

# The Watchmaker's Pupil

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# Chapter 1

## Premeditation

Inside a wooden structure, too small to be properly called a house, without a foundation, without any floor to cover the dirt, cross-legged on the ground, pencil in hand, eyes closed, she thought. She thought of strange abstract structures, their relationships to one another, their properties. She thought of philosophers and philosophies, religions, principles, governments of nations, and the proper government of the soul.

She opened her eyes, and looked at the sheet of paper in front of her. She erased two instances of the same symbol, one in the center of the page, and one near the top, and wrote another line — not quite a sentence, and not quite a formula — at the bottom. The page was nearly full of writing, now. She smiled, and set the pencil on the earth. She closed her eyes again, and returned to the meditation she had interrupted.

She smelled smoke.

It reminded her of the smell of birthday candles. She hadn't celebrated a birthday in years. There was something about birthday cake that made it taste different from ordinary cakes, something about cheap little birthday candles, burning away merrily by the dozen, that set them apart from ordinary candles.

She loved that smell. But as time went on, the smell of the smoke changed. It seemed as if the initial resemblance was just a mistake, the way a person you see far off can look exactly like an old friend, the way you get ready to say hello to them, how are you, how have you been, already smiling, and you come closer, and it's not the old man you knew it was at all, but a young woman with light hair that reflected the sunlight strangely, and she gives you a look that says, what on earth gives you the right to smile as if you know me?

This wasn't the smell of birthday candles, she realized. It was the smell of a house burning.

She thought of the last time she had celebrated a birthday. It was her fortieth. At the time, she still had close friends. She still had connections to the world of people and cliques and politics and gossip. It was a nice life.

She had sufficient reason to leave it, however. The life she had been reborn into was fascinating in itself. She was freer, wiser, more open, more adaptive. She felt no pain when former friends died, for she lost nothing. Her life before her rebirth had its advantages, but she learned to live without them. It had been time to move on, to leave behind. And she did.

Just as the smoke began to become dense enough to make breathing noticeably difficult, she concluded that this, now, here was another time to move on.

## Chapter 2

# Cat

Lin Em sat in a dusty corner of the room, holding her knees close to her chest. Her eyes were open, staring, terrified. She whispered to herself.

Her hair was a red-laced dark brown. It was the sort of color you'd expect a public park's picnic tables to be painted. It jumped out from behind her ears in curves bending in on themselves, like waves in an old Japanese woodcut.

Across the room from her there was a table. On the table was a cat. The cat licked itself patiently. The wet sound of its tongue against its fur, despite being barely audible, was still the most noticeable sound in the room. The only other sounds at all, as far as Lin could hear, were that of her own breathing, and a few clocks in the other room ticking and whirring.

Lin was staring at the cat. The cat, she was convinced beyond all question, knew what she was thinking. It heard every thought. It heard her fear of it. It knew why she was afraid of it. It would know in advance of any plan she might plot against it. It knew more than her. She stood no chance. This is why she was afraid.

There was a contest here, between the cat and her. She realized this. She knew, of course, that the cat had already come to this conclusion. The cat was smarter. She accepted this. She had to find some other advantage. Some advantage. She had to win without depending on being able to outwit it. She had to reach the door, the exit, before it did. She noted three things. One, she was larger. Two, she was capable of being unpredictable. She was certainly capable of acting before thinking about it enough to broadcast her thoughts to the enemy. Three, she was closer to the door. That should be enough, she thought. Although this meant the cat must know that it was in a disadvantageous position, at least by these three measures. It must have prepared something. It was planning, she thought, and narrowed her eyes, so as to give away less of her emotional state.

In point of fact the cat was sniffing at the surface of the table. There was a small piece of day-old bacon in a crack in the wood. The cat ate it, and returned to licking itself.

Lin loosened her grip on her legs. She stretched them out across the floor a bit, and beat some of the dust off her sandals. She pushed her hands against the floor for support, and slowly — and as silently as possible — got to her feet. She fixed her eyes, meanwhile, on the cat as she stood. It had finished cleaning its back and had moved on to its back legs.

She took a couple tentative steps, trying to avoid the noisier parts of the wood floor. Having lived in this house for entire life — almost twenty-seven years now — it wasn't hard to remember where they were. She surveyed the room.

The table took up most of the room. The room was a rectangle of about the same proportions as the table in it. The floor was rows of expensive-looking buffed hardwood, but the table, from its appearance, might have spent another life as a prop for a film about medieval kings, a feast-table in some ridiculously outfitted historical reconstruction of a castle hall. The top was three huge slabs of wood glued together, on top of four legs each of which was probably heavier than Lin could hold for any length of time, if she could get them off the ground at all. Not that this was a relevant measure of their weight, she thought. She had no plans to try to take the table apart. But maybe that was exactly what it was counting on.

Of course the cat wouldn't expect her to disassemble the table it was resting on. That was precisely the right thing to do. She thought about where she could find an axe, or maybe a sledgehammer. No! It was too late. She had already thought about it too much. She had to find a different plan. She had to leave the house as quickly as possible, without making any more noise.

The dust in the air made her want terribly to cough. She knew she could not. It would be too loud. It would give away her position. It would reveal too much. She tried as hard as she could not to, but failed.

The cat looked up. She froze. Her throat was tense. It's finally ready to attack me, she thought. It was just letting me think I could escape. There are more of them outside. More of its family. Its kin. It's calling them. They will attack me too. They had this planned from the beginning. They're all smarter than me. They see what I'm thinking before I do.

She barely breathed. Her left hand shook. She tried to suppress it. She shoved it into the pocket of her jeans. She fidgeted with its contents, a crumpled one-euro note, and two 30-cent coins.

The cat batted at a wandering fly, and returned to licking itself.

Lin waited for five or six more minutes before concluding — not without some surprise — that the cat was probably not going to attack her. At least not yet. She continued towards the door, listening carefully for any sounds coming from outside. She heard nothing. The cat coughed twice, trying to loosen something in its throat, bounced off the table, and walked unceremoniously, in the direction totally opposite to the one in which Lin was so carefully moving, into the adjoining room.

Lin stood near the exit of the house, completely baffled. The adrenaline slowly drained out of her mood. She stood up more normally, more relaxed.

She straighten her hair. She walked the remaining few feet to the door, opened it, and stepped outside into the rain, enjoying the clean, cold water washing over her forehead.

“That cat certainly is smarter than me,” she said, to nobody in particular. “But that is strange,” she responded, as if taking the other side of the argument, “because, after all, I built it.”

She suddenly wondered why she hadn’t already heard the rain.



## Chapter 3

# Sisters and Brothers

He stood on an empty box of frosted peach-lemon slices, in a clearing through which passed a small walkway. The walkway connected the north part of the park to the south half, and to the highway leading downtown. Preskar John stood on the box, threw back his shoulders, and tried to make eye contact with the occasional passing pedestrian.

They all noticed that he seemed a little too eager to begin a conversation, and as soon as each person noticed they suddenly became extremely interested in their own feet, or the setting sun, or a bush off in the distance. He would mutter a bland greeting from time to time, or tip his ragged hat, turn his head to follow the course of a deliberately inattentive jogger, waiting for a response, but he never got one.

If Preskar was ever discouraged, he didn't show it. Then again, the way he smiled revealed nothing. You'd think he would keep smiling like that if someone punched him in the face. It was clearly so practiced and so strained that it seemed more likely that it would take a phenomenal amount of will-power on his part to stop smiling. His eyes were barely visible with his cheeks flung so high from the rising, almost painfully stretched corners of his mouth, but a bit of color still showed through them, a clear, whitish blue.

Finally there were enough people in the vicinity – a man unable to leave quite yet because his dog hadn't finished urinating, a couple that had met there by chance and had begun a conversation, and an old woman sitting on a bench feeding small pieces of a jelly donut to the pigeons – that he decided to begin his rehearsed speech. He held his hands in front of his waist without being conscious of it, each forefinger pressed against the thumb as if still holding onto the index cards he practiced with. He inhaled.

"Friends, friends, my friends! My sisters and brothers!" he said, smiling his unwavering smile, the tone of his voice dripping with the unmistakable melody and rhythm of a preacher. "I have come here to tell you — no, I should say instead, my sisters and brothers, I have come in the midst of a great ecstasy. I am overflowing with joy to be here among you all.

I have come here on a mission of education and enlightenment, to take upon myself the sublime burden of teaching, to take into my two hands this wonderful opportunity to share with you all the wisdom and thoughts of my teacher, the benevolent and wise Parni Eratharyana.”

He delivered this in a single breath, the tone of his voice shifting slightly, positively glowing with reverence, when he at last said the name of his teacher. Now he clapped his hands together and looked heavenward in an exaggerated gesture of thankfulness. There was, at this point, no way he could possibly see the reaction of any of his accidental audience. His face was tied up in such a squinting grin that his eyes were completely shut.

“I have come here today,” he said, “to tell you all about, I say to you, to bring you a message, a most holy message, of the seven virtues of the benevolent and wise, my beloved teacher, Parni Eratharyana.

“I will not overwhelm you, no, I will not pour an ocean of virtue into your ears, my sisters and brothers, not yet — I will not tell you the whole story of virtue today, for I will just tell you a little. I will on this day tell you all gathered here, I will tell you a story, just a little story, of just one face and aspect of just one of the seven virtues taught by the most benevolent and most wise among us, may she live to teach ten thousand more among us.”

He held on to the *s* sound at the end, as if lingering on the final resolution chord of a prelude to a fugue. He inhaled deeply again, and this time actually exhaled before beginning to speak again.

“I have come here today, my sisters and brothers, to tell you a story about the virtue of Signs.”

## Chapter 4

### Page

There was a sheet of paper stapled to a telephone pole, in the east of the city, near the ocean. It looked like a fifth-generation photocopy of a crude drawing of an anthropomorphic raccoon wearing a construction-site hard-hat, giving a thumbs-up that floated outside a thick, black frame that surrounded the rest of the image. Above the raccoon's head was another thick-bordered rectangle, and inside it was written the number 1689 in clumsy, blocky numerals. Below its feet were another three rectangles, arranged in a horizontal row, each one empty.



## Chapter 5

# Clockwork

She stood in the rain for about ten minutes, and became quite cold. Getting wet didn't bother her — if anything, she enjoyed it, enjoyed the feeling of being washed clean by the sky itself — but the year was moving into late autumn, and standing motionless in a light shirt and jeans in the rain wasn't something she felt like doing for too long.

Once back inside, Lin paid attention to the sound of the house. She could hear the rain hissing on the roof quite clearly now. She strained to think why she hadn't noticed it earlier. Maybe it had just started raining when she got outside, she thought. Maybe she caused it! Of course. The intensity of her fear disrupted the weather, ripping entire clouds in half.

She began to think about how she might determine which emotions went with which patterns of weather. Evidently, she would need to begin keeping notes on both fronts. She thought back to the memorably destructive rainstorms two summers ago, and felt guilty. What had she been feeling like, then? More or less stable. Much less agitated than now. She had taken the summer off. No work at all. Just watched television and ate four meals a day. A fantastic summer. But if that contentment was responsible for seventeen injured and one dead, then what?

Her thoughts rose to a soft murmur: "I had better be more careful in the future," she said, facing the bookshelf behind the table.

One book in particular caught her eye and distracted her from her meteorological delusions. Its cover was an ugly species of yellow, some disowned cousin of proper shades of lemon and sun-yellow, that had in all probability had some unfortunate relations with a similarly untouchable off-pine-green, and never quite recovered.

Most of the books on the shelf were quiet browns and grays, so it wasn't very hard to notice this one. Lin paced around the table, towards the shelf, removed the book, and read its spine.

It was titled, "An Introduction to the Theory and Methods of Clockwork".



## Chapter 6

# Regrettable Past

“Now, the story I am about to tell you, my sisters and brothers, comes directly from the most holy and revered teachings of the benevolent and wise Parni Eratharyana, directly from her serene lips, from her, through myself, her humble and proud messenger, to you on this blessed, blessed day.

“There was a time when I was a young man – a child, to tell the truth – an immature child, a child seeking answers and meaning and purpose in my life, forever seeking, and for many years seeking in the most wretchedly wrong of wrong places.

“I tell you now, my sisters and brothers, though it pains me to tell you, that I sought the answers in many shameful things. I do not tell you to make you pity me, and I do not tell you that you should look up to me for my strength, that I was able to overcome my former, sinful state. For it was indeed not my strength that mattered, friends.

“No indeed, I tell you about my regrettable past only so that you may see that I am no different than many of you, and so that you may see that even if you have been led these false answers, these false but sublimely tempting false answers, that there is no obstacle that cannot be overcome by the teaching of the benevolent and wise Parni Eratharyana.”

Preskar paused, and though he did not stop smiling, his mouth turned a little, and his eyes widened, and his expression seemed somehow more sad.

“My friends, my sisters, my brothers,” he said, slowly, building a tone of regretful sorrow, “there once was a time when I did not listen to those who knew better than I knew, a time when I was willful and arrogant. I was filled with an arrogance that was watered by the foul waters of ignorance, and not the pure, righteous pride that is taught by the benevolent and wise Parni Eratharyana.

“And this arrogance grew, and grew, and truly it grew without limit, and soon I was eating food and drinking as many as seven, sometimes eight times a day. Eight meals a day, my sisters and brothers! Can you imagine, can you fathom, can you comprehend the sea of depravity that my soul was drowning in?”

His tone rose for emphasis each time he said essentially the same thing a different way, so that it was now almost a scream. He had been sweating liberally, so much that it visibly stained his thin, cheap shirt.

“Now you know, my friends, that we in this world have invented many forms of food and drink, for our amusement, for our enjoyment, for our pleasure. But pleasure is not the goal of our lives, it is not the final destination, no, it is at best a distraction! We need not eat, we need not drink, we need but the air around us to breathe.

“Eating is not sinful, in itself, my sisters and brothers. Drinking is not sinful, in itself. But in the depths of immoderation to which they can carry you or me – and truly, there, to this abyss they had carried me – there is wickedness.”

## Chapter 7

# Mill

A bus passed the telephone pole, disturbing the piles of dry, dead oak leaves on the sidewalk. The breeze it left in its wake was also just enough to detach the poster with the picture of the raccoon on it from the pole. It had not been stapled too carefully, and the wood of the pole was rotting anyway.

The weather was humid and windy, and the raccoon floated quite a distance, down the slope of a hill and across the width of the road, before settling noiselessly on a patch of black asphalt, a patching-up of a weather-worn crack in the pavement.

A group of aggressively-dressed people appeared from around a corner, arguing about last century's philosophers and laughing at indecent jokes. One of them happened to step on the poster as she walked, leaving a muddy boot-print.

She stopped with a whispered "oh, shit", and turned to her cliquemates, now a few steps ahead of her, having turned around after realizing she had fallen behind. Her nose-ring still swung back and forth a few times from the sudden stop. "Shit, shit, shit. I totally forgot," she said, "classes at the Mill start today. I'm, like, five minutes late already." She was almost running now, shouting back with her head turned. "I'll see y'guys tonight still, right?"

The crowd, as if with one voice, echoed a vague sort of "yeah". Any more of an involved reaction than that would have seemed unnatural to them. They continued on without her, a little bummed that they would have to put off their plans for another few hours. Still, it was good she was getting a bit more education. With any luck, she might get into the first degrees of the Mill in a year or two. Talk about moving up!

They only hoped she wouldn't change too much, once she made her way up. Assuming she did make her way up, eventually. Which most of them did. She was a bit flaky now and then — I mean, hell, she was late for classes on the first day; that can't look good — but there was no arguing that she was smart. Besides that, she had a ridiculously good memory for history, for some reason. It was as if every biography she read was about

her own great-grandfather, the way she cared about it so fucking much. She remembered every last date and tombstone and skirmish down to how spicy the hot sauce on the general's last omelette was, because it all mattered to her. Every detail was just as arbitrary as any other, and so they were all equally fascinating to her.

There was no denying that Wei was smart, that was for fucking sure. She was going places. She was already going out to the Mill! For someone who had lasted ten years in the Prostitute's Niece after getting out of Blacks-and-Purples, now that, there, that was quite a fucking achievement.

Still they hoped she wouldn't be like *that* guy, or *that* stick-up-her-ass bitch they all knew. They had to cut down on the customary level of Mill shit-talking once Wei made Audit at the Mill, but it by no means had disappeared. Besides, it wasn't really ever Wei they were insulting, it was those Mill fuckers. None of the insults stuck to her, since she didn't fit any of the stereotypes the jokes depended on.

Her laugh was low and wild, not the patronizing, high-pitched, sniffing titter the Mill reserved for only the most amusing stories of the perennial territorial disputes between the Niece and the Fire Brigade. Her speech, even when she was in the middle of her most brilliantly constructed rhetoric, was satisfyingly vulgar. She didn't euphemize, she said what she meant. And tossed in a "motherfucking" or two for good measure. Conversations at the Mill were like concerts without percussion. Or fucking amps, for that matter.

No, it was okay. Wei still wasn't really with them, yet. Maybe, they hoped, she wouldn't ever really feel like she was. Just get some solid education, and move up to some other place, some quality place with less of an attitude. Shit, she probably wouldn't remember anything about Prostitute's Niece once she was fifty cliques down the road, but that was too far in the future to worry about. What mattered now was keeping her from going from being in the Mill, to *being* Mill. An easy job, they figured.

## Chapter 8

# Textbook

She turned the book over and looked at the back cover. It was nice to remember the beginning of her training. The first couple of years were so easy, so exciting. On the first day, when Teacher gave her her own copy of this book, she sighed and thought to herself of all of the machines and mechanisms and toys that she, as a child, had loved and obsessed over and taken apart and reassembled (even though most often it was incorrectly so), and now they were going to begin to flow from her own fingers!

For her own amusement, she read the text on the back cover out loud, in the best mockery that she could manage of her Teacher's shaky, sing-song lecturing voice :

“This text, an unmistakable and indubitable classic, and a more comprehensive introduction to the field than ever before, now that it has seen its eighth edition, thanks to the keen editorial watchfulness of none other than the late Professor Aardwirth's son, an eminent scholar in his own right, the Doctor I. J. Aardwirth, Jr. It is an indispensable companion to any beginner in the School of Clockmaking, and a work of art unto itself.

“No prior knowledge of physics is assumed. A complete description can be found herein, appropriate to the level of the beginning student, of the mechanics of gears, the relevant properties of all common materials required, both organic and inorganic, and the efficient use of forever-wire.

“The explanations are surpassingly clear and precise. The exercises are so compellingly enjoyable that they seem as games, but so instructive as to be almost as good as a replacement for a skilled instructor.

“But we can hardly in good conscience recommend (though with such an exemplary text, it is indeed possible) that the student should pursue their studies independently. The *Theory and Methods* was written explicitly with an eye toward the concerns of the teacher. The five-centuried expert in advanced high-temperature organic interface mechanics, when faced with a room full of impatient students, can profitably look to its contents, for the pedagogical techniques are of the very highest calibre. Indeed, even teachers of unrelated subjects may find its advice enlightening and useful.

“We, the controllers of the publishing house of Roedman & Roedman, can not begin to express our pride in providing this textbook to the public, nor the extent of the congratulations owed to you, the reader, for your discriminating taste in making such an exceedingly wise purchase.

“We are confident that the memory of its author, a close personal friend of Hans Roedman’s, is served well by this, the first posthumous revision to appear since his unfortunate murder, since which has passed seven years, at the time of publication. It is to be hoped that his genius will have a place secured for it in the pages of history, thanks to the enjoyment and enlightenment he has caused for so many of his readers. We finally hope that you will soon join their number!”

Lin turned the book over once more, and looked at the illustration on the front. It was a collage of a dozen or two photographs, draughtman’s-pencil drawings, and oddly romantic paintings of gears and joints and springs.

Her classmates, when she had just started classes, when indeed there were classes instead of private tutors and two- or three-person work groups, thought it quite strange that the master-practitioners, the bookwriters, the instructors, had all fallen so hard for their art. But Lin, in turn, didn’t have any ability to understand their point of view. How could you stand the amount of tedium and effort such an endeavour required if you didn’t love it?

Lin loved it so much, she knew she didn’t even want to know why. It was sealed into her, a secret twist in the folds of her brain that leaked pure contentment and joy, flooded the rest of her thoughts with it, if she only behaved the right way, and fooled that imperfection in her brain into turning on, opening up, releasing. If only she *made* things.

She felt it was an imperfection, but she had accepted it.

In the same way, she could (and did, from time to time) look at a face and fall in love with whatever person dreamed behind its closed eyes, look without thinking, simply passing along the image to a deeper part of herself for approval, and find that she loved it. It was the same feeling as when she made things, built big things out of little, complicated from simple, when she built, from things that could be understood, things that could not.

It was an imperfection that she could enjoy without any reason at all, she thought to herself now, while *Theory and Methods* fell open on her lap to the middle of chapter seven, but a necessary imperfection, for otherwise she could not enjoy anything. Pleasure had to start somewhere.

It would cheapen the affair to dig below that primitivity, to understand the basic pleasures. It would, no doubt, reveal itself to be tiny gears and wires and pipes and juices. Doing such a thing would be taking apart, making understood things that were once obscure and beautiful. Lin didn’t take things apart — she put them together.

Lin fingered the edge of a page, and turned it over. She looked at the first few paragraphs, and tried to commit them to memory. She closed her eyes, and moved her lips to the words as she saw them floating back, hazy and inverted. She looked back at the page. Three, maybe four errors. Unforgiv-

able. She definitely had to start practicing daily again. Not today, though. She was far too tired. The episode earlier today was evidence enough of that.

Whatever could it have been that made her think such unlikely things about the cat? What reason was there to fear it? She hadn't even built in claws, which, come to think of it, was even surprising. Realism was usually top priority. After all, why would you build something that looked merely sort of cat-like if you weren't simply failing in the more obvious task of making it a perfect imitation? But she hadn't put claws in, and she used plastic instead of ivory for the teeth. That was an even stranger decision, she thought. Ivory's cheaper this time of year. How long have I been afraid?

She tried to listen to the sound of the rain, but it kept slipping away from her ability to focus on it.



## Chapter 9

# Jelly Donut

Preskar John looked at his audience again. He had hardly paid any attention, between the time he started talking and the present moment, to whether anyone was actually listening to him.

There was only one listener that had lasted through the prelude, the pigeon feeder. Everyone else had found some reason to leave. The walkway was fairly well-trafficked, however, so at any given time there were still a handful of people around. Every now and then one of them would even stop and listen for a minute, wondering why the man standing on the empty box was so excited.

The woman's jelly donut was almost exhausted.

"Friends, I felt, every morning when I woke up, when I opened my eyes, and left my bed, I felt a desire to eat, and when I finished eating I was satisfied for at most an hour or two. And this feeling of satisfaction, my sisters and brothers, not only did it last a shorter and shorter duration with each passing day, not only did it become weaker, not only did it shrink and wither like a flowering tree thrust into darkness, it was, from the beginning, a false satisfaction.

"Soon this false satisfaction diminished so much that I could not go five minutes," he said, holding his hand in front of him with his fingers spread, as if teaching a child how to count, "without thinking of when I would eat next. So much that I thought I would surely die if I never ate again. So much, my friends, that I was willing to go to unspeakable lengths to find enough money to buy meal after meal after meal.

"I tell you now, my sisters and brothers, though it pains me to tell you, that I stole, I attacked my friends and sisters and brothers in this world, though at the time I did not — having not yet been blessed by the potent healing power of the teachings of the benevolent and wise Parni Eratharyana — I did not think of them as my sisters and brothers. No, I thought of them as my enemies, holding what might have been money, holding what could be my property if only I took it, having and holding and hoarding the food I wanted to eat, having things that were just as rightfully

mine as theirs.

His hat struggled to stay on his head during this part of the speech, convulsing as much as he did with every phrase, emphatically crouching and wincing at every pause, every comma, and standing up, full height, when a sentence finished, leaning forward, fists clenched in evangelical passion, sweat dripping from his nose.

“Why, you,” he gestured towards the woman on the bench. Her lap was half-covered by pigeons. “If you had met me before I had found my true self, my righteous self, before I had rediscovered my soul, if you had met me before, you would not have been safe. I would not have thought it wrong to cut your hand off, just to steal that crumb from you. At that time, I had no respect at all for the dignity of my fellow human being.”

An attentive viewer — not that there were any present — would have seen the tongue of Preskar John to peek through his closed lips for a moment as he said this.

“But I do not tell you this for your pity, and I do not tell you this so that you fear and distrust me, I say to you again, that I only say these things so that when you say to yourself, ‘can I achieve what this man has achieved with his life?’, when you say to yourself, ‘is it truly possible that I can scour the dirt from my heart, and dissolve the black tar that congests my soul, can I sweep away the ashes in my mind, ash from the fires of immoderate desire?’, my friends, when you ask yourself, ‘can I be remade as a new, complete, and righteous person by the wisdom of Parni Eratharyana, the benevolent and wise?’, I tell these pitiful stories so that when you ask yourself these questions, you can answer without hesitation, with a resounding and rejoicing Yes!”

Preskar removed an unhygienic-looking square of cloth from his back pocket, and wiped some of the sweat off of his forehead and cheeks. They still shined wetly. He breathed heavily now, but he seemed to be trying to calm down. He took off his hat, and held it to his chest. He looked down, but still spoke loudly enough to be easily heard.

“I wander, however, my friends, from my original purpose, the purpose for which I came here on this blessed, blessed day. And my purpose was to tell you all gathered here a story from my life, a story which is not meant to elicit pity nor fear nor even to teach you again that no amount of sin is beyond the power of my benevolent and wise teacher.

“It is a story — I should say, my sisters and brothers, it is *the* story — of how I came to stop eating.”

The woman on the bench was no visible except for her faintly, vacantly smiling face, for the rest of her was occluded by squabbling pigeons.

## Chapter 10

# Entrance

Wei worried, too.

She worried, on the one hand, that she wasn't really good enough for the Mill. She feared they had made some mistake letting her even on the premises. Nobody from the Niece or the Brigade was even allowed within earshot of the Mill's official outer border. They had bought up all the surrounding land unofficially, under different names, so that they wouldn't even have to listen directly to the fights as they were actually going on. They preferred to read about it the next day.

But she made Audit, didn't she? A small devil in the back of her mind whispered that they must have fucked up when they were grading, switched hers with that colossal tool's, the Mill-lifer sitting in front of her when she took the exam. Some shit like that. Wei knew her friends in the Niece thought she was smart, but she never believed them. What the fuck did anyone in the Prostitute's Niece know about smart? Fuck all this, she muttered. I should just go back to the Blacks-and-Purples. Learn something fucking useful. Not have anyone telling me any bullshit about being smart.

Despite saying this, she kept walking in the same direction.

She walked through a passage between two oddly-shaped concrete buildings. The one on her left looked like it went about five stories up, and got narrower the farther up you went, all the windows set at an angle to accommodate its slight nod to pyramidness, and the one on the right did the opposite, only not as smoothly, and not as much. Each floor jutted out abruptly half a foot, maybe a foot, beyond the previous one, while the pyramid sloped a good yard smaller per story. They were both flatly and featurelessly vertical, however, on the side that adjoined the other building. The narrow passage between them — Wei didn't have unusually long arms, but she still couldn't extend them fully without scraping her fingers on both walls — was dark, cool, and quiet.

