

Limbo

A novel by Glenn Campbell

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1. Escape Attempt #34

It was not his first escape attempt, nor would it be his last.

He walked along the beach, cliffs to his right, ocean to his left. The early morning sun was rising invisibly behind the cliffs, so he knew he was heading north.

He walked along the waterline. Occasionally, the warm waves lapped his bare feet. The gravelly sand wasn't the most comfortable surface to walk on, but his feet were used to it. If he had designed this place himself, he would have made it a proper beach, with fine sand rather than gravel, but no one had consulted him. They just gave it to him.

It was a half-hearted escape. He knew he wouldn't get far. Most mornings, he went jogging on the beach, and this morning he just kept going. He knew how things would play out, but sometimes you have to assert yourself, pretending you have free will even when you don't.

He could have gone a lot farther a lot faster if he had some shoes, but they wouldn't let him have shoes here. With shoes, he would only try to climb the cliffs, inevitably getting himself stuck in a position where he would have to be rescued. That was a big operation they didn't like, so they took away his shoes. He never made it to the top of the cliffs when

he had shoes, and without them it was impossible to even try.

He had been gone about two hours. He knew this because he started from the house at dawn, when the beach was still bathed in fog. Now the fog had burned off, and the sun was just about to peek over the cliffs, so two hours was about right. This assumed, of course, that this was Earth and the sun was the Sun and a day was actually 24 hours, but some things you have to take for granted.

This was a mild beach. The surf was steady with waves 1 to 3 feet high but rarely thundering. The gravelly sand was probably the result of this modest surf. You need big waves to make fine sand, and big waves happened only during storms. At least there was weather here. He was grateful for that. There was usually fog in the early morning and occasional heavy mist that almost amounted to rain. Sometimes storms came in from the ocean consisting mainly of wind, lightning and high surf but not a lot of precipitation. For the most part, the temperature remained within a comfortable range where the only clothing he needed was a T-shirt and short pants.

This was fortunate, because those were the only clothes he had. He was wearing cargo shorts reaching to his knees and the same Oakland Raiders T-shirt he had arrived in—or a reasonable facsimile thereof. For a long time, he had regretted the choice. He was no fan of Oakland or the Raiders or football in general. It was just the shirt he happened to be wearing at the time, and now he was stuck with it. It was familiar, however, and over the course of his stay it had come to grow on him. He studied it every morning before he put it on. It was his only physical reminder of home, and it helped him hold on to old memories.

On the front of the navy blue shirt, in white overprint, was a pirate in a football helmet, patch over his eye, in front of two crossed swords and a shield. It was a silly design, but it was all he had. Over time, the design and fabric would fade from the sun and salt until you could hardly make out the pirate. At that point, they gave him an automatic upgrade. In the morning, he would wake up with a brand new shirt, same design, folded neatly at the foot of his bed.

He slowed down his walk, waiting for the inevitable response. The tide was low, and the beach was strewn with small linear piles of debris. It was rotting seaweed mostly, mixed with the usual ocean detritus—shells and small polished rocks that were a lot prettier wet than dry. He wasn't much of a collector anymore. He had already picked up and taken home every kind of local rock, shell, oddity and life form, but he still kept looking, hoping for something out of the ordinary. Sometimes he would find starfish, jelly fish and complete seashells, but most of what you saw on the beach was smaller fragments of marine life. There was never anything manmade washing up on shore. No bottle caps or Styrofoam or plastic rope, which was a pretty strong argument that this wasn't Earth, at least in his own era.

Seagulls wheeled overhead, suspended in the updraft caused by the cliff. They were noisy birds. Some of them were perched on outcroppings on the cliffs, calling out to mock him.

“Ha!” they seemed to say, “We can come and go as we please!”

Other birds, little ones with long legs, skittered along the waterline, probing the highest point the waves reached, picking at invisible food. They dispersed as he approached and returned to their work as soon as

he passed. He didn't know the name of these birds but was familiar with them from back home. There was nothing alien about them.

He thought he heard something above the sound of the waves, and he turned to look back the way he had come. Far down on the shoreline, barely visible in the distance, was a tiny speck moving rhythmically, up and down. It was his ride. They were coming for him. In the old days, he might have taken off running, putting as much distance as he could between himself and the speck, but that was pointless. The speck was faster. It had more horsepower.

Instead, he pretended to ignore the speck. He continued his visual beachcombing without picking anything up. In one pile of seaweed he saw a complete crab shell, legs still attached to its hollowed out body. This was unusual. When seagulls caught a crab, they would tear it apart to get at the meat. You would find legs and shells but rarely the whole exoskeleton as one unit. He suspected this crab died of natural causes, was hallowed out by smaller creatures and washed up on shore already empty.

Occasionally, he glanced up, watching the speck get closer. The heat of the sun created a mirage in the distance, so for a moment there appeared to be two specks, above and below, moving in unison. As the speck got closer, it resolved itself into a single creature, coming at him at a steady pace. Soon he could make out legs and a bobbing head.

It was a horse, without a rider, coming at him at a comfortable gallop.

He knew the horse well. He even had a name for it. He called it "Horse". He could have come up with a different name. He had thought

of many, but in the end he decided he didn't want to get too familiar with his captors.

"Hello, Horse," he told the horse as it approached him, slowing to a trot. It came to a halt about ten feet away, breathing heavily. That's as close as it would come on its own. There were never any threats or bribes involved in these retrievals, just a lack of credible alternatives. It was as if Horse was saying, "Do whatever you want, but I'm here if you need me."

He wished he knew more about horses and could say what kind this was. Horse was brown with a few flecks of white on its head and neck. It was saddled, so the message was clear. Horse was a good horse, easy to ride. Its only shortcoming was that it would take its rider in only one direction, back to the house.

He stared at Horse, and Horse stared at him. Then he approached and gently stroked Horse's muzzle. Horse let out a sigh of apparent satisfaction. He had no idea whether Horse had feelings or indeed whether Horse was even real, but Horse appeared to care, and that was enough. For a brief moment, he felt bad that Horse had to come all this way to find him. Horse must have been sick with worry. Or not. It was really hard to tell with horses.

He could have fought. He could have run. But now that Horse was there, with no end to the beach in sight and no other options available, it seemed unproductive to resist. The sun had cleared the cliffs and was beating directly down on him, not diverted by any clouds. He was hungry and thirsty and couldn't go on much farther anyway.

Horse turned slightly to make it easier for him, and he mounted. Then he let Horse take him home.

2. Breakfast

When he got back, she was waiting for him. She stood on the patio above the beach, looking down on him as he dismounted from Horse. Her long brown hair jostled in the breeze. She didn't look angry or annoyed, but then again she never did.

"I missed you," she said, loud enough to be heard over the wind and surf. It was what he taught her to say.

"I missed you, too," he called back, only half lying.

He started up the sixty-four stone steps from the beach to their bungalow. Exactly sixty-four steps. He had counted them many times. Did the number itself mean anything, or was it just the random number needed to reach the ledge where the house was? They were ancient steps, cut into the rock, worn down apparently by many feet before his own.

Meanwhile, Horse ambled off, its mission complete. Curiously, it did not return the way it came, south, but doubled back along the same path they had just ridden, north. He had just walked two hours in that direction and found nothing, so where was Horse going? Were there stables or some kind of exit beyond the point he reached? Or was there perhaps a hidden passageway in the cliffs that he had walked past without seeing?

In a previous, almost identical escape attempt, he had walked in the opposite direction, south. Again, he kept going for a couple of hours finding nothing but cliffs, beach and sea before Horse caught up with him. In that case, after dropping him off, Horse departed to the south, again retracing the route they had just taken. On that occasion, he lingered on the beach, watching Horse as it faded to an insignificant speck then vanished in the distant haze. Any exit from the coast would have to be beyond that vanishing point.

When he got to the top of the steps, he kissed her on the lips. She returned the gesture without anger or passion, in the normal perfunctory way married people do.

“Is breakfast ready?” he asked, pretending there had been no delay. There would be punishment for his escape attempt, but he could do nothing to mitigate it now.

“Not yet,” she replied. “I was waiting for you.”

“I’ll have my usual,” he said. “Three eggs, over easy, two strips of bacon, hash browns, buttered toast with...” He stopped to think about it. “...orange marmalade.”

“Of course,” she said, heading toward the kitchen. “Will that be white, rye or wheat?”

“Wheat, thank you.”

He smiled. He had trained her well, at least in her verbal responses. He only wished he could say the same about her cooking.

The patio was a stone veranda, about 20 feet across, occupying a natural ledge low on the cliffs. It was ringed by a waist-high stone wall on three sides. On the fourth side was their tiny bungalow. It was more a

cluster of caves than a house. Their home consisted of three arched chambers excavated into the cliff. The biggest was their bedroom, and another to the left was the kitchen. The smallest chamber was the toilet, which neither of them ever used. All three caves had wooden fronts, painted white with blue trim, with doors opening onto the patio. The other sides of the chambers were solid rock, whitewashed on the inside to look like plaster.

The furnishings were spartan but comfortable and seemed to date from the late Twentieth Century: a queen-size bed, some chairs and a dresser. The dresser had no clothes in it because both of them were wearing the only wardrobe they owned. He used it instead to store his finest shells and other natural trinkets collected along the shore.

The patio served as their main living area, which was fine because the weather was usually just right, requiring neither heat nor air conditioning, just some shade from the afternoon sun. On one side of the patio was a round café table with a big beach umbrella mounted in the middle. It had a perfect view of the coast on both sides. It was flanked by two wrought-iron chairs, painted black. He sat down on one of them. He wasn't allowed in the kitchen while she was cooking, so he could only wait.

"Could you bring me my newspaper?" he said, as he did every morning.

"I'm sorry, sir," she said from the kitchen, "We don't have any."

"Well, then, can you tell me the news of the day?"

She replied: "A man ran away, and Horse had to go get him."

"I see," said the man. "It sounds serious."

“Not serious,” she replied. “Just something that happened.”

He knew this didn’t mean he was off the hook. There would still be punishment.

“Why do you suppose he did that?” asked the man.

“You tell me,” she replied. “He has everything he could want here.”

Indeed, she was technically correct. He was living rent-free in beachside bungalow in a tropical paradise where it hardly ever rained. He was free of all worldly obligations, living with an impossibly beautiful girlfriend who cooked for him, never complained and did almost anything he asked.

“Do you love me?” he said spontaneously.

“Of course I love you,” she said, coming out of the kitchen with his breakfast. “You’re the most wonderful man in the world.”

“But dear,” he said. “I’m the only man in the world.”

“That too,” she said, setting his breakfast down in front of him.

Porridge.

Not oatmeal or grits or Cream of Wheat, but a gray, homogeneous, watery mush, filling a white china bowl set on a white china plate.

“What’s this?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

She remembered: “Three eggs, over easy, two strips of bacon, hash browns and buttered wheat toast with orange marmalade.”

To him it was just porridge. That was his name for it anyway. It was a bland concoction of nutrients tasting like liquefied cardboard, served to him every day, morning and night. Evidently, this gruel contained everything his body needed to stay healthy, because it always was. The exact consistency varied from day to day. Today, when he had been out

in the sun and had perspired, the gruel was more watery and voluminous than normal. He didn't know how she did it, but she always got the mixture right, so his weight stayed steady and he produced about two cups of urine a day.

Beside the plate, she set down a soup spoon and white cloth napkin. Then she poured him his drink in a clear glass: another big helping of watery porridge.

He smiled at her and said, "Just the way I like it. You really do love me!"

"I do it all for you," she said.

He pursed his lips and stuck out his jaw for a kiss, and she obliged.

3. Cat

He called her Cat, because that's what she was. Apparently, they wanted him to have a mate, but in practice she was more like his feline, always in the house when he was there but following her own set of rules. She could give and receive affection but remained aloof and inscrutable, giving away nothing about herself. Unlike a real cat, she spoke English and quickly learned any verbal trick he taught her. She had a grasp of irony and produced some occasional understated humor, but it was never clear whether she was a conscious being or just a complex robot.

If Cat was a robot, she was a beautiful one, a perfect female human specimen apparently in her twenties. In fact, she was freakishly perfect. Not a single blemish, pimple or freckle anywhere on her skin. He knew this because he had searched her thoroughly, every inch. If he pinched her, she recoiled in discomfort like a normal human would, and the red mark on her skin lasted as long as you would expect. He assumed that if he cut her, she would bleed, but he cared enough about her that he didn't try that experiment.

Why shouldn't he care? He could hurt her, but he would only be hurting himself. If you are human, you have to respect other humans to feel good about yourself. She was all he had, so he pretended she was real

and conscious and that she actually cared about him.

He spent a lot of time educating her. He taught her verbal idioms and turns of phrase, like tongue twisters that she repeated back flawlessly. He even taught her how to juggle small rocks, which she now did much better than he but never without him asking her to.

Her skin was white, a little too pale given all the sun she was exposed to. Her hair was brown and reached down to her shoulders. It never seemed to need cutting. She brushed her hair every day, which was the only self-maintenance he ever saw her engage in. If she ate or used the toilet, he never saw it happen. Her eyes were hazel with an inner ring of orange. He knew, because he stared into them often, studying their geography and hoping for a sign.

Evidently, she wasn't fertile or she would have been pregnant by now. He thought at first they were part of a breeding program, but apparently that wasn't the plan. Their sex was consensual, or at least it seemed to be. She appeared to take pleasure in his touch, but she never initiated affection. Her climax was predictable. She didn't cry out, but her motions seemed to seek her own pleasure. He felt her body tighten as she reached her peak, then relax. If he asked her, she always said the sex was good. Perhaps, it was just what she was programmed to say to make him feel more comfortable.

Outside the bedroom, she wore a bikini bottom and a light linen blouse that merely veiled her perfect breasts. She didn't have to get dressed at all, since there was no one else to see her, but he asked her to, just like he dressed himself every morning. It was all part of his self-imposed delusion: the attempt to live a normal, structured and

meaningful life when he had no reason to.

In the evenings, he told her stories. He recounted memories of his childhood and the place he came from, and she remembered everything he said. Much better than a tape recorder, she seemed to process not just his words but their underlying meaning. She asked questions when his meaning wasn't clear. Like any good spouse, she would remind him of his own past statements and point out his inconsistencies. This was annoying at times, but overall it was good. Better, at least, than being alone.

The one thing he couldn't teach her was initiative. She would respond to his words, gestures and touch, but she would hardly ever start anything. When she did start something, it was usually part of his punishment.

Now, she sat across from him, in the other chair overlooking the sea, as he drank the last of his porridge from the glass.

"Fine breakfast, dear!" he said, repeating his usual banter. "I don't know how you do it!"

She failed to produce the expected response. Instead she was silent, as if lost in a trance.

"You saw a crab today," she said, staring out at the sea.

He looked down at his empty glass, lined with its residue of porridge, feeling like a guilty little boy. His punishment had begun.

"Maybe," he replied.

"A whole shell with legs attached," she said.

There is no way she could have known that. He only looked at the crab, miles from the house. He never picked it up or even motioned

toward it. Horse had not yet arrived, and if there were video cameras in the cliffs, they would have seen nothing but him standing there.

“How do you suppose it got that way?” she continued, reconstructing his own thoughts.

This is how they punished him when he was naughty. They got inside his head and rummaged around, like the FBI searching your apartment without a warrant.

She went on: “Maybe it died at sea of natural causes. Small organisms ate out the insides, and the empty shell washed up on shore. How else would you explain it?”

“Exactly what I was thinking,” he said.

He didn’t bother to ask her how she knew. “I just know,” she would have said.

Just the implications were punishment enough. In essence, they were saying, “We are inside your head and can do anything we want.” He could never hide from them because they knew everything he did. They could make him feel pain. They could make him crazy. They could project any kind of image onto his consciousness—which could in fact account for Cat, Horse, the beach and everything else. Maybe they always had this ability to read his mind, but only when he was bad did they show it to him. It was hard to describe the violation of it. He had only one thing that was truly his—the privacy of his own thoughts—and now even that was being compromised.

The positive side of getting inside his head is that most of the time they didn’t. They respected his boundaries. If they wanted to know what he was thinking, they asked him in words and he replied in words.

Without the words, they could predict his general behavior but apparently not his thoughts. If they could read his mind directly, they normally didn't let on.

But getting inside his head was only part of his punishment. Another was the cold shoulder.

"I love you," he said, testing Cat's reactions.

She said nothing. She just sat there, looking out to sea, not even turning her eyes to acknowledge him.

"More porridge, Mum?" he asked, holding out his empty bowl with a plaintive face, as though he were a starving child hoping for a few more drops of gruel.

Still no reaction.

This was serious. Hell hath no wrath like a passive robot.

They sat across the breakfast table from each other, nothing to say. "I love you" was the test. If she didn't respond to that, she wouldn't respond to anything. She could go on for days like that, doing nothing but prepare his meals. It was the traditional Silent Treatment, as old as Adam and Eve.

He could taunt her a little, asking her questions she wouldn't answer, but his body was telling him it was time to move on. As the porridge settled into his stomach, it pushed everything else forward.

He needed to take a shit.

For this, he had to leave the house. He had to go to his special shitting place. Their bungalow was equipped with a standard 20th Century flush toilet, occupying its own little cave beside the bedroom, but he declined to use it. Call him anal retentive if you will, but he

refused to let them have his shit. It was his shit. He made it. He owned it. It was his. He took full responsibility for his own bodily waste and handled it in his own special way.

“Sorry, love,” he said to Cat, excusing himself from the table. “I’ve got some business to attend to.”

She said nothing, as expected.

He headed back down the sixty-four steps to the beach. Then he walked about 100 yards to the south. Climbing up the jumbled rocks at the base of the cliff, he reached a relatively flat spot that was high enough to be protected from the storms. This was his sacred and private place. Not a latrine but a temple.

The Mayans had their calendar, embodied in the arrangement of their avenues and pyramids. The Druids had Stonehenge. This man’s calendar was nearly as epic and mysterious, composed of little pyramids of own shit fastidiously arranged.

Whatever porridge consisted of, evidently it included some fiber, because he was nothing if not regular. One shit every day after breakfast. Whatever else happened over the course of his day, this was reliable. After a few lost days of using the toilet, he began to recognize the value of his own waste as a timekeeping device. Without much rain, his scat dried into hard little rocks which he jealously hoarded. Now he owned a vast personal inventory: daily shits grouped by weeks, months and now—according to his latest calculations—years.

Today’s contribution was deposited in its preordained place. Then he urinated separately a few yards away, where it would drain to the sea and not toward his precious stash.

He returned to Cat to find her still sitting at the table, staring impassively out to sea. Compared to intruding into his mind, the Silent Treatment was just silly. He had all the time in the world and could last it out longer than she could.

He bent down in front of her and kissed her on the lips, a gesture she did not return.

“Goodbye, my love!” he said.

Then he went off to work.

4. The Psychiatrist

“I understand you found a crab shell today,” said the psychiatrist.

“Yup,” said the man, lying on the couch, girding himself for a tedious interrogation.

“How do you feel about that?”

“I don’t feel anything,” said the man. “The crab was dead. It was dead before I got there. I didn’t kill it. These things happen. Maybe the crab had a family who misses him dearly, but I am not part of that family. To me it was just a crab. Dead. On the beach.”

“I see,” said the psychiatrist in a nonjudgmental manner, with unconditional positive regard.

In a hidden corner of the darkened office, an old clock ticked ponderously. Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

“A bit defensive, aren’t we?” said the psychiatrist.

The man gritted his teeth and suppressed his natural response. Anger wouldn’t help him here.

This office was always the first stop in his work day. The psychiatrist was sort of like his caseworker, assessing his overall condition then assigning him to other divisions. The psychiatrist, like Cat, was inscrutable, requesting information from him but giving away

nothing. He asked questions but wouldn't answer any. If the man asked a question of his own, the psychiatrist would turn it into a question and spit it back at him.

For example, if the man asked, "Where am I?" the psychiatrist would reply, "Where do you think you are?"

Or if he asked, "What do you want from me?" the psychiatrist would say, "What do you think I want from you?"

The psychiatrist spoke with the slightest hint of an Eastern European accent, which should have revealed something, but like the furnishings of the room, there were no details you could pin down. On the wall were impressive-looking diplomas, but if you got up close to them they said nothing, just gobbledygook Latin with no recognizable schools or place names. The rest of the office was like that: authentic-looking from a distance but lacking in detail upon close examination. This could have been Papa Freud's Vienna office, or at least a Hollywood set designer's impression of it. All that seemed to matter was that it looked good in the wide shots.

There was a window behind the psychiatrist, which silhouetted him and made it difficult to make out his facial expressions, if indeed he had any. The window was frosted, however, and you couldn't see any details beyond it. There were no sounds coming from the window or from anything else in the room. Just the clock. Tick. Tock.

This office was his first stop of the day simply because he had no choice. He was channeled here. Back at the house, there were sixty-four steps leading from the beach to a landing at the edge of the patio, but then there were sixty-four *more* steps leading to a higher level. He took

these higher steps after he kissed his Cat goodbye. At the top of the stairs was another small cave fronted by a wooden door. Inside the door, running deep into the cliffs, was a corridor lined with windowless nondescript office-style doors, sixteen of them, numbered on alternate sides 301 to 316. The corridor was lit by fluorescent panels in the ceiling. He could touch the panels by jumping but they were solid and immovable. All of the doors were firmly locked except the last one, Room 316, which was the psychiatrist's office, so there really wasn't any question about where to go.

Coming here was part of his job. Every morning, he would decide whether he wanted to go to work, and if he did, he climbed the stairs and walked down the corridor. Whatever time he got there, the psychiatrist was waiting for him.

Now he was lying on the couch staring at the ceiling, waiting for the psychiatrist to say something.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

He came to work more often than he didn't because it was interesting, at least more so than lying around the house. Room 316 was always the first stop, but after their daily therapy session he was subjected to a variety of experiences he could never predict in advance. They seem to be psychology experiments with him as the subject. Some of the tasks were tedious, a few educational. He never knew what would happen when he went to work. The psychiatrist was just the barrier he had to pass before getting to these interesting bits.

Tick. Tock.

Tick. Tock.

Breaking the silence, the psychiatrist began one of his stories: “A man is swimming in the sea, but he is foundering. He has lost sight of the shore and doesn’t know which way to go. The waves are rough, and he is losing energy. He knows there is no escape and that he will surely drown. What do you suppose it means?”

“It might mean something if this were my dream, not yours,” said the man. “You aren’t following the script. The way it’s supposed to go is I tell you my dream, and *then* you say, ‘What do you suppose it means?’”

“Have you never had that dream?”

“Of course, everyone has. Yes, I am afraid of drowning. Everyone is. Fear of drowning is one of the reasons I don’t swim very far from shore. I don’t know what the currents are like out there.

“I see,” said the psychiatrist, going silent again.

Tick.

Tock.

Tick.

Tock.

Their sessions could go on for hours like this. Sometimes, it just seemed like they were messing with his mind, but there was usually something they were after, and he wouldn’t be released until he gave it to them.

“Yes, I ran away,” said the man, without being asked.

“Why did you do that?” said the psychiatrist.

“I don’t know. Something to do with free will. As long as I am trapped here, I will want to escape. It is natural for someone in my predicament.”

“And what is your predicament?”

“Limbo. A world without meaning or motivation, with no life-threatening problems and no flawed people to interact with. A world that’s always the same, day after day. Always perfect. Hardly any rain.”

“Some people would appreciate a life like that. No pain. No worries. Some would call it a vacation.”

“My body is comfortable. It has never been healthier. But my mind is hungry. People aren’t meant to live like this. I am a caged animal. A lab rat. I want to be free.”

“Freedom is relative,” said the psychiatrist. “You have chosen to be here in this office. You could have stayed home instead. And this morning you chose to run away.”

“I’m not even sure that I did run away. I knew I wouldn’t get far. Maybe I was just exploring the coast.”

“Exploration is different than escape. Exploration is when you plan to come back. Escape is when you plan to leave. Even if the actions are the same, the intent is different. One is honest, the other is not.”

The man was silent as he thought about that. It was unusually insightful for the doctor.

Just then, the gears on the old clock started whirring, and it let out a single loud chime.

Their session was over.

“I want you to go to Room 317,” said the psychiatrist.

The number wasn’t hard to remember, but the doctor insisted on writing it down. He took a small prescription pad from the edge of his desk and scribbled some notes on it with an ancient fountain pen. Then

he tore off the sheet and handed it to the man.

“Until next time,” said the psychiatrist, brusksly. “Goodbye.”

The man looked at the piece of paper in his hand. The notes were written in a doctor’s scrawl and were completely illegible. Only the number was clear: 317. It was written in the European style, with the “1” looking like an inverted “V” and the “7” having a horizontal line through the middle.

“Goodbye,” said the doctor again, as though his time was extremely valuable and he could give no more of it, even though he had no other patients.

“Goodbye,” said the man, and he left.

5. The Corridor

There were only 16 doors in the hallway he first entered, numbered 301 to 316, so being sent to Room 317 might seem odd, but the man took it all in stride. Things would be arranged for him.

Indeed, when he stepped out of Room 316, it was a different corridor than when he entered. Previously, the hallway ended at a blank wall just after the doctor's door. Now that wall was removed, revealing a continuation of the corridor. Furthermore, the corridor he entered through was now blocked off with a new wall just before Room 316. There would be no returning the way he came until his work was completed to their satisfaction.

The man was used to this. It was all part of the physical stage managing that kept him moving in the direction they wanted. The man never saw or heard the walls move, and they always seemed solid to the touch, but he envisioned a system of partitions that could be slid into place along various points in the corridor. Furthermore, the corridors themselves could move, changing their configuration from day to day, at least beyond Room 316. When the partition after the doctor's office was removed, you never know what you would find on the other side.

He really was a lab rat, running through a maze of underground

passageways looking for his cheese. The only trouble was there wasn't any. There were no rewards to speak of. He was here only because it was more interesting than staying home. Every day he was the subject of experiments that seems to have little rhyme or reason. He was usually expected to learn something before he was released for the day, but it was rarely a useful skill, and the experiment was changed the next day so the previous day's lesson didn't help him.

You might think that since the psychiatrist's office was Room 316, Room 317 would be right after it in the newly opened corridor, but no, that was too easy. The first door number after 316 was 435. The next number, on the door across the hall, was 436. Beyond that were 437, 438, 439, and upward. If this pattern continued, he would never get to 317.

It was one of their typical mind games.

His first inclination was to go back to the doctor and tell him he had made a mistake, but they didn't make mistakes, or at least they didn't admit them. He had a piece of paper in his hand that said "317", not "517" or any other number. Door 316 was spring-loaded, and after it closed behind him, it locked solidly. Experience told him that he could pound on that door until his fist hurt and no one would respond. Evidently, just finding Room 317 was going to be part of today's test.

Still clothed in his usual uniform—bare feet, cargo shorts and Oakland Raiders T-shirt—the man headed off down the hall. He made a mental note of his trajectory. He was still heading away from the ocean, deep into the interior of the cliff. North was left, and south was right. For all he knew, the cliff could be completely hollow or merely a thin wall

between the ocean and some other place. He imagined himself inside a big sound stage with corridors and rooms constructed or rearranged for the movie currently being filmed. He figured a lot of resources were being spent on him—The psychiatrist’s office alone was a work of fine stagecraft.—but he was never allowed to see behind the scenes, only the lab-rat raceways laid out for him.

The room numbers continued to increase in a predictable manner: 440, 441, 442. The corridor seemed to have a distant end point, however, so this progression couldn’t go on forever. He could see it ahead, about forty doors in front of him: a blank wall similar to the one behind him before Room 316. Another moveable partition? As he walked, he tested a few of the doorknobs, but they were locked, and the doors were solid and unbreakable. This was expected. They didn’t give him options they didn’t want him to have.

At Room 480, he reached the blank wall, but it wasn’t an ending, only a choice. It was a “T” intersection, and he could go either right or left. They loved giving him choices like that. It was a chance for him to exercise his “free will,” but it was hard to say you have much freedom when some scientist confines you to a passageway and designs artificial choices for you.

He probed a few feet down each corridor to check out the room numbers. He went left, and the next room he encountered was 481. Across the hall was 482, and a little farther on was 483. Then he returned to the junction and went right, where he found 481, 482, 483... i.e. exactly the same thing. From all appearances, the two corridors were completely identical and both were leading numerically away from 317.

Each corridor seemed to have an end, a wall perhaps 60 doors down, but that could just be another “T” intersection where another impossible choice awaited him.

He returned to the junction and sat down on the floor, his back against the wall. Ahead of him was the corridor he had just come down, and to his right and left were two equally impossible options.

Maybe he should just die right now and end all of this. He could lie down on the floor, refuse to move or eat and just perish there on the spot. They might be able to control his movements, but they couldn’t force him to live, could they?

Actually, he tried that once before. At one point early in his stay, he decided to go on a hunger strike and refused to eat the porridge Cat served him. He saw himself as a political prisoner who could not be broken. They could confine him here and restrict his options, but life itself was still his own choice. At that point, dying seemed preferable than living forever in Limbo.

His protest went well at first. He felt pleased with himself that he had finally found a way to beat them. They couldn’t make him eat. The thing he hadn’t reckoned on was the pain, which crept up on him slowly. The main problem with a hunger strike is it makes you hungry. More importantly, it made him thirsty, because porridge was also his only source of liquid. As time passed, he felt himself get weaker. His mouth grew dry and it felt like his eyes were shriveling up into his head. He didn’t go to work, and he dared not leave the shelter of the house for fear of sweating in the sun. He became a prisoner of the bedroom.

Cat didn't seem the least bit perturbed by his refusal to eat. "Suit yourself," she said, taking away his uneaten porridge from the breakfast table. She didn't offer even a hint of sympathy for his suffering. As he lay in bed, weak and dehydrated, she came into the bedroom, brushed her hair, then left. She didn't seem to care what happened to him. Maybe they wouldn't miss him at all, just kidnap another random Earthling to replace him.

Lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, he pondered the meaning of death, since he would be arriving there soon. As far as he could tell, death had no meaning. He didn't really believe the religious stories he was fed as a child, that he would meet his Maker in Heaven. According to those stories, Hell was another possibility, and he wasn't positive which one he qualified for. He doubted, in fact, that anyone on Earth knew what death was. It could be an empty void. It could be something better than this life or something worse. You just didn't know until you got there.

Given the uncertainty of death and the relative certainty of the place he seemed to be living, he eventually chose life. Whatever death was, it could wait. Whatever planet he was on, he was part of some kind of experiment, and it would be interesting to see how it all turned out.

As the sun was going down, he dragged himself out of bed and reported to his feeding station on the patio. In acknowledgement of his delicate condition, Cat served him twice as much porridge as usual: two bowls and two glasses of watery gruel. I actually tasted good this time, and he consumed it all greedily, grateful that his ordeal was finally over.

He had missed exactly one meal.

Now, as he sat on the floor at the “T” junction, thoughts of shriveling to dust on this very spot were set aside. Since he didn’t know what lay on the Other Side, suicide was not a solution to any of his problems, nor was it even a realistic option given his lack of weapons or precipitous drops.

He would have to think of something else.

6. Buridian's Ass

Sitting at the junction of two equally unattractive options, the man remembered Buridian's ass. The apocryphal donkey, placed between two equally appealing bales of hay, supposedly starved to death unable to choose. That would never happen to a real donkey, who would eventually move toward one bale at random and start eating. The same couldn't always be said of humans, who were often paralyzed by indecision. Sitting at the "T" junction in the corridor, that was his dysfunction now.

The man had experienced many forks in the road in the tests he had already been given. By necessity, he was becoming of a philosopher in the art of choosing. He was a "choicologist"—a field of study he made up himself as he needed it. It was a more complex field than it seemed.

In his job as a laboratory rat, he was presented with a series of choices he had to make before he was allowed to go home. Should he press the red button or the blue button? They presented him with that actual dilemma early in his stay: two buttons on a console in an empty room—red on the left, blue on the right. There were no instructions, just the buttons. He went through an internal debate just like he was doing now. Initially, he refused to press any button—He wasn't going to play their game.—but the door was locked, and apparently he would not be

released until he answered satisfactorily. Ultimately, he pressed the red button, just because it seemed slightly more radical. The door opened automatically and he went home to his Cat. He often wondered whether he had made the right choice. If he had chosen blue, would he have gotten out of this place? He resolved that if he was given the test again, he would choose blue, but it never happened again. Every test was different, and none were repeated.

