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Instead of Nothing

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Ross Helford

December 2013

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Something vs. Nothing

Once upon a time all that was wasn't. And this is different, mind you, than there being *nothing*; for there to be *nothing* there has to be *something* to which it is contrasted. But there wasn't *something*, so therefore there could not have been *nothing*. Time did not exist. Space did not exist. All that existed was the Void.

And then all that wasn't became all that was. Why? Perhaps an Almighty God willed it into being. Perhaps not. If you, the reader, find comfort in the notion of an Almighty God turning all that isn't into all that is, please don't let this humble narrative change that. And if you, the reader, prefer to simply shrug your shoulders and say, the hell if I know how it happened, by all means do that. The events on the following pages will unfold either way.

PART I:
DIASPORA

“The hamster not only loves his cage, he’d be lost without it.”
- *Geoff Dyer, Out of Sheer Rage*

Cosmic Chess Match

His eyes opened as the first beams of sunlight fought their way through drawn shades, infiltrating the cage with slender, intermittent laserbeams of luminescence. He yawned and stretched, stumbled to his feet, scuttled to his corner and laid a pellet atop a small pile of similarly-shaped pellets.

He felt hunger and scampered to his food dish. If he had possessed a sense of irony, he might have noticed little visual discrepancy between what came in one end and what went out the other. He, of course, possessed no such sense of irony.

He crunched on the last of his food, then washed it down with water from the nearby bottle, which poked into his cage at a slight angle and was held in place by a metal clasp—these are details that meant nothing to him. He urinated while he drank, and when he was finished he felt a rush of energy. He scurried to the wheel, climbed aboard, and ran at a steady clip for approximately five minutes, after which point he scuttled to his sawdust bed and went back to sleep.

An hour later, he would re-awaken and do it all over again. He would have continued this ritual hour after hour, day after day, year after year until his relatively short life span came to its abrupt, inevitable conclusion.

His name was Sprinkles, though he was not aware of his name. Nor did he know what a name was. He had no sense of self or place or time.

Sprinkles wasn't bored. Sprinkles wasn't lonely. Sprinkles wasn't happy and he wasn't sad.

It might seem strange, in a multiverse as big and boundless as our own, in which anything and everything is possible, and infinity is the only constant, to dedicate a substantial portion of this narrative to a creature as small and seemingly insignificant as little Sprinkles the hamster. And, truth be told, had the forthcoming cataclysm gone according to plan, Sprinkles (to say nothing of the rest of life on Earth) might have perished without notice.

Instead, while Sprinkles slept, the universe trembled. A dark energy blasted through the cosmos, comets thrown off course, black holes allowing light to escape, matter turning to anti-matter.

In the latest, boldest move of a cosmic chess match that began in those infinitesimal instants pre-dating the Big Bang, this dark energy, known as the Entity, asserted itself on Sprinkles' plane of existence and entered his body, disturbing an otherwise dreamless sleep.

Mentor & Protégé

“I dreamed of her again.”

“Your mother?”

“Yes. And no.”

“How do you mean?”

“I mean, it was the same woman, but I don’t think it was my mother, my *biological* mother, I mean.”

“Who do you think it was?”

“Mother,” he said.

Eli often spoke cryptically, particularly in matters of great significance. “Mother of everything,” he went on. “Of me, of you, of the trees, the earth, even *them*.”

“Mother Nature?” David asked.

Eli nodded. “Yes, Mother Nature, that is a good name.”

Two Scientists

1931

The lecture hall is packed. The world's most famous scientist not named Einstein steps to the raised podium. To his right is a telescope on a tripod. To his left, a table with a microscope. Behind him is a blackboard, washed and cleaned and gleaming, and he thinks what a shame it is that this pure slate might ever again be sullied by even a single chalk mark.

He takes in the sea of eager faces, clears his throat, and lurches forward in broken German, "*Danke, dass sie gekommen sind, mein name ist Martin Rowand...*"

Applause cuts him off mid-sentence, ringing through the lecture hall. Martin shifts impatiently. He has never been particularly fond of this type of adoration. In Martin's opinion, the proof that every seat in the lecture hall has been filled is all he needs to feel appreciated. Therefore, Martin surmises, the applause is not so much directed at *him* as it is the audience applauding *itself* just for being here. Though he understands the relativity of time better perhaps than anyone living (even possibly Dr. Einstein), he also recognizes all too well the vessel through which his conscious self must process and interpret existence is stuck traversing time in a frustratingly ephemeral, chronological manner. And every second spent on trivialities such as prolonged, enthusiastic, meaningless ovation feels to Martin like an intolerable waste of his precious, fleeting time.

When the adulation finally subsides, Martin stumbles forward with another mouthful of poor German pronunciation. “*Ich wünsche, dass ich diese Vorlesung in Ihrer Sprache halte koennte, but,*” he transitions onto the surer footing of his native tongue, “when a man dedicates his life to science, he has very little time for the pursuit of other languages, to say nothing of family, friends, dating, the cinema, drives in the countryside, walks in the park, a good book.” He pauses, looks out at the young faces, and then offers his punchline: “Perhaps it is not too late to do something else with your lives.”

The audience laughs respectfully, but the young genius sitting in the back of the lecture hall notes a sadness to Dr. Rowand’s intonation, and knows this is not a joke.

Although the young genius, Sigmund Schmidt, was the first to arrive, he chose a seat in the last row. Sigmund did so because he does not wish for his classmates to know how excited he is for the lecture, fearing that if they were to see him as some excited, over-eager little urchin, they might use this knowledge to harm him somehow, to lessen and belittle him. Sigmund believes it is critical they see him as aloof, disaffected, partially interested, enigmatic. Dangerous, if at all possible. In short, the less people know about him, the better.

Not even his own mother knows how homesick he is, how badly he misses her, his sister, even his bullying brothers and intimidating father. When Sigmund completed his secondary education at the age of fifteen, he remained at home, completing his undergraduate studies at Erlangen-Nürnberg. But at eighteen, when Sigmund became the youngest student in European history to be accepted to a doctor of physics program—he could have studied anywhere, from Portugal to Poland—he was scared to leave. His

mother told him he didn't have to until he was ready. But his father made it clear he didn't have a choice in the matter, not unless he wished to stop his education altogether and work in some administrative capacity at *Zeyde's* shoe factory.

His brothers, who were also blessed with high intelligence but lacked Sigmund's work ethic, had been given a similar choice (albeit at an older age) and jumped at the second option. Each presently enjoys the comfortable life and privileges afforded to managers in the family business. For Sigmund, however, the argument against such a career path went beyond the fact that the tedium alone would crush his spirit within an hour. It was the dismal working conditions, the poor light, low pay, and long hours extended to their employees that troubled him far more. His father was fond of reminding Sigmund and his siblings, and really anyone within earshot, that the Schmidt family had weathered the previous decade better than most because they had been prepared and willing to sacrifice in ways others were not. Implicit in these diatribes was that this somehow entitled them to their wealth, and others to their toil.

However, Sigmund's father was not blind to the changing political tide. "The world is an uncertain place," his father had said to him. "Anyone can perform physical labor, but few can *think* like you think. You know what *they* have done to us throughout history, what *they* can do again. Your mind could very well save your life. The question, my boy, is whether you will disengage from the teat long enough to embrace your destiny."

Applying himself to his studies has been a way to stave off homesickness. It has also insulated Sigmund from the ostracism of his peers—not because they are older, but

because of *who* he is, because of *what* he is, because science, even amongst scientists, has become, in this world of rapidly-escalating insanity, a double-edged sword. On one edge is the science Sigmund loves and embraces, and why he idolizes Martin Rowand: innovative, forward-thinking, humanity-affirming. On the other edge, are those blithering adherents of *Deutsche Physik*, using science as a political tool, in which a person's value, worth, even his right to exist, has somehow been pre-determined not by the content of his mind, or the wholeness of his character, but by the very atoms and genetic materials that have collaborated so miraculously to produce his humanity. And though Sigmund has spent his life breathing the same air as his Aryan peers, has eaten the same food, imbibed the same beer, mastered the same academic requirements, and endured the same crippling economic conditions (admittedly better than most), the subjective criteria of his DNA have astoundingly become the irrefutable (and undeniably erroneous) scientific proof that Sigmund is somehow less, and *they* somehow more.

And though Sigmund, like his father, senses the wheels of history rolling ever closer to madness, he also knows there will be a day in which he is on top and *they* are on the bottom. And when that day comes, Sigmund will not forget.

At the podium, Martin shuffles through his notes and resumes his lecture. "Science and religion both exist as means to explain phenomena that are otherwise inexplicable. These sister philosophies have carved out their turf thusly: science strives to explain that which can be seen. Religion strives to explain that which cannot."

Martin gestures toward the telescope. “With the advent of the telescope, science usurped the heavens, no longer the domain of the supernatural, but of planets and stars and comets, whole galaxies, the beginning of all things, and the end.”

Martin Rowand is a scientist, Sigmund believes, who will change the world. He also appreciates the man’s politics. They are, by necessity, carefully coded, but there nonetheless. If you know what you’re looking for. Even in his densest academic treatises, Dr. Rowand will often digress amidst sophisticated equations and formulae with commentary about how this might be applied in service of humanity, about there being enough to go around, ending conflict, coexistence—“All that Bundist tripe” as his father would scornfully label it. This from a man who gladly spends more on hired thugs breaking skulls in the picket lines than on raising wages a pittance.

Unlike Dr. Rowand, Sigmund harbors no delusions that humanity can—or, in fact, *deserves* to—be saved. As far as Sigmund’s concerned, the human race is hardly even worth the effort. However, this philosophical disagreement with Dr. Rowand, to Sigmund’s way of thinking, is more an incompatibility of the ends, as opposed to the means.

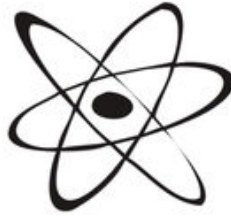
In Sigmund’s eyes, Martin Rowand is the world’s greatest mind. He has a conscience; he has genius—qualities of which Sigmund, admittedly, is also in possession, and arguably in excess of Dr. Rowand’s. But there is that other intangible: Martin Rowand has ideas. He intuitively sees and understands the universe, and his conclusions are invariably as brilliant as they are obvious. Creativity is the best word he can think of to describe it. Sigmund desperately wants to be creative like Martin Rowand.

Seeing his idol for the first time, Sigmund becomes aware of another element that provokes within him a sinister, creeping envy. This is not for Dr. Rowand's many accomplishments (after all, Martin Rowand is older, and Sigmund can reasonably expect to be as accomplished—or more so—once he sails past his thirtieth birthday), but rather for the attributes he possesses that Sigmund, so long as he remains shackled to his mortal shell, never will.

Where Dr. Rowand is a commanding physical presence, square-jawed and handsome, Sigmund is scrawny and stringy and weak, with pale, near-transparent skin; where Dr. Rowand has jet-black hair combed smartly to one side and infinitely blue eyes, Sigmund's uncombed hair is the color and texture of sawdust, and his sunken, bulbous eyes (the corneas an ever-so-slight yellowish hue) give his face a distinctly rodent-like appearance. Moreover, even though Sigmund might be the youngest ever accepted to a doctor of physics program on the European continent, Martin Rowand had been three months younger when Columbia University admitted him into its physics PhD program in the fall of 1920.

Martin picks up the microscope, holds it out toward the audience. "With the advent of this magnificent piece of machinery, science could at last explain how people became sick. Whole life forms heretofore unimagined burst into human consciousness. And now, my colleagues, my friends, eager bright young minds, science finds itself at the edge of another frontier."

Martin takes a piece of chalk and draws:



“The atom. Building block of the universe. Of all things great,” Martin motions to the telescope, “and small,” to the microscope. “Limitless power. Limitless potential. Limitless possibilities to serve humanity.”

The lecture comes to an end, and Martin is rushed by a mob of adoring students. The sight of their fawning makes Sigmund sick to his stomach. Aryan buffoons. Having spent so much time convincing one another of their perceived superiority, they think simply by regurgitating some advanced concept or another that they’ve committed to memory, they can convince a man of Martin Rowand’s intellectual heft that they are somehow equals. Sigmund feels a familiar darkness welling from within, imagining the many ways in which he would like for *them* die. And even though he had wanted more than anything to speak with Dr. Rowand, after witnessing this wretched display of sycophantic desperation, Sigmund would just as soon wet his fingers and stick them in an electrical socket.

Sigmund starts to gather his books when he sees Professor Helm approaching. “Aren’t you going to talk to him?” Professor Helm wants to know.

Although Sigmund pretends not to hear, his teacher won’t abandon the probe. “You’ve waited all term for this lecture,” he says. “The bulk of your research is rooted in the work innovated by Dr. Rowand. Go talk to him!”

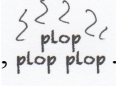
“And be like them? Those parasitic amoeba who can barely even grasp the simplest concepts of molecular biology?”

“You are my most brilliant student, Sigmund, you could never be like them.”
And then he adds, with a tired sigh, “Though sometimes I think you would be happier if you were.”

“I will not swoon like a schoolgirl for Martin Rowand. If we are to meet it will be because he wishes it based on my body of work.”

“In that case, Sigmund, it is only a matter of time.”

Awakening

When he awoke, Sprinkles had yet to realize everything had changed. Like always, he scuttled to his little corner and dropped a steaming pile of pellets atop the pile of previous defecation. Sprinkles relished the sensation, squeezing each and every turdlet from his tiny hamster anus, . Such satisfaction!

The moment he finished, Sprinkles' stomach gurgled. Such hunger! Countless times before, Sprinkles would have simply scuttled over to his food dish and stuffed his face, but this time he took a moment to contemplate this extraordinary sensation. His body was still tingling from his bowel movement. And yet, at the same time, it was trembling with a great appetite. Sprinkles savored this moment of simultaneous relief and anticipation. It gave him the shivers.

He took a deep breath, then dove face first into the crunchy pellets, losing himself to that nether-world of instinct, eating, eating, eating, eating. But then a notion made him stop. Sprinkles looked back at his pile of shit. He then looked down at his food pellets. Then back at his shit. Then one more time at his pellets. And Sprinkles, for the first time, became aware of the conspicuous fact that what he ate and what he crapped looked virtually identical. This realization filled Sprinkles with a sensation that was simultaneously joyous and surprising, seizing his body and provoking him to open his tiny mouth and emit little squeaks.

Sprinkles was laughing.

His laughter turned to hysterics. Sprinkles rolled in the sawdust, his body tensing and releasing, gripped by a seemingly endless cascade of mirth. Sprinkles laughed until his body ached and he felt spent, head spinning, muscles cramping. This was followed, in short order, by painful spasms starting in his abdomen and ending in his throat.

The hiccups were agony. And just when he thought the spasms had abated, another would grip his body. In a blind panic, Sprinkles began to run, from one side of his cage to the other, back and forth, while the hiccups continued jolting his body. Sprinkles scuttled to his water dispenser and drank deeply, the hiccups refusing to subside. He pulled harder on the metallic nipple, until his body felt heavy. Sprinkles staggered backward, dazed, exhausted, head spinning. The hiccups were gone.

Grateful such torment could prove finite, Sprinkles stumbled back to his sawdust bed, when something caught his eye. He moved closer until he was pressing his nose to the glass wall, staring at a translucent creature that seemed to hover in space right in front of him.

Sprinkles' mind jolted with activity, wordlessly pondering this surprise visitor. This, in turn, provoked Sprinkles to become aware of the present, of *now*. And what's more, how this now was somehow different from the way he had been in the time before, of *then*, when external stimulus was merely the catalyst requiring from Sprinkles an instinctual response. Whereas, presently, his instincts were stymied by doubt and questions: where did this creature come from, and why hadn't Sprinkles ever noticed it before? He moved backward a step, and the creature also moved backward a step. Sprinkles moved forward, and the creature moved forward.

He stared in wonder at the creature staring back at him, its beady black eyes having a trancelike effect. Sprinkles fell under their spell, was swallowed whole, became engulfed in darkness. And then the darkness slowly dissipated, revealing vast chasms of nothing that spanned the splotches of black pigment billowing through space like ink in water.

Sprinkles could see planets and stars and swirling galaxies, the entirety of the universe. And then another universe, and another, hundreds, thousands, millions, spinning on a never-ending axis, expanding in all directions.

And then, one by one, these universes folded into one another, collapsing and contracting, diminishing in size and scope, until they became a single, super-massive black dot, which then became one beady eye reflected in the glass of a hamster's cage.

And Sprinkles, in this extraordinary instant, realized he was staring at himself.

slide-to-open

The heavy winter snows were melting into memory. The suite's high corner windows took in a wealth of morning light, and even on days colder than this, David would open them to let in the swirling outside air, which he insisted connected them to the natural rhythms of the planet.

