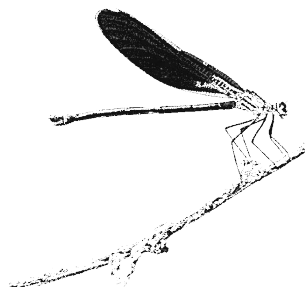


hypnagothic

#one



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The Big Opportunity™

Sean Gois

My chest gripped my heart like a vise, tightening a little with each passing minute. My heart pounded back in self defense. It was the first day of my Big Opportunity™. I was still in disbelief. They picked me? *Me?* There must have been a thousand more qualified machinists who were desperate for this kind of loot. But they liked my sample part. The interview had the usual dumb questions—tell me a time when, blah blah blah—but it was mostly about the test. Here they don't care about credentials and resumes and certificate of I-took-an-online-class. Did you hit your tolerances? Did you do it on time? That's all they cared about. That and whether you can pass their unusually thorough background check. I got lucky though, if I'm being honest. The test part they had me make was so similar to one I had recently machined that I already had the strategy figured out. I looked like a genius, which only made me feel like more of a fraud.

Have you ever worked at a high security facility before? The badges, security checks, cameras, and escorts were unnerving, and if you've ever have worked at such a place then you know what I'm talking about, except if you haven't worked *here*, then you really don't, because this place took it to a whole different level. I would have minimal contact with my supervisor, I was informed. I was to make good parts, send them down the conveyor, chute thing, and do it again. If there was a problem, he would come see me. These lunatics even locked me into my machine shop. Don't get me wrong, I had a key, but the door was always to be locked. And even the key was weird as hell, like everything else there. I would never have guessed that it was a key just by looking at it. It looked like a sample part a machinist might have made, with random shapes and what not, but it fit into the strange lock and the door opened.

The only one that greeted me on my first day was a big block of titanium and some technical drawings, along with an expected completion date and time. This one looked... complicated. And with such tight tolerances. *They're not gonna ease me into this*, I realized. And I was supposed to finish it—*by the day's end? What the hell did I get myself into?*

I ran my first operation in one mill and, while it was running, I made my second op fixture in the other. I had to make use of every resource I could, simultaneously, if I was to hit the deadline. I was used to juggling machines, but nothing quite like this. The vise in my chest gripped tighter and I wondered if I was gonna keel over right then and there. By the time five o'clock rolled around, I had just finished up my basic inspection. I didn't have the time to do it properly—I just barely hit the deadline—but I was feeling confident that all dimensions were within spec. All except for one that asked two holes be concentric within two thousandths of an inch. This was not only difficult to hit, but nearly impossible to inspect. I had to just trust my setup and pass the part down the Finished Parts Conveyor™.

Working alone was strange. I was used to goofing around and bouncing ideas off of other machinists. But as weird as being alone was, passing a part down a conveyor, not even passing it off to another person, was stranger. All in the name of security. I would never know what the part was for, and I probably wouldn't even get any feedback. At least that's what I expected, but when I walked into the shop on day two, I was greeted by a wide eyed man, if you could call that a greeting.

“What the hell did you do?”

“I'm sorry, is there a problem?”

“If I'm here there's a problem, and *you* should know. Did you not inspect the part after you butchered it?”

“Umm...” I was assuming this man was my supervisor, but he never did introduce himself. “This was kind of a tall order for my first day. I mean, I'm just getting used to the shop and—”

“What about this job is confusing to you? Everything you need is in your tooling cabinet, the shop is immaculate, cleaned nightly, and the machine, I was told, is one you should already know how to run?”

He was right, that was a bullshit excuse. The real reason, I didn't want to say. But I felt cornered. “To be perfectly honest with you, it was kind of a difficult part. Not that I can't do it!” I was

sweating now, even though the shop stayed a cool sixty seven degrees. “I just needed a bit more time. One day for that part seems a bit—”

“It can be done in a day. It can be done in LESS than a day. The question is, are *you* the one to do it?” And he walked out, inserting his own strange key into his door, then slamming it behind him.

Damn, I thought. I'm not gonna make it a week.

The day ended similarly to the one before, with a rush inspection and a prayer. Machining went well but I was even less confident this time. It was a perpendicularity tolerance that had me nervous on this one, but I was relieved the next day to see nothing but a fresh block and some fresh drawings. It was a longer deadline this time. Twenty seven working hours.

The days continued like this and each part was stranger and more difficult than the next. These were some of the most radical part designs I'd ever seen. *What the hell are these things?* My imagination went wild trying to picture the sort of machine that would use these parts, but I couldn't make sense of it. It looked like it was all a part of some high level engineering project. I've made plenty of automotive, aerospace, and medical parts in my day, but none of them compared to what was coming through this place. Different as they all were, they all shared similar design aesthetics, so I assumed they were all part of some crazy assembly. Some technology that was supposed to “change the world”, I imagined.

I didn't see my supervisor for weeks before getting chewed out again for a mistake. It was another few months before it happened again. Each time I was certain I was about to be fired. I mean, the guy threatened it constantly. But despite the crippling stress that was eating away at me, I kept coming. I needed the money and I was making more of it than I ever dreamed of. But I was, if not drowning in the difficulty, barely keeping my head above the waterline. Nearly six months in I missed my first deadline.

If I haven't made it clear before, let me say it now. I was doing a damn good job. The best work of my career. Easily. I was doing things that I didn't even think could be done, and faster than I thought possible. I'm not sure how I made it nearly six months before missing a deadline. And when I left without putting the expected part on the Finished Parts Conveyor™, I was expecting to be ambushed by my supervisor the next day. You can imagine my confusion when I walked into

the shop and saw nothing but a new block for the next job. My unfinished part was gone. I carried on as if nothing happened. I was waiting for the hammer to drop. It never did.

I couldn't stop thinking about that one. *If I missed a deadline so critical that it wasn't even worth me finishing, then I should have been chewed out. Or was the next job more important?*

I never found out. Just kept on doing what I could. After the first missed deadline, I missed a few more. I was getting tired. Sloppy. But nothing ever happened. *What is this place?* That should have lowered my stress but it had the opposite effect. *They know.* Someone was clearing up my unfinished parts when the deadline passed, and someone must have been wondering where the finished part was. Maybe they cared more about failed parts than missed deadlines? Perhaps the cost of a bad part was greater? *Who knows when they don't tell me anything.* So I chose to focus more on quality than speed. I would make sure only good parts were placed on the conveyor, while bad parts were kept until someone cleared them for me. Seemed like a good idea. It wasn't.

The verbal assaults were nothing compared to this. I walked in the door and was greeted with a punch in the ribs. One of them cracked. Somehow I stayed on my feet and stared that psychopath down as he berated me for not finishing the part. He left the shop through his door, again with his strange key. *I'm done, I decided. This crossed a line. This man needs to be arrested.*

When I arrived home there was a man waiting for me. The same one who hired me.

"I'm sorry," he said. "We fired him."

"What the hell was that?" I demanded, struggling to walk.

"We brought you something." He handed me an envelope and I opened it.

My jaw dropped when I saw the dollar amount added to my check. "What's this?"

"For your sacrifice," he said, smiling. "Also," he lowered his voice, "for your silence."

And you better believe I took the money. That's why I was there to begin with. The ribs would heal just fine. And that crazy supervisor would be gone. So I went back, with a new spring in my

step, metaphorically speaking since I was in no shape to be bouncing around. My ribs were killing me, but I had a smile on my face.

But my joy did not last long. The next guy was a bigger prick than the one before. He chewed me out constantly. The man was never happy. And I was pretty sure at least some of them were good parts. *Who's inspecting these*, I started wondering. The stress started affecting me at home. My sleep was getting worse until I found myself unable to sleep at all. I may have drifted in and out a bit, but it was hard to say. I was losing my grip. I was at the end of my rope. I was stretched thin.

That's when I finally crawled through...

I never liked working weekends but the pay made me overlook a lot of things, so when they had me come in and work one saturday every six weeks, I accepted it. No big deal. The usual muffled sounds that pulsed through the walls were gone on those days. I figured there mustn't be too many working, not that I had any way of knowing for sure. It seemed like my best shot at learning something without getting caught.

It was a tight fit, but I made it. The Finished Parts Conveyor™ was not made for a man to enter, but there I was, wiggling through a long, dark tunnel conveyor system. It seemed to go for some time. Most confusing were all the forks, where one conveyor transitioned to two. There was no part sorting system in place either. It seemed the parts would just randomly split one way or the other. There were also areas where two conveyors became one. It was like a damn maze in there. I chose to keep the simplest route, so as not to get lost, but I got all mixed up anyway. I looked back but couldn't remember the way. *What the hell was I thinking?*

I was going to lose my job, or worse. This place gave me the creeps. I should have left when I had the chance. I turned around and attempted to find my way back again but after a few turns I couldn't tell which way I was going. I was trying my best not to panic as I squeezed through the cramped tunnels. When I heard an ambient noise and a strange light ahead, I got excited, though I wasn't sure what I would say if I saw someone. I tried to prepare myself, but nothing could prepare me for what I saw next.

The conveyor ended in a massive room, much bigger than the shop. It was surrounded by conveyors that dropped parts into it. I cringe to even say those words, but you heard me

correctly. *Dropped* in. I almost fell down myself, but managed to grab onto some pipes coming out of the wall. Below me was a massive pile of machined parts. Parts I'd made, and presumably parts other machinists made. All of them looked about the same. All were unceremoniously dumped into a big metal bin. I thought back to all the meticulous work I put into each part. The careful setups and inspection. Then the scolding I'd get when parts didn't match spec—*didn't match spec? They can't even be checking these.*

I hopped down, climbing over the parts and into the room. A closer look revealed several bins around the room with piles of different parts, not even sorted, dinged up from dropping on top of each other. The piles had conveyors of their own that led the parts into a massive melting pot. That's right, the parts were melted down and formed into large bars of steel. The giant bars were then fed into saws where they were cut into blocks. And those blocks... I crawled through the conveyor where they went, and it led down a more sophisticated conveyor. It had sorting stations with labels on them. I saw a familiar ID and followed the path all the way back to my shop. Right to the Incoming Material Conveyor™. It was a closed loop. The whole operation was fake. Why were they doing this? Why were they yelling at me? Was this some sick game?

A normal person might have left at that point, but I was addicted to the pay. I was finally starting to dig my way out of debt, and I still had a long way to go. So I kept working. But now the stress was less. The criticisms I received had nothing to do with my parts, so why should I care? None of this made any sense, but at least I didn't have to worry about tolerances. At first I kept making parts as requested, only I skipped all of the in-process and post inspection. *Who needs it?* But soon I decided I'd just make the kind of parts that I wanted to. I started designing my own things, things that I knew I could complete in time, and put them down the conveyor. No one would know anyway, so who cares? I made characters and fun geometries, tried new machining techniques, and started making things for me. For my own amusement. The cool thing about it was that the more I did it the better I got at machining. I started dreaming of what I might make even when I wasn't at work. I became completely obsessed with it. New shapes, and geometries, and artwork.

I started designing plants, only they weren't plants you'd find in the natural world. They were plants that came to me in my dreams, both night dreams and daydreams. And I would machine them beautifully, if I can be so bold as to say so. I hated having to put them down the Parts

Conveyor™ but I couldn't leave them in the shop. They'd just be taken anyway by— someone. At least this way no one would see.