The man stood up, determined to go one way or another. If he had a coin, he would have flipped it, but he didn't have a coin or anything else in his pockets except the paper the doctor had given him, so he just went south, for no particular reason except to avoid the sad fate of the ass. That is, he turned right as seen from his original approach.

The room numbers continued sequentially upward. In time, he passed 480, 490 and 510. He stopped briefly at 517. He compared the number on the prescription slip. "3" kind of looked like a "5" if you squinted. He tried the doorknob. Locked. He continued on.

Still ahead was the blank wall. From this distance, he couldn't tell if it was a dead end, another "T" junction or a simple turn. If it was a dead end, his plan was simple: He would come back to the original junction and go the other way. If it was a turn, he would continue ahead because he still had no options.

If it was another "T" junction, he would be forced to make another choice, but these things couldn't go on forever. Even if the space available within the cliffs was huge, the corridors would eventually start running into each other or into the natural boundary of the cliff itself. Apart from the trick where they read his mind about the crab, nothing in

this world ever violated the laws of physics. If they kept adding “T” junctions, there would eventually have to be some dead ends, and at that point he would just turn around and go back.

Dead ends didn’t bother him. Choices bothered him.

As he approached the end of the corridor at around Room 560, he began to see that it was just another “T” junction. Sigh! Another choice, but he figured there could be only about two more “T’s” before corridors started running into each other.

When he actually turned the corner, however, a surprise was waiting—a big “Gotcha!” They had outwitted him once again.

Stairs!

Looking right and left, there were two short corridors ending in identical-looking stairways going up. This was clever! With stairways, they could completely bypass the limits on “T” intersections. Corridors didn’t have to run into each other if you kept adding levels to address the potential collisions.

This maze really could go on forever.

There were only a few doors in each direction before the stairs. As with the previous junction, the room numbers on either side were identical, starting at 561. In appearance, both options were identical, but in his mind they were not. Unlike the previous junction, he now had a basis for choice.

Since his current corridor was heading south, parallel to the cliff face, turning right again would take him in the direction of the cliff and the ocean. While he doubted the corridor would ever reach daylight, a right turn was more of a safe choice, at least emotionally. He was staying

closer to the beach and the “home” he knew. It was also within a constrained region he could more easily map in his head. If he went left, he was heading deeper into the cliff and away from presumed safety. In that direction, the maze could go on indefinitely, whereas on the right it was bounded by the cliff.

He didn’t have many opportunities for rebellion in this world. Escape seemed impossible, suicide impractical. Hunger strikes, anger and noncooperation had little effect on his captors. He could only express himself with his choices. At this new “T” junction, he wasn’t Buridian’s ass any more. The hay bales weren’t identical. There was at least a marginal emotional difference between the two corridors: One was “safe” and the other “less safe” and more unpredictable.

With an ironic and unjustified sense of self-importance, he made his choice: Left. East. Away from safety.

“You see!” he said aloud. “No one can say I’m not a risk-taker.”

He headed down the corridor and up the stairs. There he found another short corridor ending in a distant wall. He picked up his pace. He was ignoring the room numbers now. They appeared to be sequential, so he figured he only had to note them at junction points. Jogging now, he reached the end of the corridor quickly. There he found not a “T” junction but a simple left turn. There was no choice here, so he kept going briskly. He was now moving north, again parallel to the cliff.

He was moving so fast that it took him a while to notice that the room numbers had changed. He didn’t know where it happened, but they were now in the double digits and going down: 367, 366, 365, 364... Yay! He was on the home stretch! 317 shouldn’t be far off.

Sure enough, about 45 doors later, he found it: “317” on an otherwise blank door. He stopped in front of it, breathing heavily. Success!

He smiled to himself. He had solved the maze with no mistakes. If there was only one Room 317, then he had made all the right choices to get there. Or maybe there was no choice. It was a little confusing.

In the corridor, he stared at the door for a minute, catching his breath. He wanted to be composed before he went inside. He monitored his own breathing and waited a few minutes for it to return to normal.

He was about to reach for the doorknob when he stopped himself. Once he entered an experiment room, he wasn’t allowed to leave until he completed his task. This corridor would probably not be the same when he got out. New partitions would be added or removed to channel him to his next experiment or back home. The maze he had just navigated would no longer exist.

A new idea came into his brain. A little revelation. He would report to Room 317 as instructed, but not yet.

He still had things to do.

7. Exploration

Something the psychiatrist said stuck in his mind. “Exploring is when you plan to come back.”

So how could he prove that he planned to come back?

He looked down at his Oakland Raider’s T-shirt, now stained with sweat from his jog down the hall. It was the most valuable object he owned. He didn’t have to wear this shirt, or wear anything at all for that matter, but it was an emotional connection to the normal life he once knew. It was sort of like his security blanket, a precious comfort throughout his ordeal.

He loved this shirt and never wanted to leave it behind, but that is exactly what he decided to do right now. He took off his shirt and hung it on the doorknob of Room 317. It was a message to them—and to himself—that he planned to be back.

Then he took off running.

He headed back the way he came. He ran because he a lot of ground to cover and didn’t know how long it would take. He needed to explore all those other corridors he didn’t choose the first time around.

He sprinted past the rooms in the double digits. 376 was the last room before he turned right, and then he was back in the high 500s. He

leapt down the stairs, 3 at a time, and got to the second “T” intersection where stairs went up on either side. Here, he turned left again, still retracing his steps, back down the hall until he reached the first “T” junction. He didn’t stop here, however. He turned left and kept running, all the way back to Room 316, the doctor’s office. The door was still locked and the wall after the door was still there, blocking the route to the beach. He wasn’t expecting any change; he was just returning to his baseline.

He was engaged in reality testing.

The door of Room 316 was something he saw every day, at least when he chose to go to work. It never changed while everything after it did. Room 316 was his reference point, his anchor. Confident now in his base marker, he ran back down the corridor to the first “T” junction. Then he turned left, north, to explore the route he didn’t take the first time. He ran down that hall, seeing what he expected. Everything he passed seemed to be a mirror image of the path he had originally chosen, with rooms numbered sequentially upward from 481. When he reached the end of the corridor, it was a “T” junction just like the one he encountered before, with stairways in either direction, seemingly identical to those on the south side.

At this junction, he made the same emotional decision he made at the other one. He turned right, away from the ocean and “safety”. He sprinted up the stairs, reached the end, where he found a right turn. There, as on the other side, the room numbers started at 376 and went down from there. He thought he knew where this was headed.

Sure enough, he ran the final stretch to find just what he expected:

his T-shirt hanging from the doorknob of Room 317.

The corridors formed a loop, with both sides of the loop heading toward the same Room 317. As long as he had chosen to move away from the ocean, he would have found it. In the design of the corridors, they were hedging their bets, not necessarily reading his mind. Based on probability alone, there was a 50-50 chance he would reach Room 317 on the first try.

He was breathing hard from his run as he paced in front of Room 317, contemplating his next move.

Was he ready to go into the experiment room? No, not yet. There were still more corridors to explore, those on the ocean side.

Leaving his T-shirt in place on the doorknob, he jogged back down his original path toward the south. He slowed down a bit so his pace was more sustainable. He went down the stairs to the “T” junction on the north, then he continued past the junction to the “safe” stairs he didn’t take before.

He knew he was heading toward the face of the cliff, so this corridor had to be limited in length. Indeed, upon reaching the top of the stairs, he saw a wall ahead. Jogging up to it, he found it to be a dead end. No turn or junction. If he had come this way the first time, he would have had to turn back.

At this point, the initially mysterious and seemingly endless maze was now quite routine and finite. The distances were long, but the maze itself was very simple: an entrance, a loop and two dead ends. It didn’t go on forever as he first suspected. It had boundaries and limits. Why his captors chose to set things up this way was beyond him, but at least he

knew the structure of what he was dealing with. Exploration taught him that.

He now seemed to know everything there was to know about the maze. There was still one corridor he hadn't explored—up the stairs toward the ocean on the north side—but everything in the maze had been symmetrical so far, so he had no reason to believe it wouldn't be in the north. It was time to go back to Room 317 and whatever test that had for him. His exploration was complete, the mystery of the maze solved.

Or was it?

As he jogged down the southwestern stairs, the one unexplored corridor bothered him. Was it worth exploring? This whole maze was probably going to be disassembled as soon as he entered Room 317, so what was the point in having perfect knowledge of it? It probably wouldn't help him in the future.

But just the fact that he was asking the question bothered him. As long as one corridor was left unexplored, he couldn't claim to truly know it. This Road Not Taken would probably bother him later, just like the blue button did in the earlier experiment, so he decided he needed to check it out, just to satisfy himself. It wasn't much farther to swing back that way on his return to Room 317. There were no deadlines for getting there as far as he could tell, so why not complete the simple task he set for himself?

Jogging back to the northern "T" junction, he turned left, toward the sea, and climbed the stairs. There he found a corridor seemingly identical to the southern one. In the distance was a wall, as expected. So far, his theory was confirmed, but he wasn't finished yet. He would have

to jog down and touch the way before he knew for sure that it was a dead end.

When he got there, he found to his surprise that it wasn't a dead end but a right turn, leading to another long corridor.

What?

This was unexpected, and he didn't know what to do. He stopped at the elbow of the turn to consider his options. Enough running! Wherever he went from here, he would walk now. His exploration couldn't go on forever, because after all his running he was getting thirsty, and his only source of liquid was Cat's porridge. Soon he would have to return to Room 317 so he could complete his work and get back home for dinner.

He looked down the new corridor. He figured it was parallel to the sea and close to the cliff. Way down the hall about sixty doors away was another wall. He figured this was unlikely to be a "T" junction because the left side of the fork would intersect the cliff. It was probably either a dead end or a right turn.

What should a choicologist do: continue down the corridor or turn back? This new corridor was a novelty, a break in the expected symmetrical pattern. Under normal circumstances, he would explore any novelty he encountered, simply because he had plenty of time and nothing better to do. Now, however, he was facing a constraint: His body was becoming dehydrated. If the corridors continued, at some point he would have to turn back. Should it be now or later?

After assessing his own hydration and calculating the pluses and minuses, he decided to press on down the new hallway. He would go down to that distant wall and turn around there, regardless of what he

found there. At least he will have explored as far as his physical constraints allowed.

He was about ten doors down when he started hearing the surf.

Yes, he was hearing the ocean! The view ahead of him was just the usual office corridor, numbered now in the 600s. But coming from somewhere down the hall was the unmistakable sound of waves lapping against the shore. As he continued down the hall, he heard more: the sound of seagulls. Somewhere in this vicinity, there was access to the outside, perhaps a ventilation shaft or something.

As he continued down the hall, the sound of the sea grew louder. It wasn't deafening, but it was clearly real, not a figment of his imagination.

After a while the sound grew softer. He stopped. He backed up until he got to the point in the corridor where the sounds of waves and gulls seemed loudest.

Room 666.

The mark of Satan, or so he heard. Clearly, someone on the research staff was having a good laugh.

He reached for the doorknob and turned it. It wasn't locked.

The door opened inward toward the hallway. As he cracked it open, bright light flooded into the corridor. He opened the door about a foot and peered in.

It took his eyes a moment to adjust. He was looking out at the ocean. His ocean! He recognized some of the features of the beach north of the house.

He cautiously stuck his head out the door and looked around. The door was in the middle of the cliff! Below him was a straight drop of

about 100 feet. If he walked out this door, it would be the last one he ever used!

He now had a means of suicide if he wanted it, but he hardly gave it a thought now. This experiment was too interesting.

The most intriguing thing about the door was that its exterior face was textured and colored like the rest of the cliff. In fact, the surface of the door seemed to be covered with the same rock as the cliff itself. When the door was closed, there would be no way you could detect it from a distance, especially when it was so high on the cliff.

There was no obvious explanation why a door would be here in this awkward spot, but the whole thing was rich with implication. Until now, the only known opening into the underground world was the door above the house. Door 666, even if it was temporary, opened up the possibility of other doors hidden in the cliff.

Or at least that's what they wanted him to think. None of this would have happened if his captors hadn't designed the corridors to allow it. They must have wanted him to find Room 666. Why? He couldn't even begin to guess.

Clutching the doorframe, he looked down the coast to the left and tried to see the house, but given the way it was nestled in the rocks it was invisible. He wondered if Cat was still sitting on the patio. With a twinge of vertigo and little fear, he then looked straight down, noting the arrangement of fallen rocks below him. He recognized this stretch of beach but couldn't say exactly how far it was from the house. The next time he was walking on the beach, he would wander down here and see if he could see the door.

Now that he had opened the door and analyzed what he saw, there wasn't much more he could do. He couldn't climb up or down the cliff, especially in his bare feet. He could take a suicidal leap onto the rocks below, but he had already determined that suicide wasn't the answer.

He closed the door of Room 666, and as soon he did it was solidly locked. The doorknob wouldn't turn again. Apparently, that was all they wanted him to see.

He resumed his original mission, walking to the end of the corridor. It was a dead end. He now possessed a complete understanding of the layout of the maze, even if he was clueless as to its purpose. In any case, the maze and the door to the cliff would surely vanish the next day, to be replaced by a new configuration.

Although he felt proud of his own initiative in finding Room 666, it wouldn't have happened unless they wanted it to. He couldn't have turned the door knob unless they permitted it. Were they trying to teach him something, or was it just another random and meaningless test?

In any case, his mission was over. He had done everything he could with the resources available. There were no more corridors to explore.

It was time, at last, for Room 317.

8. Room 317

Back in front of Room 317, he put his shirt on and straightened his tie. Actually, he didn't have a tie, but he pretended he did. He wanted to look his best for whatever awaited him on the other side.

He turned the doorknob, and the door opened inward, away from him. Inside, he found not a room, but a stairway leading down.

"Ah hah!" he said, laughing to himself. He knew the trick they had played on him.

He followed the stairs down one floor where he found yet another corridor lined with doors, leading straight ahead in the same direction as the stairs. These doors had no numbers on them, but he had a sense of where this hallway was leading.

He passed about forty doors before the numbers started again: 480, 479, 478... He was back in the corridor through which he entered the maze.

There was no Room 317! It was all a ruse. Just finding the room and exploring the maze was the whole point of the experiment.

When he got back to Room 316, the doctor's office, the corridor kept going. The partition that had previously blocked his exit had now been removed, with no obvious joints or scars to indicate it had ever

been there. Fifteen doors later, he reached the wooden door where he first entered the cliff.

Opening it, he stepped out into the late afternoon sun.

9. Evening

“How was your day at work, dear?” she said, seated on the patio in the same place he left her.

It was what he had taught her to say, but he still found it reassuring. At least the Silent Treatment was over. He must have said something right in the psychiatrist’s office or done something right at work.

“Actually, kind of cool,” he said. “I think I might have learned something useful.”

He bent down and kissed her on the lips. Her lips responded to his this time, as they should. “Good robot!” he thought to himself.

“What did you learn?” she asked, picking up on his conversational cue.

He sat down in the other chair across the table, and put his feet up on the stone wall. The sun was heading for the horizon in front of them, aiming for yet another glorious sunset.

“Something to do with expectations,” he said.

“Explain it to me,” she said.

He realized that he could be talking to the enemy. Cat was a companion provided by his captors, human in outward form but not

provably human inside. Everything he said to her could be conveyed to them. On the other hand, they seemed to be omniscient anyway, apparently capable of reading his mind, so there seemed little point in withholding anything. In the end, he talked to her because it felt good to unburden himself. At least it was more comfortable than using the Silent Treatment himself.

Even if she was a robot without conscious awareness, she was a good listener with a good memory, and explaining his own thoughts to her helped him analyze things. When he was naughty, she expressed his captor's displeasure, but she gave no indication of knowing anything about the experiments. He had to describe to her in words what had happened to him. She would remember it, and her memory essentially became an extension of his. She was like his diary. He couldn't flip back to specific dates, but she was equipped with a contextual search option. He could ask, "Do you remember when...?" and as long as he was specific enough she would recall his words or actions.

So he told her about the maze he had been given that day, how he had solved it on the first try then explored the rest of it on his own. He told her about the biggest discovery of the day: the doorway that opened onto the face of the cliff. Nothing like this had ever happened before, so it was worth recording in his log.

He asked her: "Did you know there were doorways in the cliff?"

"No," she said.

This was expected. She professed no knowledge or memory apart from what they had experienced together. On the rare occasion when she conveyed messages from his captors, she claimed not to know where the

information came from. (“I just know,” she would say.) In everything else, she was an intelligent but passive observer with no curiosity about anything in the world except him.

“So what did you learn today?” she asked.

“That patterns aren’t the same as truth. I thought I saw a pattern in the maze, and because of that I wasn’t going to explore the last corridor. Patterns can deceive you. They can help you make predictions, but you have to explore for yourself to know what’s really out there.”

“I see,” said Cat, sounding a bit like the psychiatrist. But Cat was different than the psychiatrist. The psychiatrist accused and insulted, questioned the man’s motives and wasn’t very pleasant to communicate with. Cat was warm—or at least as warm as a program can be. She smiled at him and touched him tenderly, although he had no idea if there were real feelings behind it.

Perhaps Cat and the psychiatrist worked together as a Good Cop/Bad Cop team, one obtaining information from him that the other couldn’t get. Neither of them gave him any data he didn’t already have, and both were provided to him without his consent. They just filled different roles.

“The other milestone of the day is that I took time to explore. When I found Room 317, I could have walked in immediately, just to get it over with, but I didn’t. I wanted to understand my environment first. I was exploring, not trying to escape. I left my shirt on the doorknob to make sure they understood.”

“I love that shirt,” said Cat spontaneously, but she claimed to love everything he loved so it was kind of meaningless.

The sun was getting close to the horizon now, an orange glowing ball surrounded by just enough clouds to give the sky texture.

She started to get up to prepare his meal. There wasn't much daylight left and the house had no lights.

"Don't go," he said, grabbing her hand.

"But it's time for dinner," she said.

"That can wait," he said. "I know you can cook in the dark. Come here."

The sky was lighting up now, a symphony of red and orange as the brilliant orb of the sun touched the razor-thin horizon. As it slid down below the edge of the world, the two of them sat on the stone wall, secure in each other's arms. He nuzzled his face in her hair as she held hers to his chest.

It was a stunning sunset, as usual. The sky exploded in colors that changed by the minute. When the last sliver of sun vanished, there was a final gasp of red in the clouds, then darkness descended quickly.

Here in the tropics the sun went down hard, with little lingering dusk. A dozen stars were visible at first, then a million. The quarter moon, which had been directly above them all along, now replaced the sun as their main source of illumination. It was bright enough to cast shadows on the patio. There was no glow of any city on the horizon, just a solid sphere of stars all the way down to the sea.

It was oddly comforting to be there, holding the device assigned to comfort him.

Just a boy and his robot.

10. Training His Cat

In the morning he went swimming, naked. The water was the temperature of a lukewarm bath, completely painless to step into. He waded out beyond the surf until the water was chest deep, then he swam a couple of short laps back and forth parallel to the beach. Returning to the shore, he grabbed his soap—a hard green cake that produced suds in salt water. In the shallows, he lathered up his skin and hair, rinsed himself off, then went up to the beach for his towel.

The soap and towel were provided by management in the bathroom he never used. If they were returned to the bathroom, they would be replaced overnight as he slept. The soap had to work in salt water because that's all there was, even in the house. The first time he tried drinking water from the tap, he spit it out quickly. Apparently, it was pumped from the sea. The toilet water was the same: clear and odorless but undrinkable. It was part of the ingenious design of his prison: He didn't have enough water in his body to venture far from home because his only source of it was Cat's porridge.

She had breakfast waiting for him when he got back to the house: a bowl and glass of the bland gruel, freshly squeezed from wherever she got it. From her own breasts maybe? He wasn't allowed in the kitchen

when she was making it, so he didn't know where it came from. If he approached the kitchen, everything stopped. Cabinets locked shut, and Cat turned around to face him. He never saw so much as a decanter or a cooking pot, just an empty counter. Cat wasn't angry or defensive. She simply stated: "A man must sit down before his meal can be prepared."

He had almost forgotten what real food tasted like, so drinking his breakfast wasn't as noxious as it once was. It had some flavor, reminiscent of plain yogurt, but it never changed from day to day. Now that all variety was absent from his diet, eating was just a routine maintenance activity—actually less interesting than his daily visit to the Temple. Still, he tried to liven up every meal with some light marital banter.

"Could you bring me my newspaper," he said, as did every morning.

"I'm sorry, sir," she replied. "We don't have any."

"Well, then, can you tell me the news of the day?"

"A man went swimming in the ocean. He swam two laps between the rock piles. Then he bathed, dried himself off and came up here."

"Why do you suppose he did that?"

"Did what?"

"Bathed."

"I suppose because he hadn't done it in a while and was beginning to smell."

The man laughed. That was actually a new development, something he hadn't heard before. Were there smells that displeased her?

"Oh, really, did you notice?" he said.

“Yes.”

“I thought you liked the way the man smelled.”

“I do.”

“But you didn’t like the way he smelled this morning?”

“It was different. It was stronger. It smelled the way a man said he didn’t like to smell, so I don’t like it either.”

This made sense. Cat lacked independent preferences of her own, but she could detect and remember his preferences and they became hers. At some point, he must have detected his own body odor and mentioned it to her. She remembered that smell and it produced a response in her when she smelled it later.

Was it an emotional response? It was hard to say, but it was something he could use to generate a pseudo-emotional response in the future. This was the fun part of living with a Cat: He could program her.

“Listen to me,” he said.

Those words were his cue to her that he was trying to teach her something, a trick he wanted her to remember beyond today.

“I’m listening,” she said.

“The next time I smell like that, I want you to tell me so.”

“What should I say?”

“You should say, ‘Ewww! You stink. Go take a bath!’”

“Ewww. You stink. Go take a bath,” she repeated blandly, without much conviction.

“Okay, but you need to be more theatrical about it.”

He had already taught her what “theatrical” meant, so she repeated the phrase again in the melodramatic manner of an impassioned British

actress in a Shakespeare play, complete with posturing and hand gestures: “Ewww! You stink! Go... take... a bath!”

It was hilarious and still wildly off the mark, but it made him happy.

“That’s good,” he said firmly, to indicate the end of the lesson. He knew it was fixed in her memory now.

Henceforth, if he smelled bad, he would hear about it.

11. A Close Shave

After breakfast, she shaved his face and cut his hair. She was a perfectionist in this, and it took some time. He decided when it was Shaving Day—usually mornings when he bathed—but once the process began, he was at her mercy. She wielded sharp objects—scissors and a straight razor—handling them swiftly and precisely with little margin for error. Any unexpected move on his part could mean instant death, or at least a nick, which she would unapologetically claim was his own fault.

“A man must not move or he will be hurt,” she would say.

He would have preferred to shave himself, but he wasn’t allowed to have sharp objects. The ban wasn’t for the obvious reason you might suppose: that he would hurt himself, Cat or the psychiatrist. They seemed to be worried about something more sinister: that he would write.

It was a curious feature of this world: There was no readable text anywhere. There were numbers on the doors in the corridors and “OAKLAND RAIDERS” printed on his T-shirt, but those were the only printed characters he ever saw. Even when something looked like text from a distance, like the doctor’s diplomas, if you get close enough to read, the text would be meaningless. While he had the impression that

the diplomas were in Latin, he couldn't identify even a single Latin character. Up close, it was just a blur.

Right now, resting on the café table beside him, was an aerosol can of shaving foam Cat had just used on him. The label on the can showed an attractive swirl of white mousse with a mint leaf stuck into the top of it, but the text looked like it was written in Hebrew or some other alphabet he did not know. He dared not move while Cat was working, but he knew that if he picked up the can, it too would resolve into a blur. Apart from the obvious illustration that this was shaving foam, no information whatsoever could be obtained from the label. He supposed that this was a deliberate effort to keep him in the dark about where he was and even what era he was in.

It was many months ago, at the beginning of his stay, that he first learned they didn't want him writing. In the evening after an atrocious meal of gray muck, he confiscated the clear glass it was served in. He let Cat pick up the plate, bowl and silverware but he wouldn't let her have the glass. He smashed it on the rocks beside the patio and took the biggest shards to the bedroom, where he started keeping a record of his confinement. Using a piece of glass as a knife, he cut a small notch on the edge of the dresser for each day he thought he had been there: 13 notches, although he wasn't positive since the first days were so fuzzy. He even scratched his own name on the dresser, fearing that he might forget it.

Cat didn't try to stop him, but she didn't seem to understand.

"Why does a man do such a thing with the tableware?" she said. "Is

he unhappy with my cooking?”

“You’re cooking was marvelous,” he said sarcastically, “Just exquisite.”

He was angry. He had been here nearly two weeks and no one was giving him any answers. Whatever this place was, it was extremely remote, and escape seemed impossible. He had discovered the door into the cliff, but they only played mind games there. That psychiatrist was a piece of work, and this woman was just creepy. How can an actress stay in character for so long?

The dresser would be his log book. There was plenty of surface area on the top and sides, so he planned to record the experiments he had been subjected to and the results of his own explorations of the area. He figured that when the dresser was filled with words, he would move on to the walls, which were solid rock but covered with paint that could be scratched off. It felt good to get back to what he did best: collecting and analyzing data.

Back home in the real world, he spent most of his days reading text on a computer screen and typing it on a keyboard, so being without written language was a real hardship. With no emails to send, no way to take a photograph and none of his colleagues to discuss things with, most of his tools for processing this world were disabled. He just had himself and this weird actress apparently hired by his captors. Now, however, he had a system of record-keeping at his disposal, which promised to change everything.

Unfortunately, it was already getting dark by the time he started his opus on the dresser. Etching his name and the 13 notches was about as

far as he got. The moon lit the patio, but here in the bedroom cave, it was about as dark as dark gets. There would be no more writing tonight.

Once the sun went down, there was really nothing to do here but go to bed. He groped his way there. The sheets felt crisp and clean, as they had on previous nights. A maid service must have come in, although he never saw it happen. It was a comfortable bed—At least they gave him that courtesy.—but they didn't let him sleep alone.

“May I lie down?” she said in the darkness. She had asked the same question on previous nights. There was only one bed in the place, so there really wasn't a choice. It felt to him like a set-up, like someone was trying to manipulate him into a relationship with this woman. She was beautiful, but that didn't make it right. Or safe. If he touched her and nature took its course, where was the birth control? With all the future implications considered, it seemed best to block the process at the earliest stage and never touch her at all.

“If you must,” he grunted, and he felt the mattress move as she lay down. He didn't know if she was clothed or not; it was too dark to tell. He certainly was. He was on his side of the bed and she was on hers, and he took great pains to make sure there was a gap between them. One thing he had no intention of doing is having sexual contact with his captors, not the least because he had a girlfriend back home he was loyal to.

But that was a long time ago. Things change. Now they slept together, if not entwined in each other's arms then at least touching. She was unreal in many ways, but it was increasingly clear that she wasn't an

actress or prostitute. It felt good to hold her, and it appeared to feel good to her too. He was human, whether or not she was, and there was only so long he could fight what felt good.

His opus on the dresser had been a complete failure. When he woke in the morning, his graffiti was gone, as though he had never written anything. The shards were gone, too, both from the bedroom and the area around the rocks where he smashed the glass. When his breakfast porridge was served, the glass looked the same but felt lighter, more like plastic. And it absolutely would not break. No matter how big a rock he smashed it with, the material only deformed; it never shattered.

Now her hand firmly gripped the scissors as she completed her barber work. He knew that if he reached for them, she would resist. “Mine,” she would say, pulling them away. He could take them by force, but if he wrote anything with them, he would face the same problem as with the shards of glass: everything he produced would vanish the next day.

Anyway, he didn’t like to use force on her. That would be crude and disrespectful. He made a conscious decision early in his stay that even if she was a robot, he would treat her like a conscious being with real feelings who really cared about him. It was one of the ways he kept his own sanity.

She was finally completing her mission of scraping the grunge from his face and trimming his mane. She ran her hands gently across the skin of his face, checking for invisible stubble. Her touch was gentle and caressing, definitely a pleasant sensation.

“I feel like I’m in a shaving cream commercial,” he said.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“Oh, just something on television.”

“What’s that?” she said again.

“Never mind, it’s not important,” he said, and it really wasn’t.

She had finished now and was looking at his head from all angles to make sure she hadn’t missed anything. The house had no mirrors, so he couldn’t see himself. He could see his reflection only in tide pools down on the beach, so for now he had to trust her impeccable judgment. She wouldn’t let him go to work looking like a bum, unless he wanted to look like a bum.

But work would have to wait. Maybe he would take today off. He still had some unfinished personal business from the previous day.

“Thank you for the amazing service,” he told her. “You really do love me.”

“Yes, I do,” she said, following the script he taught her. “You’re the most wonderful man in the world.”

He moved his mouth toward hers for a kiss, and she kissed him back.

“Would you like to go for a walk?” he said.

12. A Walk on the Beach

His mission today: find the place on the beach where Door 666 opened onto the cliff. Given how high it was off the ground and how well camouflaged, he wasn't optimistic he would see anything, but it was a lead he needed to pursue. They must have showed him this door for a reason. It was a clue deliberately displayed to him, begging him to go down the beach to check it out.

When he walked or jogged on the beach, he usually went alone. Cat was willing to come if he asked, but frankly she was a burden. She had no independent curiosity or initiative of her own, so all she could do is tag along. This was one of the things that made her more like a cat than a dog. A dog would be bounding ahead, sniffing at things, exploring novelties and urging you to play. His Cat just tried to keep pace with him, waited for instructions and initiated nothing. She was no more fun as traveling companion than a real cat would be.

And she was slow! Surprisingly so. Like him, she owned no shoes, but she spent nearly all of her time in the house where the floors were flat and hazard-free. On the gravel of the beach, filled with sharp things like slivers of seashell, she took each step gingerly and cautiously. He was jogging on the beach nearly every day so his feet were tough and

calloused. She could only poke along at a snail's pace, insisting she wanted to be there even though her body obviously didn't.

He brought her along this time because he was exploring and she was his supplemental memory. With no camera and no way to write anything down, she was his only recording system. If they experienced things together or he told her things, she would remember and repeat the information back to him later if asked the right questions. Her memory wasn't any better than his, but it processed the world differently, and this was useful in itself. She was a naïve observer, not colored by emotional needs like he was, and sometimes she saw things he didn't.

“Where am I?” he had asked her many times.

“In the bedroom,” she would say, missing the larger dimension of his question.

“But where is the bedroom?”

“In our house.”

“And where is our house?”

“In the cliffs above the beach.”

“And where is the beach?”

“Out there!” she said, pointing to it with finality.

That's as far as she could go. The concept of a planet, or even a land beyond the cliffs, was alien to her. As far as she let on, the world ended at the cliffs on one side and the sea on the other and her existence began on the day he arrived.

She spoke flawless English, using an undifferentiated American

accent that was warm and nuanced, not mechanical, but she could not explain how she learned it. She claimed to remember no mother or father, although she knew what those words meant. Her knowledge of the language was not supplemented by any real-world experience. For example, she didn't know the names of rock stars, politicians or actors. She knew the definition of "war" but couldn't name any of them. She didn't know any nursery rhymes except ones he taught her. In many ways, she was a child just starting to experience the world, but she already had a complete vocabulary, so she learned even faster than a real child would.

Her finest gift was her even temperament. She seemed to get a little frustrated when she didn't understand what he was asking of her, but she never got angry. She asked intelligent questions and did her best to understand his answers. Her calm attitude eventually rubbed off on him, so he stopped getting angry with her. When she didn't understand something, he took whatever time was necessary to explain it to her. After all, he seemed to have all the time in the world.

One evening as the sun was setting, he told her how the world was round and extended far beyond the horizon. He explained how the stars were essentially fixed in space and only seemed to move because the globe was turning. It took her a while to understand, but she eventually got it.

"The world must be very big," she keenly observed, "and we must be very small."

She was a lot like a digital assistant, his smartphone. Many people have close relationships with their digital devices, but his was closer than

most. This device had some remarkable apps! It cooked for him (if you call it that), had sex with him (not just porn but the real thing), shaved his face and cut his hair. She would have tied his shoes if he had any. In some respects, however, her apps were sub-standard. There was no map program, calendar or text processor. Crucially, she couldn't tell him where he was and she received no signal from the outside—apart from a few psychic messages like the thing about the dead crab.

Over his months of captivity, he spent a lot of time and effort determining her technical specs—that is, what she was and was not capable of, physically and mentally. In most respects, she had the expected capabilities of an average human. She could lift a rock about half her weight. She could do about five push-ups. She could memorize random digits but wasn't very good at it, stumbling after about six.

