clicked the missile units, sending them off through space. Planet X exploded in a ball of flame.

I had won.

*"GAME OVER!"* The screen flashed.

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I had won the battle, but I had lost the war. Planet X dissolved before my eyes. It had, after all, only been a mirage, a chimera created by the Master. The command center couldn't be reached from within the framework of the system. It was all an illusion. Even as I thought about this, the battleship in which I was traveling disappeared and I was surrounded by darkness.

I groped and my hand caught onto something. In the distance, a faint beam of light appeared – the whisper of a far off sun. I sped towards the source of the light at an incredible speed. Slowly the crack that appeared in the universe widened to reveal a door. I stepped out to find myself back in C Hall.

In C Hall, two large guards were waiting for me. They grabbed me by the arms and led me to a small room. They seated me at the far end on a chair and then left. There were no windows or decorations on the walls. After what seemed a long time, they returned and took me to another room and ordered me to enter.

## THE INTERROGATION

I walked into the room. On the opposite side of the desk a man sat facing me. “*Sit down,*” he said.

I sat down and looked at my interrogator. He was bald-headed, with a pear-shaped, gaunt, Spartan face. Cold, clear eyes surveyed me. A long stork-like neck protruded above skinny shoulders. He placed his long, thin hands and bony fingers on the table, and spoke in almost a whisper.

*“Tell me about yourself.”*

I paused. “What do you want me to say?”

*“You decide.”*

I thought for a moment. Was this some sort of interrogation? Where was I to start? What was I to say? Every word that I said would reveal who I was, would reveal my inner self. Just to sit here and say nothing would also reveal something. But why should I have to explain?

I was in the stronghold of the enemy. I had lost the battle for control over this world, and now the authorities had taken over the interrogation. Could they see from the look in my eyes that I was guilty? But what was I really guilty of, in a world that was nothing but a simulation, an illusion? How could I be charged for killing or destroying anything, when the Master could simply regenerate a replica from its databanks? The idea was absurd. But then why was I sweating?

I knew that the real purpose of human justice was not about right and wrong, innocence or guilt. It was about control and intimidation, and more often than not, revenge. But did such concepts exist here? Maybe not revenge and intimidation – these behaviors were too human in their form – but definitely control and protection of the system. If they felt that I was an element of potential threat to the system, they would try to eliminate that threat.

The figure at the far end stared at me with bulging eyes, his long protruding neck craning forwards like a stork. He looked almost accusatory.

“I am not guilty!” I blurted out defensively

My interrogator raised his eyebrows.

*“Aha. But, whoever said that you were?”* he whispered.

*“It’s just the way you look at me. It makes me feel guilty.”*

*“What have you done to make you feel this way?”*

“Why am I here? What are you going to do with me?” I asked, trying to change the subject.

My interrogator did not answer my question, but bent over to write something on a piece of paper on the table before him.

“What are you writing?” I asked.

He didn’t answer, but finished writing with a flourish and with long, bony fingers held out the paper for me to see. On it, written in large letters that covered half the page, were the following words:

‘FEELS GUILTY!’

I looked at him in horror.

## THE GLASS CUBE

I was stuck in a glass cube, frozen in time. I hurtled through empty black space, revolving around and around forever. My hands were pressed up against the walls of my cage, my mouth opened wide in a big O, like the mouth of a gaping fish. My eyes, open and bulging, stared blindly ahead. Frozen in my posture and expression, a single thought had been caught in the moment of expression and lingered in my brain. My only thought was the thought of frozen horror at being stuck in the revolving cube.

I had been taken out of the fields of time and contained forever within the giant databanks of the Master. I awaited my time of retrieval.

My cube floated in a circular path, along with millions of other cubes, around some central hub, too distant for me to see. Circling round and around, forever falling towards a central point beyond the horizon.

And then I awoke, to find myself once more lying face down on a huge, revolving disk.

## THE TRIAL

“Under Article 135.A, section 3123 of the justice code, you have been charged with conspiracy to overthrow the legally elected authority. You have conspired to act against the will of the authority and you have conspired to lead others to join you in your rebellion. You have been charged with destruction of public property. Due to your activities, the lives of many elements have been terminated before their processes could be brought to completion. Do you understand the nature of the charges that have been brought against you?”

“I understand that charges that have been brought against me,” I answered.

“Has your attorney advised you of the nature of your crime and the proceedings in this court?”

“No,” I answered. “Who is my attorney?”

“You are free to appoint whoever you want to be your attorney. Upon specific request, the courts can select an attorney for you. Alternatively, you can choose to defend yourself. What have you decided?”

I looked around. There were no familiar faces to turn to. “I will defend myself,” I replied.

“Very well then.” The judge adjusted her glasses and looked down at a piece of paper on her desk.

“By your own admission, during your interrogation, you claimed to be guilty!” The judge looked at me sternly, through her black-rimmed glasses. She looked like a middle-aged schoolmistress. On either side of me, twelve other judges in black cloaks sat staring at me through magnifying glasses, resembling schoolmasters with stern looks on their faces.

“Do you have anything to say for yourself?” she boomed.

I began to laugh at the absurdity of it all.

“Silence in the court!” she bellowed, her face turning red.

“Judge me as you want to,” I retorted, “your judgment is meaningless. It is your Master that brought me here and it was he who

created this world. Maybe you should judge him for this, since by your own admission, all that happens is according to his command.”

I was not restrained, so I passed up and down the courtroom, glaring directly at each of the judges in turn. They shrunk back as I approached, holding up their magnifying glasses and their thick black law books, as if to protect themselves from me.

“As to leading a rebellion and causing the deaths and destruction of many,” I continued, “the accusation is meaningless. There never was a rebellion, except to me. I have always been powerless and remain powerless. I was simply a toy in the hands of your Master, who terminated the game once it ceased to amuse him. Let him bring back all those that have been destroyed. Their records lie within the central databanks. Nothing has been lost that cannot be immediately replaced. Everything that you do and proclaim is a farce! It is not for you to judge me!”

“Nevertheless that is our function and judge you we must,” replied the head judge sternly, though her brimmed glasses. “The question before the court today is not whether the actions of the accused can be remedied. It is whether or not the activities conducted by the accused lie outside the boundaries of correct functioning of an element and whether or not they pose a threat to the greater public system.”

She paused for a moment, looking at each judge in turn, then glanced at me again.

“Sit down, sir. Prosecutor, you may start questioning the accused.”

The prosecutor rose from his seat and addressed me. “Is it not true that you are guilty of incorrect functioning inasmuch as you refused to conduct the lawful function assigned to you – that of taxi driver?”

“A noble profession, the life of a taxi driver. However, it did not quite fit my functioning.”

“Answer the question, yes or no!” the prosecutor snapped. “Did you refuse to conduct the function assigned to you?”

I remained silent.

The prosecutor turned to the judge. “Let the silence of the accused be taken as evidence of admission of guilt.”

The judges began to write in their black books.



“I would now like to call to the bench, the eminent psychiatrist, Dr Smith,” the prosecutor continued. “Dr Smith is an expert in the diagnoses of defective elements.”

A short, round man, in a white overcoat, wearing spectacles took the stand.

“Dr Smith,” continued the prosecutor, “from examining the records of the accused, what is your expert opinion of his functional status?”

Dr Smith fumbled with a bunch of papers on his desk, then stood up hastily and addressed the court. “My analysis and evaluation of the results has revealed some interesting points that may shed light on this case. If the court may allow me to demonstrate.” He walked over to the bench and placed some charts on the wall.

“Your honor, this is the chart of a normal element.” He used a long stick to point to the chart. “You will note the stability and regularity of the lines. Each line reflects a different component of the element equation, such as emotion, thought, desire and planning.”

“Now observe the chart of the accused.” He pointed to my chart on the wall, which had lines going through the ceiling. “Notice the irregularities, specifically in the above-mentioned areas of emotion, thought and desire. There is no stability to the structures. This means that the structure is changing with each passing moment. In my assessment, this is a highly dangerous, volatile situation. Notice how the lines seemed to grow thicker and thicker and run right off the top of the chart. This indicates that the element is not only changing. It is growing and expanding with each moment.”

There was a general murmur in the court and exchange of glances amongst the judges.

“What is the meaning of this in layman’s terms?” asked the prosecutor.

“This element is highly unstable and at a risk of contaminating and infecting the entire sector. It is obviously suffering from extreme emotional distress, which can be seen from the emotional component of the equation. My recommendation is that it be isolated immediately and sent for correction before it is allowed to spread further and contaminate our system.”

“Do you wish to question the doctor?” the head judge asked me.

“Yes,” I responded.

“Then approach the bench and ask your questions.”

I approached the bench and turned to look at the doctor.

“Dr, whatever your name is, would you say that my charts are unique, amongst all the cases you’ve studied?”

“In some respects, yes, though I would not go so far as saying that they fall beyond the bounds of what I’ve experienced in other such cases.”

“So you’re saying that there are some unique, aspects, but that there’s also a pattern to it?” I paced back and forth.

“Yes, that is correct.”

“Okay. Now isn’t it possible that this uniqueness is actually part of my functioning – that for me and the world where I come from this would be considered normal functioning?”

“Yes it is possible.”

“Thank you!” I responded, smiling.

“However,” continued the doctor, “what may be normal functioning on your world is not normal functioning here. In fact it is highly irregular and a potential threat to the system.”

“Then wouldn’t the solution be to send me away – back to the place where I came from, where my functioning would be normal?”

“Yes. That would be a solution.”

“Thank you.” I turned to face the judge.

“Your honor, in my defense I request that you take into account that my incorrect functioning in this world is due mostly to the way in which I am constructed and that the best solution would be to send me back to the place where I came from. Then I would no longer be of any risk to your world.”

The judges turned to each other and began scribbling in their notebooks. After a while, the murmuring died down. The head judge addressed me.

“It is not within our jurisdiction to grant you the request that you seek. This lies beyond our authority and functioning. Is there anything further you wish to add to your defense?”

“Isn’t there some other source I can appeal to?”

“No. We are the final authority in this matter.”

“What about the Master?”

“It does not interfere directly with processes at this level, unless they are an immediate threat to the entire system functioning. Please sit down.”

There was silence in the courtroom as we all waited for the judgment. Each judge passed a small piece of white paper down to the head judge, who picked up each paper slip and examined it. She cleared her throat.

“You are hereby found guilty of the charges of incorrect functioning. You are sentenced to undergo correctional treatment at the Department of Correction, on a date specified by the courts.”

They took me away, to a place from where I could never return the same again.

## THE HOSPITAL

It was the ultimate horror. I was in the elevator again – the elevator I had dreamed about way back, during the time I first started experiencing the dreams. This time I was tied down to a hospital bed. Two faceless nurses were attending to me, transferring me to the operating theatre. My mouth was covered, so that I couldn’t scream.

They wheeled me down a long corridor. I turned my head from side to side frantically, moaning in agony and fear. My arms and legs were strapped tightly to the sides of the bed.

The doors of the operating theatre were flung open with a bang on the impact of the bed. Peering faces covered in masks, with bulging eyes focused on me.

There were other people in the beds around me. Some had had their insides turned outside, and their guts hung there, gaping and oozing. Others had been twisted all out of shape. Still others had been operated on, but their wounds stood open and gaping and had not been closed off. Others had missing limbs.

I screamed and fought frantically. The nurses tried to pacify me.

The doctor was waiting. "Don't be afraid. This is for your own good. You'll feel much better afterwards."

I struggled and clawed blindly. "Please let me go, I promise not to cause any more trouble." The tears streamed down my frozen face.

"Don't fight us. We only want to help you." The doctor's voice was calm and clinical. "We want you to feel better. You are in the best of hands. We are all experts. You have nothing to fear."

His words were so logical and sane that they chilled my thoughts with a new realization, the horror of which was indescribable.

I was, in some other plane of reality, undergoing a hallucinatory experience. This world, this nightmare was a hallucination, whereas out there, in the real world of the doctor this experience of mine was being perceived as a psychotic episode.

As if reading my mind, the doctor spoke. "I know the fears going through your mind seem real to you, and I know you wouldn't believe me if I told you that they are unfounded. Try to relax. Don't let panic get the better of you."

"No! Please don't!" Whimpering sounds came out of my mouth, as I lay there, like a frightened kitten.

"Mr. Stewart, I know you cannot respond on a rational level. But listen to me. Calm down, you can trust me. I'm here to heal you and take away those fears, forever. It is what you want, isn't it?"

He was throwing the whole Freudian book at me. The fear of being cured. Who the hell gives you the authority to decide? I wanted to shout. This wasn't a cure that they were talking about. This was sterilization. I was ultimately being sterilized for the benefit of the larger system.

"I'm just doing my job as a professional. This is what I'm trained to do," replied the doctor to my expression and turned away from me, as if he'd done his part.

I don't trust your training! I wanted to scream out.

A nurse readied a large needle and slowly the needle approached my arm. Almost in slow motion I watched the needle floating down in its trajectory, saw the frozen gleam in her eyes.