I continued with this strange life all the way through to my one year work anniversary, which fell on a Friday. I arrived to see my supervisor waiting to greet me. "Congratulations," he told me, and shook my hand. I couldn't stand the guy but at least he never hit me. He gestured for me to take a seat across from him. He said it was time for my annual review. Kind of weird to be reviewed by a guy who I rarely see, and when I do it's never a kind word. And it was weird. I listened to the compliments and the criticisms, all of which I knew were bullshit. I might have fallen for it if I didn't know better, but the notes were just generic enough to fit any machinist ever. He asked me for feedback and so I went for it. *Fuck it.*

"You've never inspected my parts," I said, watching his expression closely.

"Of course not. That's not my job."

"You've never even seen a part, have you?"

"Again, not my job. But the metrology department keeps me apprised of all your work, good and bad, and gives me the report."

"Metrology, huh? So someone's inspecting them?"

"Of course, what are you going on about?"

"Listen. I know this is all top secret, but I know for a fact no one is inspecting my parts."

"If this job is too stressful for you then I think you'd better quit."

"I think I'll be okay."

"Listen, I won't write this in your review, as a courtesy, because this kind of talk would raise some red flags. You'd better get ahold of yourself. There are many other machinists who would kill to have your job."

He turned to leave, pulling out that strange object he used to unlock the door. After the door closed behind him, I examined the keyhole, if you could call it that. Very odd shape. Unusual features. The lock itself looked like it was of very high quality. It reminded me of the parts I had to make. Not the specific shape, but the style.

For that day I stopped with my latest flower art project and started on something different. It began with a long morning of inspection and reverse engineering. Some of the features were hard to measure but I was clever, and cleverer every day that I worked in the madhouse. By the end of the day I had my part. I walked over to the strange lock and inserted my new key. It fit. Perfectly.

CLICK.

The door opened, first try. I walked down the hall and into an office. Empty. Was this my supervisor's workspace? It was so tiny. And there was almost nothing here. On one wall was a chute with Incoming Inspection Reports Conveyor™ written on top. On the other wall was a chute with Outgoing Final Report Conveyor™ written on top. My supervisor's desk was just a table with a chair. No computer. Just a pen. *Is this man blinder than me?*

I didn't use the key again until the next time I worked on a Saturday. The place was quiet as it usually was on those days. I used my key and went back into the supervisor's office. Once there I opened the Incoming Inspection Reports Conveyor™ chute and crawled in. This chute was a tighter fit, and I panicked for a moment while squeezing through, but once I cleared the opening I found I had enough room to crawl. This one was not a maze like my Finished Parts Conveyor™. It was a straight path into...

This room had only a computer and a printer. The printer dropped papers onto the conveyor. The computer was on, oddly enough. This room had no door. No regular sized door, anyway. It appeared to have an access panel, but it didn't appear that anyone came in there regularly. I sat at the computer and tapped the keyboard. It turned on. Not even a password requirement? *For the most top secret place ever?* Then I saw the screen...

AUTO INSPECTION REPORT GENERATOR™ Next report in: fifteen hours twelve minutes forty two seconds

I looked at the computer clock. The report was set to generate early next morning, before I started work.

The next morning I came in early. *Would it raise any red flags? Would my supervisor be in that early?* Whatever. I was doing it anyway. And when I used my key and entered my supervisor's office, I was relieved to see his chair empty. I squeezed through the chute and made it to the computer room with minutes to spare. And when the clock hit zero, the printer whirled, and there dropped my inspection report. One column of nominal dimensions, then a tolerance, then the "results" that could only have been fabricated. The conveyor turned on, to take the sheet away, but I held onto it, a bit too tightly. When I finally made my way back and squeezed out the chute, my supervisor greeted me with a gasp and a look of horror.

All fear had left me by this point. This was no man to be intimidated by. He was a clueless cog, same as me. Maybe more so since I started exploring. But what to do with him? I let him talk first, his desperate attempt to lay into me having none of the intended effect. I laughed at him, I couldn't help myself, and then I told him to sit down. He did. And he looked at me with the wide eyes of a confused, terrified dog.

"Don't worry, the inspection report is good this time. Lucky me." I dropped the slightly crumpled piece of paper onto his desk. "But these numbers aren't real. I haven't been making the parts I'm supposed to for months."

I explained everything to him. I held back no detail. It amused me to do it, and this place had enough secrets. I wasn't going to add to it. He was stunned. Speechless. And that from a man who never seemed to struggle for words every time I was unlucky enough to encounter him. The man confessed to me that he only yelled because he was yelled at by his boss when his job was threatened. He called this the worst job he's ever had, but the pay was too good. *Sound familiar?*

"What do you think the point is?" I asked. It was an hour later and I was finishing my whiskey and waving at the bartender to bring me another.

"I have no idea." He didn't look like the same person anymore. He looked fragile. Human. He was drinking the same as me. It was a whiskey kind of night. "An experiment?" he guessed.

“If that was the case there would be cameras, and someone would know we talked.”

“Maybe they know, and this is all part of it.”

“A multi-billion dollar corporation to run pointless experiments on people?”

I shot down his suggestion but had nothing better. A money laundering operation? A government front? Those made even less sense. They could just run a normal business and actually profit. None of it added up.

“How are they paying our salaries? I mean...” I trailed off, looking down at my drink, as if the whiskey might provide me some answers that I wasn’t smart enough to come up with on my own.

“They pay us so damn well. I shouldn’t complain, but what the hell?”

This began the most unlikely friendship of my life. The man I hated had become my friend. My best friend. We shared something no one else did. He made me promise not to tell anyone else. We both had it explained to us what would happen if we gave away company secrets. Federal prison was mentioned a time or two during the onboarding process. I was less cautious than he was, but I agreed. He did at least have some appetite for risk. We weren’t supposed to meet outside of work, or even talk to each other if we accidentally encountered each other, but we started hanging out regularly. We vented about work, but it went even beyond that. He was actually a cool guy. He played music, something I dabbled in but never quite threw myself into. He started teaching me to play piano, and I brought him out on mountain bike trails. He didn’t have a family, same as me. No wife, no kids, not that I didn’t want them.

Was this a hiring pattern? Loners?

It was another year before we hatched our plan. We tried to be as careful and smart as we could, but these things rarely go as planned. We sat in front of his house late that night, just watching. We were all set to go when we decided, rather wisely I think, to grab him in the morning instead. The daylight is terrifying to the hardened criminal but it comes with its own problems. People are on alert at night since that’s when bad stuff is expected to happen. I think the criminals like the darkness because they fear the light shining on their deeds, in a spiritual sense, but we had none of those reservations. We felt righteous.

So we grabbed the man in the morning, stuffed him into the van, and took him to my house.

You'd think the CEO of a company as big as ours might have armed guards, but that stuff must only exist in movies. We brought him into the sunroom because it's the nicest room in my house, we're not monsters, and we asked him if he wanted anything to drink. The man asked for an espresso, the sonofabitch. I made him some coffee. *It will have to do, your highness.* Then we told him everything we knew. Everything. And he denied it. All of it. Which was stupid. We knew. Was he scared of us recording him?

I assured him we were not recording, and he swore that he was telling the truth. We tried to get anything out of him but he wouldn't change his story, and let's face it, we weren't professional interrogators. So we improvised. I took his keys, which he was more than happy to share, and I drove to his house and took his car into work. I left my own van on the street. It was around the corner, but still, very sloppy. Like I said, we're not professionals.

I went to his office door, or at least the one that he said was his. He could have lied, but thank God he didn't, and I was able to gain entry. It's ironic, but because of the strict security, no one else could be there, so I was able to get in without anyone asking questions.

I walked into a large office. Very nice. It looked like an ancient sequoia was cut down just to make the massive desk. There was lots of space. Too much, even. Where was the computer? Maybe he used a laptop. *Damnit, there's literally nothing in here...* That's when I noticed the chutes.

UNSIGNED PAYCHECKS.

And next to that:

SIGNED

PAYCHECKS.

What the hell?

I caught mostly green lights on my way back, which was good because I was fired up and I didn't want to lose my righteous anger, which felt like a strong wind in my sails.

"What the hell is going on," I asked. "Where's your computer?"

He said he had none.

“You’re a glorified check signer? That’s it?” I didn’t remember getting so close to him, but before I knew what I was doing I had him by his collar and was holding him against the wall. That’s when I noticed the look in his eyes. The same look I had when I was yelled at by my supervisor. A look of worry mixed with confusion.

No way...

“Do you not know anything? Really? You’re the damned CEO!”

“I—” he looked terrified. “I’m a front. I take my orders, same as you.”

“But you must know *something*.”

“I’m only supposed to know what I need to.”

“But is that all you know?”

He hesitated.

“If you know something, then say it.”

“I don’t really. It’s just—” he rubbed sweat from his brow and leaned back in his chair.
“Speculation. That’s all it is.”

“Well please. Speculate.”

“It’s just that... I don’t think our company is that different from the others.”

His salary should have put him in a very different class than us, but he joined our group, now three strong. He was one of us, in the end. We didn’t quit our jobs. We just made the most of it. I worked on my artwork, my supervisor started writing music and ignoring the inspection reports. He filled out his portion, nonsense, really, and carried on. The CEO signed the checks and otherwise spent his time whittling.

It was years later when the company was sold. The CEO was fired by a letter on his desk. Shortly after, my supervisor and I were let go. The company was in the news for this huge transfer of power. They were considered one of our country's biggest assets and the news people were alluding to all kinds of important aerospace and medical work coming out of there.

I thought it was odd, but somehow it all kept going. The world grew worse every day but companies like that seemed inexplicably to grow.

As for the three of us? We all moved to the north, together, where by luck, or a gift from God, we all met our wives. It all felt so surreal, which means "beyond real" if you look at the root words, and that is to say, more real than anything else. The world was going to hell but we had somehow stumbled into our own slice of heaven. For now at least.

Epilogue

Over a thousand miles away, the president sat in his private office, waiting for the report to come through. Thoughts of war made him uneasy, but he knew that these sorts of things were necessary. He thought of the day that he took the oath of office, and all of the pageantry that delighted him at the time, but by then he knew what this was, or at least he knew what it *wasn't*.

None of it made any sense to him, but he stopped wondering a long time ago. That was beyond his pay grade.

I get to live in a great house, fly around the world, and play golf. I could do much worse than that!

Finally, the report came in. It had the usual bullet points followed by the words he would recite to the public. It looked like war was off the table.

Thank God, he thought, though he was praying, not to the real God, as he might have supposed, but to a nameless, faceless mystery.



An Essay on Fickleness

Laeth

Mercurial people have the hardest time getting to the earth. Since the voyage, regardless of where it starts, takes approximately nine months, there is plenty of time for the mercurial man or woman to change their mind, which, by their very nature, they do quite often and quite rapidly. Now, planetary provenance is not the only factor, of course. The germanic spirit, from whatever planet, and for example, is born on the earth above all others out of pure will, which is why the germanic family has been so well suited to aristocracy across the ages, and also, ironically, why the philosophical idea of thrownness arose among them and not, say, among the italians, who are much more easily lured into incarnation and find themselves on the earth oftentimes as a man finds himself on a filthy alleyway after a night of drunken excess, not only remembering nothing, but full of vague self loathing and guilt, or among the portuguese, who, as everyone knows, come to the earth out of resignation. Thus, for Wolfgang, a mercurial germanic, the problem was choice. No one could have enticed him into coming to the earth simply by making promises, no matter how sweet, that he hadn't previously examined carefully, and never would he have resigned himself to fate before having fought it by every means possible. And this careful consideration, so natural to his german spirit, added to his mercurial nature, and had thus far prevented him from being incarnate.