She was much better at remembering the gist of things: what happened and what it meant. He would speak in a few words about something they had already discussed, and she would understand his meaning quickly, perhaps retrieving some piece of relevant information he had forgotten. They were building a language together based on a growing body of shared experiences. Teaching her new skills and concepts was one of the things that kept him sane.

She was also a kick-ass juggler! Once he taught her how to do it, she got better and better at it, eventually keeping five small rocks in the air at the same time—much better than he could do. She would never do it on her own, however. She displayed no personal satisfaction in mastering something or improving herself; she only wanted to please him.

There were no end to the tricks he could make her do, but he eventually stopped training her this way. It felt creepy and unclean, like she was a puppet and he was the puppeteer. She stopped juggling because he stopped asking her to. No more tricks, he decided. These days, he only tried to teach her meaningful things: skills that were genuinely useful to him or that expanded her understanding of the world.

He also did the best he could to be sensitive to her needs, even when she didn't enunciate them herself. He felt responsible for her in a way he couldn't quite explain. He wasn't certain she was human, but treating her that way made him more human.

Now she was poking along the rocky shore on her tender feet. She didn't complain, but her movements said she was uncomfortable. At least that was something! She had no personal initiative, but her body had its weaknesses, which gave her preferences of sorts. Her apparent discomfort was something he could relate to. He could have gone ahead and let her catch up, but that wasn't the right thing to do. Instead, he held her hand, supported her when she needed it and let her set the pace. It was inconvenient to have to attend to her this way, but he had plenty of time, and it made him feel a bit more noble and chivalrous even if he was her prisoner.

As they walked hand in hand, his eyes scanned the beach, as usual, looking for anything out of the ordinary. He caught a glimpse of a dead starfish on the gravel above the waterline, and he left Cat for a moment to pick it up. It was a fat starfish, about four inches across, but it was

deformed. Instead of five arms, it had only four, with a stub where the fifth one should have been. Perhaps a fish bit it off. Losing the arm was not the injury that killed it, because the missing arm had healed and was starting to grow back. The man showed the starfish to Cat. She seemed only mildly interested in it, only because he was, but that wasn't the point. It was a mnemonic device.

"What is this?" he said.

"A starfish," she said. "A man has brought them home before."

"Do you notice anything different about it?"

"Yes, it's missing an arm."

"Have you ever seen a starfish like this?"

"No."

"Listen to me, Cat."

"I'm listening."

"I want you to remember this: the starfish with only four arms.

Today is the day of the four-armed starfish. Got it?"

"I understand," she said. "Are you going to bring the starfish with us?"

"Yes," he said. "I'm putting it in my pocket."

His cargo shorts had several large pockets, and he made sure Cat saw him put the starfish away.

One of Cat's technical specifications was that she had a poor sense of historical time. Days, weeks and months had no meaning to her. Her memory for past events was as good as his, but she had no sense of when they occurred. An event of months ago seemed as fresh in her mind as one that happened yesterday, and she could not tell which of them

happened first. Cat's only reckoning of time was "today" and "before today." In this sense, she was very much like a cat or dog, learning from the past but living mainly in the present and only vaguely aware of the future.

The idea with the starfish is that it provided a label for today's walk that he could refer to later. He could say to her, "Do you remember the time we found the four-armed starfish?" Hopefully, she would then be able to recall the finding of the starfish and any other events associated with it. It was an ingenious way to access his "diary" without a date index, but he had to set it up in advance by drawing her attention to unique objects and events.

The man, on the other hand, was obsessed with time, so much so that he organized his own shit in little piles to try to keep track of it. Time tore him up inside. He didn't know where he was or how he got here, but he saw his life slipping away. Each day's passing was time lost and a day away from the normal life he once knew.

The pyramids of shit in his Temple of Dung told him bad news he couldn't shake: His life was dribbling away. It wasn't just weeks or months he had been imprisoned here, but years. By his best calculation, he had now been trapped here a year and a half.

545 days, plus or minus a few.

A lot can happen in such a long time. The people he once knew, all his friends and colleagues, would probably consider him gone by now. If he was missing all this time, he would have been declared legally dead, his estate settled, his work passed on to others. Everyone would have moved on, their grief set aside. Only the man himself still grieved for the

life he lost.

But even his own despair was beginning to pass. Something happened yesterday after his feeble escape attempt: He decided to stop fighting. He let go of escape. Whatever his fate might be, it now seemed out of his hands, which was freeing in a way. Now he was motivated more by something else: curiosity.

Forget about trying to get away, he told himself. Let's just figure this damn thing out!

13. A New Mission

They reached the place below the cliffs where he figured Door 666 must have been. As expected, the cliff face in that vicinity was indistinguishable from the miles of cliff on either side. He was reasonably certain it was in the right location from the features on the shore, but there was no obvious hint of an entrance.

He kept up a little patter, verbalizing his thoughts, so Cat would know what he was trying to find. She was good at detecting patterns, but he had to tell her the patterns he was looking for.

“So I opened the door, and a square hole opened in the cliff up there,” he said, pointing to the cliff face. “I know this is the right place, because the rocks here are the same ones I saw from up there. The door is well-camouflaged, so it won’t be easy to see. What I’m looking for is a tall rectangle in the cliff, probably with very fine edges.”

She looked up and did her best at scanning the cliff. “I don’t see anything,” she said.

“Neither do I,” he said.

One thing he could have done when he looked out the door was drop something from it. Then he could have retrieved the object today, confirming that the door had actually existed and that he was in the right

place. Unfortunately, he didn't have anything to drop at the time. The only thing in his pockets was the prescription slip the psychiatrist gave him. Even if he had crumpled it into a ball, the wind would have caught it, and he might never have found it on the beach.

"Why would someone put a door on a cliff?" he asked out loud. It was a rhetorical question, and he didn't expect an answer.

"Maybe someone wanted to get out," offered Cat.

"Who?"

"Someone who can fly?"

He had told her how people could fly like birds using airplanes and hang gliders. He had hang glided himself in his previous life, launching off cliffs similar to this one, but the doorway would have been much too narrow for that. You needed more space to spread your wings.

"Or maybe they just wanted me to come down to this part of the beach," he said.

"They always seem to have a plan," said Cat.

He laughed. She was just repeating his own observations back to him. He had spent many hours interrogating her about who "they" might be, but she had no information that didn't come from him. There was certainly an intelligence behind this place. Someone was rearranging the corridors every night and setting up experiments for him. And that entity liked to play games.

"What do you suppose they want from me?" he said, looking up at the cliffs.

"Maybe it is a test," she said, again repeating his own past observations.

“Maybe so.”

It was now mid-morning. The sun was well above the cliffs but not yet at its zenith. The temperature was warm but not hot, with the sea breeze moderating the sun. He was feeling good.

He licked his lips to test his own hydration. His mouth wasn't dry yet.

“How do you feel?” he asked.

It was a simple question that took months to explain to her. He didn't expect her to define her emotional condition, which could always be described as “moderately positive.” He wanted to know her body's state.

“Good,” she said.

“How are your feet?”

“I can still walk.”

Indeed, she had been moving faster in the last part of their journey. She was a trooper!

He didn't bother to ask her if she was hungry or thirsty. She couldn't assess these values. Indeed, he didn't know where she got her energy or liquid. Was she nuclear powered?

“Is it okay if we keep walking?”

“Yes,” she said.

Then she remembered something else.

“Why?” she added.

It was a question he taught her. Don't just follow his orders but ask why. He taught her that she shouldn't stop asking “Why?” until she understood. It was training he sometimes regretted.

“Because we are already here, so we might as well explore,” he said.

“Why?” she asked again.

“When you explore, you don’t always know why. All you know is there’s a gap in your knowledge. You just want to fill in this gap, hoping that something useful comes out of it. You don’t know in advance what you will find.

“Until yesterday, I didn’t know there could be doorways in the cliff. Now I do know, and I know they can be very well camouflaged. That means there could be entrances anywhere. I could have walked by one hundreds of times. For example, I want to find out where Horse enters and leaves the beach. There must be some kind of entrance or he couldn’t get here.”

“Why do you want to know?”

He lied: “Because Horse is our friend and I want to know more about him.”

“Why?”

“Just because!”

That was his signal to her that she had “why’d” enough.

Indeed, finding Horse’s entry and exit point was a pretty good mission. He had seen Horse vanish in the south, fading into the haze through sheer distance, but he had not seen him vanish in the north, where they were now. He could have looked in that direction after his escape attempt yesterday, but he didn’t bother. He just assumed the pattern would be repeated. Now he knew not to trust patterns.

He instructed Cat to look for any fracture in the cliff that seemed unnatural or a set of fractures that could mask a door. Then they

continued north along the beach. They held hands as they walked, not because she needed the support but just because it was part of their programming.

He figured they would keep going until the sun was about a third past its zenith. That would give them time to get back before nightfall. He wanted to explore as far as he could while still getting home in time for dinner.

He would not be going to work today. He was working in the field instead. Since Room 666 was shown to him, he assumed his employers would approve. Today's mission was really an extension of yesterday's work. They were following the same route he took yesterday in his escape attempt, but this time he was not trying to escape. Today, he had Cat with him, which was a little like leaving his shirt on the door knob: a message to them that he intended to be back.

Today he was looking for doorways on the cliff, not as means of escape but just for the pleasure of knowing. The real test of their confidence in him was whether Horse showed up.

He wondered if he could summon Horse on demand just by changing his attitude. Could they read his mind that way? Right now, he wasn't planning to escape, but if he changed his mind and decided to flee, Horse might come and they would get a free ride.

It would be like calling a taxi to take them home.

14. Discovery

Heading north along the shore, they were essentially walking in a tunnel. They couldn't turn left without walking into the sea. They couldn't go right, or they would run into steep and impassible cliffs. Down meant digging into the gravelly sand, and up was reserved for the seagulls. They could only move backwards, toward the house, or forward, into the unknown.

After a couple of hours poking along the base of the cliff, searching for anomalies that never appeared, they reached the point where the man had abandoned his escape attempt the previous morning. He had now reached the limits of the known universe. Any step beyond this point was virgin territory, *terra incognita*, even though the beach ahead of them looked about the same as the beach behind.

Unfortunately, the sun was already approaching the point where the man had vowed to turn back. Unless Horse showed up to rescue them, it would be a long slog back to the house. If they kept going much farther, they would be walking in darkness as they returned home. Even with a crescent moon to light their way, walking on the rocky beach was treacherous at night.

He tested Cat's systems. He checked her pulse, monitored her

breathing, examined her feet, then gave her a kiss and asked her how she felt.

“Good,” she said.

“Can we go a little farther?”

“I guess,” she said. “Will we be late for dinner?”

Smart girl! Although she had a poor sense of historical time, he had taught her how use the sun to judge the time of day. Like he, she had monitored the movement of the sun since they started and could guess the amount of daylight that was left. Since he usually ate just before sunset, she added and subtracted and came up with that intelligent question.

“I don’t think so,” said the man. “I want to go just a little farther, just to say I’ve explored something new. You see those rocks?”

He pointed to some boulders that had rolled from the cliffs into the sea about a half mile ahead of them.

“Yes,” she said.

“That’s where we’ll turn around.”

He planned to build a cairn when he got there: a unique and obviously artificial pile of rocks to serve as a future reference point. It was part of his new plan to start systematically surveying his universe.

But that plan would have to wait. They had just crossed the line into virgin territory, when he saw something unusual in the distance...

Movement!

Could this be Horse coming to get them? If so, it would be a blessing because it meant they would get a free ride home.

But it was not Horse. It was two moving specks. Not a mirage, but

two distinct and independent objects, side by side.

People!

He figured they were at least a mile ahead of them, too far away to make out any details, but there was definitely a human gate to them, not the bobbing motion of horses.

This was big news! Were there others here? Did it mean he would be rescued at last?

“Hey, Cat! Look down there. What do you see?”

Her eyesight was little better than his, and he wanted confirmation of his own senses.

She squinted and looked.

“A man and a woman,” she said, matter of factly. She then turned her eyes back to the ground, watching where she walked. She showed no excitement or interest.

“Oh my God! People!” he said. “Who do you suppose they are?”

“Us,” she said, still looking down at her feet.

“What?”

“It’s just us.”

He was confused. “You mean your people. Do you have family here?”

“No, it’s just us. A man and a woman.”

Indeed, the tiny specks were consistent with their own appearance: a man in a blue shirt and a woman beside him. What did this mean? Could there be a giant mirror up ahead? He saw no evidence of it. In any case, the two distant objects were not moving in sync with their own movements, so they couldn’t be a reflection.

“We have to go meet them,” he said. “Even if they are us.”

“Will we be late for dinner?”

“No, I don’t think so. If we keep moving and they keep moving, we should meet just about where the rocks are.”

“Okay,” she said.

The couple in the distance was coming toward them at about the same pace as they were moving. As details began to emerge, they indeed looked a lot like them: a suntanned man in a blue shirt and a pale, dark-haired woman in a blouse and bikini bottom. They could be a mirror image of them except their motions didn’t match. The landscape didn’t seem to match either. It was just a random rocky coastline with sea on the left and a vertical cliff on the right.

He stopped and made big waving motions with his arms, trying to signal the other couple.

The man in the distance didn’t stop and wave, at least not right away.

Then, about five seconds later, the man in the distance did exactly that: He stopped and waved in an identical motion.

This was too weird. Is there such a thing as a mirror with a time delay?

As the first new people he had seen in a year and half, he should have been running toward these visitors, jumping for joy, but he was not entirely sure these people were even real. Instead, he stayed with Cat and matched her slow pace.

As the two couples approached each other, it was increasingly clear that Cat was right: The two couples were the same people.

Furthermore, the time delay in their movements became progressively less as they got closer to each other. The man waved and the other man waved back almost instantly, not the five second delay when they were far apart.

The man searched the sand, cliffs and sky for signs of a physical mirror. He couldn't see any. If there was a giant pane of glass straight ahead, the sea would be sloshing against it, but he saw no signs of that. He detected no distortion or straight lines at the point up ahead where the mirror should be, and there was no obvious duplication of the terrain on either side.

All the available evidence said that the people coming toward him were real, not mirror images. These people just happened to look the same as them and were increasingly moving in unison with their own motions.

He had no idea what was happening, but he wondered if they would explode if they touched each other. Isn't that what happens when opposites encounter each other?

"Hello," said the man when they were about 100 feet apart.

"Hello," said the other man a split-second later.

The sound the man heard was an echo. In fact, he was getting a double echo, his own voice coming from his doppelganger ahead as well as bouncing off the cliffs on the right. Both sounds got to his ears at about the same time. He was used to the echo from the cliff, but the voice from the other man was new and much louder than the echo. It was his own voice played back to him with a split-second delay.

When the couples were about 20 feet apart, the man stopped. Cat

stopped behind him, and their counterparts stopped simultaneously, now with no perceptible delay.

“The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain,” said the man, mimicked simultaneously by his doppelganger. There were still no signs of a mirror in front of them. No obvious line appeared on the beach or in the sea, and there was no mirroring of the gravel on opposite sides of the central point. The man identified a small rock near his feet that did not appear near the other man’s feet, so the beach was not mirrored, only the people.

He closed his eyes, opened them, closed them, opened them. The other couple was still there. Everything was still real—or at least as real as anything else on the beach. This didn’t make sense. On Earth, it was not physically possible for two sets of creatures to move in unison this way. Even identical twins could never pull it off, at least not without some careful choreography in advance. It could happen in a mirror, but there was no mirror because the landscape wasn’t mirrored.

The other guy was wearing a navy blue Oakland Raiders T-shirt. He was heavily tanned, almost ruddy in complexion, while the woman beside him was pale, like a woman from Northern Europe who saw little sun. The movements of both of them were precisely mirrored. The man waved at himself as himself waved back. Cat, however, didn’t wave or speak, and showed no obvious interest in her opposite image.

The man sat down on the ground as his doppelganger did the same. He had to think. He wasn’t ready to get closer to his twin, not yet at least. He was genuinely worried about self-destructing if he touched his counterpart. It was an irrational fear, but this was not a rational

situation.

Cat sat down beside him as her mirror image did the same. She put her hand on his shoulder, waiting for instructions. Her focus was on him, as it usually was, not on her own mirror image a few feet away.

What kind of woman was this, who did not care about her own reflection? Another defiance of the laws of physics?

The sun was well past its zenith. They were burning daylight now and had to head back soon. Meeting himself on the beach was a startling new development, but he had to assess it quickly. He did not want to make any rash moves. Although suicide had passed his mind on previous occasions, things were interesting now, and he was not ready to annihilate himself through careless contact with his opposite.

But he didn't want to just walk away either. There was data here, and he had to come up with a plan for collecting it.

15. Crossing the Line

Cat seemed to have no interest in her identical counterpart on the other side of the line. She simply sat there, awaiting his instructions. As far as he knew, this was the first time she had seen her own full length reflection. He had shown her tide pools near the house where she saw her own reflection in the water, but that was a poor rendition compared to what she was seeing now. She actually seemed more interested in the tide pools, since it took her a while to recognize that the image down there was really her. Now, she was as disinterested as most cats are in front of mirrors. It was as though encountering her doppelganger was an everyday occurrence.

“Who are those people?” he asked her, as the guy on the other side said the same thing to his companion.

“Just us,” both Cats said.

“But what are they doing here.”

“Sitting on the beach.”

“But why are there two sets of us, two men and two women?”

She seemed confused. “No,” she said, “there is only one of us. One man and one woman.”

“Don’t you see them over there, those people who look just like us?”

“Yes.”

“How can we be here and over there at the same time?”

“We just are,” she said, with any hint of curiosity.

He tried to explain to her how this wasn't a mirror, wasn't a reflection like the tide pools, because the landscape wasn't mirrored, and she seemed to agree, but she still didn't see anything unusual in the situation.

“Where are you, Cat? Are you here or over there?”

“Both,” she said, as if it was obvious.

Cat wasn't very helpful. He would have to conduct his own experiments.

He stood up. There was a paradox here, and he knew a way to test it. The couple a few feet away might be identical to them in every way, but their environments were not. The beach looked completely natural, a random jumble of gravel, rocks and ocean debris. The gravel at their feet was not mirrored on either side. That meant the two couples couldn't be exactly the same because they were dealing with slightly different external forces.

What would happen if he picked up a rock on his side that the other man didn't have access to? Then their movements would have to diverge.

He looked around the beach near his feet for a unique rock to test this theory. The other guy duplicated his search motions like a mirror image would, but he was looking at a different patch of gravel. Then the man spotted a potato-size rock that did not appear at his doppelganger's feet. He reached for it. At the same time, the other man reached for a *different* rock a few feet away. The man reached with his right hand

while the other guy reached with his left in a different direction. The other guy actually had to step a couple of feet to his left to pick up his own unique rock.

They had diverged! The other guy was not an exact mirror image. They picked up different rocks from different places.

But as soon as they both had their respective rocks in hand, they snapped back into sync again. The man didn't intend for it to happen; it just did.

"Oh, no!" both men exclaimed. "This will not be resolved easily."

Exercising what he felt was his own initiative, the man tossed his own rock at the feet of the other. The other man did exactly the same at exactly the same time. Although the rocks were different in size and shape, both landed at about the same place at the foot of the other.

Then the man had another idea. He reached into his pocket as his mirror image did the same. He pulled out the four-armed starfish while the other guy pulled out a similar-size sand dollar with a visible notch in it.

The implications were stunning! They both must have had the same idea at the same time—looking for a unique object to show their Cat—but they had different environments around them, so they exercised their intention in different ways. This is why identical twins eventually diverge: Even if raised in the same environment, they will eventually encounter different experiences which turns them into different people.

The creepy part was how they snapped back into sync following the diversion. There must have been some invisible force pushing them back together, overruling or subverting his own intentions. The implication

here was that he had no free will, that his actions were determined from the start so that his doppelganger could duplicate them. This was a conclusion he was not prepared to accept.

“You wise guy!” the two men said to each other, shaking their respective fists in mock rage.

Both of them put up their fists in fighting position.

“You want a piece of me?” they said.

Both of them started laughing.

They postured and hammed in front of their mirror images. They showed their muscles to each other. They pouted and stuck out their tongues. This sophomoric foolishness continued until the ladies couldn't take it anymore.

Cat and her opposite both stood up and brushed off the gravel clinging to their legs. As sanguine as they normally were, they were getting impatient now.

“We're going to be late for dinner,” they said.

“Aw, mom!” said the men. “We can't go now. This is too much fun.”

“The sun will go down, and we will be walking in the dark,” said both the Cats.

The man pretended to ignore the ladies. He wanted to run more tests on his doppelganger.

He decided to touch himself. He had less fear now that they would annihilate each other upon contact. This was a parallel being, not necessarily an opposite one. Cautiously, the twins approached each other. They each reached out their hands—the man's right one and the other guy's left as you would expect from mirror images. Gingerly their

hands touched at the point between them where the mirror should have been.

Luckily, they didn't explode.

If this had been an actual mirror, he would have felt only glass. Instead, he felt the soft flesh of his own hand. Not surprisingly, the harder he pushed, the harder the other guy pushed back.

The man pressed both of his hands against the other guys', braced himself and pushed as hard he could. The other guy pushed back with similar force and neither of them got very far, but the meeting point between them wavered, not like a solid pane of glass. They were standing on slightly different gravel, so they had different footing. Their hands didn't stay exactly at the point of the hypothetical mirror but moved back and forth across that line.

Apart from the force of his doppelganger, there seemed to be nothing keeping him on the south side of the imaginary line. If only he could defeat himself, he could keep walking down the beach. He had no real intention of continuing north—It was time to head back home.— but getting past the other guy was an intriguing puzzle. The key to solving it lay in their different environments.

Standing a couple of feet from each other, the man and his mirror twin looked toward the cliff. At the base of the cliff was a jumble of boulders that had calved off it over time. If they pushed against each other over there, the playing field would not be even and they might be able to get past each other.

The other guy must have had the same idea because they both headed away from the beach and toward the cliffs. Walking in perfect

sync, they came to a boulder about four feet high. The boulder was mostly on the other guy's side of the line, blocking his path, while the man's own path was clear. There couldn't be a more uneven playing field than this!

Since he couldn't walk through the boulder, the other guy climbed on top of it, while the man stood below him on his side of the line. They smirked at each other, pleased with their cleverness, then the other guy jumped over him as he stepped beside the boulder to cross the line. They didn't even have to wrestle each other.

Viola! They were both across the line. He had stepped into a mirror!

Frankly, this other side of the mirror looked and felt the same as the one he came from, just a few feet to the north. Within a couple of seconds, the two men snapped back into sync with each other without the man intending for it to happen. Back at the line again, the man reached out and touched the other guy, palm to palm. He was still right handed and the other guy was still left handed, but now he was on the north side of the imaginary mirror and the other guy was on the south side.

The rules of reality had just been rewritten.

His Cat was still on her side of the line. Or was she? There was another identical Cat on his side of the line. They both looked impatient. Both wanted to go home.

He was ready to go home, too. But which Cat should he take home, and which way should they go?

He stood behind a Cat and his doppelganger did the same, facing

each other across the line.

He cautiously touched the other Cat, the new one on his new side of the line, as the other guy did the same. This Cat felt as solid as the other. He looked her in the eyes and saw the same eyes he knew. Then he took each of her hands in his.

And they danced!

It was ballroom dancing. He had taught her how to do it. Like his own Cat on the other side of the line, this one was technically proficient but lacked any real passion for the art. The spun around and around on the beach as the other couple did the same.

But something about this wasn't right. It felt improper. The Cat he was dancing with seemed even more awkward than usual, as though she wasn't used to him leading with his right hand. She wasn't his Cat but somebody else's.

The imaginary music stopped, and the dancers respectfully disengaged from each other.

"Cat," the men said, addressing their own Cats on the opposite sides of the divide, "can you touch the other Cat for me?"

Both Cats reached out a hand and touched their twin, fingertip to fingertip. Their only difference was that the Cat on the other side of the line used her right hand while the one on his own side used her left. His own Cat was right handed, so she was still on the other side of the line.

"Cat, please come over here," said both men, pointing to their woman on the opposite side of the line.

He wasn't sure how Cat would respond to this. Would she try to wrestle her doppelganger like he did, or would she go up to the boulders?

Neither. It was much easier for Cat than it was for him. She just walked across!

The two Cats crossed the line about two feet away from each other. They used identical motions but took different paths, walking right past each other without so much as a nod.

“How did you do that?” he said, after his Cat was on his side.

“Do what?” she replied.

Now he had his own Cat back, and the other guy had his.

He took his own Cat in his arms and kissed her.

“I missed you,” he said.

“I missed you, too,” she replied on cue. “But I thought I was supposed to say that only when you went away.”

“Sometimes you have to say it anyway,” he said.

Although the Cats appeared identical, it was important to him that he had the right one. The right-handed Cat was his and only his.

The other guy apparently had the same idea. They sneered at each other theatrically and pointed a threatening finger at each other.

“Touch my girl again, and I’ll beat your ass,” they said in unison.

16. Heading Home

“Time to go home,” said both men in unison.

The only question was which way.

The home they came from was on the other side of the line, far out of view. To get there, he would have to dodge his identical twin again. The other couple had come from the north. Was there another home down there, identical to his? There were no visual clues to say yes or no.

“Which way is home?” he asked his Cat, as his doppelganger asked the same of his girl.

“Either way,” the Cats replied.

Crossing the line again and going back the way they came was the safe choice. He knew for a fact he had a home down there. The existence of a home in the other direction was speculative. It was the less safe choice.

Heading into *terra incognita* held great risk. If they walked north for the rest of the day and found no house, he would not get dinner. He would be dehydrated at that point and badly in need of liquid. Without rehydration, it was questionable whether he could make the all-day trek back south to his original home.

It was possible the same risk applied to Cat, although he wasn't

sure because he had never seen her eat or drink. In any case, she seemed to be pretty good at taking care of herself. She wouldn't place her own body in obvious peril.

"Are you sure there's a house down there?" he asked her, pointing northward.

"Of course," she said. "It's the same way we came."

"But it isn't! We came from the other direction, down there." He pointed to the south.

"The same," she said.

There was no rational analysis he could apply to this situation, but he had a rebellious preference for "less safe" over "safe", based in part on his experiences at work the previous day. Although he didn't know who Cat was, what she was or who she worked for, he trusted her naïve observations that one direction was as good as the other. She had never lied to him before.

He finally committed himself to continuing northward, away from safety, toward the doppelganger house of the left-handed people that he only assumed was out there.

He waved goodbye to his doppelganger rival who simultaneously waved back.

"See ya later, handsome!" both men said.

Then Cat and he turned away from their counterparts and headed north. Assuming the new house was the same distance as the old one, they had a long walk ahead of them and had to make good time.

As it turned out, though, the long trek wouldn't be necessary. Someone ordered a ride for them.

As soon as they started heading north, another moving speck appeared far ahead of them on the beach.

Turning back toward the doppelgangers, he saw a similar speck in their direction. It was bobbing up and down in a familiar pattern.

Horse!

Their taxi was coming—from both directions!—apparently ordered up by whoever was running this circus.

They continued walking north on the beach, and by the time Horse got to them, they were separated from their counterparts by several hundred yards. The man looked back and saw a duplicate Horse meet the couple down there. However, there was a slight delay—about two seconds—between their own movements and those of the other couple and horse.

The man waved at himself, and the other guy waved back about two seconds later. He could only assume the other guy was seeing the same thing: a two-second delay. How could time possibly work like this?

Horse turned sideways to make it easier for them to mount. Like a gentleman, he helped Cat onto Horse first. He was about to climb on board himself when he remembered something: He forgot to build a cairn.

He wanted to mark this place for future reference. This was especially important after meeting himself on the beach. If he came back again and didn't meet his doppelganger, at least he would know he was at the same location.

While Cat waited astride Horse, the man walked away from the ocean toward the cliff, to a place that was well above the high tide mark

and presumably safe from any storms. In the distance, his counterpart did the same, his motions delayed by about two seconds.

Working fast, the man made a tower of balanced stones that could never exist in nature. His counterpart down the beach did the same. The other guy was probably using different stones, but his cairn seemed to have the same general shape and height as his own.

When the cairn was about two feet high, the man stepped back and admired his work. Done. He returned to Horse and climbed aboard behind Cat.

Horse knew where to go and moved fast. They got to their new home in only a fraction of the time it would have taken them to walk.

Their new home in the north appeared identical to the one they left behind. There was only one small wrinkle: The dresser in the bedroom was on the left side of the bed whereas the one they left behind was on the right. He moved it back to the correct side to restore order to the universe.

The quick ride from Horse gave them a jump on the sun. Dinner was served on time and in great quantity: three bowls and two glasses of especially watery porridge, compensating for his dehydration during the day. It tasted good and went down easily.

He belched loudly.

“Another fine meal, dear!” he said.

“I do it all for you,” she replied.

17. Something Lost

“Who am I?” said the man.

He sat up in bed with alarm. He had forgotten!

It was just before dawn. Outside the open door in front of him, the stars were fading from the sky. The gentle sound of waves lapping the shore washed through the bedroom.

“Cat!” he said, waking her, “Who am I?”

She roused herself from slumber, looked up at him and smiled sleepily.

“You are a man,” she said. “My man.”

“No, what is my name? You must know my name. I’m sure I told you.”

“Matthew,” she said. “That’s what you said your name was. Your friends call you Matt.”

“Matthew,” he repeated, mulling it over. That sounded right, but why couldn’t he remember it himself?

“And what is my last name?” he asked Cat. “The name that comes after Matthew.”

“There are two of them.”

“Tell me both.”

“Dale Gibbons,” she said, “but most people don’t know about the ‘Dale’ name.”

“Matthew Dale Gibbons,” he repeated, trying it out. “Matt Gibbons.”

He now remembered scratching that name on the dresser with a piece of broken glass many months ago, so it must be right.

“Matt Gibbons, Matt Gibbons, Matt Gibbons,” he repeated to himself. He didn’t want to forget it again.

“Yes, that’s the name you told me,” said Cat.

“When did I tell you?”

“Before,” said Cat.

This was her typical response. She had no sense of time before today. She could remember what he said and what they experienced together but couldn’t say when they occurred.

“Listen to me, Cat,” said the man. “This is very important. From now on, I want you to call me ‘Matthew’. I’m not ‘a man’, just Matthew. Got it?”

“Yes, Matthew,” she said.

“You can also call me Matt.”

“Okay, Matt, but which one should I use?”

“Any one you want.”

“Can I still call you ‘you’?”

“Yes, but any time you would say ‘a man’, please replace it with Matt or Matthew.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Because it’s my name, and I don’t want to forget it again. I woke

up this morning and couldn't remember."

"Why do you need to remember?"

"I just do. Because my name is part of my identity."

"What's an identity?"

"Never mind. Just please call me Matthew or Matt. Please say it at least five times a day, so I don't forget."

"Okay," she said, starting to sit up. "Is Matthew ready for breakfast, or will Matthew go jogging first?"

"Matthew is really, really confused," said Matthew. "I think he is just going to sit here and try to figure things out. You can go back to sleep if you want."

"Okay, Matthew," she said, and she lay back down again. She curled up close beside him, just like cats do, and fell instantly to sleep.

He was alone again, listening to the waves, watching the ocean emerge from darkness. Matthew Gibbons had his name back, and Cat would make sure he didn't forget it again.

There was just one problem.

He had forgotten everything else.

18. Therapy

“What have you done with my memory?” said Matthew Gibbons.

“What do you think I have done with your memory?” replied the psychiatrist.

Matthew was angry.

“I think you or the people you work for have been monkeying with my brain. Sometime last night, you guys reached in and disconnected something. You turned off my memories.”

“I see,” said the psychiatrist.

“I want them back.”

“Tell me more,” said the psychiatrist.

“Don’t ‘Tell me more’ me. I’m tired of the program. Answer the question. What have you done with my memories?”

“What memories are you missing?”

Matthew was livid. “I don’t know!” he shouted. “If I could remember what I can’t remember, I wouldn’t be coming to you for answers!”

The psychiatrist went silent, as often happened when Matthew got worked up. Apparently, the program was giving him time to calm down before responding.

The old clock punctuated the silence.

Tick.

Tock.

Tick.

Tock.

“I can see you are very distressed about this,” said the psychiatrist at last. “Shall we talk about it?”

“Yes, let’s,” said Matthew, suppressing his anger.

“What memories do you still have?”