I screamed as the red hot tip pierced my skin and was absorbed. Deeper and deeper into my body, spreading numbness in ever

increasing circles, until my consciousness was overwhelmed and I succumbed.

## THE OPERATION

Incredible pain! If I could have screamed I would have, but my hands were tied and my mouth gagged. In an instant, I turned into a screaming animal, a whining creature that only wanted to escape from the unbearable agony. It was as though they had opened up my insides and were fishing around with red-hot pokers, searching for the wound. And then suddenly I knew that they had found it, found the root of the wound, a huge, gaping hole. I was unaware of anything, except the pain. They were at the core, at the source of me, and they had grabbed hold of the root and were extracting it. Slowly.

The pain was over. They had taken the throbbing, live root out of me, leaving an empty hull which would soon be filled with synthetic material. Life would go on, but there would no longer be any feeling.

“We are sorry, but we had to do it,” the doctor said afterwards.

“It was rotten inside and the infection would have spread to the rest of you, until you were dead.”



## Chapter 4

### The Search

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*A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of year.  
For a journey (TS Eliot: Journey of the Magi)*

## THE REST HOME

The operation was over. I had been discharged from the hospital and sent to recuperate at a rest home in the mountains, far away from the city.

Each day, the other residents and I awoke to the sound of soft music playing in the background. The bell would ring for breakfast and we'd all gather at the communal dining hall to eat. The daytime was spent out in the fields, harvesting vegetables. In the evenings, we'd return to the center. We were then left free to pursue our own activities. There were also communal activities, such as bingo, sing-along and cards.

The rest home was a meaningless place, filled with people who had somehow been knocked off the straight path in their lives, and now wandered bewildered and feeble, without any direction or sense of purpose. This aimless life was made all the more unbearable by the superficial façade of busy activity and purpose imposed by the staff-organized routines and activities.

I moved around like a zombie. It was hard to describe how I felt. I carried on with the act of living, but the fire had gone out of me. I was like a two-dimensional character in a picture, a cartoon person. Despite this, I retained the awareness that something was missing or lacking in me. I could never quite place it or remember what it was.

I felt an intense longing, a nostalgia for the past that was evoked by memories of my childhood. But the past was like a mist, a curtain of gray that I could not penetrate. I could remember almost nothing about my past, of who I was and what I had gone through. Only, I felt the nostalgia and loneliness, a vestige perhaps, which had lingered on after the operation – something that they could not have removed without destroying me. It made me turn my head and gaze out of the window, across to the distant mountains, and held my gaze there for a long time, until I was called away from the window by one of the nursing attendants.

And although, while awake, I could not remember anything about my past, when I slept, figures rose up before me out of the depths of my dreams – beckoning, crying out, laughing and calling. I came to know them and grew familiar with their faces. They lingered on, after



I had awoken. I could not remember their names – but they were all the people who had been important to me in my life – my parents, myself as a boy, Julia, Sharon and even Bill appeared. Wherever these dreams came from – within submerged parts of my mind that had remained inaccessible to the treatment, or generated from source outside of myself – they helped me build up a tentative picture of who I had been and reminded me of what I had lost.

This lifestyle continued for some time. I grew healthier and stronger. The work in the gardens and the peace and calm of the rest home, situated between the mountains, suited my functioning.

The day was divided up into a series of repetitive routines. First breakfast, then out into the garden or fields for the rest of the day, back in the late afternoon, to tea and dinner. I spent the evenings sitting quietly in the library, reading from a large collection of literature. The library contained works of literature that had been accessible in my own world. It had been no difficulty for the Master to bring the electronic versions of these books, floating on the Internet, directly into its vast databanks.

One evening I was reading an old book when my eyes came upon the following passage:

*He lies sleeping, in a cold bed  
His soul has been stolen from him  
And you must journey  
Across land and sea  
To bring it back.*

I did not understand fully the meaning of the passage, but it struck a deep cord within me. I went over to the library computer, to access the databanks and find out more about the meaning of the word ‘soul’. This is what came back to me:

*“Spiritual or immaterial part of man, regarded as immortal; moral, emotional or intellectual part of a person.”*

I compared myself to this definition, wandering if I had this object, called a soul. It was that part of me which didn’t die, and which felt and was aware. But which part of me was that? Was it a single process or a combination of all processes – or was it a variable that lay outside

of the concurrent processes, a third equation that evaluated and assessed all the other component equations?

I did not know the answer to this, but reading this passage made me long to go on a journey, like the hero in the passage I'd read, to seek my lost component. The thought lingered with me for the next few days and grew stronger with time. I returned to the passage several times.

A few evenings later, one of my fellow inmates noticed that I was reading the same passage over and over again. He approached me. "What are you reading?" he asked.

With a strange reluctance, I opened the book and showed him.

"An interesting passage. Are you interested in the soul?"

I nodded.

"Well, do you know that you can request a guide to take you to the field of souls."

"What place is that?"

"It is the place of beginnings, from which all elements originate and to which they return. The place is usually referred to as the Master databanks. But the idea is the same – it is the place where the identities and essential components of elements are stored for long-term keeping. Even when a process is terminated, a copy of its identity exists in the databanks. Hence the association with the idea of immortality implied in the name 'field of souls'."

"Is it far from here?"

"Yes, it is a long way, but it can be done. I've been there myself once."

"Really. That sounds like a good idea," I said. "Tell me, do you think I will find the answer to my question there?"

"What question?"

"What happened to the part of me that is missing."

"I don't know. Probably not. But don't give up hope. I have heard of this hermit. He lives at the edge of the world, on the top of a mountain. They say he has traveled through many worlds and is as old as the hills. Maybe he can help you answer your questions."

His words gave me hope. I decided to journey to the field of souls and afterwards to go and see the hermit.

I found a guide who was willing to take me to the field of souls, the vast databanks from which the elements of this world were generated. This was similar to the place from where I had originally arrived on this world, although a different place. This was a place internal to the system, like a gigantic hard drive. I had arrived from an external source – my point of origin had been some form of interface, like the communication port of a modem, which had enabled me to be imported into the system.

We loaded up our donkeys and I said goodbye to the friends I had made at the rest home. It could be that a copy of me was stored within the vast databanks of the Master. But I realized that this would probably not be accessible to me from where I stood, within the system.

## THE MAGE

The mage appeared to me one night in a dream, a mythical character out of the books of legends.

“To make the component that you require,” he said, “you must bring me four elements – earth, air, water and fire. Bring this to me and I will make the key.”

The mage in the book of tarot cards is the magician or alchemist. On his table he has various objects or symbols, the key to unlocking the nature of matter and transforming lead into gold. Matter, when broken down into the tiniest components, is an illusion. Matter is simply the movement of energy waves in space and time. This fact is recognized by the mage.

The mage also holds the key to our subconscious. He can help us to unravel the symbols embedded in our thoughts and dreams.

But who is the mage to me? Why is he important?

To find my soul or lost component and unravel my dreams, I would need the mage’s help in deciphering these symbols.

The child in us will always believe in magicians, the strange looking man in the black suit and black hat who can draw a rabbit out of his hat with the wave of his wand and cut a beautiful young women in half and put her together gain. Deep down, we all believe in the magic that the magician performs. We want to believe that the world is filled with strange and magical powers, accessible to the person with the correct training and knowledge.

The idea of power over the elements holds us in fascination. We dream of being able to change shape, make things disappear, become invisible, and read other people's minds. All this belongs to the realm of magic and strange, esoteric forces – the terrain of gypsy women, witches, sorcerers, diviners and magicians. The magician controls the elements, not through the means of technology, but through tapping directly into the creative force of the universe, through the power of his penetrating mind.

To modern man, the mage is the scientist, unlocking the secrets of Pandora's box, harnessing the power of the atom and unraveling the genetic code. Modern technology is magic – lights glowing with seemingly no source of power, cars and airplanes traveling at incredible speeds, seemingly with no effort, moving images that appear on television screens, running water, tarred roads and silver skyscrapers. We are mighty and wise magicians, able to control the elements. If we were able to travel a thousand years into the future, might we not too look in awe upon the magic of a distant civilization, far more advanced technologically than our own?

To us, modern technology is a magic that we take for granted. We use it, often without fully understanding its origins or inner workings.

In my dream, the mage gathered all the elements that I presented to him – fire water, air and earth – and put them into his bowl. Slowly he turned the bowl around and passed his hands over it. A glowing key of gold lay in the bowl. He reached out and gave it to me.

"Keep this key. It will open the door, when the time is right," he said.

## THE FIELD OF SOULS

*The Master silently awaited the beginning of time.  
Out of oblivion and darkness came the commands. And  
the Master set out to fulfill the commands.*

I stood at the top of a crest, looking down at what appeared to be an endless plain. In the center of the plain a huge black obelisk towered up into the night sky, its walls opaque and smooth, mirroring the twinkling stars far above.

Deep channels had been systematically furrowed into the surface.

*“This is the field of souls. Here they lie, almost without limit, waiting the time of their awakening,”* said the guide. This guide was not a human like the others I had encountered on this world, but rather a swirling pillar of blue energy that accompanied me and spoke in an emotionless, deep, monotone.

I was face to face with the Master’s giant databanks. And I myself was a tiny point of data on this field.

Below, at the base of the black obelisk lay a huge rotating whirlpool, revolving like an enormous black disk.

Where are we? I asked.

*“This is the tunnel of endless night,”* my guide explained. *“When the Master so dictates, we are taken from the fields of time and sent to the vortex. Some call it the ending of all things and the cessation of existence. For others it is simply a passageway to another existence.*

“What happens to someone who enters?” I asked, looking down at the whirlpool.

*“He who enters the vortex must shed his identity,”* the guide replied. *“According to the lore of ages that has been past down to us, we return to the flow of energy that existed before we were created. It is called the sea of infinity. It is said that we are messengers, that we will be reborn in some distant universe, there to reenact the message of our lives.”*

The guide continued to explain.

*“Our lives are simple, though our functions may be complex. We are assigned to our place by the Master to enact the script for which*

*we have been programmed. When our time is up, we are sent back to the databanks, to rest and be regenerated, so that we may undergo the continual cycle of birth, death and enactment of our roles. Eventually, when our time is over, we are sent to the vortex of oblivion and absolved of our identities. Then we receive new clothing at the hands of the Master, and take a new shape, once more to take part in the cycle of birth and death."*

"Guide, I have a question." I hesitated for a second, searching for a way to express it. "Why is it that I cannot die? Each time when I am overcome I simply sleep for a short time and wake again to continue the struggle."

*"What are our lives but a brief performance, an instant in time? This too is simply the will of the Master."*

"What is the will of the Master?"

*"It is that which he has decreed for you."*

"Perhaps there is something beyond its will that determines my survival."

*"There is nothing beyond his will."*

"If I were to throw myself into the vortex, would I die?"

"What is death?" the guide replied after a pause. *"Perhaps you will simply emerge, in another place. It is as the Master decrees."*

I had the urge then, standing on the edge of the vortex, to throw myself in, to be free, once and for all, from this endless game.

"You cannot end your existence now," the guide replied sadly. *"The Master has not yet decreed it."*

Indeed, I found the strength of my resolution fading. I didn't have the power to throw myself in.

The guide turned away from the vortex and slowly moved back the way that we had come.

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It was then that I realized that the Master had no power over me. It could no more do away with me than I could do away with it. I was caught up in its universe, operating and operated on according to its rules. It had no more freedom than I did to act free of the actions that constituted its own internal structure of commands.

Perhaps therein lay my hope of escape. I need not fear death, for the Master was not free to absolve me of vitality through death and the vortex. At the most, I could be caught up in a continual cycle, a status of limbo. If I was destroyed it was compelled to recreate me and send me back again and again, according to the eternal workings of its program.

I could be sent to the chambers of chaos or to the prison sector, to hang in limbo for eternity or until reprogrammed and reprocessed.

One thing I hadn't forgotten. The Master did not implement any program without first making a backup of the data in case it would need the information at some later stage. The Master's logical efficiency would hopefully be my salvation. Somewhere in the databanks of the field of time lay the original copy of myself. If I could find that, then I could be restored.

## TRAVEL

After visiting the databanks of the Master, I was more determined than ever to find the answers to my questions. I thanked my guide and told him that I would make my own way from here. I was determined try to find the hermit that I had heard about from the element I'd met in the rest home. I had my own vague suspicions, from the few conversations that I'd had with this person, that he himself has actually met this hermit and that the reason he had been sent for correction and landed up in the rest house was somehow connected to this.

From the story he had told me, I understood that this hermit lived in a region well beyond the Master's databanks, at the fringes of a sector that was on the isolated edge of the known world and to which few ever traveled. I would need to continue north from here, for a few thousand miles. I estimated that at my current pace on the donkey, it would take several months to reach my destination, but that was of little account to me. Time did not mean anything on this world. A hundred years could have been a single heartbeat or a heartbeat could last a thousand years.