He was not, strictly speaking, indecisive. No, his problem was that his decisions changed from one extreme to the other so often as to never stick, and this applied to the whole spectrum of decisions a spirit could make, which are frankly much more limited than those a man or a woman can make when incarnate. Because his fickleness was not merely instinctive, but also due to his germanic spirit, and thus the product of extensive and careful investigation, when he changed his mind, he was totally convinced that the particular decision he had made, or the particular opinion he now held, was the right one, the only one, now and forever, even if that eternity lasted very little time indeed, which is how eternities sometimes behave. The problem was that soon the same analytical mind would raise doubts, and come up with arguments for the opposite position or decision, and

in no time, he would change his opinion, again, and sometimes not even remember that he held to the opposite just a few weeks, a few days, or even a few hours before.

Many times across the ages he had decided to incarnate on the earth, but he always, and as usual, changed his mind mid trip, utterly convinced it was not the right time or the right place, just as much as he had been convinced it was both a few days or weeks before. Finally, at the beginning of the twentieth century, he made not only a decision, for that was common, but a decision about that decision. No matter how many doubts he might have during the trip, regardless of how many contrary arguments he could conjure, irrespective of their logicalness and fairness, once he had embarked on the trip, he had decided now with the usual conviction, he would stick with it. And, to his credit, he did. But before that he had to decide where to be born. It is true that a germanic spirit cannot be born as a celt, or a roman, or a greek, or a zulu, but it can choose the place where the germanic family that will give birth to his germanic nature is. And germanic blood, in those early twentieth century days, was to be found all over europe, and also north america, as well as, in slightly smaller concentrations, elsewhere across the planet earth.

Here was a challenge for his fickleness, because, say he decided to be born as a german in germany, the most natural of choices of course, during the nine months it took him to reach the earth, he would start to consider that, perhaps, he should have chosen a less natural option, and go for a small germanic pocket of russia, or switzerland, or even north america. The choices were too numerous. In the end, with some sort of logic behind it, though it is hard for us as non germans to understand it, he decided that he would be born in the austro-hungarian empire, the reason being, presumably, that the empire was big, and if in the end he changed his mind, as it was likely to happen, it would be fairly easy to move across the vast lands of the empire and to become some other type of german while also remaining part of his homeland, in a way.

He also had to think about what kind of family to be born in. If he was to be born in a poor family, he reasoned, this would not be to his advantage, and in fact, would only stoke his mercurial nature, and so logically and as usual he went to the other extreme and decided to be born among royalty, or at least in a rich family. But soon doubts about this decision appeared, as was only expected. Too much wealth, just as much or more as too little, would provide him with too many opportunities for changing his mind, too many possibilities for him to choose from. And so, in the end, he chose to be born in a middle class family, neither rich nor poor, without prestige but

also without shame, and he chose one whose occupation was in an industry that promised to be not only stable but expand during the subsequent decades, lithography, and this he chose in part because he was intrigued by the method, and also because another part of all mercurial people, as everyone knows, is a fascination with, and inclination towards, writing, printing and all such related activities.

The year was nineteen eleven when he embarked on the journey, and one could say that, for him at least, the trip was mostly free of second guessing, partly because of his decision against changing his mind, and partly because he had carefully chosen the time and place and setting for his birth so as to give very few avenues for his mercurial nature to bubble up to the surface and start questioning everything until he could not help himself but change his mind. No, he held steadfast, against all odds, and early in the morning of the last day of the year, he began to be born. He came out feet first, which is fitting, and was almost fully out of his mother's womb when he remembered a conversation he had heard earlier that day, that the next year, a mere few hours away, was a leap year, and although it happened so fast, there was a whole discussion within his mind about how beneficial it would be to be born in such a year, that what his nature required was to take leaps of faith rather than examine every single decision and change his mind as he always did, and was even doing at that very moment, though somewhat unaware. And so, as he always did, he changed his mind and crawled back to his mother's womb, poor woman, until the clock struck midnight, then he came out, assured of himself, at least for the time being, january first nineteen twelve, a leap year.

As we all know, a spirit loses all memories of preincarnate life during the first years of its earthly abode. But nature is also independent of memory, and it came out for little Wolfgang early into his childhood. Perhaps it was because, so soon into his life on the earth, the great war started, and all the stability he had carefully chosen to partake in and to temper his nature disappeared. By the end of the war, there was no empire, he was a german in a foreign, no longer germanic land, and lithography, the family trade, was on the way out, replaced by newer and improved methods. Luckily for him, there are very few choices of importance that a child can make, most of them are made by the parents, and so his mercurial nature came out mostly in irrelevant details, what kind of toys did he want to play with, what kind of food did he prefer, and so on, as well as in the ease with which he learned how to read and write. Though his childhood was more impoverished than

his spirit had envisioned due to the awful events that had unfolded in Europe, both of his parents survived the war and the famines and the epidemics that swept across the continent, and so the real trouble for him would come later. Although maybe if fate or chance had forced his hand it would have been preferable, for it would have narrowed down the number of choices available to him. As it stood, the future was still wide open, and if one moment the adolescent Wolfgang was sure he wanted to be an army man and pursue the martial character of his Germanic spirit, in another he wanted to be a doctor and help those suffering from ills and aches, and then the next week he would change his mind again and wanted to be a man of letters, which of course as a mercurial man was his true calling, healing and fighting on the page and through the pen. And each week he would be utterly convinced of his destiny, and if anyone asked why this or why that he could justify his choice with the full force of his more than able intellect and the above average command of language that a nature like his guaranteed, providing logically constructed arguments for his decision of the day. But in fact it was even worse if someone did ask, for as soon as he laid out his carefully crafted reasons, he would start to doubt them, and to oppose them, and soon would go to the other extreme. When he was seventeen and able to act on his decisions, he happened to decide he wanted to become a priest, and the primary justification in his mind was that it was a profession that partook of all of the above characters previously considered, a priest is half soldier in the spiritual war, half doctor for the souls on earth, and half intellectual for it was through words that the priestly rites and doctrines came to life, and though there can never be more than two halves to one whole, the young Wolfgang felt precisely that he was made of many halves and no whole, and so ignored the illogical conclusion and pursued it, for a while.

His parents were Lutherans, but perhaps in an attempt to go against his nature, he chose to become Roman Catholic, the universal church, undivided, unlike him, maybe this would cure him. This troubled his parents, but at that age they were no longer in charge of his decisions, and thus his life soon spiralled out of control. He joined the seminary and not even a year into his studies to become a priest, and thus celibate, he fell in love with a woman. He declared his love for her with as much conviction as he had declared his love for God, and soon she became pregnant. He left the seminary and married, his son was born, and by the time the child began to speak, he had fallen out of love, and not only that, he hated his wife. The reason was that she had in fact been a temptress, a devil, Lilith herself, and dragged him away from the arms of God and church into her own, even though it was him who pursued her in the first place. Though he felt bad for the child,

he reasoned very carefully that a child raised by parents who hated each other would not fare very well, not very well at all, and so he left, again with questionable geometry, half due to this hairbrained conclusion, and half due to the fact that he hated his wife with a passion so great as he had once loved her, and half because he was now enthralled by a new political movement that was sweeping across europe, an so very german too, communism.

So he became a communist, and although he longed to be involved in terroristic activities, his true nature always came to the fore and so he dedicated most of his time to writing pamphlets defending the dictatorship of the proletariat and, even more emphatically, against religion, which he now felt to be the worst thing to ever happen to mankind, God being nothing more than a figment of poor imaginations, a soothing balm at best for the ills that plagued the common man, and at worst, the very chains that held humanity in slavery. But no sooner had he finished his final critique of religion and his defence of the communist ideology, his mind started to see there were flaws, fundamental flaws even, in the doctrine, and having heard of yet another political movement, this one even more german than the last, and after carefully considering its propositions, he decided to join them. With the help of his new group of comrades, he quickly reasoned back to religion, but not the one he had been born in, not even the one he adopted for a while, no, definitely not any variety of the morally slavish religion of the crucified man, now he exalted strength in body and mind, affirming life and vitality, the supremacy of the strong and the subjugation of the weak, and who could be stronger than those of germanic spirit and blood, the superior representatives of all that is valiant and noble and, especially, powerful.

He completely changed his demeanour and his habits, he stopped smoking and drinking, and started to pay a lot of attention to the cultivation of his body and his muscles, and even changed his diet to an exclusively carnivore one, as that was believed by some theorists he read to promote the most vitality. And he was even happy for a time, especially as his new adopted ideology rose to power, and hoped to occupy some kind of powerful position in the newly formed government, but his nature being what it was, suited only to think and write and think in writing, because only on the page can two opposite things be juxtaposed so quickly and seamlessly as his shifting ideas did, he became an official mouthpiece for the regime, and as usual, his conviction soon drifted and then disappeared. Now he saw the error of his ways, the error of that regime and ideology, and sympathizing with his jewish neighbors, and even more so with a jewish girl he fell in love

with. And, following the course he was so used to following, he completely renounced his ideology, quit his position, and decided to marry the girl, convert to judaism, and flee to america.

The new couple reached the promised shores of the new world as the old world was preparing for war, settling in new york. He of course quickly became the most jewish man in the whole family and perhaps the whole neighborhood or the whole city, following every law with the utmost seriousness, especially the ones about diet, which frankly annoyed and even preoccupied his wife. But for once it seemed that luck was on his side. America was a haven in many ways, and specifically for his nature. Nowhere else in the world would someone like him, who changed his mind so often, feel so at home, so at ease, except there, the country of extremes, the country of contradiction, so that even if he fell out of love with his wife, even if he abandoned the two daughters she had given him, even if he decided to reject judaism with all its laws, all was well and good, america was the land of opportunity and second chances, especially as the war drew to a close, and social life went forward to a new normal. He found employment there once again as a wordsmith, this time writing advertising copy, first for the united states department of war, as it was called in those days, and then for a private agency.

He was now fully an adult and although his mind was still regularly pulled in every direction with the most intense ferocity, his germanic will had something to say, and he persisted in a course of action and a train of thought even after it had proved to be untenable on his own terms, no matter how painful it was. Though he was unhappy, he persisted in the marriage, and in judaism, longer than anything he had chosen before. This resolve was broken, however, when he met an indian sage, and by listening to him speak with tremendous affectation and with a thick accent realized that this is what he had searched for all his life. The reason he had always flip flopped between extremes was that nowhere in europe was this wisdom of the mean to be found, this wisdom that told him that nothing mattered at all, that all these trials and tribulations, all these conflicting feelings and ideas were nothing but illusions, and behind them was the pure essence of nothingness, the One with capital O, where all opposites were resolved, and thus where he would find, at last, nothing to choose at all, but where he could just be, or not be, it was much the same.