“I remember everything that has happened to me in the year and a half I have been living on the beach. I don’t remember it all at once, but I have access to those memories if I want them. What I don’t remember is anything before I arrived. I don’t remember who I am or where I came from in real life, before the beach. I feel certain I had these memories before last night. We have even discussed them here in this office. When I woke up this morning, all the memories of my past were inaccessible. Not erased exactly, just inaccessible. I sense they are there in my head, just out of reach, but I have no way of getting to them. It’s like you need memories to bring back other memories, and I don’t have any memories to start with.”

“Don’t you have the Oakland Raiders?” said the psychiatrist.

“I do!” said Matthew with a sudden flash of insight. That could be the key to getting his memory back!

He looked down at his own T-shirt. It was his only direct reminder of his previous life, but he had forgotten how it related to him.

“It doesn’t help,” said Matthew. “I know what football is. I

remember how the game is played. I know that the Oakland Raiders are a football team. I imagine they are based in Oakland, but I don't know where that is. I can't picture Oakland on a map or tell you anything about it. In my mind, I see a football stadium, but can't get out of the stadium. It's like everything beyond it is a fog that my eyes can't penetrate."

"Can't you picture yourself at the stadium, sitting in a specific seat?"

"No. I don't remember attending an Oakland Raiders game. It may have happened, but I have no specific memories of it. I have no idea how the Oakland Raiders relate to me. Does it mean I come from Oakland, or was this just a random shirt I happened to be wearing? I haven't a clue. I just remember what football is and what a stadium looks like. All my personal memories are still missing."

"And those memories are important to you?"

"Yes. Everything I am is based on my memories. I need them to decide how to live. They help me evaluate what happens to me and plan for the future. Without my memories, I am nobody."

"Yet you are still here, even without your memories."

"Sure, I am here, breathing, but this is no way to live."

"Are you still conscious?"

"Yes."

"Is your body healthy?"

"Yes."

"And aren't you living in a nice house on a private tropical beach with a beautiful woman who loves you very much?"

"With a woman assigned to me who is programmed to love me,

yes.”

“I don’t see why you are unhappy.”

“Arrgh! You just don’t get it. People can’t live like this. They need more than mere survival. They need more than food and sex and companionship. They need something else.”

“What do they need?”

“I don’t know!” shouted Matthew, almost crying now. “I can’t remember!”

Tick.

Tock.

Tick.

Tock.

Matthew composed himself, thought for a moment and continued:

“Do you know what I think this is? I think this is some kind of zoo. You kidnapped me from Earth and stuck me in a cage designed to look like Earth to put me at ease. You feed me every day with a nutritionally complete diet. You have given me a mate and programmed her with everything a man could want except a soul. You think you have supplied this animal with everything it requires to be happy, but the animal isn’t happy. It is stressed because it knows none of this is real. It is pacing its cage and wants to get out.”

“What would be the purpose of such an arrangement?”

“Research maybe. Every day, you set up an experiment for the animal, just to test its responses. You make the animal think he is doing the experiments voluntarily, but you don’t give him any choice. The animal either does the experiment or stays home and goes crazy from

boredom. Every night you send the lab rat back to its cage and set up a new testing apparatus for it the next day. It never ends.”

“Assuming this is true, how would you want to change things?”

“First, I want my memory back, then I want to go back to the place I came from, wherever that is. You need to send this animal back to its native habitat.”

“And if that wasn’t possible, what would you do?”

“Well,” said Matthew, “I guess that’s the experiment I’m involved in right now, the one I am conducting myself. How does a man find meaning when you have taken everything away from him including his memory?”

The gears in the old clock starting whirring, and it let out a single loud chime.

Their session was over.

“I want you to go to Room 317,” said the psychiatrist.

It was same assignment he got in their last session—and the one before that, and the one before that. In fact, he was always sent to Room 317. It just happened that Room 317 was different every time: in a different place in the corridors and different inside the room.

The psychiatrist wrote some notes on his prescription pad and handed the slip to Matthew. The notes were unreadable of course, but he could make out the European “317” in the middle. In the top dresser drawer in his bedroom was a big stack of these prescription slips—hundreds of them, all marked “317.”

Here was another fine specimen to add to his collection.

19. The Planetarium

Room 317 wasn't hard to find this time. It was straight down the hall, the door at the very end. They weren't giving him any options.

It was dark inside the room, and his eyes took a moment to adjust. It was a circular room with a domed ceiling that glowed faintly blue like the sky, giving off just enough light to see by.

The door clicked shut behind him. It was now invisible in the dim light at the base of the dome. He knew he was locked in for the duration of the experiment.

He was standing below one half of a perfect sphere: a planetarium! He had visited places like this in his previous life: a domed auditorium where a projection of the heavens is displayed to an audience. He couldn't say where or when he had been inside a planetarium, but he knew what they were. There were no stars in this one yet, but he imagined there would be.

In most planetariums, the stars were projected from the inside by a big contraption in the center of the room. In this one the projector was missing. In its place was a single chair—a padded living room recliner. Evidently, he was expected to sit in this chair and look up, because there was nothing else in the room. He knew from countless previous

experiments that when you were given no options, you simply followed the plan. There was no sense in fighting it.

He sat down in the recliner, leaned back and made himself comfortable. As soon as he did, the blue sky slowly faded to black and the stars came out. Since there was no projector on the inside, the stars were either projected onto the dome from the outside or embedded in the ceiling itself.

He knew the stars well from living on the beach where there was nothing to do at night but look up at them. He could name only a handful of celestial features— the Big Dipper, Cassiopeia, Sagittarius, the Pleiades, Venus—but the other patterns in the sky had become like old friends even if he didn't know their names.

The stars he knew on the beach were those of the Northern Hemisphere on Earth—or a credible facsimile thereof—but the stars displayed on the dome weren't the same. This sky was similar in general appearance, but he didn't recognize a single constellation. He couldn't even detect the Milky Way, a broad band of light that was always visible on the beach on nights without a moon.

Was this a hint? Was this a view of the sky from the planet where he was currently being held captive? Or were the stars just a random computer-generated pattern? All he knew is there were a lot of them: endless detail wherever he looked, just like the real sky. Sitting in a comfortable chair staring up at millions of stars, he was overwhelmed with data, but there was nothing he could do with it.

Then there was a flash of light.

It was similar to lightning when you can't see the actual bolt: a

split-second flash that lit up the whole sky evenly. The flash was brief and diffuse, and it was impossible to determine its source. It could be coming from the dome or a phenomenon within his own eyes.

This was not a new sensation. He had experienced these flashes frequently in his time on the beach. They could happen at any time, day or night, seemingly random and unconnected to anything else. At times, they happened in clusters—several in succession—and other times it was just a single isolated flash. The flashes were unpredictable, inexplicable and not physically disruptive, so he learned to tune them out. Perhaps it was a glitch in the program or projection system that created this artificial world.

He was certain of it now: This world was not real. It seemed real to his senses. The recliner underneath him seemed solid. The rocks on the beach were solid, too, and if he stubbed his toe on one of them, it hurt like the dickens exactly as it should, but there were other features of this place that couldn't possibly be real. The complete absence of trash on the beach—not a single human artifact washed up on shore—told him this could not be his own planet in his own era, and once he understood that, anything was possible.

Meeting his doppelganger on the beach solidified his position: This was virtual reality, not real reality. His life on the beach with Cat was an extremely detailed and consistent illusion—an elaborate video game he was somehow trapped in. He couldn't say for certain whether the illusion was generated outside his body—like a physical movie set—or by direct manipulation of his neurons, like computer special effects. For all he knew, his body could be lying in a vat on spaceship with sensations

pumped directly into his brain, but it was a stable and potentially painful hallucination, so for now he had to respect its rules.

Another flash!

The planetarium was an obvious illusion. No one would see it as anything but an artificial simulation of the sky for the edification of guests. So why were there flashes here?

Another flash!

They seemed to be happening at regular intervals, not random like they seemed to be on the beach.

Flash!

The stars weren't moving but his eyes were, and he sensed there was some kind of connection between the flashes and his eye movements.

His eyes scanned a certain part of the sky, and the flash happened again. Now he got it! The flash was connected to where he looked.

His eyes scanned back and forth, up and down, testing the flashes. After a while, a pattern began to take shape. There was a bright star on the left side of his field of vision—an ordinary looking one but among the brightest. Around it was an invisible circle, and whenever his eyes tripped over that circle toward the star, the flash went off. Apparently, they wanted him to look at that star.

“I get, it guys,” he said out loud. “It’s a star. Is it my star, the sun? Is it your star? Why do you want me to look at this star? What good is it?”

But there were no direct answers. There never were. In all the experiments he had been through, there had never been a voice from a control room telling him what do or what it meant. There were only

stimuli which he responded to and that he was supposed to learn something from. The only way he knew he learned the lesson is the door would open and he would be allowed to return to the beach. Back to his cage.

The door of the planetarium was still closed, so evidently he had not learned the lesson yet.

He scanned other parts of the sky, but the flash pattern didn't change. It happened only around this one star. The sky as a whole appeared unchanging. It didn't rotate slowly like the real sky did. Once he deduces the flash pattern, there were no new developments in the sky.

This experiment was getting tedious. He could only lie in the chair looking up. He considered getting up and running laps around the room, but he knew that wouldn't help. He could either look at that one bright star or not look at it. When his eyes moved toward it, there was a flash, but there was none when they moved away. The flash wasn't painful, just annoying and now predictable.

What was the point in all this? It was frustrating. The sky was boring now, especially since it wasn't his own and he couldn't detect any obvious patterns in it.

He looked at the star again. He just wished it would go away.

Then it did!

It just winked out.

No more star. It was gone.

He wouldn't have noticed had he not been focusing on it. The pinpoint of light he attention had been directed to was now missing. Turned off.

The flashes stopped, too. His eyes scanned that region of the sky, but nothing happened. No more star. No more flashes.

Turning off the one star wasn't hard if you ran the planetarium. The creepy thing was they had read his thoughts. He never said aloud, "I wish that star would go away." He only thought it, and the moment he did it happened.

Then the stars in the planetarium faded, replaced again by the faint blue glow of an artificial sky. The show was over.

The door opened on its own and bright light from the hallway flooded into the room.

He had no idea what he had just learned or why, but the experiment was over.

He was allowed to go back to his cage.

20. After Dinner

“How was your day at work, dear?” she said.

“Frustrating,” he replied. “I don’t know what they want from me.”

Dinner was served in a white china bowl on a white china plate and in a clear plastic glass. It was exquisite as usual, and he told her so. Now, with the table cleared, they were sitting in their chairs on either side of the table looking out on another glorious sunset.

“What did they ask you to do?” she said.

“They made me extinguish a star,” he said. “Today I vaporized a giant ball of burning hydrogen, probably destroying a whole solar system along with it. It was tragic. Billions of lives lost. I’m not proud of what I did, but they made me do it.”

He regretted saying it as soon as it came out of his mouth. Cat tended to take things literally and didn’t always grasp his humor. If she didn’t get it, he would have to explain the joke to her in tedious, painstaking detail which would render it not funny at all.

“At least you got home in time for dinner,” she said.

Bless her! She must have figured out from his tone or facial expression that he was pulling her leg. Smart little robot!

“I’m actually a very powerful man at work,” he said. “The whole

place revolves around me and everyone looks to me for answers. When I want to blow up a solar system, I just do it, and everyone says, ‘Well done... Well done...’”

He paused, grasping for a name.

“Matthew,” she said.

“Right,” he said. “They say, ‘Well done, Matthew,’ and congratulate me and send me home to you, where you make me a marvelous meal and we sit in the warm ocean breeze watching another remarkable sunset. I don’t see how any man could ask for more.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying,” she said.

Then he turned serious. “It’s just frustrating not knowing the plan. If I knew where we were and what was happening to me, I could make better decisions. I have even lost track of where I came from. I’m stuck in Limbo and can’t seem to get out.”

“Why don’t you tell me what really happened today,” she said.

She couldn’t serve as his diary if he didn’t give her accurate information about what he experienced, so he dropped the jokes and gave her the facts as plainly as he could. He told her about the planetarium, the flashes and the bright star on the ceiling that he extinguished by thought alone. However, he declined to tell her about his conversation with the psychiatrist or his theory that she was part of his zoo habitat designed to put him at ease. She may have been a robot, but he didn’t want to hurt her feelings.

Cat professed to know nothing about what happened to him at work unless he told her. Once, he took her up the steps and showed her the door in the cliff where he entered, but she refused to go inside. She

claimed to be afraid, which was the only time she ever expressed fear. “It isn’t my place,” she said, retreating down the steps. Since she couldn’t come with him, he had to describe his work experiences to her explicitly. In this case, he also had to explain what a planetarium was and why people would pay money to go inside.

“Isn’t our sky out here better than that sky in there?” she asked. Could there be a hint of jealousy in her voice?

“Definitely,” said Matthew. “Nothing beats this beautiful sky, especially with the most beautiful woman in the world sharing it with me.”

It never hurt to flatter a robot.

“Aw,” she said, “that’s sweet of you to say.”

They reached out their hands to each other across the café table. Hers was soft and warm, not at all like a machine.

“This whole thing is a mystery within a mystery,” he said. “This place looks like Earth, but it isn’t. Meeting ourselves on the beach just confirmed it. This isn’t my planet. For that matter, it can’t be any other planet in the universe. My only possible conclusion, from the available evidence, is that none of this is real—not our house, the beach, the sky, my work or anything else. It’s all some kind elaborate projection, an induced hallucination. Even you, my dear, cannot possibly be real. You’re too perfect. You’re just a figment of my imagination.”

He drew her hand to his mouth and kissed it. Then he looked over at her and made a frowny face.

“I’m sorry about this, dear Cat, but you’re just not real.”

She smiled at him warmly.

“I don’t mind not being real,” she said, “as long as you still love me.”

21. Among the Stars

After the sun went down in Paradise, there wasn't much to do. Sleep accounted for only a portion of the night—about 7 hours he assumed—while night in the tropics lasted roughly as long as the day with very little twilight on the edges. That left about five dark hours of waking darkness with nothing to do. There was no TV, nothing to read and not enough light to roam the beach. He couldn't even go to work because the door into the cliff was locked after noon and before dawn. He and Cat could have sex in the darkness, but that didn't take long no matter how he tried to spice it up or stretch it out. For most of those evening and early morning hours, his only entertainment was the stars and whatever conversations he could initiate with his mostly passive companion.

Tonight, after the planetarium experiment, the stars took on a special significance. They were *his* stars, not some computer-generated pattern. He knew them by appearance if not name. He had taught Cat the few constellation names he knew, and he made up names for the others. He could mention “the squiggly snake” to Cat and she knew the pattern of stars he was referring.

There was no moon yet, so the stars showed especially brightly.

The Milky Way was a wide band of light across the sky, almost bright enough to cast a shadow on the ground. He knew he was looking at the disk of his own galaxy seen on edge. Or at least that's what his captors wanted him to see. Was he still in the Milky Way galaxy or in some other one? Did galaxies have any meaning at all?

"Who am I?" he said aloud.

"Matthew Dale Gibbons," said Cat.

"What am I?"

"A man, but you wanted me to call you Matthew."

"No, I mean what did I do for a living before I came here? What was my job? My profession. I must have told you."

"You were a scientist."

It made sense. He could see himself working on a big campus of stately academic buildings, talking to other scientists about scientific things, but he couldn't recall any specifics.

"What kind of scientist? An astronomer? A chemist?"

He knew "astronomer" wasn't right or he would have known his constellations.

"You were a scientist who studied people."

"What did I study about people? Their bodies? Their society?"

"You studied how people think."

"So I was a psychologist?"

"No, that's not the word you used. You were a neuroscientist."

The moment she said it, he knew she was right. A wave of conflicting emotions flooded over him but still no specific memories. He was a neuroscientist; he knew it now, and at once he felt both joy and

dread at the idea. This could be the key to everything.

He could have kept interrogating Cat about his past life, but frankly he was scared. He wasn't ready. There was something big here, and he needed time to assimilate it. Perhaps there was something protective in his memory loss. It felt like if he retrieved too much too fast he would explode. Without any facts, just feelings, he sensed he was dancing on the edge of a cliff, getting just a little too close to something dangerous.

Cat would have answered any questions he asked, but he stopped asking for now. It was time to change the subject.

"Do you see the North Star?" he said.

"Yes, over there" she replied, pointing to it low above the horizon on the right. "It looks like all the stars rotate around it, but really the Earth turns while the stars don't move much at all."

"Right. Now I want you to watch the North Star and see if anything changes."

"Okay."

He watched the North Star himself. Then, without saying anything aloud, he asked the star to turn itself off.

And it did.

"The North Star went away," said Cat calmly.

"Voilà!" said Matthew.

"Did you do that?"

"Yes," he said. "I just asked it to go away, and it did. Aren't you proud of me?"

"Of course," she said. "You extinguished a giant ball of burning hydrogen and probably killed billions. You must be very powerful."

“I am,” said Matthew. “Now let’s go to bed.”

22. Personal Hygiene

“Ewww! You stink! Go... take... a bath!”

You teach your children, devote your life to them, then they turn on you, spitting back exactly what you taught them.

“Aw,” he complained. “I took a bath last week.”

“You need another one,” she said, and she was never wrong. Whatever rule he programmed her with, she would enforce it.

It was just before dawn of yet another perfect day. He woke up before she did to check the sky. The North Star was still missing. He seemed he had wiped it out definitively. It was a little like the Wright Brothers first flight: a small event that proved a big concept. Turning off the star showed he had some psychic control over his environment.

In the predawn hours while she was still asleep, he tried the same trick on a few more bright stars and it worked! He could turn off a star as easily as flipping off a light switch. The way he did it was hard to explain even to himself. He just looked at a star, fixed it in his mind, asked it to turn off, and it did. He didn't know how to turn stars back on, and with billions of them up there he couldn't make much of a dent in sky, but the phenomenon itself was fascinating. Was he turning off whole suns or just bits in a computer program? He wondered if the extinguished stars

would still be missing the next night, or whether they would regenerate like the towels and soap in the bathroom.

Even gods have to rest, however—and bathe, which Cat was now requesting him to do.

As the sun was coming up behind the cliffs, he grabbed a towel and cake of green soap from the bathroom, set them down on the beach and walked naked into the surf.

It was refreshing water, especially given that it wasn't real. It was the temperature of a warm bath water and as easy to step into, but he felt the pressure and warmth everywhere on his body. It was just like water should feel. He had to hold his breath when he dove underwater or he would be coughing up water. Snorting water up his nose felt painfully real, and the water tasted appropriately salty. How could any computer program reproduce all of these sensations?

If these world wasn't generated virtually, then what was it? Did they reproduce a whole planet for his benefit, or was it an enclosure of limited size? Perhaps this was just a bigger version of the domed planetarium he had visited yesterday. In that case, there would have to be an edge, a place where he could walk up and touch the sky. Maybe that point was where Cat and he met their doppelgangers. Perhaps there was some sort of trick there, an illusion to hide the fact they had hit the wall of their enclosure and were heading back. This boundary was more humane than an electric fence or bars on the windows, but the effects were similar. His cage was finite in size. There was only so much beach he could explore before it repeated itself.

As he was lathering up close to shore, there was a flash of light.

Apart from the planetarium, this was the first one he had experienced in a while, perhaps several weeks. He looked up, trying to determine its location, but there was only one flash. He waited, but didn't happen again. Another glitch in the machine? He wished he had paid more attention to previous flashes. Perhaps he should start recording their occurrence in his Calendar of Shit. They might show a pattern if mapped over time.

Cat had breakfast waiting for him when he got back to the house. He got dressed first, because he was too proud and dignified to eat naked, then he sat down for "Another fine breakfast, Cat"—meaning grey, watery gruel served in a bowl and glass. You would think with all the effort that put into reproducing a beach on Earth, they could at least give him some decent food. He tried to remember what real food tasted like, but even that was fading. He knew only that it had many different flavors apart from the blandness of porridge and the salt of the sea.

For some reason, M&Ms popped into his mind. Chocolate on the inside, hard candy coating on the outside. "Melts in your mouth, not in your hand." The outside came in several colors—yellow, green, blue, orange, red and brown as he recalled—and they all had "M" printed in white on the outside. He had no specific memories of eating M&Ms but he could sure use one right now.

Just one M&M would be enough. He would cherish it and make love to it and let it dissolve in his mouth without it ever touching his teeth.

A whole bag was too much. Just one was all he asked for.

23. Assignment

“Room 317,” said the psychiatrist, handing him a prescription slip.

That was it, the whole interview. Whether or not he had “therapy” was totally at their discretion, and today they weren’t going for it, even though he had plenty to talk about.

“Until next time. Goodbye,” said the Doc.

24. The Torture Chamber

They heard his thoughts. They read his mind. They knew his weakness and were now using it against him.

Room 317 contained only a single object: a gumball machine on a stand in the middle of the room. Yes, a traditional mechanical gumball machine where you insert a coin, turn the handle and get a gumball. No electronics involved, just mechanics.

The door clicked shut behind him as he went over to examine it.

The merchandise for sale was displayed in a sturdy glass globe, but it wasn't gumballs. Inside were objects more sinister and menacing.

M&M candies!

There were thousands of them, taunting him from inside the glass. Red, green, yellow, blue, orange, brown.

The torture of it was there was no way to get to them. The machine appeared to take nickels, and he didn't have any. The stand was made of solid metal and was firmly attached to the floor, so he couldn't knock it over. The glass around the candy was thick and there was no way he could break it with his fist or bare feet. He tried twisting the handle without a coin, but it wouldn't budge past a certain point. He forced it as hard as he could and still no luck.

“Why do you torment me!” he cried out loud, collapsing on the floor in theatrical despair.

They didn’t usually read his mind and tailor the experiment accordingly. It was almost as though he had done something wrong and they were punishing him, but he had done nothing wrong lately, at least as far as he knew. He had been exploring the beach with Cat but hadn’t tried to run away. There was a difference. They could detect dishonesty, and that was what they seemed to punish him for, not for any specific act.

He looked at the gumball machine from every angle, examined every detail, twisted the handle in every possible way. He opened the little metal door where the gumball comes out, looked inside, probed up there with his fingers. No luck. The M&Ms rattled when he smacked the machine with his hand, but they stayed firmly within their enclosure making stupid “M” faces at him.

He sat down in the corner of the room, staring at the machine, dejected but not defeated.

So what was the test? Every Room 317 had one. There was something he was supposed to do, something he had to learn before the door would open and he would be allowed to leave. Now he was stuck in a locked room with a torture device and no way to escape it.

Perhaps he could use his mind! If his own psychic power could turn off stars—great balls of hydrogen thousands of miles across—couldn’t it also coerce a gumball machine into giving out M&Ms without paying? It was worth trying.

He got up and stood in front of the gumball machine. He focused

on the M&Ms, wishing them to be his, then he shifted his focus to the handle and asked it to turn.

Then he reached out, turned the handle... and it worked! The handle turned all the way around, and he heard a single M&M slide down the chute and hit the metal door.

Cautiously, he opened the metal door, and there it was: a red one, “M” side up, wanting to be his.

He took it reverentially from the chute, his hand shaking just a little. He placed it in his other palm and examined it visually. Was it a real M&M or a cruel reproduction? Would it taste like an M&M as he remembered them or bland like porridge? Did it contain chocolate or some kind of medicine or poison? Heck, it didn’t matter, since they could medicate or poison him anytime they wanted through Cat’s cooking.

“Just eat the thing!” he told himself.

He placed it on his tongue, closed his mouth and let his saliva wash over it. A sensation flowed over his tongue. Sweet! This M&M was beginning to taste distinctly M&M-y. It could be the real thing!

He resisted the temptation to bite. Instead he let the candy coating dissolve of its accord until the chocolate starting breaking through. He never remembered the flavor being so strong, but after 18 months on a bland diet, he wasn’t surprised. He wondered if his system was even ready for this single M&M. After eating only porridge for so long, how would his stomach react? Would the chocolate give him diarrhea? That could disrupt his scatological calendar and throw off the alignment of the heavens.

The M&M seemed to be authentic. It tasted good but didn’t bring

quite the euphoria he expected. It was something of a melancholy experience to renew this relationship with real food not knowing if he would ever get to taste it again. Soon the M&M was completely dissolved. He swallowed, and the flavor began to fade.

In his fantasy after breakfast, he wish for only a single M&M. Just one, not a whole bag. Since they were reading his mind and gave him what he asked for, he assumed the experiment was over. He could try his psychic trick with the machine again, hoping for a second candy, but that would be dishonest. He wanted to show them he was a man of his word, even if his word had never actually been spoken.

He went to the door, expecting to be let out, but it was still firmly locked.

Huh?

He had resisted temptation, hadn't he? He had used his awesome psychic power to manipulate reality, but only within the bounds he had previously declared. He wasn't greedy. He was virtuous. He didn't want all the M&Ms, just one.

But the door was still locked, and the gumball machine was still standing there in the middle of the room—either tempting or taunting him.

Whatever the lesson was, he hadn't learned it yet.

25. The Terror Continues

He circled the M&M dispenser, wondering what to do. Did he want another one? Sure, but he didn't want to seem greedy. At first, two M&Ms seemed like too much to ask, more than he deserved, but the more he thought about it, the more he figured he deserved the whole jar for his unjust imprisonment.

He decided to try the psychic trick again. He would just be requisitioning an M&M. It didn't mean he had to eat it.

He stood before the gumball machine, called the M&Ms to worship him and commanded that the handle should turn.

It didn't. It only turned as far as you would expect without a coin.

He willed and willed again, but nothing happened. The handle wouldn't turn and no M&Ms came down the chute.

What sort of game is this? His captors wouldn't let him leave the room, but they weren't giving him anything to do.

Then he idly tried turning the handle, with no psychic force applied, and it worked! The handle turned, and another M&M tumbled against the metal flap. It was a blue one this time. He carefully removed it and pondered its fate.

No, it would not join its brother in his stomach. That would be

dishonest. It might even start him down the road to M&M addiction. Instead, he took it to the corner of the room where he placed it gently on the floor. It would be safe there.

M&Ms themselves weren't the issue anymore. The real challenge was defeating this damn machine!

Psychic manipulation was difficult! Sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't. Was there such a thing as trying too hard? Was there a sweet spot where you exerted just enough psychic pressure but not so much that you overloaded the system?

He tried his psychic powers again, as subtly as he could, just *asking* the handle to turn. It didn't. Then he tried deliberately *not* thinking about the handle. He imagined the beach in his mind and focused on that, trying to block all thought of the machine or its contents. That didn't work either.

He even tried a rain dance, chanting in gibberish while dancing like a banshee around the gumball machine.

That worked! The handle turned and another red one tumbled down.

Argggh! This was frustrating. First, psychic power works, then it doesn't, then a nonsense incantation works.

He tried everything: Yodeling at the top of his lungs. (Didn't work.) Sitting on the gumball machine. (Worked!) Cursing the gumball machine with every expletive he knew. (Didn't work.) Speaking in soft and gentle tones to the M&Ms. (Worked.)

He had accumulated a stockpile of about 30 precious M&Ms before he began to realize the pattern.

There wasn't any.

M&Ms were released randomly, regardless of what he did. Psychic power had nothing to do with it.

In the end, the strategy he settled on was to sit on the floor, count out about 70 of his own breaths, then reach up and turned the handle. It usually worked. If he counted fewer than 70 breaths, he had less chance of getting one and would have wasted his effort. If he waited longer than 70 breaths, he would almost certainly get an M&M, but the handle would turn only once. He wouldn't get two M&Ms for waiting 140 breaths, so he maximized his yield by turning the handle earlier.

If he had been allowed to walk out the door after the first trial, he would have thought himself psychic, but now he saw it was just random coincidence that got him that first red M&M, not anything he did with his mind. He was a fool back then, a callow youth. Now he was much older and wiser.

Having mastered the system, he now turned the handle every 70 breaths without even opening the metal flap to retrieve the prize. He knew the M&Ms would accumulate there, so why waste the energy? When a number of unclaimed candies accumulated behind the flap, the door of the room opened on its own. Evidently, he had learned the lesson of the day.

He gathered up his M&Ms from the floor and from the chute of the machine. They were the most precious lucre in the universe, and there was no way he was leaving without them. Altogether he had 52, the equivalent of a small retail bag—53 if you counted the single one now residing in his stomach. He stuck the uneaten ones in the pocket of his

cargo shorts.

“So long, my friend,” he said to the lonely gumball machine. It was still full of M&Ms that he knew he would probably never see again. He felt sad for their fate. Wherever they were heading in the next life, it probably wouldn’t be his mouth.

As he made his way down the corridor to the beach, he dwelled on the apparent moral of the story: “Don’t overestimate your own psychic powers.”

Or the more concise version: “You’re an idiot, Matt.”

26. Feeding the Robot

“I brought you a gift,” said Matthew.

“That’s so thoughtful of you,” said Cat. “What are they?”

He held out a handful of M&Ms.

“The most precious objects in the universe,” he said. “And I want you to have them.”

“That’s so sweet. You are very kind to me. What do I do with them?”

“You eat them. They’re candy.”

This was a bold experiment. In their whole 18 months together, he had never seen Cat eat. Or drink. Or poop. Or pee. She was the perfect lady that way. She never even farted. She declined to drink porridge when he offered her some of his. She said she didn’t need it but could provide no explanation for where her sustenance came from. He assumed she would also decline the M&Ms, but it was an interesting experiment anyway.

She looked at them quizzically. “They are very strange,” she said. “Do they come from the beach?”

“No, I got them at work. I worked hard all day to get these for you. It would be impolite to refuse them.”

“How do I eat them?”

“It isn’t hard. You just put one of them in your mouth, and the juices in your mouth will dissolve it, then you swallow the juices.”

He knew she had juices. He had tasted them.

“I don’t know,” she said. “That seems like a funny thing to do.”

“Wait, I got it wrong. You can’t just eat them. There’s something you have to do first.”

He dumped his fistful of M&Ms on the café table, then he fished the rest out of his pocket and put them there too. All 52 M&Ms were now accounted for.

“First you have to sort them,” he said. “You have to group them by color.”

“Why?”

“Just because. Trust me on this.”

He showed her how to do it: group the reds with the reds, the blues with the blues, etc. She figured it out, and they sorted them together. He was careful not to move too fast so that she did as much of the work as he did. When they were done, they had six little groups of M&Ms on the table segregated by color.

“Now what do we do?” she said.

“You pick up one of them and eat it.”

“Which one?”

“A green one,” he said, trying to sound official and authoritative.

“The one closest to you.”

She picked it up.

“Aren’t you going to eat one?” she said.

“I had one at work. A red one. That means it’s your turn. Remember these are the most precious objects in the universe, so we have to savor each one.”

To his surprise, she raised the M&M almost to her lips.

Then she stopped.

“Why should I eat this?” she said.

“Because it tastes good. It gives your mouth an interesting sensation. It’s sort of like when we have sex and you say it feels good. This is the same idea, except it happens in your mouth.”

“Oh,” she said, thinking about it. “Then shouldn’t I kiss you first?”

“I suppose. Sure! I think that would be a very good idea, especially considering how valuable they are.”

She carefully set the green M&M down on the table again. Then she reached her hand around his neck and drew him to her. They kissed passionately for several seconds.

Who knew M&M eating could be so romantic!

“That’s very nice,” he said softly, feeling all worked up down below. “Now you can eat your candy.”

She picked up the green M&M again, opened her mouth and placed it on her tongue.

“That’s very good,” he said. “Now close your mouth and cover the candy with saliva.”

He was watching her eyes for a reaction, but what happened next was totally unexpected.

He started to feel sweetness in his own mouth!

She was eating the candy, but he was tasting it. It was hours since

he had his own red M&M, but now the sensation was repeating itself even though there was nothing physically in his mouth.

He continued to watch her eyes. They widened. She was tasting it, too!

“Don’t speak,” he said. “Just nod your head for yes or shake your head for no. Are you tasting something?”

She nodded her head, yes.

“Is it a good sensation? Do you like it?”

She nodded again.

“Do you want to stop? You can spit it out if you want.”

She shook her head, no.

“Are you glad I gave the candy to you?”

She nodded.

“Do you love me?”

She nodded.

“Are you me?”

She seemed confused by that. She didn’t nod, and she didn’t shake her head.

She appeared to be preoccupied with the sensations in her mouth, which he was experiencing simultaneously two feet away. He knew from his own tongue that the candy coating was completely gone and she was working on the chocolate inside. That taste was spreading through his own mouth just as vividly as it did earlier in the day. He swallowed—nothing but his own saliva—and Cat did the same, sending most of the liquefied chocolate down her throat. Soon, the chocolate taste started to fade in his own mouth.