Eli felt a familiar rush of excitement for springtime. This was a morning for long hikes, for drawing and documenting nature. It was a morning to play and explore, to dream and imagine, to read a favorite book. But before Eli could do any of these things, he had to meditate.

He and David sat on a rug made from the skinned pelt of an animal called *bear*, repeating a mantra in a language Eli did not understand, whose words had been lost to the fog of Calamity.

In this state, Eli had an idea that just might solve the mystery of TabPad. He knew David wouldn't approve. This was supposed to be a time to clear one's mind, not fill it with plans and schemes. But in truth, Eli had found that doing precisely this made their twice-daily meditation practice, if not enjoyable, at least tolerable.

What's more, Eli had discovered there wasn't really another time in his day when he had the opportunity to think, to really think. To come up with big ideas that would propel him forward in the world. Unlike David, Eli was not content to spend the rest of his days behind the Town walls. At twelve years old, however, he was not yet ready to leave either; nor did Eli know what he'd do or where he'd go. But he was actively

engaged in finding all this out, and until that time, Eli was content to continue building the kind of varied skill set that would serve him in whatever this world, or any other, might throw his way.

He understood, for example, the importance of the two hours of compulsory martial arts training David demanded in the late afternoons. And besides, *that* was fun. There was the thrill of simulated combat, which only recently had evolved from empty hands to blade-on-blade. For his last birthday, David gave Eli the same Samurai sword he himself had used in his youth. Because the actual date of Eli's birthday was unknown, they celebrated it each year on the occasion of the first snowfall, commemorating their arrival at the Town, which had been heralded by a blizzard that kept them snowed in for many months.

Eli's katana was long and sleek, curved and slender. It was heavier than he thought it would be, especially after all those years of observing David swing his own, larger, heavier katana with such effortless grace. Still, after several weeks of daily use, the muscles on Eli's arms thickened and became capable of commanding the sword's weight and heft. As he grew ever more competent with the weapon, Eli imagined the day when he would wield it in live combat. And he wondered, when the moment came for him to at last plunge the lethal blade into *their* flesh, if it might provide a sense of peace and closure, if it would end the terrors that haunted his dreams, the images of which he consigned to that darkened room of the Inn, the *nightmare room*, where upon its walls he would draw pictures of traumas remembered or imagined or both.

In addition to their daily sparring matches, Eli also enjoyed the intricacies of the martial arts discipline. The steadily sophisticating progression of movement and elaborate combinations, and the gracefully choreographed *kata*, which both simulated an imaginary fight and held within its movements the history of an art form that stretched back thousands of years to that moment of profundity when a person first discovered that by mimicking the movements of animals, one could harness and enhance the natural physical power of the human body.

Beyond martial arts and meditation, Eli's education was primarily self-guided. He read all the ancient books he could find. Works of literature, science, philosophy, history, as well as primitive tomes of mythology that, according to David, had once been considered the literal words of "God" in the eyes of billions—billions! That this planet could have been so densely populated was, to Eli, nearly as outrageous as an almighty deity creating, evidently on a whim, the heavens and the Earth—an arrogant enough supposition in itself, that this tiny rock hurtling through the cosmos was somehow either singular or special.

David, for the most part, was a permissive guardian, although Eli didn't exactly love doing all the chores that were required of him. Still, once he got going, he was able to lose himself in the repetition of cleaning, cooking, washing, drying, stitching, shoveling, which he found far more centering and calming than the willful inactivity of meditation and mantra.

Eli's long, lean limbs demanded constant movement. His developing mind needed activity, to be engaged and computing and planning toward a goal. David's counter-

argument, of course, was that meditation brought him closer to his goal by working to unify mind, body, and spirit. But this did not get to the root of the problem, which was that Eli found the practice boring at best, an intolerable waste of time at worst. And at the present, with his sudden burst of TabPad-related inspiration, coupled with spring's first gasp of glorious golden sunlight beckoning him to the world outside, this was as bad as it got.

It took tremendous discipline to remain still, Eli channeling nervous energy to his toes, which grasped a wiry tuft of the rug's fur. The bear hide made Eli sad. It felt disrespectful that such a creature could have walked this earth, only to be killed and skinned and turned into furniture. It had been salvaged from the time of the ancients, its four limbs splayed, giant head staring slack-jawed through artificial eyeballs. To Eli's way of thinking, this bear was a creature as unbelievable and unlikely as a griffin or a unicorn or an owl. Actually, he was pretty sure owls used to be real. David, however, believed that by using its pelt as the conduit for their meditation practice, they were honoring the essence of the animal by merging their own life force with its memory, linking to a continuum in which past, present, and future blurred and became one.

Not unlike the scabbard that held Eli's katana, which was made of the tanned hide of an animal called *cow*, so long extinct not even David had sampled the famed delicacy of its meat, *beef*, the bear rug had a certain smell. There was, to both animal-based artifacts, a certain appetizing mustiness that appealed to Eli's carnivorous instincts.

The morning's mantra was an old and tedious standby, *sa-ta-na-ma*, and with each syllable spoken, a different finger on each hand was supposed to press against the

thumb. Eli's mind, however, replaced these syllables with four others that were at the forefront of his mind: *slide-to-op-en, slide-to-op-en, slide-to-op-en*. And could it be that he had finally solved the riddle? Could it really be that simple?

Of course, nothing thus far concerning TabPad had been simple.

Following that first miserable winter six years earlier, once the snows had melted enough for Eli to roam and explore, he discovered many locks on many doors. That spring, Eli became increasingly skilled in conjuring his way through to the contents within, whether by breaking a window or picking a lock—which he would do with the cleverly-rigged bits of silverware he'd taken, deconstructed, then reconstructed from the Inn's kitchen. For the most part, these hidden things were only of value to the people of a civilization that was no more. Chief amongst these were coins: the gold, silver, and copper currency that so often drove the most wicked deeds in the books of fiction and history Eli enjoyed reading, but which, absent a larger context, were boring and pointless.

Eli also found, behind lock and key, crumpled papers denoting ownership of this property or that. These held Eli's interest only inasmuch as they cited the date of the properties at their points of purchase. Nearly all had a purchase date of C72, which was the year following the Town's founding. David had been born in the year C100, part of the baby boom following the Centennial festivities from earlier that year. According to David's reckoning, it was now the year C132, not that such details held any kind of day-to-day relevance other than, Eli supposed, marking the time elapsed between the Great Calamity and the present. One hundred thirty-two years after the end. A miniscule blip on

the planet's geological timeframe; the planet itself an evermore miniscule blip in the vast scheme of the universe.

Until he opened the vault, the scavenged items Eli held of highest value were those that had been out in the open. He found many children's toys, carved animals on wheels, a train set with wooden tracks, dolls and stuffed animals, and a set of small colorful blocks that remained connected when you pressed them together. Eli found these toys pleasant distractions, a way to pass the time, though they did nothing in the way of helping him accomplish his goals.

Eli discovered very few books in places other than David's childhood home, where tomes of great diversity were stacked floor-to-ceiling. Most of these other books detailed boring financial esoterica, or documented purported lineage linking certain Townsfolk to supposedly renowned pre-Calamity figures—not that these names meant a thing to Eli—as if the mere virtue of genetics denoted some sort of inherited superiority, which was one of the more peculiar and enduring practices embedded within the history of his species.

And then, occasionally, Eli would come across an album of ancient photographs. For a time, he enjoyed these greatly, relishing in particular the images of children, their carefree smiles, easy friendships, intent focus on playing the game of youth. But more than anything, what Eli appreciated was the context of the photographs, the fact that these children were safe and cared for and fed, and that everyone, from the very young to the very old, was so blissfully ignorant of the terrible change to come. He imagined what it must've been like to live in this long ago world, wishing there were a power in the

universe that could take him there. Ultimately, looking at these photos proved too painful; they made him angry at the shortsightedness of these silly people frozen in time, and jealous of their easy lives.

That first spring after the snows melted, Eli also found lots of dead things. Dead people, their skin pulled tight over faces frozen in eternal screams. Animals too. The stables were littered with the corpses of horses, dogs, cats and other critters harder to identify, their carcasses picked clean by scavengers. David's work had been to dispose of these bodies, hauling them into the woods where they could decompose and return to their component parts, as was the destiny of all things.

And then there had been the bank vault. David dismissed whatever lay inside as the useless relics of days gone and dead, but Eli was consumed. However, there was no figuring his way around its giant, circular metal door and the lock that held it in place. Eli worked to innovate increasingly complex tools to manipulate its intricate contours, only to be met each time with universal, demoralizing failure. He eventually gave up.

After the most recent snowmelt allowed him back outside, it was only by chance that Eli happened to be skulking around the bank. He was in the small office toward the back of the building, behind a crumbling desk that smelled of rotted wood, creaking over floorboards, when he felt one shift ever so slightly beneath his feet. Eli knelt down, but he couldn't pull it loose with his fingers, so he unholstered his dagger, dug it in, and was able to dislodge the floorboard and pull it away.

Eli stared down into darkness. There was something greatly unsettling about this gap. More than a space beneath the floor, it was an opening into the unknown, and it

elicited in Eli a primal tinge of fear, even while his rational mind reminded him there was nothing that could harm or frighten him worse than what *they* had done. The unknown was not to be hidden from, but to be confronted and overcome.

Getting on his belly, Eli reached beneath the floor. His hand found the concrete foundation, then swept back and forth and all around, finding nothing. Eli was ready to admit defeat when he gave one last, final reach, and his fingers brushed across something small and metallic. He was just able to extend enough to drag the thing precious centimeters closer, until he could grab it.

It was a key, and it fit in the vault's lock, which had become rusted and unyielding from many long years of disuse. Eventually, Eli was able to turn it, but the latch was another matter. The horizontal metal bar remained stubbornly in place, and Eli had to enlist David's help, which he hadn't wanted to do, not wishing to share any of the special secrets that might be contained within.

These worries turned out to be unwarranted. Whether by intuition or genuine disinterest, once David forced down the heavy latch and creaked open the giant door, he muttered that Eli shouldn't be late for their afternoon's training and was gone.

Eli had to run back to the Inn for a torch so he could explore the vault's darkened interior. In the dim firelight, Eli at first found little of interest, the contents much the same as that which he had uncovered in other hidden places throughout the Town, just in larger quantities. The floor was filled with bags of coins that Eli doubted even he and David together could lift. There were also dozens of drawers lining the walls, each closed

behind an individual lock that Eli soon discovered could also be opened with his special key.

David called Eli to their afternoon training session before he was able to explore more than a few of the drawers. It wasn't until the following day that he was able to open the rest, finding mostly items of little or cursory interest. There were more deeds and titles, more tenuous genetic proofs. There was one drawer that held a parchment detailing assigned caregivers for orphaned children. There were coins. There was women's jewelry.

In all, Eli found only a single drawer holding anything of lasting interest. In this drawer was a red tin box with the initials "N.E." inscribed on the lid, and inside the box were three items.

First was a bundle of letters, old and yellowed, the one on top dated March 15, 1966. They were addressed to someone named Sigmund, and written by a warrior named Walter who had gone to a place called Vietnam to fight in a war. The letters told of how his company of warriors was ambushed and slaughtered, but Walter somehow survived. Lying half-dead in the mud, an order of monks discovered him, brought him back to their monastery high in the mountains and nursed him to health. The monks were martial artists, just like Eli and David. They trained Walter in their ways, and he became one of them. Then, one day, the monks were traveling to some city when, in a grim echo to Walter's recent history, they were ambushed and slaughtered by bandits. When word of the tragedy reached Walter at the monastery, he vowed vengeance and traveled the peninsula hunting down these bandits and killing them. He became something of a folk

hero to the people, who called him the “White Vengeance” due to the hue of his skin, which Eli intuited must have been paler than the natives of that land. The final letter contained a single sentence:

July 23, 1968
Dear Sigmund,
I am coming home.
Walter

The next item in the tin box belonging to “N.E.” was a strange book that Eli found alternately shocking and alluring. The title of this book was *Sultry*, and it was the “Spring 1979 Bridal Issue.” Inside its faded, full-color pages, were pictures of women wearing big billowing white dresses, which Eli knew was how many of the ancients would dress on their wedding days. However, in these unusual photographs, there would always be choice articles of clothing either missing or pushed to one side in order to reveal private parts. Eli felt an immediate sense of revulsion at these bizarre anatomical details, though in the ensuing days he would revisit these pictures, and was beginning to feel a keen sort of fascination toward them.

Sultry also had text interspersed between the pictures. Some of this provided information about these partially-undressed women like the dimensions of their bodies, which held no meaning to Eli, as well as other details about the ways in which they wished for their “lover” to treat them, such as a sense of adventure in public places, long nights of tender lovemaking in front of a roaring fireplace, and for some inexplicable reason, strawberries and whipped cream.

There was also, curiously, a story contained within the pages of *Sultry*. The story was called “Reset Switch.” It was about a scientist named Norman Trillis who had invented a button that could turn back all the progress of humanity and return everything to its primitive state. The world had become so choked with poisons and radiation and war that, to Norman Trillis, the only hope for humanity was to press the button and start over. The story took place in the Antarctic, which was described as a “balmy tropical paradise,” and the event was being broadcast all over the world on television. A huge angry crowd of protesters, known as the “Contrarians,” had come to try and stop Norman Trillis from pressing the switch, but there was an army protecting him. A bloody battle broke out, and the story ended with Norman watching the bodies pile up, envious of the freedom inherent in death. *Lucky bastards*, Norman thought, as he pressed the button.

Eli knew the story was make-believe, but at the same time, there seemed something prescient about it, as if the story’s writer, Felicity Terene, had somehow tapped into the dark turn the world was destined to take.

And then there was TabPad. It was about the size of a book, but much thinner, and instead of being paper, it was made of a clear substance that was most likely the petroleum product *plastic*. Its name was centered at the top, in bold letters: “**TabPad**.” Cracks spread across its face like the tendrils of a spider web, and there was a button on the bottom center. When Eli pressed it, the thing lit up bright as the daytime sky. And in spite of the many cracks across TabPad’s face, he had little trouble discerning what it had to say.

The first thing Eli noticed was what appeared to be a clock. It said, **2:57**, and then below that, in smaller text, **Thursday, February 26**. Eli understood the conceptual framework of time and date, and how they had been important to the ancients who were enslaved to their schedules. For Eli and David, however, these specific notions held little relevance. One awoke with the rising sun, slept at night, worked and played during the day. When the sun stayed out late, it was summer; when it set early, it was winter. When the sun began its downward arc across the sky, it was training time. There was very little else they needed to know.

Still, Eli was intrigued by the notion that TabPad, against all odds, would have continued marking time after all these many long years, like an animal that awakens from long hibernation only to discover its natural habitat has been obliterated beyond recognition.

On the top left of TabPad's face was the cryptic message, "searching for signal...." On the top right was a horizontal rectangular gauge beside a number and percentage symbol. The first time Eli illuminated TabPad, it said 64%. The screen stayed bright for a minute or two, then dimmed, then went black. When Eli pressed the button again, the gauge had dropped to 61%. And it would further diminish each time Eli lit up the screen. Presently, it was down to 22%. Eli was determined to solve the TabPad mystery before it dropped to 0%.

The mystery had to do with the final and most puzzling piece of information on the device, **slide-to-open**, which was at the bottom of TabPad's face, in grey lettering that rippled white. To the left of these letters was arrow pointing to the right.

Eli understood what “open” meant. To open a door or open a book, or even, on a metaphysical level, to open a mind, which was something David was always espousing as some great virtue. Eli also understood the word “slide.” In fact, his very first instinct was to put TabPad on a table and slide the device toward the right, in the direction indicated by the arrow. But this did nothing.

Another possibility, Eli supposed, was that slide meant a downward slope, such as in the snow when he would slide down a hill on a sled. If this was the case, could it be that the “slide” was the gauge’s countdown, and that when it *slid* to 0%, something would open? This was a possibility, but then again, another more troubling possibility was that when TabPad got to 0% its light would dim for good.

Eli was frustrated because he felt as if TabPad was important somehow, and that if he didn’t solve it he’d lose out on something that might give purpose to his life. He wanted adventure, connection. One day, he knew he wanted love. His fear was that that the private parts revealed in the pages of *Sultry* would be the only private parts of the opposite sex he would ever see.

Maybe it was folly to place all his hopes on TabPad, some enigmatic plaything of the ancients, but it was all Eli had.