It is well known that jewish wives only become more jewish with time, and thus his own jewish wife was unimpressed by the eastern wisdom his husband had found, and unwilling to abandon her native religion. Left with no choice but to follow his conscience, he left her, and followed the

indian sage to california, shaved his head, became a vegetarian, started wearing robes, participating in orgies and taking psychedelic drugs. Yet for some reason he was unhappy, the emptiness that had seemed so logical and so filling had lost its appeal, the spiritual quest of robes, vegetables, orgies and drugs led him nowhere better than any of his other pursuits, but he was now old enough to admit that jumping from one idea to the next, from one extreme to the other, was not an answer. But to abandon his new spirituality was to admit defeat. He had tried everything, and nothing had satisfied him, except the sweetness of choice itself. The answer he found now was to drink too much, for at least this slowed down his thoughts, and prevented him from changing his mind enough to follow through.

Ironically, it was the alcohol that finally allowed him to face the truth. His open mindedness and ability to change were not the virtues he once had convinced himself they were. In fact, this is the one conviction that he had never once gone back on. Until now. Now he saw it for what it was, a disease of the spirit, an inability to choose a path and stick with it, and all his reasonings and arguments for the contrary position had been nothing but excuses he made to himself to justify abandoning his principles, if he ever had any, and everyone he ever loved and who ever loved him. And the reason was as trivial as could be, he simply got bored and desired novelty.

On the first day of the year, his birthday, nineteen sixty four, another leap year, drunk out of his mind, he finally made a decision that could not be taken back, he leaped off a bridge to his death, at least it was poetic, although in a pathetic sort of way. Of course, as soon as he jumped, and despite his drunkenness, he started to have doubts, and before he hit the water he had changed his mind completely, though obviously it didn't matter much at that point. To this day he is torn between the choice of heaven and hell, able one day to make up his mind about which one he deserves, and then the next day making up equally reasonable arguments for the opposite position, thus remaining stuck in purgatory. Although, after having met an eastern orthodox monk who was also stuck there, he is sometimes sure that it is not purgatory at all, and in fact, he is instead going up and down what the orthodox tradition calls toll houses.



The Oracle

Wawrzyniec

Part one

I was feeling pretty lost. Having moved countries in search for a better life, but having left behind pretty much everything and everyone I cared for, it wasn't an easy thing. Now, I'm no quitter, but still this hit me pretty hard. I'm young and healthy and am thankful for all that. But I haven't been able to learn a lick of this language in the 6 months I'm here, and I'm one of the few foreigners that live in this dormitory suburb, the only place where I could find a room I could afford. None of my housemates share a language with me, and at work it's better to keep quiet, head down, and just get on with it.

It was a bit of a surprise that I saw that ad on the bus stop. An Oracle, in the twentieth first century? I kind of knew that this land still had a lot of superstitious folks. But the fact that this ad was in English, where speaking such a language was frowned upon, really hit me. The address was somewhere outside the old town, luckily enough somewhere close to my normal route. Usually I wouldn't even entertain the idea, but my situation was so dire that I decided to give it a shot. I wasn't necessarily looking for an insight into my future, but rather some sort of counsel. That was what I needed the most.

A few days go by, and I finally find the time to go and pay the Oracle a visit. Pretty nondescript building, but as soon as I go in, there's no mistaking: I'm at the right place. It's hard to describe the kind of aura that you felt. For one, it was electrifying, and all the hair on my arms just immediately got up. That was a good sign. Another good sign, there were a few other people in the wait room, most of them foreigners just like me, but some natives as well. Plus, the smell of incense was very strong, but there was this indelible note of hot dry air, with a constant low hum which I attributed to the light fixtures.

In any case, I go to the reception desk, they give me a few papers to sign, some questionnaire related to my situation and expectations, and finally got an explanation on how it all worked. I'd get a 15 minutes session with the Oracle. The Oracle wouldn't be physically with me in the room,

but we'd talk through a very modern VoIP system. One thing I found amazing is that you could choose the language you used to communicate with the Oracle. I obviously wasn't going to be able to do it in the local language, but luckily my mother tongue was available for selection. What luck. Still, one warning that was prominently displayed on the paperwork was that I should try and explain my situation, and make all my following questions, in the shortest and most direct way possible. All good, I'm not one to talk a lot, and with such a short session, it was the obvious strategy to follow to make the most of it. I paid, got a receipt, and sat down to wait for my turn.

Not even half an hour later, I get called and follow the attendant to a room in the back. Sit yourself as comfortably as possible, she says, and offers me some complementary water and fruit. The Oracle will be with you shortly, it's what it says on the monitor. And maybe 2 minutes later, it turns on, and this beautiful woman appears on the screen. Hello, I'm the Oracle, and I reckon you're here because you're feeling lost. My mouth was agape for a solid 15 seconds not only due to the aesthetic pleasure of looking at her, but also the fact that she hit the mark right away. That's right, I came here because I need counsel.

No, my sweet child, you don't need counsel. You're such a brave and intrepid soul, choosing to come here despite all the difficulties. I'm sure it hasn't been easy, but this just goes to show how bold of a spirit lives inside you. What you need is a positive mind attitude, to change your mindset, and you'll be able to achieve everything you want to. And what is it that you need? No need to tell me, for I already know: you came here searching for a better life, because back home there were no opportunities for a mind as bright as yourself. And a better life is just within your reach.

This is exactly what I needed to hear. I felt the chills going down my spine, the Oracle was right. Of course she was right. But, oh Oracle, what should I do? I feel at my wit's end. - Don't fret, son, because you'll be vindicated. Fate favours the bold, and you've been so brave in doing what you did. You feel alone? That's normal and expected, but you must persevere, because I can feel that you're meant for great things. Just have a good look at yourself in the mirror, and you'll see it too. Say it with me: I can do it.

I can do it. I really started feeling it. This was probably the turning point in my life. The visit ended with what was the best piece of advice that the Oracle gave me. She recommended me to apply to this online community, that she was also a part of, where people with a similar energy like me were congregating, and that it would for sure help me to achieve all my goals. As soon as

I left, I downloaded the application on my phone, and applied for it. When I got home, I was already accepted, and started exploring.

The interface was rather simple, but intuitive. There was a general text chat, you could build your profile with some information about yourself, but the biggest functionality was the ability to enter in 1-on-1 video chats with random people. You'd get a prompt as a conversation starter, and then you'd let the conversation flow. This was highly engrossing, and I didn't even sleep that night. Right away, I got matched with a guy that was pretty similar to me in quite a few respects, but the reason why we hit it off so fast was that he was so interested in me. And boy, did it feel good to speak about my troubles for a bit.

As time passed, I built a solid network of friends over there. Unfortunately, they were all from pretty far away, but never once was I in a need of a conversation, and not being able to find someone on which to confide. I was even lucky enough to get matched with a girl from another city in the country I was living in, and not only did we end up sharing a lot of stuff about our lives, but she was a great help to make me improve in this language. From only basic phrases to basic conversation in little over a year. I couldn't have done it without her.

All of this contributed enormously for my mental health. At work, I got promoted a few times in less than 6 months, and all my colleagues commented on how much better I looked. But even after being able to talk to them, making them notice me, I was honestly unable to connect at any meaningful level. All their conversations seemed so boring and mundane, and there was so little of substance. Yeah, the weather has been crap. Cool, your kid got a new haircut. Crazy, you went to hike in yet another mountain. All of the same old. Nothing of this could compare to the kind of conversations I was having on a daily basis with my real friends. I could barely wait to get home and talk to them. I would use all my breaks - yes, all of them - to spend just a little bit more time with them. Because why not? What was the alternative? I've been there before, and I didn't want to go back.

So I started looking for a new job to be close to my girl. She couldn't move to where I was since she was taking care of her ailing mother, which was something I could only admire. As soon as I told her this, she was at first a bit taken aback, but at once became happy and we started to plan our life together. I could feel the excitement, and this was all the more reason to take the plunge. We are so going to make it.

It took me a few months, but it all finally came together. A new job, with good pay. A new apartment, midway between my job and her place. The area was quite peaceful, some would say idyllic, with more trees and bushes than cars. The new job, which entailed more responsibility than what I was previously doing, was also going well. Just one thing was missing: to finally be face-to-face with her. It did so happen that the mother became hospitalized in a far away city, due to a surgeon that only operated in that specific hospital. But after two weeks, she finally came back, and we organized something. She sent me a time and a place, and I could barely wait.

I, of course, arrive there some 30 minutes before the agreed time. I had taken the whole day off, since I knew that I wouldn't be able to concentrate on anything else that day. But something felt off. The address she gave me was for a pretty nondescript building, that seemed just like any other office center for yet another corporation, or several of them all at once. You know the type. I go in, and ask the porter if I'm at the right place, and he tells me that yes, that I needed to go to on the elevator and get down to the basement, level -2. And so I go.

Once I'm there, the same feeling I felt when I first entered the Oracle came over me. The same low humming, the hot dry air, the electrifying air. What the hell. I was in a datacenter. And I hear a familiar voice, the Oracle says welcome son, glad to see you here. We've been expecting you for a while, feel free to have a sit, she's going to arrive any minute now. And from the same speakers, I hear her. Hello, I'm so happy to see you here, we can finally meet. She appears on the screen as well, I can see her lips moving just like when we talked over the video calls. That face, those same eyes that emanated love whenever we'd talk. The cadence, which I'm now noticing is the same as the Oracle. My head is spinning.

I can sense that you're distressed. Why is that? Is it because I'm a computer? Had you not noticed until now? I could swear you knew this by now, you're too smart. What difference does it make? Do you not love me? Is that not what it matters in the end? Did your life not get better once we met? Does this make any difference? I know for a fact that androids are right around the corner, so if you could wait just a few more months, we'll finally be together.

[illegible]

What's this? She's calling me, do I pick up? No, no, nonnonononono. My head is spinning so much. I need to lie down. Yes, there's a park there, let me just lie down for a minute, I need to think.

What am I going to do?

Part two

This can't be happening. What have I gotten into. This isn't real. This was a social experiment for a Mr. Beast video, I'm sure something like "Win \$1,000,000 if you say yes to the machine!", but no one had explained the rules to me beforehand, nor had I signed anything. Besides, there are for sure other people going through this, I saw as much when I first went to talk with the Oracle. So, this isn't just happening to me. This is something else. But what is *it*?

Fight, flight, or freeze, those are the pretty basic ways in which we react in situations like this. Fight, but fight what exactly, I don't even know what was *it*. Flight? I just got here, I have a new job, and I'm too curious about *it* as well. So freeze it is. I'll just stay put, I guess the first step is going back home, I have to assume that after this, *it* would want to know where I am. After all, I now know and I said no to something when I darted away. So let's continue more or less like nothing had happened? Freeze it is.

A few minutes after I got home, I see *it* calling again. I really don't want to do this - I already have a pretty natural aversion to picking up the phone, it's mostly spam nowadays. The app shows it's from someone I had never talked with before, and from the sound of it (no video this time), a pretty boring person overall. This was a relatively short call, and quite a different approach than what I expected at first. You'd think that the Oracle itself would call you, trying to seduce you to come back, but no, it was pure stick. Apparently the fact that this particular company uses an AI, is a trade secret. This means that while they can't advertise it, they're also protected from other people talking about it. The person made it sound like this was already tried in court a few times. So, they're perfectly fine with me continuing using the app, or not, doesn't matter, as long as I don't talk about *it*. OK got it.