The walls were, of course, a dry, speckled concrete gray for the most part, but near the ground they were black and dirty, covered by graffiti. Wei stepped around a sleeping man — he's just sleeping, she told herself,

and after a half dozen times, she almost believed herself — and bumped her elbow against the wall of the anti-pyramid. It came away with a dusty black stain on it. She suddenly remembered where she was.

This was the Yezbee entrance to the Mill. Old Yes-or-Maybe territory, before they fell apart. The Mill bought them out cheap just as they were dying for lack of students, took their name, took their land, built some scary shit on top to keep the natives out, and went back home in time for tea. Or whatever the fuck it was they drank over there. Lord, did that ever suck the piss out of the Fire Brigade. They had been balls-to-cock close to Yes-or-Maybe for, like, a hundred and fifty years. They must have been spraying themselves and anything unlucky enough to be in range in righteous anger. She laughed an evil-sounding laugh through her nose.

Right, right, right. There was so much ash on the walls here, they must have napalmed the fuck out of this alley. The whole area, really. I guess the Mill just cleaned up everywhere else, she thought. Make it look like there was still a group operating here, just quietly. Quiet as a girl sucking her boy with her father downstairs, to be sure, but you never know — maybe it actually fooled some people. Probably kids around today that weren't around for the Brigade's little RSVP message, kids that think Yes-or-Maybe is still here, 'cause that's what daddy in the Mill told them.

Had to give the Brigade credit, if nothing else, for being capable of a nice professional "fuck you" job. If nothing else, indeed. What a tribe of empty-headed cuntlickers. Food and sex and setting things on fire, twenty hours a day, just in time for an hour of juvenile bickering they have the balls to call class, and a few hours of sleep before starting again. And they had such god-awfully pathetically shitty taste in music. Her tongue hung past her teeth in an involuntary expression of disgust.

She worried, of course, on the other hand, that the Mill wasn't good enough for her. She hadn't spent ten years imitating formulaic insults without a little bit of it seeping into her way of looking at things. They wouldn't like her for being an outsider, and she wouldn't like them, because they were to the last obnoxious pricks, but she passed the fucking test, and they couldn't argue with that. Even if it was just by luck, she told herself, reflexively.

The alley approached its end as she walked. The angle of the sun was such that it was quite dark in the space between the buildings, but it was still a bright day out. It took a second or two for Wei's eyes to adjust as she emerged. Most everything was still concrete, but there were a few sections of grass here and there, fenced off to prevent too much foot traffic.

Out of Yezbee, into the Old Potter's Mill. It was one thing to know it on a map, another thing entirely to see the entrance yourself, to feel the sudden impact of the light and space and the noise of busy people.

Wei remembered how late she was, and broke into a run. Fortunately she knew exactly where she was going and exactly how to get there. She had in fact looked at a map of the center of the Mill a few weeks ago, the day that she found out she had passed Audit. It would have been unlike

her to have forgotten it already. She passed a wall covered in an array of sheets of paper, about twenty by twenty square, each one bearing the number 1689 and the same hard-hat thumbs-up raccoon. Wei didn't pay the wall of posters much attention.

It was time to learn some fucking history.



# Chapter 11

## Fear

Lin set the book on the table and tried to remember when she had stopped being able to filter out unreasonable fears. Even with her eyes closed and arms crossed, a posture that usually shut out whatever was distracting her from finding the answer to a question, she wasn't able to remember. It had been so long now. She wasn't even sure that that was the right way to put the question.

Was it really just that the fears were always there, and that the mental barrier that separated them from her day-to-day thinking had gotten weaker? Or was there some point when she really was completely and thoroughly free of them? She couldn't remember. It had been far too long.

But somehow she had managed, so far. The barrier was still strong enough that she only seemed a little strange, a little edgy and anxious. The episodes usually came at home, when she was by herself. Being around other people either calmed her down, or else just reminded her that there was an external world that expected her to act in a certain way, and so she did. At least as well as she was capable of. She had managed admirably well, considering how disconnected her thoughts were from the world of possibility. Who knows how long that will last, she whispered fearfully.

She knew things had reached a bad point when the fear looped back on itself. It was bad enough that the cat was making plans to eat her once she fell asleep, cut her up into wet, fleshy strips with ivory claws it installed itself when she turned away, bad enough that the old woman across the street had poisoned her lime-water, bad enough that her friends told horrible lies about her whenever she wasn't part of the conversation. She could *do* something about proper delusions like those. Don't sleep. Don't eat or drink. Forget her friends, and live and work alone.

But when the thing she feared was completely losing control, becoming insane to the point of being unable to hide it, what could she do about it, except sit and wait around for it to happen?

Lin sat in her chair at the unnecessarily large table, and felt tired and a little sad, thinking that she practically trying to cry at her own funeral. It

was a bit premature to assume that she would eventually lose control. This might just be a rough spot before things got better again. Like two years ago. She could stand to have another year like that.

The cat returned from the next room over, and sat at Lin's feet. Its tail moved smoothly, and in fact a little more smoothly than an actual cat's would. She noted this. She'd get the jerk of it right next time. The cat shifted its weight back, jumped into Lin's lap, and nudged her stomach with its head. She scratched its ears affectionately.

## Chapter 12

### Signs

“Friends, at that time I lived in a poor box of a house, I am not ashamed to tell you. For poverty and wealth are completely irrelevant to virtue, as we are taught by the benevolent and wise Parni Eratharyana. It is neither a virtue to be as poor as I was, nor a vice, and it is not righteous to be rich, nor sinful.

“But there came a day when I sat on the steps of the poor box of a house that I rented, and my stomach churned and roared with desire, as empty as my soul, and I meditated on the fact that my rent, even the meager rent on that poor shack, the rent was three months late, for I had spent it all on food.

“And as I sat, trying to think of a way of getting more money, I saw the head of my landlord appearing over the side of the hill whose peak my house rested, and friends, I became scared, and I ran inside my house and I closed the windows, and I shut the door, and I locked it three ways as quickly as I could. Coward that I was, my sisters and brothers, I turned off all the lights, and I held my breath as I heard my landlord knocking on the door.

“The strange thing was, my friends, the thing that had my mind searching for a rational explanation, the thing was, I still heard someone breathing in my house.

“Once I was sure that my landlord had given up trying to find me that day, once I was sure he left his angry note on the door and walked away, I reached for the light switch, I turned it on, and I turned myself around, scared as a rat smelling catnip.

“Friends, I tell you with a touch of embarrassment, that I then looked upon that blessed, blessed face with the most abject terror, for I thought that it belonged to an agent of my landlord, a woman sent to take from me everything I owned, so that I could no longer eat.”

Preskar John laughed. It sounded unnatural, as if he had just read “ha, ha, ha!” from a script, perhaps with a stage direction saying [jovially].

“How wrong I was, my brothers and sisters, and at the same time, how

correct! No, she was not my landlord's agent, she was not on a mission to collect my rent, but she was on a mission to teach me, and to unteach the lies which I had come to believe. She had come to rob me of my sin and my wickedness, to take away the obstacles which I held on to so tightly! Truly, she was on the same mission that I am now, as I stand before you, on this blessed, blessed day.

"She said to me, as I stood in my house, shaking, full of fear and dread, 'Do not be afraid, friend, for I have come here to help you.'

"After I heard this, after I heard the grace of her most serene and beautiful voice, the calm of the indifference of the unmovable earth came upon me, and the nervous tremors in my arms and legs and hands and eyes, a condition that had afflicted me continuously for the past twenty years, ceased at once. After this miracle had occurred, she continued speaking, saying to me, 'I ask nothing of you but that you listen to what I have to say. You need not give me any money, and you need not make me any promises. You need not obey me, but I will but suggest a course of action, and you are free to follow it or reject it.'

"She told me to find a piece of paper. The only thing I had in the house, my sisters and brothers, was a newspaper from which I tore sheets to clean my unmentionable parts when I voided myself of the astonishing quantities of food I consumed. There was but half a sheet left, a half-page advertisement, and I hope that the sense of humor of the cosmos is not lost on you, my friends, in this case, for the advertisement belonged to a restaurant to which I had just gone on that very day, from which I had just returned, a house of immoderation and sin.

"Now, her instructions at this time seemed to me very strange, and I was most perplexed and confused. But there was something in the profound peace in her voice and demeanor that made me supremely eager to learn what she was trying to teach me. She told me to fold the paper in this way, and now that, and she drew my attention to the shapes and figures that the creases made, and she drew a pencil from her pocket, and began to write numbers and symbols, and invited me to contemplate them.

"She said to me, after a great and silent pause, 'All such things that I have shown you know, and many more, are Signs, these shapes and figures and numerals, and by immersing yourself in their beauty you may make yourself clean. Their structure is boundless, infinite, full of unknowably immense riches. If you wish to learn more about them, I will teach you everything I have myself learned. In a lifetime of study, I have discovered an infinitesimal fraction of the eternal dance of the Signs, but already its beauty overwhelms me.'

"I did not know what to think as she first invited me to be her student, but she continued without waiting for my response, saying 'This study, this discipline, it has given me the ability to see things in the world to which unaided humans are blind, the ability to hear music where others hear silence. Not only this, but it has made it possible for me to be blind to sin, and to be deaf to the temptations of the world. With it I can feel proud of

the blissful radiance of my soul, and at the same time humble before the presence of the Limitless Everywhere Always.

“She said, ‘I have discovered that virtue is sevenfold, and I have given the seven virtues names, meaning them no disrespect with my imperfection, and acknowledging the imperfection of my description of their eternal and holy nature: I have called them Signs and Music, Pride and Humility, Unity and Honesty, and Creation.

“At this time, my friends, my soul, weakened by my life of distractions and sinful dissolution, was vanquished, conquered by her unfathomable, immovable peacefulness and compassion. She said one final thing to me, asked me one final question, before she rose and left my house, but in my heart, I had already answered yes.

“She asked me, ‘Do you wish me to return to this place, tomorrow, at sunrise, and begin to teach you the whole of the wisdom that I have discovered?’”



# Chapter 13

## Lecture

Wei stood at the door and strained to look through the frosted glass panel set just above the room's number, which was spelled out in brass numerals screwed into the wood. She fingered the handle.

Just as the muffled sound of the lecture and what little she could make out visually together suggested that the speaker had turned his full body towards the blackboard, she, in a single motion, opened the door, swung her body inside the room, found a desk to sit at, closed the door, and sat down. She made no noise louder than the chalk scratching out the term's curriculum-in-brief.

After a little while, the lecture proper began. Wei found that in such situations she could relax and listen passively, and still be able to remember what she heard later. She had used her time in the classes at the Niece to daydream, check out her classmates, doodle, maybe ask a question or two to make sure she didn't come off looking too slack. No reason not to continue the tradition, she figured.

She let her eyes unfocus, and looked out the window. Not much of a view, really. Just more fucking concrete. She noticed, however, yet another group of posters, these ones taking up the space between the window and the back wall of the classroom.

They were all duplicates of each other, dozens of individual pages, but only three or four types represented. All of them had numbers written on them in various places, some handwritten, some typeset, and a couple had stylized pictures: boxy caricatures of celebrities, abstract patterns of lumpy shapes, naked women. One stood out peculiarly for not having anything eyecatching on it, just a river of gray unless you looked at it close enough to see that it was text. It read,

Look. You, who's reading this right know. Listen to me. Believe me: you know her. You will know who I'm talking about, anyway. She's your friend. She's your best friend from years and years ago. You said you'd stay in touch. She calls you on your

birthday. You don't expect it. It's nice of her, a nice gesture. She really cares. She knows you'll never talk any other time, and you never remember when her birthday is anyway, but she really genuinely doesn't mind. She doesn't get easily offended. She doesn't need much. She doesn't need to be entertained. She makes the stuff of her own pleasure. She reads. She writes. She makes beautiful things. An artist, maybe, a singer. She loves to think deep, deep thoughts, but has a shallow one now and then, too. You loved to argue with her. She made disagreeing with her the most pleasurable thing, made the tension of debate and thought and ideas and ideals and persuasion a living, brilliant dance. She doesn't think she's beautiful, but if you ask her, she'll concede she's not ugly. Other people think she's plain, if anything. She doesn't really bother with cosmetics. She doesn't think about whether her shirt matches her pants, or whether her pants make her ass look too big. She has more interesting things to think about.

But you know that your friend is, in a way that no coat of paint and advertising can reproduce, the most astonishingly beautiful woman on the face of the earth. I do, too. Most people that see her don't. I feel sorry for them, but I'm not about to tell them the secret.

Her hands, her long fingers, are made to fit, with miraculous perfection, the back of someone's head, to steady their neck as she kisses them forcefully, but the scene never leaves her imagination — she knows her designer's intent, but never finds the opportunity to fulfill it. They are made to touch the side of someone stranger's shoulder coyly, by accident, with total deniability, for she strains to think of herself as desirable. She's only human.

But her eyes are deeper than possible, deeper than human eyes should be. You fall into them, looking at her calm, inviting face. You hope she looks away, so that you can have your life back, and then you hope she doesn't. You want to spend your life like this.

There's something about her that is wordlessly *more* than the crowds she loses herself in. She holds her breath and dives, touches the sea-floor sand, while humanity splashes noisily in puddles.

You know her. She's your friend, or a friend of a friend, or the lonely girl you felt sorry for at a party, tracing the wall with her hand, looking at her peers, the ones that spent a lifetime learning instead how to flirt and how to be pretty, and wondering why she accepted the invitation at all.

You know her. I don't yet — but I hope to.

Help me.

It still, like all the other posters, had a box at the top, and three boxes at the bottom. On this one the number in the upper box was 9992, typeset in little pointy-ended segments like an LED readout. In one of the three boxes, someone had pencilled in 1689. The other two were blank.

Wei had a stubborn little bit of sympathy left in her for whoever wrote the text on the poster, but it was mostly drowned out by a more general and reflexive feeling of scornful apathy. Clearly he was just pretty fucking lonely and thought if he made some oh-I-am-so-deep capital em Message, and printed it up and posted it all over the fucking place, he could get some girl to write her phone number on it, or some shit like that. Maybe even get laid. But seriously, who the hell falls for such drippy-nosed shit like that? Are there girls out there that really take themselves so seriously? Would they see this and clutch their fluttering hearts and cry, “Oh, my, my, my, my Gawd, that’s so *me!* Aren’t I lucky that there’s a *real* man out there that sees my inner beauty!” when he hasn’t seen them at all? Probably some ugly bitch, anyway. ‘Plain,’ my tail. You ask for a girl that doesn’t think she’s the sexiest piece of ass this side of East Harbor, and you’ll get one that damn well *isn’t*, my friend. And if she does have these fucking magic come-hither deep-as-the-ocean eyes, and we’ll toss in magically perky breasts as a freebie (I know you were thinking it, even you couldn’t make it sound so fucking poetic) what in God’s name makes you think she’ll want you?

She lost control and swore out loud in her disgust at the poster-poet’s stupidity. Even from the back of the room, this caught the attention of the lecturer.

“Um, ah, Ms., uh, don’t know your name, mm, do we have a, uh, a question in the back there?”

Wei thought fast.

“Yes, sir. In your opinion, are the economic consequences of the Roman invasion of North America really as significant as McEvoy claimed, in light of the archaeological evidence you mentioned five slides ago?”

The smugly-dressed student seated directly in front of her turned his head half-way around and raised an eyebrow. Then again, he only really had one, so it wasn’t an entirely trivial matter to tell what he was trying to say.

The lecturer responded, “My, my, an excellent question. As a matter of fact, I just had a paper accepted on the topic...” and his voice trailed off into Wei’s subconscious once more. She had a feeling last week that doing a little homework on the professor might pay off. Always nice to be proven right.

The thought of some whiny little prick, sitting by his phone and crossing his fingers, still made her feel extremely irritated.



## Chapter 14

# Walk

Lin set the cat down and got to her feet.

There were some errands she was supposed to run, today, things from town Teacher wanted her to pick up, some wire and a couple gross of nines and eleven-and-a-halves, and she might as well grab a sandwich. Her episodes had a way of making her forget about the details of normal life. A very real sense that your life is in danger, whether from a homicidal animal or a suspicious-looking doorknob, makes routine shopping seem a little unimportant.

She kicked off her sandals and went to her room to get some better walking shoes. It wasn't a simple task to find a pair. She owned two or three, but in all likelihood at most one was in her room. One was almost certainly at the public library, on the top shelf, in the history section. On the days she took off from working, about once or twice every couple weeks, Lin liked to go down to that library and read books about ancient history. She liked imagining them to be novels, reviewing and critiquing them in her private thoughts according to how interesting the characterization was, or how compelling the plot, how surprising the twist at the end. Lost in such thoughts, she often forgot items in the library and returned home, happily reading along the way, getting wet for lack of an umbrella, getting lost for lack of her glasses, or, in the one case, getting blisters on her feet for walking home barefoot.

The third pair — who knew? Maybe she had given them to that beggar she had seen on the sidewalk across the street from the hardware store last Thursday. She couldn't remember whether it was shoes or a sandwich. She felt sorry for him, being deaf and blind. So much of her life depended on subtle images and sounds, in blueprints, diagrams, diagnosing machines by their heartbeat. She reckoned that at least you could read braille, but what was there to replace music?

While thinking, she shuffled through stacks of papers, piles of books, moved some half-working bits of equipment to see if anything useful was behind them, and came very close to giving up. As a last resort, she closed

the door, and found her shoes hiding behind it. It was about time she got around to cleaning, however. She made a mental note to get started after getting back.

As she was tying her shoes, she looked idly into the hallway. The cat's head appeared. Its eyes, as they turned, reflected the fluorescent lights overhead with a greenish flash. It squinted, and coughed and gagged for a few seconds. Lin dropped the shoelaces from her hands, unable to focus on anything but the cat. It made a awful choking sound from its midsection, something that Lin was sure was an impossibility, and it rested uneasily on the floor and trembled. She stood and walked towards it, nearly tripping over her untied laces.

It coughed up a tangled mass of wire, a ball bearing, and a few tiny bolts, each just a few millimeters in diameter. They bounced across the floor irregularly. The cat continued along its original path as if nothing unusual had happened.

“Well,” said Lin. “That can't be a good sign.”

## Chapter 15

# Relent

Preskar John now noticed that not only was there nobody present paying attention to his sermon, but that there was simply nobody present.

He was severely disappointed. Why did nobody want to hear? Did they simply not care about religion at all? He had so much to teach, a path to such beauty, such purpose and meaning, a world free of sin and noise and irrelevant distractions! It had transformed his life from a muddled pit of eternal withdrawal into a normal life, a life of meditative contentment, always flowing forward, into greater hope and greater peace, deeper wisdom and deeper acceptance. Wouldn't it be that much more effective on someone who was already normal, already functional? Couldn't they reach even a higher level of enlightenment than him? He was certain that it was the world's initial head-start on him that held him back. This was as far as he could come, from such a low beginning, and that was enough; it would suffice to take his teaching and spread it — he was content with this task, for it was the one given to him.

Although, he noticed, he honestly didn't feel very content, certainly not as much as he felt he should. He was still quite poor. He held a job for a week or two at a time, until his employer became positively unable to stand his presence any longer, or (on the increasingly rare occasions when he was hired for a job that involved interacting with customers) when the public complained enough to get him fired.

He just barely managed to avoid getting on the wrong side of his new landlord, having assumed his present name to avoid being connected with his previous history of chronic nonpayment. He had developed the habit of saying it was symbolic of his spiritual rebirth, but felt a twinge of guilt every time he did. After making sure rent was paid, if he saved carefully, it left him with just enough to buy a new set of clothes every now and then, not ever more than a month or two more than the last set became unwearable by any normal standard.

He felt discontent, tired, wandering, purposeless. But he knew he wasn't. He wasn't supposed to be. The sun was still yellow, but starting to get low

in the sky. It was time to go home and continue meditating.

On the park bench where the woman with the jelly donut had been sitting, there was a curious group of pigeons, apparently fighting over something that wasn't there.

## Chapter 16

# Investigate

Two hours passed, and the lecture found an awkward stopping point, promising to re-cover the last few slides the next day.

Wei left the classroom and made a few calculations. A year of Audit, as usual for such upitty cliques, and then (assuming she passed the inits) a few years of actually being in the Mill training program, get out at some point, stay and work for it, or leave. She hadn't decided whether she wanted to seriously consider staying to teach at the Mill. Maybe even working some other job here would be a remote possibility; their bureaucracy had plenty of empty desks these days. Lots of people respected the Mill, even if she and the Niece didn't. Might be a good idea, if she could hold her tongue for a few terms. That was doubtful, though. She was already spitting out involuntary curses on these fucks on the first day.

She spent the better part of the afternoon wandering around, filling out her mental map of the area, looking for the details she couldn't see on paper. It was excruciating, having to show her Audit papers so damned often. Fucking I&E bastards. It wasn't as if she didn't stand out in a Mill crowd like a suspicious red stain on a white shirt, but come the fuck on. Would she be strolling along, reading graffiti, not making any effort to hide herself or make sure she had an exit if she was the vanguard idiot for the retard platoon invasion force? Who the fuck would try to invade the Mill, anyway? They were out of their skulls with paranoia, here.

There were a fuckload of posters around the Mill grounds, of the same screwy kind she had seen before. She began to notice some patterns in how they were distributed. You'd come across pretty often a few dozen copies of the same poster, covering a side of a building. They didn't seem to be advertising anything, just a number and some picture, some handwritten numbers at the bottom. She noticed that there weren't any posters where all three boxes at the bottom were filled in.

She went into a bathroom in the building next to the Yes-and-Maybe entrance, and the even sides of the stall were invisible for all the paper covering them. As she urinated, she stared at the picture common to all of

them there. It was of a snake swallowing a raccoon, head-first.

## Chapter 17

# Hungry

The cat was resting on a pile of dirty laundry in the spare room. The room occasionally saw use from traveling students that Teacher took in as guests. There hadn't been one for several years, however. Lin never got along well with them. They took time with teacher away from her. She became jealous and restless when they were around. Even once or twice she deliberately made something she was working on break in subtle ways so that he would spend more time with her. But nobody was there, now. In the absence of a boarder, it got filled with boxes of dusty equipment, old clothes, newspapers, and junk mail that Teacher was, for some reason, disinclined to throw away.

Lin picked up the cat and looked at its eyes. Something was certainly wrong with it. Maybe she hadn't fixed the problem with the digestive system after all. Biology of the intermediate animals was never her strong suit. Insects, after all, were easy. They were plenty believable as long as they buzzed around, and bit you now and then. But a good cat had to fulfill its catness to be convincing, eating and drinking like an animal. Trying to reproduce the chemical nonsense that went on in a cat's guts with machinery was definitely doable. She had seen it done, even. The pet store in town had a couple of fake squirrels in the window display, fake so they wouldn't breed or die quite as quickly as the real thing. The store owners tossed nuts in when they saw enough people gathered outside, and got a chorus of oohs at how preciously cute the little things looked.

Lin still thought she had done a good job on her cat, though. She was, after all, still a student.

She carried the cat towards the dining room, and out the back door again. The rain had slowed to a whisper of a drizzle. It was more of a hanging wetness in the air than any actual rain. Lin stroked the cat's ears so that it went to sleep, and walked around to the front of the house where her bicycle was chained. She remembered that she had left the key to the chain's padlock inside, and put the unconscious cat in one of the panniers before heading back into the house. When she returned, she was surprised to find peeking out two paws and a head with slowly blinking eyes.

"Not so tired, are we?", she said, sounding a little patronizing. She put it to sleep again, and closed the pannier securely. She tried to convince herself that it was just a cute accident that the thing snapped out of sleep, but it really wasn't. Just another sign that there was something seriously broken about it.

She enjoyed the air, half-cold and wet, thrown at her face by the motion of the bicycle, rushing past her ears noisily. It woke her up, made her feel more aware, more real, less crazy. For about a half of a mile from her house, the territory was completely residential, houses owned by large families mostly. Teacher was in the minority, living alone except for a few students. He was also uncommon for not really worrying about what his house looked like. It was a boring affair of stone and orange brick, fairly institutional-looking, in fact. Not somewhere you'd imagine living. Not that Lin cared one way or the other.

But this was the neighborhood where if you were anyone at all, you wanted to be known, to be recognized. You wanted your house repainted every summer, with the paint job prominently featuring whichever couple of colors were stylish this year, but with some custom touches so it wouldn't look like you were just conforming. If you were lucky enough to highlight the window trim in a dark pink to contrast with the yellow background, and red was next summer's choice, then your perfectly cut lawn would be swarming with people asking you for the source of your prescience. You'd mock them, once you thought they couldn't hear you, for being so stupid as to think there was some magic to your decision, but you'd still pat yourself on the back for making such a clever guess.

Lin never got along with her neighbors very well, either. She tried talking to a boy about her age ten or fifteen years ago, but found that they didn't really have much to talk about. He idolized his father, and, Lin supposed, probably didn't have the patience to listen to *anyone* else talk for more than five minutes before starting in again on a story about how dad beat up some guy that insulted his sister. It didn't help that Lin only wanted to talk about things that bored him to tears as well. That experience of being so powerfully uninterested in another person made a deep impression on her. She always reserved a little suspicion that anyone she was talking to outside of her own specialty might any day turn into that kid, and begin ignoring her, and become incredibly dull.

Consequently she never made any great effort to meet people. There was the possibility that they might be interesting, but the dread that that original experience would be repeated was too much for her to bear. Let them come to her, she thought. She certainly had no overwhelming burden of loneliness to suffer under, the way some people seemed to.

She made her way towards the center of town, heading now east, now north-east, as the road bent back and forth. As people became more irritated at how dirty things had become in the eastern, more heavily populated half of the area, they moved their businesses farther west. The neighborhoods here were even richer — not only the color but the architecture

itself went in and out of style each year, and obligingly changed accordingly — and partially invaded by little family-run shops; restaurants, bars, second-hand clothing stores.

Lin pulled around to the side of an inconspicuous little building that sat in front of a more mansion-like house. She couldn't figure out what the owners were thinking, running a restaurant there, as little business as it seemed to get. She came in once every couple weeks for a sandwich and a coke, almost the only time she ate, and the place was always nearly empty. It was possible that the middle of the day was never a busy time for them, but she couldn't picture all the tables filled. There wasn't any advertising around, and the building itself was hardly a good draw in such a trendy neighborhood. Lin struggled to remember how she had even started coming there in the first place. It came back to her, eventually, that it was on a similar errand-run, years and years ago, that she had ducked in here to wait out a storm, and found a warm couch and a nice guy named Gary that wanted to sell her lunch.

She asked him now for her usual. She ate it quickly, and went back outside while still chewing to make sure the can hadn't woken up again. Thankfully it hadn't. Lin felt a bit of fear creeping back, thoughts of the cat waking up, eating her bicycle, growing larger, clawing apart the neighboring buildings. She would be blamed. That wouldn't do. She had to fix it.

Lin biked still further east, over to the hardware store, and paced the aisles, looking at prices. Nine gears on sale. Have to buy more of those now, she thought. But the eleven-and-a-halves were sold out, back-ordered until next week. She grumbled. That meant she couldn't fix the TV for a while. Two eleven-and-three-fourths sat temptingly, however, in their little plastic bin, marked way down because nobody seemed to need them for anything. She could file them down, even though it would be tedious as hell. Lin put off making the decision and walked over to the forever-wire aisle.