She licked her lips.

“That felt really good,” she said. “May I have another?”

27. Star Work

When the sun went down and the stars came out, Matthew had plenty of work to do. The first order of business was to check his work from the previous night. He looked for the North Star, and it was still missing. Fantastic! He checked for the other bright stars he had extinguished in the morning, and they were absent as well. Even though the missing stars were insignificant in the vastness of the heavens, concepts had been proven, progress had been made.

Meanwhile, Cat had become a whore for M&Ms. She couldn't stop eating them! That was okay, because she was doing it very slowly, letting each one dissolve sensuously in her mouth, and he was sharing her pleasure, even as he concentrated on the stars.

He selected a portion of the sky in the east, just above the cliffs. He chose it because he assumed it would stay in the sky the longest, given the daily rotation of stars. Having defined his canvas, he began snuffing out stars one by one. It was slow, painstaking work, but after a while there was one tiny smudge of black sky. He hadn't snuffed out every star in that area—That would be impossible.—but he erased the biggest ones that he could easily get a fix on. The result was a noticeable hole in the sky that any human would see if they looked in that direction.

Then he rested for a few minutes. Playing God was tiring, but he was getting better at turning off stars and the work was going faster.

Cat was just finishing off the last of the M&Ms. Frankly, he was feeling a little queasy. A whole bag of M&Ms was a bit too much for your stomach to take when you haven't had solid food in a year and half, but Cat didn't seem to suffer any ill effects. She seemed to experience only the pleasures of their taste while he dealt with the consequences of their digestion.

"Aren't you going to offer that one to me?" he said, indicating the last forlorn candy, a blue one that she was just about to pop into her mouth.

"No," she said. "It's mine."

Wow! That girl had developed an attitude. He wondered if he could still control her now that she had become a raging M&M freak.

"Look at what I'm doing," he said, pointing to the tiny black patch he had just made in the sky.

But she couldn't speak, being occupied with the pleasures of that last M&M. She nodded her head, yes, then shook it, no. Clearly, she wasn't paying attention.

He turned his attention back to his work. Poking out stars was the only control he had over this world, so he was determined to use it for something. He didn't exactly know what yet, but he wanted to make his mark, prove that he existed. He would become a graffiti artist in the sky.

His previous attempts at graffiti had been suppressed. With shards of glass, he had tried to write things on the surface of his dresser, but when he awoke the next morning, that graffiti had been erased and the

shards taken away. Now he intended to try the same experiment again on a bigger canvas.

“When you go to work tomorrow, can you bring me more of those candies?” said Cat.

“I doubt I can do that, Sweetie. I think that’s all there is.”

“I would love you even more if you brought me some,” she said plaintively.

He laughed. “I don’t think it is possible for you to love me any more than you already do.”

“I could try.”

He looked at her with an exaggerated frown. “I’m so sorry, dear, but those were the only M&Ms in the whole universe, and you just ate them. We might never experience that bliss together ever again.”

“Oh,” she said, with a sad face of her own. “That actually felt better than sex.”

“Thanks,” he said. “You know how to make a man feel special.”

She didn’t catch his irony.

“Matthew was very nice to bring me those candies,” she said.

“Do you want to see what Matthew is doing?” he said.

He pointed to the sky above the cliff, where he had managed to draw an obvious vertical black line by psychically removing stars. It was like someone had drawn across the bright sky with a black magic marker.

“That’s very nice, Matthew,” she said. “Why?”

“Sometimes you don’t know why. Sometimes you just do things because you need to express yourself.”

“Oh,” she said. “Can I watch?”

“Sure. You can even help if you want.”

Maybe she could psychically remove stars just like he could. The only way to know was to have her try. He pointed out a star to her at the top end of his black line.

“I want you to concentrate on that star and try to make it turn off.”

She tried, and the star blinked off. No problem. No fuss. He was sure that she did it, not him, because he understood the process now and he knew that he hadn't flipped the switch.

Now that he knew she could do it, he told her his plan and they set to work.

With both of them turning off stars, things went much faster, especially since she quickly became better at it than he. She was a chainsaw of the stars, ripping through them at a relatively rapid rate. He directed her to draw a diagonal line while he worked on another vertical one. She was already done with hers while he was only halfway through his.

Pretty soon they had a distinct “M” drawn in the heavens. It was a little crude but clearly readable by anyone who looked up in the sky in that direction.

“M” for “Matthew.”

It wasn't very creative, but it was all he could think of. He intended to write his full name in the heavens. It was the first baby step for any graffiti artist.

They kept working, but it was getting late. Their canvas was moving higher and higher in the sky. Psychic work was surprisingly tiring, and he was ready for bed.

They quit when they had accomplished the minimum task: “MATT” was now etched clearly in the sky. It was enough work for one night, especially for gods who were still new to the business.

They sat back and admired their work.

“It’s beautiful,” said Cat.

“Yes,” said Matt. “It is.”

28. The Storm

That night there was a terrible storm. Weather like this didn't happen often, but when it did, it came up quickly and could be ferocious. Without much warning, the winds picked up, whipping the sea into big thundering waves. Clouds moved in and obscured his precious "MATT". There was only a smattering of rain but plenty of thunder and lightning.

They were forced to close their bedroom door to keep out the wind and ocean spray. They never did this otherwise. Without any windows, they now slept on total darkness. Only the lightning penetrated their fortress.

The lightning wasn't just coming from edges of the door. Even in their cave in the cliff, it seemed to be all around them. The flashes even penetrated his eyelids as he tried to sleep.

"This is annoying," he thought to himself, "and it probably isn't lightning."

29. Reply

Sometime before morning, the storm abated as quickly as it came. The winds died down, and the sea returned to its regular steady rhythm.

Matthew roused himself just before dawn. He wanted to catch a last glimpse of his “MATT” logo before it dropped below the horizon. The first question was whether it would be there at all. Would his captors let the graffiti stay or would they erase it like they did with the dresser?

He opened the door to find, to his satisfaction, that “MATT” was still up there in the stars, although it was very faint in the sky’s predawn glow. It was upside down now, just above the western horizon, having made the full transit of the sky.

But there was something else in the sky—more graffiti he didn’t write. He stood in stunned silence as his mind struggled to decipher the new markings.

Just above his own upside down “MATT” was a reply etched in the same rapidly fading field of stars. They were new words also written upside down:

“HELLO MATT!”

30. An Inventory

He woke Cat to show her the new marks in the sky, but the time they got back to the patio, the reply was already washed out by the morning light. He could only show her the area on the western horizon where the words once were. He asked her if she had put the marks up there, and she assured him she hadn't. Anyway, she was illiterate as far as he could tell, with no opportunity to read or write in their text-free environment. She was able to help with last night's skywriting only because he had told her what straight lines to draw.

It seemed that someone was trying to communicate with him, but who? Could it be his captors? If so, this would be the first time they had ever contacted him directly. Or could it be someone else, someone in the stars?

"HELLO MATT!" the graffiti said. It was crudely drawn but just as legible as his own "MATT".

They knew his name, but maybe that was only because he had just written it up there. They added nothing but the "HELLO" and an exclamation point. Maybe this was just another computer program spitting his own responses back at him, like the psychiatrist did.

There were no stars left in the sky so he had no way of responding

until nightfall. For now, the message in the sky was just one more bullet point to add to the Inventory of the Impossible he was assembling in his head. Although on the surface this appeared to be Planet Earth, there were several definitively unearthly things about it, things that seemed to defy the laws of physics. His latest list:

- 1) He could turn off whole stars with his mind.
- 2) The stars wrote back.
- 3) Down the beach, he met a perfect duplicate of himself.
- 4) Farther down the beach, he found a perfect duplicate of his own home, which he was now living in.
- 5) He was living with a beautiful woman who never ate—except for those 52 M&M last night.
- 6) When the woman did eat those 52 M&Ms, he tasted them in his own mouth.

In addition to his Inventory of the Impossible, he had a longer and less clearly define list: the Inventory of Weirdness. This mental list included phenomena that were unlikely on Earth but that he couldn't say was physically impossible.

Everything he experienced at “work” inside the cliffs was weird. That is, it would be unusual but not physically impossible on Earth. You could pull it all off if you had a huge budget and a staff of hundreds working behind the scenes to set up the experiments for him. He envisioned a huge movie production with a multi-million dollar budget all focused on testing him. It wasn't physically impossible. The main

mystery was why any human organization would bother. Was he that important?

His Inventory of Weirdness was extensive because nearly everything about this place was weird apart from their immediate physical environment. The house, beach, cliffs and sea could exist somewhere on Earth. The weird part was not finding any way off the beach, which would seem highly unlikely if there was a dwelling there.

The weird stuff was merely creepy, but the impossible stuff told him, “This can’t be real.”

But if this place wasn’t real, why were there any rules at all? The sun and moon rose and set on a predictable schedule consistent with Earth. Rocks and other objects seemed solid and obeyed all the rules you would expect of them. When he stubbed his toe, it hurt, and the wound took a predictable number of days to heal. All of this was not beyond the theoretical realm of a computer program pumping sensations into his brain, but some person or force must have set up the program.

Creating and maintaining illusions requires energy, intelligence and planning. Every computer game requires a programmer. Even with the technology of some advanced race, you still needed someone to design the game, activate it and place him in the middle of it. You needed a master designer to put it all together.

Could that be the entity who wrote the message in the sky?

31. The Download

“Where do I work?” said Matthew.

“You work in the cliffs,” said Cat.

After breakfast, Matthew was ready for the truth. He wanted to know everything she did about who he once was.

“No, I mean where did I work before I came here? I must have told you. You said I was a neuroscientist. Where did I do that?”

“In the basement.”

“In the basement of what?”

“The basement of Ames Hall. That’s where your office was.”

“Okay. And where is Ames Hall?”

“Johns Hopkins University.”

“Wow!” said Matthew, as a flood of memories came back to him. They were general memories of the university, not personal ones about his life there. He pictured a well-manicured campus filled with red brick buildings. He saw students coming and going on the quad. He could envision the outside of Ames Hall, a three story academic building with two protruding wings on either side, but he couldn’t picture anything inside.

“Is that in Oakland?” he asked.

“No, Baltimore,” she replied.

His mind was racing, overwhelmed with emotions he couldn't quite pin down. Something in his head wasn't working. It felt like there were many important memories inside him, just out of reach, but he couldn't get to them. The pathways were still blocked.

“How did I get from Johns Hopkins University to here?”

“You were playing with fire and got burned.”

“What kind of fire?”

“A machine named Fire. It burned a hole in your head.”

He reached up and felt his own head. There wasn't any hole in it, at least not on the outside, but there was a hole somewhere. There had to be. Certain parts of his brain weren't functioning.

“Why was I playing with Fire?”

“You wanted to change your mind.”

“Why did I want to do that?”

“Because you were curious.”

That made sense. He was a scientist, and scientists are curious. But what did she mean by “change his mind”?

Then a word popped into his head: “consciousness.”

He remembered now. That was his field: Consciousness Studies. His job was to define consciousness, analyze it and track down the structures and pathways in the brain that brought it about.

He had been asking the same questions since he was a child: “How did I get stuck inside this body? How can I be aware of my own thoughts and actions? Where does consciousness come from? What is it made of?” At Johns Hopkins University, he had a new lead and was pursuing it, but

he played with Fire and got burned.

Even with most of his memories missing and his brain not fully functional, it began to make sense.

He understood, then, why he had to get out of there.

32. Appointment Cancelled

Tonight, he would be communicating with the stars, but right now he had to go to work. Technically, he didn't "have" to go. No one was forcing him, but he wanted to see the psychiatrist. At last, he knew the right questions to ask. He now felt he could control their therapy sessions to get the information he wanted. He wouldn't be a victim anymore.

He kissed his Cat goodbye, because that's what he always did, then he started up the 64 steps to work, like he had done hundreds of times before.

That's when his world began to fall apart.

At about 32 steps, the stairway ended. It just stopped in midair! If he hadn't been paying attention, he would have walked right off the edge and into oblivion. He pulled back in sudden panic, away from the precipice.

"Holy shit!"

The upper half of the stone stairway was completely gone. So was all the terrain around it. It was replaced by a giant gaping hole, perhaps 30 feet across. It was like a huge sinkhole—an empty circular shaft that descended straight down into darkness. It was as if someone had taken a

giant drinking straw and jabbed it into the base of the cliff. When the straw was removed it left this gaping hole. The walls were cored out of solid rock and were even more vertical than the cliff behind the hole. No bottom was visible, and the shaft seemed to go down even deeper than the level of the ocean.

There was a breeze rushing past him as air was sucked into the abyss. If hadn't caught himself, he would have been heading down there too.

He picked up a rock and tossed it down the hole. He was expecting to hear a splash, since there had to be water down there given the proximity of the ocean. Instead, the rock just went "Clink! Clink! Clink!" as it struck the sides of the tube as it fell. The clinks just faded away. There was no sound of hitting the bottom.

He tried an even bigger rock, the biggest one he could lift, and got the same results: just louder clinks that took a little longer to fade. The sinkhole seemed truly endless.

There would be no work today because the entrance was completely gone, swallowed up by the sinkhole. There was no evidence of any horizontal tunnel or corridor on the side of the shaft where the entrance had been, just solid rock. It was as if it never existed.

But of course none of this existed. It was all an illusion. No such hole could happen on Earth. Just a few feet from the ocean, it would collapse or be flooded immediately. All the same, he would rather not test the unreality of the illusion by falling down the hole. He wasn't ready for that kind of leap of faith.

He stumbled back down the stairs to the house.

“How was your day at work, dear?” said Cat. Having no real sense of time, she couldn’t tell he had only been gone minutes, not hours.

“I didn’t go to work,” he said.

“Oh,” she said, “why not?”

“I think I have just been fired.”

33. Unemployment

Add this to the Inventory of the Impossible:

7) Giant bottomless sinkhole in the backyard.

That kind of earth movement doesn't happen a few feet from where you are sleeping without a whole lot of noise and vibration. True, there was storm last night, but it was nothing like the focused kinetic energy required to core out this huge shaft on a real planet. No one could have slept next to a blasting zone like that.

Then again, anything could happen while you are asleep. Sleep was a fascinating mystery to a consciousness researcher, but it was even more inexplicable since he arrived here. In this world, he slept but did not dream. Or at least he had no memory of any dreams. He had a sense of busy things happening in his head as he slept, but he had no specific recollection of them when he awoke. It must have been part of the damage.

Damage.

Why did he think of that word?

He remembered what Cat had said: "A machine named Fire. It

burned a hole in your head.”

She was just repeating what he told her back before he lost his memory. Since she had no understanding of his previous world, he would have explained things to her in the simplest terms. “Burned a hole in your head” could mean something much more complicated, but “burned” implied some serious, irreparable damage.

Brain damage.

He ought to be an expert on this sort of thing, being a neuroscientist and consciousness researcher. His amnesia seemed to obscure his whole life history, blacking out all specific memories of people, locations and past events before he came here, but he did retain a body of general knowledge.

He remembered language and how to use it—the language he would have learned before adolescence—but he remembered very few of the big words scientists use, which he would have learned after adolescence. Maybe after adolescence, there was a change in how memories were stored, so they went into a brain region that was now damaged.

He remembered countless facts and mechanisms of his home planet but couldn’t relate this knowledge to any specific personal events, even before adolescence. For example, he remembered climbing trees in his youth. He knew what a tree was and could picture the physical actions of climbing one, but he couldn’t remember any specific tree. Perhaps certain kinds of knowledge were stored in different parts of his brain. Some parts were broken while other parts worked just fine, and his memories must have reflected that damage.

Thankfully, his logical reasoning was still intact, and the general knowledge he did possess was better than nothing. Even with a dysfunctional memory, he could still analyze his predicament and perhaps come up with a useful course of action. Deprived of some of his intellectual tools, he would have to work with the ones still available in his toolbox. To get himself out of his current predicament, he would have to work around the holes and rebuild his intellectual database.

Consciousness was his profession, so he would start with that. What did science know about consciousness? He had thought about this even before adolescence, so it ought to be accessible.

He drew a blank for a moment, but not because of amnesia.

Correct answer: Almost nothing.

Science could certainly correlate conscious events with neurological activity, almost to the point where you could read a person's mind by watching their brain activity, but correlation was not causation, and you couldn't prove that neural activity "created" consciousness. Science could explain the machine—how the gears turned—but it wasn't even close to explaining how one person got stuck inside the machine, aware of their own gears as they turned.

Consciousness was fundamentally not of this universe. Nothing in physics or biology could begin to explain it. You couldn't even say that consciousness had a location. If you asked people where their self-awareness lies, they would point to their head, but that was only because that's where their eyes and ears were mounted. For all you knew, your brain could be a remote transmitter, with consciousness actually existing

in some other galaxy light years away or in an entirely different dimension.

You couldn't even prove that your body or its life on Earth was real. The only thing you could say was that the illusion was stable. Every morning, you woke up in the same body you went to sleep in and all the practical problems of the night before were still pressing on you. Whatever consciousness was, it seemed to be firmly tethered to the body you currently occupied. You couldn't jump bodies, and there was no release from your current bodily host without some traumatic event like death.

Now it seemed that Matthew truly was in another galaxy or dimension. Was he, in fact, dead? Was this place indeed Limbo in the traditional religious sense, a place you go after you die? If so, it was something of a disappointment. He wasn't meeting his Maker, nor was he roasting in eternal damnation. This place seemed more like a holding pen where he was stored in relative comfort while St. Peter tested him and decided what to do with him.

He remembered a song from his youth and he sang a few bars out loud...

Saint Peter don't you call me 'cause I can't go.

I owe my soul to the company store.

“What's that?” said Cat.

They were lying in bed together in the middle of the day. He was thinking, and she was watching him think.

“Oh, it’s just a song I once knew.”

“What is it about?”

“It’s about a man who can’t get into Heaven because he owes too much money on Earth.”

“Why were you singing it?”

“It just matches my train of thought. I have a new theory about what this is all about.”

“Please tell me.”

“I think I have died.”

“Oh,” she said, “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“I know. Kind of a bummer. The thing is, I haven’t gone to Heaven or Hell but this in-between place where they decide what to do with you.”

“You mean your life here with me isn’t Heaven?”

“Of course it is,” he lied. “Life with you is everything I could want. It’s just that I don’t think this world is stable.”

“What do you mean?”

“I have lost my memory. There is a giant sinkhole in the backyard. I have been fired from my job. I sense that whatever this world is, it is collapsing in on me.”

“Oh, that sounds serious,” she said. “But if you have already died, how could things get any worse?”

“They can,” he replied. “Maybe I don’t get into Heaven. Maybe they send me to the other place.”

“Oh,” she said, thinking about it. She seemed worried about something.

“Matthew?” she said.

“Yes, dear.”

“Wherever you go, will you take me with you?”

“Of course,” he replied. “I promise I won’t leave you behind.”

And he meant it.

34. Communication

It seemed like forever waiting for the sun to go down, but at least it gave him time to plan and think about a protocol for skywriting. The previous night he and Cat had poked out hundreds of stars to etch their crude “MATT” in the sky. There had to be a faster way. Then there was the bigger question of what to say in the stars. Assuming a real person wrote “HELLO MATT!” and was waiting for his response, what should he write next?

Unfortunately, it was a rare cloudy day in Paradise. As the sun headed for its daily resting place, there were angry clouds obscuring at least half the sky. Matthew worried they would block his nighttime canvas. Clouds usually meant a spectacular sunset, but he wasn't interested in that. He had seen over five hundred glorious sunsets from this patio and had no need for more.

When the first stars emerged, he was ready. He didn't even wait for “MATT” to appear. If his graffiti from the previous night was still there, it wouldn't emerge from behind the cliffs for perhaps an hour, and it might be obscured by clouds anyway. In the meantime, he focused on the only cloud-free section of sky and set to work on some new skywriting.

One by one, he poked out stars using only his mind, but he worked

much faster now. He didn't try to draw dark, obvious lines in the stars; he only poked out the few essential stars to form letters, just enough so he knew the letters were there.

"TEST," he spelled out in the heavens—not a very creative message, but a logical first step.

He didn't need Cat's help this time. He could do the work himself faster than he could explain to her where to draw the lines. She sat beside him on the patio, looking up at his work.

"What are you writing?" she said.

"Just a test message. I would write 'HELLO WORLD' but that is too many characters. Hopefully, whoever is up there will respond."

And they did!

About two minutes after he finished the final "T", a message faded into view just below his...

The stars said: "TEST 1 2 3 MATT ARE YOU THERE?"

Contact! The connection was live!

These new letters were perfectly formed, unlike the crude ones from the previous night. They faded in all at once, not letter-by-letter. Their consistency suggested a computer was involved. He was essentially drawing on a computer screen, and someone in an unknown location was typing back.

Matthew composed his next message carefully. There were a million things he could say, but given the clouds moving in he didn't know how long this connection would last, so he focused on the single most important question he could possibly ask.

"WHERE AM I?" he wrote in the stars.

The sky wrote back promptly: "J H HOSPITAL YOU HAD AN ACCIDENT."

"FIRE?" wrote Matthew, taking a shot in the dark.

"YES ORGANIC DAMAGE."

"WHO ARE YOU?"

"STEVE K"

He didn't remember Steve specifically, but he knew what "K" stood for: Kalochristianakis. There weren't many who could spell it or pronounce it, but he could, which suggested he knew Steve in his previous life.

"HI STEVE," Matthew wrote.

Or at least he tried to write it. He had run out of sky. Clouds were completing their invasion, and the last of the stars were fading. If Steve replied, Matthew couldn't read it.

And that was the end of the conversation. There were no more stars to write in. Clouds now covered every patch of sky.

Another storm was coming.

35. Analysis

Matthew and Cat hunkered down in the bedroom with the door closed. It was the only way to keep out the ocean spray from the violent sea. Unfortunately, this meant they were cut off from the outside. The previous night's storm seemed to have masked the creation of the giant sinkhole out back, and this storm was no less fierce, so anything might happen by morning.

For a few minutes, Matthew tried to stand outside on the patio in the full gale, but it was pointless. With clouds covering the stars and no moon behind them, he couldn't see two feet in front of him. He only felt the wind and heard the wicked surf below. If he tried to make his way down the 64 steps to the beach, he could be swept away. The only light came from the occasional lightning, but unlike normal lightning, it didn't illuminate the terrain around him. The flash was only in his eyes. The only way he knew it was lightning was the thunder that followed a second or two later. The short delay suggested the lightning was close and the patio wasn't the wisest place to stand, so he retreated to the comfort of the bedroom and his Cat.

"Why do you suppose there is a storm right now?" he said, speaking to Cat in total darkness.

“I don’t know,” she replied.

“The weather is hardly ever bad here, but now we’ve had storms two nights in a row. I am just starting to communicate with an outside entity when clouds move in. Coincidence? Are these people just playing with me? Is it just another test?”

“You said they sometimes try to frustrate you just to see what you are made of.”

She was right. In virtually every test he experienced in Room 317, he was presented with a frustration—like a gumball machine full of M&Ms but no nickels to put in it. In every test, he had to come up with a strategy to deal with his own frustration. Only when he had mastered the situation and resolved his frustration was he allowed to leave the room.

Maybe he was in a sort of Room 317 right now. Maybe this was just another test. There was no sense in getting too excited about the messages in the heavens because his captors controlled this environment and could present him with any stimuli they wanted. Maybe “Steve K” was just something they dredged up from his memory to make him think he was communicating with the outside. Conveniently, the communication was cut off before he could ask any questions that might verify Steve’s identity.

This whole thing about writing in the stars could just be another test for the lab rat. After all, they trained him how to turn off stars in the planetarium. His captors seemed to have cut him off from his workplace, but that didn’t mean the experiments weren’t continuing. Maybe they just decided to move them out to the beach.

Nonetheless, he never found any benefit in trying to analyze his

captors' intent. Asking "What are these people trying to do?" never helped him solve the challenge placed in front of him. Instead, he had to look at each puzzle on its own merits. For example, to maximize his M&M yield, he had to observe the gumball machine and how it actually worked. He had to set aside his initial psychic or narcissistic assumptions. It may have been true that the contents of Room 317 were created for his benefit, but if he acted that way—as though he was the center of the universe—he would never get out of the room.

Even if the messages in the stars were yet another artificial test, his best approach was to take them at face value: Someone he knew from outside this place was trying to communicate with him. On that assumption, what did the messages say?

"WHERE AM I?" Matthew had written.

The stars had replied: "J H HOSPITAL YOU HAD AN ACCIDENT."

"J H" must have meant Johns Hopkins. "AN ACCIDENT" must have been the unexpected event that landed him here.

"A machine named Fire," Cat had said, recounting his own forgotten words. "It burned a hole in your head."

"ORGANIC DAMAGE," the stars had confirmed.

So something happened in his head that landed him at Johns Hopkins Hospital—probably some experiment gone awry. But he wasn't in a hospital; he was on a beach. How could he be in both places at the same time?

Duh!

He wasn't on a beach. He was in a hospital.

"Eureka!" said Matthew.

“What does that mean?” said Cat in the darkness.

“It means ‘I have found it!’ I have solved the mystery. The beach, the cliffs, the ocean, this house... Everything here is a self-generated hallucination. It’s a dream! I am really lying in a bed at the Johns Hopkins Hospital!”

“Oh,” she said. “Are you sure?”

“Sure, I’m sure! What else explains all the data? Everything around me seems solid and real, but that is only because the illusion is grounded in my own perceptions. I pick up a rock and it feels like a rock because my own mind is actively reconstructing what it thinks a rock should feel like. This is far simpler than computer generated virtual reality. It is self-generated virtual reality. That’s the reason I don’t dream at night. This whole place is a dream, just a very stable one. The larger reality is that my body is lying in a bed at the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore.”

“But aren’t you lying in bed here with me?” said Cat.

“The two are not mutually exclusive. They could be parallel realities existing simultaneously, but if I were to bet on one reality being more real than the other, I’d say the hospital reality is more sustainable. I suspect nothing there violates the laws of physics.”

“Oh,” said Cat.

“Oh?” said Matthew, sensitive to her subtle moods.

“Does that mean I am an illusion, too?”

He held her close in the darkness. She felt soft and warm, just like a woman should feel. He reached his lips to hers, found them and kissed them.

“Of course you’re an illusion, dear,” he said. “How else could you be

so perfect?"

36. Revelation

Knowing something is true and being able to change it are two different things. When he woke up in the morning, the beach was still there, and he was still trapped on it. The theory that this place was a persistent dream caused by brain damage did not seem to change its apparent solidity: It felt as real as real gets. The only difference now is that he seemed to have a tenuous link to the non-dream world: writing in the stars.

As dawn was breaking, the storm had passed but the sky was still cloudy, so there was no further opportunity to communicate with Steve. Whoever Steve was, he obviously couldn't control the clouds, nor could he communicate directly with Matthew. Steve had to resort to poking out stars in the sky just like he did, although he seemed to have some computer technology to let him do it faster.

But why the stars? Why couldn't Steve just speak verbally, like the booming voice of God? What did both of them have to resort to manipulating points of light?

Matthew imagined himself in a hospital bed. His body was there, but his mind was someplace else. He was "locked in"—conscious but without any motor control. Many patients with this disorder are unable

to control any voluntary movements except their eyes. The eyes were often the key to communicating with these people. With their eyes, they may be able to indicate yes or no and even peck out messages on a visual keyboard displayed in front of them.

That wasn't much different than what he was doing with the stars. With his own eyes, he was focusing on individual stars and exercising a conscious intent to turn them off. Both the exact position of his gaze and the electromagnetic signature of intention could be measured non-invasively. If his eyes moved to a certain position and he wished for something to happen there, researchers with the proper equipment could detect this.

That was probably it! The stars must be part of some kind of mechanism Steve and his colleagues were using to get in touch with him.

He knew about Locked In Syndrome, even though he could not recall any specific patient, research article or any of the big words used to describe it. His case was worse, however. He was also "Locked Out"—unable to retrieve any sensory inputs from his own body. Or at least he couldn't receive inputs from his "other" body in the hospital bed. Apart from the stars, all of his sensory inputs were coming from here, his virtual body living on the beach. He had no theory yet to account for where the beach came from or why it was so stable and seemingly solid, but the experience had to be virtual to explain all the data.

Knowledge of his predicament was no guarantee of a solution. Apparently, he had known about the accident before losing his memory—enough to tell Cat about "Fire" burning a hole in his head—but this knowledge didn't prevent him from being trapped here all these months.

Intellectually, Matthew knew that none of the world around him was real, but it was still real enough that he had to deal with it on its own merits. Only a fool denies the hard reality of his own senses.

If you have a theory that you can fly, that doesn't mean you should jump off a building right away. You have to work up to it.

37. The Day's Plan

Cat stirred in the bed.

“Good morning, Sunshine!” he said.

She opened her eyes, smiled and stretched in a cat-like way.

“Good morning, Matthew,” she said. “Did anyone talk to you in the sky again?”

“No, it was too cloudy. We’ll try again tonight.”

“Will you be going to work?”

“Nope. I checked this morning. The big hole is still there. I’m still fired.” he said.

“Oh,” she said. “What are you going to do?”

“I guess I’ll have to find another way to amuse myself. The job didn’t pay very well anyway. I earned only 53 M&Ms for a year and a half of work, 52 of which you ate.”

“They were good. Can I have some more?” said Cat.

He shook his head sadly. “Sorry, dear. No work, means no more candy.”

“Oh,” she said, looking sad. “How do we get more?”

He was amused by her insistence. She rarely expressed preferences and hardly ever initiated anything. Now she wanted something she

couldn't have. It made him wish he had saved a few M&Ms. He could have made her do all sorts of tricks for them.

"Sorry, love. No more M&Ms unless we get out of here."

"Then let's get out of here."

"I'm working on that. I don't have any answers."

"Can we go for a walk today? Maybe we will find something."

That was another unusual request. She would walk if he asked her to, but until now she had never expresses an independent desire to do it.

"If you want," he said. "Where would you like to go?"

"Somewhere we haven't gone before."

"That's difficult, my love. We've been north on the beach and south on the beach. There's no way left but climbing the cliffs, which we can't do, or walking into the sea, where we will get very wet."

"Let's get wet," she said.

"That's a nice idea, except you can't swim."

He had tried to teach her, but swimming wasn't one of her skills. He could teach her strokes, which she reproduced flawlessly, but she never learned how to breathe—or more precisely how to *not* breathe when her face was in the water. She would gag and gasp for breath and he would have to rescue her.

"We'll go someplace today," he told Cat. "It might not be someplace new, but we'll take a field trip."

"When do we leave?"

"After breakfast. Do I need a bath today?"

"Come here," she said.

He did, and she sniffed him over.

“No,” she said. “You’re good.”

38. Desecration

He let out a scream of horror and despair at the destruction that lay before him.

“It’s gone, gone!” he cried, collapsing on the beach.

Then he turned his face to the heavens and raised his fist.

“Why do you torment me?”

Cat heard his anguished wails and came down the steps to investigate. He had just finished breakfast and had asked her to wait on the patio while he attended morning worship.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, deeply concerned.

“My Temple. My life’s work. My precious calendar. Five hundred sixty days of labor... flushed away!”

He suppressed his own laughter. He didn’t want to spoil his own melodramatic performance.

“Oh dear,” she said. “What happened?”

He took her over to show her the new sinkhole that had appeared overnight. Like the one above the house, this hole was about 30 feet across and seemed bottomless. It was strategically placed exactly where his sacred Temple of Shit had been.

“This isn’t funny,” said Matthew.

“I’m not laughing,” said Cat.

“No, but I am,” he said, giggling through his tears. “Do you know how hard I worked to arrange those shits? It was my only reliable way to measure the passing days and now it’s gone.”

“That’s so sad. I know you worked hard. Maybe you can build another one.”

“What’s the point? Another sinkhole would just obliterate it.”

Indeed, these sinkholes could hardly be called random. Of the vast beach available, they somehow managed to desecrate the only two places that meant anything to him apart from the house itself.

“Is there anything I can do?” said Cat.

“Just hold me. Comfort me. Help me through this.”

“Of course,” she said. She hugged him and it felt good.

He buried his head in her soft breasts. It partly made up for the loss.

39. The Waterfall

From the security of her warm embrace, he looked over at the new sinkhole. It was identical to the one above the house except a lot closer to the shore. Some gravelly sand from the beach was spilling into the hole along with a small trickle of water. It gave him an idea.

“Can you help me with something?” he said.

“Sure.”