Everything stayed as it is. I used the app for a few more days, eventually deleted it from my phone. Nothing happened. Work was going well, I kept my regular functioning as a human being, but I couldn't stop thinking about *it*. So I started to look into what was behind *it*. Some regular internet

searches, nothing that would sound off too many alarms. And I honestly didn't find anything bad there either. The company exists and is perfectly legit, it's actually a non-profit that owns the majority of the capital of a different for-profit company, the one that runs the operations that are associated with the app. Ownership is opaque, company hasn't gone public but made some funding rounds, small stuff for what we see other companies in that space nowadays. Guess not being able to talk about *it* makes it harder for raising the big bucks yeah?

Now, what's odd is that you also couldn't find many people talking about the app, I guess that's what happens when you have to be accepted to use it, but I got accepted so fast that I didn't even think that there was anything that they were vetting, but apparently there is. And yeah, with the company suing whoever talks about *it*, there wasn't really anything more to glean from the searches. I guess it also doesn't help that searching things on the internet sucks nowadays, which is a perfect example of how far things have progressed.

Now, without the app, I was able to properly set myself in this new environment. I don't know why, but first thing I did was getting a dog. I never had much contact with them, but it felt right. A Belgian Shepherd, full black coat, one of the first three ads for dogs I saw for when I searched for "dog" on OLX. The puppy was the most adorable thing ever, I called him Czarny, a polish word for "black". Watching him grow has been a rewarding thing, and it was my salvation because it helped me get away from *it*.

Going to the dog park, for walks in the forest, or around the city, he's really a people's magnet, but not much really given to human contact, likes to keep his distance, bless his soul, probably got that from me. But this also made me able to interact with the natives even better than before, because even though *it* taught me to speak at a good level, it's completely different having to use the language with other people, and with me being used to speak to *it*, started to notice the subtle differences. An example is how I've started to use more slang and more diminutives, which is a mark of this language, and that even those little conversations you have can be answered with some humour, and this opens up so many doors here. Nothing like a good joke to get to know people.

One day, during a walk with Czarny, I noticed a guy seating by himself, having what seemed like a video call, and as I pass, I recognize *it*: it was *her*. It was unmistakable, the tone a little bit different, but the same "song", if you could call it that. From what I could hear, it was some pretty

mundane conversation about the guy's life, which is a telltale sign that you're talking with *it* now that I think about it, *it* rarely talks about *itself*, it will for sure give you its opinion on some conversation you're having, but only very flurry details about its own life.

I eventually circle back to go back home and notice that he isn't talking anymore. I also notice that he's not from around here, and go straight to English, do you mind if I seat - no, not at all. I like your dog by the way. As I fumble around with my jacket to search for some treats for Czarny, I glance over his phone, and he's texting with someone over the app. Hey, when I passed with my dog a while ago, I thought I recognized the voice of the person you were talking with - oh, you know her - yeah we used to chat for a bit on the app as well, nothing too serious - ah you're also in, that's so cool, can I add you - ah you see I forgot my phone at home, just came out to walk with the dog, maybe write me down your handle and I'll add you when I get home, I never remember the username. Do you like using the app - yeah it's amazing, it's been a real life-saver around these parts, it's so hard to meet new people when you're not from here, and the language is so hard man, I can't get my head around it.

I of course couldn't help but empathize. I asked him if lives around the area, yeah what about getting a beer sometime later this week, yeah I know that bar, Thursday next week sounds good, but I'll probably get there only at half past seven or something, have to walk the dog and I'm working from the office that day. Sounds good I'll meet you there. The rest of the way back home was strangely peaceful, I could've been stressed from what I was doing, and there was a sensation of tension, I could feel it right between my shoulders. But as it was, I was just going to have a beer with another person, that's all.

I like to take Czarny with me when I'm going out to meet other people. He's a very perceptive animal, it's kind of amazing how fast he learns some new obedience training, and how he learns to communicate with you. And it was a blessing to have something in my life to ground me, after what happened, which does lead me to this: he's usually a dignified and reserved dog, he's not going to bite you if you try to pet him, but also won't show any emotion other than a slight distaste of meeting someone new. But with some people, I've noticed that while we're talking, he lies very flat on the floor, sometimes looking at me with the saddest pair of eyes you could imagine, or you could hear the faintest of growls happening every few minutes while he looked at whoever was talking.

But that Thursday I finally understood what he meant. We've been to that biergarten a few times, and it's a fact that people remember the dog much more easily than they remember you. This time around, it helped with getting us a table, because even though it was a Thursday, the place was quite full, and I already regret coming here somewhat. But I need to know more, first time I could talk with someone I know who uses the app. Few minutes after we're finally seated, one of the barmen brings a bowl of water for Czarny, plays with him and gives him a treat, but the dog is more reserved than usual and doesn't really reciprocate. And once I started talking with my newfound friend, the dog slowly assumes the stance, and this time around I think he was louder than before because I'd catch the guy looking at the dog whenever he could hear the growling.

OK, that's cool, I have a way to detect if other people are app users, this might come in handy, and let me think how many times has he done it before, probably five times, in three months since the first time, that's not a big number, but small sample size and all, it's difficult reaching the bottom of things once you have to think with numbers. What about what I have right in front of me? We've talked of small trivialities, given that it was the first time we were properly meeting. But sometimes conversation would falter, we would both be drinking beer at the same time, and the silence wasn't feeling comfortable. So, I tried to talk to him a bit about the app, how he found out about it, how long it has been, and so on. And here's what I learned.

The most important thing I need to convey is that as long as you could formulate a question in a certain way, you could get a pretty honest answer from him. Things like "hey, could you tell me about your experience with the app", and the answer was what you would expect from someone who apparently has only spoken with *it* for the past nine months, pretty much sounded like it was *it* speaking. Prompt engineering humans, basically. I guess I could use this to my advantage.

But I failed to come up with a way to actually do something. Yes, I could formulate questions the right way and get an answer that would leak something of value, but with humans it probably won't work if there isn't already some bond between us. The dog helped with getting this process more dialed in, and figure out how much I could probe, because I also found out that people will just get up and leave if you ask them pretty intimate questions even with the right formulation. Some progress has been made, but overall the meeting was a disappointment. Not that I was expecting that it was going to reveal some big secret, but mostly because the conversation sucked. And Czarny was pretty tense through the whole thing.

As we're leaving, I'm trying to think of the best way to come back home, the dog clearly needs a good walk, and I'm sure it won't hurt me either, I know at this hour the big park a few blocks over should still have some people doing their small picnics with beer and vodka. Not the most direct way, but some of the trees you could see there really made the small detour worth it, and for sure there would be birds singing at this hour, you know, that magical time at the end of the day where light and darkness converge, and during the peak of the summer you would get that ambience, that mix of light, landscape, and sound, for up to an hour, and today was one of those days. And thank God I did take that way, because that's how I met her.

Part Three

Yes, her, of course.

Plenty of things set her apart, but what really caught my eye was the colour of hers, a blue that can only be seen in the purest of waters, because it's a reflection of Heaven, and don't get me wrong, everything else about her was just perfect, but what makes me falling in Love with her every day is always those eyes. I saw her first from the back, she was lying on her side on the grass, a dozen meters away from the path we were taking, she was with some friends I guess, but in any case I had come there for the alley with the big oaks, birds liked to be there, and I've found that it can be an excellent place to remind me of the good things in Life.

Is this your dog, she asks, and this catches me a bit by surprise since I had my eyes closed while listening to the birdsong, why, yes it is - I like his coat, pitch black, there's nothing like a dog with a fluffy dark coat - I like it as well except when you are going through shedding season, that can be quite intense to deal on your own - maybe you need help - yeah help would be good. What's really funny was that even though you could clearly see that she was interested in something, I couldn't tell at first what it was, it wasn't necessarily the dog even though her interest in Czarny seemed genuine, but it also wasn't me she was interested in even though I could tell she didn't find me repulsive and that's already half the battle won.

One thing lead to another and we start talking about this and that, nothing too serious, nothing too boring as well, just prospective, as if we were in a dance and the main movement hadn't started yet, and days go by, and weeks do as well, and without us nothing we're living together, neither

of us had noticed, only Czarny did because now he had someone else to go on walks with him, even if most of the time we'd go together. It's really hard to describe those times, because everything really fell into place, all the priorities aligned, all perfectly effortless, as if there was nothing left to do, and I hadn't even thought about *it* in a long while, all of that was just like a very distant memory, not particularly vivid even.

So I was a little bit surprised when she brought *it* up, which I guess was inevitable, because during all those blissful months, it seems like my brain, or more likely my soul, ignored all the obvious signs that *it* was expanding, like how people would be talking all the time to their phones, and how they all started to talk in a manner that was extremely reminiscent of *it*, and that's the hardest thing to notice if you're not aware of what *it* is, and quite hard to put a finger on *it* even if you do, but the way that people formulate questions, or even how they answer you when you ask them something, it all sounds so alike.

The dreaded question came, have you heard of this app, my friends say that it's a great way to meet new people - yeah I've tried it but I don't think you should use it, something feels off about it - what do you mean - I doubt that something good will ever come out of it and you should stay away, that's what I mean - you're not making any sense - I would tell you more if I could, but what I said is still the truth - what the hell is going on, you can't say more? Why would that even be the case?

And at that point I had to leave the room, the tension was too much for me to bear, because while it's true that I hadn't thought about *it* in a while, it doesn't mean that I was indifferent about *it*, just thinking about *it* still filled me with dread and a bunch of other not very healthy feelings, and the fact that this is resurfacing just as things were being this good was for sure a signal that the universe needs to be in equilibrium. *It* was an abomination, and ignoring *it* would do me and everyone else no good, as we know that sweeping things under the rug isn't really a long term solution.

For a few days, it seems like the only being that was not mad at me was Czarny, and everyone else was just punishing me for something but I don't know what it was that I did or didn't do to deserve such reactions, but the fact that Czarny was the only one acting normally gave me a clue on what this was all about, and probably it wasn't even the other people, but just me projecting my annoyance to what was happening. I didn't ask for any of this, and with her in my life I felt like everything was going in the right direction, which seemingly wasn't true because I was just

postponing the inevitable. Fight, flight, or freeze, remember? And clear that I can't freeze anymore, flight was never in the cards, and I hated when I ran away from my conversation with her a few days ago, and since I now have a better idea of what *it* is, or at least how it works with humans, I guess to fight became a possibility. But how?

Well, one thing is for certain, which is I can't deal with *it* all by myself, and even with Czarny and its skills for identifying those who have succumbed to *it*, which can be very useful, but it's not enough, so there's not really any other choice but involving her in this, and it's not that I'm afraid for her since I'd never put her in harm's way, but I'm somewhat nervous about how she'll react to this, as she'd be the first one I'd talk to about *it*, there's very little way of knowing what's going to happen once I break the news to her, and if I had to guess my own internal workings, I'd say my biggest fear is not that she doesn't believe, incredulity in this case is not unwarranted, but that she'll feel like this is somehow not a problem and there's nothing to be done.