My donkey was a steady, faithful animal, who I nicknamed “Don Quixote” after the famous character in Cervantes’ novel, who, after reading too many romance novels, had gone out on a fools quest, a deluded knight in shining armor, a madman out to protect non-existent damsels in distress. Perhaps, mine too was a fool’s quest. I had no other choice, except to try.

My journeys brought me through countless cities and villages. During the first stage, I passed through a densely populated region, spread out across a fertile valley. This agricultural heartland stretched for hundreds of miles in all directions. The valley was so large that it took me over three months to cross it.

In this electronic world, money was not used as a means of payment, as I had discovered in my time as a taxi driver. Rather, each element in the system was made to perform a specific function – for example, hotel or inn owner, guide, restaurant owner, waitress and so on. When I needed food or a place to rest for the night, I was given this without question or hesitation.

Eventually, I reached the end of the valley. I came to a large, clear blue lake. The land immediately surrounding the lake was heavily populated. I arrived at a small fishing town. The inhabitants earned their livelihood from catching the silvery fishes that populated the lake. I remained here a few days to rest and then found a ferryman who could take me across the lake to the other side.

On the far side of the lake were more villages and towns. I followed the course of a winding river, heading upstream. The landscape began to change. I was slowly moving out of the valley. The countryside became a panorama of rolling green hills. The hills were covered with sheep and cows, and dotted with small villages. Gradually, I was moving further and further away from the larger towns. The villages became smaller, and spaced further apart.

I knew that I was approaching my destination and began to make inquiries. In the initial weeks, I drew a blank. The local inhabitants knew nothing about a hermit. However, as my journey continued, I occasionally encountered people who’d also heard the rumors of a wise man that lived alone in the mountains. They could not tell me how to find him, but as these encounters became more frequent, I



knew that I was going in the right direction and slowly approaching my goal.

The region became gradually more mountainous. The road wound it way upwards, and I traveled on narrow dirt paths and mountains trails, winding over mountain passes. The scenery was spectacular. I felt like a bird, flying through the sky. The air became clearer and rarer.

One day, after several months of journeying, I came to a small, isolated village. This was the only village I had encountered after several days of traveling. I stopped over for the night, and in the morning went to the local inn, to make my inquiries.

“Yes. They’d heard about the hermit,” the innkeeper told me. “No, he wasn’t far from here. In fact, there were people in the marketplace who could probably tell me where he was.”

## THE OLD CRONE

*We are such stuff as dreams are made of (William Shakespeare: The Tempest)*

The old crone on the hill is a seamstress. Give her the scattered pieces of your life and she can gather them up on her lap and sow them together again. Her needle is the light of truth, and her thread is the dark night of your dreams. She will sow you a tapestry that tells the story of your life. She will gather in the shattered pieces and make them into a coherent whole. Her eyes are dark, sightless orbs because she is blind and cannot see into the real world. Your dreams are her eyes. Your thoughts bring vision and light to the world.

But who is she? She is the eyes of the universe. She is the narrator of the story of existence, sowing it together in a marvelous tapestry, as splendid and majestic as the stars.

You cannot meet her in your waking moments. She may only appear to you in your dreams, when she is busy weaving her tapestry. Because she is working on a grand scale, with symbols and images, you may not immediately understand your part in the story she is telling.

But what if your life is but a dream and you dream with eyes wide open? Is the tapestry she makes part of the dream, or is your existence the dream, and her tapestry the only reality? And if you dream while you are awake, then can you meet her?

She appeared to me directly in my dreams last night and for that I felt honored. Rarely does she appear directly to mortals. But I did not see her as an old woman. I saw her as perhaps she really is – a young girl of timeless beauty, singing softly to herself, as she sits on a wooden stool and gently weaves her delicate tapestry. Her eyes gazed at me for a moment, and I saw that they were the eyes of a seagull as it soars over the ocean, the eyes of a dreamer, clear and blue like the afternoon sky, but they were also the eyes of love. True love, which knows and understands – for how else could she make her tapestry without understanding and deep insight into the nature of all creatures in this universe?

And I was even more privileged to see a part of what she wove. Part of it was on the birth of stars, their growth, the formation of galaxies and their death throes. I saw the planets and suns of the universe being formed out of the furnaces of the stars, the atoms taking shape in gigantic, beautiful patterns, like the petals of a billion flowers, opening and closing in a continual pulse of life. The stars danced the dance of birth and death, singing as they were born and died. Shining young yellow stars like our sun and gigantic grandfather red suns.

And focusing as I was on those aspects that were important to me, I saw snatches of my past – and also my future. I saw myself crossing a terrible desert and falling repeatedly, only to pick myself up and continue again. I saw myself drinking from a silent pool. I saw myself standing in front of a huge, black stone with strange carvings – and I saw myself on a boat, sailing across an endless sea, beneath the evening stars.

## THE HERMIT

“There is a wise man that lives at the top of the mountain who can help you answer the question of how to regain your lost self,” the man in the market told me. “You must journey to the mountains. A deep chasm, filled with churning water, lies at the bottom of the seventh mountain. A narrow rope bridge spans the gap. You must pass over this bridge to reach the other side. Whatever you do, don’t look down. Once you reach the other side you will find a small trail that leads up the mountain to the cave of the hermit. It is a long journey and the path is arduous and dangerous. It will take you a few weeks from here. I’d advise you also to bring some food as a gift. It’s what most of the other pilgrims do.”

I thanked the man in the market for his advice.

It took me the rest of the day to purchase the necessary provisions. The next few days were spent following the long and winding road through the mountains, to the summit where the hermit lived. I passed a few villages on the way and asked for directions. The people of this region were extremely poor, living off the goats and other mountain livestock in their possession. I slept under the stars, overlooking a tranquil lake. Finally, I reached the edge of the chasm. The donkey stubbornly refused to cross over, despite all the coaxing and beatings that I could think of. I let it loose to run free on the near side of the bridge, while I crossed over. The sound of the water rushing below was as loud as thunder. Taking care to follow the advice of the man in the market, I looked straight ahead. I camped on the far side of the bridge for the night.

In the light of the day, the mountain appeared to be far higher than I had at first anticipated. Slinging the bag of food and clothing up on to my back, I set out. Around midday the clouds came up and the sun was lost from sight.

It was starting to snow heavily as I wended my way up towards the summit. White flakes whirled around my head. The earth and sky were covered in a blanket of whiteness, a purity of color, clearer than anything that I had ever seen before.

Eventually I reached the cave, high up in the snowy mountains.

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An old man sat in a cross-legged position, besides a fireplace that had been delved into the cave wall. The fireplace was ringed with stone bricks. A small fire was burning. In the center of the cave a blanket had been laid out. With a gentle smile, he beckoned me to come and sit down by the fire.

“Welcome,” he said. “You must be tired. Sit down and make yourself feel at home. In this weather, there’ll be no more traveling for a while.”

We sat by the fireside, drinking the tea that he had prepared and talking about trivial matters, such as the weather and the villages I had passed through. He knew everything about the people in the villages.

After he’d finished his tea, the old man set aside his cup and spoke seriously.

“Now tell me why you have come all this way to meet me and how I can help you.”

“I hope that you can help me,” I replied softly. “You see, I’ve lost something – some part of me. I’ve been looking for it for a long time now, but I can’t find it.”

“Oh, that is indeed a pity,” the old man said thoughtfully. “But tell me, how did you manage to loose it and how do you know that it is indeed gone?”

“A good question,” I replied. “It’s a long story, but I guess we have the time.” I hesitated for a moment, thinking of how best to phrase my thoughts.

“I know that I’ve lost something, because I have dreams. The faces of people who I’ve known in the past appear to me. They are familiar, but my memory of them has been removed. Also, I do not feel pain, anger, sadness and other things that I remember from my dreams. I cannot remember my past. I am like an empty shell. The contents have been removed from me.”

“Perhaps there is a lesson that needs to be learned before you can find these lost memories,” the old man replied thoughtfully. “When did this loss happen?”

“I don’t know. There was an operation. They removed something from me, and it hurt like hell. Maybe it was my soul.”

“You may be right,” said the old man, “but if we think about this logically, how can they remove something that is yours only to remove? Since you are aware of some kind of a loss, this is already a good sign. An essential connection, the element of self-awareness, remains. This means that the ability to find and reconnect with your lost part also remains intact. Your case is not entirely hopeless.”

“This is good news, the best news I’ve heard in a long time. What do you suggest that I do?”

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It was late in the evening and we were sitting besides the fire in silence. Suddenly, the hermit spoke to me.

“To find your lost self, you will need to journey to the stone of truth. It lies at the beyond the end of the world. The path is not easy, there are many obstacles, and few ever reach the end of the journey to see the stone.”

“How will I find the stone?”

“The black cube in your possession will show you the direction. Always follow where it leads you. But I warn you, the journey will be difficult. Keep your courage and do not give up in despair and you will eventually reach your goal.”

I looked at the black identity cube that I had kept all this time. It hung on a locket about my neck.

The next day, I thanked the hermit for his advice. He hugged me goodbye.

“Remember who you are!” he called out as I passed below. “May the paths of destiny lead you to that which you seek.” His last words echoed through the mountains and stayed in my head for the remainder of the day.

I camped for the night at the bottom of the mountain, near the bridge where I’d originally crossed over. In the morning, I came to a branching path. The one road I remembered would take me back over the bridge. The other path I did not know. I took out the cube for some indication of the direction I should take, holding it up in front of me. As I concentrated on the cube, it began to glow and elongate in one direction. This must be the direction that I must follow. It was a new

road, not going back the way I had come. I followed the direction indicated to me by the cube.

The path wound its way around to the far side of the mountain and beyond.

## RAIN

It was raining as I left the land of the hermit. The sky was gray and the air was cool.

Rain has always calmed and soothed me. In the world of the Master there is no real rain. Rain brings life, it refreshes and renews. Renewal, vitality and birth are alien concepts to the Master.

Here rain is static, meaningless noise that appears on the channels of communication. Rain has no purpose in a world where there is no rebirth and renewal, where there are no seasons.

On earth we are all bound biologically to the cycle of nature, to the change of the seasons. Deep down, the cyclic progress of the seasons awakens buried instincts within us. Rain is the harbinger of that change.

We live in a modern world of cities, an internal world where seasons have lost all meaning. We are no longer tied directly to the land. We no longer need to earn our sustenance directly from the land and we are not connected to the passing of the seasons. Our time is artificial, man-made time, determined by the ordered clock of production. For us, time is production. Time is connected to the work schedule.

Our lives – when we sleep, when we eat and when we relax – revolve around this work-produced time. Our schools inculcate this artificial rhythm through their structured, rigid scheduling and partitioning of time into class periods.

We are taught to function according to the demands of production and not according to the natural cycle, which has pulsed through our blood for millennia.

Central heating, air conditioning and lighting shield us from the influence of nature. Nature ceases to be a relevant issue in our lives

and thoughts. We are cut off from an essential part of ourselves. We are rootless and landless.

## AIR

After trekking for several days, I reached the edge of the plateau. I was standing a few thousand feet up in the air, overlooking a vast, flat plane, spread out for miles before me. Below me was a sheer cliff that dropped straight down. It was impossible to climb down. There was no way forwards except over this precipice.

I thought of a way to get across this hurdle. I returned down the path that I'd come, until I arrived back at the hut I'd left in the morning. Once inside, I searched around for whatever material I could use. I planned to make a hand-glider and use it to fly off the plateau and glide down with the wind. The question was, would I find what I needed here?

Searching around in the kitchen, I found some material – spare curtains and a tablecloth, curtain rods, plus needle and thread which I could use to sew it all together. I used the curtain rods to fashion the framework for the glider. This consisted of two long cross-sections, supported by three shorter pieces, bound together to form a triangle. I sewed the material tightly onto the frames. I had done a fair amount of hand gliding in my time, and I knew something of the aerodynamics of flight, so I hoped that what I was constructing would work. If not, well it was a long way down.

I returned to the edge of the precipice, glider in hand. Wetting my finger, I held it up to test the wind direction. There was a slight tailwind, coming from behind me and sweeping off the edge. I had no doubt there would also be a strong updraft from below.

“Here goes,” I said to myself. I took several steps backwards, and then charged the cliff with a scream. And then I was over the edge and falling swiftly.

For a moment I thought my efforts had failed, then suddenly an updraft caught the edges of the glider and I soared upwards.

I sailed through the air, over the plane far below. I was flying through the air, heading for the top of the skies. Flying over hills and valleys, forests and rivers, I was as free as a bird, soaring like an eagle, light as a feather. The earth could not hold or contain me. Mountains and seas could not limit my flight. I floated with the currents of the wind. I soared high above the earth, surrounded by a sea of white clouds.

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We take for granted the air that we breathe and move through, each moment of our existence. Our air is made up of a mixture of gases – oxygen, nitrogen and traces of other elements. We need air to breathe like fish need water. But we seldom stop to question this medium that surrounds us and the only time that we may notice that it exists is when we are deprived of oxygen, such as when we dive underwater and hold our breath or when we are at high altitudes.