Here the many plastic bins hummed and vibrated slightly, even though their contents were kept in black plastic bags — the packaging was never quite perfect at filtering out the light. A range of various springs here, a few dozen sizes of thin rods, flexible wire, two- and three-jointed, and a bucket of miscellaneous strangely-shaped coils. Some of them were quite huge, obviously for more industrial applications, and heaved with a slow, bored frequency, as if breathing.

After selecting a few bundles of wire, she went back to the gears and resigned herself to filing down the eleven-and-three-fourths. As she walked to the checkout, she heard a noise from across the store, not visible behind all the shelves, like a bucket of nails being upturned onto a metal floor. This was a little strange, since the floor of the building was a soft, rubbery plastic, but she didn't think much more about it.

Lin grabbed the list from her shirt pocket, and checked that she had everything Teacher told her to get. She looked at the ceiling while the skinny clerk behind the counter — probably some relative of the owner, she

supsected; he looked bored and indignant, as if he was only working here out of some sense of duty, as if he could easily find a better job — added up the prices. She tried to think if there was anything else she wanted for herself.

She remembered that her scope needed a new lens — it was, in fact, during the final assembly of the cat that it got scratched. She would certainly need that replaced if she was going to figure out why the cat was broken. Lin noticed that she was just a few euro short, however, of being able to buy one. She cursed herself for buying lunch unnecessarily. Maybe if she returned the eleven-and-three-fourths, she could afford it.

Lin stared at the display of lenses hungrily, but even if she could convince the surly nepotist at the register that she bought the gears by mistake — she didn't think they offered returns here as a matter of principle, but she was usually able to con her way through such things — she could only afford, at best, the cheapest model they had. She stuck a hand into her bag without taking her eyes off a product she couldn't buy if she saved her apprentice stipend for three years. Granted, it would last five times that long.

The expression on her face soured when she noticed that there was only one package of wire left in her bag, and a large hole at the bottom.

At the end of the aisle, she saw, for a moment, a tail, which jerked away. She closed her eyes, and sighed. Why had she brought that thing with her?

## Chapter 18

# Exchange

Lin managed to exchange the forever-wire for a roll of tape. It was a tremendous hassle, and Nijl, the cashier, complained endlessly about how dad would string him up by the balls if he ever found out about him violating policy. He pointed exasperatedly several times to the tiny “all sales are final” sign, so old that the ink had faded to yellow and was barely legible. He gave in, finally, because of a basic, desperate evolutionary superstition, the nagging suspicion that if he rendered even the smallest favor to a woman, then, just maybe, there might be a slightly greater chance that she would sleep with him.

Of course, the thought couldn't have been further from her mind. She was busy taping the pannier as tightly shut as she could, ignoring the mewling complaints now coming from inside it. The damned thing wouldn't even stay asleep for more than a minute, now.

She knew, though, that it was important that she kept it with her. If she let it loose, it would cause irrevocable damage. She didn't know what kind, exactly, but she had a fiery certainty once more, that it was dangerous. It was smart, smarter than her. She would be held responsible for anything it did, and so she had to protect it.

Her course of action was clear.

Return home, find Teacher — he should probably be home by now — explain to him what had happened, ask him what to do. He probably had a lens to spare, somewhere in the boxes in the guest room. He could be trusted. He could fix things.

Return home. Not by the same route, though. The cat's allies had already seen the two of them there. No, she would go through the park. More cover there. Less suspicious. Less obvious.

She sped south, possessed by a dizzy confidence in her actions, only because she couldn't think in a straight line long enough to be able to doubt them.



## Chapter 19

# Stump

A bicycle appeared from behind a turn in the path that went behind a group of trees. Preskar John looked at it passively. On another day, a less hopeless day, he would have seen a potential convert, a potential friend. Today he just saw another cynical, hopeless person, apathetic about anything more subtle than earning the respect of their peers and controlling them.

However, as she pulled closer to him, he saw her wild, inconsolable fear on her face, and a powerful sympathy came over from him. He wondered what she was fleeing. He tried to tell her to stop, to slow, to talk to him, to let him help her — for he was sure his message would at least give her something else to rest her thoughts on, but she raced forward as if he wasn't even there.

In Lin's mind, that wasn't far from the truth. At best, he wasn't there. He was an obstacle. He was a living tree, no more necessary to stop for than the trees that didn't move, only he might be harder to swerve around. At worst, he was an enemy. He was trying to free the cat. He wasn't on her side at all. Teacher would help her imprison the cat, or destroy it. She could do neither by herself. She was helpless, alone. She was vulnerable as long as men such as these existed, and stood inexplicably in the middle of the street, trying to stop her. He was definitely trying to stop her. Each time she turned left, he stepped left, and he ran after her when she turned off the pavement entirely.

"My child, my sister, what are you running from?", he said. The sound of his voice annoyed her. It reminded her of her grandfather, who had never wanted her to apprentice with Teacher. Obviously he was trying to interfere with her long before she had ever built the cat. Such ability! How could she be expected to survive when they were so powerful?

She was lost enough in her thoughts to miss seeing a freshly-cut tree stump, a small affair about six inches across, but enough to throw the front wheel of Lin's bicycle violently off to the left, back on to the path. She hurt, scraped and bleeding in several places from the asphalt. She had been going as fast as she could manage.

The face of the skinny man with the soupy voice hovered over her. She groaned.

“Child, what *could* you be running away from? You have hurt yourself more than it possibly could! What in this blessed world would want to cause you such pain?”

“Ugh,” she said. She thought she might have chipped a tooth. She felt at her front teeth with her tongue. Maybe not. It felt like a tremendous effort to talk. She had hit her head pretty hard.

“It’s in the bike. Don’t let it out,” she managed.

“What is in the bike, child?” He laughed patronizingly.

“Don’t let it get out.”

“What?”

“The machine. The machine. The cat. I built it. They’ll blame me. It will be horrible.”

“You are not making one ounce of sense, child.” Preskar righted the bike and looked in the panniers. “You see? There’s nothing in here at all. Nothing to be afraid of. I can see why you were going so fast, if you thought your devil was right next to you! Why, in a sense, the same thing was true of me, when I was younger. I tell you the truth, when I...”

“Shut up, you stupid old man!” she interrupted. “Shut up, and stop calling me ‘child’, and stop stealing my grandfather’s voice, and stop making my head hurt.” Her voice cracked and shook with fear and anger. “We need to find the machine before it’s lost again. You don’t understand what it will do!”

“No, child, you need not fear, all is well in the universe, I have seen it myself.” His irrational calmness made him happy — happy that he had overcome his own agitation by reacting properly to hers — and infuriated her.

“What right do you have to say that?” she screamed, pushing the ground away from her face.

“You don’t even know what I’m talking about! You don’t know what the danger is! The cat, the machine, it will find others like itself, find allies, it will make them, it will build a legion, build an army, and they will find me, come for me, seek me in every house and closet and hidden door, no matter where I hide I will not be safe. They will torture me, smiling but not laughing, enjoying it but not too much, rip me apart, keep me alive and stare bemused at my pain, because they can’t feel it. They want to understand how I work, how people work, it doesn’t make sense to them, they are smarter than I am, smarter than you are, but they have to know everything. They won’t stop until they know all my thoughts, and then they will kill me, and everyone else, and I will be blamed. Everyone will see my fingerprint, my style written into the beast, into the first and the many, and they will blame me.” She was standing now.

Preskar started to shake his head and cluck his tongue at the senseless, incoherent stream of words that flew from Lin’s mouth (as if that would

calm her!) but she rushed at him with her fists held tight and small, punching him in the face and stomach. She knocked him over.

“You don’t understand! You don’t understand!” she repeated, screeching, almost crying, directly into his face. Preskar’s eyes were wide, now, with confusion, wondering why this girl had attacked him, why she had gone out of her way to assault him like this. He was only trying to help her, rescue her from her insane fear. She must be blind even to that, he thought. “She must be as blind as I once was...” he mumbled.

Preskar John sat up abruptly, with strength he didn’t know he had. Lin tumbled onto her back, surprised. He stared directly into her eyes, and spoke with a different voice. It was calm, still, but a lower tone, without pretension and without the tiring ring of scriptedness. Lin was shocked. This was not her grandfather. Now he was stealing the voice, stealing the thoughts of Teacher himself.

He said, “I understand. I remember.”



## Chapter 20

# Again

“I remember,” Preskar John said, “your face from a distant time in my life.”

“What are you talking about? I’ve never met you before.”

“But I met you before you were born into this body. I met you when you had a different body, an old body. I met another woman who was you before.”

“I told you, that’s not possible. I’m barely out of my twenties. I’ve never been old. There’s no way you could know me. Leave me alone. Stop talking to me. Stop trying to help me.” Lin took her bicycle and tried to fit the chain back onto the gears, and bend the cheap handlebars back to their original position.

“No! My child, you are correct. I cannot help you. It is arrogant of me to think that I could. Please forgive me. It is your help that I need.”

Lin was positively irritated now. Somehow the insanity of this man snapped her out of her own. Her head was clear. She did not worry that the cat had become lost. She just wanted to return home, tell Teacher what had happened, get his advice. He would be calm. He wouldn’t be as crazy as this.

“Look, I really don’t know where you get off asking me for help, or giving me help for that matter, when you just stood in the middle of the path and made me crash my bike. I don’t know you, I don’t want to know you, and I’m not going to talk to you any more.”

She all but expected the strange man in front of her to start crying, but he grinned widely, and mumbled to himself.

He said, “Of course, of course, she doesn’t understand yet, of course she wouldn’t. I simply need to explain to the child who she is, and she will see. She will understand, she must, and she will help me. With her I will have direction again.”

Lin couldn’t help but wonder what he thought she was, but she was more afraid than curious, and started pedalling away as soon and as fast as she could get her bicycle into a working state.

Preskar John stood in place, and waved at her as she tried to leave. He shouted, "I know that I will see you again. I know that fate will not take you away from me again. To see you face renews my hope, my purpose! I am sorry that you do not recognize me. I am sorry that you must fear me in the beginning of this. But it will be less unpleasant as you remember more. The peace you once attained will be with you again! And so too will it be upon me. Fly from me now if you will, but I am free from doubt. The storms in my soul have cleared again, and the tranquil winds tell me that you will save me again. I will be clean, and whole, and enlightened! I will be as I was when I was first saved, first remade!"

He was talking quickly, now, the rushing flow of words of a street-corner madman. A hint of desperation entered his voice. Every time he proclaimed his restfulness, his calm, his confidence, it became less convincing. Lin tried not to hear him, but she couldn't stop both her ears at once. She didn't dare take both hands off the bicycle for fear that she would have another spill, and he would catch up to her. She resisted the temptation to look back for a time, but turned her head slightly. Out of the corner of her eye she saw him running toward her, still quite far behind, but nearly matching her speed with his long, unnaturally bony legs.

"Save me again, my teacher, O blessed, save me! I once called you teacher, I once loved you as a mother! I was lost and broken, and you healed me! I have lost the path again, and I lack the power to find it! I need you! I called you in those fallen years, I called you compassionate, and wise, and I have praised your name since then! Faithfully I have spread your wisdom and peace, I have seeded the minds of millions, but their minds are as a desert, dry as the dusty moon! Though the seed is holy and worthy, it finds no water in these souls to grow! Save me again, my teacher, my guide!"

The feeling of being possessed by a completely rational fear struck Lin as strange. She felt energy shooting into her legs, spurring her on to greater speed, because she faced a real threat. She was afraid, but it was a pure, quiet fear. There was none shouting, dancing, chaotic worry that she felt during her episodes. There were no dozens of new theories about new threats, related to the old by mysterious hummingbird-dart logic, popping into her consciousness like bubbles floating to the top of a deep liquid. She was afraid that the insane man behind her, running ever faster, practically flying, shouting incoherent things, would overtake her, knock her down, and harm her. It was simple. She was afraid that this would happen, and she would go about doing everything in her power to avoid it. The simplicity of it thrilled her. She wasn't sure if she had ever been afraid like this before.

She felt that she had made a breakthrough in self-understanding. She knew the flavor of real fear, of reason. She could cure herself, now. She need only lick her finger and hold it to the wind, now that she found a compass. This was fear. This was acceptable. She could build a reasonable life around this.

The euphoria which this thinking brought made her forget, however,

that she was actually afraid. She felt a preternatural calm. The world in front of her simplified. Trees became cartoon blobs of green, the road a straight line. She slowed down. She coasted. A dim voice behind her became suddenly louder. It screamed, "Save me, Parni Eratharyana!"

When she heard that name spoken, something in Lin's mind broke, and something else rose up.



## Chapter 21

# Morality

A man with a friendly face set down a tray on the table, and took three drinks off of it and set them in front of the people seated there.

“Anything else y’all want right now?” he asked.

“No, thanks, we’re fine.”

Two of the seated customers resumed arguing, and the third listened and sipped her drink.

“So, as I was saying, there’s plenty of mathematical structure hiding in classical analyses of morality.”

“That’s total bullshit.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s fundamentally incoherent to mix math and morals. One’s universal, the other’s contingent.”

“Slow down!”

“Oh, right. I forget you still live in the philosophical stonage age.”

“Hardly.”

“In any event, I suppose you’re taking issue with morals being contingent?”

“Not only that.”

“What else, then?”

“That even if they are, it doesn’t rule out math being a relevant language.”

“I don’t buy it.”

“Take physics: if anything’s contingent, the physics of the universe is. The particular arrangement of all the particles in the universe could have been otherwise, or else pretty much everything is necessary.”

“Well, I read a paper the other day that claimed —”

“Just let me finish. You accept for the sake of argument that physics might be reasonably supposed to be contingent?”

“Sure, I guess.” The speaker rolled his eyes slightly.

“I swear,” the other one muttered, obviously being just loud enough to be heard clearly and still be able to claim innocently that he said nothing.

“Totally backwards. Physics absolute, and morals relative.”

“Well, be so kind as to excuse me,” he began counting on his fingers, starting with his thumb, pausing dramatically at each comma, “Aardwirth,” index finger, “and the rest of the fucking world,” middle finger, and not coincidentally at this time the other two were retracted, “for the last two hundred years.”

“Okay, okay, just leave me with my pity for the decadence of modern philosophy, and let me make my argument.”

“Fine.”

“So supposing physics is not absolute, it’s still describable by mathematics. *If* we accept that the current state of the universe is described by  $X$ , and that it evolves according to some complicated function  $f$ , then its future state is  $f(X)$ . Notice that all the reasoning we do to get from  $X$  to  $f(X)$  takes place in the realm of math itself. That reasoning is absolute, and unchanging. The only contingent facts are *that* the universe is modelled statically by  $X$  and dynamically by  $f$ .”

“Hmm. So you’re saying that you can factor out exactly what is contingent about physics, and everything that’s left over is absolute.”

“Yeah, more or less.”

“Okay, fine. I’m just claiming that in the end, the success of physics as an endeavour only obtains if the contingent stuff left over — saying, oh, well, the mass of the electron is such-and-such, and the antienergy decay rate of the universe is so-and-so — eventually gets whittled away entirely.”

“Well, I see no reason why that should be possible, but —”

“I really think,” he interrupted, “you should read the things I give you instead of holding on to your I-see-no-reasons ani I-can’t-see-hows.”

“Maybe.”

“So tell me what this has to do with morals.”

“Okay. Consider the actual stone age of philosophy, not the one in which you think I live.”

“You’ll have to paint me a better picture, because I don’t know the difference.”

“Very funny. So, imagine Ug the philosopher deciding that, in the world, there are good things and there are bad things, and that all things are good and bad.”

“Wasn’t he your thesis advisor?”

“And you criticize me for dismissing your favorite theories too quickly?”

“Sorry, couldn’t help myself.”

“Continuing: Ug looks around him, and mistakes his own preferences for morals. Things he likes are good, things he doesn’t like are bad.”

“Wait, why do you get to say ‘mistakes’? You haven’t said what a morality is, much less why hedonism isn’t a valid one.”

“Fine, forget I said it that way. Ug takes as his moral system that things he likes are good, and things he doesn’t like are bad.”

“Okay.”

“Now notice three features of this: one, that it’s untyped.”

“What?”

“Untyped. Doesn’t distinguish between nouns and verbs and adjectives or anything like that.”

“Oh. I didn’t even consider a moral system to be talking about anything but actions.”

“Well, this is Ug the stone-age philosopher, remember? He can hardly be expected to know enough grammar to tell an action from a hole in the ground, much less have a notion of moral agency.”

“Fine.”

“So he says food is good, because he likes food, and taking things from Urk next door is good, because he likes Urk’s things.”

“Where are you going with this, again?”

“Well the second thing to notice is that it’s asymmetric.”

“In what sense?”

“Under permutations of people. Urk thinks Ug taking his things is bad. More to the point, if Ug used the same methods to arrive at his morality, and he *was Urk instead of Ug*, he would assign good and bad to things differently to the same things.”

“Where by ‘thing’ you mean, most generally, actions or objects, or whatever?”

“Yeah.”

“This already seems a bit sophisticated for Ug’s ability to reason.”

“I’m not putting words in his mouth yet! I’m just talking about what we can say about his system standing on the outside of it, with the benefit of all of history on our sides.”

“In your case, *most* of history, with all the good bits gone missing.”

“Whatever. The third thing is that the assignment is to a two-point set.”

“Huh?”

“Good, bad.”

“Well, what else would it be?”

“Are you serious? I think spending so much time decrying morality as relative has left you blind to how subtle moral structures can be, relative or not.”

“Do tell. Maybe I’m being a little bit dense on purpose.”

“Just to annoy me?”

“Would I do that?”

“In any event: The morality of Ug is typeless, asymmetric, and two-pointed.”

“Some fine jargon you have their. Have we learned anything?”

“At least that saying things that way lets us more immediately see how his system could be different.”

“Like?”

“It could be typed. Objects could have intrinsic moral properties which are of a different status than actions. I’ll claim that the typical moral system you have in mind actually does this.”

“How?”

“Things in the world can be moral agents or not.”

“Well...”

“Okay, okay, I can *consider* objects around me, like this chair, or, God forbid, you, to be moral agents.”

“You know flattery will get you nowhere. But that’s a better way of putting it.”

“And I can consider actions to be good or bad separately. Saying that you are a moral agent is a statement of a completely different sort than saying that you are good.”

“Okay, I accept that.”

“Furthermore, a system could be symmetric instead of asymmetric. I could arrange things so that my moral system doesn’t reflect that I came up with it. It assigns the, uh, whatever it does assign, it assigns in a way that remains invariant if I shuffle around all the moral agents in the world.”

“But that doesn’t mean it’s universal. I can easily come up with a handful of different systems that are all, by your definition symmetric.”

“Calm down, I’m not claiming that.”

“Good.”

“Yet.”

“Oh dear.”

“Anyway, the most interesting property of Ug’s morality to negate, especially from the mathematical point of view, is the third.”

“Do tell.”

## Chapter 22

# Telling

The bed was soft and slightly lumpy. It was clearly old from the feel of it. It had the warmth of a thousand people still in it. The sheets were exhausted, everywhere almost transparent. There was a pillow, clearly newer, replaced perhaps just last year. It didn't really fit in. The cover on it was too new, too stylish. It was a noisy kid swearing in his grandmother's house.

Jan was on the bed, his head resting next to the pillow, not on it. He preferred sleeping that way, tilting his head all the way back, feeling reassured that it was on the same level as the rest of his body. He lived in a warm climate in his youth, and camped in his own back yard frequently, without any sort of sleeping bag or tent. He simply slept on the ground. The first few nights he did it — though he could scarcely call up such memories now — he felt scared, but that was his purpose. He savored the fear, and the feeling of defeating it each time. Even the softness of this bed was a little foreign to him, even unpleasant. This was not his own bed. His was firmer. It afforded barely a half-inch of quick, light give, and then it became solid, inelastic. Like grass on earth.

But this was not his own bed. And he was not in need of sleep. He was telling a man seated across the small room from him about his dreams.

"Let's start with the one from two nights ago. You alluded to it yesterday, but we didn't have time."

"Yes."

"You were... you were walking?"

"Yes. It was very strange. I do not walk, normally. I drive. I did not buy a car so that I should walk everywhere. I enjoy using what I have."

"But you were walking. Where?"

"I... I do not remember. That is, whether I had a purpose. A destination. It may have had something to do with my grandfather. He was... not well."

"Now... let me check," the seated man said, flipping back in a legal pad, and adjusting his glasses, "you told me that you only ever knew one of your grandfathers, on your mother's side?"

“That is true. I never knew my father. Even my mother never knew his name. Only that he came from a certain region. In the south, I think. I never attached much significance to it. I assumed I would never meet him, or at the very least never know if I had, so I made no effort to learn about him. It was painful to exert myself toward something I thought impossible.”

“I see. So your mother’s father is not well, in reality?”

“No, the grandfather in my dream was my father’s father.”

The dream analyst was quiet, but made a slight motion with his lower lip. Jan continued.

“My father’s father, as I dreamed it, was not well. I do not know how I learned this. I think... there could have been a letter. I know that it was not my father who told me. He would never do that. He would never try to reach me. But my grandfather... somehow he found out who I was. He was of an altogether different character. He kept promises. Even those he regretted making. He subjugated everything to maintaining the truth of his words. It was the... It was the very purpose of his life to tell a story so, and shape the world to it. To be dishonest... to break a promise, to him, it was not immoral, it was something else. Something more, something less, I do not know. Something else. But something he could not bear. It was not immoral, but it was a terrible burden on him. So he was, in my dream.

“My father’s promise, to my mother, to love her forever, was a story my grandfather somehow had heard of, and it became his story. Even though my father held on to it for a single night, and released it, my grandfather could not let it go. Nor could he any other story which at one time entered into his mind. No more than he could sew together a glass once broken.

“So my grandfather sent for me. Yes. This was how I dreamed. He sent a letter, which demanded copies be made of itself, until the world was full of its children, until every living being had need to sweep them away from their eyes to see an inch in front of them, and I, blinded somehow... I was able to see, at last, and I read the letter, and it called me to his home.”

“He was not well, you said.”

“Yes. There was something wrong with his body, an illness.”

“Illness?”

“It was... destroying itself. Or something was destroying it. Not someone. An invisible thing, or things, many things, too small to see.”

“Go on.”

“He was about to die.”

“By himself?”

“Yes, for no visible reason.”

“It happens, sometimes.”

“Not to anyone I have met. Why should I dream it?”

“We dream, by definition, things that are not happening. Dreams are lies. Go on.”

“I was walking. I was by myself. That is, there was nobody else I was walking with, to see my grandfather. There were other people around me, whom I passed, but I did not speak to any of them.”

“Tell me about them.”

“They were unremarkable.” Jan said this immediately after the doctor spoke, very nearly interrupting him.

“Try to imagine them again. They may be important.”

“There was...” Jan closed his eyes, “there was a woman.” It was hard to concentrate in this room without closing his eyes. He wanted to plug his ears, too, but thought it rude. He would not be able to hear his analyst, anyway, if he did. What he really wanted was to paint the patterned ceiling dark gray, and strip the strange masks and paintings from the wall, and burn the noisily mottled carpet, and silence the chattering clock, and calm his analyst’s lung-rattling cough...

Jan held his eyes shut, and forces himself to concentrate, to remember. It hurt him.

“There was a woman. She smiled at me. No. She was just smiling. At nobody, but I was there. She was smiling because... was she happy? I can not remember. No. I do remember. I remember that I did not even know. The fact is missing, not because I have forgotten it, but because it was never there. As I was dreaming, I did not know how she felt. I knew some of it. I knew more than I would if it were real, but less than I wanted, less than the whole. If a living person could only smile like that! I knew more than I thought I should have, just looking at her. Her mind spilled out of her face, her eyes, the restfulness of her smile! She did not smile at me, not because she saw me, she simply smiled, she was smiling and I was there, by coincidence, unattached to the history of her life in any way, and she gave a piece of her joy to me as a gift, because giving did not diminish it, could not diminish it.

“Because I was there, I was free to see it. I saw through, I saw her, I saw the essence of her, and she was beautiful. It was only a tiny piece. I wanted to spend my life, freely falling into the ocean of air that she was. There was endless sky and no earth. If you fall, and believe in no earth below you, there is no fear at all. I wanted that. I wanted my life to be that, forever falling, seeing the depth of her smiling at me, never fearing its end.

“But I passed her, and I said nothing, for I needed to see my grandfather as quickly as possible.”



## Chapter 23

# Wonder

Half a lifetime ago, Lin had seen a grandmotherly woman sitting on a park bench. There was something about the woman's perfume that seemed familiar, as if it was exactly the same as her own grandmother's. That wasn't possible, of course. All the brands had changed a dozen times over in that amount of time.

She reconsidered: was it impossible? It could be just the names that changed. She remained confident that they must have changed the formulas a little in that amount of time. Even if, by coincidence, this woman had selected just the right fragrance out of all of those currently available, an improbability Lin was prepared to accept, it wasn't likely that it was precisely the same.

It wasn't however, just the similarity of the smell that surprised her. It was the immediate sense of oldness that it evoked in her, a precise sense of membership in her grandmother's generation.

Did people's taste in perfume change as they got older? Did the perfume makers know this? Was there really no fashion at all to it? She worked out the details of her theory. Smells were substantially determined by age. This was the axiom. Why? To communicate age, sexual status. Desire. Desirability. To signal to your children that you are their parent. To your grandchildren that you are their grandparent. That you can be trusted. That your morals and mores should be thinly tolerated, and ultimately rejected, in favor of something more experimental, more risky. To risk all to create your own children, to breathe the air of the world, and create, to ignore danger for the sake of the magnitude of reward of possible success. To grow up, and begin to feel the creeping sense that those below you, those younger than you, that they are doing the right thing, but going too far. To the extent that they agree with you, they are distorting the one true message, almost getting it right. But how they distort it! If only you weren't so exhausted by life, you would set them straight. They are right in rejecting their parents — almost your peers, now, barely older, but wrong, still, excessive. To the extent that they disagree with you outright, they are ir-

responsibly ignorant. Throwbacks to your parents' mistakes! Anarchists! Parentalists! Ridiculously out-of-date, or absurdly, comically, dangerously over-avant-garde! You feel the world slipping out of your ability to empathize with it, but you are slipping, and it is running furiously in place. Your ideas get older, and others' seem immature. Your ideas do not simply mature, they do not just age. You drink not a finer vintage each year, but throw out wine for grape juice, and juice for water, and the wine of your grandchildren is too, too strong.

Your ears are weaker, not the dance louder. Your eyes are weaker, not the text smaller. Your mind is more tired, more slow, and not the realm of ideas larger and more frightening. Your tongue is duller, not the food more spicy. Your politics are more conservative, though the race of man is no more frightening than it has ever been. Your confidence is withered, though the world is not one jot more hopeless than it has ever been.

You realize that you have become old — or you don't. It doesn't change anything. You have become old, and your wrinkled hands know it if your tongue admits nothing. They, the hands of your grandmother, inherited by curse, still hover between two bottles, and pulled and held and dragged by ghosts more ancient than you can put a name or number to, you buy a grandmother's perfume.

## Chapter 24

# Concentrate

Jan found it increasingly hard to think. For some reason Dr. Foundre saw fit to decorate his office in such a way that it suggested dreams. Surrealist paintings, full of imagery that balanced on the threadline between familiar and foreign, caught the eye no matter which way it was pointed. It was hard for Jan to continue believing that he was awake. He knew he was, though, in the end. What kind of person would have dreams about dream therapy? It was just the decorations. The hollow-eyed masks, collected over years, and from dozens of different countries, served as a nauseating reminder that people everywhere shared the same nightmares. It nearly made them seem real, and concrete: if everyone produced devils that looked alike, who could say that they were not something real? That species of consensus was the only criteria by which we agreed the world was real, after all.