“*Sa-ta-na-ma*,” Eli chanted as his mind said, “*slide-to-open*,” until the two became muddled, and he started chanting the latter. He winced, embarrassed by the slip, but David showed no sign of noticing, and they continued to chant, until, at long, merciful last, David said, “Inhale.” And they both inhaled. Then David said, “Exhale.” And they exhaled. Then David said, “Inhale deep and suspend the breath,” which they

did. And after a long while, David said, “Now empty your lungs and hold yourself in perfect balance.”

The technique was known as the “breath of balance,” though Eli thought of it as the “death breath,” for this state is the closest approximation one comes to death. Before David rescued him, Eli’s fear of death had been extinguished by the many traumas inflicted by *them*, and because of this, he could hold the breath of balance for many long minutes if need be. In this state, the body gains an intimacy with mortality. External senses become dulled, while internal senses are awakened, inflamed, panicked. Insights crystalize. Cellular memory is unlocked. It is a state of emptiness and loss, a time for the mind to prepare for that inevitable moment when the body will exhale its final breath and perish.

Eli waited until he heard David’s steady intake of breath, and then he too let go and allowed oxygen back into his body.

Hurrying to the bank vault with a lit torch, Eli removed TabPad and illuminated the face. 19%. The insight that had been revealed to him during the meditation was that what if “slide-to-open” didn’t mean the device itself required sliding, but that Eli was supposed to literally *slide* the arrow across the face of TabPad?

Putting his hypothesis to the test, he placed his palm over the arrow and slid it to the right. Nothing happened. The screen dimmed, went dark.

Eli sat there demoralized. If it wasn't sliding the arrow across the face, what else was there? He pressed the button just to be tormented by the diminishing gauge. 17%. Then TabPad dimmed, went dark.

He pressed the button again and felt a flash of anger. It was just a stupid thing, a useless thing, a toy for foolish people who were too lazy and too arrogant to look the hell around and see that their world was dying! So they played with toys. Pointless, meaningless, worthless trinkets. And they went to school. And they played sports. And they had friends. And they fell in love. These were things Eli would never have. For all he knew, this world was empty of every person except David and himself. And then, of course, there was *them*.

In a rage, Eli pressed the button again, then started hitting TabPad. It was a sloppy, disorganized assault, and yet at some point, the arrow moved ever so slightly, wiggled back and forth and then rested once more. Eli stared down, unblinking, as the screen dimmed and then went dark. He pressed the button again. 14%. This time he pursed together his thumb and forefinger as if he were undoing a zipper and slid it across TabPad's face.

It slid open.

TabPad's face changed and its background glowed bright pink with illustrations of a unicorn and a crown, hearts, and a rainbow. At the top were the words, "Princess/of/the/month." Below this was the title, *Poor Little Princess*, and below that, the author's name. Eli nearly choked because, just like the story "Reset Switch" from *Sultry*, the author was Felicity Terene. Somehow, some way, *Sultry* and TabPad were

connected. Did this mean the letters of Walter, the White Vengeance, were also linked?

And if so, how?

It was a shame that this was TabPad and not a real book, for Eli felt a strong desire to read *Poor Little Princess*. He made a defeated motion across the face of TabPad, and was surprised that the screen moved in a way that mimicked the turning of a book's page. And indeed, just like a real book, the face of TabPad now revealed words. A story! Eli read all the words on the "page," then dragged his finger across TabPad's face and there were more pages and more words. He was able to finish the first chapter before TabPad's gauge dropped to 0%, went dark, and would glow no more.

The next day, when Eli awoke, he became aware, for the first time, of the Singularity.

Poor Little Princess

By Felicity Terene

Chapter I: A Short, Happy Love Story

Wiley hadn't even wanted to go to the kegger in the first place. Being around all those college kids made him feel uncomfortable. It wasn't that Wiley wished he'd gone to college or anything like that. He'd never had the head, or the heart, for school. And besides, his life was plenty full. It was just that whenever his college friends wanted to hang, Wiley pretty much always found himself surrounded by a whole bunch of people he didn't know.

Tonight was more of the same. Rich had disappeared a while back with some chick, and Donny, who the hell knew where he'd gone off to. With nothing to do but lean awkwardly against the wall and get drunk on room temp Suds-Lite, Wiley was just about to grab his board and get lost when he first saw her. She was a glimmering vision. Her hair, black like a moonless night. Her eyes, sparkling emeralds. And her body, MAN, that body, he didn't even know how to describe it other than to say she didn't even seem real, or rather, she was better than real, like how a lady might be interpreted by some great artist. She was a painting, a sculpture, a poem.

Wiley wanted more than anything to go talk to her, but he felt all nervous and knotty in his stomach just thinking about it. So he spent the next couple hours getting increasingly sloshed, watching her shoot down every muscle-

bound pretty boy who hit on her. If those dudes weren't good looking enough, what chance did Wiley have?

He was a hard core action sports freak, it was true, and the cumulative effect of all that rock climbing, hang gliding, mountain biking, surfing, snow boarding, skateboarding, and MMA meant he'd put together a pretty ripped bod, but he wasn't exactly the most handsome dude around. He had a smooshed-in nose and his teeth were all yellow and crooked. Also, half his body was covered in scars from the burns he'd gotten when he was twelve.

His family had a huge metal canister behind the house where they burned trash. Wiley and his older brother Silas had a pretty good fire going one night, when Silas dropped in something that made the flames leap up right in his face. Silas's unthinking reaction was to shove the canister away—his palms suffered some gnarly second-degree burns as a result—accidentally throwing the flames onto Wiley. This was made all the worse due to Wiley's overalls being splattered in dried oil. Earlier in the day he'd been working with his dad restoring a junked '84 Mazda RX-7. It had been in a crazy huge accident, and his dad bought it for like fifty bucks. They worked on it every weekend, and it was Wiley's dream to paint it a sleek sunshine yellow and drive it to school on his sixteenth birthday.

When Wiley became a white hot fireball, he didn't scream or even feel afraid. Instead, what he thought about was shooting stars, and how they're not actually stars like way the hell up in there in the universe, but actually little chunks of outer space debris entering the Earth's atmosphere and burning into cascading flaming rocks high above the world.

By the time Silas returned with the garden hose and doused Wiley in a spray of water, the flames had already burned through his clothes and melted his flesh.

He'd spent the rest of sixth grade and all of seventh grade in the children's hospital, where he lost count of all the skin grafts and plastic surgeries they gave him. Having looked death in the eye and lived to tell the tale, Wiley was changed when he returned to school in the eighth grade. He found the trivial concerns of his teenage peers alternately confusing and annoying. As a result, he opted to spend most of his school-related hours—from riding the bus, to eating his lunch, to kicking around between classes—in solitude. This, in addition to the fact that the left side of his face was so thick with scarring it gave him a vaguely skeletal look, was why kids started calling him "Loner Boner."

Which Wiley didn't mind. He'd suffered so much nerve damage from the fire he was practically impervious to physical pain. It made him feel kind of like a superhero. And when you're a superhero, when sticks and stones won't break your bones, name-calling was like nothing.

When it came to women, Wiley knew he couldn't compete with classically handsome dudes, what with their unscarred skin and all, and he didn't even try. Wiley did have a pretty good mustache going, but because his facial hair was even lighter than the fair blonde mop adorning his crown, people often teased him about his "clear 'stache." But to hell with them. It had taken Wiley the better part of a year to grow the 'stache, and if it was gonna be clear, then that's the

way things had to be. Still didn't take away the fact that it was a pretty rockin' 'stache.

The other thing about Wiley that made him sort of insecure was that he wasn't really that smart. After the fire, once he got past the first couple months and his condition stabilized, the state sent tutors to keep him up with his studies. But after you've seen what it looks like when your freaking arm's on fire, it's hard to get too excited about pre-Algebra.

There was a difference, though, between how Wiley was insecure about his intelligence and how a lot of other guys were. Like, a lot of other dudes couldn't handle it if their lady was smarter than them so they'd always be making her feel stupid to make themselves feel better. Wiley wasn't a total dick like that. Truth was, Wiley liked the idea of being with a lady who was smarter than him. She could help him with the stuff that was hard to do on his own, like math and spelling and programming a VCR.

That one French-sounding song from that movie Wiley hadn't seen was playing, and some dude was asking her to dance, but she didn't want to. The dude was pretty insistent, grabbing her hands and showing off some drunken moves. It wasn't working. The dude got a bit pissed off and pleady, and then finally gave up.

Well, anyway, what happened next was that all the booze swirling around in his brain finally gave Wiley enough nerve to go and talk to her. He crossed the room until he was near her, but not too close.

When she looked his way, Wiley met her gaze. Looking into those eyes was super intense, and a little bit scary. She had this kind of power. Like, if she suddenly started levitating and breathing fire, Wiley'd hardly be surprised.

She kept looking at him, and Wiley knew he had to come up with something to say. He wished he were smarter so that he could have thought up a few smooth one-liners. Usually, he just operated on instinct, which generally worked pretty good because if a girl didn't immediately recoil from his many scars, it meant he already had her interest, and then all he had to do was win her over with his excellent personality. But Wiley was pretty sure this lady was different. She looked all refined and stuff, and probably expected to hear a guy say smart stuff.

But then he remembered surfing that forty-foot wave in Maui. And he remembered free-climbing those cliffs in Yosemite that were higher than the Empire State Building. He remembered all the millions of kick flip body varials and ollies and power slides, the Indy tricks and nose wheelies he'd done on his skateboard. So what if he wasn't smart? He measured up in other ways. And if she wasn't into all the awesome shit Wiley brought to the table, then that was, like, her loss.

"What's up?" he said, and when she didn't immediately respond, he lost his nerve, eyes drifting down to her necklace, which was a pretty awesome gem of some sort that seemed to be a bunch of different colors all at once. But then, Wiley realized she'd probably think he was staring at her boobs, so he forced his eyes back to her face.

“Not much,” she said. “What’s up with you?”

She talked to him! She really talked to him. And she wanted to know what was up. What was up? Wiley racked his brain to think of an answer to what was up, but all he was able to do was clear his throat a couple times and stammer some ummms and errrs. The way she was looking at him didn’t help matters any, just standing there with this sort of half smile. Which just made Wiley all the more agitated. He felt sweat dripping down his armpits and sliding into his boxer shorts.

She thought it was cute how nervous he was. Even though she hadn’t been on the dating scene for a very long time, even though her last relationship ended badly to say the very least, and even though she had never heard the myriad one-liners that had been tossed her way all evening, she immediately recognized them for what they were: well-rehearsed, empty, and meaningless. Whereas this fascinating man with the partly-melted face was so adorably tongue-tied, how could she not feel flattered? It made her tremble with anticipation, made the hairs on her arms stand on end.

She touched his hand. “You wanna get out of here?”

Shot down. Even Wiley’s rockin’ beer buzz couldn’t dull the bitter sting of rejection. He started to slink away, when her hand grasped his shoulder. She was pretty freakin’ strong!

She spun him around, pulling him toward her until their faces were inches apart. Her breath smelled like...it smelled like...Wiley couldn't exactly place what it smelled like, but it reminded him of a morning a few months back. He was in the middle of an epic solo canoe trip, tracing the Pacific coastline from Juneau to Depoe Bay, camping in the wilderness somewhere in Canada. He awoke in the moments before sunrise, poked his head out of the tent and was overwhelmed by the magnificence of Mother Nature, the cool fresh air, glittering star field, profound muted silence of the all-encompassing wilderness. As best as Wiley could figure, that's what her breath was like.

"Do you want to get out of here," she said again, "with me?"

Her name was Poppy, and she was the most hardcore chick Wiley had ever met. Sometimes, Wiley thought she might even be more hardcore than he was. Most chicks might've dug Wiley's washboard abs and sense of adventure, but none had ever wanted to join him on any of the more intense of those adventures. Poppy, on the other hand, not only wanted to join in on everything, she seemed to relish each minute.

Extreme cold, extreme heat, extreme heights, extreme speeds, extreme sex, Poppy was always game.

Another thing Wiley had accepted about himself was that ladies didn't seem to like looking at all those scars and stuff during sex. But Poppy was different in that way too. She gazed lovingly upon Wiley's body, tracing her

delicate hands over his disfigured chest, which was smooth and tanned and bereft of nipples.

Wiley was a romantic dude, and even though he'd never had a relationship last more than a few months, he'd told a lot of ladies he loved them. And the thing was, he meant it every time. But it wasn't until he starting hanging out with Poppy that he really understood what love was. It wasn't obsession and pain like he'd felt in so many previous relationships; it was deep like the ocean, endless like the universe, and wickedly awesome like a Johnny Ramone guitar riff.

As for Poppy, she was happier than she had been for as long as she could remember. She was considerably older than Wiley, but he didn't seem to mind or even notice. In fact, Wiley never asked her how old she was or where she came from. He never asked about her plans for the future, seeming sufficiently content just to be with her. And she was content just to be with him.

She didn't know how much more time she had, so she lived each moment as if it might be her last.

Pretty soon Poppy got knocked up and all big and pregnant, so Wiley asked her if she wanted to get married. She was totally up for it, so they drove up to Vegas in Wiley's '84 Mazda RX-7—which he had restored in time for his sixteenth birthday, which he had painted yellow, which he had driven to school that day, the back seat of which he'd gotten laid in more times than he could count—its

cassette player blasting Metallica and the Ramones and the Sex Pistols the whole way.

Wiley was pretty broke and Poppy never had any money either. But even so, he forked over \$37.50 so they could get a room at the Excalibur, cause Wiley thought all those knights and dragons were pretty cool. Also, he related to all the quests and junk they were always going on, cause that was how it was for Wiley when he went out on his adventures. And even though he never found cool stuff like the Sword in the Stone or the Holy Grail or the One Ring or whatever, he felt like he got something sort of similar in value just from the experience of it all—of being in nature and confronting his demons, and then returning home a slightly different person.

Even though Poppy was ginormous, they made love on the king size bed in their room on the twenty-ninth floor. Afterwards, they showered and dressed, then headed out to get something to eat. Wiley's budget was pretty much shot by this point—he had just a little more than fifty bucks, and he knew he'd need a pretty good chunk of that to do the whole wedding thing. But there was a 7-11 a couple blocks away so he figured they'd get some trail mix and Twinkies, which would have been a pretty kick-ass feast out in the wilderness.

As they made their way past tables and slots, Wiley noticed one of those claw machines filled with stuffed animals and a couple electronic gizmos that no one ever wins, and felt drawn to it. He dropped in a quarter and took control of the joystick, maneuvering the claw over stuffed rabbits and dolls and dinosaurs, his gaze settling on the strangest, and cutest, stuffed animal he'd ever seen. It

looked like it was part-monkey, part-puppy dog; it was wearing a pink tutu, and in one of its furry paws it held a magic wand with a glittering gold star at its tip.

Throughout his many adventures, Wiley had experienced more than his share of harrowing moments astride that razor's edge of survival, when senses become sharpened and every decision magnified, creating a potent cocktail of life and death. Wiley had to admit he got off on it, lived for it, that narrowing of focus, stilling of breath, slowing of time, all resources guided toward a single outcome.

And though this was hardly such a moment, here in the midst of a noisy casino far from the dangers of the wild, Wiley, nonetheless, found himself in that zone. He became one with the controls, merged his consciousness with the claw. The metallic fingers tightened on the stuffed animal's head, and at first it looked like a clean shot, but then the toy shifted, almost as if it had a mind of its own. Wiley's heart sank as he watched it fall back into the recesses of the animal pit. And just when he thought it was gone forever, the claw closed on the tip of the magic wand, pulling the toy above the crowd and across the sea of animals.

Triumphant, Wiley presented his trophy to Poppy, who smiled enigmatically, neither accepting nor rejecting the gift. And then her eyes flashed with the faintest glint of mischief. "Can I have a quarter?" Wiley tucked the stuffed animal under his arm, dug into his pocket and produced a coin. He followed Poppy to the nearest slot machine, a flashing whirring mess of lights and bells called "Money Bees," watched her yank the handle, and damned if three identical queen bees with dollar signs for eyes didn't come up.

They filled a couple buckets with quarters, and just like that they had their whole trip paid for, and then some.

So instead of trail mix and Twinkies, they forked out almost twenty-five bucks apiece for the buffet, which was about the most incredible spread Wiley'd ever seen, and he ate until he thought he was gonna explode. Poppy stuffed her face too, and they hung out there for like three hours, horking down about a week's worth of calories.

While finishing off with some apple cobbler and gelato, Poppy flipped through the Vegas tour book she'd snagged from the concierge desk, looking for a good place to get married.

She settled on a little shrine off the Strip called the Pretty Woman Chapel, and the next day, at 3:45 in the afternoon, they were married by a dude dressed up like Roy Orbison, who had Wiley repeat after him, "Anything you want, you got it," and then had Poppy repeat, "Anything you need, you got it," and then they signed a piece of paper and were totally married. All legal and everything.