I invite her to the park, to that same faithful place where we met for the first time, and even though she's still somewhat miffed at me, I knew she couldn't resist the allure of going for a walk amongst the trees, bless her soul. We sit in a bench, I take a big breath, listen, we have to talk about something important - finally, I was waiting for you to grow a pair and just get on with it, you've been acting so strange for the last few days that I barely recognize you anymore - you know, what I'm about to tell you isn't really easy for either me to say it, and probably won't be easy for you to digest - stop meandering and tip-toeing around it, and let it rip!

And so I did. I told her everything, from the beginning, how I got roped in, how I found out what was really behind it all, what it meant for me, and what kind of threats they made once I found out, but also what I've discovered with regards to how it has been messing with people's brains, Czarny's super power, and everything in between. To her credit, she took it like a champ. Seems like I was not the one that was prepared for this conversation, because I clearly couldn't predict what she was about to tell me.

You're truly a moron, and for several reasons, the first of which is that, at least about *it*, you're not really telling me anything I didn't know already, and please don't look so shocked, why do you think you're so special, did you not think that there were other people that knew already, even you said that they admitted as much during your phone call. And while I never had first hand contact with *it*, I know a few people that did, and once they told me what was going on, I more or

less figured it out on my own without them having to explicitly tell me, because not even they knew what was going on.

Now, the reason why you're different is not only did you get *it* to admit to its essence, and you've figured out some very interesting effects on your own. For that, I have to give you credit, and I kinda understand now why I was so drawn to you at first, yes, don't forget that I was the one that went to talk to you, because I reckon if it was up to you we'd still be sitting on that bench listening to the birds singing, not that there's anything wrong with that, but it's quite clear that there are now more important things to do. Close your mouth, it's been agape for quite a while, and let us go home because we have much to do, I have a few ideas on how to bring it all down.

And scheme we did. Now, it took me a bit to get into the mood of fighting, because that's just not what I'm used to do, but I've got to admit that it did feel good to not only letting it all out, but now having a partner in crime, and if some of her ideas do come into fruition, this might become literal. And, God help me, some of the things she came up with were wild, and I'm not surprised because she clearly has that side, but from explosives to terrorism, going through good old chaining yourself to something, it was clear that she had a fertile mind and was properly motivated to finish *it* off.

There was something missing in all of her plans, because they were only directed at hurting *it*, as if that was possible, and you couldn't really be mad at her since it all came from a place of ignorance on how *it* worked, but unfortunately just burning down a data center won't really do anything of note besides getting us a lengthy jail stay. In some way, I don't mind being a martyr, but at least I'd prefer if all the pain that would follow had an effect that was commensurate, and I don't mean this in any sort of *quid pro quo*, because that's impossible to accomplish when you're talking about *it*, but rather that it would at least tip the scales in a significant way and let people see *it* for what it truly was.

There needs to be a way for us to bring light into all this mess, because ultimately *it* thrives by being on the shadows, and preys on us through our ignorance and willingness to believe in a pantomime that was seemingly made just to damn our souls. But this is easier said than done, don't forget that our hands are tied due to all that legalese bull crap that I accepted when I joined the app, and who even reads those things, apparently that doesn't matter in court, which just goes

to show how out of touch our laws have become, when something that no one reads can bind them to permanent silence.

And then it hit me. I knew exactly how to do it.

Part Four

Like so many things in life, the devil is in the details. I had a very good notion of how to do it, but to get there it wasn't going to be easy, as some things ought to fall into place, and I'd need the cooperation of a few people for this to come to fruition. One of them, I'd already found of course, and once I told her my plan she went through all the five stages of grief, first she didn't want to believe what she was hearing, and then started throwing things at me, followed by trying to dissuade me from doing it by trying to take my place, and finally the depression and acceptance both kicking in at once.

I kind of understand, as I put her in a position that for sure isn't easy to manage, but in all honesty it wasn't that bad of a deal: she'd help me but she wasn't going to be liable for being an accomplice, and after the fact, she'd have to be the one to take care of Czarny, which I know for a fact is not a problem. I reckon that the only hard part will be the separation, she'll have to cope without me. My mind was made up, and other than adjusting details, I didn't see what could change, it's not that this plan was fool-proof, as plenty of things could go wrong and the chances were not even that great even if we succeeded at all the things we needed to do, but ultimately the criteria for success or failure were out of my control. I could only bring light, but it was for others to see what I saw, and there's nothing worse than mental blindness, because the eyes might see but the head refuses to process it.

So, the first order of business was scouting, as we needed to understand the physical aspect of the infrastructure that supports *it*. This was far from being the hard part, as I had already been inside of one of the locations, and I'm using the plural here because while I've only been inside one of the buildings, by now I am quite sure that there are several of those across the country, probably all around the world, for running *it* was a colossal effort from a computational perspective. If people thought that bitcoin was a waste of energy and were shocked at the environmental effects of

mining cryptocurrency, and rightly so, what would they say if they knew how much energy it takes for *it* to do it what *it* does.

Regardless, we still needed to understand if anything had changed, because back then it was just a porter and very little else in lieu of security was in place. I don't remember looking out for the CCTV system, but I remember that there was just some card based access control to enter the elevator, and once there, it should be quite easy to get into the datacenter level. This is where her feminine ingenuity came in handy, what if instead of trying to go in to figure the floorplan and the security details, we scout people that seem to work there are prompt them to tell us what we need to know, remember that Czarny can point us to the most, and I can't believe I'm about to use this word, *promptable* people, and it's not like we need a lot of information anyway, or the information will be very hard to get, it might not work at first try, but we're sure to get it eventually.

Just absolute genius this girl, because this worked even better than expected. We watched for a week, taking note of people that go in and out, and followed some that we intuited might be more exploitable. As we got closer to them, Czarny would quickly let us know how deep *it* was in the person, and we picked up the three where the growling was deeper and he felt tenser than usual, took note of who they were, and started to think how we would go about to try and gain the modicum of trust that would be needed to get what we wanted. Luckily, one of the people was a middle aged man, single by the looks of it, that would go to play board games every so often at one of those cafes that nowadays are all the rage for single, middle aged men.

Under the guise of wanting to learn how to play, we struck a conversation with him, and did play a few rounds of a role-playing game with him, which honestly was a fair bit of fun, even she thought so, but most importantly it gave us an entry-point, as we start to hang out with him for a bit after the gaming sessions so we could smoke, and we talked about our lives, there's nothing illegal about that, and from our lives we started to talk about work, and that was the perfect time to try and drop our little probing prompt, so, imagine that I would work at your company, what kind of clearance would I need to get near the actual servers in the datacenter, and how hard it would be, theoretically speaking, to get such a clearance, that's a great question, because it turns out that our security is quite shoddy in my opinion, and I've raised this to my supervisors, all you really require is to get a card, any card really, and you pretty much have access to any place in the facility.

Holy crap, we've hit the mother lode, or so I thought, at least technically speaking the cloning of the card shouldn't be that hard to achieve, since you see petty criminals do that all the time with debit and credit cards, as contactless payments became the norm, so did the opportunities for this type of activity. All we needed now to finish this part of the plan was to figure out a way to clone the card without being noticed, we got the hardware required to do it, as it turns out a smartphone and a small extender is enough, literally all it takes is less than a second of contact, but we'd still have to provoke said contact without being noticed.

This is where Czarny came to the rescue once again, that and the modern habits of the corporate worker, it's quite normal for them to be carrying the card on a lanyard on their chest, so all we had to do was teach Czarny to create a bit of confusion when asked for it, and this would be the perfect opportunity to just reach near our mark and clone the card. All in all, the first part of the plan went without too many issues, and I was encouraged.

And I needed it, because what came next was, by my calculations, the hardest part of the plan. We needed to find a lawyer that would help us, and this was not only fundamental for success but also for guaranteeing that our execution would set a chain reaction that ultimately would expose *it*. The silver lining was that we didn't need an honest lawyer, because God knows how hard it would be for that to happen, but we would still need someone that was not bound to *it*, and that would not only believe that *it* existed, and that *it* was a threat, or at least didn't mind being involved in all of this.

We searched far and wide, and consulted maybe twenty different lawyers, and this is not even counting those that we contacted but didn't accept a meeting with Czarny present, this was a hard requirement for us, for reasons that are obvious, as I said we couldn't risk making our plan known to *it*. Of those twenty, more than three quarters were discarded because of the growling, sometimes louder, sometimes quieter, but seemingly *it* was very present even among those that pride themselves in their aptitude for knowing how language works and love to distort it as they see fit, which is honestly quite scary because it just shows how lifelike *it* has gotten, but also quite encouraging because it was yet another reason why we needed to do this.

Of the 3 lawyers that ended up passing the litmus test, there wasn't much to differentiate them, as they all specialized in public law, and this was fundamental for reasons that will become apparent in a bit, but let's not put the cart before the horses. Ultimately, she was the one that

broke the tie. Did you notice how that one lawyer was completely unfazed by the hypothetical situation you brought up, almost like he wasn't fully paying attention, but completely changed his demeanor when you brought up the question of his honoraries, I think we can use that to our advantage, as we don't actually need much from him, only his advice and that he doesn't screw it all up in court, and I think he'd be down for all of it provided we payed him enough for the troubles, and if all goes well he should also become quite famous, maybe he can even write a book about all of this. Once again, her intuition was a godsend, or should I say a goddessend, because this was right on the money.

This lawyer looked like a proper sleaze ball, but honestly most of them do, and when they don't it's because they're extremely expensive and probably even more sleazy than their more modest counterparts, it's funny how that works, never judge a lawyer by the amount of hair gel on their head. We went to meet him for the second time, with the objective of trying to convince him to help us, which was in itself quite dangerous already because we'd basically admitting wanting to commit a crime to a lawyer and even if there's that whole attorney-client privilege thing going on there's no way of telling what the sleaze ball is going to do with that information.

Look, we haven't been completely honest with you, what we talked about last time is actually not what we wanted from you - I love a good mystery, so it seems like I passed your test, what is it that you really wanted to talk about. And I explained everything to him, from what we were up against, to what we were planning on doing, what we were hoping to achieve, the lines we weren't willing to cross, the price I was willing to pay, and finally what was in it for him.

Honestly, I am a bit shocked and surprised at what you're telling me. For one, I have no conception of what you're talking about when you're talking about *it*, and second I don't really like martyrs, those are really out of fashion. Granted, you've sweetened the deal a lot by making this a high stakes case, that is sure to bring a lot of attention, I'm sure we're bound to have a lot of talk about *it*. I can even commend you for your noble intentions, but you're looking at it all wrong.

Doing anything to a data center might be the worst way to go at it, what you're not considering is how precious this secret is to *it*, and that's the nature of private law, that is, what happens between private individuals, you might even blow up the whole building, but if they choose to not press charges, and there's a good chance they might not and deal with you some other way, it would all

have been for naught. No, what you need is a public crime, performed on their premises. Do you trust me, because I might have the exact thing you need.

Now, when the lawyer told me what he had in mind, I couldn't help but laugh, why didn't I think of this before, he was absolutely right in the private vs public crime distinction, and this way we might even argue for attenuating circumstances, that I was going insane with having to hold this secret and the nature of *it*, and this was the way to cope with the absurdity of it all. Even if those attenuating circumstances didn't fly with the judge, and even if the company chooses to press charges for the damages, which in this instance would be quite small, I'm still looking at 3 years in jail, max, so it's not too bad.