The doctor interrupted his nervous tangent.

“How did you feel about not talking to her?”

“I felt horrible. I should have said something. I should have explained to her... explained that I was busy. That I wanted to meet her later. After I had settled other matters. But I felt even guilty about planning to say that. It would mean postponing her... making her less than the first priority. But my purpose had already been taken over, my direction had already been chosen for me. The impetus of everything in that dream was to find my grandfather. I wanted to love her, drop everything else and love her, but I was bound, just as my grandfather was bound, to tell the story as it had started. I had to finish telling my grandfather’s story. It was my story. It was also his. I do not know.”

Jan was on the edge of tears.

“Was there anyone else that you remember seeing, in your dream?”

“I think... no. I do not think there was.”

“There were others, but...”

“Yes, I remember *that* I saw other people, but I do not remember anything about them. Only her.”

“You’re certain?”

Jan struggled to focus his inner eye, again. His memories were indistinct, blurry. He felt like he was squinting at a distant road-sign while driving without his glasses on. He was not sure if he wanted to remember any more people from his dream — one was painful enough. He had a feeling some part of his mind, further below the wave-worried surface of his conscious awareness, was busy erasing unpleasant scenes from the very memories he was trying to recall. He knew that he had come here, to be analyzed, voluntarily. For that reason he wanted to present the most accurate picture, for in that way he could become more whole, more healthy. For that reason he hated the little demon of whitewashing forgetfulness in him, and for that reason he felt spitefully helpless, not knowing whether there was something important that he had just lost his grasp of, some tiny but valuable thing that had fallen heavily from his tired fingers into a consuming, black pit.

There was, however, another force at work. He knew that he could rub out the demon, pinning it to the ground with his thumb, easily, without any excessive effort, look at its pathetic form, wrestle the old paintbrush from its claws, and step on it, crushing it easily. But he didn't. He lived a lifetime dotting on that little demon, shaking his fist at it publicly, but protecting it in private.

In his mind lived a bigger thing than a harmless little demon, big enough that Jan could not say that it wasn't properly the same thing as himself. Little habits, little flaws, these he could call *other*, these he could blame on the wrinkles in his brain, his upbringing, his parents, the scars left by small-minded bullies of his youth. But their shepherd, their protector, the thing that kept the herd of little demons alive once they had been born! This had been with him always. It was him always.

"Yes," he said, "I'm certain."

"What happened after she passed you?"

"I spent five, perhaps ten minutes crying. The asphalt I walked on became wet, as if it were raining heavily. It flowed behind me, washing away dead leaves and garbage, and into the storm gutters, and into the sewers. I stumbled as I walked, slipping on the rushing saltwater."

"But you continued walking."

"Yes."

"You were held up by your purpose."

"My purpose. Yes."

"To see your grandfather."

"He needed to see me. He was not well."

"He was ready to die."

"By himself, yes. But I would let him at least not die alone."

"It wasn't suicide?"

"No, no, no. Never. It would be pure hubris for him to tell the end of himself. My grandfather was slipping into death involuntarily."

"An invisible death."

"Yes."

“You were walking — did you stop crying after a time?”

“Yes, of course. I had no more tears in me, eventually. The clouds exhausted themselves, there were no more clouds to fall. In that way the storm ended, not because the sky no longer wanted to rain down — only because it had no rain remaining in it. I still felt an empty sadness, for my grandfather, and for myself, my loneliness, for that I might have had an infinite joy instead of this sadness, had a handful of coincidences coincided otherwise, and if I had only... and... had the...”

“And?”

“...and if I had the ability to say anything to her at all.”

“You don’t think you did?”

“No. I can not imagine clearly what I would have dreamed if my grandfather had never been part of it. I think I may have cried the same tears, for the same reason. She still would have passed me, wordless, smiling, and suffocatingly beautiful, and I would have done nothing.”

“You stopped crying, after a time. What happened then?”

“I saw a tree.”

“A tree? What kind?”

“I have no idea.”

“Were there leaves on the ground?”

“This was... early... middle of autumn, I think.” His head hurt terribly. “There were leaves on the ground, yes. Many of them had fallen. Most of the trees around me were naked. Thorny alien fingers, alien hands, aliens buried alive, huge ones, sticking their hands out of the dirt, reaching up. The trees frightened me. Their shapes were unnatural. Most of them frightened me. But I saw one that didn’t.”

“Why didn’t it?”

“It had a single leaf left on it.”

“What kind of tree was it?”

“I do not know.”

“Did you smell anything?”

“It had rained. It had just rained an hour ago. Even apart from my weeping, it had just rained. Everything smelled wet, and cold. No, not too cold, merely cool. The humidity, the mist of after-rain still in the air, it tempered the cold somehow. It smelled like a distant winter. Not too far that one would not be aware of it, the way that winter is a myth in July, a phantom. It was late enough in the year that you knew winter was a real thing, because you could smell it. I could smell the cars’ breath, the smoke and fumes of them, the dusty wind, the red-brown sweetness of pipe-tobacco, flying far on the cold wind, but there was another smell. I can... no... I almost...” His headache had worsened. It didn’t even have a steady rhythm now — it became irregular. It caught him off-guard, suddenly becoming now less painful, now more painful, with no discernible pattern. It made thinking a laborious but delicate task. He was balancing a tray of fragile glasses on a ship’s deck. He was carrying himself up a cliff with tired, tired arms.

He saw, however, the top of the cliff suddenly: the memory came back in one piece.

“I smelled maple sap. There were millions of maple leaves on the ground. It was the smell of breakfast, of mornings, of being young and small, and eating sweeter things, and never tiring of them. I saw a single tree, a maple tree, with a single leaf still on it, a beautiful thing. The leaf was absurdly large, seemed too large for the tiny lines the tree traced out with its branches. That leaf was as a tree-framed setting moon, as it seems too large framed just so by closer frame. I knew, you could see if you were blind, that the tree loved that last leaf intensely, and I knew it would weep the winter through for its last child. It had already grieved the rest, but it had spent none of its grief. It all remained, and it would be thrust into this one, final death. I... woke up... just after... just before I would have seen the leaf fall. Or... I do not know... It might have been much later. In any event... I did wake up...”

“Are you well, Mr. Erikson?”

Jan was not. He was not listening to his analyst, however. He was talking to nobody. He was talking because he needed to. He needed no audience. His head hurt terribly. He whispered, “...some time after I saw the tree... I had not yet reached my grandfather’s bed... I still had not seen his face... I woke... I woke up... I was alone...”

He lost consciousness.

## Chapter 25

# Structure

“So you do accept a two-valued morality as reasonable?”

“I suppose I have to. I think the burden is on you to convince me that something else is reasonable.”

“Fine. Consider two people, one rich, the other poor. The first has the opportunity to give money to the other. The second is sitting in the street with a hat, begging alms.”

“Okay. But before you start suggesting that the rich person has some kind of intrinsic right to his or her own property, let me tell you—”

“No, I’m arguing nothing of the kind. I think the position I’m going to take will be quite happy sitting beside the extremity of your relativism.”

“We’ll see.”

“We will. So, take as an assumption that some outside observer — say, me — considers it immoral for A to give B no money.”

“Fine, but A may think differently.”

“Let him! But I think what I think.”

“I accept that. If you’re going to make me believe that you have any earthly reason for doing so, well...”

“Quiet. So I think that the action of giving B no money to be ‘bad’. Furthermore, I go so far as to believe that merely giving B some tiny amount of money is also bad, an insufficient gesture for someone so rich as A. Say I believe with certainty giving B 1,000 euro is actually a morally defensible act.”

“And no less? That’s quite a bit, unless A is the sort that sleeps on gold sheets at night.”

“No, that’s exactly my point; the turnover happens somewhere below 1,000. That’s just a reasonable upper bound.”

“Okay, so maybe I could still get into heaven for the price of 10 euro per bum, eh?”

“Let’s not drag theology into this, too.”

“Fine, fine.”

“My point is, if 0 is ‘bad’, and 1,000 is ‘good’, it has to switch over somewhere.”

“So?”

“So at that point, the act is morally neutral, something other than bad or good.”

“Why should I accept that? Why couldn’t it be the case that giving 10 is good, but 9.99 isn’t enough?”

“Suppose money to be infinitely divisible.”

“Then what if every amount less than 10 is bad?”

“Well...” he paused. “I concede that that system is coherent, in a weak sense.”

“I’m glad you do. Honestly, I don’t know why you bother thinking so hard about people’s moral structures per se. It’s like spending your life dissecting one particular corpse of one animal. The state of the art in ethics can only look at populations, right now, since we’ve only just recently woken up to the fact that God didn’t create the animals we’re studying.”

“No, no.”

“I thought you wanted to keep theology out of this?”

“I’m not contesting your theological claim.”

“Good.”

“Yet.”

“Look, what are you arguing about?”

“That we don’t stand to gain anything from looking at particular moral systems.”

“And what is there to gain?”

“Well... let me put it this way. You say that it’s not forced on us that a moral system should be anything other than two-valued. Maybe that’s true. Ug can live his life assigning ‘good’ and ‘bad’ to things, and never once be indifferent.”

“Exactly.”

“But! Neither is it forced on us that our moral system *is* two-valued. I claim that it is coherent to view certain acts as morally neutral.”

“Fine. You realize you’re totally ignoring the *reasons* for viewing things that way, though. The thing to pay attention to is how the societal framework in which you participate licenses or encourages this sort of neutrality.”

“Come on, now, it’s not that strange. Inhaling at one time versus a split-second later. Could such a trivial choice really be morally charged?”

“Maybe. You never know what consequences it might have, meteorologically.”

“Now you’re just saying that to sound fashionable. Really! It’s uncharacteristic of you. Morality is supposed to be a human thing, isn’t it? If so, it ought to be limited by human epistemology.”

“Well...”

“I’m serious: if I can’t discern any substantial effect between making a choice and not making it, it ought to be morally neutral, from my point of view.”

“I suppose I like that argument somewhat better than your last. Still, there’s no reason to think that someone’s moral sense has to obey the sort of logical rigor you’re imposing on it.”

“Conversely there’s no reason to think that an arbitrary agent necessarily wouldn’t reason sanely.”

“We’re arguing in circles again.”

“I know.”

“Where were you going with this?”

“Let me see... you accept that a person could think of morally in a trivalent way?”

“Good, bad, and also don’t-care? Sure.”

“Great. Now suppose B has, uh, moved up in the world, and bought a house and a car, somehow.”

“I suppose A gave B a couple million euro just to be on god’s good side?”

“God doesn’t have anything to do with this, I told you.”

“So how did poor, poor B land a house in this market, hm?”

“Oh, it doesn’t matter. Give it a different name, if you want. C has a house, and a car, and the car is sitting in the driveway, with the keys in it.”

“So where B is poor, C is an idiot.”

“Is it thought experiments *per se* you don’t like?”

“No, just you.”

“With such a vote of confidence, it would be criminal of me to not continue.”

“Oh, please do.”

“So A comes along, and steals C’s car, but leaves an envelope with some amount of money in it.”

“Which B takes?”

“No, B’s not even in the picture.”

“Funny, I pictured him right next door. Hey C, how’s it going, oh look, must’ve dropped my envelope, here, I’ll take care of that.”

“Forget B, please.”

“Willingly. I wouldn’t want to associate with such *nouveau-riche* trash anyway.”

“As I was *saying*, suppose A steals C’s car, but leaves some amount of money. If the amount is zero, A has just stolen C’s car, bad, but if the amount is far more than the value of the car, more than enough compensation for any inconvenience the theft caused C, then A has really done something good, albeit strange.”

“Hmm. Setting aside the glaring question of why in the world A would do this when simple charity seems to be an hassle—”

“I told you it was just a thought experiment.”

“—fine, fine. Setting that aside, why isn’t it fair to say that A has done a bad thing *and* a good thing, without this mysterious judgment of whether the good cancels out the bad or not?”

“Oh, but that is absolutely fair.”

“Okay...”

“I just mean to assert, again, that it is *also* reasonable to imagine someone having a system in their mind of the sort I mentioned. After all, people do make trade-offs all the time. When you get down to the essence of those kind of decisions, they *are* estimating the value of all the factors *pro* versus all the factors *con*.”

“You say that like there’s some ideal valuation that they’re estimating.”

“That’s true, *I* very well might think that — but you’ll forgive me for my habits. That’s not essential to my present argument, and it’s not what I mean to say here.”

“Good.”

“The point is that if you asked C, if you told C, ‘hey C, if you turn your back, A will sneak in here and steal your car, and leave an envelope with twelve million euro,’ C would gladly go inside and have a beer and watch TV.”

“If he trusted you!”

“I’m assuming that’s what A will actually do.”

“You know, that’s a really funny way of negotiating the sale of a car.”

“That’s actually a good point!”

“I’m glad you’ve finally admitted how ridiculous your examples are. I was beginning to wonder—”

“No, I mean the very concept of sale and trade means that it’s extremely common for people to assign worth — though it isn’t exactly moral worth — to objects, and they experimentally discover their valuations every time they hold an auction, or negotiate, or whatever.”

“Oh, I see. So you want a ‘morality market’ where noble sacrifices can be traded against unspeakable misdeeds for pennies on the dollar?”

“Stop joking.”

“I’m not, there’s a house down by East Harbor, it’s hard to find because they can’t really advertise, you know—”

“Seriously.”

“Okay, fine. But if you want directions, just let me know.”

“Won’t be necessary. So do you accept that, further generalizing the trivalent system, some reasonable moral agent might value actions along some sort of number line?”

“Uh... it seems a little strange. I don’t see anyone going about with calculators when they argue ethics.”

“Of course not — and you don’t calculate explicitly when at lunchtime you trade a banana for your neighbor’s cup of rice pudding. You just think, well, I feel like rice pudding right now more than I feel like a banana. And if it were two bananas you had to trade away, you might be more hesitant.”

“You’re saying the numbers are implicit?”

“Exactly.”

“Well... okay. I suppose I can accept that, as long as you admit that finding them, in the case of morals, may not be nearly as easy as in the economic case.”

“Gladly.”

“Which brings up the question of why you care about these things that you can’t even feasibly observe.”

“Do you actually think that they’re unobservable in principle?”

“Do you actually think the world cares about what’s true in principle?”

“Let’s save that argument for some other time.”

“If you say so — I think it’s at the heart of this one, but you started talking, so I’ll let you find out for yourself.”

“How kind of you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Recapitulating, in order of increasing generality: we have good and bad, good, bad, and don’t-care, and numbers, say positive means good, negative means bad, and zero means don’t care.”

“What else is there? I can’t see how you could get more general than the real numbers and still maintain any connection to morals. I hope you’re not going to start talking about imaginary utilities.”

“Hah, I regret missing the painful look on your face I’d get if I were to tell you that that was the next step. No, I am going to generalize a bit more, but in a different direction.”



## Chapter 26

# Order

“Notice,” he continued, “that each step we’ve taken involves a reduction in the strength of the properties we’ve demanded of some moral system.”

“How so?”

“I suppose I’m getting ahead of myself — so far, the most obvious thing is that the classification of actions has gotten more and more refined.”

“I can see that.”

“We can interpret that as making a weaker demand on the moral agent that’s making the classification.”

“Actually, it doesn’t seem that that’s true — it’s much harder to say exactly how good or bad something is than to just judge it good or bad.”

“Weaker in a logical sense, I mean. If you *can* classify into two buckets, then you can classify into numbers: just assign ‘good’ to one, ‘bad’ to minus one.”

“But I can send things the other way, too: positive is good, nonpositive is bad.”

“I... suppose that is true.”

“Moreover, why does the mapping of good to minus seventeen and bad to three and a half have any diminished status?”

“I’m going to have to backpedal a bit, I suppose.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time.”

“As if you’ve never.”

“Didn’t say that.”

“In any event.”

“Continue.”

“Where I’m going involves making weaker demands on the structure, even if that’s how I haven’t been proceeding that way.”

“I feel so awful that I destroyed your logical progression.”

“No you don’t.”

“True. You were saying?”

“Look at the number line. Take precisely your objection that computing the morality of compound actions is problematic.”

“I wouldn’t put it that way, necessarily.”

“How would you?”

“I’d rather say that nobody is forced to consider two actions as one.”

“I’ll accept that, for now.”

“There *may* be a totally sensible way of saying that an action, which amounts to two actions — maybe more, even — is good, taken as an agenda, or is bad. There’s nothing problematic about an agent making that evaluation, but neither is there any reason that we should assume he or she in fact will — much less should — do so.”

“Fine. So take numbers, and abstract away from our ability to add them together. What’s left?”

“Reading and writing?”

“I thought we had finished with educational policy arguments last week.”

“I still say they should start teaching them Derrida as soon as they’re out of diapers.”

“Thank you once again for completely missing my point.”

“You say that like you have one.”

“It’s that numbers have an order structure underlying the arithmetic on them, a thing that can be characterized by axioms considerably more general than the properties of the concrete thing that satisfies them.”

“So I can throw out actual numbers when talking about morals?”

“Right.”

“Thank goodness, I’m glad we got cured of that.”

“We’re not through with the math, though.”

“No, I can tell we’re still in the middle of that philosophical swamp. Can you tell me why you aren’t, at this point, just spitting tautologies? It sounds a lot like you’re saying, oh, the moral status of action A is this funny mathematical object with no concrete existence at all, which I have conveniently called ‘the moral status of action A.’”

“Hardly. The meaning of the moral status of an action is given precisely by the role it plays with respect to the rest of the structure.”

“You’re losing me in language, now.”

“Let me start over: by interpreting morality in numbers, you’re committing to *how good* or *how bad* an action is. Maybe this is ill-defined. Rather, maybe according to at least one moral agent, this doesn’t make sense. In his or her worldview, there just aren’t numbers. There is just a sense of one act being better than another, not one act being better than another by three point nine eight.”

“I like that. But is this any different than what we started with? We’re back to making binary judgments.”

“Not at all. It’s true, we’re making a sort of binary judgment, better-than versus worse than, but it’s about pairs of actions, not single ones.”

“What difference does that make?”

“We can talk about action A being better than B, being better than C, being better than D. In Ug’s system, we’d have to pick some cutoff and say everything better than that is just good, and everything worse is bad. We

would lose the ability to talk about a range of morally commendable actions being more or less good.”

“Oh. So, this system, for every *two* actions, it tells you which is better?”

“Yes.”

“Why stop there?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why not say that, for any point where an agent makes a choice, the system says which choice is the right one?”

“That falls out of the two-action case.”

“I don’t see how.”

“You tell it, hey, I have all of these actions I could perform, tell me, for all pairs, which is the better action. Then you look at the results, and you find the action that is better than all the rest.”

“What? I don’t believe it. So the picture you seem to be painting is that I have a little machine that gives me an answer for any two actions, and it’s supposed to help me make a complicated choice from many possibilities. Who’s going to stop it from giving me a different answer each time I ask it, or giving strange answers, like that A is better than B is better than C is better than A?”

“I neglected to actually mention the axioms.”

“How convenient.”

“Well, I’m not trying to actively deceive you.”

“You’re not?”

“I’m just catering to your attention-span.”

“Are we still talking about that?”

“Anyway,” he said, visibly irritated, “when you axiomatize the properties you care about, you abstract away exactly those features of the ordering of numbers that you need.”

“Exactly?”

“Well, sure. That’s the idea.”

“How do you know you’ve succeeded?”

“You... don’t, exactly. You become confident after a long time that the definition you’ve made is useful, if it provides a lot of useful results.”

“Sounds a bit viciously circular.”

“To be frank, I think it is, too. I’m not really the perfect apologist.”

“Apology accepted.”

“Nonetheless. There is a commonly accepted definition of what it means to be an ordering — several, in fact — and—”

“Several?”

“Well, they serve different purposes. They’re on basically equal footing, in that each one can be useful in different ways, for different applications.”

“It sounds as if relativism has already won in a big way in mathematics.”

“Maybe it’s fair to say that it has.”

“I’m surprised you’re stubborn enough to make so much noise about being in a different camp than us.”

“Well, we are.”

“Remains to be seen.”

“In any event, the last system we mentioned orders *every* two actions, conclusively says one or the other is better.”

“Right.”

“And, given some assumptions, this allows you to uniquely find the best choice among many.”

“Which I’m taking on faith for the moment.”

“But it can be proven rigorously.”

“Which is the thing you claimed in the beginning?”

“That purely universal arguments are relevant to analysis of contingent issues, yes.”

“I’m beginning to see your argument, I think.”

“I’m glad.”

“There is a further relaxation, not much unlike the first one I pointed out.”

“Let me guess: we can say that, among, two actions, no one of them is better?”

“Exactly. The order says of any two actions that the first is better, the second is better, or that they are morally neutral with respect to each other.”

“So after this, we put numbers back in? This action is nine and a half better than this one?”

“No, that’s basically the same as the original numeric proposal.”

“Except now you don’t know where zero is.”

“True! I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Right, so it’s similar, but not identical. There’s no landmarks. Nothing to tell you that a certain action really is morally neutral, or good, or bad. Just relative to another action. I like it.”

“You would, wouldn’t you? I knew it wouldn’t be enough to just give in and say in the beginning that all of this was relative to some evaluating agent.”

“But I see how all of this is interesting, in theory, even though I remain unconvinced that it’s good for anything but passing time over food. It also seems like we’ve reached some sort of limit to generalization if, as you claim, there’s no real generality to talking about evaluation of three or more actions. I mean, we moved from one to two, and got something new, and if moving up more steps is fruitless, what else is there? Is dealing with an infinity of choices all at once any different?”

“It might very well be — I’ll have to think about that some time — but the direction I was heading is again somewhat different.”

## Chapter 27

# Restless

Nijl suddenly observed that he was now more bored than he had ever been before. He hated this job, resented it, knew it was worthless, tedious, numbing. Why was he even bothering obeying his father? Some promise of future respect. If he made it through this, he would be accepted. But there was a scream of single-minded rebellion in him. He wanted to do something according to his will — even if it was doing the same thing he would otherwise, he had a desperate need to own it, to have it be his cause.

He stepped outside, and left the store empty.



## Chapter 28

# Time

“I suppose that I do want to examine a little further where we’ve gotten to.”

“The dizzying heights of pointless abstraction, it seems.”

“You’re entitled to think that.”

“You’re entitled to try to convince me otherwise.”

“Well, I don’t think you’ll ever be convinced it’s not pointless.”

“That may very well be. But go on, I’m still listening.”

“I claim that where we started out was, in effect, a definition of what a moral system is, naively. It is a thing, I postulated in the beginning, that sorts all the things in the world into bad and good.”

“Sounds like a reasonable enough definition to me — morality is the study of the words ‘bad’ and ‘good’, and how people use them, which amounts to the same thing. But I don’t remember you being so strong with your statement, then. You just listed that as a *possible* system, and then proceeded to make fun of it as primitive.”

“Well, you’re getting ahead of me *and* putting words in my mouth. Don’t ever let me disparage your rhetorical skill.”

“I won’t. How am I putting words in your mouth?”

“I really didn’t mean to say that a binary system is *bad*, just that it’s simple. I obviously let my own opinion slip through, there — I do in fact believe that such a simple system is nearly useless, but that’s neither here nor there.”

“Fine, how am I getting ahead of you?”

“Well, the question I mean to eventually ask is, what *is* a definition of a moral system, with the indefinite article?”

“Let’s skip the eventually and ask it: why isn’t my definition good? Why not say that the study of morality is the study of good and bad, not these strange orders of yours?”

“First of all, they’re hardly my invention. Second, I am — and let’s not think this makes any sort of present — in total agreement with you in asking that question. Why not, indeed, consider legitimate the study of how people divide the universe into two moral categories? For I also want to ask,

why not study three-way divisions? Numeric utility measures? Abstract orderings? And so on.”

“Wait — why do I have any reason to believe that these abstractions actually obtain in any sense in the human mind? Clearly, we do have words for good and bad, and maybe I’ll even concede the naturalness of some sort of moral neutrality, since we can still talk about that with short, commonplace words. I can imagine someone saying ‘Oh, it didn’t matter whether she did that or not, it was six of one, a half-dozen of the other.’ Where are the people introspecting about their actions with such abstract, mathematical machinery? ‘I did this because it increased my utility by seven point one’? That’s absurd.”

“You’re making the same fallacy you did before — I thought I had educated you sufficiently.”

“I suppose not.”

“You’re confusing introspection with the introspected thing itself.”

“Am I?”

“Just because nobody talks about something doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist.”

“I suppose I have to accept that as a principle, but the burden is still on you to show that these particular mechanisms do exist.”

“True — but that was the point of my earlier examples. By observing people’s behavior, by observing the choices they make, in auctions for instance, we can probe the implicit structure that determines which actions they prefer, or consider moral, or whatever.”

“That seems circular. Don’t you have to postulate that the structure exists before the experiments on it make any sense?”

“Not at all. I say, here, perhaps my mind works this way, let’s see what that theory predicts, and compare it to the evidence.”

“No, you’re right, I suppose that’s basic. Still, I don’t like believing something exists merely because no experiment contradicts it.”

“I’m not really demanding physical existence, if that helps. Just a mathematical sort of existence, and a relevance to the situation.”

“Okay, I’ll accept that. If these structures do provide a good tool for talking about or predicting what choices people do make — not that I’ve completely accepted that, since by ‘good tool’ I’d like to think a simple, efficient tool — then, tautologically, they are worth talking about.”

“So I really haven’t convinced you of anything substantial.”

“No.”

“I’ll try harder, then.”

“If you must. I think of these discussions as having the aim of entertaining me, personally.”

“Oh, I try.”

“But you do it so effortlessly! I can’t help but laugh.”

“You’re too kind. Bringing us back to the actual topic, the question I still don’t have an answer for is, among all of the things that we could study

that we might reasonably call moral systems, what actually binds them together? What actually makes them moral?"

"Isn't it just that you've called them that?"

"Well, that's all that seems evident. But I *want* to say that there's something else to it. There seems to be something else, unifying all the definitions. But I can change my description slightly, and suddenly obtain something that, by any reasonable intuition, hasn't the slightest thing to do with morals."

"Such as?"

"Suppose I assign an order to all possible actions I could execute, based on, oh, let's say, how long they take. So in the abstract order, act A is 'related to' act B, if A takes less time than B."

"Sounds like a nice philosophy of laziness."

"Wait a minute — where do you get that from?"

"Am I misunderstanding you? I thought your abstract nonsense was to describe which things a person thought were better than which others. It sounds like you're saying this person claims moral superiority of any act that takes less of their time."

"No! That's the subtle difference I'm trying to point out. Nothing about the structure of the system is necessarily *about* either thing. I might have a structure in my mind that describes what I think is *right* — from the point of view of comparative judgments — and another to describe what I think is quick — with the same comparative sense attached to it — but neither has anything to do with the other."

"Except in that they have exactly the same specification?"

"Exactly."

"So what is it that distinguishes them? I think this is exactly my objection. When I say 'good' and 'bad', people know what I mean. When you say, 'a structure such that so and so', it's totally divorced from reality, and from what morality actually is."