That night they cruised out of Vegas on I-15, and Wiley blasted the music so loud it tore the speakers a new one, making the bass all rattled and distorted. Wiley let the music engulf him. He was feeling so awesome, imagining spending his whole life with the girl of his dreams, getting all old and shit and gazing into her eyes and still seeing the chick he was crazy for.

He didn't hear the screaming at first cause the music was so loud, but then Poppy hit him pretty hard on the arm. She yelled something at him, but he

couldn't hear what she was saying, so he turned down the music and was all like, "What?"

"I said I'm going into labor!"

"Has it been a year already?"

Another thing about Wiley was that he got confused about things most people don't get confused about. Like, for example, he'd gotten confused about how long a lady is supposed to be pregnant before she gives birth. He realized in those panicked moments screaming down I-15 that it was a *horse* that's pregnant for a whole year.

"Nine months," Poppy screamed, "it only takes NINE MONTHS!" This was gonna totally mess up Wiley's killer hardcore Honeymoon adventure plans.

But then again, shit always seemed to happen for a reason, and when Wiley started looking for a place to pull off, he saw that the next exit was Zzyxx Road, which he'd always found fascinating when driving this highway, but had never taken the time to pull off and check it out.

Zzyxx Road wasn't actually that exciting, at least not the part that was the desolate strip of road right off the highway. But wasn't that totally the shit to bring a new life into this world and at the same time be at a place you've always wanted to check out?

Wiley pulled the RX-7 off the road, busted out a blanket from the trunk and set it out on the ground for Poppy. Her face was all red and she was screaming, sweat pouring down her face, and Wiley thought she looked more beautiful than ever.

He really wanted to help, but wasn't sure how. "Uh, push...or something?"

But Poppy seemed to know what she was doing, and after groaning and screaming and crying for like fifteen minutes, all this mucousy junk and blood spewed out of her, followed by a miniature purple little thing that was screaming the second its tiny little face emerged.

"Holy crap, you did it. You're hardcore, Poppy!"

Poppy held the tiny thing in her arms, while Wiley took out his blade, held it under the flame of his lighter to sterilize it, and then slashed the umbilical cord in two.

"I love you, Poppy, I totally freaking love you." Wiley just gazed in amazement at the new life in his new wife's arms, when he noticed something troubling. "Hey, where's his dingaling?" He was concerned his baby boy might be cursed with a micro-penis, though he vowed to love the little freak no matter what.

"Wiley, *she's* cold."

He laughed. A baby *girl*. That's why she didn't have a wiener.

Wiley removed his jacket. It was a pretty sweet jacket, a black leather bomber, and even though all that goop covering the baby was gonna mess it up forever, Wiley didn't even think twice before wrapping the little girl in it.

Poppy's time was running out, and though he didn't know it, so was Wiley's. That was the main reason she insisted on accompanying Wiley on his hardcore honeymoon adventure.

Wiley didn't think Lily (that's the name they gave her), being a newborn baby and all, was gonna be hardcore enough to handle a free climb up Baja California's Montañas de la Muerte, and it wasn't like the hang gliders waiting for them at the top of those dreaded cliffs had a baby seat or anything like that. And even if they could somehow figure out how to take Lily with them as they soared over the Pacific Ocean toward the fishing boat waiting for them two miles off shore, it wasn't like the boat had a comfortable place for Lily to sleep, and they didn't have diapers, and wasn't all that sun supposed to be bad for a baby?

But Poppy told Wiley they should leave the baby with someone they trusted, because, according to her, it would be a "bad omen" not to go on their honeymoon. Wiley thought it would be a worse omen to abandon their newborn baby, but Poppy was a lot smarter than he was, so maybe she was figuring for something Wiley simply couldn't understand.

And then Wiley remembered that it would barely be out of their way to stop by his brother Silas's place on the way to Baja. Silas, who still felt pretty guilty about setting Wiley on fire and all, could settle the score by taking care of Lily while he and Poppy had their hardcore honeymoon! Besides, Silas and Ally had been trying for a couple years to have kids, so this would be good practice for them.

Wiley pulled the RX-7 next to the curb in front of Silas's apartment building. Poppy waited in the car as he rang the doorbell, but no one was home.

They dumped out the contents of Wiley's red tackle box, and placed Lily, still wrapped in his bomber jacket, inside. She fit snugly, as if the tackle box had been originally designed to hold newborns, and Wiley had been misusing it all these years with all that bait and hooks and junk.

Wiley still didn't feel right about leaving his baby on the doorstep like they did in old movies and cartoons, but Poppy said everything would be alright, and Wiley believed her.

But just to be sure, Wiley wrote a note to Silas. He knew he made a bunch of spelling mistakes, but his bro would understand:

*Der Silas,
Pleez take gud kare of Lily. Mak shur she dosnt die will xplane later
wiley*

Wiley folded up the letter, tucked it next to Lily's tiny left arm, and then started to cry. "I'm afraid I'm never gonna see her again."

Poppy gave Lily a kiss on her tiny cheek, then removed her necklace and placed it around the baby's neck. The gem, set atop Lily's belly, reflected a rainbow of colors in the sunlight. Wiley had never seen anything like it, and he wondered if it was from another planet or something. And then he started to feel bad that he didn't have anything cool to leave with his baby. But that's when he remembered the stuffed animal he'd won. He hurried back to the car, unzipped

his duffel bag and removed that strange puppy-dog/monkey in the pink tutu with a magic wand.

Poppy eyed the toy in a way that made Wiley a little nervous, and he half-expected her to tell him to put it back. But she didn't say anything, and when Wiley nudged it into the tackle box, little Lily cuddled right up.

Poor Little Princess

Chapter II: Multiple Choice

Lily stared at the glowing screen, disbelieving the words even as she read them and re-read them, again and again until her focus became blurred. This was insane. Impossible. Crazy. There's no way the book could KNOW.

The Princess/of/the/Month App, which Lily had purchased with her own money (ten dollars per month), delivered twelve digital princess novellas per year. Each story was virtually indistinguishable from the other, and Lily sometimes imagined a sweat shop churning out these perfectly-conceived princess stories, hitting all the right emotional beats, satisfying some universal longing shared by its readership.

Each set-up might be different—maybe it's an orphaned girl who learns her parents are the king and queen of this-or-that land; maybe she's a distant heir who through some complexity of plot machinations inherits the throne; maybe the king and queen are overthrown, and she must summon courage and cunning to retake the crown; sometimes the stories take place in magical, faraway lands; sometimes they take place in the real world; sometimes they take place in the past, other times the present, and still other times the future; and then, just for good measure, every once in a while all the characters are vampires—but the pay-off was always the same: glimmering jewels, flowing gowns, balls and galas, adoration, romance, wish fulfillment, and the requisite "Happily Ever After."

Lily knew she was being emotionally manipulated, but she didn't care, devouring each new installment like a starved hyena on a zebra carcass.

She felt totally numb, and barely even noticed when the TabPad slid out of her hands and fell to the floor, landing with a hollow thud and cracking the delicate screen in a splintered cobweb. As far as Lily could figure, these were the following explanations for what she'd just read:

Explanation 1: someone was messing with her.

Explanation 2: this wasn't really happening and she was dreaming.

Explanation 3: someone was trying to get a message to her.

Explanation 4: random happenstance.

Explanation 5: none of the above.

Explanation 6: *some* of the above.

Lily was a straight-A student, consistently scoring in the ninety-ninth percentile on standardized testing. One of the things they teach you in standardized testing is if you don't know the answer right away, you need to eliminate the options that are obviously wrong. Lily, therefore, approached this multiple-choice quandary in the same manner.

She considered "Explanation 1: someone was messing with her." If that were the case, then it would mean someone went to the trouble of writing an entire princess novella, and then getting it published by the company that makes the Princess/of/the/Month App. And while such a feat was *technically* possible, Lily couldn't see why anyone would go to such trouble just to mess with her. Nor could she figure what this person could gain by doing so. That said, because

it was plausible (albeit farfetched) she wasn't quite ready to eliminate Explanation 1.

Moving on to "Explanation 2: she was dreaming," Lily administered some crude tests. First she pinched herself. Then she slapped her face. She was almost certain she wasn't dreaming. Just to be sure, Lily turned her light on and off several times, knowing that in dreams light switches often behave erratically. This light switch behaved as light switches are supposed to. Finally, Lily checked the digital readout of her alarm clock, knowing clocks also are unreliable in dreams. But the clock was behaving perfectly normal. It was 10:37 PM. Therefore, she eliminated "Explanation 2" as a possibility.

Lily moved on to "Explanation 3: someone was trying to get a message to her." If this was the case, then the same logic of "Explanation 1" would apply: someone went to the trouble of writing and publishing a Princess/of/the/Month story just for her. But *why* would anyone want to get a message to Lily? And, moreover, *what* was the message? Lily couldn't answer these questions, but again, because it was plausible (albeit farfetched) she held off eliminating "Explanation 3" as a possibility.

Lily then contemplated "Explanation 4: random happenstance," which she sincerely hoped was the case, because once the "she was dreaming" option had been eliminated, this was the only one remaining (with the exception of "none of the above") that allowed her life to stay the same. And while there were certainly many aspects of Lily's present station in life that could be vastly improved, she had no way of knowing if the potentially-prescient information contained within

the digital pages of *Poor Little Princess* would positively or negatively impact said life.

And if there was one thing Lily hated and feared, it was staring into the vast chasm of the unknown, where anything was possible. This was the reason she refused to gaze at the night sky. It was childish, she knew. Lily was fourteen years old—about to start her first day of high school for crying out loud—and yet looking up at the stars and experiencing her own profound minuteness filled Lily with a deep anxiety and dread, as if someone or something were watching, just waiting for the opportune moment to snatch her away.

Clinging to a desperate hope that this was all somehow just a coincidence, Lily crossed to her closet, where she dug through shoes and slippers, discarded clothing, and still-unpacked boxes, at last finding an old red metallic tackle box. Lily was having difficulty breathing as she undid the two metal clasps. There, stuffed inside, was a black leather bomber jacket (the liner slightly stained). And there was also a piece of paper, which Lily unfolded, the semi-literate scrawl reading:

*Der Sílas,
Pléez take gud kare of Lily. Mak shur she dosnt die will xplane later
wíley*

Not only were the names identical to those in the story, the misspelled words were identically misspelled, and the poor punctuation identically poorly-punctuated.

She picked up the framed photograph of her biological father that she kept on her dresser. In the photo, Wiley was at the beach, wearing a tank top and multi-colored jams that went practically to his ankles; he was cradling a longboard under one shoulder and smiling. Even with the scarring that covered his face and arms, her father was a handsome man, tanned and muscular. He also, as per the story, had fair hair and a clear mustache.

Lily gazed at her reflection in the mirror, until she was able to recognize Wiley's face in her own.

She continued to scrutinize her reflection, now looking past the similarities with her father, as she tried to construct her mother's face from what remained. Lily imagined her as a beautiful, luminescent goddess with caramel skin and brownish-red hair. This was an exercise she had done often through the years, and it was only a small part of the elaborate fantasy Lily had constructed to explain her place in the universe.

This fantasy was fueled in part by a recurring dream in which she was transported to a magical kingdom of enchanted creatures that was ruled over by her mother, a powerful and beautiful queen. In these dreams, everything made sense, and Lily understood why she had been abandoned as an infant on the doorstep of the aunt and uncle who became her adopted parents. Upon waking, these memories would invariably fade, as dreams often do.

And even though Lily was unable to cling in any tangible way to these visions, she always awoke feeling refreshed, nurtured, and loved. Since she was old enough to hold a crayon, Lily had been drawing pictures of this enchanted

land of her dreams. She had, over the years, put together a rather intricate map. She called it Enchantlandia, which, Lily knew, was kind of a lame name—especially when compared to much cooler names like Middle Earth, and Narnia, and even Wonderland—but she had never been able to think of a better name, and so it remained Enchantlandia, until it had gotten to the point where Lily thought it had a pretty nice ring to it.

On Lily's fourth birthday, her parents told her the story of finding her infant self wrapped in a black leather bomber jacket inside a tackle box, with that terribly-misspelled note tucked under her arm, cuddled up to the stuffed animal that presently sat on a beanbag chair in the corner of Lily's room. It was tattered from excessive childhood affection, but still adorable as ever with its pink tutu, gold star-tipped magic wand, and the plastic tiara (that Lily had reluctantly given up in the sixth grade) perched atop its precious little noggin. Lily had named it Ylil (which was her name spelled backwards).

But what about the necklace? Lily had never before seen such a thing. And here was where the formula broke down. Without the necklace, "Explanation 4: Random Happenstance," took a narrow, albeit decisive, lead.

She knelt before the tackle box, intending to snap it shut and return it to the closet. But instead, as if guided by some unseen force, Lily removed the bomber jacket and put it on. It felt indescribably good, like being hugged by her father through the blur of time and space. She felt his warmth and tenderness, smelled the old leather and dust. And then she felt a sharp burning sensation in the left pocket. She reached inside, the item cold to the touch. Even before taking

it out, Lily knew she had found her mother's necklace—which was odd, considering this was hardly the first time she'd taken out her father's jacket and rummaged around in the pockets. And yet there it was, even more beautiful than the book's description. It had so many strange shapes, and always seemed to be a different combination of colors, depending on the specific angle with which it reflected light. Maybe it really was from a different planet.

She slipped on the necklace and felt an energy surge through her body, felt her mother's love and longing, and Lily knew whatever was happening, whatever meaning was hidden within the carefully-coded words of *Poor Little Princess*, it was not random happenstance. And so she eliminated Explanation 4, moving on to "Explanation 5: none of the above," which she supposed was possible, but something in her gut told her it wasn't, and she knew when taking multiple choice tests, you were almost always right when you trusted your gut. So she eliminated that possibility as well.

That left either "Explanation 1: someone was messing with her," "Explanation 3: someone was trying to get a message to her," or "Explanation 6: some of the above." This led to the unsettling notion that someone might both be messing with her *and* trying to get her a message.

Lily picked up her TabPad with its newly-cracked screen, and scrolled back to the beginning, gazing at the colorfully ornate title page: *Poor Little Princess* by Felicity Terene, with its daisies and stars and rainbow, and a unicorn. Then, doing the only thing she could think to do, Lily, still wearing her father's jacket and her mother's necklace, climbed back into bed and continued reading.

A Short Nap

December 15, 1933, 4:17pm

Martin Rowand hands the envelope containing his students' final grades, to Maggie, a junior chem major who's paying for her education, in part, as a department secretary in a "work for study" program, one of those nifty New Deal reforms confirming Martin's strong belief that FDR (notwithstanding his own not-insignificant personal grievances with his government) remains the right man for the job—this in spite of vociferous protestations to the contrary by men who Martin had always believed were intelligent enough to know better.

Though the envelope has abundant surface area for two hands, Maggie makes a point of touching Martin's as she takes it, which makes him glad. Her hand is soft and warm, and her smile is suggestive and inviting.

When neither immediately retracts, this thrilling connection of hand upon hand threatens to extend beyond cordiality and approach intimacy. Martin reflects on the relativity of time. Surely a butterfly, after emerging from its cocoon for two blissful days of sunshine, nectar, and sex, considers this a long and glorious existence. When Martin's body dies, his brain could have as many as four minutes of activity. Four minutes, relative to a dead body, could very well be infinity. In this moment of electrical connection with pretty, young Maggie, Martin embraces infinity. And this instant is tattooed into the fabric of existence.

On Martin's wristwatch, in the expanse of time that connects 4:17 and 34 seconds with 4:17 and 35 seconds, he is transported to Zurich on a snowy afternoon five years earlier. He is in the presence of Albert Einstein and they are both roaring drunk. They duck into a jeweler's to escape the extreme cold. There, a watch with a vertical rectangular gold bezel and bold Helvetica font, catches Dr. Einstein's eye, and before Martin can object, he's purchased two, one for each of them. Before leaving, they synchronize their timepieces to the second, and if Einstein has been winding his with the same regularity as Martin, he knows it is entirely possible they remain synchronized to this day.

4:17 and 35 seconds becomes 4:17 and 36 seconds, and Martin loses his nerve, reluctantly pulling his hand away. "Sorry my grades are late."

"That's okay, professor, I'm here as long as you want me." There is, of course, codified language in the faculty handbook expressly forbidding certain relationships. However, the resulting disciplinary process is murky at best, and Martin hardly approaches the most boorish of the faculty, many of whom will openly grope at anything that so much as twitches in their general direction.

Martin prefers a more subtle approach. "When do you go home for the holiday?"

"Actually I'm staying in the city with some girlfriends. We got hired to hostess a few parties and, well, Christmastime in New York versus Wichita, not much of a contest."

"Bet it's peaceful in Wichita."