“I think we can dig a channel from the ocean to the hole.”

“Why?”

“Because I think it would be fun.”

“Why?”

“Because we might be able to drain the ocean.”

“Why?”

“Just because! You don’t have to question everything.”

“But you told me to.”

He drew away from her and walked to the edge of the hole. He pushed some sand along the edge into the abyss. He kept pushing until the hole had a lip that looked like it was lower than the ocean level. The trickle of water was bigger now, leading from the wet sand over the edge and into the hole, disappearing into the darkness.

“Okay, we’re going to dig a trench from the ocean to this point. You start up here and I’ll start at the water, and we’ll meet in the middle. When we’re done, we should have a waterfall into the hole.”

He showed her how to dig with her hands, shoveling the gravel up on either side of the trench. The gravel was courser and harder to move higher on the shore and her hands were more tender than his, so he had her switch places with him, so she worked at the waterline where the sand was finer.

There were only about 50 feet between ocean and hole. In about twenty minutes they met in the middle. The last bit of gravel was removed and they had a complete canal. Water from the ocean started flowing directly into the hole.

He raced up to the lip to see his waterfall. It was small but steady. He had no idea where the water was going, and there was no splattering sound of hitting bottom.

Now that they had substantial flow, it was easy for them to widen the channel. The bigger the stream was, the more easily gravel was swept along in it. There was a limit, however, to how deep the channel could go. The bedrock below the gravel was solid and immovable, so the channel could be made wider, not deeper. This was probably fortunate for the ocean, as it would probably all flow down the hole if given the opportunity.

Soon they had a shallow stream about three feet wide leading to an attractive waterfall cascading over the edge and into the darkness.

They stood back and admired their work. If they waited a while, it could drain the whole ocean.

It just might take a few million years.

40. Field Trip

Thanks to their engineering project on the beach, it was well past noon by the time they started off from the house. There probably wasn't enough daylight left to reach the Doppelganger Boundary, even if they had Horse's help getting back. Matthew really wanted to meet himself again, ask himself a few questions and find out what this other guy was made of, but that encounter would probably have to wait for another day when they could start out earlier.

Nonetheless, he had promised Cat a field trip and on this rare occasion when she actually asked for something, he didn't want to let her down. He figured they would just patrol the beach to the north, looking for anything new. Perhaps they would encounter some more sinkholes or some M&Ms to feed Cat's addiction, although Matt wasn't hopeful in either regard. A practical benefit of a long walk was to help condition Cat's feet so they were as tough as his. He now regretted not taking her on past walks and/or escape attempts. Who was he to leave without his partner?

"How much wood would a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood?" he asked as they headed up the beach.

"He would chuck what wood a woodchuck could chuck if a

woodchuck could chuck wood,” she replied on cue.

He smiled. “You don’t even know what a woodchuck is.”

“It’s a giant mouse,” she said.

“And what’s a mouse?”

“A little creature that frightens elephants and makes ladies go, ‘Eek, a mouse!’”

“Right. You’re very smart.”

“Yes, I know,” she said. “You always tell me so, but I don’t feel very smart. I feel like there are a lot of things I’m not seeing.”

“Me, too. That’s why I’m bringing you with me. Maybe we can see together what we can’t see alone.”

They had walked about mile from the house and had seen nothing unusual. No new sinkholes or errant M&Ms. He instructed her to watch the part of the beach closest to the water while he surveyed the rocks at the base of the cliff. He saw all the landmarks he was a familiar with—rocks and tide pools with unique characteristics—and nothing seemed out of place.

They were just passing a place he called Buttress Butte where the cliffs almost touched the sea. At this point there was hardly any beach at all, and at high tide, like it was now, the waves lapped the base of the cliff and you had to dodge them to get to a wider stretch of beach just beyond. They had just gone past this narrow point when he saw two tiny specks in the distance.

“Oh my,” he said. “This isn’t right.”

“What?”

“There we are, up ahead.”

She looked up and saw them too. “Just like last time,” she said.

“No, it’s much closer. We will meet them at barely half the distance as before.”

Indeed, as they continued down the beach, the two specks resolved themselves into a man and a woman who looked just like them but whose actions were delayed from their own. He waved, and about five seconds later the man down the beach waved in a mirror-image fashion. Matthew began to realize that the delay was roughly equivalent to the speed of sound. At sea level on Earth, sound takes about five seconds to travel a mile, and the other couple appeared to be about a mile away. The delay would make a little more sense if he was hearing what he was seeing.

He held his hands above his head and clapped them together. A couple of seconds later, the other guy did the same. Sure enough, Matthew heard the other guy’s faint clap at the same instant as he saw his hands come together. It seemed that light and sound were traveling at the same speed. This impossible fact may have always been true on this beach, but until now he had no way of knowing.

With both couples moving at the same pace, they approached each other quickly. About 10 minutes after they first spotted each other, they were standing in front of each other—Matthew facing Matthew on the right and Cat facing Cat on the left.

“Hello old friend!” both Matthews said. “I wasn’t expecting you so soon.”

It no longer seemed unusual to Matthew to meet his doppelganger on the beach. Didn’t this happen to everyone? The disturbing part was

that it happened so soon in their walk. Last time, they had walked more than half the day to reach the meeting point. Now, the Doppels showed up after less than an hour.

Standing face-to-face with himself, Matthew came to a disturbing conclusion: His world was shrinking.

“Dude, you don’t belong here,” the Matthews said to each other.

As a scientist, he knew that two points of data did not prove anything, but he didn’t need proof to be alarmed. Two days ago, his world appeared to have a radius of about 10 miles, beyond which it repeated itself. Now it seemed to be down to about 3 miles. Meanwhile, his neighborhood was being turned to Swiss cheese by mysterious sinkholes. He lost his job and access to his psychiatrist. Although a trend could not be proven, the initial data suggested a contraction, like he was living in a balloon that was slowly losing air.

At the place where the Matthews met, there was no obvious repetition of the terrain; yet off in the distance in both directions he saw the back side of Buttress Butte. When they got beyond that in either direction, they would presumably see the house. That suggested they had perhaps 6 miles of unique beach before things started repeating. That was the zoo cage he was living in, less than half the size of two days before.

One advantage, however, is that they weren’t very far from home. Even without Horse, they could easily get home before dark. He had time to ask the other Matthew some questions and run some tests.

So the interrogation began.

41. Interrogation

He held up his right hand as the other Matthew held up his left.

“What hand is this?” both Matthews asked?

“Right,” both replied.

“Wrong,” said both Matthews in unison. “Mine is right. Yours is left.”

Both Matthews were stubborn and weren't going to budge. Each thought the other guy was left handed. Apparently, you couldn't win an argument with this guy.

But the fact remained that their immediate environments were different. Matthew decided to repeat the same trick as last time. He stooped down to pick up the largest rock at his feet. The other Matthew did the same. Of course, the two didn't have access to the same rocks, so they each picked up different ones. Their movements diverged as they bent down and reached, but as soon as each had a rock in hand, they snapped back into synchrony.

Each Matthew held up his rock toward the other in a threatening manner.

“Okay, brother, which rock is bigger?” said Matthew.

But here they diverged again. The other Matthew said “smaller”.

“Ha! Gotcha!” said both Matthews simultaneously.

“You said smaller!” said Matthew, while the other said, “You said bigger!”

“What’s happening, brother,” said both Matthews, “is we have the same intent at the same time, but it’s modified by our environment. As soon as we adjust to that difference, we fall back into sync.”

“Impossible!” said both Matthews.

“I know,” said the Matthews, “but this world isn’t real anyway, so anything is possible.”

“At least it follows stable rules, which is the funny thing. You wouldn’t expect a dream or hallucination to be so stable.”

“I could go on talking to you forever. You’re so smart and handsome.”

“I know.”

The Cats, however, were looking a little bored. They seemed to have no interest in each other or the self-congratulatory banter of the Matthews.

“So Cat,” said the Matthews, “why aren’t you amused by this? Don’t you want to talk to that other girl?”

“That’s just me,” she said, glancing at the other Cat. “Why would I be interested in me?”

“But it’s not just you. It’s somebody else. Aren’t you on one side and not the other?”

“No, I’m on both sides.”

“At the same time?”

“Yes.”

The Matthews were confused. “But that’s not how I feel,” they said.
“I am only conscious of being on one side.”

“That’s only because you choose to be.”

“Huh?”

Cat tried to explain. “There’s not two of you, there’s only one of you.”

The Matthews looked each other over, equally confused.

Matthew placed the palm of his right hand against the left palm of his doppelganger. It felt solid. He was here, on the south side of the line, and the other guy was over there, on the north side. They weren’t the same. They were living in different environments, at least at the microscopic level.

“Who are you?” said both Matthews.

“Whoever you want me to be,” said the other guy.

Huh!

Just the other guy said it, not him. He heard his own voice in his own ears, but he didn’t say anything. Only the other guy moved his mouth.

“We can diverge whenever we want,” said the other guy.

“How?”

“I can’t explain. You just do it, but now that I’m doing it, you don’t have to. For the moment, I am in charge.”

“I don’t like taking orders, especially from the likes of you.”

“Don’t be silly. I am you.”

“Prove it.”

“Okay, take my other hand,” said the other Matthew, the dominant

one.

Matthew complied. He intended to place the fingers of his left hand against those of his counterpart, but somehow their fingers missed each other, passed through the boundary and intertwined.

The two Matthews were now holding hands.

“This is creepy,” said South Matthew.

“Just go with it,” said North Matthew. “Shall we dance?”

“I guess so,” said Matthew. “Who is going to lead?”

“I will,” said the other guy, firmly.

“Okay,” said Matthew sheepishly. “What should we dance?”

“Just a simple waltz. Nothing fancy. Put your arm around my shoulder.”

Matthew did, while the other guy put his hand on Matthew’s waist. They were now diverging big time. Their other hands were still clasped together.

“Okay,” said the other guy. “Now imagine a Viennese waltz. Music by Strauss. We’re in a grand ballroom in the 1800s. Do you hear it?”

“I do,” said Matthew.

“Then let’s dance!”

And they did. They spun around and around on the sand, the other guy taking the lead and Matthew following. He was a pretty good dancer, this other Matthew, not any better than he, just more assertive. Matthew, in turn, had chosen to follow. Once they agreed on this, everything fell into place. They knew what to expect from each other, so they kept perfect time, even with imaginary music, and never stepped on each other’s toes.

As the dance continued and their rotations in the sand became too many to measure, Matthew began to lose track of himself. Was he the Matthew from the north or the one from the south? Was he leading or following? At once he could see himself from both sides, and he liked what he saw.

At last the music in their heads finally came to an end and their dancing stopped. They still held onto each other, however, cherishing the moment.

Then Matthew did something impulsive. It was homoerotic, or maybe autoerotic, he wasn't sure. He didn't know why he did it, but he did.

Matthew kissed the other Matthew on the lips.

It felt good.

Then the Matthews embraced each other tightly and started to feel each other over.

"That's enough!" said Cat.

"Stop it!" said the other Cat.

"We need to go," said both Cats simultaneously.

42. Nightfall

Nightfall couldn't have come too soon. Dinner was served in a bowl and glass but with none of the usual panache and not a word spoken. It was just plunked down in front of him. He got the Silent Treatment all the way back from the Boundary, too. Horse didn't rescue them this time, so he had to endure Cat's silence alone.

"Was it something I did?" he asked as she cleared off the table.

She said nothing. There were no outward signs of anger, but he knew a jealous robot when he saw one. And for what? One little kiss.

"It was totally innocent," he assured her. "That other Matthew means nothing to me. That other Cat, too. It's only you I care about, dear."

Silence.

To be honest, though, he wasn't completely sure he came home with the right partner. With all the dancing and carrying on between the Matthews, he kind of lost track of which Matthew he was and which Cat was his. There was a moment of confusion as they tried to sort it out, but it didn't seem to matter to the Cats, who just wanted to leave. The only thing he felt confident of was that the other guy was catching silent hell just like he was.

Actually, Cat's silence wasn't a bad thing. After dinner, she went into the bedroom, and he assumed she would stay there for the rest of the night. This meant he could concentrate on the task at hand: communicating with the stars.

As the sun headed to bed, it looked like a perfect night for skywriting. Hardly a cloud in the sky. He prepared himself for communication with Steve. He had a mental list of the questions he wanted to ask, starting with the most important in case their communication got cut off. It took him a lot longer to write than Steve, since he had to poke out individual stars and Steve apparently had a computer, so he would have to keep his own messages brief.

Steve K was very tech savvy. Matthew knew that much, even though he still couldn't remember Steve specifically. Steve would be sitting at a computer screen waiting for his communication. There would be some sort of interface that could track his eye movements and a sophisticated brain scanner. When he asked a star to "switch off," Steve could probably detect the crude signature of his mind's intent. With modern technology, they probably couldn't read his mind, only gauge general brain states. Precise data on his intent could only come from his eyes.

He didn't know how they could be feeding a star field back to him. Some sort of special goggles? Probably not? If he was both "Locked In" and "Locked Out" then he was blind. How could he see the stars without seeing anything else in the hospital room he was presumably in? They must have rigged up something special for him, some back door into his low-level visual system, but he couldn't picture how it worked.

Steve was a smart guy. He was also a good guy. Matthew knew this even without access to a single specific fact about Steve. He didn't know Steve's age, race, where he came from or how they knew each other. All he knew is that the emotions he felt when he first read the name were good. He didn't have to be guarded with Steve. Steve was the sort of guy he could trust with his life, which he suspected was exactly the situation he was currently in.

Steve was smart but not smart enough to generate this whole world he was living in. Manipulating a star field—essentially binary bits on a flat surface—was infinitely easier than reproducing all the sensations of living on this beach. Even as video game, this was far beyond any known technology. Some other force was maintaining this world, and that force appeared to be disintegrating. His world was shrinking and being riddled with holes.

The stars were coming out now, and before he could even write anything, a message appeared directly overhead.

“HEY MATT – WE ARE HERE – HOW ARE YOU?”

43. Conversation with the Stars

“WHO” wrote Matt in the sky. It was slow work, etching letters in the stars by snuffing out stars, but he was getting better at it.

The sky wrote back: “WERE ALL HERE! STEVE DANA JOHN GERI JILL OTHERS – YOU'RE A STAR!”

“WOW” wrote Matthew.

“HOW ARE YOU?”

“GOOD U?”

“WORRIED – YOUVE BEEN GONE A LONG TIME”

“HOW LONG”

“589 DAYS”

It was more than he expected. Apparently his own day had gotten longer in the absence of any environmental cues.”

“WHAT DAMAGE” wrote Matt.

“SERIOUS – CORPUS CALLUSUM SEVERED – DAMAGE TO BRODMANN 12 13 7 –PERIFERAL NEUROPATHY GETTING WORSE”

“FUCK”

“LOL! FUCK INDEED”

“GET ME OUTTA HERE”

“WEVE BEEN TRYING – YOUR BRAIN HAS BEEN ACTIVE BUT

NONRESPONSIVE – WHAT YOU BEEN UP TO?”

“KEEPN BUSY”

“YOU’LL HAVE TO TELL US ABOUT IT – RIGHT NOW YOU’RE
IN PERIL – GOT TO RECONNECT”

“HOW”

“DONT KNOW –BYPASS THE DAMAGE”

“EZ 4 U 2 SAY”

“WE HAVE SOME TESTS FOR YOU”

“I HATE TESTS”

“LOL – BE OUR LAB RAT”

“OK BUT NOT NOW FADING”

Indeed, as important as the conversation was, he couldn’t keep his eyes open. Poking out stars was hard, slow work, and here on the beach sleep was an unstoppable force. When his brain wanted it to happen, he couldn’t delay it.

Steve wrote: “I SEE – TRY AGAIN TOMORROW?”

Steve could probably see indications of fatigue on the monitors, so Matthew didn’t have to explain.

“K” wrote Matt, and he couldn’t write another thing after that.

Steve wrote: “TMRW THEN – WERE HAPPY YOU’RE BACK –
EVERYONE IS EXCITED BUT TIME IS RUNNING OUT – GNITE!”

Matt didn’t have the energy to poke out anything in return. He could only drag himself to bed and collapse there beside Cat.

She curled herself around him, apparently not angry anymore, and a deep, dreamless slumber fell upon him.

44. A Dire Situation

“There was an accident that brought me here,” said Matthew.

“Yes, you told me that before you lost your memory,” she said.

It was breakfast time, and she was talking to him again. This was good, because he needed access to her memories.

“Okay, but let me reconstruct it again, and you tell me if anything I say now is different from what I said before. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“I was experimenting with a machine named Fire, which noninvasively suppresses or stimulates selected parts of the brain. I did these experiments on myself because this is new technology and it is considered too dangerous to do on other people, even with consent. The machine malfunctioned and damaged several parts of my brain.”

“You said there was an explosion in your head.”

“Right. No smoke or flames, but effectively a microwave bomb going off in my head.”

“You also said were an idiot.”

“Yup. I shouldn’t have played with Fire. This accident severed my corpus callosum and damaged parts of the brain associated with higher consciousness and identity.”

“You didn’t say that before.”

“No, Steve told me that last night. He wrote it in the sky after you want to bed. The corpus callosum is the way the two hemispheres of my brain talk to each other. Without it, there are two separate people in my head who can’t communicate with each other directly.”

“Are the two people you and me?”

“No, it doesn’t work that way. I think You and I are both residing in the left side of the brain, the verbal side. We can talk to each other. The part of me I can’t talk to is on the right side. He is nonverbal and can only communicate with me through low-level spatial and motor sensations. I suspect he is the one who has constructed this world. Instead of receiving sensory input from the outside, I am receiving it from the other hemisphere of my own brain via the brainstem. We can’t talk directly, so we communicate through form and sensation.”

“You never told me this before.”

“I don’t think I knew it before. When Steve said my corpus callosum was severed it began to make sense.”

“Then who am I?”

“You are Cat. My girlfriend. The most beautiful woman in the world.”

“That’s all I want to be, but who am I in your head?”

“You are a co-process.”

“What is that?”

“A parallel personality. When Brodmann Area 12 is damaged, it can affect the integration of identities. Every human is composed of multiple personalities. Brodmann 12 coordinates these people so they work

together and seem to be one. When this area fails, co-processes can spin off on their own. You are probably one of these processes.”

“So I am part of you?”

“Yes. You are a co-process running on the same neurological hardware that I am running on. We are different but incomplete people inside one person’s head.”

“But I can see you.”

“I think that’s the work of the other me, on the right side of the brain. You and I are both receiving sensory input from the brain stem, which is controlled by the right hemisphere at the moment.”

“That makes sense.”

“Not totally. I’m just spinning theories here. I’ve got data, and I am thinking up some crazy scenarios to explain it all.”

“That’s better than having no theories at all.”

“I suppose. I think my psychiatrist was another independent co-process, but he may be dead now.”

“What makes you think so?”

“Peripheral neuropathy.”

“What’s that?”

“I think my brain is slowly shutting down from the edges inward. My peripheral nervous system hasn’t been used in over a year and a half. There have been no messages from my brain to the rest of my body. This can’t go on indefinitely. Those systems are beginning to fail, and once the process begins there is a cascade effect and eventually my whole brain will stop functioning.”

“That doesn’t sound good.”

“It isn’t. I think all of us in here are dying.”

45. Inside the Shrinking Balloon

After breakfast, Matthew went for a quick jog. He asked Cat to stay behind because he could move faster without her. He wanted to see how big his world was, and judging from the contraction yesterday, this survey mission wouldn't take long.

He went south this time, although "south" and "north" and "left" and "right" were all beginning to blur in his mind. One thing he noted right away were the sea birds. There weren't any! The only sound in the air was the surf. There were no cries from seagulls, even distant ones, and there were no birds to be seen anywhere in the sky or on land. Apparently, they had all flown the coop.

He had jogged only about five minutes when he saw the other guy: a runner looking just like him in the distance.

That's all he needed to know. He didn't have to meet himself to see that his world had continued to contract overnight. It now had a radius of less than two miles. If he went about a mile farther south, he would meet himself and the beach would start to repeat.

He was turning to go back to the house when he noticed something else. A double dose of impossibility. He had been scanning the base of the cliff for sinkholes, and finding no new ones, his eyes glanced upward

to the face of the cliff to look for doors. There, on the vertical face directly above him, was a little blue figure.

“Oh my God!” he exclaimed, and he took off back to the house.

Cat had to see this!

46. Vertical

“Look up!” he said.

“It’s just us,” she said, unimpressed.

“They’re standing on the face of the cliff.”

“Just like we are.”

Matthew and Cat were standing on the beach, looking up the vertical cliff. Meanwhile, another Matthew and Cat were standing horizontally on the face of the cliff, defying the laws of gravity, looking down on them.

“Dude, what are you doing up there?” Matt shouted.

His own voice echoed back at him a split-second later asking the same thing.

Down the beach about a mile away, there were two more tiny couples, one horizontal and vertical, apparently engaged in the same actions.

This world was beginning to look like a kaleidoscope.

The cliff never had looked like solid rock, more like a dense conglomerate of sand. He assumed the Doppelgangers up there perceived themselves as standing on a beach while Cat and he were the ones suspended horizontally on a cliff. At the base of the cliff, where the

two surfaces met, was a jumble of boulders which could be perceived as either horizontal or vertical. If Cat and he clambered over those boulders, they could probably meet themselves. They could probably even pass themselves, change orientation and become vertical themselves.

Above the Doppelgangers standing on the cliff was a transition point where the cliff turned into sky, only it didn't appear as sky anymore. It was sea, with waves rippling vertically onto shore at the top of the cliff high above them. The ocean continued directly overhead, looped over their heads where the sky had been and joined with Matthew's own ocean at ground level.

Like a surfer inside a monster wave, he was now inside a vast tunnel of water. There was only a narrow strip of beach and cliffs that he and his three doppelgangers were standing on. Everything that once appeared as sky was now ocean. There was normal daylight illumination of the beach, cliffs and sea, similar to how things used to look in the early morning before the sun rose from behind the cliffs. Only now the sun could never rise about the cliffs, being as all the sky was now ocean.

Of course, all of this was impossible. It could never happen on any real planet. Everything he was seeing was an illusion, the product of processes in his own head.

The really disturbing part was the missing sky. No sky meant no stars and no way of communicating with the outside world.

He was Locked In again.

47. Panic

“Why do we need gravity at all?”

They were back at the house, and Matthew was pacing the patio, anxious and upset. Above him on the side of the cliff, another Matthew paced a similar patio. Both were trying their best to think clearly, but they knew things were collapsing fast. It was like being on the Titanic, knowing it was slowly sinking and grasping desperately for a way to survive.

Cat tried to be helpful. “You said we need gravity so we don’t fly off into space.”

“Right, but this world isn’t real. It’s a dream. There’s no reason you need gravity in a dream, yet most dreams have it. You don’t fly in a dream unless that’s the main subject of the dream.”

Matthew tested gravity by jumping in place, but he kept coming back down to the patio.

He went on. “Dreams have gravity only because the brain chooses to retain it. Although dreams can be crazy, the dreaming brain respects the laws of physics whenever it can. Whatever rules it knows in the outside world, it is going to impose them in a dream unless there’s a reason to defy them. Astronauts may dream of weightlessness, but most

people dream of walking around tethered to earth like they usually are. When they step off a cliff in a dream, they fall, which is just what you'd expect in reality."

"I'm confused," said Cat.

"There has been damage to certain parts of my brain, resulting in a lot of strange signals sent to other parts of my brain. The dreaming brain in the right hemisphere has tried its best to make sense of these inputs by creating this vivid world we are living in. It has constructed this environment according to the rules of physics it already knows. It gives this world gravity and all the other remembered characteristics of the real world.

"In the beginning, this world seemed completely realistic to me. I really didn't know I was dreaming. Now, with my nerves dying and systems failing, the dreaming brain has had to make compromises. It has had to abandon many of the conventions of reality in order to continue to explain the sensory input."

"Does that explain why the world is getting smaller?"

"No. The world is getting smaller because some of my nervous system is shutting down. Dreaming only explains how we are perceiving the shutdown. We started with a realistic environment just like earth. As systems fails, the dreaming brain modifies the environment, filling it with holes and inconsistencies as necessary while still retaining the central narrative."

"So where does that leave us?"

"Fucked. The world is closing in on us and we won't be here much longer. Are you prepared to meet your Maker?"

“I already have,” said Cat.

“Oh,” said Matthew. “When did that happen?”

“You are my Maker. You created this. Only you can get us out.”

48. Appreciating Death

Night fell, but there was no sunset. It just got dark over the course of a half hour. When darkness came, there were no stars because there was no sky to hold them, only sea where sky used to be. There was, in fact, no light at all, since no sky meant no moon either. He could hear the surf below them—and now above them!—but he could see nothing. If Steve and the others were waiting for his communication, he had no way to contact them.

“We may not wake up,” he said, holding Cat in bed. “Tonight we could die for good.”

“Does it matter?”

“I think so. There were things I wanted to accomplish, although I don’t remember them now. There are people who will be sad when I am gone, although I can’t remember any of them specifically. I have a sense I left a lot of things undone, like walking out of the house and forgetting to turn off the stove.”

“What would happen if you just gave up?”

“People aren’t like that. You choose to live because it’s the only game in town. There could be another game after this one, but you have no idea what it is, so you keep playing the current game as long as you

can. At least you learn more about life the longer you play, so why not use that knowledge and keep playing?

“But what bothers me the most is that people have made an investment in me. A group of my colleagues have apparently devoted a lot of effort to keeping my body alive and trying to communicate with me. To die on them now would be bad form. I would be letting them down. Now that I’ve made contact with them and know they care, it’s not just about me anymore.”

“Then you’ll have to find a way out.”

“It’s not easy. There has been damage to my brain, preventing certain parts from talking to each other. The damage is probably permanent, so the only alternative is to find another way around the blocks, some way to bridge the regions. People with severed hemispheres manage to find a way to function. I’m pretty sure it’s not a fatal condition. The disconnected parts of the brain find new pathways and learn to work together again. As long as I’m alive there’s always something I can do. The trick is staying alive.”

“How do you bridge the regions?”

“The other hemisphere created the playing field. I can’t talk with him directly, so I can’t change the rules. For now, I can only play by the laws of physics he has established. He’s a smart guy and he probably has a plan, but I can’t walk through walls he has created.”

“Unless he left you a door in the wall,” said Cat.

“True. But we looked for doors in the cliff and didn’t find any.”

“We can look again.”

“I suppose. At least there is less cliff to search now.”

“Never cease pretending you have free will,” said Cat.

“Wow, that’s pretty deep. Who said that?”

“You did.”

49. The Hamster Wheel

Turns out they didn't die for good that night. Things just got incrementally weirder.

When they awoke, their world had become small indeed. What was left was dry, cold and repetitive. This world was "round" but not in the sense of a planet. They were living in a hollow cylinder composed of 32 instances of their immediate environment. The cylinder was perhaps 1000 feet in diameter and about the same in length. It was like living on the inside of a giant hamster wheel or tin can.

As Cat made breakfast, Matthew sat on the patio looking up at 31 other Matthews looking down at him. He tried to think of a way to describe this geometry. Fifteen of the other Matthews could be explained by mirrors. If you placed two giant mirrors above the house, resting on each other at an angle, and added a third vertical mirror capping off the end, then, assuming there was light, the people inside would be seeing what Matthew was seeing directly above him.

However, sixteen other Matthews could not be explained by mirrors. They were on the end caps of the cylinder. If two giant mirrors were in place above them, then there still had to be one physically impossible duplicate of themselves on the cliffs.

Matthew looked straight up at the Matthew suspended directly overhead and waved. That Matthew waved back about a second later. If light traveled at the speed of sound, this meant the hamster wheel was less than a quarter of a mile in diameter. If he wanted to make a game of it, he could have waved at each of the 30 other Matthews, but he knew what to expect of them. They were duplicates of himself, operating with the same motivations and intent, even if not in lockstep. It was fair to assume that what happened to him happened to all the others too, so all he really had to worry about is saving his own ass.

This world was dry because the sea had completely drained into the sinkhole where he had built the waterfall. Make that 32 sinkholes now! At the time of the waterfall's construction, there was no risk that the vast ocean would drain away, but in the new configuration, the sea was so small and shallow there wasn't much water to drain. Had it not flowed down the hole, there would have been three small lakes remaining: a donut-shaped one circling the mid-point of the cylinder and small circular lakes in the middle of either end. Now, in their place, were only three small mudflats.

Ignoring the repetitions, their property now consisted of their house and about 200 feet of former beach on either side. Where the ocean had been, there were about 400 feet of mudflats before the other beach began—or about 200 feet of unique terrain. Altogether, their property was roughly 400 feet by 400 feet, or the size of a large suburban lot, repeated 31 times inside the cylinder. Of this limited space on each lot, significant area was now monopolized by those two giant sinkholes.

The curious thing about the cylinder was that the geography and

physical rules of their immediate environment were preserved. Nothing inside the house had changed, and the laws of physics seemed to work as they always had. Behind the house were the cliffs, but if you looked up, you saw the patio of another house as the cliffs became a dry beach. If you looked at only a single lot, every detail made sense. It was only on the larger scale that this world became surreal and impossible.

“As you ordered, sir,” said Cat. “Three eggs, over easy, two strips of bacon, hash browns, buttered toast with grape jelly.”

The usual gruel was set down in front of him.

“You know just the way I like it,” he said, taking up his spoon to eat.

“If there is anything I can do for you, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“What do you think of all this?” he said, indicating the couples on their respective patios on the ceiling above them.

“Think of what?” she said.

“All the Cats and Matthews all around us. There weren’t so many yesterday.”

“I think the beach is getting smaller,” she said.

“Where do you think this is going to end?”

She thought about it for a moment.

“I think there will soon be a lot of people living in our house,” she said.

50. Informed Consent

“So we’ve got a problem,” said Matthew. “Let’s think things through and see what our options are.”

“Okay,” said Cat. “Start thinking.”

“No, I mean we both start thinking, not just me.”

“Okay, I’ll start thinking after you start thinking. You go first.”

“What is our problem? My brain is dying because it can’t connect with the outside world. The peripheral nervous system is disintegrating, which manifests itself as an ever-shrinking world around us. Logically, we have two options: We can do nothing, just letting things happen, or we cdo something to intervene, actively trying escape this place or stop the damage. Which option do you prefer?”

“Whichever option you prefer,” said Cat.

“Okay, I’ll take that as the ‘no action’ alternative. That means giving up and surrendering to whatever happens. We do nothing today. We go to bed tonight, and if current trends continue, we will wake up with hundreds of Cats and Matthews crammed into our house, to the point where none of them can move. If we can’t move, then we can’t take any future actions and we become helpless victims from that point forward.

“The alternative is the ‘take action’ option. We try to intervene to

change the current course of events. We try to stop the collapse of this world or escape it before it does.”

“What if there is nothing we can do?” said Cat.

“That is always a possibility. Maybe the forces working against us are just too big and we’re going to die no matter what we do, but there is still a benefit in trying. It gives us something to do and makes us feel more in control, even if we’re not and we still die. If we try, at least we have something to do in our final hours.”

“It sounds like you have already made up your mind to take action, so why do need me to decide?”

“I have a plan, but I need you on board. I need your informed consent. I don’t want you just following me without understanding why. Before we do anything else, I want you to answer the question: Is it better to take action or do nothing?”

Cat looked uncomfortable. She didn’t like making decisions. She was a submissive personality that just wanted to be lead. He understood this part of her because it was part of him.

“I don’t know,” she said.

“Do you want to live or die?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is it better to try to exert control over your life or just let things happen?”

“I don’t know.”

She was frustrated, but Matthew wasn’t ready to give up. For what he was planning, he needed her active and deliberate will. His plan wouldn’t work if she merely followed.

“Do you want another M&M?” he said.

She looked suspicious. “Yes, but you don’t have any left. You gave them all to me and I ate them.”

“True, but there are more M&Ms out there. In the world I come from, there are truckloads of them. If you die here, you will never taste another M&M chocolate candy.”

“That would be sad,” she said, looking genuinely pained.

“However, if you take action and choose to do something, there is a chance you might taste M&Ms again. I’m not guaranteeing it. I’m only saying it’s possible. Taking action gives you a better chance of M&Ms than taking no action.”

“Okay, let’s do something then.”

“Are you ready to take action?”

“Yes, if it will get me candy.”

“It’s not a guarantee, only a possibility. Isn’t a possibility of M&Ms worth more than no possibility at all?”

“Yes it is.”

“Then let’s go.”

“Okay, where are we going?”