"I agree — except with your first statement."

"I don't see how I've made more than one."

"The second is that there's something missing in all of my definitions to characterize them as moral, and the first is that the definition of a binary system is somehow exempt from this problem."

"But it is by definition! Morality *is* right and wrong, good and bad. That's just what people mean when they use the words."

"If you say so. What would happen if we came across a language with seventeen words for moral categorization?"

"Well, I claim that you won't — the notions of good and bad, though which particular things get judged to be which are totally relative to culture and setting and context, are *de facto* universal, basic to the human experience. We can't avoid them. Every language that pretends any sort of descriptive adequacy has to have them."

"I'll back off from that claim, then."

"Good."

“Though I could make a few remarks about this being a prime example of the fundamental failure of your relativism. You can’t claim that everyone must agree that there’s nothing everyone agrees on.”

“Oh?”

“I won’t touch that right now. I want to address the fact that your claim that every language has terms for good and bad is meaningless.”

“A strong word itself! I’m liable to consider becoming tactfully offended any minute now, I’ll have you know.”

“Oh, I’m desperate to avoid that, of course. Let me clarify: it’s meaningless until you tell me how to *tell* whether it’s true or not.”

“Well, you just go into the field — some of us still do that, you know — and you learn some language, and you look for terms that convey approval and disapproval. If you don’t find them, my statement has been falsified.”

“But how do you identify whether they exist?”

“Look, this is really basic. I don’t know why this isn’t obvious to you.”

“Indulge me.”

“I would, if this didn’t apply to native language learning just as well. Would you have me doubt that I even know what I’m talking about when I say something is morally good, in my opinion, in my subjective experience? I claim you don’t have access to that experience, so *your* claim is meaningless.”

“No, that sounds like a good idea — let’s look at native language learning through the same lens. How do children match up words with an actual, real, meaningful, intrinsically *moral* sense? How do they know that they haven’t got bad and good reversed? How do they know that good and bad are *moral* qualities? If they learn seventeen words that all happen to be adjectives that apply perfectly well to actions, but have nothing to do with any sense of ought, should, righteous, good, where do they learn that from?”

“You’re being deliberately dense now.”

“Not really. I actually don’t have a good answer, and I don’t think you do, either.”

“Maybe not one that stands up to your standard of rigor, but that’s not surprising.”

“Let me hear it anyway.”

“Let me ask you this first: you don’t question that we learn names for colors, do you? There’s nothing mysterious about that, is there?”

“I suppose not.”

“Well, how do we do that? How do we attach these external concrete things, names, to things like the ineffable, internal, subjective experience of mauveness?”

“I don’t even remember which one’s mauve.”

“Just as well! If you saw mauve, your experience wouldn’t change if you knew it was named that.”

“True.”

“So you know that what you call ‘red’ really is red, because everyone else calls it that.”

“Okay, fine. But what if a language evolved so that ‘good’ and ‘bad’ stopped having any moral reference? What if a culture valued, I don’t know, being tall, so that eventually ‘good’ just meant tall, and ‘bad’ meant short, and then that value system disappeared, leaving those words semantically stranded, as it were, on the shore of a totally non-judgmental territory? Now these people say, maybe, ‘grue’ to approve and ‘bleen’ to disapprove.”

“That’s fine — the same thing could happen with colors. Let ‘blue’ cease, in some future world, denoting the color, and mean ‘sad’ only. So what?”

“Well, how do you know anything about the actual structure of the experience of moral endorsement? Physics tells us something about light. We know that any finite division of the space of color is insufficient. It’s a fundamentally continuous thing, and our experience of it is continuous, and all the words we use to describe it are in the end a fiction. Why should morals be any different?”

“You’ve answered your own question — because there is no external, objective ‘physics’ of morality to tell us what the experience is *really* like. I can say, okay, what’s the word in this language for the experience of 700 nanometer wavelength light? There is no corresponding thing for morals — the whole point is that morality wouldn’t exist if it weren’t for people, whereas light very well might. We *have* to rely on words, to some extent.”

“That’s your position.”

“It is.”

“Hm. I seem to be a bit stuck, then. I’ll try a different approach to the whole business.”

“What?”

“I start by accepting, again, that what you mean by the study of morals is a legitimate thing.”

“Generous of you.”

“Take the idea of a system of thought which provides a way of comparing the moral worth of actions.”

“Taken.”

“Now, this doesn’t fall under your definition. It’s not a ‘moral system’ *per se*, because it’s not two-valued.”

“Right.”

“But there’s something about it that has a moral flavor to it. To actually say that act A is more good than act B requires *some* concept, and I claim that to say that act A is *good* full stop requires the same concept, though applied differently.”

“Oh, I see — and a system which talks about color or time or something doesn’t depend on that.”

“Right. So I’m trying to get at that primitive sense of *should* that sits behind the idea that you *should* do good things, and you *should* prefer better things.”

“Okay. So what do you propose that is?”

“I told you, I don’t know.”

“I know you better than that. Surely you at least have a theory.”

“Fine, I’ll tell you, but be so kind as to keep below your usual level of premature spiteful criticism.”

“Who, me? My mind is, as always, wide open.”

## Chapter 29

# Old Problems

“Bear in mind that I proposed the comparative system because I do in fact think that it’s much closer to the primitive idea.”

“Well, now you’re back to needing to convince me that that level of abstraction is necessary.”

“No, no, I know that’s a lost cause. But you asked me to tell you what I think, so I will. I’ll just accept that you’re too unsophisticated to appreciate it.”

“Who’s premature and spiteful now?”

“I’m just being realistic. In any event, I think it’s fair to say that moral opinions *have* to take place against some background, in some context.”

“That I’ll gladly accept.”

“I thought you would. Because of that, to be complete, you must always say something like ‘action A is good *in the judgment of so-and-so*’ or ‘action A is good *compared to action B*.’”

“I’d prefer if you added ‘in the judgment of so-and-so’ to the second one.”

“Of course you would. There is an advantage of this approach here, that though we disagree what sort of relativization is necessary, we agree that some relativization is, whether to another action, or to an agent doesn’t matter.”

“Hm... I can live with that, for now.”

“So we are left with things being judged morally with respect to other things.”

“You’re heading back to abstraction again.”

“I don’t deny it.”

“Fine, then.”

“The important part is that moral judgments themselves can serve as things to be judged.”

“It could be seen as rather tactless to do so in polite company, of course.”

“That’s why I never come to your parties. I can never say two words without stepping on someone’s subjectivist toes.”

“Funny, I always thought it was because I didn’t invite you. But please, don’t let me interrupt you again.”

“The thing I’m proposing really isn’t all that strange — mathematicians have known about it forever — but I think I’ve seen through it in a way nobody else has before.”

“Why, I’m shocked. You’ve never come out and said things like that before. I figured you preferred to force other people to praise you by being so publically humble about the significance of your own work.”

“This *is* different, though. I can sense it. It’s tremendously important. It may very well change the way human beings look at the world.”

“Well, I’m listening, now. Here I was, thinking that philosophers just took up space.”

“Don’t mock me!” There was an edge to his voice.

“Sorry! Don’t act like you don’t know I like to joke.”

“It’s... okay. I just feel attached to these theories. When history’s understanding of me is at stake, you know, I can... I can get...”

“Just slow down, then. Have your ideas first, and let history judge them in its own time.” He felt strange even copying his companion’s terminology — why speak in such sweeping terms? History would surely forget the both of them.

“As I was saying,” he said, as he regained his composure, “if you take this mathematical idea, and push it through to the concept of morality, it becomes an extremely natural but revolutionary way of looking at everything. The essence of morality is to compare, and to compare comparisons, and to compare *those* comparisons, and so on, judging judgments of judgments, valuing valuations. The notion of *justified* morality is just a way of saying that you think that one moral judgment is *more* moral than another, even though they reach the same conclusion. It’s so overwhelmingly natural, the more I think about it, it becomes compelling. It *must* be true. This is the nature of the human moral sense.”

“An interesting theory, I suppose. You’re a long way off — as I maintain you are for all the other theories you’ve brought up — from showing that it’s any more than that. Really, now — I enjoy these arguments well enough, but who are we to think that we’ve finally solved such old and well-studied problems?”

## Chapter 30

# Moment

In Lin's eyes the world shivered and glowed, nothing made sense, and everything fit perfectly. She saw a man's face, saw his name, heard his face, saw him talking to her. He was smarter than her, he was crazier than her, he thought she was a dead woman. Impossible. He was frightening her, she had to escape him. The cat, the cat had to be found, it was lost, it was smarter than her, it had escaped her, it had to be lost, it must have gone that way, the story must have gone that way. She must lose it, disown it, or else it would be traced to her. She must lose, she must be discovered. She is discovered, she has found. He thinks she is a dead woman, but she is alive. That is why he must be wrong. She is asleep. She is falling. The ground hurts. She has a name. The ground has a name. The earth is named, is mother, is Teacher. The dead woman has no name, it died with her. He calls her Teacher. She has not been Teacher before, before she had a teacher. Teacher was smarter than her. She had to find the cat. She had to lose herself. She had no name. The dead woman had a name, and it was Parni Eratharyana. She was asleep for a moment.



## Chapter 31

# Over

The doctor stood over Jan's body. He examined him as best he could, though he didn't have any training for a proper medical examination. He felt obligated to do something after his patient abruptly stopped talking, and became apparently unaware of anything at all. Jan looked, however, to be fine, even healthy. His eyes were open. His face seemed calm. His respiration was regular, not too slow. His hands rested tranquilly at his side, in contrast to their state just a few seconds ago, while Jan was still retelling his dream. He was fidgeting, then, unbuttoning and rebuttoning the top button on his shirt, scratching a spot on the back of his thigh, fingering his hair, rubbing his eyes, gesturing, pointing at invisible objects in the space of his story.

He wasn't smiling, but the natural expression on his face was nonetheless pleasant to look at. He appeared thoughtful. The doctor addressed him several more times, but he did not respond. He grabbed his shoulder, squeezed it, shook it. Jan continued staring wordlessly. The doctor thought, filled with a momentary hope, that he saw Jan's mouth move slightly, as if speaking, but he couldn't be sure. He fixed his eyes on Jan's lips, but saw no further activity.

As he went to look for someone more qualified to examine his patient, he paused in the doorway for a minute or two, hoping to see some sign of motion. He saw none, and quickly broke into a run down the corridor.



## Chapter 32

# Dream

Jan had returned to his dream, or it had returned to him. He knew he was dreaming. He felt he had a weak grasp of the situation. Other people had described lucid dreams to him before, and he was never able to fully understand what they were talking about.

He didn't think that it made sense to dream, and be aware that one was dreaming. He was well able to say, while awake, things such as "I am now imagining that I am sitting on the grass, in a clearing in a great forest, I hear, and I see, and I feel" — in fact his analyst had him undergo such exercises in order to allow him to remember his actual dreams more vividly — and these experiences were the closest things he had experienced, until now, to a combination of wakefulness and dreaming. But such a shadow unworth even comparison!

For when he dreamed, he never knew it. That was what made it real: he was always trapped, while he slept, in the belief that the world of the dream was real. To imagine silly scenes while awake — that wasn't real, because he knew it never was. To be completely fooled was what made dreams dreams, he thought.

The present state of affairs contradicted him, however. He had returned to the dream he had been describing. The pain in his head was gone, and he knew that the head he now placed his fingers against probingly wasn't really his. It felt precisely as it should, perfectly realistic, but he was certain it wasn't.

There was something about the world that felt small to him. It seemed big enough on the face of it, the clouds far enough away that their slow creep across the sky seemed fast enough, but the world, the whole universe he was participating in, disregarding its physical dimensions, was somehow far too small to be real. The trees behind him, though they were there when he turned to face him, weren't there before he did. He was sure of it.

The world was so small, it fit inside his head. He was making it. He had no faith in the permanence of anything he was not presently looking at. Nothing which escaped his focus was really there. He merely conjured

up the ghosts of forgotten things each time he returned to them.

The feeling of creation, of control and ownership, rose in him, swelled, soaked into the cracks of his mind. This was lucidity. He understood it now. Dreaming was about being fooled, but before there were two minds that slept: here one was sleeping, but the other, the one that was really *him* was still awake. His sensory self, the animal that was him, the thing that carried itself around cumsily, the thing that barked and whined, the thing that hid itself, the thing that tired itself fleeing from competitors and predators, this thing was asleep.

But there was something left over, something that the animal carried around, and thought a peculiar burden. The camel need not ever know what its hump is for, he thought, need not ever realize that it depends on it, that its life-water sleeps in there.

Something was still awake. It knew that it was awake. It was, after all the part that was able to know anything at all. Its business was awareness: to know, to think, to value, to create. He could create, now. He lived in the world, the small, small world that lived in him. He had already created it, and he could continue to see its creation.

He called her name. He heard nothing. This surprised him. He thought that he had said her name, but in calling her, he hadn't. She didn't come. He wanted to see her again. He had seen her many times before, but only once when he dreamed. He laughed at how people spoke of hoping to meet their fantasies in reality, to pull the dream-people out of their minds and plant them in the earth. So long had he wished the opposite, and how painful it was to have his wish granted at the wrong time!

He had seen her awake so many times, in so many people. She always flew so quickly away whenever he saw her. To look more closely at her face destroyed it. To listen to her voice more attentively silenced her. She was an ideal, and idea, and to see her in concreteness was sin.

It didn't do him any good to try to tell himself that no person was an ideal, that his hope was hopeless. It was like loving a woman already married: the impossibility of attaining her companionship simply has nothing to do with loving her or not. He would look through the windows of the house she never left. He sometimes saw her husband, and he sometimes saw her. Never more than a few seconds at a time — he could never be sure, but he thought that she hated him for looking at her. She never looked directly at him, and fled whenever she seemed to discover him watching. Her husband was thoroughly indifferent.

He saw her in so many women, for a few seconds at a time, and then she fled from him. He knew, by know, that it wasn't accidental. He had hoped that it was merely misfortune, that she was a bird that loved no branch in particular, and hopped from one to another only out of habit, hoped that he could calm her somehow, find a nest for her, find a place where she could rest. But he knew she was avoiding him, fleeing from him. He could never find rest, and neither would she.

It was for this reason that he hoped his backwards hope, that the woman

he knew and loved in his waking days might enter his dreams, so that he could know her there. And she had, at last, though he dared not explain that this was what happened. It was too close to the part of him that was awake now, too fragile to let the sleeper handle.

But he had met her, and she smiled at him, met his eyes. She didn't look away. She didn't walk away from him. She didn't avoid him. It was he who walked past her without saying anything! He had just smiled at her, sadly. She was there, and she had no burden, she had no other. The part of her that was taken, stolen from him, that part was sleeping, too. It had no importance any longer. It was disconnected from her.

She was an idea, and he loved her. He called her again, called a soundless word that was her. Her name wasn't really other than what she was made of. He called her name again. He felt that she was coming to him after all, that it would just last a while. Though he had returned to his dream, though his dream had returned to him, she was far away. She had been walking for a long time, looking for him again. She wasn't offended when he didn't talk to her. She understood. She was patient.

The sense of control of his dream vanished for a moment. He felt an urgent need to listen. Every noise around him was important. He might be hurt if he missed something important. He might die. He might wake up. He heard his doctor asking him questions. He answered them, somehow. When was this? Weeks ago. A different session. Was he still in one now? He was frightened. What day was it? He couldn't think about time. He had no memories of breakfast, of waking up, reading a newspaper, seeing what day it was. He had no days here.

His doctor was asking him questions, another time. He remembered them. He experienced them now. It was the beginning. The doctor asked him general questions. Not about dreams at all. Questions about how he thought. "Do you feel nervous often?" "Can you talk about your worries with your friends?" "If not friends, then who?" Then questions about dreams, but not specific ones. "Do you ever write down what you dream?"

There was a point, a pinprick of emotion. Embarrassment. He was replying. "Once," he said. "I wrote..." It was impossible to hear his own words. Static crowded them out of his awareness. Other voices. Voices telling him to be quiet, to shut up, saying that it wasn't necessary to talk about such childish things. But he could hear the doctor insisting, over the noise, that it was very important, that the very things he thought most trivial might be the most important.

He said, "If you wish to force me to tell you, then I will. It is a game we play."



## Chapter 33

# Pages, pages

“It is a game. It is at least almost as old as the Mill. Some of us think that the game is actually older.”

“What is the goal?”

“There is not exactly a goal. At least, it does not exactly end. We continue playing.”

“How is it played, then?”

“You make... pages. With your number on them, which marks them as yours.”

“A number belongs to you?”

“Yes.”

“It is assigned to you?”

“I chose it.”

“You can change it at any time?”

“No, once I choose it, it is fixed.”

“Why a number?”

“I do not know. It is the way the game works. It has the effect that it may be unknown to others which pages are mine.”

“But they may find out?”

“Yes. I might tell them, or they might watch me. They might find out. They might communicate it to one another.”

“They?”

“The other players.”

“How many play at once?”

“There is no telling — theoretically, the whole of the Mill could be playing. I have seen certainly at least several hundred different numbers in the last year. People start and stop playing as they come and leave.”

“Are the rules explained to new players?”

“As little as possible. It is considered rude to deprive the new player of the experience of learning by observation. I... find it somewhat uncomfortable even to be telling you about it. Not least because it is such a frivolous expenditure of time. Nonetheless, there is no harm in telling you, because

you are not playing, and will not. It is also acceptable to explain rules in cases of necessity: if a player is found to be violating some rule, the violation will be explained.”

“Such as?”

“If a player marks a page more than once.”

“Marks?”

“Sorry — the other use of the numbers is in marking. I may see another player’s page, and I can mark it with my number. But only once.”

“What does that accomplish?”

“If three numbers — different numbers — appear as markings on a page, then it may be taken down, after a day has passed.”

“I see. So you say there is no goal?”

“Not precisely. There is no condition under which the game ends. There is no final success, no winners.”

“Nonetheless...”

“...the motivation is to have as many pages visible as possible. More frequently viewed areas are considered more valuable.”

“So you can’t simply take down other people’s pages?”

“No, you must mark them, and wait a full day.”

“Why don’t you just cover them with your own?”

“That is also specifically prohibited.”

The doctor paused. Jan was almost able to pull his mind out of this memory, back into his dream, to pull the dream back into him. The silence here gave him rest, gave him strength. There was nothing here to pay attention to. There was no memory to distract him. He almost had enough time to succeed, but he remembered how the doctor continued, and it jerked him back. Her forgot again that he was dreaming.

“So... tell me what this had to do with writing.”

“The players, we sometimes, when we make them, we put other things on the pages besides just our number.”

“Such as?”

“Pictures are common. Some of the most respected players of the game are talented artistically. Often they are respected precisely because the art on the pages is of high quality. People hesitate to mark more beautiful pages, even if they are made by their enemies.”

“Enemies? That seems like a strong word.”

“There are strong feelings associated with the game. Ultimately, every other player takes up space which you would gladly have yourself. In the end, each is your enemy, in a small way. In the meantime, you need friends so that your enemies have someone to fear. Three people is enough to wipe ten or twenty walls in a day. If you have a couple friends, and this is known, then your enemies will hesitate to mark you. Larger groups create larger threats, but require greater loyalty.”

“I see. And you... you used this game as a way of writing down your dreams, by writing on a page you made?”

“Yes. I have no friends in the game, so it did not stay on the wall on which I put it for very long. When a player has nothing to fear from marking, they do not hesitate to do so. I was taking up space that they would gladly take. I was lucky enough to find that space. My timing was good. But... I made a page — a handful of copies — with something I had composed on it. It was based directly on a dream I had. It didn’t exactly have a story to it. It was a feeling of familiarity. Of being someone else that knew of something I wanted to find, and wanting to tell me about it. Though... it was a request, of sorts. I phrased it that way, when I wrote it. It was a request. It was never answered.”

“I should like to see it.”

“I am afraid that is not possible. I kept no copies.”



## Chapter 34

# Winning

Wei understood the rules, now. They weren't really complicated at all. Her first reaction was that it was completely fucking stupid, a typical Mill waste of time. She thought it was sort of weird that she hadn't heard of it before, that she hadn't already had the chance to make fun of how lame it was to hide behind little numbers and go around writing you stupid fucking little numbers and getting all wet and happy if the rules permitted you to take down someone else's little bit of refrigerator art.

Shit, she could just rip down a whole wall of them herself. What were they going to do? Beat her up? The ones in the actual army of Mill, the ones that could take her in a fair fight — they seemed totally uninterested in the game. It seemed to be a game specifically for the weak, for the bureaucrats, for the management. It was, she figured, a substitute for the fights they weren't willing to have, a simulation of bad-ass, for a bunch of tools that wouldn't know bad-ass even if had a fucking full-year seminar on the semiology of the bad/ass dichotomy. She was already angrily disgusted with the style of presentation of everything here. The Niece did philosophy, sure, but at least they said what they meant. Not all this fucking jargon.

Still, despite her general steady irritation with the Mill, and despite maintaining what she felt was a respectable, healthy distance from actually liking it, she found herself more and more fascinated with the game itself. She quietly eavesdropped on conversations, figured out which people aligned themselves with which others, watched allies meet, cooperate, betray each other, and ally again, as if nothing had transpired. She learned the symbols they used to communicate threats and proposals, promises and empty posturing, treaties, declarations of war, claims of territory. She read into the posters more deeply than the text on them.

Wei *could* play the game expertly. She knew it. She could win. She could dominate such amateurs. But she couldn't bring herself to actually play.

She sat now, and gathered information. She had, more or less, befriended, as much as she did anyone outside the people in her own group, a young man that called himself Ant. She didn't know if that was his given

name, and she really didn't fucking care. The Mill was pretentious in a thousand other ways, and she wasn't about to begrudge a guy for giving himself a toolish nickname. Ant was active in the game, one of the best players around, a diplomat and a psychologist. She had gone out with him for drinks, but he wasn't really paying attention to her. This was fine with her, because she wasn't paying attention to him either. The place they had gone to — Ant suggested it — was on neutral ground. By coincidence, Wei had been here many times before with her friends from the Niece. She was preoccupied with worrying that they might show up. She didn't want to seem too quick to get so friendly with these Mill guys. If they saw here here with them, even though they weren't even talking, they'd surely assume she was fucking him or something.

Her anxiety was unnecessary. Nobody came. She sat and listened to Ant argue with his friend. As she listened, however, something in the conversation soured.

## Chapter 35

# Remebered

Ant was nervous now. They argued all the time, called each other names, insulted each other's work, ideas, derided entire disciplines that the other spent decades of their life working within as useless wastes of time, and the whole while neither one of them ever raised his voice. It was just a conversational game, a rhythm, a common joke. It was more interesting to spar a little bit here and there, to have a good *argument* instead of just a dry discussion, to poke and jab now and then, keep it fun.

But across the table from him stood a very angry man. He was standing, now. His chair had been shoved back. His hands were on the table, red and sweaty.

"I thought I could trust you," he said. He wasn't shouting yet, but he was quickly getting there. His voice wasn't yet loud, but it was tense. "I thought you, of all people, would see the value in my ideas. I thought you were smart enough to understand the direction that this field needs to move. I have been slowed down by the orthodoxy long enough! It saddens me to find that you, too, are too slow to keep up with this change."

"What are you talking about?"

Wei watched carefully. She was nervous, too. She looked around slowly, and made sure that she had a clear path to the exit.

"I am facing the same difficulties of every true genius. I have discovered the path of truth. It is I alone who have worked hard enough to see it. Everyone else is blind, stubbornly ignorant. I have unlocked the mathematical lock that hides the going-under. The last man! The overman! The secret of human values is in my hands, and the all-too-human, the herd, the establishment, you, you are all too cowardly to see it!"

"Slow down! You're not thinking straight. Look, you never even liked Nietzsche, before, you said —"

"You presume to call my thinking misguided? You presume to claim understanding of my ideas, now? You reject them and then say you understand them? Hypocrisy! I am surrounded by children, and hypocrites! This is it! This is the reason I have failed. Not my ideas, but the environment

in which I am forced to labor with them. This foul, salted earth, the soil of your child-like minds will not bear even the hardiest seed. Your minds are already poisoned by the slipperiness of your bankrupt so-called philosophies! They are not even philosophies. It is an insult to the endeavour to call them that. Philosophy is the answering of questions. You don't even presume to answer them. You dodge them instead. I say, 'what is truth?' You say, 'oh, well, there is no truth.' I ask, 'what is right?' You mutter and grumble, and complain that it is old-fashioned to say that anything is really right or wrong."

Ant tried to interrupt again, but he wasn't being listened to. His friend right talked over him, ever louder.

"Every true idea, every great idea has met with resistance. The little truths might meet with ready acceptance, I concede. But they are the work of little minds, these little truths. They are footnotes. History forgets them, skims over them. Nobody reads footnotes. The great ideas are the ones that nobody believes until a hundred years after they have been buried under a mountain of false disproof, and the mountain is blown away by the slightest breeze, the morning-sigh of a community of thinkers waking up, questioning, searching for self-honesty. But this generation of thought, this regeneration, is a rare, precious thing! It only comes ever so often. Each day has but one morning. The majority of the day is accounted for by a dull afternoon, a stumbling dusk, and a night of darkness and sleep. Most of the time we, the thinkers, the soul of the body of humanity, we are asleep! We dream with the scattered tumbling of our waking ideas on our tongues, inventing shallow variations of them, because this is all we are capable of, as we lie asleep, our eyes shut, our ears deaf. Only rarely do we wake up. Only rarely do we see a new day.

"But my work is the cock's-crow, the dawn-glow, the rising, the dawn of something other, a door opened into a new relationship between humans and the universe. My ideas are a new morning, a much-needed awakening. The community is tired, lazy, slothful. They wish to cling to the warm sheets, to sleep away the morning, to whine and scowl at their neighbor calling them from beyond the bedroom-window, welcoming them to the day.

"I never liked Nietzsche because he was too narrow-minded. He saw a little, and then closed his eyes. He wanted that to be enough. He wanted what he had written to be the end, to be enough. He wanted his vision to be grander all others, but in the end, it wasn't a vision of greatness at all. It was a tautology. Humans create values. So what? If Nietzsche tried to write a treatise on cooking, he would conclude 'humans eat food.' No doubt he would find some more thorough way of writing it down, making it seem like the most significant discovery in the history of thinking. Nietzsche was a fraud.

"Nonetheless he saw a little light through his half-blind and half-closed eyes. But I have stared directly at it! I have seen it clearly! He rightly saw the need for a going-under! He rightly preached the overman! But his story was so shallow, so simple. He said 'once upon a time...' and halted. I am

ready to tell the whole of the story, but the sleeping would not have their sleep disturbed with my speech!

“His mistake was to think it was enough to merely value! His mistake was to say that the proper *understanding* of music should come from each one of us writing a single song. How far it is from understanding music to simply try to create it, ignorant of its nature! But I have heard much music. I have labored to understand it. I have labored with an honesty, an earnestness, with a trueness absent from anyone else alive. I have not deceived myself the way that all others have been deceived. I have so succeeded where they failed. I can compose symphonies where they tunelessly croak and groan their primitive melodies. I do not *value*. I do not execute a morality. I do not single out a morality. Neither do I stutter and hum and qualify and say that all moralities are just as good as one another, that there is no absolute.

“I alone understand the truth. I alone see clearly the picture that others squint at. I see the *whole* system, the vast and beautiful mosaic whose glass-chips others dote on singly, I see the heart of God himself, the unchanging, the absolute.”