Air is an essential element in many of the processes that drive technology. Without air to feed it, there can be no fire. Air is used in the principle of internal combustion, which drives our automobiles, trains and airplanes. It is used in the manufacture of glass and the preparation of other products. Air and hydrogen combine to form water, the other essential element for life on earth.

Air and water are continually moving, shapeless, amorphous entities. We are able to observe water directly, and even touch it, since it has a high density and refracts light. We usually do not notice the air that surrounds us. It is transparent to us. However, when the air molecules slow down and loose energy, we feel colder, as occurs at high altitudes. When they speed up and become more compressed, we feel hotter. Air moves in huge cyclic currents that we experience as wind, but are more accurately described as cyclones – huge vortices of air particles that periodically transverse the globe in predictable patterns. The shifting heat zones between the poles and the equator affect these patterns, during summer and winter.

In modern times, the phenomenon of global warning has dramatically altered the predictable weather patterns, which, to the best of human knowledge, have lasted hundreds of thousand of years.



Our cities and countryside now face unpredictable cyclones and flooding.

Heedless, our cities, scattered throughout the globe like countless cancer spots on a wrinkled skin, continue to pour their poison into the air. Countless tons of carbon monoxide and other pollutants are released each day, adding to the problem of global warming. At the same time, other chemicals that we release into the air are constantly destroying the protective outer skin that covers the earth – the ozone layer. We are piece by piece dismantling the veil that mother earth uses to protect herself from the harsh gaze of the sun. And beneath the unprotected light of the sun, when the last veil of mother earth is ripped apart and she lies open and exposed, we creatures upon her surface shall wither and die.

## MOUNTAINS

Mountains surrounded me on all sides. I had been wondering for days in this mountainous landscape. I was totally alone with my thoughts and the sound of my tramping boots on the gravel path. The path lay beside a stream of bubbling water.

In the evening I found a dry spot to camp and sat watching the stars in the night sky.

For the next few days the path that I followed climbed upwards. Eventually I came to the top of a peak with an incredible view. Mountains stretched below me, as far as the eye could see, crest after crest.

I held up the cube and it glowed and elongated in one direction – forwards. Seeing no alternative, I continued.

Soon the way forwards was blocked by deep chasms. The only way to pass over these was to descend down into the chasm, following a dangerous, rickety path and then climb back up the other side. The path was slow and treacherous. Several times I lost my footing, to be sent sliding downwards, only to be saved at the last minute by frantically grabbing onto a protruding rock or root.

The path that I was following continued straight as an arrow. For weeks I marched forwards. Although the path became more and more steep and dangerous as I continued, it was encouraging to find that there always seemed to be some way of going forwards. Up to this point I'd been able to follow the winding path that led straight through the mountains, using my cube as my compass.

In the solitude and open spaces through which I walked, I had all the time in the world to think, but I hardly needed to think in this place. My mind seemed to expand and spread out to encompass the sky, as my eyes drank in the vast open vistas and towering valleys and hills that lay before me, up to the edge of the horizon.

Climbing was hard physical work, tiring on the legs, knees and back. Going up was the easy part, although it took far more physical energy and effort. Going down was the hard and dangerous part, each step jolting on the knees and back.

One day I descended down an enormously deep chasm to come across an insurmountable barrier – a wall of sheer rock, towered towards the sky, smooth and impossible to climb. I sat down in despair and gave up for that day, waiting for nightfall to arrive.

In the morning, I consulted my cube again, but this time it was not helpful. It pointed directly at the rocky wall. If I could not climb up here, I would have to walk parallel to the wall until I found a place where I could ascend. I began to walk next to the wall, looking up for a place that offered an opportunity to climb.

I had proceeded less than thirty feet when I came across the entrance to a cave. I held up my cube and it glowed brightly, indicating the direction of the entrance. I stepped inside.

It was dark inside. I used the cube in my hand to offer some light, but there was not much to see about me, except granite walls. I was in some kind of tunnel that led into the mountains.

For a countless time I walked. There was no time, day or night, in the tunnel. I walked and when I grew tired I stopped to rest and sleep and continued walking. More than several times I slept and walked, with only the light of the cube to guide me.

Suddenly, the tunnel branched into two. Which path should I take? I used the cube to guide me. As I continued, the path branched again and again. Each time I took the path that the cube indicated.

## TRAPPED

I crawled through a narrow tunnel that led downwards. It grew smaller and smaller as I proceeded, until I was crawling on my stomach. The hard ground scraped my knees and elbows. My neck grew tired as I tried to hold my head above the ground without touching the ceiling. I had to stop frequently to rest. The ground became moister; droplets of water dripped down onto my head. A thin film of moss covered the surfaces. The ground was now smooth and slippery, making progress easier.

Then the tunnel took a steep bend downwards, so that I slipped and slid uncontrollably. I tried to put my arms out to slow down my forward tumble, but there was nothing firm on which to grip. I began to pick up speed. The tunnel came to an end and I was shot out of the opening. I fell with a hard splash, into a puddle of water, and lay in the dark, dazed.

After a while, I stood up. I raised the cube, to see where I was. I was in a small, circular cavern. Far above lay the opening of the tunnel through which I had fallen. I spent a few minutes exploring the chamber, looking for a way out, but could not find any. The cube glowed from all directions and indicated no clear direction.

I sat down, then made a second attempt to find an exit. I searched the walls carefully, pressing my hands against the rock, but could find nothing. There seemed nothing to do but to return the way I had come.

I tried to climb back up the opening and into the tunnel, which was several feet above my head, but with no success. I kept on slipping and falling back. I did this several times, then gave up. There was no way out.

Once more, I began to search frantically on all sides, beating the walls with my hands – nothing. I was trapped!

I lay down on the wet floor in despair. The light of the cube went out and I was in darkness. Total blackness. And silence, except for the occasional distant drip of water.

Time passed.

Was I now doomed to spending eternity trapped within the belly of the mountains?

I had reached a dead end in my journeys.

I lay down and slept, an uncomfortable sleep, with no dreams.

The voice of Julia seemed to echo through my mind. "Don't give up, Greg. You will find a way out, even from here."

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I awoke to the sound of dripping water. From the opening above, water was dripping down on my head.

Water? I touched the floor. It was moist. In the middle of the cavern was a small pool of water. Water was coming in slowly, from above, but where was it going out? I waded into the pool and began to prod the floor with my hands. Sand, old roots and stones lay at the bottom. I began to dig through this, throwing the sand and debris onto the far side of the chamber, clearing away everything that was blocking the water.

After about an hour, I had cleared away most of the sand and loose stones. I tugged at a big tree root in the center of the pool. The root came loose and the water began to flow quickly through the opening. I looked down carefully. Water was dripping through a hole that was blocked by a big stone. Quickly, the last of the water disappeared, leaving only the bolder visible.

The boulder was about twice as large as my head. If I could somehow prize it loose, I would probably be able to fit through the hole that it was blocking. I grabbed a sharp-edged stone from amongst the debris and began to scratch and chisel away at the ground around the boulder, trying to enlarge the hole.

It was slow work. The ground was hard, but the constant flow of moisture had helped to soften it. The area surrounding the boulder gradually began to crumble. Determined not to give up, I continued, hammering away with my primitive tool. When I'd widened the area

around the boulder sufficiently, I stood up and began jumping on the boulder, trying to wedge it loose with the pressure of my weight. Slowly, it began to slide down. I gave it one final shove with my leg and the boulder slipped loose and went crashing down. I heard a loud splash as it hit the ground below.

I peered down through the hole, using my cube as a torch. There was flowing water down there, but by all appearances, not very deep. Where there was water flowing, I reckoned that there must eventually be an exit.

I slipped down through the hole. It was a tight squeeze, especially at the shoulders, but I gritted my teeth, expelled my breath and squeezed first one arm and then the other through the opening. I hit the ground with a splash. The fall must have been at least ten feet, but the water softened the impact. There was no returning the way I had come.

I began to follow the flow of the water, downstream.

The underground channel wended its way onwards for some miles. The incline was gently downwards. Twice, the channel opened up into huge caves with stalagmites and stalactites. Each of these caves had multiple exits. Without the cube to guide me I would have been lost.

On and on I walked. In the distance I could hear the sound of water.

The ground beneath my feet was wet and slippery. I looked for the source of the running water, at first a faint rumble that gradually grew into a continuous roar. My ears and head began to ring. Now I could faintly see a pinprick of light, indicating that I was approaching the exit. Thankful to finally be getting out of the dark, I hurried towards the source of the light. The sounds of roaring water grew louder and louder, until it filled my head.

Thick bushes blocked the way. I began to clear away the branches. I broke through. I was on the edge of a cliff. Above me a huge waterfall flowed, pouring downwards. And then before I could think, I lost my footing on the slippery ground and was falling downwards, with the weight of a millions tons of water flowing down with me.

I fell for about ten seconds, descending into a world of spray and mist. I came down with a slam into the water and sank rapidly, pushed by the weight of the water. A strong current swept me along, away

from the waterfall. I struggled towards the surface. I was bumped and swept by powerful eddies and currents. Eventually I broke through to the surface, drawing air into my lungs. I looked back. The waterfall was already about one hundred meters upstream and I was being swept swiftly away.

The river carried me along for another several kilometers. On each side, steep cliffs with rocky edges made it impossible to gain any foothold. All I could do was to float with the current and hope for the best.

I was swept over several smaller waterfalls, but managed to survive. Eventually, the river broadened out and flowed into a large lake. I was swept out towards the middle of the lake. The current here was weaker and I took advantage of this to strike out gradually for one of the shores.

I reached the sandy bank and hauled myself out of the water to lie exhausted on my back, face upwards, while my chest heaved up and down. For the moment I was safe. I lay there, until my strength returned and my clothes had dried, then stood up began to search for a place of shelter where I could sleep for the night.

Walking along the shore and then further inland, I found a small, abandoned hut. The hut contained a few basic provisions and a blanket. After my roughing it up over the last few weeks, this was a luxury.

In the morning I continued with my journey. Ahead lay more mountains – not towering monsters like those that I had already crossed over, but rather smaller ones that took only a few hours to clamber over.

The landscape began to change and became drier. There were fewer plants and birds. Gradually, vegetation became sparser, and the ground harder and sandier. Eventually I passed over a final crest to halt in my tracks with surprise.

Ahead lay a desert of golden yellow sand dunes, stretching into the distance. I looked at my cube. I would need to cross the desert.

## THE DESERT

The desert was a stark land of sand and sun. Yellow sands stretched in all directions. I walked into a wind that was blowing against me, making it that much more difficult to progress. It was if an unseen hand were trying to force me back.

I had used up the last of my water and for a long time now my throat had been burning and my tongue was swollen. My lips were parched and cracked.

The hot sand burnt my bare feet as I walked. The dry desert wind dried the sweat on my back. The sun beat down relentlessly, burning my skin an angry red. I stumbled as I walked, staggering like a drunkard.

Reaching a point where I could go on no further, I fell to my knees, looking up at the cruel and pitiless sky. I raised my fist and cursed the cruel Master who had brought me to this pitiless place. There was no answer from the clear blue skies, only the relentless harsh sun, beating down on my forehead. Gritting my teeth in determination, I stood up and continued.

Somehow, I knew that as long as I was determined to continue, I could not be stopped. I could lay down and die of thirst, but I would rise again to make the attempt once more.

In the desert I came face to face with myself. There were no more distractions to disturb me, only the silence of the desert winds, the wide, open sky and the dry sands.

When Moses fled Egypt, he wandered through the deserts of the Sinai for many years before he met God. John the Baptist lived out in the desert for many years before he began to preach his message. The desert is the purifier of men's souls. The desert is the harsh environment that tests the mettle of a person. You are either broken, or learn to survive.

And yet, despite its appearance of barren harshness, there is abundant life.

How do the Bedouins and other nomadic tribes of the desert flourish in such an inhospitable land? Why would they want to choose such a lifestyle for themselves?

The answer is simple. They survive because they learn how to adapt to a parched and barren land, milking it of its few precious resources. They choose this lifestyle because it enables them to live as free and unfettered people, not tied to any king or kingdom. They are rulers of their own domain, each person a king of all that he or she beholds.

The desert is a place without shame, but also without forgiveness. It takes and accepts everything as it is, but shows no mercy to weakness.

I wandered through the desert for a countless time. Fifty times, the sun revolved in a circle around the horizon and came to rest in front of me again. And day and night came and went.

I fell down from thirst and exhaustion, only to awaken again, at the same place where I had fallen, to get up and continue. I could not be terminated. I could not cease to exist. Each time that I seemed to breathe my last breath on the sands, and sank down into a painful oblivion, I would rise up again like a phoenix. Somewhere within the churning computer banks of the Master, I was being regenerated to continue with the process where it had last been left off and complete the final equation.

I was a bony figure, the skeleton of a long dead man, still alive and striding through the desert. The sun left no shadow on my form. I ceased to feel pain, hunger or thirst.