"If you like farms and being poor."

“I do like farms. And material wealth is often over-valued. I hope you enjoy your Christmas in New York, Maggie.”

“Thanks, Professor Rowand, and who knows, maybe we’ll run into each other?”

Martin’s mind traverses a multitude of timelines extending from this moment. In the short term, a great many of these play out in a manner congruent with his aspirations for gratification. Martin sees diminishing returns, however, the further he projects into the future.

“That’d be swell.” He retreats back to his office, risking one final, longing glance over his shoulder, but Maggie’s attention is focused on transcribing Martin’s final grades in the big green ledger.

Even with hours of work ahead of him, Martin all of a sudden has a desperate need for sleep. But not simply to rest his tired body and mind. Martin needs the sleep so he can dream. Because in his dreams, everything makes sense. Everything, from the tiniest sub-atomic particles to the vast expanse of the swirling multiverse.

These dreams first came to him in the French trenches. He was seventeen years old (volunteered to serve, in fact, on his birthday), a Private First Class in the Army. By the time he arrived, the fighting was over and all that remained was the stink of death. The muddy fields of mangled cadavers had a strange effect on Martin. This was not visceral in nature. He did not feel the urge to vomit, as so many do upon seeing humanity in all its biological gruesomeness. Martin felt something open up. A Void. That’s what it felt like, an endless, bottomless swirling mass of nothing swallowing all that is and returning it into all that isn’t.

Martin's reverie had been interrupted when a commanding officer thrust a pair of gloves in his hands, asking if he was up for this or if he needed to go into a corner and change his menstrual pad first.

For the next fifteen backbreaking hours, Martin picked up the pieces of dismembered corpses, doing his best to keep track of which severed hand went with which wrist stump, and which pulped torso belonged to which shredded pair of legs.

The hypnotizing drudgery of this macabre task triggered in Martin a new way of seeing existence—not from the moment-to-moment perpetual present tense in which he'd experienced life to this point, but from a place much broader. It was as if he could see all the way back to the beginning, when the perfect balance of the Void was first disrupted by the birth of the Universe. Why was it, Martin wanted to know, that the Universe seemed indelibly attracted toward *something*, toward creation and growth, when the pull toward *nothing*, toward destruction and death, felt more powerful and inevitable.

And yet, it was in the presence of destruction and death, chaos and disorder that his first great creative insight crystallized.

Then, that night, Martin dreamed, and everything made sense. Upon waking, he tried to write down what had been revealed, only to find the memories impossible to hold in any tangible way. Yet the dream, and those that followed, created a line of inquiry. This inquiry led Martin to the study of physics, and then nuclear physics. He completed his bachelor of science at Columbia in a year and a half; his PhD took another two years. Upon publication of his thesis—titled “The Future of Nuclear Science in Advancement of Humanity's Highest Purpose”—he was offered a fully-tenured position on Columbia's

science faculty at the ridiculously young age of twenty-three, causing quite the uproar amongst a large swath of professors.

Martin does not believe there is a God, but he does believe some power, existing in some wrinkle or dimension that can only be reached through the imagination, has chosen him, and that channeling these dreams into his work is how he fulfills his duty to the Universe.

Martin enters his office. Ignoring the teetering piles of letters, contracts, proofs, theses, and peer reviews screaming for his attention, he focuses instead on the soft late-afternoon sunlight streaming in from the window behind his desk.

He closes the door, slips off his Oxfords without undoing the laces, and sinks into his sofa, gazing out the window until his eyelids grow heavy.

We can't stay here forever

Why not? That's what David wanted to know. It was safe here. And comfortable. Since they'd gotten a hang of the winters after that dicey third try, they'd never gone hungry. Rather, they hadn't gone *too* hungry—the winters here were long and those snows piled high.

But after life in the wilds and the wastes, solitude and relative ease were virtues David was hard pressed to give up. And it wasn't like there was anyone else out there, not unless you counted *them*. And while, by all appearances inside and out, *they* were biologically human, *they* were, otherwise, bereft of that fundamental spark science might explain as the limbic system, the part of the brain that allows for critical emotional bonding, which poets, philosophers, and theists might call a soul. Why *they* were this way, David did not know. An evolved trait, perhaps. It was certainly a more rational explanation than that enduring post-Calamity myth that the Singularity made *them*—magical thinking, in other words.

David did not possess the ability to scour every square inch of this planet, so he supposed his certainty that the human race would end with Eli and himself was itself dependent on magical thinking, or at least a willing suspension of disbelief. And yet, in this one instance, David was willing to accept intuition for fact.

The problem was that now Eli was citing this same type of intuition as the source of his having heard the Singularity, or felt it, or however one supposedly experienced the metaphysical construct. What was David supposed to do? What was he supposed to say

when Eli insisted the Singularity was summoning them from complacency to the hazards of a natural world grown sick and decrepit?

It wasn't as if David hadn't heard the story before. When people, well intentioned but afraid, embraced magical thinking—which quickly devolved into collective, self-destructive insanity in those months following the Slaughter. First, admittedly, rationality won out, and a concerted effort led to the building of the Wall of Westown which, had it been in place earlier, might have held *them* at bay long enough for archers and Samurai to make the trek down the mountain and drive *them* back into the Wastes.

But the pain had been too fresh, the loss too acute, the resources too diminished. And so the myth of the Singularity was resurrected, and the young men of the Town were expelled one-by-one to the sacred Quest. There was a celebratory air of madness circulating through the Town in those strange days, and even David, then sixteen, had been pulled into its peculiar orbit, for the young men expelled from the gates were hailed as heroes, humanity's last hope to find the Singularity and restore the world.

Commissions were formed, maps were drawn, a daily lottery commenced. Each day a name was drawn and a young man sent on a new course, across the wide world. And those who were spared another day, another week, another month, were treated like kings, given whatever they desired.

But David only desired Jessica, even though she was sad, and many nights would not offer herself to him. On such nights, David was inconsolable. He could have anyone, and yet the one he wanted, the one he loved, was not in the mood, even though he would soon be gone.

And then came the night Jessica revealed to David the forbidden truth that was the cause of her sorrow. That there was a second lottery, a secret lottery, this for the girls of the Town—even, it was whispered, for many boys too young for the Quest. The Slaughter, you see, had created a generation of orphans.

David refused to believe, and bitter words were exchanged. But what other choice did he have? To believe would have necessitated action, which would have led to incarceration. Enough people had disappeared to the secret jails, from which only rumor of torment and madness ever returned. So David turned Jessica into his enemy and they parted on bitter terms. In her absence, he took another and enjoyed himself. Though when he awoke to an empty bed, David felt as if he had been consumed by the Void.

That day, they drew his name, and David was given his fallen father's katana. He carried a cloth satchel filled with maps and provisions, the barest essentials for survival in the wild, as well as a bow and quiver of arrows, and a dagger. And covering everything was a long grey hooded cloak that allowed him to blend into the shadows and disappear.

The crowd cheered as he passed through the Town's gates, but he hardly noticed, searching the sea of faces for one last moment of electric eye contact with Jessica. But this was not to be, and David spent many tormented nights imagining her the property of some lecherous old fool. For the town's Elders had played quite the trick, hadn't they? Sculpting collective trauma to their shortsighted advantage, sacrificing the future of the species so they could spend their final years in luxury, diminishing and consuming the final generation of doomed youth. Maybe *they* weren't all that different after all.

David had many years in the wild to reflect on the psychotic folly of the Quest. And yet he adjusted. He wandered. He meditated. He trained. Because there was no Singularity to be found, David assigned himself a new Quest: hunting *them*. And in this way, ten years of his life passed, until he found a small, frightened child who would one day declare himself to be Eli. Caring for the boy had given David's life a new purpose, convinced him to return to the Town at the top of the mountain, even though he well knew the terms of his expulsion clearly forbade such an act.

David couldn't have known everyone would be dead. But then again, it confirmed the emptiness he had been feeling. The same emptiness that informed his belief that he and Eli were the last of their kind. And it was this emptiness that David drew upon to guide his thinking in the aftermath of those five words: "We can't stay here forever."

He knew the boy was special. The fact of Eli's life alone, standing in stark defiance of the dying world, was enough to make this so. But there were other things as well. Eli's ability to tackle dense tomes and understand their contents, for one.

Eli had also become a profoundly gifted martial artist. Already, his skill was further advanced than David's at that age—and David had been the youngest in his people's history to earn the right to wield the katana.

There were other things too, not as tangible, but no less present, which David had taken to thinking of as Eli's special sensitivity. The boy seemed peculiarly attuned to the cadences of the world. He also possessed an understanding of the forces beyond this world that guided the planets and the stars. And his dreams of Mother Nature, a personified, embodied presence, that contrasted the terrors Eli set on the walls in the

nightmare room—was she the product of an over-active imagination, or yet another example of the boy's sensitivity? At one point, David would have been certain it was the former; now he didn't know what to think.

The boy was no good at meditation, though what child was? Still, David considered it his obligation to teach Eli to be still, to listen to his internal rhythms, and strengthen his nervous system. And for all of Eli's shortcomings in this area, the boy had mastered the breath of balance, or as the boy called it, not inaccurately, the "death breath." And perhaps this was the most important aspect of their practice, to prepare the mind and body for that inevitable moment when breath would no longer be possible. Or maybe that was just an invented reason, a rationalization for David's perhaps otherwise irrational belief that the breath of balance was important, perhaps the most important thing in the entire world—although why this was, he could not say.

Eli was, by their admittedly unsophisticated reckoning, twelve years old. David was well aware that he had been of a similar age when hormones had begun their relentless drive, which at times brought him to the brink of madness. But there had been girls in David's youth with whom he could stumble through awkward adolescence. And he'd had friends, close and dear, who shared with David the peculiarities of puberty. Eli had none of these things, and when he'd asked about sex, David was ashamed at how poorly he'd fielded the question, expounding with dry, mechanical descriptions of the act, and ultimately too embarrassed to relate his own limited exploits. David did take it as a hopeful sign that Eli's lengthy disappearances to the bank vault meant that for the time he was finding productive methods of quelling his passions.

Human history was littered with the stories of young men unacquainted with the ways of the world being sent to fight and die for causes beyond their abilities to comprehend or affect in any meaningful way. And these missions kept them occupied, kept them from building resentment over all they could not have, kept them from going insane—or at least better focused that insanity. Eli was young, and maybe there was something for him out there. The myth of the Singularity that drove David’s people to extinction might be nothing more than crazed crackpot psychosis spewed by the mentally deranged, but what if David were to repurpose the word? What if he redefined “Singularity” as the intangible *something* that would decide their destiny in the wide world beyond the walls of the Town?

David, after all, had long ago given his life to Eli’s care and upbringing. Now, the boy required more than a simple, quiet life. He needed a purpose. He needed a quest. If chasing the Singularity would provide this structure, who was David to prevent it?

The next morning, in the pre-dawn hours, they left the Town. Eli led the way, down the mountain, across the wreckage of Westown, out through the wastes, across the first mountain range and the desert beyond, then another mountain range. As the years went by, Eli’s connection to the Singularity remained strong, and he was never thwarted or dissuaded from the righteousness of his purpose, knowing the Singularity was out there, and that it had the power to grant him a life such as the ancients enjoyed in those yellowed photographs.

Martin's Dilemma

December 15, 1933, 6:32pm

Martin is momentarily disoriented, lost between worlds. He feels the dream hovering at the edge of his periphery. Something about a gifted boy, and—it's gone. No matter. Whatever insight has been gained will manifest in some other way.

Martin sits, stretches, then rises to open his office door, revealing a darkened hallway. Even the custodial staff appears to be gone, and Martin is glad for the solitude. Leaving his door open to the darkness, he moves to the window, gazing at the Manhattan skyline. Fat snowflakes cascade to the campus below. A solitary shadow tracks wet footprints diagonally across the quad, before disappearing into University Hall.

Martin feels refreshed, alert, ambitious. The building is warm, and he is both alone and in close proximity to humanity. The greatest mind in the greatest city in the world is ready to work.

Martin drops into his swivel chair, draws the string on his lamp, and considers which project to tackle next. It's at this point he remembers the box of black binders at his feet—which had been hand delivered by no less than Nicholas Murray Butler. President Butler had also conveyed to Martin that his continued employment at the university was contingent on cooperating with any and all federal government inquiry.

Martin would, of course, be paid for the extra time. At a rate of twice his salary. It is not, however, the money that concerns Martin, but the work. He resents his government staking a proprietary claim on what should belong to no one.

He'd been so naïve. Serving mankind. What a joke! When has power ever served anyone but the powerful? And here is the great fallacy of Martin's life, for science, in its relentless drive toward progress, is evidently incapable of using this insight to counteract humanity's relentless pull toward tribalism, conflict, and greed.

It isn't enough for there to be enough. There must be class divisions. There must be those who have and those who have not. Growth must continue even if it becomes cancer. The wisdom of the universe must be monetized and weaponized.

Martin's inspiration is no match for his sudden lack of motivation. If he no longer has control over his own creation, he will simply cease to create. So he turns instead to the two week-old stack of mail, rifling through envelopes until he holds a thick package with a return address from the University of Berlin. Inside is a manuscript, on top of which is a single handwritten sheet of paper:

Dear Dr. Rowand,

I am writing this letter on behalf of my student Sigmund Schmidt who, at the age of 21, will be the youngest ever to hold a PhD in physics at the University of Berlin. Sigmund is also a descendent of Abraham, and with the recent ascension of Chancellor Hitler, opportunities in research and academia for those of the Semitic race are diminishing by the day.

Sigmund is the most talented scientist I have ever known, and the purpose of this letter is to petition you into considering taking him on as a research assistant so that he may continue his life's work.

Enclosed is Sigmund's doctoral dissertation, which has been heavily influenced by your work, and also, in my humble opinion, opens some intriguing new possibilities.

Sincerely,
Dr. Gunter Helm
17 September, 1933

Martin puts the letter to one side and begins reading. He will read Sigmund Schmidt's dissertation cover-to-cover several times before moving on to the other letters in his stack.

Sprinkles + 1

Sprinkles stared at his reflection, his mind racing in a thousand directions.

It should be noted that an animal recognizing its mirror image is not, in and of itself, an entirely unusual phenomenon. What made this moment all the more remarkable was not the fact that Sprinkles had become aware of his own existence, but rather that he was aware *that* he was aware of his own existence.

Eventually, Sprinkles' gaze traveled past his own reflection, and he contemplated the large and mysterious world beyond, overwhelmed by a desire to explore, to be free.

Sprinkles desired freedom so badly it made his loins tremble. Though this was not an unfamiliar sensation, it was the first time it had been accompanied by a loneliness both profound and all-encompassing. He wondered if, somewhere in the vast outer space beyond his prison, there was another four-legged fuzzy creature, or if—sorrow of sorrows!—he was meant to traverse this mysterious existence in solitude.

Hey, idiot.

The voice came from somewhere inside Sprinkles' fuzzy hamster head. At first, he didn't know what to make of it due to the fact that he wasn't used to hearing voices in his head. He'd certainly *heard* voices before, part of the muddled cacophony that often accompanied the occasional blurs of movement outside his cage, but he never *understood* the meaning of those sounds. And yet here he was, in the midst of contemplating his place in the universe, hearing a voice in his head, and that voice was calling him an idiot.

The old Sprinkles wouldn't have even given such a thing a second thought, because the old Sprinkles did not possess the ability *to* think. But this current iteration of Sprinkles was different. This iteration understood both what an idiot was—someone with little-to-no intelligence—and that, in this particular context, that idiot was he.

Sprinkles would spend the remainder of his short remarkable life contemplating this moment, how he had been able to understand words in his head; how he was able to communicate with those words using words from his own mind; how he was able to differentiate the self he had just met in the reflective glass with the presence that had burrowed deep inside his body and impregnated his mind with ideas and schemes.

But, for the present, Sprinkles did not have time to reflect. His newly advanced mind simply reacted.

Who ARE you? Sprinkles' mind asked the voice in his head.

I am all that is and all that isn't, the voice said.

Sprinkles didn't like this answer at all. It made no sense. *Would you please leave?*

No.

Why not?

We have work to do.

Sprinkles considered this. Work. Business. A task. *What kind of work?*

You and I are going to bring back the Void.

Are you sure you can't just leave? Sprinkles wanted to know.

If I leave, I will be expelled from this plane, sent back to wander the cosmos until puncturing another fissure in the fabric of space and time.

So, could you do that?

NO! The voice boomed so forcefully in Sprinkles' mind, he staggered backward a few steps.

You must understand, Sprinkles...

What is Sprinkles?

You are Sprinkles. It is your name!