“It is no wonder they are afraid of it.”



## Chapter 36

# Reappear

She was disoriented. She was awake. She was in a house. It was small. It had one room. It had a bed in one corner, a television and a folding chair in the other. The television was on. It was playing a comedy, a movie, an old comedy from half a century ago, actors long dead, with dead smiles on their faces, and hollow laughs.

On the chair Preskar John sat, and watched the television. He did not laugh, however. He was watching it not in the sense that a person watching television would ordinarily watch. He studied it. He made little grunting noises, appreciating this or that nuance. He took notes.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Ah,” he said, “You’ve woken up already.”

“What are you writing?”

“I am doing as you instructed me.”

“I did?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“Over two hundred years ago.”

“What? How old am I?”

“You seem to be about thirty, but I have never been good at telling age.”

“But that doesn’t even make...”

“Hush, hush, don’t think about it too much, child, you are tired, still.”

“Who are you?”

“Go back to sleep.”

“Who are you?”

“It is good that you have started recovering so quickly, but you must go back to sleep. You must get rest.”

“Who are you?”

“Not now.”

“No, no, I need... I... need to know, Who...” she said, and felt dizzy. Almost as if he had willed it, her eyes closed and her neck became limp again. She slept.



## Chapter 37

# Wander

Nijl was somewhere. He didn't even know much more than that. He had gotten lost in a maze of houses and streets and signs with quaint, historical-sounding names on them. He didn't remember why he had come here. He didn't have any business here, did he? Probably not. Otherwise he would have felt more apprehension about being somewhere at a certain time. He certainly didn't feel nervous.

He did not remember being this calm. It came, he thought, from not being able to actually access anything in his memory that could upset him. The very fact that he couldn't remember anything substantial didn't bother him either. He was a little surprised at that. Didn't he see movies about people with amnesia, fluttering around like hunted birds, panicking, searching, desperately trying to find themselves? He didn't feel like that at all. He didn't care. What did he need with himself? He was here, somewhere. He was walking somewhere. Maybe something would present itself to him, as he walked.

He played games with himself and the cracks in the sidewalk. For an hour he strived to step on every crack in sequence. The next hour he tried not to step on any crack at all. Experiments following that included demanding that his right foot always land on a crack, and his left foot never, but he found that troublesome, because it meant the length of his stride was constrained to be either a half-square or square and a half of sidewalk, too short or too long. Too long was the more tolerable of the two choices, because at least leaping from foot to foot was fun. Muttering along a half-square at a time was terribly dull.

He wasn't sure why moving so slowly bothered him, however. Hadn't he just established that he had nowhere to go? His legs protested, though, if they weren't being used as much as they felt proper. They were for going forward, fast, purposeful. That's what he had them for. The least he could do for them in the absence of anywhere to go was run fast in a circle.

There was, in fact a cul-de-sac at the end of the road he was on. There were about six houses, maybe seven around it. He tried counting them, but

one of them, he thought, kept appearing and disappearing from his count. He stared at it. The house itself was not doing anything remarkable. It certainly wasn't becoming invisible as he looked at it. But he felt compelled, somehow, to omit it. It drew attention away from itself, the way it was built. Not camouflaged, not simply blending in to the background, and not merely unassuming, it made you not want to think it was a house.

He walked toward it so that it was the only thing in his field of view. It told him to look away. It told him that he didn't live in it. It told him that it was unnecessary, that he didn't need to be here. It said to him,

“Why are you here? You were not invited. You do not live here. Nobody told you to come here.”

He sat down, on the sidewalk, amused. He felt better doing something that nobody told him to do, something harmless but unwilled. There was no reason for him to be here, he knew it. This was precisely what he wanted. He was happy, here. The fact that inanimate objects were speaking to him in his mind didn't trouble him in the least. He had already put aside any memory that such experiences were strange.

The house continued to protest, and the other houses joined into a chorus — they were all as eager to draw his attention to them as this odd one was to be not noticed. They collaborated to persuade him, to move him from his spot, but he resisted.

He crossed his legs, rested his hands on his knees, closed his eyes, and smiled.

## Chapter 38

# Restraint

Wei and Ant looked at each other. Without words, they had already agreed to grab one arm each, hold him down, keep him from hurting anyone. He was going to unless they did.

They didn't succeed. His movements were unpredictable, fast, well-timed to confuse them, and to avoid being restrained. He twisted out of each grasp singly, with his thrashing hurting his captors' arms and joints more than they did his — or else he was better able to ignore the pain.

"Look," Ant said, "just sit still. Calm down. You don't need to react like this. You still have plenty of friends in the field, plenty of allies. You don't need to go off like this. I know you've been nervous lately, I know it's been a lot of rejections in a row to take, but there's no need to cling to one theory so tightly as this. You know things aren't as simple as that. I know you don't really think that."

"You fool! You incompetent, short-sighted fool! I really am disappointed in you. I wanted to have you on my side more than anyone else. It is a crime and a tragedy. No! It is a comedy. It is comedic, it is hilarious how stupid you are, how stupid you all are. But I still cry. I am still sad. I wish you could have been with me, instead of against me, like all the others. They were against me from the start. You, at least, were with me for a time. Our arguments, even as you disagreed with me, I could tell that you respected me, by the fact that you continued to listen. I thought you respected me. It is clear that you no longer do. I beg you to reconsider. Your role in this is most important."

"Why? I want to help you. I am on your side."

"You are? Wonderful! I thought just a moment ago you didn't want me to give myself over to this work, that you doubted me. Why did you try to grab my arm, as if I were a dangerous lunatic?"

"Look, I think you just need to sit down, breathe a bit, and think carefully about this..."

"I have thought carefully! I have thought more carefully than the sheep and cows know how. I have sunk to the ocean trenches, I have mined the

richest veins of human thought along the way to this decision, to this realization. Why do you ask me to think more, when you don't even know, when you don't even know *enough* to understand what I speak of?"

"You're getting worked up unnecessarily."

"Unnecessarily? This is the most necessary work in the history of humankind! I thought you had just said you were on my side. You speak like the cows and the sheep, saying that their scratchings in the dirt, their grass-cutting and cud-chewing are more important than real work, my work."

"Just sit down."

"Okay, I am sitting. What does it matter? Are you really on my side, Ant? You have doubted me. I can forgive you, but you will forgive me for doubting you."

"Certainly. It's okay. I'm on your side."

"Good. Good. I'm glad." He seemed to be calming down. Ant was hopeful. Maybe they wouldn't have to find a doctor after all. Ant looked for Gary. He couldn't find him. Where had everyone gone? It was just the three of them.

Ant looked across the table at the weary man sitting there, hopeful but afraid.

## Chapter 39

# Vanish

Jan was waiting for his doctor to ask him to describe what he had written. He braced for it. He knew his own mind well enough that he saw the reaction playing out before it had even started in earnest. There was a smell, a sound. Internal things, triggered by fear, exposure, embarrassment. There was a buzzing, humming, urgent sound. Almost a voice. Get out. Get out. Escape. Somewhere else. Be quiet. Don't say anything. Make excuses. A smell. Smells. Who can say how many odors there are in one experience? Physics lets us see single frequencies of light, but smell is a muddled space. No straight lines, no frequencies, no wavelengths. Just blurry associations, little kingdoms, little regions of similarity. Floral, rancid, sweet, burnt and burning, spicy, dirty and sweaty, sick, vomiting, ureic, acidic, dry, meaty.

Somewhere in a room in a hermit's-house in a forest in an abandoned corner of the world lived a smell that was pain, anxiety, adrenaline. Jan couldn't take a breath without choking on it. It was bad enough that he had written it down in the first place. It was hard enough to do that. Now he was being asked to relive it. But he had asked for this! He had looked for help. He needed it. He couldn't sleep anymore, couldn't bring himself to eat. He had asked himself, really. There was no reason to hate this so much. He wanted it. He thought these things. Was it so much worse to put words to them? Was it worse still to write them down? To let another person see them? It shouldn't be, he thought. It shouldn't be. It was, somehow.

Each step was painful. Each step was being naked in a crowd, alone in a crowd, shouting, being seen, being noticed. Each step was making a promise that might not be kept. Each step was claiming ownership of a theory that might be wrong. It was revealing an attempt at an untutored self-analysis that might prove to be horribly naive.

Jan tried to repeat to himself, hoping that in repetition that he might at last believe it, that *this was the point*. He didn't trust himself to understand his own mind completely, and that was why he had looked for help. He didn't trust himself to analyze his own dreams, and that was why the doctor was doing it. He was trained. He was talented. He was there for a reason.

It still didn't work. The first step was coming to this realization, and looking for an analyst. The second was calling. The third was talking to him on the phone. The fourth was making an appointment. Fifth, writing it down. Sixth, the period at the end of the sentence. Seventh, putting the pencil down. No. This was ridiculous. He couldn't say what constituted one particle of his difficulty any more than he could tell two smells combined from fifteen. It was continuous. The space behind the phenomena themselves was continuous. It was like asking how long a moment is.

It was his own perception that divided up the space. This is the smell of the wet maple leaves, this is one thing. This is the smell of her hair, a million tiny voices singing one note. This is the smell of pain, the same as the smell of a bloody nose, metallic, troubling. This is the next step in what needs to be done, and seen as a unit, put into a parcel by itself, it is horrible. No matter how he did divide up the space of his own healing, each division became a unit of his reluctance to perform it.

Jan was waiting for his doctor to ask him to describe what he had written, but his doctor had vanished. He was sitting up, now. His hands were cold and wet. He swung his feet toward the floor. He stood up.

His relief was intense. He had an unshakable certainty that he would have to do something very soon which went against the very grain of his soul. He knew, he knew, he knew for sure that he would have to take the knife handed to him, and cut himself open, and show the tumors, point to them, bleeding. He had already smelled the blood, felt the hot screaming of the incision. But it was not happening. He was fine. He was still contained and hidden from the world. The siege had lifted. The enemy was gone.

Jan felt wonderful. He did not need to be healed today. The doctor was gone. He need not analyze anything else. He could leave the images without names, without meanings, without clumsily stitching them together. It didn't matter. He was well. He had been well before. He was merely confused. He was merely possessed by hypochondria. There was no need to relate any of this. There was no need to feel separated, unwell, contagious. The quarantine had been lifted.

# Chapter 40

## Lecture

“You told me once about the number seven.”

“Yes, I did.”

“Would you tell me again?”

“Yes. What I had discovered was the sevenfold nature of virtue.”

“There are seven virtues?”

“That is... almost true.”

“What should I say instead.”

“That there is one virtue, that virtue is one thing, but that it moves in seven ways.”

“I do not understand.”

“One of the forms of virtue is one which virtue has itself, which I might describe without too much inaccuracy as *unity*.”

“How is this a virtue?”

“It is in the nature of things to, by themselves, be separate, to be many, to have many parts, to have many causes, to have many purposes, to have many results. It is our purpose to work against this. Just as a rock falls, a bird is made to work against gravity. In the same way, the human mind is made to take the many and make of them a one.”

“But how is this right? How is this a virtue? A wolf, by its nature, will kill and eat a deer, but the deer does not call it virtue. Is it right for me to follow my impulses always?”

“No, not every thing which we naturally do is virtuous, but the pursuit of unity is one thing that belongs to both our nature, and to virtue.”

“How? I do not yet even believe that it is natural. Your description is too vague. A man who loves to collect many things, to collect possessions, does he not worship the many? Is this unnatural? It seems such worshippers of the many are common.”

“I am necessarily vague. There are no millions of words that can single out what I refer to, let alone a single word. But I will answer the question you posed: that man seeks to make one owner of all things, and he seeks to

make it him. He does follow his nature, but he follows it past the point of virtue. He engages in false hubris, and not true pride.”

“You have not committed to meaning anything at all. Your words are empty!”

“I happily confess that your accusation is true. Why, then, are you still listening to me?”

“I... I do not know.”

“It is because you do think there is something of value in what I say.”

“It is.”

“Even though you can not penetrate to the source of what I say, even though you can not start at the beginning, and work up to the conclusions you wish to draw.”

“Yes, it frustrates me that I can not do that.”

“This difficulty is fundamental: you wish to believe a handful of things at the bottom, on the ground you walk on, at a level you can see and touch and smell. You wish to trust a handful of axioms and build up.”

“Yes, give me a foundation!”

“I can not. I will never be able to.”

“But why?”

“Because the truth arrived from heaven, not from earth. I have begun by seeing the truth of a few things, yes, but they are far above me, not below me. They are the conclusion. I must devote my life — and you must devote yours, every person, in the end, must spend every second — looking for the foundation, even while they are certain it is unreachable.”

“Why? That makes no sense.”

“No truth does.”

He shook his head. “What a simple excuse! And how untrue! While you sit there and smile, and cherish the senselessness of your way of thinking, why should I join you? Why should true things not make sense? Why do you think the truth revealed to you is true? Why are you not just inventing truth, and being blissfully apathetic about the fact that you are trying to justify it after the fact?”

“You are still attached to the way of building-up. You must still learn to create in the other direction, from the high to the low.”

“What does that nonsense mean?”

“Creation,” she said, never once reacting any differently according to whether he seemed to be agreeing with her or not, “is a very important face among the seven. It is another point of agreement of nature and virtue.”

He sighed. “Tell me. Explain.”

“Animals only rarely create, and in a way which is a shadow of human creation. A bird may build a nest, but it is hardly a different nest each time. One might better say that a species of birds itself has created a nest, created a way of building nests. A noble achievement, but something that no bird, by itself, can do. Contrarily, a single person can create. A single person can look to the creations of others, and steal, and reuse, and modify,

and throw away. A single person can shut her eyes, and create something that is new in a way, even if it has already been accomplished.

“A bird knows nothing of creation, and the birds, the population of birds, the archetypal bird, even she has not truly *created* the nest. There is no intent, no awareness. It would not matter that each nest is the same if each bird believed its nest to be unique, if it meant the act as an act of creation. But a bird can not *mean* anything, and so it can not create.”

“You mean to say that a human can mean to create and therefore is capable of creation at all?”

“Yes.”

“But why is it a virtue to distinguish ourselves from the beasts? Just because there is something humans do that animals do not, it does not seem virtuous to me. Is it noble that we wear clothes? Is it right that we should fight wars?”

“You are confused again: I do not claim that what is natural is right, nor do I claim that what is right is always in our nature, but I remark upon those things which are both right and unique to us, and in our nature.”

“I think I see. Forgive my error.”

“I already have.”

“Tell me why creation is a virtue.”

“I can not.”

“Then tell me why I should care about anything you just said.”

“I think that is up to you to answer. Why are you still listening to me?”

“I think,” he said spitefully, “it is because I am weakened by my affliction, because I want *some* answer, even one that I deride as foolish, more than no answer at all.”

“That may be. Tell me, how many roads go from the East Harbor to your home?”

He counted. “Five.”

“Is that so?”

“Do you doubt me? I make four turns. Counting the street that goes through the harbor, that makes five roads I drive on before getting here.”

“That wasn’t my question.”

“What was it, then?”

“How many roads go from the East Harbor to your home?”

“That was the same question that I answered.”

“It was the same question that I asked before. But you did not answer it. You told me how many roads you go upon to reach your home. If you didn’t exist, how many roads would go from East Harbor to your home?”

“If I didn’t exist, I wouldn’t have a home.”

She smiled. “I knew my optimism was not unjustified. If you didn’t exist, how many roads would go from East Harbor to your home?”

“Why do you keep asking me that?”

“Because I want you to answer.”

“Why do you want to know the answer so badly?”

“I don’t. I want that you should know the answer.”

“I still don’t understand the question.”

“How many roads are there in this city?”

“I don’t know. A hundred? A thousand?”

“And how many of them go to your home?”

“Um,” he hesitated. “One?”

“One of them directly passes your house.”

“Yes.”

“And five of them are used when you go from the East Harbor to you home.”

“Yes, that’s what I was trying to tell you.”

“But you could go another way, could you not?”

“Yes.”

“You perhaps even do, sometimes?”

“Yes. Once I saw my landlord, and changed direction to avoid him.”

“And on that occasion, you drove on a different street, not one of the five?”

“Yes.”

“Would you not say that *that street* also takes you from the harbor to your home?”

“I suppose so.”

“Then how many roads go from the East Harbor to your home?”

“Surely you don’t mean to say that all of them do. Do you?”

“Yes, that it the answer I wanted you to find.”

“I see. Why did you want me to answer that way?”

“It does not matter why you are listening to me. It only matters that you are.”

“Then why did you ask me why I continue to listen to you?”

“Only to humor you. It seems to matter to you very much why you are listening to me.”

“Not really. I only wish to know why you use such strange logic when you believe in these heavenly truths of yours, why you believe in the forms that virtue takes, why you believe that what distinguishes humans from animals can be considered noble.”

“Then stop listening to me! Ask me to leave your house, and never think of me again, except to sniff and chuckle, and wonder at your foolishness that you should have ever heard one word from my lips. This I exhort you to do, yet you do not eject me. You continue to listen to my illogic, and so you *must* ask yourself why this is so. It bothers you, concerns you, worries away at what little peace you have left. In the end, you want to know why you are listening to me. You are learning the right way to think. You have taken the fact that you are listening to me, and have descended. You have reached the question of why you need me.”

“Have I? And why is that?”

“Below that question, just below it, lies the beginning of whole of the truth: you listen to me because it is the truth that I have found.”

## Chapter 41

# Unresponsive

“I honestly believe I have no need to be here.”

“I think I am a better judge of that than you are.”

“But nobody has committed me here. I am free to leave any time I wish.”

“Indeed you are, but I don’t recommend it.”

“Why not? I feel much better since I fell asleep.”

“You call it that!”

“And why should I not?”

“You did not just sleep. You were comatose for five hours. I couldn’t wake you.”

“I sleep deeply.”

“Sleeping that deeply is not healthy.”

“I feel much better now.”

“You think you do. Feeling good in your surface thoughts is no guarantee of health.”

“What other measure do I have? I only came to you in the first place because I did not think I was feeling well. Was I in error?”

“No, you were not well. You were troubled.”

“I was. Am I in error now?”

“You may be. You may be unwell still. You did not have a... normal reaction.”

“What would a normal reaction have been?”

“Well... to be honest... there was no particular thing to which you had reacted. I mean to say that it is not common for my patients to become so unresponsive for so long. It is not clear what caused that. It is for that reason that I wish to continue to examine you.”

“I have told you that I feel much better now. I do realize that I could simply walk out of your office, but I would much rather not be rude. Please, give me permission to leave without it being offense.”

“No, I insist that you should stay. I have told you already that your apparent remission may be illusory. There may still be problems deeper in.”

“Do you presume to know how deep problems can exist?”

“What do you mean?”

“You say that, although I think I have no further need for your help, that you presume that I do, that I am too naive to have seen all the way down to the foundations of my own mind. If another doctor points to one of your patients — one of whom you think you have cured — and says that you have only scratched the surface of his ailment, what then?”

“It is not as simple as that, Jan. Please, you make light of—”

“Yes, yes, I know I am oversimplifying. But when would ever you feel confident that no more problems exist?”

“It is a matter of judgment. If you had the training I did, I might then trust your judgment. Until then, I—”

“If you had the revelation I did, I might trust your judgment.”

The doctor was silent for a moment. Jan stood up, but did not make any further motion.

“Jan, understand that I ask you this not only because I think you could benefit from further analysis, but that also I could benefit. I and my profession could benefit greatly from understanding what happened to you. Consider it a favor to me, even if you believe yourself to be cured.”

Jan sat down.

“Very well. I see your interest. It is no great effort for me to continue talking.”

“Thank you.”

“What do you wish to know?”

“Tell me about what happened to you in the beginning. How did it start?”

“I had the image of the tree in my mind. I was describing it to you, and it appeared before me with greater and greater clarity as I spoke. It replaced you, where you sat. It grew there, took root in your chair. The chair aged as fast as the tree did. Very fast. I saw thousands of years go by in seconds. The tree turned from a seed to a mighty wooden pillar in seconds. The chair decayed and fell apart. You yourself, you were absent. The chair remained, but only in its crumbling form. The tree... it ate up everything around it, the way a whale drinks in its food with the water, as if simply breathing. It doesn't even think about the fact that it is eating. Food is there, always there, no more. For food to be absent would be suffocation, breathing in vacuum. The tree consumed the room, the bed I lie on. It nearly consumed me, but the tree knew I was here, and would not consume me.

“If you were here, if you had not left, I am not sure what the tree would have done. It might have not noticed you, and you would have been turned into a thousand milk-and-blood-colored flowers, inhaled and eaten and digested and transformed. The tree flowered in the spring, and spring came every second, a heartbeat. The tree threw up great quantities of flowers and leaves, and branches and insects, jettied them into the air like so much exhalation, a whale's-breath geyser a hundred feet into the air, each season a heartbeat.

“This image came to me as you asked me to describe my dream. The room was transformed into it. It was a dream, it was the same dream, but I knew I was dreaming. I have not had a lucid dream before. It was a new experience for me, a wonderful beginning. Before I would have thought the dream a place, a place where I could become lost each night, a maze I keep stumbling out of each morning. Now I feel that I am the place and the dream the thing that is in me.

“The heart of the tree slowed its beating, and I could see each season passing clearly. Finally its spring wound down and the leaves took minutes to change color fully. They were the healthiest, richest green at first, a color so intense that you would never doubt that the human eye, the very notion of color itself... you could tell that our capacity for understanding color at all had been built by evolution to see *this* color. It was the color of living things, good things to eat, all good things. And I wept with the tree as the green fell, vein by vein, to a tired yellow, and the yellow became shot through with red, and the red sank into brown, and the brittle brown leaves fell.

“And one leaf remained, and it was at that time that I had become certain that my dream had returned to me.”



## Chapter 42

# Honesty

“You say also that honesty is a virtue?”

“I did.”

“How can that be?”

“How can it not?”

“Your constant echoing of my questions is becoming annoying. You know that I look for a better answer than that.”

“I do.” She smiled.

“Are you trying to annoy me?”

“I am doing things, which I mean to do, which are fully intentional, which I believe will frustrate you. I do nothing by accident.”

“Is that so? Is there any difference between frustrating me and annoying me?”

“I think so.”

“What is it?”

“That, at the very least, you say I am annoying you, and I say that I am frustrating you.”

“I say you are doing both.”

“Very well.”

“Your answer is still more or less vacuous.”

“It is.”

“Why do you give vacuous answers to me, then?”

“Why should I not?”

He sighed. “Why should you give me vacuous answers to my questions, when you claimed in the beginning that you were trying to help me understand?”

“Why should I not?”

“Because they are not helping me understand anything!”

“I disagree with your assertion.”

“I don’t think it really matters whether you think I understand anything.”

“Of course it doesn’t matter. But it does not mean that I am wrong.”

“You think that you know that I am understanding something better by means of your ridiculous half-answers, while I claim that I in fact do not understand it?”

“Understand what?”

“Whatever it is you’re getting at! Whatever it is you claim to be teaching me.”

“And what is that?”

“I have no idea! That is my complaint.”

“That is why I know you are learning something, and why you do not know it.”

“What is it, then, that I am supposed to be learning?”

“That honesty is a virtue.”

“Are you being dishonest, then?”

“In a sense, yes, I was.”

“How?”

“I was keeping myself from you. I was holding things which you would have been happy to have, but held them from you. It would cost me nothing to give them to you, but I refrained from giving.”

“You were simply being irritating.”

“No, I made you cross in a very specific way.”

“What way?”

“I could have lied to you. I could have positively misled you. I could have pointed and said, ‘that is the direction in which you should think, this is the thing upon which you should meditate’ about the wrong thing entirely. Instead I gave you no direction. I reflected your own questions. If you had been talking to yourself, if you had been talking to a still pond — you would have received the same reflection. I had excused myself from the room. Though I continued talking, I was absent.”

“So you were being irritating in a particular way. So what? I don’t need you to teach me that people can be irritating by refusing to answer questions.”

“But I mean to teach you that honesty is a virtue.”

“Why should I believe that? Does morality spring from not irritating others? Is that all it is?”

“Certainly not.”

## Chapter 43

# The Philosopher

“Now, I was scared there for a while. It’s hard, really hard, when I spent so much of my life fighting to get my ideas respected, you know...”

“I know, I know. I understand. It’s going to be okay.”

“It will. I’m okay now. I got a bit scared there, I thought, well, I thought you were trying to attack me there, a second ago, I thought I had to defend myself against you, I thought—”

“No, no, I wasn’t attacking you. Not any more than I always have, you know, all in good fun. In the good sense, people challenging each others ideas to make them stronger, right?”

“Yeah, yeah, you only wanted to make sure that what I was saying would stand up to... stand up to the criticism of others. People less sympathetic than you.”

“Yeah, okay. I was... only trying to help.”

“You were on my side.”

“The whole time, on your side.”

He laughed nervously. “You...”

“I what?”

“You believed me, the whole time?”

“Believed what?”

“That my ideas were worthwhile?”

“Sure, sure.”

He became tense again. “What does that mean?”

“Sure, I think they’re interesting.”

“Interesting?”

“Yeah, I think maybe you could work something out along the lines of —”

“Interesting?”

“Look, what’s wrong with calling it interesting? I told you, I’m on your side. Even when I’m insulting what you do, I don’t really mean it. Just devil’s advocate, you know?”

“I thought you *believed* me.”

"I do."

"No you don't."

"Why are you contradicting me?"

"Because you're lying to me. You said you believed me."

"I do believe your ideas are interesting. What do you want me to say?"

"I want you to admit that they're right."

"Look, we've been over this a million times. I don't think it's meaningful to say that you can be right in such a setting. The subjective point of—"

"Liar!"

"No, look I—"

"You *are* trying to attack me! You are trying to ruin me! I see now! The only way you could succeed was to make me trust you! You know that if I don't trust you, if I don't trust anyone, I will go ahead with my work. If I go ahead with my work, it will revolutionize everything. If a revolution comes, you will be out of work, for the practitioners of the old will be discarded! If you lose your job, you will become me! You will be forgotten! You will be irrelevant! It will be you that will be called crazy! You can not have that, no, never, that is unthinkable!

"If you become me, then you must face this. You must destroy with your left hand and create with your right hand. You must channel the forever-everywhere, you must be a prophet, the shunned prophet, speaking the song of God! You will be hated, and spat upon! You will be certain that your rejection bears the signature of truth! You will understand, then. But you must not let yourself understand. You desire blindness. You are addicted to your deafness. Your delicate eyes burn in the presence of the light of God, the light that surrounds me! Your weak, fragile ears, your too-human ears are shattered by the angels' trumpets! The seals have been opened, and only I will survive the end-times! I will be the last man, and you..."

Ant looked at the philosopher speaking. His fatigue was gone. His age was gone. He had the energy of a younger man. It had returned to him from somewhere, but it had come poisoned. He was not so much merely excited as manic. He did seem to glow, almost, but not with the holy light he claimed. His pupils had dilated, and his eyes wandered seemingly without pattern. Ant no longer feared that he would cause any damage; he was too far gone to do any harm.

"You, you, you... you can not bear that, you can not tolerate that thought. It creates a great nausea in you, a sickness, you must vomit. You must purge that thought, that image, that world. The world in which I am the last sentence, you must end it. So it is from that thought that you proceed to attack me. You must kill me, so that I do not sing the final note. I understand now. I understand what you and your monsters have been doing to me. Do no more! You have no more power over me. You can not hurt me any longer. Not only have I penetrated the mathematical depths of morality, I... I..."