“Down the hole.”

51. Into the Abyss

“Is anybody down there?” shouted Matthew.

His voice resonated but didn’t echo—at least not from the sinkhole itself. Echoes only came from the 31 other Matthews shouting into their own holes up there in the cylinder.

He and Cat were at the edge of the first sinkhole: the one behind the house that swallowed his place of employment. He tossed a rock into the hole. It fell at the rate predicted by gravity and quickly disappeared in the darkness. They continued to hear it ricochet off the walls of the tube as it fell, but there was no terminal sound like a splash or a crash, which suggested that the tube kept going. All the way to China?

“Are you ready to jump?” he said.

“No thank you,” she replied.

She was equipped with basic self-protection impulses. If he clapped his hands in front of her face she would blink, and if an object came flying at her, she would duck. Neither of them was thrilled with the idea of jumping into this seemingly endless hole, but cat was even more reluctant than him.

He tried to reassure her. “When you fall in dreams, you never actually die. Usually, you just wake up, which might be exactly what we

want.”

“Can’t,” she said, backing away from the edge. “We would be hurt.”

She was clearly afraid, an emotion he rarely saw from her. She retreated down the steps, away from the hole and toward the house. He could physically grab her, drag her back to the hole and try to force her to jump with him, but that wasn’t right. He wasn’t certain he would just “wake up” when he fell, and he didn’t want a murder-suicide to be his final act.

“Wait,” he said. “I think’s another way.”

Unlike the sinkhole that swallowed the ocean, the back side of this one was up against the cliffs, which happened to form the horizontal beach for the neighboring property. To that couple above them, the sinkhole was horizontal—a tunnel not a shaft. Likewise, if they clamored over some rocks at the base of the cliff, they would reach the neighbor’s sinkhole, which was a horizontal tunnel from their perspective.

“Maybe we don’t have to fall,” he said. “Maybe we can walk right in.”

She stopped about halfway down the stairs but still seemed reluctant.

He went down the stairs to her and took her by the hand.

“It’s okay,” he said. “It will be easy. No falling involved. I’ll show you.”

He lead her gently across the few feet of jumbled rocks to their neighbor’s hole.

Soon they were standing at the entrance to a tunnel that was just as big and seemingly endless as the one they had just looked down, but this

one was horizontal—a tunnel not a shaft. Maybe if they came to it from the other side they would fall, but not on this side. How gravity applied seemed to depend only on how you approached the hole.

It was the neighbor's hole, not their own, but that didn't seem to make a difference. It was a way out, and now that falling was not required, it seemed senseless not to pursue it.

"I still can't go," said Cat.

"Why not?"

"It is not my place."

He expected this resistance given her previous refusal to accompany him to work. When he went to work, she could be cajoled to come up the stairs with him, but she would never pass the door into the cliff. He suspected that the cliff represented a neurological boundary of some kind. When he went to work, perhaps his consciousness was venturing into the non-verbal right side of the brain. The psychiatrist talked to him, but there were never any words beyond that point, only lessons taught by action.

Cat seemed to be a personality from the left side of his brain. She was verbal. It wasn't clear what would happen if she passed to the other side. For that matter, he didn't know what would happen to him if he ventured down this tunnel. He didn't know what it was, why it was here or where it went. All he knew is that it was better than staying behind in the shrinking balloon.

"We don't have much choice," he said. "The world we have been living in is collapsing around us."

"I don't know. It's dark in there. I'm afraid."

“I’m afraid too, but we’re going together. I will hold your hand and I won’t let go.”

“Can’t we just wait and see what happens tomorrow?”

“If we wait even one more night, the world may be so small that this tunnel will vanish. Then we will truly be trapped.”

“Can’t you go without me, see what’s down there and come back for me later?”

“Nope. This isn’t like work where I was sure I would be back. We have to stay together. I don’t know what’s down there either. We just have to be brave.”

“I’m not brave.”

“Yes, you are. But if you can’t be brave, just close your eyes and I’ll lead you.”

She tried closing her eyes but she still didn’t move.

He put his arms around her and held her. “It will be okay,” he said.

“How do you know it will be okay?”

“I don’t. But if we don’t survive, we probably won’t know it. If we do survive, then you’ll think I was right, so it’s a pretty good bet to say, ‘It will be okay.’”

She still didn’t want to move, so he kept holding her.

Finally, she said: “Are there M&Ms down there?”

“I’m pretty sure, if we survive, there will be. All the M&Ms you can want. At lot of other sensations too. Believe me, we have been living in a fishbowl, a tiny bubble. If we make it to the outside world, you’ll find it bigger, richer and more amazing than anything here.”

“Will you stay with me?”

“Absolutely. I will never leave your side.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

“Okay,” she said. “Let’s go.”

52. The Tunnel

The sides of the tunnel had the same rough texture as the beach and cliffs. Gravity, or at least the illusion of it, held them in the same side of the tunnel they entered. He held her hand as they poked along, feeling their way along the floor in their bare feet. With both of them facing away from the light, he couldn't tell if her eyes were open or closed, but increasingly it didn't matter.

Just a short distance into the tunnel, the darkness started closing in. The only illumination was the bright round entrance they came through, but if he looked back in that direction, it wiped out his night vision, so he kept looking forward, trying to let his eyes adjust to the ever deepening darkness. Finally, he gave up on the light. He could still see wisps of it on the walls, but it wasn't enough to tell him where to place his feet. They just had to feel their way along.

After they had been walking for a while—He had no idea how long.—he looked back to see the entrance had shrunk to a tiny little dot, much smaller than the full moon.

“I'm cold,” said Cat.

That wasn't what he was feeling. There was a light breeze flowing through the tunnel, away from the light, but the temperature seemed

comfortable to him. He stopped and hugged her, and indeed she felt cold, colder even than the surrounding air. He was worried.

“When will we get there?” said Cat.

“I might be able to answer that if I knew where we were going.”

“Do you think the hole has an end?”

“I don’t know that either. We can only hope the tunnel is here for a reason. It is our only way out, so we’re taking it.”

They kept going until the entrance had become nothing but a tiny star in a whole universe of blackness. It was a bright star at first, but it began to go gray. Night must be falling outside in the cylinder. Fatigue was overtaking him, and his brain gave him no choice but to stop and sleep. The rough floor was the only place to lie down, but they climbed up on the curved side to recline a little more comfortably.

They were in absolute darkness now, and the floor was only slightly more comfortable than a bed of nails. He insisted that she lie on top of him, resting most of her body on his. He was doing better than she was, and once he went to sleep he would be feeling nothing anyway.

She began to shiver, and he held her close, trying to warm her up.

“What happens if I die?” she said.

It was a surprise question he wasn’t expecting. She rarely showed any curiosity about her own existence or future.

“I don’t know, but I don’t think you can die without me dying too.”

“Oh, good,” she said cheerfully. “At least you’ll be coming with me.”

53. Back at Work

He awoke to a blinding light. Or at least it was blinding for a few seconds while his eyes got used to it. He wasn't dead, or at least not obviously so. They were lying on the floor of a well-lit office corridor!

She was lying on his chest, still asleep. She was breathing and her body was warm again.

"We're here!" he said, gently rousing her.

She tried to open her eyes but squinted in the harsh glare of the ceiling panels.

"Where are we?" she said.

"At work! Or at least it looks like it. These look like the same corridors I used to visit before I got fired."

"Are we alive?"

"As alive as we ever were, which still may be dead for all I know."

He looked around him. There were numbered doors with "302" being the closest. Beyond 302 on the opposite side was 301 and then a blank wall. In the other direction, there seemed to be about 15 more doors and then another blank wall. This corridor was about as long as the one he first entered when he went to work. If they were in fact the same, then the psychiatrist's office should be at the end.

“Time to get up,” he told her. “If this is work, they probably have an experiment for us.”

Reluctantly, she removed her head from his chest and sat up, still dazed from sleep but apparently healthy. He stood up and probed down the hallway a few feet to see how the door numbering worked. It looked just like his usual entry corridor at work.

“Let’s go see the doc,” said Matthew, taking Cat’s hand to help her up.

But when they got down to Room 316, it was firmly locked. Matthew knocked and nothing happened. Evidently, the doctor wasn’t in.

But that wasn’t where the corridor ended. There was one more room before the blank wall. It was Room 317. It was weird to see it coming sequentially right after Room 316, but sometimes they did things like that just to confuse him.

He turned the knob, and the door opened inward.

Inside, he faced yet another version of himself.

54. Meeting the Patient

They stood in a windowless hospital room with a single unconscious patient in the middle. The patient, apparently male, was the focal point of a network tubes, wires and monitoring equipment and a complex superstructure of pipes, ropes, pulleys and support beams. This patient wasn't lying in an ordinary hospital bed; instead he was suspended in a sling from an aluminum frame. The wires and tubes lead to an array of medical and computer equipment. Colorful screens displayed his vital signs, and there was an audible beep for every beat of the patient's heart.

Matthew moved closer to see the man's face. The patient's head was covered by a helmet of wires and sensors, like a giant multi-colored Afro. His eyes were closed and tubes ran into his nose and mouth. The face was thin and pale and not much of it was exposed, but there were enough features visible to identify who it was.

"Do you recognize him?" he asked.

"It's you," said Cat.

Before him was the shell of a man after a tragic brain injury. The body was still alive, but the mind was elsewhere—in this case looking down at him from a few feet away.

“But which one is the real me?”

“They both are.”

He trusted her naïve observation.

The scientist in him began to analyze the details of the scene. Without touching anything, Matthew began to assess the patient’s vital signs and condition. Pulse was about 70 beats per minute—about normal for a body at rest. The patient was breathing on his own. A small tube into the patient’s nose was apparently supplemental oxygen. A larger tube into the mouth conveyed a grey opaque liquid. He traced the tube back to a liter-size plastic sack hanging from the aluminum superstructure.

“It looks like I won’t be needing breakfast this morning, dear. I’m already getting it.”

“It’s not the same,” she said, a bit defensively. “I can do it better.”

He turned to her and smiled. “I know you can. This guy gets no customer service.”

But just then customer service arrived. A nurse stepped into the room through the same door they entered.

She was translucent.

“This guy looks in tough shape,” said Matthew loudly.

The nurse didn’t respond. She just went about her business of adjusting tubes and monitors. At one point, she actually passed through both Matthew and Cat, suggesting they weren’t on the same plane of reality.

The nurse pulled on a rope connected to a series of pulleys in the superstructure, and the patient’s body rotated on its central axis so he

was now lying on his side. Matthew began to understand why the patient wasn't in a regular hospital bed. The suspension system allowed the patient's body to be rotated and move easily. This was important both to prevent bedsores and accommodate the big Afro-style head monitor and other telemetry attached to the patient's body.

The head monitor was connected to a variety of electronic equipment that Matthew recognized but could not name. Various screens monitored brain activity. He had enough experience with one of the screens to verify that the patient was fully conscious even though he appeared comatose in the hospital room.

The nurse passed right through him again to look at the same monitor he was looking at. For a second, there were occupying the same space at the same time!

It seemed that Cat and Matthew were ghosts!

The nurse typed a few commands on a keyboard then finished her work and left the room. Matthew tried to follow her out of the room, but he couldn't leave. He should have been able to slip through the open door after her, but some sort of hard force held him inside, as though the door was closed even when it looked open. He only caught a glimpse of what was outside. It was not the empty corridor they first enter from. Instead, it was the wide and busy corridor a hospital ward.

He returned to the keyboard the nurse had used and cautiously reached out to touch it. It felt solid, but he couldn't depress the keys. They simply wouldn't move no matter how hard he pressed. Apparently ghosts have difficulty with such things. He touched other things in the environment—likes wires, tubes and pulleys—and found the same

phenomenon: He could feel these objects and his hand was stopped by them, but he couldn't move them. Even something as light as a tissue on a utility table wouldn't budge. They were all rock solid.

He reached out and touched the face of the patient expecting it to be solid too, but he found something altogether different. While the nurse had passed right through them and other objects were completely immovable, the skin of the patient was halfway in-between. He felt the patient's skin. It offered some slight resistance, but his fingers kept going right through the skin, as though he was touching jelly.

He recoiled at this creepy sensation.

"What do we do now?" said Cat.

"We chill out and relax," said Matthew. "I think we will be here for a while. If this is like other Room 317s I have known, we won't be getting out until we figure out the puzzle."

55. Vigil

“Have a seat,” he told Cat. “I think this is my puzzle to solve. I’ll let you know if I need your help.”

There were, in fact, plenty of chairs in the room. It was as though a large group of people often gathered here. The chairs looked comfortable but they were not. When Cat sat down on one, the padding on the seat didn’t depress but remained rock solid, as though made of steel not vinyl. She made herself as comfortable as possible and patiently waited.

One chair on wheels was in the middle of a makeshift control room, surrounded by several keyboards and monitors. Matthew couldn’t move the chair; he could only sit on it. In front of him was plenty of data about the patient’s condition, but he couldn’t access most of it. The main problem was not being able to type on a keyboard, push a mouse or manipulate a touchscreen. At the foot of the bed was an electronic tablet containing the patient’s chart, but he couldn’t pick it up and look at it. He was limited to surface observations.

Until Steve came in.

Steve entered the room briskly and without hesitation, as though he had done it thousands of times before. He sat down in the exact same chair Matthew was sitting in so they were now occupying the same space.

He knew it was Steve even though he had no specific memories of who he was or how he knew him. Steven Kalochristianakis. Good guy. Matthew suspected he was the person most responsible for looking after him, who had not given up on him when others had.

The problem was how to communicate with Steve, since any physical interaction seemed impossible. He was merely a ghost in this world. He wished he had some chains he could rattle to at least tell Steve he was here.

“Hello, Steve!” said Matthew loudly, speaking from within the boundaries of Steve’s own body, but Steve didn’t react. Instead, he started typing on the keyboard. This was good, because Matthew could at least see whatever Steve saw.

Steve pulled up a cross-section of the patient’s brain. Colors showed the relative activity of various regions in real time, with red being the most active and other colors indicating lower activity. The bridge between the hemispheres was black, like a dark canyon between the two sides of the brain. This wasn’t just a lack of traffic. Matthew could see that this region was simply dead—as in, never coming back again.

Throughout the brain, there were various other “lacuna” or dead spots, but the displays flipped by so fast he couldn’t study the exact locations.

Matthew’s brain looked like Swiss cheese.

Steve got up from the chair and went over to the patient. The patient was on his side facing the monitors, and Steve went behind him. There he undraped the patient’s back to reveal a foot-square patch of bare skin just below the shoulder blades.

Steve put on some surgical gloves and applied an electro-

conductive gel to the whole exposed area, then he placed a square panel against the patient's back. He strapped the panel firmly to the patient's body so it didn't move.

Matthew understood what was happening even if he didn't remember the technical jargon. This was an experimental apparatus intended to allow the blind to "see". The nerves on the back would be precisely stimulated so that shapes could be projected there. In theory, a video camera would provide the input, which would be translated into electrical stimulation of the skin of the back. If the camera saw an apple, it would stimulate the skin in a circular shape. The intent to use the back as visual sensor, like the retina of the eye.

Matthew recognized that Steve was trying to communicate with him. Perhaps this was the mechanism by which messages were displayed in the stars.

Steve return to the keyboard and started typing. He initiated a test sequence of impulses to the back. Unfortunately, they weren't getting through because the ghost Matthew felt nothing in his own back or anywhere else on his body. The same conclusions were displayed on the brain monitor. There was no reaction by the brainstem to this low-level bodily stimulation.

Even though Matthew couldn't feel anything from the apparatus, he had something even better. He could directly see what Steve was typing on the screen, so he knew what he was trying to do. Receiving messages from Steve wasn't a problem. The problem was sending messages back to Steve.

Steve pulled a rope on the superstructure, and the patient's body

rotated on its axis until it was facing up again. Then Steve pointed a laser at the patient's right eye. It looked a bit like a dentist's x-ray: a bulky gun attached by a spring-loaded arm to the superstructure. The patient's eyes remained closed, but that didn't seem to matter. The laser etched a pattern of faint red lines on the patient's eyelid, reminiscent of a supermarket check-out scanner. This apparatus was apparently used to detect the position of the patient's gaze even with his eyes closed. Movement of the cornea would cause a slight distortion of the eyelid which could be read by the laser.

Steve returned to the keyboard and called up an application to track the patient's eye movements.

That's when contact began.

Almost immediately, Matthew recognized that his own eye movements, as a ghost, were being tracked in real time by Steve's apparatus. As he sat in the same chair Steve did, jagged green lines were being drawn on the screen in front of him to match his own eye movement. Evidently, the patient in the sling had the same eye movements as his invisible ghost self.

Matthew moved his eyes to each corner of the video monitor and a crude square was drawn on the same screen.

He had control! He had contact with the real world!

"What the hell!" said Steve, startled.

Then Matthew used his eyes to draw a great big smiley face in the middle of the screen.

56. Celebrity

Within minutes, there were at least ten people in the hospital room, all transfixed by the eye movement monitor. Matthew performed for them, drawing designs and symbols on the screen in response to their words and actions.

“Someone is screwing with us,” said one technician. “This can’t be real.”

“That’s what his eyes are doing,” said Steve. “Look.”

Steve pointed to the faint laser pattern etched on the patient’s right eyelid. When you got down close to the eye, you could see the slight deformations of the skin matching the movements of the cornea.

“Matt, move your eyes side-to-side.”

Matthew did it. Even though the eyelids remained closed, everyone could see the corneas moving horizontally on both the monitored right eye and the unmonitored left one.

“Now up and down,” said Steve.

Matthew obliged.

“Can you open your eyes?” said the technician.

Matthew couldn’t do that. As far as he knew, his eyes were already open as he looked down on his own body from a few feet away.

Matthew walked freely around the room, passing through people and their clothes but not objects that had been in place for a while. The key criteria for how solid an object felt to him was how long it had rested in the same place. That accounted for the fact that the patient's body felt like Jello. The body was occasionally moved, while the superstructure above the body rarely did.

Steve spoke to the patient. "Matt, I am going to clear the screen. You can spell out words or whatever you want. Just wait a second."

Steve took out his smartphone out of his pocket and snapped a photo of the existing screen, which was now covered with Matthew's graffiti. Then he hit the "clear" button and the screen went black.

"Okay, we're ready," said Steve.

Matthew sat in Steve's chair, in the same place Steve was sitting, looking at the same screen Steve was looking at. Behind them was a growing audience of hospital staff, colleagues and scientists from other departments hastily called to the room.

Writing with his eyes in crude letters, Matthew spelled out an important message:

"HI GUYS"

There were gasps of amazement from the crowd.

"How do we write back?" a woman said. She was talking to Steve, but Matthew replied on his own.

"JUST TALK"

Everyone started asking questions all at once. "How are you? Do you feel anything from your body? What is going on?"

"WHOA STEVE ONLY"

Everyone became hushed and reverent. Some people were videotaping the scene with their phones. This was a big deal!

Steve cleared his throat and spoke distinctly: “Okay, Matt, what do you want me to do?”

“NEED KEYBOARD”

“Okay, give me a minute,” said Steve. They had a visual keyboard available on one side of the room, apparently never used. It was a device specifically designed for Locked In patients who could only move their eyes—but it required that the patient be able to see. Steve turned the machine on and a grid of characters appeared on a big square screen. Steve seemed confused, however, about where to position the screen. It was normally suspended in front of the patient, within his field of view, but the patient’s eyes were still closed and the person communicating with them did not seem to be located in the patient’s body.

“Um, where do you want it?” said Steve.

“THERE”

The screen was facing the audience, not the patient. Even if his eyes were open the patient wouldn’t be able to see it.

“Are you sure?” said Steve.

“YES”

“Okay, give me a minute.”

Soon, Steve had patched the output from the eye movement monitor into the visual keyboard. A hovering cursor appeared on the grid of characters. The cursor followed Matthew’s own eye movements, which were also the same eye movements of the apparently comatose patient. Matthew stood in front of the grid and adjusted the position of his head

until the movements of the cursor closely matched the place he was actually looking.

With his eyes, he typed “A B C D.” As he eyes moved into each square and “hovered” there for a second, the character in that square appeared into a display area at the top of the screen. It was like typing on a computer keyboard only slower.

Matthew typed: “THERAININSPAIN”

Then he found the space character.

“FALLS MAINLY ON THE PLAIN TESTING 1 2 3”

Once the letters formed real words, the speech synthesizer kicked in and began reading them aloud: “Falls mainly on the plain testing one two three.”

The crowd was blown away.

“This isn’t possible,” said the skeptic technician. “His eyes are closed. How can he be seeing this screen?”

“Read you loud and clear!” said Steve. “I have never been to the plains of Spain, but I’m sure that’s where the rain mostly falls.”

“LOL!” typed Matthew, finding an exclamation mark.

“Laughing out loud,” spoke the synthesizer.

“Where are you?” said Steve.

“RIGHT HERE. STANDING IN FRONT OF THE SCREEN.” The synthesizer spoke it as he wrote it.

The audience was aflutter. They looked around. They made surprised faces at each other. They gasped and guffawed at this physical impossibility.

These were scientists. No one in the room would admit to believing

in ghosts. Nonetheless, they all stepped back to make space for the man who wasn't there.

57. Talking with a Ghost

The crowd gathered in Room 317 had grown to the point where hospital security arrived to try to sort things out. The scene had become something of a circus.

Matthew tried to help things by typing “STEVE IS IN CHARGE” on the screen. He also typed: “TOO MANY PEOPLE IN HERE”

Before anything more could be communicated, they had to cull the crowd to a manageable size. Steve understood his role and cruelly dictated who should stay and who must go, but it took a few minutes.

Meanwhile, Cat sat quietly in her chair as a series of strangers sat down on top of her. Although her own ephemeral spirit didn't deform the padding of the chair, other people's bottoms did. When they sat down, she sank down an inch, and when they got up again, she popped back up with the padding. Weird.

“How are you doing, love?” said Matthew.

“Fine,” she replied.

He doubted that she understood what was happening. Like a cat, her eyes and head followed the activities of the room, but she didn't react emotionally to any of it.

Finally, the audience had been reduced to nine people, not

including Matthew, Cat and the patient. The door closed and the nine gathered around the monitor, allowing a respectful distance for the invisible man standing among them. Matthew recognized most of the nine even though he couldn't place them exactly. He had the sense they were friends. One of them was videotaping the scene with a small camera.

"Okay, Matt, this is your show," said Steve. "Tell us what you want to do."

"HOW LONG?" typed Matthew with his eyes, spoken aloud by the synthesizer.

"How long have you been here? 572 days since the accident," said Steve.

"WOW! I'M SO SORRY!"

That was longer than he expected but not unreasonable. It only meant the length of his internal day was longer than the outside world's.

"Don't be," said Steve. "We're just glad that you're back."

"WHY DID YOU KEEP ME ALIVE?"

"Love. But also the law. There was never any question about pulling the plug, because your cortex was never in a vegetative state. You were damaged but never brain dead."

"WHAT DAMAGE?"

"Corpus callosum completely severed. Focal ABI in several other areas of both hemispheres. I have mapped seven lacunas. A very unique pattern of damage. It's a wonder you're alive."

"SHOW ME"

"How?"

“PULL IT UP ON YOUR SCREEN”

“Can you see the screen?”

“YES”

“How is that possible? Is this an out of body experience?”

“YOU COULD SAY THAT”

“Will you help me win a Nobel Prize for proving it?”

“HAHA! NOT NOW. MORE WORRIED ABOUT STAYING ALIVE”

“And rightfully so. Things are actually a little dicey right now.”

Steve sat down at his keyboard and pulled up various cross-sections showing the extent of the damage. As he did, he gave a running technical description of what was wrong in Matthew’s brain. He seemed quite practiced in his delivery, as though he had given this presentation many times before. He described the initial damage caused by the malfunction of FIRE, then he talked about the unrelated damage to the peripheral nervous system, how it was progressing due to the long-term inactivity of the patient. Steve used a lot of big words that Matthew should have known but didn’t. Nonetheless, he got the general idea.

“NO BIG WORDS” typed Matthew. **“I GOT BRAIN DAMAGE, REMEMBER”**

Steve laughed. “Okay, I’ll dumb it down for you. We always knew you were conscious. We could see that much from the brain scans. Apart from the first few hours after the accident, you were never in a coma. Without the equipment, we would have assumed so, but the MRI and EEG said your brain was very much alive and engaged in normal sensory tasks. Inside your head, you went through more-or-less normal sleep-wake cycles, and when you were awake you were fully conscious and

active. We just couldn't contact you. Your brain was engaged in organized activity, but there were almost no pathways in or out. You seemed to be experiencing a circus only you could see."

"HA! KIND OF A CIRCUS BUT MORE LIKE A RESORT"

"What kind of resort?"

"TROPICAL. PEACEFUL BUT BORING"

"We couldn't see the resort, but we could see your eyes looking at it. Your eyes were the only thing telling us your internal state. It was similar to REM sleep. Your eyes actively tracked and focused on imaginary objects even though they were receiving no visual input. The rest of your body was paralyzed, like in REM sleep."

"WHAT'S THE CRISIS NOW?"

"The problem is the peripheral system, which has been gradually shutting down. There has been no way to stop the advancing neuropathy."

Matthew knew what this meant even if he couldn't define "neuropathy." Most of his body had received no signals from his brain for over a year and a half, so the nerves that provided this service were shutting down. Evidently, the heart and lungs were still functioning, but even that wasn't a certainty if the degeneration continued.

"I SEE. PRETTY SCARY"

"Yes," said Steve. "We need to get you moving again to keep your body alive. We need to reconnect your brain stem to the rest of your peripheral nervous system, and we need to do it soon. Nothing we have tried has worked, but maybe you can figure out something to help us."

Just then, there was a commotion in the hall. Apparently, a very

important person was demanding access.

The door opened, and a woman burst in.

Steve assured the security guards that it was okay. This woman could stay.

“I came as soon as I could,” said the woman.

Matthew was stunned. He went over to greet her, even though she couldn't see him. He looked her over thoroughly, not believing his eyes. The woman was a bit disheveled and out of breath, obviously having rushed here in great haste. She was wearing heavy winter clothing and a fluffy wool cap, but the face was unmistakable.

It was Cat!

58. An Awkward Moment

There were now two Cats in Room 317. Given recent events on the beach, that in itself was not unusual, but the new Cat wasn't a doppelganger. She was imperfect, flustered and human.

Steve tried to explain to the woman how Matthew was floating invisibly in this room and was communicating with them through a keyboard display the patient couldn't possibly see.

"What the fuck?" said the woman. "This can't be. Someone is jerking us off."

Meanwhile the scantily clad Cat from the beach, the perfect one, was sitting quietly in a chair against the wall, barely eight feet from the new Cat. Like any other feline, the perfect one was just sitting, observing the scene, tracking people's movements with her eyes but not reacting to them.

"This is a hoax," said the imperfect Cat. "Somewhere in this room is a video camera and a microphone. Someone in another room is watching and listening and manipulating the screen in front of us. This has to be a prank, and a pretty sick one."

Steve tried to show her every step in the process: how the patient's eyes were moving and this was translated directly into cursor movement

on the screen and the cursor typed out letters in response to their verbal questions even though the patient couldn't see the screen and shouldn't know where to look.

Matthew, for his part, could only type out a question...

"WHO IS THIS?"

He knew it was a question that would get him into trouble, but there was no way around it.

Steve played the diplomat. First he spoke to the woman: "Matt has some memory issues." Then he explained to the ghost: "This is Carrie. Carrie Holman. She's your girlfriend. You lived together for six years before your accident."

Even with no specific memories of Carrie, Matthew knew Steve's claim was emotionally correct. He also knew he would have to carefully watch his words, because love involves a lot of that.

He wrote with his eyes: **"HI DEAR! UM, I CAN EXPLAIN EVERYTHING"**

Carrie laughed. "Yes, you've got a lot of explaining to do, but how do I know you are real?"

"I CAN GO ANYWHERE IN THIS ROOM. DO SOMETHING ONLY YOU CAN SEE."

The people in the room discussed it for a minute because it was a very important test. Finally, it was decided that Carrie would take a piece of paper, go to the corner of the room and write something on the paper that only she knew and could see.

Matthew followed her to the corner and stuck his own head inside hers so he could see what her eyes saw as she wrote.

She wrote: "You're an Idiot."

Matthew went back to his visual keyboard.

"I KNOW, I KNOW. I'M REALLY SORRY! I AM AN IDIOT"

"Is that right?" Steve asked Carrie.

Carrie squinted at the monitor. She studied the words.

She said aloud: "Tell me something about our life together.

Something only you and I would know."

"I HAVE NO SPECIFIC MEMORIES. BRAIN DAMAGE"

"Well that's convenient. The brain damage just happened to wipe out all memories of me."

"ALL SPECIFIC MEMORIES OF EVERYTHING, BUT I REMEMBER FACES"

"Okay, well here's a face for you."

She turned her face into a comical snarl, baring her teeth and growling.

"MORNING BEAR WHO HASN'T HAD HER COFFEE"

She looked at the screen. She studied the words.

"Is that right?" said Steve again.

She looked. She studied.

"I'M SO SORRY, BEAR. I'M AN IDIOT. I MADE A BAD CHOICE."

The synthesizer spoke it as he wrote it.

Carrie was silent for a moment. She seemed in shock.

"Yes, you're a fucking idiot," she said. "Do you have any idea what you put us through? 572 days. My life has been on hold for 572 days."

"PLEASE FORGIVE ME"

Carrie was crying now, and Matthew, a ghost no one could see, was

crying too.

59. Clearly More Research is Needed

Matthew was having a genuine out-of-body experience, witnessed by a room full of credentialed scientists equipped with the latest neurological monitoring equipment. No one was “seeing” him directly, but there was plenty of inferential data—as much as proved the existence of black holes or subatomic particles. Steve was right: There was probably a Nobel Prize in this—the first scientific proof of consciousness outside the body. Unfortunately, it wouldn’t be Matthew’s Nobel Prize, because he was still dying.

Steve showed him the test results. There were a lot of details Matthew couldn’t process, but he got the general drift. There was progressive neuropathy—nerve death—in virtually every system below his neck. His body had been disconnected from his brain for over a year and a half and under these conditions the unused nerve cells had started to degenerate. Even above his neck, things weren’t looking so great. Again, there was expanding neuropathy in regions of the brain that were cut off from the rest.

“What it comes down to,” said Steve, “is you either use it or lose it, and you haven’t used it for over 18 months.”

“I SEE,” typed Matthew with his eyes. “WHAT TO DO?”

“If you showed even the slightest bit of peripheral sensitivity, we could start physical therapy to try to open up those pathways. A couple of days ago, we thought we had a breakthrough with your back. With pinpoint stimulation, we were getting your eyes to respond. It even got to the point where we were typing messages on your back and you were responding. Do you remember that?”

Matthew typed: “YES.”

He remembered the messages in the stars and wondered how pinpricks on his back had become turned-off stars in the sky, but that was much too complicated to discuss with Steve now. There were more pressing concerns, so “yes” would have to suffice.

“We lost that connection two days ago, and now there is no response at all from stimulating the same patch of skin or anywhere else on the body. Of course, right now you seem to be able to hear and see us in this room, but that doesn’t solve the problem of reconnecting your brain with your body.”

Whatever was happening to Matthew, some of the finest minds in neuroscience were now working on it. While Steve and he focused on the core problem of keeping him alive, others in the team engaged in various forms of data collection in pursuit of their own Nobel Prizes. Periodically, they asked Matthew questions and made requests, and he did his best to comply.

They asked him to move a feather placed on a table top. He couldn’t. His fingers passed right through it, even though they were stopped by the table below it. After the feather stayed in the same place for a while, he began to feel it but still couldn’t move it. Finally, the

feather became rock-solid to the touch and his fingers couldn't pass through it anymore. Light as a feather it may have been, but it just wouldn't move.

They asked him to describe the contents of a sealed cardboard box brought into the room. He could. But the box had to have a light inside, and it had to be big enough for him to stick his face into. It was a curious experience rather like sticking your face into a tub of water. As soon as his eyes passed the boundary of the box, he could see inside.

They asked him to leave the room. He couldn't. Some sort of force field kept him from stepping through the door when it was open. It felt to him like the door was still closed. However, standing beside the door, he was able to look down the hall and accurately describe what he saw there—which would have been impossible for the immobile patient even if his eyes were open.

They asked him to describe the outcome of a roll of two dice, conducted outside the view of the patient and away from anything that could be construed as a camera or electronic device. He could. He described with 100% accuracy the outcome of every throw even when it was initially invisible to the person who threw them. They asked him to try to influence the outcome of the throw—make it come up snake eyes for example. He couldn't do that.