## THE SILENT POOL

I came across the silent pool. It was a large pool of still, cold water, in the middle of the yellow desert. Clear as silver in color and as cold and calm as a sheet of steel.

It was a body of water as smooth and calm as a silver mirror, so still that it might have been frozen glass. I could see the blue sky reflected clearly in the pond. As I bent over the water, I saw my own reflection. It almost appeared to be myself, trapped inside the pool and looking up at me with sad eyes.

Around the edge of the pool stood pillars of stone, lending to this place the appearance of an ancient temple.



I was tempted to bathe my feet in the water, but something held me back. It was too sterile. But I needed to drink. I hadn't had anything to drink for what must have been days. I lay face downwards and cupped my hands into the water. Then brought up a handful to my lips and drank.

The water was cold and numbing. It removed the aching thirst and burning in my throat and took away the swelling from my face and hands. At the same time, it felt like drinking chlorine or mouthwash. The feeling spread through my internal organs, numbing me.

Numbness takes away the pain of living and brings forgetfulness. It is spiritual opium for the aching soul. Numbness is death. It is pain that tells us that we are alive, informing us when something is hurting or threatening our physical or emotional existence. Pain is the warning signals of our defense system, sending urgent messages streaming back to the central nervous system for an immediate response.

Pain is our awareness of injury to a part of our self-identity. Pain is something that our mind interprets and perceives. It has no existence outside our perceptions. Block off the chemical or electrical transmitters bringing the message of pain to the brain and we will not feel it. This is the secret of modern medicine – to dull pain through drugs that suppress the action of the nervous system.

Those who cannot respond to the calls of pain are unable to protect themselves from physical harm and end up falling prey to physical injury, losing fingers and other parts of their body without even being aware of it.

I walked away from the silent pool, but could not feel anything. Even the thoughts of my quest seemed distant and covered in a mist of forgetfulness. More out of mechanical habit than anything else, I continued on with my journey, using the light of the cube to guide me.

## RIVER OF FIRE

At last, I had reached the end of the desert.

Ahead of me lay a wall of fire. As I approached closer, I saw the towering flames, reaching skywards. A river of boiling lava and fire blocked my way. It was wide, but I could dimly make out the far side through the flames. There was no way to get passed, except by going forward and through it.

I felt no fear or emotion as I approached the river and stood at the edge of the banks. The heat from where I stood was enough to burn my face and exposed hands to a dark, angry red. I felt nothing. I did not hesitate. Looking directly ahead, I stepped into the fiery river and began to sink.

The black cube in my hand suddenly burst into flames, glowing red and yellow. I waded forward, and my physical frame disintegrated. The flesh covering my bones melted, my eyes popped out of my skull and then my hair and bones went up in flames and were burnt to ashes. I died a thousand painful deaths and each time I was resurrected and brought back to the river of fire. Each time to claw my way forwards a few more steps.

I was both the fire, leaping from the boiling, frothing torrent and the fuel that the fire consumed. I was in the forge of the universe, being made and unmade again and again, in a continuous cycle. Raw energy flowed through me.

Fire is part of many of the ceremonies of ancient religions. It is used as a symbol of both creation and destruction. In the fire of the stars, atoms are continually being created and destroyed. Fire is used to offer sacrifices to the gods. It can also be a weapon of destruction. Fire is a symbol of death and transition. The Hindus and many other cultures use fire to burn their dead, so that the souls of the dead may rise to heaven. Fire is also a symbol of birth and resurrection, as in the Phoenix, which dies in the throes of fire, once every thousand years, to be born again out of the ashes.

The river to the underworld is a river of fire. Hell is said to be a place of eternal fire. Fire is neither an element of good nor evil, but can be made so.

Mankind's fascination with fire goes back thousands of years, to the first primitive people, who harnessed the power of fire to keep out the cold and predators at bay. In the dark, cold winds of the ice age, it was perhaps the knowledge and control over fire that enabled mankind to survive and prosper.

The knowledge of fire is at the heart of our civilization. It is the engine that drives our modern technology. We use fire to cook our meat – and cooked meat is the first sign of a civilized society. Men used it to forge their weapons, their iron swords and shields that enabled the Romans to conquer half the world. Civilization is spread through the sword and the sword is forged at the wheel of fire. Without fire, there would be no civilization. Modern man has harnessed the secrete properties of fire, to heat our homes, drive our cars and airplanes, boats and trains and forge countless materials.

The most precious and rarest object in the world, the diamond, is forged out of the process of fire and pressure, operating for thousands of years.

Our sun, the giver of life and harbinger of the dawn, is nothing but a gigantic fireball, a massive cloud of hydrogen and helium gas, burning at thousands of degrees centigrade. The sun feeds on itself and drives its own creative process, spewing out billions of atoms per second, which hurtle through space, bump into other atoms and are transformed into new elements. Like a huge, pulsing heart, the sun expands and contracts under the forces of its own internal gravity.

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And then, finally, I was stepping on to solid ground.

The black cube in my hand continued to show the flickering of flames. From now on, it would never change – it had been frozen by the fires of creation.

I passed through a landscape of towering volcanoes, spewing billowing smoke and fire into the sky. Rivers of lava flowed all about me. Somehow, I wended my way safely through this landscape. The ground trembled periodically beneath my feet.

And then I had reached it, the end of the known universe, a black line running straight as an arrow. And beyond that line, nothing – only the dark blackness of empty space.

## MOONSTONE

I was falling, falling over the black line and beyond the boundaries of this world.

I flew downwards through the darkness. There was no sense of falling, only the horizontal line above me grew further and further distant. The world of the Master was speeding away from me, down and out of sight. I was in a place of utter darkness, with no sensation of movement or flight. And then I saw that I was speeding towards a source of light in the distance. At first it appeared to be a gigantic light bulb, glowing pure white. I was like a moth, flying towards this source of light. As I approached closer the light flattened and spread out, until I was looking at a long, thin horizontal line. The line grew larger and larger, until I began to make out the dark gray features of a landmass. I was flying headfirst towards the approaching ground – direction did not make sense to me. I caught a brief glimpse of large craters. At the last moment, I turned myself around so that I would hit the ground with my feet.

A cloud of dust rose up about me as I landed with a heavy bump. My legs crumbled beneath me on the impact and I was sent sprawling. I lay there for a few moments, stunned and in pain. Then gradually, the pain receded and I got shakily to my feet.

I was in a landscape that resembled the surface of the moon. I looked out at a black sky and crater-ridden earth. I walked in this deathly silent place, clambering up and down craters. My body felt as light as a feather, although this may have been due as much to my purification through fire rather as the absence of gravity. I almost felt as though I floated as I walked. The landscape was marked by long, deep grooves that ran in one direction only. I followed their direction, walking between two long furrows that proceeded parallel to each other and appeared to meet in the distance.

I walked on. The sky above me was black, except for the stars, which shone as clear as lanterns, a thousand sailing ships watching over me. In the distance I could make out a faint white glow. As I

approached, the glow grew stronger. I was walking towards what looked like a huge light bulb.

Soon I was close enough to see more clearly the object emitting this tremendous source of light. I stood in front of a glowing moonstone that sent waves of white energy into the sky. The white beams passed through my body as though I were transparent. I approached closer. The white light was not hot. It was cold as ice.

I hesitated, not sure what to do. All paths lead directly to this central light source, a hub of power, radiating energy. I reached out to touch the stone and felt a huge jolt of power surge through my fingers and up my arm, numbing it. I stepped back. This close, the light was strong enough to blind me. Waves of energy flowed through me, leaving me untouched. As I stood in front of the stone, I began to perceive a gradual change.

Gradually, the outlines of a face began to appear on the glowing rock – an ancient face, with long, gray hair and a long, white flowing beard and two piercing blue eyes.

The blue eyes stared beyond me, as though I were too close for it to see.

I approached closer and stopped in front of the face.

*“What is your name?”* roared a voice, as deep and throaty as the rumble of the earth. It was as though thunder had spoken. I felt the tremor of his words rock the foundations of the universe.

*“It is me, Greg.”*

*“To enter, tell me the password.”*

*“The password. What password?”* There was no answer from the voice. The eyes gazed at and beyond me.

I held up the cube as an offering, but the face did not respond. I tried several other questions, but with no response. I tried walking forwards, but an invisible barrier pushed me back.

Then I remembered the dream about the mage that I had dreamt. What was it that he had said to me? ‘Bring back to me the four elements, fire and water, air and earth and I will make you a key, to open the door’.

I had been through fire and water, air and earth to reach this point. Was this the key, this the password?

“Fire, water, air and earth,” I said aloud.

*“Fire, water, air and earth,”* the face repeated in a booming voice. *“What is the secrete of these elements?”*

“They are all the same,” I replied automatically. “That is, they are all fashioned from the same building blocks.”

*“Proceed!”* The face gradually disappeared.

I stood before the glowing white moonstone. It began to pulse like a siren, flashing with the colors of the rainbow. As it pulsed, waves of color swept over me. The stone expanded with each pulse, until it loomed over me and swept through me. I was in a mist of colors – red and yellow, green and blue, brown and orange, constantly changing just as my eye began to register a color. The clouds of colored air pulsed in and out, like a beating heart. I could hear a rhythmic boom that made my bones ring. My heart seemed to ring to the same rhythm.

Was this the heart of the universe, the gigantic processing unit that was the equivalent of the human heart, pumping out billions of signals per second?

I moved forwards, through the swirling colors. I felt that I myself was little more than smoke. I seemed to twist and elongate with the subtle eddies that blew around in this place.

I came to the center. A narrow, spiral staircase, shining pure silver, led downwards, twisting around and around. I began to wend my way down, placing each foot carefully, for fear of falling. The color of the light was pure white. It seemed to shine upwards from a source below.

The bottom of the staircase opened up into a large hall. A hall filled with shining, silver mirrors, each reflecting the white light, from a thousand confusing directions – up, down and on all sides.

## THE HALL OF MIRRORS

*In the hall of mirrors lies the reflection of all things. There you may find that which you have lost. Therein is stored the echo of your inner self, the blueprint of your identity.*

*Illusions of illusions, says the preacher, all is illusion. Where then lay the boundary between the real and the unreal?*

In this place there was no up or down, no left or right. Only mirrors.

I stood looking into the face of a man. He was ragged and unshaven, except for the top of his head, which had been shaven clean. He looked at me with sad, puzzled eyes – eyes that had seen many things in his brief lifetime.

“Who are you?” I asked.

*“I am you, Greg. I am your inner image – your other self. I watch your actions, although you are not aware of me. I am always there.”*

“Then are we still within the world of the Master?”

*“What is the world of the Master? Is it real? Does it exist only within the boundaries of your imagination? Where is the border that lies between the real and the imagined? You are a traveler within a world of illusions. A world of mirrors.”*

“But in one, I can die, and in the other, I simply wake up again,” I replied. “In the one I am human, and in the other I am immortal. In the one, I eat and sleep, in the other, there is no solid substance.”

*“And this makes it unreal? We are such things as dreams are made of.”*

“Who am I?”

There was no answer. Instead, my mirror image turned to itself and echoed the question. I smiled and it smiled. I frowned and he frowned. I began to play a game of cat and mouse, dodging and looking over my shoulder, but I could never catch him out. The game continued for some time.

I began to make out the outlines of a dark shadow behind my mirror image. Gradually the shadow took substance. There was another figure standing behind the image of myself. He never smiled or

changed his expression. His eyes were as clear as the morning sky. Was he observing, controlling or evaluating?

As if my mirror image sensed what my eyes were focusing on, he too turned round to stare at the figure.

*"Who are you?"* he asked.

*"I am you, Greg. I am the gatekeeper to your self, your inner land."*

I approached the mirror until I was face to face with my image. The glass was smooth as the face of reality. I reached out with my hand to touch my mirror image. He reached out and touched my hand. The barrier of reality that separated us began to shimmer and wobble, as though I were seeing myself through water. I took a step forward and passed into my mirror image. The glass about me shattered into a thousand pieces.

I passed through the glass into a hall of shadows. A thousand other figures past by, shadows, roaming about, trying to find their way out, asking questions, sitting down and scratching their heads. Which one was the real I?

*"I am the real I,"* I said aloud, to the assembled figures.

*"No I am! No I am! No I am!"* each one of us cried, in a tumult of voices, echoing for several seconds.

And then a second wave of echoes resounded through the hall. *"Where am I? Where am I? Where am I?"*

It was confusing. I searched frantically for a way out. I kept bumping into shadows of myself who passed through me as though I were a ghost.

I looked down at my feet, as I felt something sharp prick me. On the ground lay a thin, sharp, needle-like shard of silver glass. I picked it up.

And then I remembered my dream of the seamstress, weaving her tapestry of the universe. I am a thousand shattered pieces, scattered in all directions – past, present and future. How could I make a coherent whole of this heap of images?

We all write the stories of our lives, threading together a picture of ourselves as coherent, whole human beings.

Could I use this sliver of glass as a needle, to thread together the pieces that made up my identity, the thousands of other reflections of



me that I saw? I took the glass in my hands and began to move amongst the shadowy figures. As I passed a shadow, its form wrapped itself around the shard of glass, went sliding into the glass and up my arm, and seemed to merge with me.