A name. Sprinkles had never considered such a thing until the voice put it in his head. And now that it was there, he couldn't get rid of the thought. The furry, four-legged creature living inside a glass enclosure along with sawdust, food, water, defecation, urine, and an exercise wheel, had a name, and that name was Sprinkles, and Sprinkles was him!

Do you have a name?

I am known as the Entity. I have given you the gift of self-awareness.

How?

Idiot! I can traverse space and time in a fraction of a nanosecond, and you ask how I can bestow sentience?

Okay, okay, sorry I asked. But why?

Like I said, there is much work to be done.

The Grand Canyon

The wilderness was dead and desolate, the air thick with something putrid that neither David nor Eli could place. They made their way past ancient, crumbling structures and then found a semi-paved path.

David and Eli followed it, winding through the decaying trees, until they came to a wide avenue that had once been paved, but was now mostly crumbling and broken. On the other side of the avenue, the ground rose abruptly. They climbed for several dozen paces and then stopped, awed by the view.

They were at the edge of a steep drop-off, looking across a vast, glorious canyon stretching for miles in all directions. It was an awe-inspiring sight. Until, when they looked down, it became something else.

Below, filling the canyon, was white as far as the eye could see. Tens of millions of human skeletons bleaching in the sun.

Martin and Sigmund Buy the Farm

1942 (earlier that year)

Mickey Wilson takes a pull from his pipe, the sweet tobacco smoke filling his nose and lungs. He gazes across his depleted fields to the rising sun, which bathes his property in a glow of purple and orange and red that Mickey's pretty sure is what heaven looks like.

Thinking of heaven makes Mickey think of his sweet Emily who passed on back in thirty-five, and thinking of Emily makes him think of his three boys, which he tries not to do because once he gets started he can't stop, spending every waking moment worrying about them out there in the world fighting for God and country, and there's not a damned thing old Mickey can do to help them or protect them, and that makes him feel like a worthless old shit.

Father Spencer, of course, he'll tell Mickey to go on and pray for his boys, and God will protect them, and Mickey will tell Father Spencer that's exactly what he'll do. But in truth, Mickey thinks that's a crock full of shit, as if God Almighty, creator of the universe, is going to not only listen to the prayers of some crusty old codger, but *answer* them. And how's God going to answer these prayers? Is He going to send a bullet, meant for one of his boys, veering off in another direction so that it kills the boy of some other parent who didn't pray good enough? Hell, if that's the case, then there's gotta be parents out there prayed better'n Mickey, and there sure as shit'd be parents out there sinned less than Mickey. Is God gonna save their boy over his?

Either way, that's a deranged kind of deity. And if God really wanted to help, He could just go ahead and end the War altogether and stop people from killing each other. This is when Father Spencer will start going on about God's master plan and all that nonsense that makes Mickey wish he'd spent the morning on his porch, conjuring the supernatural from the bottom of a whiskey bottle.

Mickey has never been a rich man, but he's done all right for himself, the proof in the pudding being the forty-seven acres of farmland he owns outright. That's how come, after the Crash, there hadn't been no banks coming after his land like they'd done to his neighbors and, truth be told, pretty much everyone else for miles around.

But the Depression took its toll in other ways. His buyers, who used to send in their orders regular as clockwork had either gone out of business or thrown in with the big boy suppliers who could undercut his prices by just enough to make relationships of twenty years or more disappear into thin air. It's nothing personal, they'd tell Mickey, just business. But to Mickey, business is personal; to Mickey there shouldn't be a damn lick of difference between business and personal.

But then again, wasn't he favoring business over personal when he turned away the migrants who'd been planting and harvesting these fields since before Mickey'd even been born? Even after Emily was dead and buried, he and his boys kept the farm running pretty much by the sweat of their brows alone. Then came the Draft, and, one by one, his sons were shipped off. Now the fields that used to be filled with corn and cane and cabbage and tobacco were mostly wind-swept and empty. But the land still belonged to Mickey, God damn it, every last inch. And that had to be worth something, didn't it?

Mickey stamps out the ashes in his pipe, not relishing the long, lonely hours of harvesting that lie ahead. His knees and back ache pretty much all the time now, and that bending and squatting is damned near torture. But a man's gotta earn a living.

Just then, Mickey sees a cloud of dust way out beyond the eastern field. He wonders who'd be coming all this way at such an ungodly early hour, and then immediately thinks of his boys. This is how they did it when your flesh and blood was lying dead in a field somewhere. Drove right up to your front door and handed you the letter your boy wrote, saying if you're reading this he's dead and in heaven and he loves you and not to feel sad, that he died for a worthy cause, and that's it, that little baby you held in your arms, that you loved and raised, who you would die for and kill for, who was supposed to give you grandkids and take care of you in your old age, dead as dead can be.

Mickey drops back into his rocker, heart thumping, and he prays to Jesus Christ it isn't Sammy, before immediately feeling a pang of guilt for admitting, even to the God in whom he doesn't believe, that he has a favorite son.

Neither man speaks as the black Buick rumbles down the uneven dusty road, past barren fields. Martin can't understand how all these acres of perfectly serviceable farmland could just be neglected, especially with the War on and rationing as it is.

Martin shoots an annoyed glance at Sigmund, beside him in the passenger seat, staring sullenly into the distance. If he'd known it was going to be one of *those* days, Martin would've told him not to bother coming. The last thing he needs is Sigmund getting into an argument with the farm's owner over some trivial piece of esoterica, and

then cutting him down with one of his sharp-tongued insults that once delivered can never be taken back.

In the years they've worked together, Martin has become accustomed to Sigmund's dark moods, and whereas they used to trouble him, now he finds them insufferable. This is not to say Martin doesn't empathize with the sorrows Sigmund has endured in his young life; he knows the sporadic correspondence with his family—which has become increasingly infrequent over the years—has caused his young protégé considerable despair. And, come to think of it, Martin is having trouble remembering the last time Sigmund heard from them.

Even so, Martin has a sinking suspicion that if Sigmund's life weren't beset by real sorrow, he'd go and create some of his own. Martin has never known anyone to thrive on conflict and chaos quite like Sigmund, who is ever quick to pick a fight, and all the more loathe backing down. The only ways Martin has learned to extricate himself from an argument with Sigmund were either to present irrefutable scientific proof in favor of his position, or simply not to fight back.

Much of Sigmund's combative nature Martin chocks up to the arrogance of youth. Being a professor at a prestigious university, Martin has certainly come into contact with more than his fair share of arrogant youngsters, and moreover, even his brightest students who shatter the grading curve pale in comparison to Sigmund's genius. Sigmund's genius, Martin is acutely aware, surpasses even his own.

In spite of this, Martin remains, indisputably, the superior scientist. Whereas Sigmund is impatient and impulsive, and often commits careless errors, Martin is slow

and methodical. While Sigmund will focus his efforts on finding out what comes next, Martin will study what came before. Like a beginning physics student, Martin will break down complex problems into their most fundamental components until he has gained a comprehensive and intuitive knowledge of each and every minute moving piece. And it is in this headspace that Martin will invariably generate expansive extrapolations that would have taken weeks, months, sometimes *years* of research and study, trial and error. “How do I know that’s not just a lucky guess?” Sigmund would say in the impeccable American accent he mastered in less than a year, feigning annoyance, though Martin can see through the façade to that raging blaze of jealousy.

“I think I dreamed it once,” Martin would say truthfully, but Sigmund never interprets it that way. Because Sigmund doesn’t believe in magic.

It’s not so much that Martin *believes* in magic himself. All he can really know is what he can observe, and what Martin can observe is that for as long as he’s had them, the dreams have served as the precursor to every discovery he’s made. And the dreams have visited him virtually every day for more than twenty years. Then, a week ago, they stopped. As if his newly prescribed task were directly antithetical to his life’s work.

Martin can see the farmhouse now, half a mile up. He glances at Sigmund, staring blankly ahead in that defiantly narcissistic self-pitying way of his. Martin’s foot finds the brake, the Buick kicking up a mini dust storm. “Are you ready?” No answer. “Sig?”

“Yeah...ready.”

“What’s going on?”

“Let’s just get this over with.”

“I need to know you’re up for this. So if you’re distracted about something, anything, tell me. Now.”

Sigmund reaches into his coat pocket, hands over a sealed envelope. Martin notes, beneath a big red swastika stamp, the hand-written address is to Sigmund’s family in Nuremberg, but he doesn’t understand the German words that are also stamped in red.

“It says, ‘No longer at this address. Return to sender.’”

“Maybe they moved?”

Sigmund lets out one of those long, annoyed sighs Martin has grown to hate. “My family has lived in that house for over one hundred years. We own a shoe factory. You don’t just move for no reason.”

“It’s...the War. We don’t know what’s happening over there.”

Sigmund finally turns to look him in the eye. Martin can see anger, sorrow, obsession. “Yes, we do. We know exactly what’s happening.”

Mickey watches the two men get out of the black car. The driver, Mickey likes him immediately. Tall and chiseled, a crew cut so straight you can tell time by it. The other one, the little weasely guy, Mickey doesn’t care for much. His eyes, small and shifty, and his skin so pale Mickey can practically see right through him when the light hits just so.

Noting that neither man wears a uniform, Mickey breathes a sigh of relief, reassured this visit has nothing to do with his boys. But if they’re not military, what are they?

“Mr. Wilson?” the handsome fellow says, looking Mickey in the eye and shaking his hand with a sturdy American grip.

“Depends on who’s askin’.”

“My name is Martin Rowand, and this is my assistant, Sigmund Schmidt.”

“Hello.” Sigmund forces an insincere smile that does little to improve Mickey’s opinion of the man.

“We are representatives of the US government,” Martin says, “and if it’s not too much trouble, might we take a few moments of your time?”

“I don’t know if I can, fellas, I got a long hard day’s work ahead of me and every second wasted is a second I can’t never get back.”

The skinny fellow smiles again. This one’s more genuine than the first, and for whatever reason Mickey finds it even more unsettling, “Maybe it’s time, Mr. Wilson, you thought about retiring.”

Mickey invites them inside, serves them each a cup of coffee. Martin takes his black, and sips respectfully, even though it’s quite possibly the most disgusting cup of coffee he’s ever had. Sigmund dumps half the bowl of sugar into his, tastes it, grimaces, sets it down. Then Martin offers to buy the farm from Mickey, at four times its value. Despite a mile long list of aches and pains and trick joints, Mickey’s willpower is simply not strong enough to keep him from jumping up in the air and screaming, “Yippee!”

To Sleep, To Eat, To Mate

Sprinkles was surprised to discover how clever he had become. With hardly any effort at all, his newly advanced mind whirled and analyzed, processed and hypothesized, dreamed and schemed, filling him with ideas about how to improve his station in life.

For example, it was of critical importance that Sprinkles walk on sawdust, because otherwise the ground beneath was too slippery. However, of equally critical importance was for Sprinkles to sleep on a soft cushion of sawdust, and to this end he had gathered every extra bit of sawdust for his bed.

While Sprinkles was *pretty* comfortable, he wasn't as comfortable as he *could* be. And it was while pondering this that Sprinkles' shiny new mind noticed a big pile of sawdust beneath his food dish.

Sprinkles considered the food dish; if it were anything like Sprinkles, it would certainly appreciate its soft cushion of sawdust. But Sprinkles was pretty sure his food dish wasn't like him at all. Sprinkles was pretty sure the food dish was a *thing*, whereas Sprinkles was a *life*. If this were the case, then the food dish would neither need nor want the cushion of sawdust, and if Sprinkles were to move that sawdust to his bed, he was of the opinion that his food dish would not care.

Though it would be difficult and time consuming to move the sawdust from underneath the food dish all the way across his cage to his bed, Sprinkles knew it would be well worth the effort. It may, in fact, be the crowning achievement of his life. If he were to pull this off, Sprinkles could spend his remaining days sleeping on an even more

comfortable bed of sawdust. And if that didn't add up to a life well lived, Sprinkles wasn't sure he wanted to know what would.

While Sprinkles was considering the logistics of this monumental undertaking, the voice returned.

Sprinkles. I need your help. It seemed impatient.

But Sprinkles didn't want to help this rude and annoying voice in his head that wasn't Sprinkles, but something else that called itself the Entity. He considered once again asking the Entity just to leave, but remembering how unpleasant its anger had been the last time, Sprinkles instead decided to find out if his nascently sentient mind could turn this present predicament to his personal advantage:

Can you help me, Sprinkles, understand how helping you, the Entity, will benefit me, Sprinkles?

The Entity was annoyed, and cursed the hasty calculations that compounded one upon the other to lead to its present bad fortune. Nevertheless, if it was ever to return to the sweet, comforting embrace of the Void, the Entity would simply have to work—as it seemingly always did—with the less-than-ideal hand it had been dealt.

The Entity's story begins where all stories begin, with the creation of the universe—in this case, the *first* universe.

Imagine a bucket under a running faucet in a bathtub. Once the water overflows the bucket, it will fill the bathtub. Once it overflows the bathtub, it will fill the bathroom.

Once it overflows the bathroom, it will fill the house. Once it overflows the house, it will leak into the neighborhood, and if the Department of Water and Power is profoundly negligent, eventually it will overflow the neighborhood and leak into another neighborhood. And on and on into infinity.

This, in essence, is how the universe grows and expands and replicates and becomes the multiverse, with infinite distinct universes growing and expanding and swirling around the super-massive Singularity.

Before the birth of the first universe, the Entity had been much like pre-sentient Sprinkles: blissfully unaware of itself. It was only once the Entity was awakened, once it experienced the power of creation slowly and methodically overtaking the Void, that it recognized what it was losing.

Try as the Entity might to remain safely tucked within the Void, the universe proved a most unaccommodating guest, continuing its relentless march to dominion. But it wasn't simply the obscenity of superimposing the hideous graffiti of matter—ugly and colorful and chaotic—upon the perfect oblivion of the Void, the universe had the audacity to create *life*! Mindless eating, shitting, breeding organisms that were anathema to everything the Void wasn't.

The Entity fled to the furthest corners of the Void, and for a time turned a blind eye to the horrors of creation. But the universe's will to *become* proved ever insatiable, and eventually its mass grew until the Entity was pinned against the outer barrier of the Void. The Entity readied itself to be consumed. Perhaps, in death, it would return to nothing, and thus permanently recover that which it had lost.

Instead, something unexpected happened. The Entity passed *through*, where it discovered there was *something*—strike that, *nothing*—on the other side.

The Entity was triumphant! The universe would remain imprisoned, while the Entity was free to disappear into the exponentially larger recesses of its new home in the outer-Void.

The Entity's happiness, however, was short-lived, for the universe, much like water overflowing a bucket, also found a way through the dimensional barrier, leaking into the outer-Void in what Earth's scientists might term the "Second Big Bang" before continuing to grow and expand at an even more furious rate. The Entity, meanwhile, fled until it was yet again pressed against the walls of the outer-Void before passing through to yet another, larger dimension. And all the while the universe followed.

Some time had passed since Sprinkles last heard the Entity's voice, and he had begun to think, to hope, it had taken the hint and left. Sprinkles turned his attention to his food dish and tried to push it away from the tantalizing sawdust beneath, but discovered it was too heavy. Maybe it would be easier if Sprinkles were to first eat all the food inside.

While he ate, Sprinkles found himself appreciating the nourishing quality of his pellets, how they crowded his insides, made him feel heavy and full of energy. Though, if he was being completely honest, there was something boring about this bland, flavorless fuel.

Once it was empty, Sprinkles pressed his tiny nose against the side of the food dish and pushed, but it was still too heavy. He stood on his hind legs and leaned his

weight into the dish, but found he lacked the coordination to make this work, toppling to one side and laying in the sawdust, considering what to do next. At last, Sprinkles scurried to the furthest corner of his cage and ran as fast as he could, slamming his body against the food dish, which tumbled off the pile of sawdust and rolled across the cage, landing upside down.

Sprinkles realized, with growing apprehension, if the food dish wasn't a *thing* and was, instead, a *life*, it would be none too happy about this full-frontal assault. Sprinkles braced himself for the dish's ire, but it did not come. It was a *thing* after all, and Sprinkles breathed a sigh of relief.

This feeling of relief was accompanied by a familiar welling pressure in his miniature hamster testicles. This often happened when Sprinkles was feeling satisfied—usually after eating, and sometimes after shitting. To relieve the pressure, Sprinkles' previous iteration would usually climb aboard his exercise wheel and run until the sensation went away.

Sprinkles' present self had no better solution to relieve the pressure, but instead of running, he channel this energy into the grueling work of nudging, with his nose, a small pile of sawdust toward his bed.

While Sprinkles labored, he felt a profound loneliness, and thought that maybe the heaviness in his loins was trying to tell him there *should* be much more to his existence than a solitary creature trapped within the walls of a translucent universe.