He lost control of his tongue occasionally. He could barely speak. Saliva covered the bottom of his chin, dripped onto his shirt. Instead of swal-

lowing, he just spit forward. He continued talking, quickly, stacatto, loudly, strangely articulate, as if reciting from memory, perfectly rehearsed, rather than inventing.

“I see, now. I understand. I can defeat you all. My motions are a space. A Hausdorff space, tee-zero, tee-two. Metric. Metrizable. My motions are a metric space. I need only minimize the motions. Minimize the energy I expend, and maximize the defeat of my enemies. Minimize my enemies. Find a closed-form solution to the boundary value problem. Boundary differential solve. Differential equations describe my motions. My mountains are a space. In the topology, the cover has a finite subcover. I can cover the maximum. Find a maximum. On a compact subset of the domain, a maximum exists. I can maximize the truth of my theories, the destruction of my enemies, my victory. Yes, yes, yes. I understand now. All the tools are in my hands. All the tools are at my disposal. Only mine. Only I have seen this far, standing on the shoulders of giants blind and deaf. I have seen the sunrise over distant mountains first. Its rays reach me first, for I am at the light-cone’s cusp, alone, but I am vindicated.

“Take a space, take a topology, take a metric, and look at it under a microscope, yes. I have all tools, I can use them all. Take the finest lens, and look at it most closely, and see the grain, see the direction of it, see the little demon telling you what to choose, feel the spark of will, of willfulness, saying, ‘choose this,’ saying this thing is better, and this thing wrong. Take a dance, and every motion is a little better and a little worse than a motion a little different. It’s a space, it’s a space, a space with an arrow.

“See now, see that it’s the circle of the sun, the perfect circle, the circle of the earth about the sun, the moon about the earth, the hand about the praying face, every motion is one, recurring. Each day follows the next, each tomorrow is better than each yesterday, or worse, depending on how you like to think of it, but each year has the same days. I have resolved the greatest paradoxes of all time, the paradoxes of time! They all tell me it makes no sense, that it’s childish, but it’s their senselessness, they are children! I see that right and wrong are as clockwise and counterclockwise, and they cannot! I see the rising and the setting, the dusk and the dawn, and they, such children, such infants, brainless, headless...”

“...they cry *the sun is dead!*”



## Chapter 44

# Abandon

Wei couldn't take any more of the philosopher's babbling. She didn't care whether he was going to hurt himself, or anyone else. Fuck him. Fuck his going completely fucking nuts. Is this what the Mill did to people? She feared for herself.

She stood outside Gary's. She had told Ant she was leaving. He didn't seem to mind that she left, but he seemed quite sure that he wanted to stay, no matter how much of a lost cause it seemed to be. The two of them had been friends for some time, apparently. Ant didn't want to just ditch him.

Still — what the fuck was wrong with him? Wei had heard stories about people snapping long before their deaths, becoming completely incoherent and wandering around doing whatever it was they did, talking to themselves, yelling at strangers, but she had never actually ran into any such people.

She was afraid. She felt herself becoming less stable.



## Chapter 45

# Sidewalk

Each square of the sidewalk was a person. Each pebble had a voice. A tall, pale woman stood three feet away from Nijl. She had appeared without explanation. She had come from the sky, from the ground, assembled out of smaller things. She was a mechanism. She spoke naturally. She had a lovely accent, something that belied her skin color. She spoke like a Jamaican, she spoke like a grandmother, mother and mother's mother to a hundred brown-skinned thumb-sucking little infants that couldn't yet speak their own names, and she loved each one singly. She had a different love for each name, each one tinted just so, a different flavor, a different nuance. She had a hundred names for love, and she could speak each one.

She greeted him.



## Chapter 46

# Images

“Continue. Tell me. Explain what you saw, what it meant to you. Tell me more about the tree.”

“It is painful.”

“It does not matter. Tell me.” The doctor’s voice was swift and angry, a waving knife.

“Give me a minute to rest.”

“No, you must continue. It is important that I hear your unconsidered opinion. It is your immediate impressions that are important. It is imperative that you tell me as quickly as possible.”

“You do not hold me hostage. I tell you these things only because I am generous enough to indulge your request. Do not make further demands of me, or I will leave.”

“Tell me.”

“I will try.”

“Hurry.”

“Why does it matter?”

“Hurry and tell me, before they get here.”

“They?”

“They know about your dream. I told them. Doctors. Real doctors. Doctors of the body. I told them. I had to. You fell asleep. Into a coma, I mean. I didn’t want to, but I had to. Now they know. I’m sure they’ve figured it out, just as I have. They’re just as smart as I am. They have had more training. More experience. I can not hide my thoughts from them. They have reached the same conclusion that I have. I told them everything. They seemed not to care. It seemed like they were telling me to be quiet, that I should tell them only what was important, where you were, what happened to you, what the symptoms were. But I told them everything. They made me. They forced me somehow. They willed me to, in their minds. They made me reveal everything. I told them about all of your dreams. Everything you ever told me. Every word. It came so quickly. If it wasn’t them, I would think that they couldn’t have possibly understood me.

I spoke so quickly. They acted like I was unwell. I told them that it was you that was unwell. They acted like they didn't believe me. But I know they did. They are smarter. I realize, the more I think about it, how extensive their plan is, how total their intelligence is. I am afraid."

He stopped. He was sweating. Jan didn't know what to think. He was perplexed by this reversal: he seemed obligated to heal his doctor. His doctor was unwell. He was sure of this. But he had no training. He did not know what to say. Instead he listened.

"I am afraid of what they will do to me. I told them about your dreams. They have seen the patterns I did not. I tried so hard. I worked late at night so no one would ask me what I was doing. I hid in the attic so they couldn't find me. I kept my papers, my rulers, my pencils locked away during the day. I knew that if I stopped acting normally, if I gave away my abilities, if I revealed myself, they would tear apart my house looking for my results. They would burn it down sooner than see my data in my hands and not theirs.

"I worked so hard, trying to find all of the patterns in your dreams. I cataloged every symbol, every idea, every word. I didn't tell you, but I kept a tape recorder under the bed. I recorded everything. I wrote down every word, analyzed the letters, described the tone of your voice so I didn't miss anything. I spend three nights trying to decode the patterns in the frequency with which you ended sentences as questions, or as if questions. I found subvoices in your voice, found such structures in your dreams! They would surely kill me if they knew I knew so much.

"What am I saying? Oh no. No. No. They do know. I forgot. I told them. They will kill me. I am afraid of what they will do to me. They know so much more than I do. Now they know everything I know, and they know that I know that they know it... They will dissect me. They will take me apart. I destroyed everything. I burned it all. I knew they were looking for it. But they — they are doctors. They have more training. They will know where to find it. They know it's in me. I tried to erase it from my brain, but I could feel it escaping. It fled my brain, and it lives in my guts still, in the corners I can't reach. In my intestines and stomach, in my heart and liver, in my elbows, in the lymph, in the blood, in the nameless fluids that shouldn't be there, alien, foreign, brown and green and vile, choking out my blood, the things I've learned live there, hiding. They will tear out my veins looking for them. They must destroy them. They must prevent anyone else from getting to me first."

## Chapter 47

# Exchange

The doctor rubbed his hands against one another nervously. He scanned the room. The very things that he himself had nailed to the walls, hung and arranged, the things that he had collected and selected and chosen as interesting curiosities now called to him from the walls, hideous faces, distorted and angry, chasing him without movement.

“Help me. Hide me. Tell me what my dream means. If I know I can escape them.”

“Your dream?”

“The dream, with the woman who smiled at you, loved you though you hadn’t even talked to her. She loved you without condition. Me. She loved me. I wanted to talk to her, even as you described her. Your dreams stole her from mine, didn’t it? Didn’t you?”

“No, I have forgotten about that. I have put it out of my mind. That is why I have healed.”

“Tell me. Confess it. I dreamed of the tree, too. I think it was before you did. It was mine. In my dream it spared me, and consumed you. My dream was the truth. Yours was false. Thief and liar!”

Jan looked at his analyst, held to his seat, held to the edge of the bed with a sinking pity. He didn’t know what to say. In the same time that he tried to compose a sentence in his head, a response came to him. He saw how anything he said would be turned against him, turned against any progress. It saddened him. No matter how well-intentioned he was, it would be seen as a trick, a method, a strategy.

“It was *my* dream. You stole it from me. It was always mine. I remember now. I see it. I don’t need you to describe it to me, because I see it more clearly than you do. Yours was a shadow, an image through a scratched lens, a reflection, a ghost. You saw the shadows of *my* candle. My light is true. That’s why they persecute me, for my righteousness. I was the one remaining leaf. I was the tree. Mine was the pure, benevolent smile. I loved where they hated, understood where they stumbled. I succeeded, and they hated me for it.”

He thrust a finger at Jan, so violently that it made him jump. Though he was entirely on the other side of the room, there was something about the gesture that made Jan feel that his finger was capable of spontaneously leaping from his hand and flying a hundred yards like a steel-tipped arrow. It would have killed him, splitting his neck, if only it wasn't attached to his doctor's hand.

"I have cured you! Make me stomach and suffer no more lies about you healing yourself! It was my skill, my mastery of the human mind, my exhausting of the subtleties of the subconscious mind that are to be credited for your recovery! Lie no more! Confuse me no more!"

"Okay," said Jan, desperately. "I concede."

"Do you?"

"Yes. I see that everything you are saying is correct." He said each word extremely slowly, calmly, as he stood up.

"Yes?"

"Yes. I apologize for everything I said."

The doctor paused, apparently happy, chattering to himself like a rodent, coming very close to forming actual words, coherent sentences but never quite succeeding.

Before his doctor realized that he had left, Jan was already running as fast as he could.

## Chapter 48

# Calculations

He continued without showing any symptoms of fatigue. He talked as if he were using another voice, a voice which could not tire, a voice which used no tongue. Ant wasn't listening any more, but he felt he couldn't leave. At was the least he could do to at least pretend to constitute an audience.

"I have seen the sun, the sun that others mourn. It comes back, it will come back. It returns forever. It is the eternal recurrence. The universe is finite. It is a great machine, a great mechanism, a tremendous clock. It has a million gears for each speck of dust, and they give its biography in full detail. One gear for its position, another for its rotation. One for how fast it moves, and one for how it spins. One for its favorite kind of pie, three for how it brushes its teeth afterward. Six to describe its favorite bedtime song. Nine big and one little gear tell it how to walk and run and skip. Seven are required just for the motion of a cynical eyebrow. There are two million tiny machines in every grain of sand. It is a wonderful machine. But each gear has no more than a thousand teeth, and though there are untold trillions of parts, each one can be in only so many places. Each second that passes, the gears chew their food, chew at each other, grind away another second, and they change places. But there are only so many places they can have ever been, and some day they will run out.

"I have calculated it. I have revealed my calculations to nobody. I kept them secret, afraid of what humanity would do to me if they found out! They did nothing to Nietzsche because they didn't believe him. I thought there was nobody who believed me. I was wrong. The multitude do not believe me, because the few have convinced them to. The few know that what I have rediscovered, what I have discovered is dangerous. They know it is far safer to herd the many away from me, make them ignore me, make them forget me, than to kill me outright. That would make the many suspicious. So I am forgotten.

"Some day they will run out. In the end this moment will come again, and after that it will come again forever. I discovered, once, that there would come a time when the cycle would begin, when we would all become

trapped. I calculated it. It is at the end of this day.”

## Chapter 49

# Belief

“Tell me how to find the path again.”

“I cannot.”

“Yes, you can, if you remember who you are.”

“I do not remember.”

“I do.”

“Who am I?”

“You are Parni Eratharyana. You are her seventeenth incarnation. I had met her sixteenth. She was old then, very old.”

“I have never heard that name before.”

“No, you have, once. I said it to you. It was then that you fell asleep. You fell, with your eyes open, dead in all respects except that you were breathing, and I carried you here.”

“Let me out.”

“I can not. You must help me.”

“I can't help you. Let me go. I didn't ask to be taken here. I need to be alone. I need quiet. I need to stop talking to you.”

“You can have silence if you want it. I will let you rest as long as you wish.”

“No, it is not quiet here.”

“I will not talk.”

“It is not quiet here. It will never be. It is not my home. It has the buzzing of other people in it. I still hear it. I have a headache. My ears hurt, it is so loud.”

Preskar held his breath. He looked at Lin levelly, with almost no expression. There was still a trace of his unshakable smile left on his lips. In this state, not so exaggerated and distorted, it almost looked healthy, benevolent, warm, reasonable.

She was surprised. She had feared him so intensely, and in one moment he had accommodated her. He was quiet. She had expected him to merely stop talking, the way other people did when she asked them to be quiet. But they continued the noise that offended her: they still fidgeted and skipped

around. Their hearts still beat and their breath still shook. Their eyes still twitched, their noses still sniffed. Their feet still tapped. They still sucked on their teeth, and tongued little pieces of food, licked at cold sores. They scratched their hair, scratched at the stubs of poorly-shaven whiskers above their lip. But he was quiet. He knew what she had meant by quiet. It was total. It was perfect.

“Tell me how you died.”

“I... haven’t died. I’m not dead.”

“You are not dead. But, my blessed teacher, you died. You were dead. And now you are here. You must tell me what I should do.”

“I am dead.”

“You are not dead.”

“Whoever I was, she is dead.”

“No, she is still alive.”

“She is dead! I was someone else, someone you can’t name. She is dead.”

Lin began crying.

“No, you were never anyone else. You are Parni Eratharyana, you are alive, you have died again, and you have returned again! Return! Remember!”

“She is dead! She did something terrible! She was negligent, somehow. She failed to do something. They killed her for it. They loved her once, but then they forgot her. If I had been stronger, I could have saved her. I was too weak. I was too stupid. She was too weak.”

“Forget that. It is unimportant.”

“Unimportant to you.”

“Unimportant to you as well.”

“No, no. It is important. Let me remember.”

He paused.

“Maybe it is necessary that you remember that as well. Yes. That makes some sense. I have never dealt with this process before. I acted too quickly. I will help you. You said some things while you were asleep. I have remembered them, though I thought it was important that you forget should who you were, that you should realize your incarnation as directly as possible. This is what I know: your name was Lin Em. You were riding a bicycle. You fell. You had a cat with you. You lost it.”

Her eyes opened.

“Yes. That is who I was. I am no longer her. I see, now.”

## Chapter 50

# Pride and Humility

“How can it be,” asked Preskar John, “that pride and humility can be virtuous at the same time? They seem to me like opposite sentiments. I see humility as good, and pride as destructive.”

“Yes, the teaching of pride is far less common in the history that we have written than the teaching of pride. But in the histories that were sung, the histories that were all but forgotten with the coming of the pen, they were full of the virtue of pride.”

“Why should pride be virtuous, though?”

“I will first cure you of your misconception of my words.”

“Which one?”

“By humility I mean the opposite of arrogance. By pride I mean the opposite of despair.”

“Shouldn’t you simply name that ‘hope,’ then?”

“Now, I will address the ‘should’ as it applies to words at another time. It will take a while to teach you, I think. Your views are very stubborn.”

“As are yours.”

“Perhaps. Nonetheless, I chose not to use the word hope, because it is inappropriate.”

“Why?”

“I will explain things in their proper order. The idea of humility, though all seven faces are equal and simultaneous, properly comes first in your education, since it is the more familiar to you.”

“Fine, go ahead.”

“I have said that humility is the opposite of arrogance. This is true. Arrogance is what you have in mind when you object to pride being a virtue. Humility is the love of symmetry, arrogance the belief in asymmetry. Humility is, ultimately, a correct understanding of the self, while arrogance is a false belief in spite of the truth. Humility is the recognition that, in the present moment, the accomplishments of one’s entire life may very well be worthless, and the acceptance of that fact.”

“This I can accept as a virtue: that each man should not think himself a god, each woman not think herself a goddess, and respect all others like them as equals.”

“Yes, that is part of it also. But it is not the whole.”

“Tell me why pride should be a virtue.”

“Pride is the opposite of despair, but it is not the opposite of all despair. It is the opposite of the despair which takes the form of humility which has broken the bounds of control, just as arrogance is pride without restraint.”

“I still do not understand the symmetry of the situation.”

“It is the same as the symmetry of past and future: humility points at the past and says, it may be that this was a mistake. Pride points at the future and says, there may be surpassing greatness here.”

“Isn’t that, however, a form of optimism about the present? Am I not saying, when I say that I may be great in the future, that I have that capacity, that seed of greatness, already in myself? Is this not arrogance if it turns out to be false?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because you rightly would not presume that it is only in you that bears that seed. You, if thinking righteously, would not assume that it is in you at all. You would have a faith that the universe itself has the power to transform you from that which you are rightly humble about, a crude lump of meat and blood, into something worthy of pride.”

“I see no difference between my claim and yours, then. Should I still not have any reason to be proud of being human, because I can be so transformed, and look down upon beasts and animals? Would this not be arrogance if it turned out to be false?”

“Perhaps, but you have found a truth, not a falsehood: pride is the pride in being human at all, and love of the things which make us human. It is an affirmation of the unity of our kind, our species. It is the fact that we are the only species capable of making this affirmation at all that compels us to do so. To see it another way, each individual member of humanity is compelled to affirm the potential wonder in any being that can imagine it, and humility compels them to treat all such beings as just as worthy as them, just as capable of achieving that wonder as they are. There is an ability that we humans have to see something, an inner unblindness, and pride says that this is necessary, and humility says that it is sufficient.

“Pride holds it up, stands on the highest mountain, and builds the greatest temple, and takes the greatest, widest, tallest, most richly decorated altar, and places this gift atop it, and worships it. Humility looks to the horizon, and sees other mountains, and other temples, and other altars, and sees the same gift in different shapes, and different colors, sees it cast in gold and silver and tin, sees it cast in song and words and symbols, and it smiles on each one.”

“What, then, is this gift? What is this inner vision?”

## Chapter 51

# Meeting

As he ran, Jan sensed somehow that his analyst — lost to madness, eyes open, stuck open, open in a delirious, fixed gaze, with an empty, black expanse shutting out any color — was chasing after him still, though he saw him quietly sitting still when he left. He would have no way of knowing where he had gone. He had left his car in the parking lot behind the doctor's office, a quiet space, a little desert of asphalt and lines of cracked paint, a peaceful desert. He tried to remember why he had left his car there, why he had not taken it. He became distracted by thoughts of the waiting-room. Once his mind had located itself in his car, in the parking lot, next to the office, it fell into a habitual path as rainwater falling into a gutter. It had no path available to it but the downward fall, the course cut specifically for it.

He thought about the waiting-room involuntarily. It smelled like old magazines, a glossy plastic smell, and dusty. He recalled the smell of tear-stained tissues, the salty smell of crying people. It smelled of comfortable chairs, upholstery that spared no expense. He heard in his mind people talking to each other tensely, angrily, parents coaxing their screaming children into the dark hallway in the back, spouses chiding each other for failing to comply with some just-made resolution.

He felt himself being dragged into the same hallway by an invisible force. It was the desire to be well. He had not been well. He felt sad unnecessarily. More often than he should. This was his judgment. He questioned it now. He considered that it might be that he was never unwell, that it was self-fullfilling. He had cured himself, hadn't he? He was certainly capable, then, of making himself unwell in the first place. He sensed his doctor chasing after him, in the hallway. That was wrong. He was going to the doctor's office. The doctor was supposed to be waiting for him, waiting to receive him. Instead he was waiting for him to be chased. He was ambushing him. Jan continued running. He noticed again that he was asleep. Had he fallen? He was unsure. He certainly was running while he was awake, and it simply carried over here. There was a need to keep running.

He reached a road that seemed to lead out of the building, out of the little villiage of medical buildings, out of the neighborhood. He followed it for some time. It led out of the city proper, and into the suburbs. He came to a place where a woman was sitting on the ground, apparently counting on her fingers. Her pants were dusty, as the ground was. She looked terrified.

She said, "I don't understand it. I don't understand. I thought I accounted for everything. I really did. Damn that game. Stupid fucking game. Need to stop thinking about it. I need to stop caring. But it just doesn't make any fucking sense."

"Excuse me, I —"

"Oh, I'm sorry, really, I'm sorry." She got to her feet. "I was just... preoccupied with something. Are you looking for something around here? I know the area."

"No, that's okay," he said. There was something familiar about her face. "So do I."

"Oh? Okay. You look lost, though."

"No, I was... I had an unpleasant experience with a doctor."

"Oh yeah? I've had a few."

"What were you... What was it that didn't make sense to you?"

"Nothing important."

"I'm curious."

"Why?" She was confused that he was asking her. She felt almost naked, being caught talking to herself. Even though she didn't mind talking about it generally, the situation made her uncomfortable. "You're just some random fucking stranger to me."

"Tell me, please. I think I might be able to provide an answer."

"What the fuck are you talking about? You don't even know what my problem is, and already you have answers?"

"I have an intuition."

"Based on what?"

"Just what you said."

She was really caught now. She wished she had been quieter. "And what the fuck do you think I said that gave you your little epiphany?"

"Just... that you said you were preoccupied with a game."

"I did," she conceded.

"That happened to me once."

"What, are you from the Mill, or something?"

"I left them some time ago."

"Oh," she said. That meant that he wasn't some weird foreigner, at least. Even against years of hating them, this one piece of information destroyed her will to shut up, to tell him nothing. Words flowed from her mouth easily. She told him everything. All of her analysis, her thoughts, her theories about the game came out. He listened patiently. He had thought a little about it, in the past, picked up the basic ideas, learned the most primitive parts of the vocabulary, and so what she said at least had a framework to fall into in his mind. But what she said went quickly beyond him, beyond

his capacity to reason fast enough. He could not keep up with her, but he continued to listen, as if hearing the sound of a stiff march breeze gust pleasantly past his ears, listening to the music of her voice. There was something in her voice that was familiar.

She finished: "...and so it seems inevitable that the game should collapse entirely at some point, not too far from now. It seems impossible on the face of it, but any theory I can construct that's consistent at a high level predicts it. There's only one number that lasts, with the same fucking stubbornness. Every model says that number lasts, even though I've only seen it exactly once, and the extras on his pages are... crazy. Ridiculous, exaggerated optimism. And it wins, no matter how I model it. It's a stubborn motherfucker. I don't believe it. It doesn't make any sense. At least I can't make any sense of it.

"Eh. Oh well," she said, clipping off the ends of the words. She seemed relieved to be able to talk to someone about the game who didn't seem to be actively playing it, someone who knew but didn't care. Talking to anyone else, she would be afraid that they would take her ideas and destroy her carefully constructed models by being aware of them, or else fear that they wouldn't understand her ideas at all. "I guess it doesn't really matter." She smiled. There was something familiar about her smile, too. He stared at her, and the smile remained, motionless, fixed, restful.

Just before the restaurant they stood in front of erupted into fire, and fragments of wood and glass, and just before both of them understood precisely who the other was, their lips met, with an almost-silent whisper.



## Chapter 52

# Departure

Preskar John was excited. There was no joy in his excitement, however, as he thought there should be. He felt no relief that he had found his old teacher again, though he was quite sure that this was her. He felt only a nervous, screaming excitement, a desperate eagerness to ask her the things that he imagined every night as he fell asleep, feeling guilty that he didn't even remember the last time he had talked to her. He felt attached to her at first, fascinated by her, grew to hate her, grew towards a fiery cynicism, loved to talk to her because he felt strong attacking her weak, worthless religion, and then something in him jumped across a chasm, and he believed in everything. He knew every weakness so thoroughly that they became this children. He loved them. He loved every rebuttal and counter-rebuttal, and the wrongness of it all, the senselessness of it jumped the expanse between vice and virtue. He loved it *because* it made no sense. It was a mystery, a beautiful mystery. He became addicted to its irreverent incoherence. It never claimed to make sense. It claimed specifically that it didn't. It spoke in a stupid, childish language of sweeping generalities, in fruitless unification of unrelated things, cosmic this, and universal that, of virtue and sin, all the things a philosophy should. It sounded horrible, a tragic cliché as much as any other, but it sounded right to him suddenly. It caught him looking the wrong way, caught him unattentive, and sank its poison into his neck. He was its slave from that moment. He was excited again, horribly so. There was something — someone — telling him what to do. She made no sense, but she was the right nonsense, the same nonsense as ever.

“You remember now,” he said.

“Yes.”

“Then tell me what to do.”

“I must tell you something else first.”

“What?”

“I see something.”

“What is it?”

"It is from... before."

"Before your death?"

"Possibly."

"Is it?"

"I am not sure."

"Focus on the image. Tell me what you see."

"It hurts."

"I know. I have done this before many times. She — you made me do it. You made me see things. I didn't want to do it. It hurt. It was unpleasant. I thought it useless. I thought it was a waste of time, a stupid exercise, but I came to see its value. Tell me what you see."

"I see myself, and a cat. I am afraid."

"Don't be afraid. Reject that image. Remember yourself when you were calm."

"I see myself without responsibility. I see myself eating, sleeping. It is dull, but I am calm."

"No, push farther."

"Where?"

"See yourself holding up the universe on your shoulders and remaining calm. Imagine the most paradoxically wrong situation. Bear an unbearable load and ignore it, shrug it off."

"I have never done that."

"You have. Look farther."

"I have not."

"You have. You told me you remembered."

"I did."

"Tell me what you remembered. It is the image you are seeing."

"I see a tree, in the autumn, with one leaf remaining on it."

"Look farther."

"It is burning, but..."

"Look at it."

"It is not being consumed. The fire dies everywhere but on the leaf. The one leaf is on fire. It glows brightly, but it does not blacken. It hurts to look at it. It is too bright."

"Look at it still."

"It is changing. It was brown, but it brightens. It is purple now, an autumn purple, the color of the sunset sky, just before the red drains out of it, before it joins the ocean of ink-blue, the indigo of the sun's promise to make morning again."

"What is it?"

"What?"

"The leaf, the tree, what is it? Withdraw, but hold your eye to it. Tell me what it is."

Lin Em felt a different voice speaking inside her. She gave up everything but his voice. She surrendered her own will. Anything he said was truth, as if it was the sound of her own conviction. Any question he asked became

hers, became necessary to answer, even to the point of invention. He gave her music and she played it, without any effort of will. It was simply the music in front of her. If it left a few measures blank and suggested a chord, she faked it, letting her fingers be possessed by whatever muse it was that could be credited for eliciting such invention.

“It is me.”

“How did you die?”

“I burned. They set the building next to mine on fire. They wanted to kill the people inside. They wanted revenge for something. I never knew what. The building I was in caught fire as well. They never meant to kill me. They didn’t know who I was. But I died anyway. It was pointless. There was no motivation in it at all. But I still feel angry. I felt angry. There was something in me that I could not subdue. I tried to erase it. I failed. I died. My death was a failure.”

“No, you can not fail. You are beyond such measures.”

“I know. I can not fail. It seemed like a failure briefly, and then I saw through it. I saw past it. I did erase it. I succeeded.”

“Yes.”

“I was not angry. I am not angry. I need no revenge. I need no justice. It was without purpose. It was a war of insects, beneath the level of what we speak of, when we speak of justice.”

“You are benevolent, my teacher.”

“Yes. We need not seek revenge. They are below justice and mercy.”

“You are so wise.”

“I will tell you what to do, disciple of mine.”