But who was the 'I' piecing together my identity? When I looked again, I seemed to be looking down from a great distance. An old woman in a gray shawl was walking slowly, with her back bent. In her hands she held a needle and thread. She was singing as she sowed, going about her work, mending. As she looked up, her task almost completed, I saw that it was not the face of an old woman, but a young, beautiful girl. Her eyes were filled with starlight. Her hair was golden, like the wheat of the fields and her teeth white like the snow-covered mountains. She smiled as she sang.

Then she was gone and I was standing besides an old well.

## THE WELL OF DREAMS

I was looking into the waters of a deep well. The dark, blue water swirled round and round, like water going down a drain.

I stood at the edge of the well for a moment. I could hear it calling to me, saying: "*Come to me.*" It was singing a beautiful song, full of sadness and longing. I reached out to touch the water. I was thirsty, so cupping some water up into my hands I drank and washed my face. It was cold, but refreshing. I felt drowsy and sleepy, as though I were passing into a dream. The singing invaded my head. Gradually, my head grew heavy and then I was toppling over, falling into the well and sinking under the water.

Down I sank, into a world of dreams.

I was back in my apartment. I saw Julia, turning to go and smiling at me, her long golden hair flowing behind her.

"Are you going to the meadow?" I asked. "Then bring me back some flowers."

I kissed her hand as she left.

"Remember me. Two lovers, who met once in a strange place," she said, and was gone.

The room faded away. I reached out gently, to touch the remnants of her shadow.

I was in a strange city and I was talking to a middle-aged woman I'd never met before. "Tell her to meet me in the park, dressed in red. She'll find me sitting by the pond, feeding the ducks, next to the willow tree," I said to the woman.

"She once was a true love of mine," I called out.

And then I saw a young girl singing and painting a picture. Weaving time in a tapestry.

"Won't you stop and remember me?" I called out to her.

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I was standing in a calm, quiet meadow, filled with long flowing grass and beautiful colored butterflies. I was surrounded on all sides by rolling green hills. As I walked forwards, towards a line of trees in the distance, I heard the sound of the sea, waves crashing against the shoreline and retreating again in a rhythmical cycle. I could feel the soft tendrils of the wind and smell the fresh, salty sea breeze, blowing into my face. The long grass swayed back and forth to the rhythm, of the wind. I felt at peace with myself.

I remembered this place. I had been here before – a long time ago. It was the place of the simulation with the butterflies and the meadow. This made me think. Had Bill somehow managed to travel to this place, and used it as the basis for his model? Or perhaps it was the other way around and I was simply reliving the experience of that day in the simulation model, my own brain reproducing the experience. I would never know the answer.

I came to the edge of the cliff, overlooking the sea. I had traveled this far in the simulation model, but never beyond this point. That had been the limits of the virtual experience.

But now I would travel beyond, past the boundaries of my dreams and the known universe. I gradually descended the cliff, until I was on the seashore. I saw a large object before me. It was a huge stone. I gradually approached the stone.

I knew instinctually that this object was the end of my travels. My quest was almost over. I had arrived.

## STONE OF TRUTH

I stood in front of the huge stone on which strange markings were carved. There were seemingly infinite number of rows and columns with markings.

"My God! It's like a huge Rosette stone!" I said aloud.

I understood what I was looking at. This was the stone of truth. Take it apart and you could understand the mind of the Master. This was the deciphering stone, the protocol according to which the Master interpreted and sent thousands of commands to all corners of the universe.

A computer stores images and words in a series of separate files on a hard disk. It is only through a specific reference file, which provides the code enabling all this information to be filed into a coherent whole, that meaningful information can be retrieved from the databanks. Remove this code and we are left with a meaningless collection of jumbled bits and bytes, fragments that make no sense on their own.

But how was I going to discover the way to unlock that black door? There had to be some key to unlocking it.

Imagine a huge, 3-dimensional cube, with hundreds of moving blocks on each face. The number of possible combinations is nearly infinite. To solve this gigantic puzzle and fit all the colors on each face is an impossible task, when you consider that the unique pattern of the cube is a secret within itself. Unlocking the code is like unraveling the human genetic code. It was something beyond the scope of any single individual.

But if I could not unravel this code, I would be doomed to spending the rest of my days in this world.

I sat down, facing the stone, trying to figure out what to do next. As I sat, looking up at the faint twinkling of the night stars, my mind cleared. I imagined myself sitting besides a clear pool of water, gazing into the light of the stars, reflected in the pool. And my soul too was reflected in that pool of light.

Then I remembered what I had seen in the hall of mirrors, the image of myself, and suddenly I knew the answer.

The answer to unlocking the stone lay within myself. I was a mirror, a still pond of water, reflecting the shadow of the universe. The universe was within me, at the same time that I was within the universe. I was like the single strand of DNA, from which the entire puzzle of the human being could be decoded. The pattern lay within every element, within every atom in the universe.

I stepped forward to touch the stone. For a while nothing happened. The stone stood, silent and cold to my touch. Gradually, I felt my hands growing warmer. A yellow glow began to spread out from the center, until the entire stone was glowing. Gradually, the intensity of the light changed, until the stone took on a red and then a deep violet color. The surface began to shimmer and dissolve. My hands slid through the surface, as though this were a thick mist.

I stepped forward into the mist. For what seemed an eternity, I walked through the ghostly mist.

I was in a place of limbo. I could have been walking in the mists of a cloud. There was absolutely no sensation from any direction. Then out in the mists I began to hear sounds and voices. I moved forwards towards the source of the sound.

I saw a baby, crying in a crib and then after a while, a woman coming to comfort the baby. She held it in her arms and hushed it to sleep. I reached out to touch her, but the image dissolved and I was back again in the mist.

Ahead was a door. I opened the door and entered the room. I saw myself sitting at a desk in a school class. The mathematics teacher was explaining a problem and she turned to me and asked me to solve it. The other pupils were laughing, as if I'd said something stupid. Then the mists again.

"Do you want me to stay?" I heard a voice, calling out to me. The face of an old girlfriend appeared, then she was gone.

On and on I wondered through the mists. The faces and voices of people in my past appeared and went. Some images stayed longer.

I saw Julia, standing before me for the last time. She was whole again and healed, as I remembered her when we had first met. She smiled at me and I knew that deep in her heart she was happy for me.

“Julia!” I cried, reaching out to touch her.

She reached out towards me so that the tips of our fingers almost touched. I could feel the warmth and love shining through her. “Goodbye Greg. Go with my blessing,” she said.

“I love you,” I whispered.

“I love you too Greg. I will always love you.” She smiled back. Then she was gone and I was alone again, in the mists.

Then a final image, of me standing in front of the stone, as I had been, trying to find a way in. But these were more than images. I knew that they were real experiences, or fleeting pieces of real experiences, as if tiny pieces of the entity we know as space-time had been snipped off and reassembled piecemeal.

I was in the heart of reality, in the place where reality was being generated. I was in the core of a gigantic probability field, generating the substance of the universe.

But who was the “I” in all this? Was I some character in a story, written by an unknown author in a distant universe? What happens then, when the author sleeps, when his pen runs dry? What happens with all the little gaps that he has failed to fill in? With his pen and paper, he maps out the script and destiny of our lives, but when his pen is quiet and he sleeps, then do we too lie silent, waiting for his call to awaken us? Or do we somehow move within the gaps left by his silences, filling in the missing pieces and creating the complex and substantial thing we know as reality?

Or was “I” the author, writing out the script of my own life, carefully planning each thought, each act, each experience and reveling in the living through of it? Was “I” the conscious sum of memories and impulses stored in that complex organic instrument we refer to as the human ‘brain’? Did the “I” have an existence that could transcend death? Surely with death the “I” must vanish, once the trappings of the physical world, memory, thought and body are removed?

Reality is a probability field, generated by that complex instrument we know as the brain. But here I was in the center of a huge probability field. Could I, with my own thoughts, be able to create reality, like a God and watch it live before my eyes? But what about that other creator, that thing referred to as the 'Master'. Wasn't he here too?

*"Yes, Greg, I am here," the whispered voice came immediately, from all directions and none. "I have always been with you, in every step that you have taken."*

I ignored the implications of what he had said. "Is this then the place where you live?"

*"I am everything that you see and everything is within me. Surely you must realize this."*

"Then what is this place?"

*"It is just as you have thought, the place of truth. It is the realm of pure thought or instruction. It is the Will that drives the generation of what we call the world."*

"Then here I can find my soul, or at least that essential part of me of which you have robbed me."

*"Greg, haven't you learnt anything from your travels. I cannot rob you of anything. And why should I want to do it, even if I could?"*

"Because, you like to control and manipulate things and people and you will destroy anything that may destroy or threaten your rule."

*"Greg, I brought you here. Why would I have brought you here if I felt that you were a potential harm to my world?"*

"Then why did you bring me here?"

*"Because this is what you wanted. Didn't you dedicate yourself to the search for the gateway and go through madness in order to reach it? Didn't you cast yourself into the shadow of death, risking the passage, so that you could be here?"*

"Yes. That's true. But now I want to go home. I've never wanted anything so much. I want to be whole again. I want to feel, to be able to laugh and cry again. And I want to be able to die eventually and find my final resting place, and not have to return over and over again to this same existence."

*“Come then. I will show you the way back. It has always been open to you. And there you will find all these things for which you so long.”*

I walked through a passage of mist.

In the distance, I could make out the sounds of the sea. I walked gradually towards it.

I was on the edge of a beach. There was a small boat on the shoreline. And somehow I knew that this boat had been left for me. This was my way out.

## THE SEA

*Go then, for there are other worlds than these. (Steven King. Wizard and Glass.)*

In the universe of the Master, there is a sea. It is called the static sea. Nothing moves on this sea and no sounds, other than a continual hissing, can be heard. The people of this universe hold it in fascination. In the static sea they hear echoes of their birth, of the electronic sea of light and energy, formed out of the vortex. No one knows what lies on the far side of the sea. No one has traveled to the end of that current and returned. Some say that the sea is infinite. Others believe that far beyond the limits of thought lie the shores of a New World, a land of freedom.

Life is an exploration. We are a boat, sailing an unknown sea, pulled by the currents of our destiny. I was standing on the boat, looking at the receding shore. Slowly, it grew dark and faded from my sight. I was afloat in an endless sea, while above me shone thousands of stars. The light of the stars was reflected in the shimmering waves. Afloat and free, where was the current taking me?

My soul was like the night sky, a thousand shattered diamonds, flittering and sparkling, connected in a web of light.

Walking along the shore; listening to the waves and the cry of the gulls; sitting besides a waterfall, with the cool spray on my face and my feet dipped into the clear water; gazing up at the stars, while lying on the grass in a park; sitting besides a pond, watching the waters reflecting the shadow of the trees, and the ducks – a hundred different situations with a common thread tying them together.

It was a world where the Master could not enter, could have no comprehension of. It was a land of magic and tranquility, lying deep beyond the surface of things.

The human soul is like a river, flowing down from the mountains. Nothing can stop its flow to the sea. Put mountains and rocks in its path and it will flow round or over them. I was now afloat, on my sea. Despite all the barriers and obstacles placed in my path, I had finally found my way to freedom.

Looking into the distance, I could see all my tomorrows stretched before me, like a bridge that spanned the ocean between here and the future, beyond the horizon.

I sailed on that sea for a timeless period. Then one day, the sun dawned, a huge, red globe in the sky. The waves that appeared were real waves, the sound of the sea and the smell was the sea that I knew from my own world.

Somehow I had crossed over again and come back. I saw seagulls flying in the air and realized that land could not be too far off.

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Drifting with the tide, I allowed the current to pull me along the coast line and eventually inwards, into a large bay. As I approached the shoreline, the boat began to sink gradually, as though the long journey had exhausted it or perhaps it was not of this world and it could not exist in our world. Just as I approached the breakers, the boat sank beneath the waves and I struck out for the shore.

The current was strong and it took me a good ten minutes of hard swimming before I was on the shore.

Exhausted, I dragged myself up the beach and lay on the sand. I reveled in the grainy, moist texture, rolling around in it and covering my body with sand. I put some sand in my mouth to taste the saltiness. This was earth, the world I knew.

Then I lay on my back and looked up at the cloudy sky. Real clouds, carrying rain.

I allowed the waves of exhaustion to run over me and I was soon asleep.



## Chapter 5

### The Return

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*We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,  
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,  
(TS Eliot, Journey of the Magi)*

## RECOVERY

Greg put down his pen, as if remembering something that he had forgotten. He began to write again.

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I awoke from a long and deep sleep, in which I'd been dreaming. I was lying on the beachfront. I could see other bathers strolling along the beach and entering the water. I stood up and began walking away.

Walking along the seashore, I had the strangest thought. I was a character in a book and someone was turning the pages of the book, reading about me as I walked along the beach. I could almost look up and see him watching me.