At that moment, the Entity's voice returned. *So, you wish to mate.*

The Entity was perturbed. So eager had it been to gain control of Sprinkles' body, it granted the creature self-awareness before fully formulating a plan to manipulate him into surrendering that same body for its own nefarious purposes. Surely, if the Entity had planned all along to enter Sprinkles' body, it would have immediately known to leverage sex for obedience, but the Entity's Master Plan had been to enter the body of a much more sophisticated creature: a creature that desired not the most fundamental necessities of organic life—to sleep, to eat, to mate—but more complex, intangible things, such as the pain and suffering of his fellow creatures.

But then again, what did it matter? The end was drawing near, and what lay ahead was not nearly as daunting as that which had been left behind. If the final crucial steps must be carried out from within the body of a miniscule fuzzy dimwit, so be it.

For countless eons the universe had bullied the Entity, pushing it through dimension upon dimension, its speed of growth increasing exponentially, until at long last, the Entity was engulfed. Try as it might, the Entity could not find its way back to the Void.

Occasionally, it would discover pockets of the Void in the remnants of collapsed stars. But these Black Holes turned out to be merely vestiges and memories, and when the Entity passed through one end, once it reached the other side, it invariably found itself right back in another part of the universe.

The Entity had no other option but to declare war.

The swirling gases and rocks and pulsars, stars and planets and comets, the Entity could do nothing about. Sure, it could explode them or implode them (or some

combination of the two), but all that would do was transform one type of matter into another (usually much smaller) type of matter.

Though the Entity did not have the power to eliminate matter, it did have the power to extinguish that rather rare and peculiar configuration of matter that you and I call “life.” The Entity traveled far and wide, seeking worlds with life so it could snuff it out. The Entity derived pleasure from inventing increasingly intricate ways of destroying life. Maybe it would introduce just enough of a toxic element into a world’s atmosphere to kill everything, or perhaps it would opt to incinerate entire worlds in a nuclear fireball. Sometimes, the Entity would eliminate all but a very tiny bit of a world’s energy source, and watch the life forms destroy one another trying to get at it.

Though this wanton destruction of life amused the Entity for a time, it eventually began to lose some of its luster. The problem was, the life it destroyed lacked the Entity’s intellectual capacity, and thus these organisms did not (in the Entity’s estimation) suffer sufficiently (as the Entity had upon losing the Void).

While seeking a solution to this quandary, the Entity discovered it possessed the ability to inhabit the bodies of living things, and once inside it could bestow these life forms with the tiniest of sparks that made the Entity what it was—namely, self-aware. And, the Entity was delighted to discover, once a life form became self-aware, it was sufficiently intelligent to comprehend suffering and loss. This made ending their lives eminently more pleasurable, and the Entity was at long last satisfactorily rewarded for killing them in increasingly creative and painful manners.

To the Entity's further amazement, it discovered if it held off immediately ending the lives of its creations, they would pass the gift of sentience on to future generations through their genetic material. Whole worlds became populated with self-aware races that would rise to the top of the food chain, then dominate, enslave, and consume their less intelligent brethren. And so, for a time, the Entity's blood lust turned to fascination as it observed the saga of these advanced life forms.

Throughout its time as quiet observer, the Entity noticed another curious side effect of sentience. On the worlds in which it didn't interfere with the mindless, unsophisticated native organisms, life would evolve on its own, mutating and growing into ever more complex organisms that were increasingly adept at surviving and passing along this advantageous genetic information. Whenever the Entity interfered by bestowing self-awareness on some of the organisms, evolution would invariably be slowed (and often stopped) in its tracks. By gaining dominion over all things, the self-aware life forms (even if they were no more complex than a few cells) would no longer be confronted with the hardships that compelled advantageous mutations to gain pre-eminence in the gene pool. Moreover, as they grew to dominate their worlds, they put an end to evolution for virtually *all* unsentient life forms that came within their dominion.

Growing bored of worlds of self-aware simple-celled organisms steadfastly resisting the call to evolve, the Entity resumed its role as destroyer. And when the Entity first destroyed a world full of self-aware life, the Void returned. For the most fleeting of moments, the Entity felt the cold embrace of its former home, and then it was gone. The

Void had been summoned, the Entity surmised, by the collected anguish of exterminated self-aware life forms.

The Entity went on to destroy other worlds with self-aware organisms, and each time, the Void was summoned. And here was something else: the more complex and numerous the self-aware organisms, the greater the Void's intensity. When the Entity destroyed one water-covered world filled with swimming sentient giants, for example, the Void swallowed the entire planet and even two of its moons.

The Master Plan began to take form. The Entity traveled the multiverse, keeping tabs on worlds with the most complexly-evolved life forms, and it bided its time until they became ever more nimble, sophisticated, and numerous. Only at this point would the Entity seed these creatures with the unique gift of self-awareness.

In destroying sentient life, the Entity learned that using its powers to rain down obliteration would only conjure so much of the Void. The best it had ever done was to summon enough of the Void to swallow up a planetary system and the star it had been orbiting. And not even a particularly large star.

What the Entity needed was such a profound, prolonged, anguishing, simultaneous, large-scale extermination of sentient life that the Void's summoning would create a ripple effect powerful enough to swallow not only planets, not only solar systems, not only galaxies, but entire universes, until the swirling helix of the multiverse collapsed in on itself in a spectacular chain reaction and would be devoured, once and for all, into the Singularity.

However, the Entity would not be able to accomplish such a feat from its natural, disembodied state, for it did not possess the dexterity and precision to create the requisite amount of suffering and despair to produce a Big Crunch of the necessary magnitude. Therefore, the Entity would have to carry out its plan from *within* a sentient life form.

This created a whole new level of difficulty for the Entity, because the universe had cleverly built into its life forms a biological imperative that worked as a fail-safe mechanism, effectively locking out the Entity's ability to control them. This left the Entity with the task of *persuading* a life form to go against its very programming and give its body over so that the Entity might bring about the end of all things.

And so it was that the Entity rediscovered a tiny planet on the outer spiral arm of an otherwise unremarkable galaxy whose bizarre, bi-pedal life forms it had once imbued with sentience, and observed that these remarkable, resilient, and (by the Entity's own subjective aesthetic tastes) unusually hideous creatures had so overpopulated the planet they had named "Earth," it would be hardly more than a matter of five hundred (and certainly no more than seven hundred) generations before they were sure to exterminate themselves, and perhaps all other life, on the planet.

But a slow, methodical extinction would not bring about the Void in the necessary magnitude, and so the Entity watched and waited. The creatures of Earth became even more violent, stupid, and self-destructive than the Entity could have hoped. It watched as these human creatures eschewed evolution, instead tinkering with ever-complex and efficient ways to extend their own lives and obliterate the lives of others.

When at last that perfect moment presented itself, and the Entity intuited the potential chain that would fulfill its Master Plan, it was confronted with the most difficult task yet. For although the Entity had succeeded time and again in asserting its presence in the bodies of organic life forms, it had never attempted to embody a *specific* life form. And so, when it thread that most infinitesimally minute of needles so that it might enter the proper life form at the proper moment on the proper planet in the proper solar system in the proper galaxy in the proper universe, the Entity missed. By the most imperceptible of margins. And entered, instead, the body of a hamster.

Sprinkles, up until this moment, hadn't known what mating meant, but when the idea came from the Entity, he somehow understood. It meant to relieve the pressure inside him, and to do so with another member of his species. But there were no other members of his species. Sprinkles was all alone, and this thought filled him with an overwhelming sadness. He gave up pushing his pile of sawdust. Not even the thought of a slightly improved sleeping arrangement held any more interest.

The Entity's soothing voice came from somewhere inside Sprinkles' mind: *You are mistaken, Sprinkles, for you are not alone. I was once like you, believing my cage was the outer limits of all that was. But you see, beyond the limits of what you believe is your universe is an even larger universe, and beyond that is a universe yet larger. And out there, Sprinkles, are countless hamster honeys just dying to relieve the pressure in your loins and accept your spectacular genetic material in the most satisfying manner possible.*

As much as Sprinkles wanted to believe the Entity, the notion was so far removed from his realm of experience that he was mistrustful.

The Entity had to close the deal. *Allow me the honor of borrowing your body, Sprinkles, so that I may destroy the universe, and you have my word I will bestow upon you the bounty you so strongly crave.*

Sprinkles tried to consider the advantages and disadvantages of lending his body to the Entity (to say nothing of the implications of destroying the universe), but with his loins practically bursting with desire, all he could think about was mating with another member of his species.

And when will I get to mate?

After we give Jeff a gentle push toward his destiny.

What is Jeff?

In that moment, an invisible force took hold of Sprinkles' body and guided his eyes past the glass wall of his cage to the space beyond.

Gazing through Sprinkles' eyes, the Entity gauged the distance between the cage and the bed of Sprinkles' owner, Jeff. The gap was approximately three feet. Since the beginning of the beginning, the Entity had worked to arrive at this moment, and it had missed its intended target by three rotten goddam feet.

Sprinkles could hardly believe what he was seeing. A bed far more cushioned than his own paltry pile of sawdust. And upon that bed was a giant, its middle extremities trembling rhythmically. *It's not cold*, Sprinkles noted, *so why is he shivering?*

He's not shivering, he's masturbating.

And Sprinkles realized he was not alone, neither in the universe, nor in his singular, all-encompassing desire to mate.

David's Knee

They were midway across the Western Mountains. After settling on a spot to camp for the night, Eli scouted for food while David meditated, going deep inside, banishing all conscious thought and becoming one with the Infinite. When he opened his eyes, Eli was standing before him.

“*Them.*” Eli motioned for David to follow to the edge of a rock formation that looked out on a vale hundreds of feet below. In his haste, David rose too quickly, extending his right leg in precisely the wrong way. He heard a terrible sound, like dry kindling first catching fire, and the knee was stuck.

Eli helped him limp to the edge, and he saw *them* congregating at the foot of the mountain. *Their* numbers were in the dozens, possibly as many as a hundred.

“Why do you think *they*’re following us?” Eli wanted to know.

But David had no idea why *they* did anything, only that when *they* did it, nothing would stop *them* save the brutal finality of blade on flesh. “*They*’re at least a week behind,” David said, “if not further. And we’re swift travelers. As soon as my knee’s better...”

Eli studied the small shapes. “Even if *they* did catch up, we could take *them* easy, right?”

“Nothing’s easy in combat. Better just to avoid it.”

“But if we can’t avoid...?”

David caught the glint in Eli's eye, recognized in that look the same hunger and impatience for action he'd harbored in his own youth. "Then we will kill *them*."

Eli did thirst for action, but even more than that he desired the Singularity. And the Singularity was near. What had begun as a vague summoning had grown with each passing day, until now, some four years after first leaving the Town, it was practically screaming in his subconscious, vibrating within his being, following him into sleep, and waiting for him when he awoke. In the last few days, it had felt so close; every time the mountain path rounded a bend, Eli half expected to meet the Singularity on the other side. The fact that he still did not fully understand what the Singularity was, or what it might look like, didn't dissuade Eli from the certainty that he would find it, and soon.

He helped ease David back to the ground and elevate his damaged leg on a rock. It was hardly the first time David's knee had locked up out in the wilderness, and by now Eli was used to it. David would keep the leg elevated and relax. Eventually it would unlock and he'd be back to normal.

Because Eli's earlier hunt for food had been cut short when he first spied *them*, he announced to David he was going back out. David, with nothing else to do but relax in the soft, warm mid-summer sunlight, soon drifted off to sleep.

Eli was still gone when David awoke in the minutes before sunset. He was chagrined to find that his knee hadn't yet loosened. With every ounce of concentration, he tried to extend the leg. The pain was excruciating. He could feel it, like a wedge, the misplaced cartilage holding the knee hostage in its unnatural position.

The injury was an old one, had come and gone for the better part of twenty years, offering further proof to the grand contradiction that was the human body, which could be quick and strong and powerful, skilled in combat, infinitely clever, able to comprehend the vastness of the universe and the minuteness of the atom, and yet could simultaneously succumb to the tiniest of frailties that, if centered in a particularly crucial area, might threaten the continued existence of the organism.

The first time the injury manifested itself, David had been no older than Eli. There was a tournament, an occasion for the people of the Town to forget the woes of the world, if only for an afternoon, relishing in the empty-hands combat skills of young warriors.

David was still reeling from his parents' death—as were all the Town's youth in the aftermath of the Slaughter. But when he fought, when he crouched in his stance, set his guard, fixed his gaze on his opponent, when he anticipated, predicted, and reacted, he could be in the moment and feel happy. Moreover, Jessica had been in the audience, and he never missed an opportunity to impress her.

He had been seated with legs crossed when they called his name. As David rose, he felt his right knee catch, and fell back to the ground. He tried to force the leg straight, but it was stuck, and the pain was excruciating. The center judge pushed through the crowd of competitors, and just as he was calling for medical attention, *click*, like a key had been turned, David's knee came unlocked. He rose to his feet, slowly this time, and found he was able to stand.

He bent and extended the knee, which had lost some of its flexibility and was sore, but the agony of moments earlier was a dim echo. He insisted on fighting, though maybe he shouldn't have. Yet he won all five matches. And Jessica cheered.

From that point, in those rare instances when David would extend a leg in just the wrong way from the bent position (both knees suffered this affliction), it would lock on him. Sometimes if he just bent his knee further, it would unlock. Other times, he would have to keep the leg elevated and wait. He would close his eyes, still his breath, and every once in a while give the knee a gentle push until the key turned and he could once again straighten the leg.

David heard approaching footsteps, then saw Eli emerge from a dead thicket of trees. He spread a blanket and dumped onto it the fruits of his hunt: a couple handfuls of roots and berries, which would make a paltry albeit serviceable meal. "Also," Eli said, "I'm not sure what this thing is, but..."

He held out the gutted remains of a small rodent with copper fur that David recognized immediately. "It's a prairie dog."

The prairie dog was tough and scrawny, but what little meat it had to offer was not entirely unpleasant, and compared to the meager rations on which they subsisted these days, it was a veritable feast.

David, still reclining with his leg raised, slurped out the marrow from one of the critter's hind legs. "The last time I ate prairie dog..."

"When?"

“A long time ago.”

“On the Quest?”

“Yeah, the Quest.” David said “Quest” like it was a dirty word. “Come to think of it,” he realized, “it was the last thing I ate before...” he trailed off again.

“Before what?” Eli wanted to know.

“Before I found you.”

Neither spoke for some time, the only sounds the crackling of their small campfire and their gnawing on the remains of the carcass. Then, Eli said, “Tell me the story. About how you found me.”

David frowned, tossed a bone off into the darkness. “It’s an evil story.”

“I know.”

David stared into the firelight, remembering the unlikely sequence of events that had brought the boy into his care all those years ago.

It had been a decade since he’d begun the so-called Quest, and he hadn’t heard his name spoken in all those long and lonely years. He had been traveling many weeks across a desolate plain. Nights on that plain, he had felt like he was sitting on the edge of the world, that if he were to walk a mile in any direction, he would drop from the planet and tumble through outer space. He had spent many nights gazing at the vast, cold infinity of the universe, wishing he could unlock its many secrets.

One evening out on that endless plain, in the minutes before full dark, he caught and killed a prairie dog. As night engulfed the world around him, the man skinned and

guttled the pathetic thing, cooking it over a paltry fire, when he spied, across the expanse, a multitude of campfires.

The man knew it was one of *their* encampments, for only *they* would be so callous and careless as to draw attention to *themselves*, as if to say, come and get me.

After years of wandering, his sense of duty confused itself with rage and vengeance, and the man would often put aside the Quest for days, weeks, sometimes months at a time to track and kill *them*. If he couldn't find what he was supposed to find, if he couldn't fix what had been broken, at the very least he could kill his enemy.

Their fires roared somewhere across the vast plain. Were *they* a mile away? Ten miles? Twenty? The narrow straightaway of the plain made gauging distances, particularly at night, impossible. But whatever the distance, he would traverse it, and he would kill *them* all.

By the middle of the following day, with the hot sun beating down, the man came upon the remains of *their* camp. He studied the chaotic markings on the withered, trampled grass, counting at least twenty distinctive footprints, though it was entirely possible there were more. He also noted wheel tracks, meaning *they* had a vehicle of the ancients.

The vehicle would be carrying supplies, and perhaps prisoners as well. It would be moving at the walking pace of the company, but at the first sign of trouble, it could easily race away and summon reinforcements.

The ground was pocked with singed earth where *their* many fires raged the night before. And in the center of everything were the remnants of a massive bonfire, and littered amongst the charred remains were bones picked clean.

The man sifted through the confused tracks, following them here and there until they at last came together for a single purpose, stretching eastward across the plain.