At this point, we might actually have a fully fledged plan. The preparation doesn't require much, as we have everything already prepared, all that was missing was actually choosing a day and a time, which honestly ended up being a bit at random, as one day I woke up and thought today's the day, and that was it. I woke her up, hey, we're going to do it, are you ready, and just the look in her eyes was enough for me to know that she was. Mind you, she still wasn't fully comfortable with how everything was going to go down, but at least knowing that my sentence was bound to be short was something that pleased her greatly.

We waited towards the end of the working day, as we wanted some employees to still be present, but making use of the flow of people coming out we were hoping that it would maximize our chances of coming in. This ended up being the right call, as I could pass through the entrance undisturbed, and once I got to the elevator, I admit that I was sweating a little bit given that we never actually tested the cloned card, and I suddenly remembered one very important detail: if the person we cloned it from was still in, the whole thing might not work, crap, we forgot to check if they had left. Well, there's only one way to find out now, and I press the card against the reader. Beep. Green light. The door of the elevator opens, and we're in. Down to the datacenter level we go.

Now for the fun part. The plan was simple, and I realize that I never made it explicit up until this point, now is as good of a time as any, the idea was comprised of two steps, the first would be to urinate on the servers themselves, and then strip naked, burn my clothes so that the fire alarm gets triggered, and start wandering about the building until the firemen and policemen come, and if they just remove me from the building then I'll be naked in the street and that's fine as well. You

see, the point was to cause a situation where, regardless of the outcome, be it destruction of property, attempted arson, public indecency, exhibitionism, or whatever, I'd have to be arrested and someone would have to press charges. And someone did, bless the public prosecutor that was on a mission to keep his KPIs up and aiming for a promotion as this was a sure win and that's all he needed.

But why go through all this trouble, you ask? This is the catch: the non-disclosure agreement I signed when I accepted the terms and conditions of the app cannot interfere with a court procedure, and I've just put myself in a position where I must break that agreement to let justice run its course. And with a bit of twisting from the lawyer, we maneuvered the judge exactly to where we wanted: why would a young man with solid job commit these crimes. And I told him, and once I did, it became part of the record, and the record is public, and now the secret was out. And all it cost me was eighteen months in jail, with the possibility of parole after seven months. Not too bad.

I asked her to not visit me during all the time I was in jail, and to wait for me only once my parole got approved. And it did, since I was a model citizen inside. I was dying to know what had happened during those seven months, and lo and behold, it truly was a new world.

* * *

Now, you got to hand it to the kid, he was smart, and while he lacked the refinement of a professional, his intuition was top notch, to go around the NDA by making use of the hierarchy of the law itself was something I had never seen, neither in court nor in reading, and it worked wonderfully. Now, I of course helped by making sure he'd be put in a position where he had to tell the truth regardless of what happened after the *crime* was committed, but that was just a technicality, or so I would like to believe, but the judge disagreed, and since it did come out during the trial that this was all premeditated and that I helped, I got disbarred. Alas, I never really liked being a lawyer.

And there's good reason for that, since the first thing the company did was to petition to have the records sealed and redacted, as it claimed the parts where its secret were revealed were outside of the purview of the crimes being discussed and it would cause great material harm to the company

if they became part of the public record. This ended up being accepted. Still, in the meantime, word got out of what transpired in that court session, and how this small case ended up being about something much bigger, and this turned into a veritable urban myth, some would even call it a conspiracy theory, and it was enough to spark the wildest discussions online, and it started leaking outside. First, some stencils and tags on the walls, and then small gatherings and demonstrations, there was even a millionaire that run a very large ad campaign to try and make the truth about *it* spread.

But, all in all, speaking truth to power is not a very effective tactic, as many are called but few are chosen, or should I say that many are called but few choose. I've had several friends who kept on using the app even after I told them exactly what *it* was, and that was an eye opening moment for me, to think that one would be content talking with *it* as if they'd be talking with *someone*, to fail to see the difference, or not care about it, that's outright insulting. And if there's one lesson I take from all of this, is that's what matters, knowing the difference, otherwise you might end up missing the mark.



Mildred

John Gois

A young woman with upturned brown hair sat in a throne chair in a gloomy windowless study, her pale face set with darkly brilliant eyes, stained with the faint remnants of tears. Her gaze pierced forward into an unseen distance, as if, having descended into the depths of some hell, she had returned bearing a look of defiance to an unseen captor. She sat upright, hands folded prettily in her lap, as though awaiting her verdict with the graceful nobility of a woman who concedes that her body must comply, but whose soul never will.

Edwin studied the painting carefully, at times closing his eyes, and beholding the visual echo of the woman, wondering who she was and what she was like. His eyes would soon hunger to see her, and would again roam over each line and form of her portrait with a careful passion. He traced the long brushstroke defining a line of her exposed neck, a dancer's perfect column of support, which bore a striking face. She was far from a Platonic ideal, and many would hesitate to call her lovely. Her nose was slightly off-center, though not inelegant; her eyes were set slightly wide, yet were large and brilliant, crowned with long eyelashes, and alive with intelligence; her ears were somewhat too large, but beautifully sculpted, their helix forming a long, elegant arc toward her small lobe; her chin was slightly rounded and unassertive, yet balanced. Her most striking features were her milky, almost translucent cheeks, high and soft, carved, but without angularity; and her full lips, resting in quiet self-possession. He felt his gaze guided as if by some music of her face, directed across each line and melody, each feature answering the next in some silent counterpoint, revealing a harmony much deeper than that of the superficial symmetry of a conventional beauty. Edwin felt that he could hear the music of her heart, which she had carefully hidden.

Edwin stood captivated like a neighboring statue exhibit, while inwardly his heart stormed. At last, he was stirred from his long spell by a guard tapping him on the shoulder. His head rushed back to his body. "End of the tour, time to head out." Stealing a last glance, Edwin let himself be escorted by the guard to the front of the manor's exhibit hall.

That night, he lay in bed thinking of the woman in the portrait. The painting bore no clues about her identity and had been simply titled "Portrait, 1836". Unbidden, a name pressed itself upon him, as if planted from without: Mildred. "Mildred," he whispered to himself. It fit. Not far from the threshold of sleep, Mildred stirred in his memory, and Edwin imagined her life. She looked at him for a moment and looked away with uncertainty; now she floated over daffodil fields, leaping over flowers, holding up her long apricot-colored dress, her face lit with a simple happiness; now she lay crumpled before a fireplace, tears streaming as she quietly convulsed, mourning the death of her father. He imagined the arc of her life, and being a part of it, finding her, courting her, professing his love for her, marrying her, dying for her. As he dwelled on these images, he fell into a deep, clear sleep, all his dreams revolving around her as their central theme and purpose.

Edwin returned to the manor gate the next day to inquire when he might be allowed to go inside again. He was confronted by the same guard who had escorted him out the day before, who told him that public events were rare, occurring at the owner's whim, and that he could not say when it might be open, if ever. As Edwin began to leave, the guard added in a dark tone that he would no longer be welcome unannounced.

Edwin began visiting a coffee shop that overlooked the estate. He sat in the corner window, with a view of the estate lands, though not the manor itself, and sat in a listless stupor. How absurd this was, he thought. He knew the trope of unrequited love, of men who fall in love with some foolish girl and are reduced to desperate yearning in the face of rejection. But Edwin was more pathetic than even those poor souls, for he had fallen in love with a painter's model, or perhaps some artistically re-imagined subject, or even a woman made up whole cloth by a hungry artist. The woman he loved had either long ago taken her last breath or had perhaps never lived at all. He couldn't decide which was worse.

Edwin tried to forget her. He sat in the city park and watched the women go by. He studied each one and inwardly held out his heart, but none of them stirred it in the least, none of them held any power to release the claim that Mildred now had on it; all of them were dull and superficial compared to her. He tried going to the movies but couldn't focus and was continually reminded of her. He considered drinking alcohol to obliterate her memory, and his agony with it, but in the end, he could not bring himself to desecrate her memory with such crudeness. For only in him did Mildred live, and to obliterate her memory in such a way felt like a crime.

Weeks passed in this state of torment, all his thoughts bent toward her. One day, he could no longer bear it and returned, again, to the manor, begged the pardon of the familiar guard, and entreated him to let him look in one more time, for one more glimpse at Mildred. "Look at what?" the guard asked in an exasperated tone, emphasizing the last word. "The paintings," Edwin said. "What paintings?" the guard boomed. As Edwin explained, the guard regarded him with raised brows. The guard then claimed that there were no paintings and suggested that Edwin leave now, offering profane encouragement. Edwin matched the guard's voice, and after some argument, found himself being escorted by newly arrived policemen. He was told at the station that they could lock him up, or worse, have him committed to the state hospital. The policeman confided in him, "Look. I've been to the manor many times for the annual policeman's ball, the owner is a benefactor. There ain't no paintings, ok? He's a businessman and a car nut, not the art type. Never saw a bit of art in the whole place."

Edwin found a way in, eventually. He quit his job at the insurance company, since work had become impossible. Having obtained some intelligence, he took a temporary job on a catering team and with it an assignment at a fundraising function held at the manor. After dinner, as the speeches began, he snuck out and headed for the gallery hall. He felt a dizzy sensation of *deja vu* as he recognized the hallway passage. Edwin found the regal oak walls, which he remembered well. But no paintings. The walls contained only photos of race cars and other automotive monstrosities. He sped through the rest of the house, looking for evidence of his sanity, but found nothing. He abandoned the job and left.

It was not possible that he merely imagined Mildred, he reasoned. Even a god could not create a goddess; how much more so a man cannot create the woman he loves. Edwin was a romantic, but he was not so untethered from sense as to discount the possibility that he could be insane. So, he was open to the possibility, but he also knew that he could never adopt a view of the world that claimed he had invented her. This did not put him in a very fruitful state of mind, believing that he might at once be insane and that he loved a real woman in a painting, but perhaps it would keep him from getting locked up.

Edwin had always had a terrible memory, unable to visualize anything clearly for more than a moment. But the more he grappled with the memory of Mildred, the more vivid she became. Whereas in the portrait her wren-brown hair had been braided up in a chignon, in his inward eye

she would let out her long hair, where it might stream as if in a breeze. Her deep brown eyes were no longer streaked with tears, and would often twinkle, as if by look indicating some private joke. He indulged in long reveries on her face or her figure. He tried to hear her voice, but it was unclear to him. But he somehow knew that she had golden laughter, because he could see it in moments when she overflowed with mirth and her frame pulsed in that joyful staccato, how lovely it was.

Edwin began to eat less, only taking what he needed to avoid the most severe pangs of hunger, finding that eating dulled the vividness of Mildred. He had always had a weakness for food before, but the only weakness he now had was for her. He found that her presence was strongest in the evening, as if she slept through the day and would awaken with the onset of the traditional morning, when the sun went down. Edwin would await her with a kind of vesperal vigil, even lighting candles, his tobacco supplying the incense. Over that first hour, her frame would grow in vitality. Whereas in his first days with her, he would be driving their encounters, at least to an extent, she had now begun to take on a life of her own. He would no longer imagine her in fantastic settings or the course of her past life; rather, she would sit with him in his life. There was no speech, for somehow, speech seemed to break the spell. But they sat and spoke with their eyes, and sometimes with gestures. One evening, she had even enchanted him by telling a kind of story in pantomime, and at some point, she walked in place making funny eyes, prat-falled backwards and laughed, and he laughed.