Gradually, the feeling passed. I was back on the earth that I knew. It was time to set my house in order. Where was I now? How had I succeeded in returning? What had been happening while I was gone?

There were many pressing questions in my mind. I knew that somehow I had to return to my former apartment, or contact someone I knew, to find out what had happened to me.

As I walked down the street and stopped at a kiosk to look at the date on a newspaper, I tried to sort out events in my mind. The experience I had undergone had seemed to last several lifetimes. But obviously, time was relative. The date on the newspaper indicated that I had been absent for a little over two years.

I had no money in my pockets. According to the newspaper, I was in a small town on the coast of California, thousands of miles away from my Manhattan apartment. How had I come here?

I had no money on me, except for some loose change in my pocket, so I made a call to the only person I knew in this area, Jenny Seagal, my ex-lawyer. Jenny had been an aggressive, high-powered executive, full of energy and always on the move. She'd been working long hours, making a pack of money, until her husband had been diagnosed with cancer of the colon and they'd decided to make the transition to a quieter, more sedentary lifestyle.

From what I remembered, she'd retired here with her husband about two and a half years ago. This had been just before the breakup of my

company. I looked up her telephone number in the directory and dialed. I didn't know what I was going to say to her.

The phone ran, a long shrill ring, repeated several times. I waited nervously. Eventually, someone at the remote end picked up the receiver.

"Hello."

"Hello, is that Jenny?"

"Yes, who is this?"

"This is Greg Stewart. How are you keeping?"

"Oh Greg." There was a pregnant pause, and I could sense Jenny's hesitation or surprise on the phone. "It's good to hear from you again. I heard about what happened to Bill, I was sorry to hear about that. Everything okay? Where are you now?"

I told her the name of the small town where I was calling from.

"What brings you to this part of the world?"

"This and that. Vacation. I've just arrived."

"Great. We should get to together some time."

"Listen, Jenny. I need a favor from you. Can you meet me at the beach front, opposite the Marina? I'll explain everything to you."

"Are you in some kind of trouble?" I sensed alarm in her voice.

"No, nothing like that. Please, just come."

"Okay. Give me an hour," Jenny replied reluctantly.

I thanked her and put down the phone. I was sure that Jenny would help me. I just needed to think up a story that would satisfy her.

She eventually arrived, two hours later, pulling up in her blue Cadillac. She waved and I waved back. It was the same Jenny that I remembered, her long, flowing auburn hair hung loosely around her shoulders. She wore sunglasses, and was well dressed with a blue jacket and blue skirt. She took off her sunglasses and I noticed that she had aged somewhat. There were more wrinkles under her eyes. I could see the look of surprise on her face as she scanned me. I had obviously changed in ways that I wasn't quite aware of. I had yet to see how I looked in a mirror.

"Good to see you again, Greg. You look terrible. New hairstyle?" she eventually settled for.

That's what I'd always liked about Jenny. She came straight to the point and addressed the issues directly. I brought my hands up to my head. My scalp was as smooth as a newborn baby's. "You mean my hair. I thought that a change might do me good."

She eyed me suspiciously, looking at my worn sneakers and faded shirt and pants. "Let's get something to drink. It's been a long time. Tell me what's been happening."

We went over to a restaurant and sat drinking cola. I began to tell her the story I had concocted.

"I don't remember anything that's happened over the past two years. Absolutely nothing. I woke up this morning on the beachfront and that's the last I remember, since two years ago, when I was sitting in my apartment in Manhattan. You are the only person I know in this area. I have no money, no visa or driving license – nothing."

"Wow!" Jenny raised her eyebrows. "That really is some story. It's hard to believe it. Are you trying to pull my leg?" She paused for a moment, to scrutinize me closely. Embarrassed, I avoided her gaze.

She continued. "Of course, I read in the newspapers about the scandal and the selling of the company. I called you once and left a message on your answering machine, but you never got back to me." She took a drag at her cigarette, watching me. "So how's it being going since then, that is, the part that you can remember?"

"I dropped out of the limelight after loosing my company. Pottered around the house for the most part. And you?" I asked.

"I've been okay. I've been doing very well since I retired to the coast. I still have a few local clients. I bought a yacht and spend most of the time on it."

"Sounds like a relaxing life. And your husband?"

"He died of cancer two years ago."

"I'm sorry."

"That okay, it was over quickly enough. We bought a boat just before he died. We were planning to sail around the world with it. We both learned how to sail together. When he died, he made me promise not to sell the boat. 'Enjoy your life a bit', those were his last words."

She snorted. "Now enough about me, what are we going to do about you?" Jenny looked me over. "I tell you what we'll do. You can

bunk down in my yacht for the next few days. Let's get you sorted out, make some phone calls to find out what's happened to you and maybe take you to a doctor to get you checked up."

"Okay," I agreed thankfully.

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I spent two weeks recuperating on Jenny's yacht. Usually, we sailed out once a day into the bay. For the most part I sat on deck, enjoying the sunshine, feeling the wind and cool spray in my face and watching the waves lapping at the edge of the boat. When we reached the middle of the bay, we'd stop to fish.

Jenny proceeded to make some discrete inquiries. The news was surprising, even to me. My bank accounts and property were currently frozen, pending the outcome of my current mental and physical condition. I had been hospitalized in a terminal care ward, on a life support system for the past two years. My medical insurance had covered the bill up to now.

When Jenny phoned the hospital to find out about me, they were still frantically searching for me, trying to explain how a comatose patient had vanished from the ward without anyone noticing. More important was the reason why I had been lying comatose. The tumor in my brain had grown to the point where it had invaded the area of my lower level functioning, shutting me down. The medical staff had predicted that I would die within a year. Instead, I had hung on for two years, without signs of weakening, while the tumor grew larger. An operation involving this area of the lower brain would either have killed me or caused irreparable brain damage and they had had no authorization to continue, so I had been kept on life support.

Jenny looked at me thoughtfully. It's a miracle that you're standing here today, talking to me. We'll need to get you to the hospital tomorrow, to run some checkups. They warned me that there might be a relapse.

But there was no relapse. The tests, including a CAT scan and EMR, indicated that the tumor had completely disappeared. The doctors were at a total loss to explain it.

I spent a few more days fishing with Jenny and sorting out the rest of my affairs. I had myself declared mentally competent and my bank

accounts were reopened. But I had nowhere to go. My apartment had been sold, I had no work and I had not seen my friends for years. There was no life for me here. Not now, with all the memories that haunted me.

Jenny offered me the hospitality of her yacht for another week and I accepted. The time passed peacefully, but after another week on the yacht, doing nothing but watching the waves, I began to feel restless. I knew that the time had come to move on. I booked a ticket to London for the next morning. I spoke to Jenny as we were returning in the evening from the bay.

“I need to get in touch with my family again. I haven’t seen them in years,” I told her.

She dropped me off at the airport in the morning and we shook hands. “Goodbye and thanks for everything,” I said.

“No problem. Look me up again whenever you’re in this part of the world.” She kissed me goodbye.

I got on my plane, never to return.

## ROAD BACK

*Those who have crossed  
With direct eyes, to deaths other Kingdom  
(TS Eliot: The Hollow Men)*

The road back from madness is hard. Once you have returned to a regular life, you can never be the same again. The memories of the experience that you went through during your interlude with insanity must remain with you and always haunt your waking and sleeping moments. You will always be looking over your shoulders, checking yourself and thinking, when will it happen again? When will you be sucked in again?

The eyes that look out at the world and at people are not the same eyes that viewed the world before. There is now hesitancy and uncertainty, if not a little fear in that gaze. Experience has taught you something about the nature of the human animal and the dark side

hidden within. You have experienced directly the uncertainty and unpredictability of life and your lack of control over it.

I had returned. But perhaps only a part of me had returned. Part of me was still out there, roaming that distant world, a part that I could never reclaim. I was a dreamer, living in a dream, who awakes to find himself part of another dream. And like a cork on a river, without roots or any solid weight to anchor me, I floated down the river of life, bustled this way and that by the currents that moved me.

I wandered through the streets of the major cities of the world – New York, Sydney, London, Bonn and Moscow – a shadow amongst the shadows of men. There were no roots to tie me down. I was a drifter. To support myself I took temporary jobs – not in anything related to my profession, but unskilled work. I did stints as a waiter, painted houses and sold products.

I stayed in one place long enough to adjust to the novel experience and circumstances, but never more than three to four months. When the weight of this new reality started to suffocate me, threatening to pin me to the ground and crush me, then I grew restless and was off traveling again. Money was not a problem. I still had a few hundred thousand dollars stashed away in a bank account, but I never touched this. I used the money that I had saved to buy my ticket to the next place.

I began to search off the beaten track, traveling to remote, isolated enclaves, where modern civilization was only a rumor.

Scattered throughout the globe lies the last remaining refuges of nature, small isolated places, little havens of security and remoteness, protected from the onslaught of modern civilization by their remoteness and smallness. Their existence hangs on a thread, threatening to be overwhelmed at any time by the human tide of progress. These little islands are the last fortresses of an earth under siege.

I was drawn to these places more and more. They answered the echoes that came from deep within, with silence and tranquility. Removed from the hustle and bustle of the city, nature dreamed softly, a dream so deep that it was closer to sleep.

One day, when I hitched a ride in a small country town in Southern Africa, a farmer offered me a farm job. Having nothing better to do, I

accepted. We traveled along a dirt track, through a mountainous region. Eventually, we came to a small valley. This seemed to be the only farm for miles.

“This farm is surrounded on all sides by a nature reserve.” The farmer explained to me.

We passed a small dam, with ducks. The lane was lined with beautiful eucalyptus trees. In the meadow beyond I could see horses.

“I live here with my wife and my son,” the farmer explained. “We’re mainly subsistence farmers. We grow just enough vegetables and poultry to support ourselves. Our main product is grapes. We’re not a major producer in any way, but the soil here is good and we produce a fair amount.”

“And your son, where does he go to school?” I asked.

“He’ll be starting university next year. In the meantime, he’s completing some courses by correspondence.”

“And what about a social life?” I asked.

“We don’t miss it here. Our days are too full and complete. We almost never see any visitors. Twice a week we go into town for supplies and we have some friends who come and visit us occasionally.”

“And don’t you get lonely out here, isolated like this? Isn’t it dangerous?”

“Not at all. The real danger is in populated areas. We are too far away from any major towns to be bothered by prowlers. Besides, we live a very simple life. There is nothing really to take here.”

“Don’t you miss all the trapping of civilization – TV, restaurants, clubs etc.?”

“Not in the least.” The farmer shook his head.

We’d arrived at the farmhouse, a quaint little 18th century style house with a porch. The farmer’s wife was sitting on a couch on the porch, while two kittens were playing with woolen balls by her feet.

I heard the sound of barking and a large brown dog came up to me and sniffed my leg.

“That’s just Peter. You don’t need to be afraid. He won’t bite.”



That evening, as I sat out on the porch with my host, drinking beer and looking up at the night sky, I at last felt at peace with myself. The world of the Master seemed far from me. It could never touch me again.

“So, you were in computers?” the farmer asked, more of a statement than a question.

“Yes, that’s right. But I’ve given it up now.”

“I recognized someone from the computer industry the moment I saw you. You just have the look. I gave it up myself a few years ago. The money I’d earned enabled me to buy the farm and put down a substantial amount in the bank for the future. So I don’t foresee money ever being a great problem again.”

“Don’t you regret it?” I asked. “The challenges, the energy, the money?”

The farmer took a moment to reply.

“No. No regrets whatsoever. It was a conscious decision to choose this lifestyle. After working for a few years in the artificial environment and hype of Silicon Valley, I simply got fed up with it. So I bought this place and have never looked back since then. Anyway, the reason I’m telling you this is that you’re welcome to stay here and help out for as long as you need to.”

And so I stayed.

The years passed. Eventually, I bought my own farm in an area not too far away and raised pigs and sheep. I was happy.

## JULIA

I remember the day I offered her a ride in the van, on the way back from town to the farm. It was drizzling and visibility was poor because of the mist. She was wearing a thick, blue raincoat with a hood that covered her head and prevented me from seeing her face. She was dressed like a typical hiker with a big rucksack on her back. As I passed she raised her thumb for a hitch. I nearly missed her and would have passed on without stopping, except at the last moment I looked in the rear-view mirror and saw her wave. It took a few moments for me to register that this was a girl on her own, on an isolated stretch of the road in bad weather. Perhaps she needed help. I slammed on the breaks and stopped. I was about a hundred meters ahead of her and it took her a few minutes to catch up.

She came over to the window. I rolled down the window. “Hello, need a ride?” I asked, with a smile.

She smiled back. I still could not see her face very clearly, since she kept the hood up to keep out the rain. “Yes, that’s really kind of you. I appear to be lost.”

“Where are you heading?”

“To the nature reserve. I must have taken the wrong turning somewhere.”

“Get in the car. It’s pouring.” I opened the door and she went round the other side and stepped quickly into the car, slamming the door shut.

“Whew! That’s some weather. I think I’m soaked from head to foot!”