“Yes, please.”

“Take me to that place. I will show you where it is.”

“Yes.”

“I will lead you there. We will not repay revenge with revenge. We will but teach them, educate them. They will see more clearly.”

“Yes, I will follow you.”

“You will see more clearly.”

“Yes, show me!”



## Chapter 53

# Music

“I have one more question for tonight. I will leave after we are through discussing it. I will come back tomorrow morning if you want me to.”

“Ask me.”

“Have you ever made music?”

“With what instrument?”

“Any at all.”

“I used to sing, years ago.”

“Did you sing well?”

“No, I was terrible. I never had any training.”

“How do you know?”

“Why would I be any good as a total amateur?”

“Is it not possible that you should be good on the first attempt?”

“I suppose it’s possible that I had natural talent, but it seems unlikely to me.”

“Did you learn to speak when you were a child?”

“Of course. When else would I have learned?”

“Did you speak well at first?”

“I can see where you’re going with this, but I don’t think it’s analagous at all. I can forgive a child — I can forgive myself as a child — for not being able to speak well, for saying *no* and *mine* and *want* before he speaks in complete sentences, because he has only had percious few years alive to do *anything*. I am an adult. If I had spent my whole life learning to sing, training my voice, training my ear, I might have become very good — I may or may not have any special talent, but I compare myself against what I *might* have been, given exactly the same amount of time that I have been given.”

“That was not what I meant — I don’t need to tell you that you should not expect to be good after so little practice.”

“Oh, really?”

“Indeed. I will take up the ideas you are using, however. They will be useful. Tell me, how long did it take you to learn to speak?”

“I don’t know — I could reasonably say that I am still learning. Do you expect me to name a day on which I suddenly matured, became a full member of linguistic society?”

“No, of course I don’t. Simply give me some number, some reasonable neighborhood. How many years it took you to go from deaf, uncomprehending, and mute, to a state where it might reasonably be said of you that you were speaking your own language as opposed to any others in the world.”

“Fine. Let’s say two years.”

“Good. Do you think that this number varies widely across different languages? Do you suspect that babies born in countries in which are spoken languages that you would consider difficult to learn take much longer?”

“No, of course not.”

“But you yourself wouldn’t pretend to claim that you could learn those languages in a mere two years.”

“No, I wouldn’t. I would have to memorize at the very least tremendous amounts of vocabulary and grammar, not to mention absorbing the culture behind the language, often just as foreign as the sounds and words, and less often well-taught.”

“So children, young enough children have a truly remarkable talent for this sort of learning. You concede this?”

“Readily.”

“And it does not shock you, surprise you?”

“No. How else would we have language at all if the process of each generation learning it was tremendously difficult?”

“You are able to wave your hand at it only because it is familiar to you. Only because you notice, after that fact, that we can use language is it possible for you to not find it remarkable.”

“I suppose.”

“The revelation is that we have no reason to think that we, as human beings, *don’t* have other aptitudes in us, tied to mysterious timing and control. We know that being born unlocks in nearly everyone’s brain an army of sociologists, psychologists, and codebreakers. Why do we assume that this is our only miracle? We acknowledge savants and geniuses only in the same breath as we set them apart from ourselves.”

“That’s easy to say. Why, however, for any particular skill, should I believe in anything but a vanishing chance that I am somehow destined for greatness?”

“You misunderstand me. I mean to say that there may be further activities that humanity as a whole is built to succeed at, and succeed in unimaginable proportion and scope, to do for better than can reasonably be expected of them.”

“Okay, well, my objection still takes the same form: why, for any one thing, should all of humanity be any good at it. There are a billion things we can do, and I grant we are all savants at learning languages in our childhood. Unlike you, I should not find it too surprising if that is the only such task. Even if it isn’t, take one other task — I believe we were talking

about music — and ask: is this another such task? I see no reason to believe that it should have any chance of being so.

“The very things which we value as skills we value because they are difficult, because we *can* point to geniuses, because we *can* distinguish genius. We have no competitions for watching television, because watching television is easy. Maybe watching for incredibly long periods of time is difficult, but it is fundamentally *empty* of content, of skill. It takes just stubbornness.

“But music — to perform it, to take a piece, to take another person’s idea and express it, to relive it, to have such a mastery of a dead, mechanical thing, or to have such a mastery of your own body that you can enliven it, create a life apart from yours, resurrect the ideas of composers long dead and give them voice — that is an accomplishment, a miracle. I need not even mention creating music to reach the space of things that I would call miracles, but composition is a world apart in difficulty. To find expression in a blank staff instead of within an existing song is doubly a miracle.

“I don’t doubt that I could learn to play an instrument, that I could learn to improvise a bit, that I could learn to write down my inventions and call this composition. But what a gulf between the greats and I! The burden is on you, I think, to show me that it’s not fair to recognize, as I wish to so strongly, the difference between greatness and my own capabilities.”

Parni Eratharyana smiled broadly. She said, “Yes. You are thinking in the right direction now. Even as you think you are arguing against me, you are doing my work.”

Preskar blinked and didn’t say anything. He thought to himself privately that he was becoming extremely impatient again with her philosophical nonsense, her constant co-opting of his approach, the infuriating way with which she seemed to consider herself the winner of an argument no matter what he said.

“Music, is not, as you claim it to be, just another arbitrary task lost in the expanse of human activity.”

“Isn’t it? It seems to me to be among the most arbitrary. We find beauty in it by convention. What is lush orchestration to us would be cacophony to someone raised in a different tradition. What is a satisfyingly woven rhythm to them is incomprehensible to us. There is nothing required by the universe itself. There is nothing absolute about it. It is just sounds, a system of sounds, that we have legislated in our minds as pleasurable. The miracle is understanding the system, and drawing great beauty out of the perceptions of the adherents of the system. Again I see no reason why I should have such a peculiar talent.”

“Everything you say applies to language as well — the most beautiful poetry is empty if you don’t understand the language of it.”

“Still, a child does not become a fabulous composer from merely listening to a symphony, nor a brilliant singer from hearing one.”

“You assume that the critical time is the same for the two skills?”

“You are the one trying to convince me that they are similar — I thought you were trying to claim that.”

“Not at all. I claim only that they are two views of the same underlying thing, or rather that language is one, unified perspective on two things, which are really two faces of one.”

“You are drifting back into the pointless jargon of your religion.”

“It is yours already, my religion, *the* religion, I can tell. I fault you none at all if you refuse my words for it. They are unimportant signs.”

“Look, I’m begging you, stop claiming that I already agree with you. Stop saying I already believe the ridiculous things you believe. I don’t. I am listening to you because I want to evaluate your beliefs, but it does you no good to insist that I have already completed some path that I know I haven’t.”

“Why shouldn’t I? You ask me to tell you the truth, and now you reject it when I tell it to you.”

“No, it isn’t the truth. You can not see inside my head, it is impossible. I know, subjectively, in a way that you can’t doubt, in a place that you have no access to, that I do not yet accept your explanation of the world. Even if you think that your explanation coincides with mine, it does not mean I believe *you* and your faith. It only means that I believe something similar to what you do. And I doubt even that is true. Moreover, you can not know any better than I do whether that’s true.”

“But if it is true that I can’t see what you believe, then neither can you know what beliefs are mine.”

“That is true.”

“Spare me then, a little patience. We stand in the same place.”

“Fine.”

“What I want to tell you is this: that music is more than you think it is. It is part of the seven, part of the whole of virtue. It is a transcendent thing, and through our conventions we reach it in a thousand ways, each one of us with the tips of her own fingers. Language is the combination of music, its sounds and pitch and rhythm, with signs, with meaning, with fingers pointing at the world itself. Music is language stripped of reference. In the world it is still a part of a culture. It still lives in the thicket of convention and form and agreed-upon signals, but this is the fault of the world. Music itself is a thing that transcends signs, and is pure. The beauty that you find in a song you learned as a child, a game-song, a primitive counting-song — that beauty, that pleasure is the same as that uncovered by another nostalgic adult in another world with a different song, with a different youth. There is one song, with different forms. It is a unity, and you must seek out that unity.”

“Again, this is nonsense. This is a call to search for some religious nonsense, a mysticism. This has nothing to do with the chance of me being able to make music.”

“You are wrong.”

“Why?”

“Because that thing which we agree that humans are surpassingly good at, inexplicably good at, is a search for the same unity.”

“Why should I believe that?”

“What is it to learn to talk?”

“I don’t know — I would more mundanely call it searching for patterns. I would prefer to call it that than this mysterious search for unity.”

“But it is exactly that. To know a word is to know the situations in which it can be used. It is to draw together an infinitude of diverse experiences and bundle them up in one sound. So it is with music as well. It is searching for unity. It is a search for connections between the broken fragments of the world. It is the gluing together of these fragments. It is healing, joining, repairing. To know the song for something is to know its name. It is to know the right word, the just word, the perfect, most appropriate way to say something. As at great temperatures the forces of nature reveal themselves to be the same, at great distances of removal, at great remove of abstraction, the phenomena of human experience become one.”

“More nonsense. Why again should children be good at learning languages and not at composing symphonies?”

“Because we have not yet achieved the right distance: we are too close. We are too myopic.”

“What? You couldn’t possibly be proposing a concrete change in how we teach children, could you? I am lost. Spare me the analogies, spare me further jargon.”

“I can not help you, if you reject me solely because of how I say things. I can never say the truth exactly as you would yourself. If you reject anything but your own words, then listen to yourself. But music is a real thing, a potent thing. Loud enough, pure enough, it takes over your perception of the universe. It becomes the background against which all perfection takes place. It is the same as a smile causing happiness: your mind seeks to be at rest, to be in the same state as what it finds itself surrounded by. It seeks unity with it.

“There is no obstacle to every human living discovering that which I have discovered: that the tongueless child, the child eager to search the idea behind each sound, the beauty behind each phrase, the voice behind each song and poem, the one behind each multitude — the child sleeps, and it dreams, and it can be woken up, stronger after it has rested.”

Preskar John sat silently. He still believed none of what his teacher told him, but later he would.



## Chapter 54

### Look

Lin guided Preskar to the location she promised to take him, but she didn't yet know herself where it was. She felt that she was thousands of years older, thousands of years in the past. She saw herself searching for a mine, a rich vein of gold somewhere in a quiet hill. She carried a baby across a river, forded it carry the bundle over her head, not letting a drop of water touch it, while the water reached her lips, forcing her to breath through her nose. She took a knife in her hands and chewed through jungle, hacking through bamboo, brushing off biting insects.

She fought off some jungle cat with sky-blue eyes and silver hair. It wanted to kill her more than anything else, though it didn't have any inclination to wonder why it should. She wanted to kill it to keep herself alive, so that she could reach this point at the end of her path that was linked through a thousand other human abstractions to her eventual happiness. An opening in the jungle meant finding a path. The path led to a road, the road a village. The village had a decaying building on its far side that housed a hermit, a hermit that worshipped gods that no other person alive could name correctly. He knew a language that no other person spoke any longer, and he would translate the instructions on her map. The map would lead her to the mine, and once there she could mark it, survey it, claim it as hers. She would return to her own city, and take capital she had already accumulated and hire miners to extract the gold. She would take out insurance, invest in secondary markets. Her baby would be safe, and well-educated, and rich.

She stopped running. Someone was asking her a question. He said, "Is this the place I should be? What should I do here? I am lost without your guidance. Help me. Tell me what to do. This is a place of immoderation, of sin. I have an desire to purge it of its sin, as I once purged myself, as you once told me to."

"Yes," she said, hazily, "do as I told you before."



## Chapter 55

# Listen

The universe had begun again. There was nothing but the woman standing in front of him. Her hair danced in a primordial wind, the sky an ocean, full of ancient fish and weeds. Leaves caught in her hair, tangled with kelp, moldy. Her face was pale, shining, pale eyelids covering paler eyes. They opened suddenly, but not quickly, not too abruptly, not with violence. It was a simple act which simply took almost no time, the way a bird can be looking one direction and a split-second later another. Nijl felt that in her perception of time she had opened her eyes extremely slowly. There were no pupils at all in her eyes, just a never-slowng swirl of white and red. Her hands were brown, coarse but clean. She extended her arms to her sides, balled her hands into fists as she stretched, visibly feeling a wonderful tension in every joint, straining in anticipation of a release, and then released it. Her arms felt at her side, but she took her right hand and held it in front of her, palm up, fingers slightly curved, invitingly.

She told him stories. They were the beginning of history, the songs of history itself. Nijl had heard poems before, tedious, ponderously long poems. He tried to understand them, to decode them. It was part of his education. It was demanded of him by his father. He hated it. He hated the feeling of obligation that transformed these otherwise beautiful things into tasks and chores, into dechiphering instead of understanding and love. But truthfully he had never suspected there was such beauty here at all — the cloud of obligation had kept him from seeing it. Now he saw it, however. He saw fibers being woven together, glued together by blood, cut by metal, clinging to each other desperately. He saw every human emotion played out, theatricalized, almost comically, but horribly, acted poorly, overacted, in the deeds of all humans everywhere always.

It was a boiling ocean of human things, human dreams, and human flaws. He saw an ocean under a dark sky, a flood that consumed the continents, an ocean of arms and feet and broken skulls, pools of hair and blood, gangrenous broken limbs everywhere. The stories of history were random, disgusting, appalling, but fascinating and beautiful. He saw great states

and great religions, leviathans shaping bodies out of millions, great machines out of smaller ones, a thousand people in an eye, tens of thousands in a striking hand, a million in a biting tooth, a single man in the pineal gland, spreading his will through the monster's blood.

He saw the tongues of the great religions saying strange things, familiar things, in the voices of his nightmare-monsters. One promised that it held a golden key in its right hand, a hand shaped crudely out of ten thousand bodies nailed together, and that there was a door that it opened. Behind the door was your dead father, it said, behind the door are all of the people that you loved and died. You knew, it said, that they weren't really dead! You were right! Your sisters and brothers and children were wrong! They told you to live, to be alive, to forget, to be strong! No! Your weakness is your strength! Hold to your weakness! Hold on to it, and love it, protect it! Your fear is your greatness! Your weakness, your desire to hide, to cry, to give up, to abandon, these are great things! The one who doesn't share them, he is wrong, he is full of sin and wickedness! They are all too attached to this world. You are not. You are righteous. Give up this world, forsake it, abandon it, ignore it, it is fleeting. It said, come here, and be with your family, the one that has always been here. It offered a ladder, and a hammer, and a leviathan-handful of nails, offered them smiling, each tooth a million souls, a tounge-army licking its lips.

He was fascinated by these stories, the songs that she sang to him. But he saw that she was becoming older, and that the stories became more gruesome as time proceeded. The weapons improved. The swords of persuasion and coercion became sharper. The metaphors became less fictional. The poetry became too real. The songs had too many words in them, and too little music. He hated these stories. He wasn't sure why. They were no worse. They weren't bad in any way that the stories hadn't always been, but he hated them.

He saw her aging. Her skin, once soft, was dry and cracked, worn and wrinkled, plowed under by the effort of singing so ceaselessly, but bearing no fruit. Her voice was tired, burdened by the fatigue of tens of thousands of years. Her hands were exhausted from holding the pen of history, tired of chiseling obelisks and carving gravestones. Her hair, once black, was licked by reddening fires that raced along each hair like a burning string, and the red became brown, and the brown a thin, watery blond, and the blond lost its yellow and saw gray, and the gray brightened to white. Each color was a thousand ages, and when she stood, hoarse to the point of muteness, unable to even croak another phrase, another measure of music, she stood, surrounded by an dead ocean of white hair, surrounding a still paler face, and she fell backwards, slowly, as if immersed in water.

She disappeared, and a door opened, the front door of the house in front of which Nijl had been resting. He saw a man emerge from the door. He was angry. He wanted to understand what was going on around him. The house, he said, was in complete disorder. It was not supposed to be. There was supposed to be someone responsible for it. Someone should have kept

it in order. The man was indignant, horrified that his demands had gone unmet. Where was she? He asked each question five times, louder each time. Where the fuck was she? She had better be dead, or I'll kill her myself. Who the hell are you? What are you looking at? Nijl held his hands to his ears to stop the echo. There were five of him, asking him questions, shouting, screaming, each one a terror enough. She was supposed to be here hours ago. Did she expect me to forget? Did she forget that she was my student? Did she forget who I am? I am the only person that can help her! Without living parents, she is mine! I alone am responsible for her! If she doesn't have me, she is nothing! Who does she think she is without me? Who do you think you are? Why are you bothering me? Why are you singing? Why won't you listen to me? What the hell do you want? Where are you hiding her?

Nijl tried as hard as he could to ignore the man's screaming, and tried to avoid making eye contact with him, for his eyes frightened him, so dilated, so strained that they seemed ready to burst.



## Chapter 56

### See

They were both inside. Lin remembered that this was the restaurant she had gone to so often. She had come here automatically. Lin wasn't dead yet. She hadn't died. She hadn't given herself up to the idea of Parni Eratharyana yet. She was still alive. This thrilled her and terrified her. She had already stepped off the cliff. She had already committed to this transformation. Though the fact that some of her memories were still intact seemed like a small miracle, a resurrection, she was obligated to forget it, to destroy it. Success was defined by forgetting, by omission. The self that she had now demanded it, screaming, uncharacteristically unsettled.

She was supposed to be calm, supposed to be tranquil. She was believed. She was trusted. She needed to become that object of that belief. She would achieve enlightenment. She would see the same pond-reflected moonlight that her predecessors had seen. She would take up their wisdom, their learning, their penetration into the mysteries of the world. She would lecture flawlessly about righteous and the sinful, about the million heavens that awaited tired men and women. She would compose the most surpassingly beautiful poems, clever aphorisms, thoughtful and compelling stories, allegories, metaphors stolen from the lips of god himself. She would create. She would invest herself in this other. She must, she thought to herself. She had already started. She could not fail to finish.

She saw two men at a table, a third behind a counter, wiping a plate. One of the men at the table was not well. She knew this. She had to help him. By helping him, she would succeed at destroying herself. Her biography — no, the seventeenth chapter of her biography, would begin with this story. She saw it clearly, now. She had been wandering with her disciple, wandering randomly. She had no connection to this restaurant at all. She had never been here before. She was bringing her wisdom to new corners of the world. How benevolent she was! She would heal this man. He was possessed by demons. She would drive them into something else. She would drive them into herself, and calm them.

She approached the table.

“Tell me, what ails this man?”

“I don’t know, kid, we were just having a friendly argument, and he snapped on me. He started rambling, talking about some paranoid claim that I was trying to singlehandedly — or maybe it was with in collaboration with everyone else in the world, he never made up his mind — destroy his career.”

She stared at him angrily.

“Do not,” she said, “patronize me. I am the seventeenth incarnation of the holy and wise prophet, the granddaughter of the architect, knower of signs, the only, the one from multitude, the one for the multitude. My name is Parni Eratharyana. One life ago, I came here, and I was killed. I lived in a house near by, and it burned down when this building did. This ground is unholy. It has been desecrated. It is full of evil will now, of ignorance. This is the place of unnecessary death, of an unnecessary sundering of the one into many. None of you should be here. I will tell you why this man has become unwell. It is because he has spent too much time here. He is possessed by demons of willful and ignorant violence, of arrogance and empty despair.”

“I don’t mean,” the man behind the counter said, “to interrupt you, lady, but this place hadn’t never been burn down since I built it, and that was a good three, four hundred years ago.”

“You! You lie! You, too, are possessed!” She faced him, eyes wide, accusing. “You are too full of the demons’ laughter to hear the truth! You forget and misremember!”

“Lin! I didn’t see you. What the hell are you talking about?”

She became even more angry. “Don’t call me by that name! That name is false! It was created to decieve me! My parents, before they died, still succeeding in spreading falsehood by naming me falsely, by scattering their agents through the world! They collaborated to keep this knowlege from me. They told me I was a watchmaker’s apprentice. They told me I should love my task, the task given to me by my corrupted brain. My brain was corrupted from my birth. The doctors put poison into my brain when I was born. It made me feel unnaturally happy when I complied with their plans. It was a false happiness. All happiness in my life was false. It was complicity. I was being rewarded. I was a rat with a wire in its brain. I was electrocuted if I should ever touch the cage, and pleased each time I closed my eyes. So I spent my life with my eyes closed, until my eyelids were torn off.

“My blessed disciple was faithful. He was the only one. He is my son, my heir. I must protect him, for he saved me. He woke me. He ended my sleep. He thrust a stick into the puddle, and the ripples revealed the puddle-sky as a reflection. I woke up. I owe him thanks for that. I realize now that I am a person of tremendous importance. I know that I must reject everything that I once loved. It was a flaw in me. I thought my obsession was dedication, a noble myopia. I thought that by believing only in my work that I would do better than anyone before me had.

“On the one hand, I was correct. I was greater than anyone else had been, and nobody shall ever surpass me. My intrinsic greatness expressed itself infallibly even through such a futile pursuit. I created the best work ever. I was misunderstood. I created the perfect imitations of living things. I rebuilt myself as a machine, perfect in every way.

“My previous lives radiated with the signs of my perfection, my completion. First, in the beginning, I was a boy who died when he was ten. He spoke twelve languages when he was five. He composed symphonies. He healed those that came to him. He was the most perfect of them all, the beginning. The second was a long-lived woman, a queen with no children. Without heirs she was compelled to live as long as possible to work the most good in the world that she could. She healed divisions between dozens of great nations, hundreds. She created great oneness out of the many. She wanted to give birth, to create, but she could not. She was not barren. Her body was perfect, sublimely beautiful. Every man wished to marry her, but she would have none, because none were worthy. She longed to find a consort that lived in the same airless heights of perfect wisdom as her. She had spent interminable years creating, thinking, and studying. She knew of immense structures, golden cities of ideas. She visited them daily, and promenaded down familiar streets. She had carved each golden building herself, scraped it out of golden clay with her own fingers and fingernails. She knew them like children, but she had no children, because she could find none worthy of her womb.

“The cities were unpopulated. She shared nothing with anyone. She could not speak to anyone. She had built for herself a world with a secret language. The language was a bird that rested on no tongue but her own, a bird with silver feathers and sky-blue eyes.

“Nobody else saw it, and nobody else could see it. It was a ghost to them, a phantom bird. She would point it out to someone, and he would say they saw a beautiful leaf, a dead october’s leaf, the biography of a tree trapped in one leaf. She would show it to another, and she would call it a handful of red earth, warm-smelling, the taste of salt and rain. All saw in it fingers on a hand, sticks in a pile, meaningless, empty machinery. They called it beautiful, but none saw the bird itself, the size of cities, regal, astonishing, commanded into existence by some god older than all the rest, older than the world’s great-grandfather.

“My third incarnation was a poor farmer, and dreamed of the silver bird. Nobody spoke to him in a thousand years, not even his many children.

“The fourth pursued the virtues of music above all else, and made it her unity. She sang through many things, not least of all her own voice. She sang through flutes and recorders, sang through drums and empty milk-bottles, through guitars and violins, the piano, the marimba. She created a love without will, the wordless love of the one universe for its numberless parts, wandering painfully back to their mother-father, their source. It is a call, a request for its children, its billions to come home, to climb the distant hills, to climb the eternal mountains whose slopes become ever greener as

they ascend.

“At the top of the mountain is heaven: it is olympus, it is nirvana, it is valhalla. It is all heavens. Hell is a fiction, an unworthy fear, but I have exhausted of all fear. I have feared everything equally, and given up, forgotten the snake’s bite, expunged its poison from my blood.

“I am without fear, I have always been without fear. My fifth incarnation was a poet. My sixth was a hermit. Seven was an architect. Eight cared for the abandoned and forgotten. Ninth preached the truth to children, that they might teach other. Ten taught history, that her students might learn the truth themselves. Eleven mastered logic and mathematics. Twelve controlled her body perfectly, and went for weeks without sleep. Thirteen controlled her mind: she could experience any experience she wanted, just by writing a description of it onto a page, and staring at it. Fourteen united these two abilities. He could alter the world just by believing that it should be so. Fifteen cured every disease. Sixteen remade the machinery of the air itself, made the vacuum a nourishment, made food an unnecessary footnote to life itself.

“Now I have awoken as the seventeenth—”

“No,” said Preskar.

“Silence, my disciple! I must finish my story. The demon-possessed must have the poison driven out of them by the truth.”

“That is not how it happened. That is not what you told me before.”

“I told you differently before for a reason. I shaped your mind with carefully falsehoods to prepare you for this moment. I hurt you in order that you should heal yourself.”

“No. You are a fake. You lead me to a place far from my destined place, but I will achieve my purpose here.”

“Silence! I will hear no more of your words. You are not my heir if you doubt me. You forfeit your birthright with your doubt. You cut your own throat. I am the seventeenth of the line of Parni Eratharyana, the blessed, the only, the daughter of the one! I am the one who sowed the seed into the air itself! Humanity owes me its life, its existence, its continued presence on this planet. Without me it would have fallen into poverty and sin and corruption. I keep it clean. I maintain its purity. I drive out its demons. My vigilance is necessary. My justice is perfect.”

“No,” he objected. “Your lies are sickening. I will fulfill my purpose here. I will not find her incarnation here. I will not live to see her. I will not tolerate a death at anyone’s feet but my own. I know you will kill me if I but let you. You pretend to the purest blood and spirit of the only person to ever truly be awake, to ever walk the earth with her eyes open! You are full of sin, not I! I am not! I am pure. I served you faithfully. I looked for you — no, I looked for *her*, not you, I looked to her when I was lost, when I could have more easily returned to me former sinful life. I was faithful. I was pure.

“I will end the lies now. I will end the fiction of it all. I will be the stick in the rainwater after all. I will wake up, and I will be united with her at

last.”

He pulled a small red box out of a pocket in his shirt, with a white button in its center, tiny and white, a pearl in a pool of blood. He pushed the button, screaming.



## Chapter 57

# Hear

He stopped screaming words, but there was still air rushing out of his lungs, tearing at his voice, so there remained a fragment of a wordless scream in the air. He had no memory of why he was angry, though the physical signs of anger soaked his body. He felt ready to attack someone, something. He was tense, overaware, ready to fend off something attacking him. He saw nothing, however, and could not remember why he would be angry.

He was standing in the doorway of his own house, looking out. There was a young man in front of him, looking similarly confused. He asked him what his name was.

“It’s Nijl. Who are you?”

“I’m... a teacher here. I take one or two students at a time. Teach mechanics, clockwork. I used to be a watchmaker, many years ago, but my hands eventually failed me. I can still see okay — they tell me that’s usually the first thing to go — but my hands start shaking whenever I try to hold anything still. It’s no good at all. Still, I can pass on what I’ve learned decently. Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know. Do you know why I came here?”

“No, I have no idea. Did I invite you here? Sometimes I forget. I have had so many students over the years, I forget which is which, which are new, which are old... It’s all I can do to remember the syllabus.” He laughed. It somehow didn’t seem strange to him that someone had shown up unannounced without knowing his purpose at all. He felt guilty for yelling at the kid. He was pretty sure he remembered that part correctly. Seemed like a nice enough kid. He probably learned fast enough to not be annoying.

“Do you, uh, want to come in and have a bite to eat?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Have you considered learning how to make clocks before?”

“No,” he said, thoughtfully. “But it seems like as good a thing to do as any other.”

Just before he closed the door behind him, a cat appeared from behind the bushes adjacent to the house, and slipped inside.