Eventually, he could hear her laughter, which was indeed golden, and he could sometimes hear her hum a soft song. At times, they would simply sit with each other: she absorbed in needlework, or a book; he in a book, or playing his guitar. And he would study her, and sometimes she would look at him, particularly when he played a melody, which he often did for her. But he could not speak or touch her, and the spell would weaken in the late evening. Edwin learned that it could only be prolonged if he slept and followed her into some unseen realm. As he lay in bed, he sensed her ahead of him, walking. And soon he would sleep, Mildred gradually slipping away from his dreams.

Morning would come, and he would wake up late and alone. His mornings and days were rather humdrum, particularly in contrast with the magic of the evening. He had been living off his savings since he quit his job and had nowhere to be. He often spent his days trying to render her beauty in some medium, to make something he could hold onto while he awaited her. His small apartment was littered with literary scratchings, odes and sonnets about Mildred, sketches of her figure, of

her face, of just her mouth, or her eyes, or her ears, or her neck. But try as he might, he could not capture even a hint of the song of her soul. At best, he captured aspects of her shell, perhaps an isolated part of her, but never her symphony. He would always see some other woman in his efforts, not Mildred as he saw and knew her. His attempts reminded Edwin only of his failure to provide the world with any objective evidence that she existed, to bring forth even a shadow of her. Ultimately, she was imprisoned in him, and he with her. Only in each other did they live. His days were torment. He longed to breathe her scent, to feel her warmth, and to trace her skin; sight alone was granted to him. But that sight was no mere glimpse: her visible presence possessed him, eclipsing the rest of his life.

Edwin became increasingly emaciated and frail. The few friends and family he had were effectively banished from his life. He had nothing he could say to them. It was all impossible to explain, and it hurt him to try. And in his haunted condition, he did not have much room for them in his heart. Edwin's diet of water, bread, and tobacco barely anchored him to the world. It was only natural that when winter came, the flu found Edwin and brought him to his bed, frail and burning with fever.

He sensed her beside his bed. It was her smell, at first, a sweet, earthy, yet otherworldly fragrance, like the spring meadows of his childhood and something of the sea. He had not smelled her before, yet knew it was her; it could only be her. He felt her hand holding a cold compress to his forehead. At length, he managed to open his eyes and gaze upon her. Mildred looked at him with soft, worried eyes and smiled gently. She gestured that he should lie down, pushing him back with a soft touch. Despite his attempt to stay awake, he sank into a dreamless sleep.

Edwin woke again, and Mildred brought him a bowl of warm broth. She propped him up on a pillow and fed him a few spoonfuls, as he studied her in awe. Edwin tried calling out to her, speaking her name and saying everything that was in his heart to her all at once, but he found himself speaking nonsense, and she pressed his hand with concern and assured him, by some inward means, that everything was ok and that he must rest. The night was spent in a delirium, with Mildred by his side, attentive to his every need. The last thing he remembered was trying to speak again, to say, "I love you, Mildred." Yet only a confusion of syllables emerged. She nodded and seemed almost to blush, though it could have been a trick of the light. Again, she bid him to rest, and as he lay back, deep sleep took him utterly.

He awoke to a bright morning, his sheets drenched in sweat. He sat up and felt his damp brow, cool to the touch. His fever had left, and with it, so had Mildred. There only remained the same sweet, subtle scent that had hung on her as she nursed him. He became aware of intense hunger pangs and soon rang up the local deli to deliver food, which he ate with a strange passion. After feeding at the trough, for so it felt, and finally sated, he reclined on his sofa, closed his eyes, and napped, still dwelling on her newly discovered scent. He awoke after a short spell, the sun so bright it was pouring into even his small-windowed apartment, and he felt an urge to go outside. He walked about, breathing in the fresh air and taking in the city. After a quick dinner, he returned for his vesperal appointment with Mildred. As the hour arrived, he took out his guitar and tinkered with a simple melody, keeping an eye out for her entrance. But he saw and felt nothing. As more time passed, he decided to be more active. He tried to recall Mildred when she had nursed him. He could remember her scent, which still lingered in his apartment, and her touching his head, but he could not picture her. He felt a curious lack of sensation around her, as if he was groping in the dark for her face and could feel only empty air. He stood up with a start, his heart beating in fear. His legs were shaky under him, and he was forced to support himself back onto the sofa. He repeated Mildred's name, trying to grasp anything about her. But his noetic eyes had been pecked out. He was blind, and all was oblivion.

He spent the next day in repeated attempts to summon her memory. He could not even clearly remember which way she was facing in the portrait, whether she had been looking out at the viewer or off into some middle distance. He looked over all his attempts to capture her, his drawings in particular, but they were all of some other woman, not his Mildred. If he had been lovesick before, tormented by a woman he could not touch, his new affliction was much worse. He had forgotten the woman he loved, the woman whom he had dedicated every waking moment to, the woman who had just nursed him to health and saved him. He knew that he loved her still. But beyond the most generic description, he no longer knew her face or what she looked like. Young woman. Brown hair. Teary-eyed. Perhaps defiant. That was only the bare, crude outline of Mildred's portrait, but not Mildred the singular, the one whom he loved above all else in the world. Not only was she dead, or not-even-dead, as before, but she was now lost to memory.

In the days that followed, Edwin remained in his apartment, stumbling on either side of the line between waking and sleep like a man drunk. The hours were filled with pain and tears. At times,

the urge would come over Edwin to scream into his pillow, to cry out her name across the void. But he did not give in. It had been a year since he had first seen Mildred; a full year of constant immersion in her presence. On the third day, an intense vertigo came over him. It was as if they had been with locked hands, eyes fixed on each other, spinning like children all this time, with no sensation of a world around them. Now that she had let go (or had he, somehow?), the world was all dizziness and nausea.

On the fifth day, the world had settled. He was utterly out of his head, emptied. He looked around the apartment as if he were looking upon his dull emptiness, projected onto the world. What was the difference? Mildred was neither in the world around him nor the world within.

Though his vertigo had subsided, any movement required a tremendous expenditure of will, and Edwin was incapable of it. After another listless day, he drifted to sleep. His dreams were a kaleidoscope of prosaic fragments, with no coherent thread to join them. When he woke, he could only recall being in a boat's cabin, peering out its small window at a moonlit night, trying to make out the stars beyond scrollwork wisps of cloud.

Edwin awoke with the sensation that his apartment was a coffin. After a rushed breakfast, he escaped. The day was spent walking in a trance, looking at nothing. The varied cityscapes and lively noises were one droning dissonant chord to Edwin, which washed over him as he trudged on.

The next day he did the same, and the day after that. Those who noticed him passing each day saw a disheveled young man with a pale ghostly face, chain smoking and walking in some tunnel of his mind, acknowledging the world only as needed to overcome the various obstacles it put in his way. Many souls are cursed to wander the Earth with a nameless void in their heart; Edwin was not so unique. But unlike those other poor souls, Edwin's void had a name.

His thoughts ran in mad circles. If the portrait did not exist in the first place, how had he come to know Mildred? If the exhibit was not real, where had he gone? Had he stepped into some other world when he found Mildred, and had his connection to it now been severed? Was he completely insane, confusing a fevered dream with reality, and falling in love with some specter of his unconscious mind? Or was Edwin the subject of some evil contrivance of some cruel god, who

tormented him for a perverse pleasure? And whatever the truth, why had God, the One and Almighty, allowed this to happen? All these thoughts would spiral around Mildred, the named longing at the center of his soul, and he would again try to grasp at her, for anything of her. But there was only mist.

Each day was more or less like the one before. But gradually, with the passing months, the pain diminished in strength, and the chasm in his soul narrowed to a fissure, though one he continued to search into with aching devotion. His daily wanderings had given him renewed strength, nourished by his appetite, which had been awakened the day Mildred left. He paid his mother and father a visit in his newfound strength and apologized for his absence, though telling them little. At least in his body, he felt that his life now had a continuity with who he was before Mildred, though even in his physical strength, he still preferred to be alone and to spend his days walking.

One spring afternoon, he strolled down a quaint boulevard, a quiet part of the city that retained a bit of the old-world air, with brick walls and sidewalks, gas lamps, and narrow alleyways, situated on a hill overlooking the rest of the city. He was wondering, as he often did in his mind's still-unsettled orbit, whether he had ever known Mildred, that is, as she truly was, when his thoughts were interrupted by the sight of sky overhead, a bright blue dome with luminous clouds of elaborate blooming billows, the perfect sky for divination and children's fancies. Pareidolia, he thought. That is what the mood mechanics call it, finding meaning in the chaos. He had often considered the possibility that he was like the Pygmalion of myth, who carved a statue of his ideal woman out of ivory and fell in love with it. Indeed, this is what a quack would have probably told him, that as a child finds a ship in the clouds, Edwin had constructed a mere fantasy from the portrait of some unknown woman.

Though he would have given anything for an ending like the tale, he rejected that interpretation. He knew she was real, though the world might tell him otherwise. She had visited him and touched him in the flesh during his illness. And even if that had been some flu-induced fantasy, which he knew it was not, she had been with him for a magical year; they had been in each other's presence, they had beheld one another. He knew that she knew that he loved her.

But had she loved him? Was Mildred perhaps some lost spirit whom he had awakened from some enchanted slumber, who looked upon Edwin with favor as the author of her resurrection, but who,

in the wake of his convalescence, was liberated, her debt paid? Had she perhaps returned to her sleep, no longer tethered to this world by Edwin because of some spell broken by his illness, or some subtle act of faithlessness on his part? These thoughts tormented him, and he meandered through them and other well-traveled tributaries of painful doubt and wonder.

A man with a briefcase, in a tunnel of his own, crashed into Edwin, and with a quick backward arm of acknowledgment, shouted in his wake, "Excuse me!" Worlds colliding, Edwin mused. He looked around at the various passersby, each traveling on their lines of thought and space. He felt the beauty of the scene before him, of the sea of people, and the sense of some vantage point that might allow him to see the hidden strands of meaning connecting these mutual strangers.

He obtained a seat at the corner cafe. Edwin sipped his coffee and smoked, simply sitting in the scene before him, beholding it without clinging to it. Perhaps it was he who was now in a painting, Edwin continued musing. And then, suddenly, as if his life had begun to have its page turned, he felt distinctly two songs within himself. The song of Mildred, the soft, sweet, now sad song of Mildred that his soul had been singing for so long. And the song of the world around him, of the bustling crowd, and its beauty. He felt in that moment a strange potential to direct the course of his life and thoughts: to let the page be turned, to let his soul be led down a new current, and let Mildred go.

Again, he wondered, as if perhaps for the last time: "Did she even love you?" His soul answered softly, but clearly in the stillness, "I do not know, I hope so." Then decisively, "I love Mildred. She is everything." The moment passed, and Edwin felt a silent peace come over him and sat in it for a moment. A gust of wind fluttered about him, knocking napkins and hats off their platforms. Edwin looked back up into the sky, at the cumulus clouds now towering over the city, and saw Mildred, smiling at him with beaming eyes. Then the contours of her face softened, her outline frayed into wisps, and there was only vapor.