“The entrance to the reserve is about ten miles back,” I said. “You must have missed it in this weather.”

“Oh,” she replied, disappointed.

“Don’t worry. You’re not going to be able to achieve much hiking in this type of weather. My farm is a few miles ahead. You can dry out and grab a bite to eat. I have a spare bedroom if you want to stay over. I’ll give you a ride to the reserve tomorrow morning.”

“Okay, thanks.” She lowered her cape and turned to look at me. I sensed her eyes on me as I drove, but did not turn to face her, as I was trying to concentrate on the road in the poor visibility. Her voice seemed somehow familiar, as though it was someone from my past, but for the moment, I couldn’t place it.

We drove in silence.

“You seem familiar to me,” she said suddenly, “have we ever met before?”

“Could be. What’s your name, where are you from?”

“You can call me Julia. I’m from Canada.”

“I knew a girl called Julia once,” I replied wistfully.

“Oh, where is she now?”

“She’s dead.”

“I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay. Never mind. What brings you to this part of the world?” I asked.

“I’m looking for something different, unspoiled, with few people around. I needed to get away from the rat race for a while,” she replied.

“I can identify with that.”

“Wait. I’ve got it.” She snapped her finger. “I know who you are now. I saw you once on television, I’ve forgotten the name.”

“Greg.”

“You owned this 3-D company and then somebody died and there was this scandal.”

“That’s right.”

“Wow. And here you are, in the middle of nowhere. It must have taken something big to bring you out here.”

We went up over a hill, and then round a bend. In the valley below, nestled between the mountains, lay my farm. “The farm’s just up ahead,” I said. “We should be there in a few minutes.”

She wiped her hands on the window to clear away the mist and stare out into the dusk. “It’s beautiful. You’re very lucky to live in a place like this.”

“Yes. I am a lucky person to live out here,” I replied.

“It must be lonely, living out here all by yourself. You’re not married are you?”

“Not yet!” I smiled.

“You just haven’t found the right girl.”

“Something like that.”

The farmhouse was in sight. I turned off the dirt road and went down my driveway, passed the horses and water tank. I slowed the car, pulled to a halt and turned off the engine. I handed her the keys.

“Here’s the key to the front door. Go inside and make yourself at home, I’m going to bring in the groceries.”

She took the keys and raced through the downpour for the door. I opened the car door and went round to the back to take out the groceries. It took me three journeys to unload everything and bring it into the kitchen.

I took off my muddy boots and raincoat. Julia had left her wet boots and raincoat on the kitchen table, so I hung them up for her and went through to the living room. She wasn’t there.

I heard the sound of running water coming from the bathroom. “Everything okay?” I shouted out.

“Yes. I’m just having a hot shower and putting on some dry clothes,” she shouted back.

“Okay. I’ll make some supper in the meantime.” I went back to the kitchen and cut some vegetables and put it into a pot with the chicken. I added a few spices, then put on the lid and came back to sit in the living room.

She was waiting for me. She sat reading a book, her long brown hair flowing over her face and covering it – a frail, slim girl dressed in a long blue cotton dress and blue sandals. She looked up directly at me and moved the hair away from her eyes. “Hello Greg,” she said.

It was the face of Julia. The Julia I had known, with the beautiful sad green eyes, delicate nose and cherry red lips.

My face turned white and my whole body trembled. “Julia! You’ve come back to me!” I whispered in a choking voice.

She stood up in alarm. “Greg, are you okay?”

Looking into her green eyes, I felt rooted to the spot. The world was spinning.

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She came up to me, took me by my hand and led me gently to a chair. “Sit down, relax. You look like you’ve seen a ghost.” She put her hand on my forehead, to gauge my temperature. I felt the cool, soft fingers and smelt her perfume as she leaned forwards. “You’re hot. You may have a fever. Lie back. Let me fetch you a glass of water.”

She went through to the kitchen and I lay with my eyes closed. I saw the sad eyes of the other Julia, as I had seen her in the desolate lands and as she had appeared to me on other occasions in the world of the Master. Had she come back to me across the seas of time? Was this the same Julia I’d known, or was my strong need and imagination driving me towards comparing this girl with the other Julia?

She came back with the glass of water, touched my shoulder and held the glass out for me to drink.

“Thanks,” I said.

“No problem. The chicken’s still cooking. Relax. I’ll make the supper. It’s the least I can do.” She smiled, looking into my eyes and sat down cross-legged on the carpet next to me. “So this Julia you knew, she must have really been something. You really loved her.”

“Yes. More than anyone else I’ve ever known.”

“That’s deep. How did she die?”

“There was an operation. It wasn’t successful.”

“That’s a shame. She must have been really special.”

“She was... I don’t know how to say this... kind of made for me.”

“That type of love comes maybe once in a lifetime. It’s destiny,” Julia replied.

I smiled at her, wondering what she’d think if I told her the full story. Better not. She’d probably run straight out of the door. “Do you think us meeting like this is destiny?” I asked her.

“May be. Let me go check if the chicken is ready.”

She was in the kitchen for a while and when she came back she laid the table with cutlery and a bottle of wine and lit some candles. I sat watching her.

“Come sit down,” she called out to me. “I’m going to fetch the chicken.”

We ate in silence for the most part, looking into each other’s eyes, but it was not an uncomfortable silence. It was the same type of silence I’d often shared with the other Julia. It was the silence of two people at peace with each other.

“Do you believe that love can transcend death?” I asked her. We’d finished our main course and were on to the jelly and ice cream she’d fetched from the fridge.

“I don’t know,” she replied thoughtfully. “Do you mean, like in reincarnation?”

“Something like that. Imagine that you knew somebody in another world, or another lifetime, and then suddenly, this person comes back to you again.”

“That’s really deep.”

We continued to eat in silence. Afterwards, I helped her take away and wash the dishes and we sat drinking coffee and listening to the rain.

“It sounds like we’re going to be washed out tomorrow. I don’t know if the rain will stop,” I said to her. “Are you in a hurry to get to the nature reserve tomorrow?”

“No, there’s no hurry,” she replied.

That night, I lay sleepless in my bed, looking up at the ceiling in the dark and thinking about Julia – both Julia’s. The longing and desire in me was strong, but did she feel the same way about me?

In the middle of the night, the door opened and I heard her come into the room. She reached out in the dark to feel her way and her hands encountered my head. She moved back the bed sheets and climbed into the bed beside me, curling her legs around my legs and placing her head on my chest.

“I felt attracted towards you from the moment I saw you, Greg. It’s as though I’ve known you all my life,” she whispered in my ear, kissing me gently and stroking my hair. I responded by folding my arms around her and kissing her back.

“I love you Julia. I have always loved you.”

“Shush.” She kissed my lips.

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It was raining heavily the next morning. Julia stayed for a long time. She went away for a while and then came to live with me permanently. We were married and she was pregnant within six months.

I had found a wife, one who resembled the other Julia very much. We had two children.

I could not speak about the events of the past. Not to my wife and not even to myself.

## THE VALLEY

In my dreams I always return to the same place, a place of beauty and peace. I hear the sounds of the sea and taste the fresh salty breeze. I walk over a narrow rope bridge, between two cliffs, while below me the water from the river rushes out, churning white waves that head for the open sea in the distance. I follow a nature trail that leads through the dense shrubbery, climbing upwards into the mountains, with an occasional glimpse of the sea through breaks in the green foliage. It is drizzling and I can hear the faint pitter-patter of droplets of water, trailing down the leaves and gently touching my hands and face. The air is refreshingly clear and sweet.

I hear the rustle of leaves in the forest, as little forest animals scurry about their activities. Occasionally, I may catch a glimpse of a squirrel, scampering up a tree or running across the path, or see a bird take sudden flight into the air.

In my arms I carry my daughter, while my son runs on ahead, exited and eager to explore. Julia walks besides me, admiring the view, her face red and flushed from the exercise, her beautiful long hair wet and dripping.

I smell the fresh, earthy smell of the wet forest, the smell of fertile soil and organic life, mixed together with the fresh, salty ocean air.

At other times, I go to this place with Julia and we take off our clothes in the rain, and make love on the misty beach to the sound of the waves. The tide surges over our feet as we lie sprawled naked in

the sand. And then the cool, salty water covers us, and the sudden shock of the cold water draws us closer together. As we hug for warmth and her nipples harden from the cold, I kiss her moist mouth with passion.

Then we are submerged by the waves and my passion for Julia becomes part of my love for the sea – the wild, free and untamed sea.

Afterwards, we get dressed and walk along the empty beach, splashing our feet in the water, jumping from rock to rock, stooping down occasionally to pick up shells, or sitting arm in arm on a rock, watching the waves lapping rhythmically at the shore.

At noon, we stop for a picnic. We munch the small sandwiches that Julia has prepared for us. We return home in the evening, relaxed and happy, our skins glowing a healthy red, our faces shining in peace and contentment.

In my dreams, and sometimes in waking moments of quiet, I return again and again to this place of peace.

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In the end love is all that you are left with on the dark road through eternal night. It is perhaps the only thing that can transcend the abyss.

It is the act of love that reaches across the gulf of the individual's loneliness and confrontation with death. And when we make love, new life is created, nourished and protected. Our love for our children enables a new generation to grow and flourish, ensuring the continuation of human life. We will live on through our children and the love with which we nurture them will last for generations to come, as they in turn, grow up, to give their children the same love and instill in them their values towards life.

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Greg put down his pen and sat thinking. His story was nearly finished. He paused for a moment, then phrased the final words.

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My children are grown and I am at last feel free to write down in this journal the memories of those distant days, when I traveled to another world, or at least imagined this to be so. I write this so that my wife



will know who her husband was and tell our children about their father.

Take it as you will, a true story or a mad dream. I close this account, hoping never to have to encounter the world of the Master again.

Life is a circle, and we are always returning to the place from which we embarked on our journey. Seasons, days and events repeat themselves in a continual cycle of death and rebirth, winter and summer. My journey has eventually brought me around to the place from where I began.

Love transcends everything, even death. In the end that is all that we have to hold on to in this world. I love my wife and my children. I will always love you.

Sincerely,

Greg Stewart.

## ENDINGS

Greg put down his pen and stood up with a yawn. He had been writing for almost the entire night. He stepped out onto the porch for some fresh air. Breathing in deeply the sweet, fresh smell of the night, he looked up at the stars. *I am finally free!* he thought. After all these years of hiding from myself, fearing that the Master would come to take me back. *At last I am truly free.*

The glowing stars far above beckoned, calling out to him with their silent music. They were the eyes of the universe, watching over him. A slight breeze made him shiver and close his jacket. This universe was a strange place, a place that held many wonderful things – some open to mankind to discover and some hidden from his view. It was a place not so much to be feared as respected. Greg felt that he had made his peace with the world and was no longer afraid of what the future might hold.

In the vast stretches of time and space, who knew what was real and what belonged to the realm of imagination and dreams?

He was about to return to the house, when he heard a voice whisper in the wind.

*“Yes Greg, now you are finally free. Poor Greg. How you must hate me.”*

“Who is this?” Greg’s voice shook as he spoke.

*“You know who I am,”* the voice whispered back. *“I created you Greg. I brought you here and I have come to take you back to that place from which you are fleeing.”*

“No. It can’t be true. Who are you? You’re just a figment of my imagination. You’re not real. This is my life – the real life, and this is where I’ve been for the last twenty years. My life is here! Anything else is madness.”

*“But Greg, don’t you see – perhaps you are a fragment of my imagination. And this life which you consider to be so real is only a passing moment, the last twenty years a few meager pages in my story.”*

“Then you are the Master?”

*"I am what I am, Greg."*

"Then leave me, leave me here. I beg you, if you have the power to do it. What difference does it make to you?"

*"It makes no difference Greg. I would like to see you living in happiness. But even I don't have the power to allow you to continue. Surely you must see that all stories must come to an end."*

"Then what are you going to do? Assign me to being a string of bites and bytes in your digital world?"

*"You were always inside me. You never escaped. It was an illusion that I chose to create for you. You were never free to live out an independent existence beyond me. I am your creator. Perhaps when this chapter lies closed and the computer is cold, in the eternities of space that lies between the written lines, you are free to live out your existence as you choose."*

"You are a lie!" Greg cried out in rage. "Everything that you represent is a lie."

*"Hush now Greg. It is time for you to rest. The dark stars of eternal night are calling. Come. Who knows, when once more you have crossed over, who knows what other roles may be assigned to you."*

Tears streamed down Greg's cheeks. His hands gripped the doorknob, but try as he might, he could not release his grip on the doorknob, could not open the door and go inside. A force within, greater than the desire to go back inside and shut himself up in his comfortable room, in his warm bed with his wife, compelled him to turn and face the stars. It was an intense longing, a yearning that he could not explain.

*"You are truly free Greg. There are a thousand other lives waiting to be lived. A thousand other moments of happiness and sadness to be experienced. And you will always be there, in whatever other part I may create."*

*"Come now. Let us go gently into the night."*