All the tests seemed to confirm that Matthew could do what he claimed: move anywhere in the room and look at anything he wanted without being able to affect any physical changes. Like any respectable ghost, he could pass through people and objects, but only if they had not been in place for very long. He could even step inside the heads of other

people, seeing the world from the same physical perspective.

However, unlike a traditional ghost, Matthew was bound to the floor by gravity or at least the illusion of it. He could jump no higher than a flesh and blood human could and quickly came back to earth. There was none of the anecdotal “seeing his body from above” associated with claims of Near Death Experiences. He saw his own body from standing level just like everyone else in the room.

At first, there was some bickering among the scientists as they jostled for access to this very valuable test subject, but eventually they established an organized protocol. They would consult with each other outside the room. When they had resolved their differences, they would come in with a simple request or series of quick tests.

Only Steve and Carrie remained in the room the whole time. Steve had apparently forgone his own Nobel ambitions to focus on the task of saving Matthew’s life. Carrie, on the other hand, was something of a basket case, still recovering from the shock of all that was happening. She sat on the sidelines just trying to make sense of it all.

In fact, she was sitting in the very same chair that Cat from the beach was sitting in. They were occupying more or less the same space at the same time, apparently two different visions of the same person, even if they had no similarity in personality. Cat seemed not at all disturbed by Carrie being in her space. Matthew had watched her eyes as various other people sat down in her chair. She saw it happening but didn’t flinch, as though sharing space with someone else was routine for her.

Carrie, however, didn’t have a clue Cat existed. Matthew wondered if he should tell her. The visual keyboard wasn’t a great place to explain

complicated concepts, and if he tried to describe Cat, Carrie would probably freak out even worse than now. Nonetheless, he imagined how the conversation would go...

Matthew: “I am seeing another woman, dear. I met her in my head and she is perfect in every objectively measurable way. She does whatever I ask her to and hardly ever disagrees with me. She looks like you but without the zits. We lived together on a tropical beach for 18 months and had sex on a regular basis. She is scantily attired and is sitting in the same chair you are.”

In an ideal world, Carrie would reply: “I understand, Matt. It was a coping mechanism for your brain damage. I’m sure your imaginary friend and I will get along smashingly.”

Unfortunately, this was the real world, not some Fantasy Island. Out here, women are not always so sanguine and adaptable. The real Carrie, upon hearing about the other woman, would probably stand up, turn gracefully toward her invisible counterpart and state her views succinctly:

“Get the fuck out of my chair!”

60. Experimental Treatment

“What would happen if you co-occupied your body?” said Steve.

“LET’S FIND OUT” typed Matthew.

If Matthew’s consciousness had become detached from his body, maybe all they needed to do is have the ghost lie down in the same place as the body. Perhaps they would merge. No one had clue how this would work at the neurological level, since no one understand what was happening anyway, but it seemed worth a shot.

The patient’s body was suspended in a sling rather than resting in a bed. This meant they had great flexibility in how they positioned it. However, it also made it difficult for Matthew to lie down in the same place as his body given the funny physics involved. There was no stable platform for his “ghost” body to rest on.

Steve arranged for a regular hospital bed to be wheeled into the room. The only modification to it was a depression at the end of the mattress to accommodate the big Afro-style sensor helmet on the patients head. The bed was placed beside the sling structure, the wheels locked down and it remained there for a while. Like other objects, it had to “age” in one place before it became solid to Matthew. After about fifteen minutes, the bed became like Jello to his touch and after 30

minutes it felt as hard as a rock and he could lie down on it. The keyboard display was suspended above the bed so he could look up and type letters on it, hopefully from within the patient's body. While the bed was still empty, Matthew lay down on it and typed some test messages....

“THE RAIN IN SPAIN”

Then he got out of bed and waited for the patient.

Moving the patient from the sling to the bed was a big operation, especially giving all the tubes and wires emanating from the body. It took a team of eight medical staff to pull it off. Once the body was in the bed, facing up, Matthew didn't have much time. Right now, he could lie down effortlessly in the same space, but in a few minutes the body would start to become solid to his touch. No one knew what would happen if the body congealed with the ghost Matthew inside it. This was intended as an experiment, not a permanent solution, so it had to be completed quickly.

Steve sat down in front of the monitors and confirmed that all the sensors attached to the patient's body were still functional. There were about a dozen people behind him, but all they could do was watch. Carrie was there but Cat wasn't interested. She remained in her chair against the wall.

“We're ready.” Steve said, speaking to the place beside the bed where he presumed Matthew was standing. “You can lie down now.”

Then Matthew lay down on the bed, right on top of himself, inside himself in fact. The patient and his ghost were now occupying roughly the same location in space.

Matthew looked up at the visual keyboard suspended above the

bed.

“I’M IN POSITION”

“Are you feeling anything?” said Steve.

“NOT REALLY”

“I got the tiniest little reaction—not now but a few seconds ago. I have a neurosensor on your big toe and it just spiked. It wasn’t major, but I think it was real. There could be some communication along the spinal cord.”

“GOOD!”

“Maybe the problem is alignment. Let’s try to get your virtual brain lined up with your physical brain. I want you to move your head, try to get it perfectly lined up with the physical head.”

That seemed silly to Matthew. With billions of nerve cells in the brain, it was impossible to line them up. Microscopically, there was no way it could happen. Nonetheless, he tried his best, at least for Steve’s benefit. He moved his ghost head up and down and back and forth trying to find some sort of sweet spot, even though he had no idea what he was looking for. As his ghost head moved in and out of his physical head, the lights of the room seemed to flicker off and on. His ghost eyes were open, but when they occupied the same space as his physical eyes, which were closed, the world suddenly turned black. That was one indication that his head was generally in the right position.

Then, when the room was black, he saw a flash of light.

It was the same sort of flash he had experienced many times on the beach—like lightning inside his head. He moved his head a little more and there were a whole cluster of flashes.

He popped out of the patient's head to look up at the keyboard and tell Steve about it.

"I FELT SOMETHING. SAW FLASHES"

"Yes," said Steve. "I was reading a lot of diffuse activity all over the body. I think you're on the right track. Whatever you were doing, see if you can do more of it."

"OK. I WILL BE OUT OF CONTACT. CAN'T SEE FROM THAT POSITION"

"I understand. We'll keep a record for you. Don't stay down there too long, though. We don't want your body to freeze up with you still inside."

Matthew understood. They didn't want to commit to reunification until they understood all the neurological implications.

He settled back down into his previous position where he had experienced the flashes. He moved his head around until got a couple of good flashes. Moving his head more subtly, he got the flashes to increase. They came in clusters now, too many to count.

That's when the convulsions began.

61. A Close Call

When Matthew regained consciousness, he was sitting on the side of the bed, still a ghost. The patient was still lying face up in the middle of it. The bedding was in disarray. The patient's chest was exposed and there were a few more sensors attached to it than there had been before. There was a lot of commotion in the room. Something big had just happened. Beeps from the heart rate monitor told him the patient was still alive, but the heart rate was significantly elevated.

He reached over and felt the patient. He was solid and unmovable, not at all like Jello. This implied significant time had passed.

Matthew lay down on the bed beside the patient so he could see the keyboard display. Using his eyes, controlling those of the patient, he typed out a message on the screen.

"I'M HERE. WHAT HAPPENED?"

"He's okay!" said someone.

Everyone in the room took notice and seemed to breathe a sigh of relief.

Steve spoke to the room, not sure where Matthew was. "You had a seizure," he said. "The good news is you reconnected your brain with your body. The bad news is everything went haywire when you did."

Severe myotonic disruptions originating in the right hemisphere. You went into cardiac arrest. We almost lost you.”

“HOW AM I NOW?”

“Stable,” said Steve. “Definitely not dead. But I can’t guarantee how long this not-dead condition will persist.”

“SO I CAN RECONNECT BUT MY RIGHT WON’T ACCEPT IT”

“That’s about it. I can show you the readouts.”

“NOT NOW. MUST SLEEP”

“I understand. It has been a long day. But how do you sleep? Where do you sleep? Tell us what you want to do.”

“I WILL SLEEP HERE ON THE BED BESIDE THE PATIENT”

“Which side are you on?”

“PATIENT’S RIGHT, BUT PLEASE CLEAR BOTH SIDES OF THE BED.”

“Why both sides?”

“I MIGHT WANT TO SLEEP ON BOTH SIDES”

Steve didn’t understand, but he made sure there was a space of about foot on both sides of the patient. That’s all the space there was on this normal-size hospital bed. Then he ordered everyone out.

Carrie was among the last to leave. She kissed the patient on the forehead while Matthew watched from about a foot away.

“I’m glad you’re back,” she whispered, then she left.

Steve said: “We’re monitoring your vitals from next door, Room 316. We can also read the keyboard. When you wake up, just say something there.”

“OKAY. THX. I APPRECIATE YOU HELPING ME PERSIST.”

“We will help you persist as long as we can, but we need your guidance. None of us has a clue what to do next.”

The lights went out, but the room was still softly lit by the gentle glow from the monitors. Only the patient and two ghosts remained in the room: himself and Cat.

“Come lie down with me,” he said.

“There isn’t room,” said Cat.

“You can lie down on the other side of this guy. I’ll hold your hand.”

She lay down on the opposite side of the bed with the patient between them. It was a curious threesome: two Matthews and a Cat in bed together. Each of the ghosts reached a hand across the patient’s chest and clasped them together near where the patient’s heart was.

“Goodnight my love,” he said.

“I forgot to kiss you,” she replied.

“Don’t get up. Just kiss this other guy and I’ll kiss him too and we’ll call things even.”

Cat kissed the patient on his left cheek while Matthew kissed the patient on his right cheek.

Then they both fell asleep.

62. Life After Death

When they awoke, the whole world was moving. Lights whizzed by above them. They were still on the bed with the patient between them, but the bed was moving. It was being pushed down a hospital corridor with great urgency.

Apparently, they could leave Room 317 as long as they were accompanied by the patient, and judging from commotion around them, the patient wasn't doing well. All of his tubes and wires had been detached from their monitors, and the big helmet of sensors had been removed from his head. The head now exposed was almost bald, covered with only a few days of stubble.

There was no laser directed at the patient's right eyelid, so there was no way Matthew could communicate with the physical world. He was only along for the ride. Cat was along too, still lying on the patient's left while Matthew was on the right. She was awake but not panicked—totally different than Carrie would be under these circumstances.

“Where are we?” she said, yawning.

“I think my body is in crisis. Whatever has happened, they can't treat it in our room. They are taking us someplace where they can treat it. It must be urgent because they disconnected all the telemetry.”

He noticed that the feeding tube had been removed from the patient's mouth.

"It looks like I won't be getting any breakfast this morning," he said.

"I told you," she said. "You never missed breakfast when I made it for you."

The bed was wheeled into an operating room. A surgical team in gowns and masks was already there. Whatever was going on, they weren't wasting any time.

Matthew sat up on the side of the bed while the surgical team worked around him and right through him. Most of the sensors attached to the body were removed and replaced with new sensors. New catheters and IVs were installed. A breathing tube was inserted in the patient's mouth.

From the chatter in the room, Matthew heard they were administering anesthesia. That was a noble courtesy, but it was quite unnecessary. Matthew felt no pain or discomfort and the anesthesia had no effect on his own consciousness.

Cat, however, was looking a little drowsy. In seconds, her eyes closed and she was out like a light.

That was interesting. Anesthesia affected her but not him. It indicated at least that she had a link to the body she was lying beside. She was attached to part of his brain, evidently a part that was vulnerable to anesthesia.

Matthew, on the other hand, was feeling fine. He was as alert and as conscious as he had even been, and he found the operation

fascinating, especially seeing it from so close.

It should have been disconcerting to him to watch them cut into his chest just a few inches from where he sat, but he looked upon it with detachment, as though it was someone else being operated on. Whatever was happening to the patient, it was out of his control right now, so there was no sense getting upset.

The patient either lived or died. No big deal.

Things were a little too busy where he sat, however. People kept moving in front of him and blocking his view of the surgery. He tried to step off the bed, but when his feet touched the floor, he felt the familiar Jello sensation. The floor, being new to him, had not yet hardened. Only the bed, the patient and Cat were solid to his touch.

Cat herself was sleeping deeply and couldn't be roused. She was soft to his touch—not rock hard like the bed or patient—just like a woman should feel. Beside her, the patient was a bloody mess. They were cutting through ribs with a circular saw. The saw made a whining sound as it sliced through bone. Matthew should have cringed at the sight, even if it wasn't his body, but it didn't bother him now. Nothing bothered him. He just wanted a better view, and sitting beside the patient and looking back through the sea of gloved hands was a little awkward.

Since the bed was his only solid island in an ocean of Jello, he decided to stand up. The hardness of bed made it a little easier, and the activities of the surgical team did not interfere in any way with his own movements.

Once he was standing on his side of the bed, he nudged Cat an inch to the side and placed his right foot between her and the patient. He now

stood astride the patient's waist, looking straight down on some major surgery. To his eyes, it was the classic Near Death scene of looking down on his body while its life slipped away. It didn't upset him at all. He just wished he had a camera and could post the photos online somewhere.

His heart was exposed now. He could see it beating.

Then the beating stopped.

People on Earth seem to get all upset about things like that, and the surgical staff certainly seemed concerned, but to Matthew it was just so very interesting. Not upsetting, just interesting. On a heart rate monitor, he could see a flat line, hear the flat beep, but he saw no reason to panic. The scientist in him just observed things neutrally and made logical conclusions.

Conclusion #1: When you die, you don't die.

The patient below him was dead or at least getting there, but he, the ghost, never felt better. No pain. No distress. No regret. No diminishing of conscious awareness. True, his mind seemed to be wiped clean of all specific memories of his past life, but this could be seen as a good thing. No memory meant no distress about things left undone.

Conclusion #2: When you die, you lose the ability to affect changes in the physical world.

From his perspective high above the patient, Matthew could see everything that was happening, perhaps more clearly than anyone else in

the room, but he couldn't change anything, couldn't move so much as a feather. That part could be seen as a bummer. It's not so great to be able to see things that need doing and not be able to do them.

He looked down on the closed eyelids of the patient and conducted a little experiment. While he continued to fix his eyes on the patient, he turned his ghost head from side to side, so his eyeballs were moving within his head. He was looking for small deformations in the patient's eyelids to indicate that the corneas were moving unison. Nothing. He detected no movement in the patient's eyes. Perhaps that lack of response was due to the anesthesia or perhaps it was connected to the patient being dead.

In any case, it seemed clear that Matthew had just lost his only connection to the physical world. If he was in a frame of mind to get upset, this would probably be something to get upset about, but since nothing bothered him now he only used this information to make one more scientific conclusion.

Conclusion #3: Living is better than dying.

This one was a little complicated. Throughout human history, mankind had wondered if there was life after death, and he had just answered that question definitely: "Yes." He was proving it right now. What people throughout history generally failed to ask was, "What is the quality of that life?"

Looking around him, the best scientific conclusion he could come up with was: "Not so great."

The body below him was dead, but maybe not “dead dead.” The surgical staff was still working on him, so apparently they felt there was still some hope. Although Matthew was dead and feeling fine, he didn’t know what would happen when his physical brain completely shut down. Perhaps things would change, or maybe they wouldn’t.

If things didn’t change, then his current circumstances kind of sucked. He was trapped within a limited geography. He could observe the real world but he couldn’t make any changes in it. He couldn’t communicate with the people he once loved. He couldn’t even tell them he was okay. If there were any big projects he was working on before he left, they would have to go unfinished. All of the experience he had gained in his time on Earth and on the beach would have no useful outlet. It was kind of a drag to have to quit the game just as you were getting good at it.

He learned from his months on the beach that Paradise wasn’t all it was cracked up to be. You needed a little Hell to make life worthwhile. You needed to be fighting for or against something. It’s not enough to be fed every day and have your physical needs taken care of, because then you are no better than a caged animal without purpose. Without some dysfunction and the hope of addressing it, existence was as bland as the gruel Cat fed him every morning.

Standing above his own body watching it die, Matthew was not distressed. He had no strong political opinion. He certainly wasn’t going to climb on the Rah-Rah-Save-A-Life-At-Any-Cost bandwagon, but he still had a position if anyone asked. The choice didn’t seem his in this particular circumstance—The doctors were in control.—but it if were his

choice, he would have an answer.

He would rather live than die.

63. A New Approach

“We bought you some time,” said Steve.

“THANK YOU” typed Matthew.

Back in Room 317, the patient looked in sad shape, held together with bandages and thoroughly wired and cathetered through every orifice. There was even a new orifice: a big drainage tube coming out of the middle of his chest. The patient was still unconscious, eyes closed, but there was movement under their lids. The big Afro helmet had been reinstalled to monitor brain activity and the laser was again directed at the right eyelid to read the movements of the cornea.

“Your heart is wired with a pacemaker now,” said Steve. “It will probably keep ticking as long as the rest of your body does. That doesn’t help with your lungs, however. When your brain gives up on your lungs, we’ll be ventilating you for the rest of your life.”

“HOW LONG DO I GOT, DOC?”

“I’m not a doctor and decline to answer that. We’re lurching from crisis to crisis here, any one of which could take you out. Things would be better if we had some help from the inside. If your body wanted to move, it could. At the moment, there is nothing neurological to prevent you from standing up and walking out of here, assuming your muscles were

strong enough. They have atrophied, but physical therapy can bring them back. No therapy can bring back nerve function once it is lost. The key thing is, your body has to want to move. Your brain has to snap out of its funk and take control.”

“TRY CO-OCCUPYING AGAIN”

“If you want, but I would expect the same results. You don’t want to trigger convulsions so soon after surgery.”

“NOT ME. MY PARTNER”

“What? I don’t understand.”

“I’M NOT ALONE HERE. THERE ARE TWO OF US”

Matthew looked over at Cat, who was back in her usual chair passively watching the scene. Beside her on a cot was Carrie, asleep. The past 48 hours had been hard on Carrie, but Cat looked as fresh, perfect and unperturbed as she always did.

“I can hardly grasp the idea of one of you,” said Steve. “What do you mean by two?”

“CALL IT MULTIPLE PERSONALITY. MY PARTNER IS BETTER CONNECTED TO THE RIGHT SIDE. MAYBE SHE CAN CO-OCCUPY WITHOUT CONVULSIONS”

“She?”

“NICE GIRL. A LOT LIKE CARRIE”

“Then your life has not been boring. But is there room in the world for two Carries?”

“NO, BUT THERE ARE TWO WORLDS”

64. Another Trial

Steve expressed his reservations. Now was no time for a new experiment. The patient was extremely weak and might not survive another brainstorm. But Matthew knew that no time was a good time. His assessment of the patient's condition was even less optimistic than Steve's, and he didn't think that waiting would increase the patient's chances of survival. If the body died he would lose his only contact with the physical world, and haunting this hospital for the rest of Eternity just didn't appeal to him. All told, he would rather die of convulsions inside his body than dwell forever in Limbo.

In the end, he convinced Steve to do only one thing: move the patient's bed 18 inches to the right for 15 minutes, then move it back again. There was no medical liability in that, at least in Steve's world. In Matthew's world, moving the body just outside its current boundaries effectively "liquefied" it while the bed underneath remained firm.

He didn't tell Steve that this wasn't an experiment. He intended a permanent solution, one that would ultimately reunify him with his body for good. It had to be done in steps, however, and the steps were too complicated to explain in all-caps on slow keyboard.

Cat was game. She always was. He explained to her what he wanted

her to do once the bed was in position: lie down in his body and see if she could merge with it.

“You have connections with the right hemisphere. I have seen it on the beach. My right hemisphere built the beach and enforced its rules, and at times you knew things that were happening there that you couldn’t have known otherwise. Even though you can talk, I believe you come from the right. I want you to reconnect with it and give it a voice.”

“Will you be coming too?”

“It will be coming a little later. For now, I just want you to make yourself at home. I can’t tell you exactly what to look for, but see if you can find a comfortable groove.”

“I know,” she said. “I have been there before.”

“Then all you have to do is plug back in.”

“I will try.”

The fifteen minutes were now over. As previously instructed, Steve pushed the bed 18 inches back to its original position and locked down the wheels. Matthew touched the patient and his fingers passed right through, stopping on the bed below.

Everything was ready.

“Where do you want the keyboard display?” asked Steve. Even though the actual communication always came from the patient’s eye movement, the character display faced the ghost, or at least the place where the ghost claimed to be.

“RIGHT THERE IS FINE. I WILL REMAIN STANDING BESIDE THE BED. MY COLLEAGUE WILL LIE DOWN AND TRY TO OCCUPY THE BODY”

Cat was standing beside Matthew, waiting for instructions. She showed no signs of fear. Only Matthew was afraid. There were many things that could go wrong, and he was trying his best to anticipate them.

“Should I wake Carrie?” said Steve.

“YES PLEASE DO”

“I’m already awake,” said Carrie, approaching from the sidelines.

“What’s happening?”

“UM, DEAR, I HAVE SOMETHING TO TELL YOU. I’M SEEING ANOTHER WOMAN”

Carrie laughed. “Oh really? Where did you meet this other woman?”

“IN MY HEAD”

“Okay. Is she better than me?”

“NOT BETTER. JUST DIFFERENT. SHE LOOKS LIKE YOU THO”

“An imaginary girlfriend?”

“YOU COULD SAY THAT”

“Who do you love more, her or me?”

“DON’T MAKE ME CHOOSE”

Carrie was confused, as was everyone else in the room, but she seemed more amused than jealous.

“It sounds like ‘It’s complicated’ describes your relationship status.”

“YES”

“But why are you telling me about this woman now?”

“BECAUSE YOU MAY BE MEETING HER IN FEW MINUTES”

65. Cat in the Hall

In the corridor, there were doors. Doors on the left. Doors on the right. Doors on the floor and ceiling. The corridor was nothing but doors. Each door was a choice. You could either open it or leave it closed. Once you opened a door, you had to deal with whatever lay inside. You couldn't close a door once you opened it. You had to live with it because it was your choice now.

Cat hated choices.

Usually, Matthew made choices for her. That was fine. Usually Matthew made good choices, and even if he didn't, they always learned something valuable, like "Don't open that door again."

But now Matthew wasn't here. She called and called but he didn't come. Cat was all alone, floating down a corridor with a bunch of doors.

How to choose?

Why even bother? What will be, will be. Things had always worked out in the past, so why shouldn't they now? Sometimes you just had to trust in a Higher Power.

But a Higher Power wasn't doing anything. Cat was just floating and the doors were passing by. Once a door passed, you couldn't open it anymore. That opportunity had passed.

Every door looked like every other door. There were no numbers on the doors or anything else to tell them apart. What is the point in choosing if all the choices looked the same?

Then Cat realized what her real choice was: She could either choose or not choose. She could just keep drifting down the corridor forever, which was her natural inclination, or she could choose a door. Maybe it didn't matter which door you chose as long as you chose something. What lay behind the door could be good or bad but at least it moved you forward and helped you choose future doors.

"So that's the plan," said Cat to herself. "I'll just pick a door, any door."

"But how?" she said back to herself. What if she picked a wrong door? Would Matthew be mad? What if she overlooked an even better door? Wouldn't she have regrets?

"Just open a damn door!" said Cat to herself.

"Okay, okay, don't rush me."

"I am rushing you! Matthew wanted us to make ourselves at home, to get in a groove. We can't do that if you don't choose a damn door!"

"Okay... I'm doing it... I'm choosing... Right now... A door..."

"That one on the right. Open that one."

"Why the right?"

"Because Matthew said something about the right. DO IT NOW!"

Cat reached for the doorknob and turned it.

Then she opened the door.

66. Cat Steps In

The patient opened his eyes.

It sent a shock wave through the room.

“Holy shit!” said Carrie.

“My God!” said Steve.

Suitable murmurs and exclamations emanated from the rest of the crowd in the room.

The patient’s eyes moved. They pivoted in their sockets, trying to focus. Steve waved his hand in front of the eyes, and they tracked it, left to right.

“He’s responsive!” said Steve.

The room erupted in applause.

Matthew, the ghost, stood beside the bed, half inside a member of the audience. He wasn’t ready to applaud because he wasn’t there yet. Nonetheless, the applause filled him with warm feelings. At least there were people rooting for him.

“Cat,” he said. “Can you hear me?”

The patient’s eyes searched the room. Apparently, Cat could hear him but couldn’t see him.

The patient’s mouth moved ever so slightly, but there was no way

he/she could speak. After 18 months of inactivity, the body would have to relearn all its motor skills.

“I hear you,” said Cat. Since she couldn’t use her mouth, she had to speak with her mind.

“How do you feel?” said Matthew.

“I am comfortable. I have found a groove.”

“Great! I am very happy.”

He touched the patient’s hand. It was now solid to his touch. Rock solid. It appeared that Cat was in there for good.

Steve spoke: “Matthew, if you can hear me, your vitals look good. No sign of seizures. I’ve got normal responsive activity in the right hemisphere and on the left side of the body, but the left hemisphere and right side are still flaccid. Looks like you’re halfway there. I’m going to turn the keyboard display toward your eyes.”

There was no sense in that. Cat couldn’t read or write. The letters would mean nothing to her. However, he couldn’t do anything with the keyboard either, since Cat now controlled the patient’s eyes. For the moment, there was no easy way for him to communicate with the people in the room.

The keyboard display was repositioned above the patient. The laser was switched to “eyes open” mode and it was pointed at the patient’s right eye from the side. A cursor appeared on the display, but it skittered across the field of letters. As the patient’s gaze stopped on one letter, a character appeared in the blank space above the grid. Everyone in the room seemed to be focused on the letters, but they were just random gibberish. “Q5JJM!LT...”

“What do I do?” said Cat to Matthew.

“Look away from the screen,” said Matthew. “You’re just confusing them.”

Cat looked away and the gibberish stopped.

“I’m going to tell you where to move your eyes,” said Matthew. “We’re just going to type two things. First I want you look back at the lower right corner of the screen, and keep your eyes there.”

“Ok,” she said, and the cursor appeared on the screen again, just outside the grid of letters.

He instructed her to look at the character in the lower corner of the grid, which he knew as “Z”, then he told her to stare at the symbol just to the left of it.

“Y” appeared in the space above the grid.

He then directed her eyes through another series of moves so she was staring at another symbol in the middle of the grid.

“N” appeared above the grid.

“Okay, now look away from the screen and don’t look at it again. I hope they get my message.”

“Y N,” said Steve. “What does that mean? Yes, no? Does that mean you want only yes-no questions?”

“Move your eyes up and down,” said Matthew, and Cat did it.

“Ah, okay,” said Steve. “When you move your eyes up and down, that means Yes, and when you move them side-to-side, that means No. Is that what you mean?”

“Move your eyes up and down,” said Matthew to Cat. “Whenever I say ‘Yes’, you move your eyes like that, and when I say ‘No’ you will move

your eyes side-to-side. Got it?"

"Yes," said Cat, moving her eyes up and down.

Matthew laughed. "Okay, but only do it when I say it, not when you do."

"Okay," said Cat.

"Please show me 'No'," said Steve.

"No," said Matthew, and Cat moved her eyes side-to-side.

"Good," said Steve. "Are you done with the keyboard?"

"Yes," said Matthew, and Cat moved her eyes up-and-down.

"Are you inside your body?" said Steve.

"Yes no," said Matthew.

"I don't understand," said Cat.

"Do it both ways, up-and-down and then side-to-side."

She did.

"Okay," said Steve, "so your colleague is in the body but you are not."

"Yes," said Matthew, repeated in the patient's eyes.

"How is she? Is she doing well?"

"Yes."

"How are you? Are you doing well?"

"Yes."

"Any pain?"

"No."

"Should we repeat the procedure and bring you in?"

"Yes."

"Okay, I will move the bed 18 inches to the left and you will try to

co-occupy. Is that what you want?

“Yes.”

“Are you ready now?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, here goes. Good luck.”

67. Back to Earth

“What would you like for breakfast, sir?” said Cat.

“Let me see,” said Matthew. “How about three eggs, over easy, two strips of bacon, hash browns, buttered toast with...” He stopped to think about it. “...apricot preserves.”

“Of course,” she said, heading toward the kitchen. “Will that be white, rye or wheat?”

“Wheat, thank you.”

“Excellent choice,” she said, and she headed to the kitchen.

He was sitting on the patio of their beachside bungalow. Only there wasn't any beach. In fact, there wasn't much remaining of this world except the patio and the rooms leading off it.

Above him and all around him, sixty-three other Matthews were also sitting on their patios. They occupied the inside of a complex polygon, sort of like a giant hamster ball.

Matthew looked up and said, “Good morning!” and all the other Matthews said “Good morning!” back. They all said it at about the same time. The hamster ball wasn't very big, so there wasn't much of an echo.

Then Cat appeared at the side of his breakfast table. She looked distressed.

“There isn’t any breakfast,” she said.

Matthew laughed. “What? No breakfast? In all the months we have lived together, you have never failed to cook an exquisite meal for me. How do you account for this mysterious breakfast shortage?”

“I don’t know. I just went to make it and there wasn’t any.”

“Hmmm,” said Matthew. “My memory is fuzzy, but I sense a crisis is all of this, like time is running out. The world has been getting smaller and smaller, and now the ultimate insult: no breakfast.”

“I’m really sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s not your fault. This is probably just the kick in the pants we need to get moving.”

“Get moving where?”

“Back to the real world. Back to the regular grind.”

“What is the real world?”

“I can’t explain. It’s a lot like this world but bigger and it usually makes more sense. Or sometimes it does.”

“Will we be together?”

“Yes. We won’t be able to escape from each other, just like here.”

With a sweep of his hand, he indicated the whole hamster ball. All the other Matthews waved their hands at the same time while talking to their respective Cats.

Matthew went on: “Our roles are going to change a little. Instead of you making breakfast for me, I’ll be making it for you. You also won’t be able to see me anymore, unless we look in a mirror.”

“Why won’t I be able to see you?”

“Because we’ll be in the same body. You’ll be on one side of it and

I'll be on the other. It's like I'm the pilot and you're the co-pilot, or sometimes the other way around. We have to work together to make the plane fly."

"How will we communicate?"

"We'll talk to each other, just like we're doing now. When there is something you think I should know or something you need, you will tell me in words, and I will respond in words. Words are the only way for the two sides to talk to each other since the accident. It will be awkward at first, but after a while we'll learn just the right words to get things done."

"How do we speak to each other through the same mouth?"

"We won't have to. We'll be speaking in our head. Only you and I will hear."

"Will you feed me M&Ms?"

"Of course. But you can't eat too many of them or we'll start feeling sick."

"Not me."

"Maybe not, but I will feel sick if you eat too many. We will have to negotiate and decide how many M&Ms is a good number."

"Okay, when do we start?"

"Seeing as there's no breakfast this morning, there seems no point in hanging around. Let's go now."

He stood up and took her hand. He led her toward the bedroom.

"Come lie down with me," he said.

68. Begin Again

“Hello, Cat, can you hear me?”

“I hear you, Matthew.”

It was totally dark. There was nothing in the universe but two voices: his and Cat’s.

“You don’t have to call my Matthew anymore. I remember who I am.”

“Okay, Matthew.”

“Okay, Cat. How do you feel?”

“Fine. How do you feel?”

“Fine, but I think that’s about to change.”

“How so?”

“Are you familiar with something called ‘pain’?”

“I think I remember it. It wasn’t nice. There was a lot of screaming.”

“Pain isn’t nice at all. We’ve had a vacation from pain for a long time, but I think the vacation is over.”

“What is going to happen?”

“I don’t know exactly, but I think you and I will be experiencing a

whole lot of pain in a few minutes. You will be screaming and I will be screaming. It may seem like the pain goes on forever, but you just have to hold on. If you can just wait things out, I guarantee things will get better.”

“What if they don’t get better?”

“Then we will die, but that’s no big deal. We’ve been through that before.”

“How long will the pain last?”

“I have no idea, but just keep talking to me and we’ll get through it. The important thing is keep talking. Even if you are mad at me, don’t give me the Silent Treatment, okay?”

“I never gave you any Silent Treatment.”

He laughed. “We’ll see how it goes. Just remember that if you want anything, you have to ask for it in words, because that’s the only way I’ll know. Okay?”

“Okay?”

“So are you ready?”

“Ready for what?”

“Ready for our new life.”

“I’m ready.”

“Let’s go!”

Then Matthew opened his eyes.