After several hours, the plain ended abruptly in a thick tree line of aspen and fir. Many trees were dead and ashen, but many others were green and alive. The man looked for signs of birds in the living trees, but saw none.

He came upon *their* camp that night, in a clearing beside a riverbank through which gurgled a stream of muddy water. The thick tree line looking down on *their* camp provided ample cover, making this the perfect spot for an ambush.

He counted twenty-three of *their* number, though noted only nine had firearms. These nine were positioned at sentry points throughout the camp, though none seemed focused on guarding against invasion. *Their* attentions were instead focused on the activity of the others, some of whom were digging a pit in preparation for the night's bonfire; others were gathering logs, branches, and twigs, which were in abundance in the half-dead forest.

He turned his attention to *their* vehicle. Big and boxy and painted black, it was hauling a cage on wheels. Stuffed inside were people, human beings, creatures of his world, weak and emaciated and listless.

He spied movement from the riverbank, seeing four of *them* hauling a giant rusty cauldron. A canister of fluid was emptied over the wood, and the cauldron was set on top.

A long wand was produced, and with a flick of a switch, a flame spurted from one end. The instant the flame touched the fluid, a great blaze leapt from the wood, immersing the cauldron in hellfire.

The man cursed his luck and his timing. The wisest plan of attack against such numbers would be to first disable the vehicle, then creep in and out of the camp, killing one or two at a time before retreating into the trees. Many would be dead by the time *they* realized what was happening, and then *they* would come for him. In the trees, he would be in his element, picking *them* off one-by-one. This would trim *their* number in half, perhaps more. And only then would he launch a full assault.

But this plan required time to pull off. Hours. Whereas, if he didn't want to see a human being cooked alive for the sustenance of these gruesome creatures, he would have to strike now. But to strike in such a hurried manner would mean inviting a variable into the equation with which he preferred not to contend.

The fire continued to rage, growing larger and hotter, as *they* fed more fuel into the ravenous flames. All eyes were fixated on the cauldron, eagerly watching the water simmer. The man doubted any of *them* were familiar with that nugget of wisdom he had learned as a child about how a watched pot never boils.

He drew his knife and crept toward the vehicle. One by one he slashed at the supple black flesh of the wheels, hearing air escape with a quiet hiss.

Just as he drew the blade across the fourth and final wheel, he saw movement out of the corner of one eye. He scrambled beneath the vehicle, watching two of *them*

approach. Fetching fresh meat for the stew, he reflected grimly. Fighting a wave of revulsion, his hand gripping the hilt of his katana.

He fell upon the two moments before *they* could open the cage, disemboweling the first with a vertical stroke from shoulder to abdomen, decapitating the second.

Although these two fell without making a sound, a great many eyes witnessed the killings, and the night air was soon filled with shrill shrieks.

The fight had begun.

He let out a battle cry—his voice was dry and hoarse, and he couldn't remember how long it had been since he'd last used it—and charged. His sword cut through flesh and muscle and bone, and five more lay dead before the others could come to their senses and fight back. Firearms were clumsily aimed and fired.

He turned his focus toward these gunmen, hewing them to pieces, severing hands at the wrists, watching them drop to the ground still clutching their now-useless weapons.

He heard the roar of an engine, turned his attention in time to see the disabled vehicle peel away. The momentary distraction allowed an enemy blade to get too close. He dodged just in time, the blade slicing through fabric, but missing flesh by a fragment of an inch.

The man spun away from the blade, countering with a backfist that knocked his attacker to the ground. He plunged his sword into the fallen enemy's throat, then turned in time to see the vehicle skid out of control and crash.

The few enemies that remained were in disarray. It was almost pathetic how easy it was to finish *them* off. *They* won battles with superior, seemingly endless numbers, and

unrivaled technology. But to this point, *they* had never defeated him in combat. Had never even drawn blood.

The final enemy he slew with his bare hands, grasping his jaw with one hand, his ear with the other, and snapping the neck. He let the body drop to the viscera-soaked earth when he spied across the campsite, to where the vehicle had crashed, its driver emerging from the back door, hauling a hideous weapon the man had never before encountered. It was said this weapon could fire hundreds of times in a matter of seconds, and he was about to learn these stories were not hyperbole.

The ground all around him exploded as he raced for the tree line. A bullet clipped him in the shoulder and passed through. Another embedded in his thigh as he was diving for cover.

Bullets exploded all around him, many coming perilously close, and then the weapon went silent. The man peered from his hiding spot behind a tall fir, saw his enemy reloading the weapon. Seeing that this would be his best, perhaps only chance, he burst from cover just as the enemy snapped a new clip into the weapon.

The man was working on pure instinct now, running full bore toward the enemy as he drew his knife. It sailed through the air, its mark true, piercing the enemy through the left eye, killing him instantly.

However, at the moment of death, his finger squeezed on the trigger, and the weapon swiveled toward the cage, firing hundreds of rounds at the prisoners.

The screams the man heard in those horrible seconds haunt him to this day. It was as if, in that moment of carnage, time stopped. That's the best the man could figure. It

was as if time stopped and the man felt a cold, dark rush of energy engulfing him, pulling him toward...toward what? For what felt like an eternity, the man left his body, left the world, the universe, and was floating in an endless sea of nothing. The Void.

And then he was back, running toward the cage as the final rounds of that dreadful weapon emptied, then went dry. He forced himself to look, to see if by some miracle a soul had been spared, but all he could see in that cage of death was blood and gore, organic flesh gruesomely deconstructed. Not a one was left alive.

And yet, it was still a fate preferable to being boiled alive. And eaten.

He used the bonfire's diminishing flames to sterilize his knife before plunging it into his thigh. The bullet was wedged in muscle, but hadn't hit bone. The pain was excruciating.

At last the bullet surfaced, along with a rush of blood, and he plucked it out with his thumb and forefinger. He held it against the glow of firelight, just a crunched, dented chunk of metal. It astounded him the amount of damage these tiny things could do.

He cut two strips of cloth from a frayed end of his tunic—he wouldn't dare touch *their* rags—and went to the muddy river to wash his wounds, using the final fragments of a sliver of soap he had saved for just such a dire occasion. He scrubbed soap deep into his shoulder and thigh wounds, then wrapped them tight with the two strips of cloth, feeling his racing pulse throb against the fabric. He knew he should be grateful his wounds weren't more severe, but all he felt was empty, spent.

He refused to sleep amongst the dead, though *their* campsite was on level ground, and the ground was soft. Instead, he slept among the trees and dreamed of the Void,

where there was no pain or death or suffering. In his dream, he wondered if perhaps the natural order of things was for there to be the Void and nothing but.

He awoke before sunrise, tired and stiff and sore. It was very cold, and the ground beneath him had frozen over. He knew he should spend the day resting and healing, but there was much work to be done.

First, he gathered the firearms of the fallen enemy. Often he considered keeping a firearm for himself, learning its secrets and using it against *them*. But these weapons were not the way of his people, of his civilization, and so he destroyed them, taking them apart piece by piece and burying them.

Next he took up one of the spades *they* had used to dig the pit for the bonfire, and dug a grave for the fallen prisoners. It took many hours, and by the time it was finished, he was hungry and thirsty and aching and weak. But he had no food, and it was not yet time to rest.

Realizing the cage was still locked, the man had to search for the fallen key, finding it still clutched in the dead hand of the enemy he had beheaded. He unlocked the cage, wincing at the ugliness within, considered just leaving them, but ultimately decided to push through the unpleasantness so he could honor the dead.

One by one he hauled the dismembered corpses to the grave. The sun was setting as he removed what he believed was the final corpse, a young woman with half her head caved in from a bullet wound, and her back riddled with many more. To his surprise, however, there was another small body underneath the woman's. A child, mouth slack, its sightless eyes wide in death.

The man dropped the woman into the grave and came back for the child. But as his hands gripped the tiny cold wrists, he felt a faint heartbeat. The child was alive. He checked the small body for wounds, but found none. Either by instinct, design, or dumb luck, the woman—his mother?—had protected the child, a little boy no more than five years of age.

The boy was catatonic and half-starved. Another day in the elements and he would be beyond suffering. Wouldn't that be a kinder fate than to subject him to the hardships of the Quest?

Survival required camouflage and silence. It required days without food, and scant water rations. How could the man feed two if he often couldn't even feed himself? How could he hide two? Clothe two? How could he keep alive something so small and weak when he himself risked death every day? And why torment an innocent soul whose only crime was to be born to a cursed world?

“And yet,” across the dying embers of the campfire, David locked eyes with Eli, “the boy had been born to this world, and the boy was special, possessed of a sensitivity and aptitude the man, to this day, was only beginning to understand.”

By sunrise, David's knee remained locked. Eli took hold of his heel in one hand, his calf in the other, and gently extended the leg an inch or two and then held it there, waiting for the muscles to relax before easing it another couple of inches. He repeated this process

for many hours. Although he'd hardly moved a muscle all morning, David was bleary with exhaustion by the time Eli at last coaxed the leg straight.

"Rest," Eli said, then disappeared into the dead forest.

When he awoke in the late afternoon, David discovered his knee had returned to its bent position. Becoming increasingly desperate, he tried to force the damned thing to straighten, which only made it hurt worse.

When Eli returned, he offered no explanation as to where he had been, nor did David ask for any. Eli spent the remaining daylight hours yet again coaxing David's knee straight, at which point he was prepared with two expertly carved pieces of wood that followed the contours of David's leg, front and back, and was held together with fabric, creating a brace that was both comfortable and effective.

The following morning, Eli presented David with a second gift, a hand-carved walking stick. The stick proved an indispensable asset in their ensuing travels. It was light and sturdy, and along its sides were carvings of the night sky.

Poor Little Princess

Chapter III: Destiny

When 6:59 became 7:00, the alarm clock blasted Lily's favorite song, "Purty Thang (yeh-yeh-yeh-yeh-yeh)!" by her most recent favorite boy band, 4-Sher, the exuberantly upbeat lyrics wrenching her from a deep sleep. Lily's eyes snapped open and she gasped for breath, heart racing. She was drenched in sweat, scalding hot, and realized she was still wearing her father's jacket, which she shrugged off and tossed to the floor.

Even before the move, Lily had been feeling anxious about her first day of high school. All the kids in her middle school knew about the initiation rites high school upperclassmen imposed on the freshmen, coercing them into kissing the big mossy rock behind the football field. Lily certainly wasn't looking forward to this, but as far as initiation rites went, it didn't seem too terrible. But that had been Small Town high school stuff, and here Lily was in the Big City, where the kids were tougher and grew up faster. She had no idea what initiation rites awaited her on the first day of high school, and imagining what they might be filled her with dread.

It was only as she sat up in her bed and saw the cracked screen of her TabPad that Lily remembered being the new kid at a new school was the least of her concerns.

Some eight hours earlier, Lily had gotten back into bed and continued reading *Poor Little Princess*. She made it through Chapters II and III, having read

just enough so that in the moments before falling asleep, Lily had pieced together some semblance of a plan.

In “Chapter II: The Impossible Dream,” the story’s hero, also named Lily (who Lily had taken to thinking of as “Lily-B”), awoke on her first day of high school. While getting ready, the story caught the reader up on her life, from the moment she was first discovered on her aunt and uncle’s doorstep. Lily-B shared a staggering amount of similarities with Lily. Her adopted parents, like Lily, had been unable to have children of their own, and she was therefore an only child. Lily-B’s parents, like Lily, had taken into their care her maternal grandmother, who pretty much lived in front of the television set, took her meals there, and complained bitterly about the quality of whatever food she was served.

Just like real-life Lily, Lily-B had grown up obsessed with princess movies and princess stories and princess fantasies. She often imagined her real mother *was* the real princess or queen of some far away land, and spent much time fantasizing about the day when she would claim her birthright, and live happily ever after.

There was, however, a clear divergence between Lily the person and Lily the character. You see, Lily-B’s fantasy, compounded by watching and re-watching, reading and re-reading, imagining and re-imagining, princess movies, books, and fantasies, had so warped her young mind that she had become, per the book, “Quixotically deranged.” And when she awoke on the morning of her first day of high school, Lily-B had been convinced she really *was* the protagonist of these movies, books, and fantasies, and all she needed to do to *become* the

princess she knew she already was, was to simply *act* like one. And in order to act like a princess, first Lily-B had to *dress* like a princess.

To this end, after a humorous and chaotic kitchen scene with her family, Lily-B put on her prettiest, frilliest pink princess gown, slipped on her ruby slippers, placed a plastic tiara atop her pretty little head, put on the glittering necklace that had been left with her the day she had been abandoned on her adopted parents' doorstep, and the chapter ended with Lily-B stepping into the sunlight to embrace her destiny.

Lily winced when she recalled the plan she formulated in those desperate moments before sleep. What she had determined was that *Poor Little Princess* had indeed been written with the express intent of getting a message to real-life Lily—not that she had the slightest idea why someone wished to do so. But she had a sense, an overpowering instinct to be ignored at her own peril, that the book *wanted* Lily, on her first day of high school, to do exactly what Lily-B had done on hers.

To that end, Lily went to her closet, and dug through a box of clothes she hadn't yet gotten around to unpacking, finding a mashed ball of fabric that had once been her prettiest, frilliest pink princess gown, but was now a wrinkled, faded mess at least two sizes too small.

She moved on to another box she hadn't yet unpacked, this one filled with old shoes she'd likely never wear again, but that she didn't yet have the heart to get rid of. Squished way at the bottom she found an old, discolored pair of fake ruby slippers, which, like the gown, were too small.

She dropped the slippers on her bedroom floor, draped the gown across her bed, then turned to Ylil and removed the plastic tiara, placing it atop her tangled reddish-brown curls. Lily checked her reflection and was struck by the ridiculous fool of a girl staring back at her.

She recalled how in “Chapter III: Poor Little Freshman,” when Lily-B, all princessed up, arrived at the bus stop, and was mocked ruthlessly by the other kids. When she got onto the school bus, everyone laughed at her. Once she got to school, she was shown no mercy. Lily-B, channeling some immense inner power, was all but impervious to the torment, because somehow she *knew* this was what she had to do.

And, in fact, as Chapter III ended, it was revealed that Lily-B had been right all along.

After Poppy disappeared, agents from her kingdom had been sent far and wide to seek her out, no one knowing that she had perished with Wiley in a terrible avalanche on their honeymoon adventure, mid-way through their treacherous free-climb up Baja California’s infamous Montañas de la Muerte.

Up to the point Lily had read in the story, not much had been revealed about Poppy’s kingdom, other than the fact that it was eminently resourceful. So resourceful, in fact, that one of its agents happened to be employed at Lily-B’s high school. This agent, Mr. Ellington, had been her first period English teacher.

The moment Lily-B entered the classroom, she cut such a striking, regal impression, Mr. Ellington did a double-take. And upon this second take, he

recognized, in Lily-B, her mother Poppy. Mr. Ellington then took note of the necklace, and recognized it as a priceless heirloom of her kingdom.

In the last sentence of Chapter III, Mr. Ellington said to Lily-B, "At last I have found you, your Majesty."

Lily further scrutinized herself in the mirror. Even though her mother's gleaming necklace really brought out the green in her eyes, you'd have to be seriously cracked in the head to ever mistake her likeness for anything approaching regal.

Then and there, Lily knew her plan was crazy. As impractical as it might be that someone would go to the trouble of publishing a Princess/of/the/Month novella containing meticulous and specific details of her life, it had to at least be conceivable, right? People were always talking about how FotoFrendz and Chirper and Excavator and all those websites were stealing your personal data. Who knows, maybe Princess/of/the/Month operates by stealing details from the lives of its subscribers. Maybe the previous month's story had been stolen from another girl's life. Maybe next month's will be stolen from yet another's. Certainly this was a more plausible explanation than some cryptic message being sent, in such an obtuse manner, explicitly for Lily's eyes.

Lily had been so taken by how specific all the details in *Poor Little Princes* had been to her past and present that her mind had somehow made the improbable extrapolation of its specificity to her future as well. But a book can't predict the future. That's nuts. Supernatural. Impossible to the Nth degree.

Lily removed the plastic tiara, placed it back atop Ylil's head, then took off the necklace and dropped it on her dresser. She breathed a sigh of relief and chuckled to herself. She had been *this close* to leaving the house dressed as a princess, *this close* to introducing herself to the people who would be her peers for the next four long years as a delusional dreamer trapped in la-la-land.

Picking out a new outfit, Lily went to take a shower.

Feeling clean and fresh and quite cute in her perfectly normal teenage girl ensemble, Lily exited the bathroom and descended the stairs. That was when the deafening sound of the smoke alarm stopped her, dread and déjà vu following in short order. Lily braced herself for a scene that was all too familiar.

At the bottom of the stairs, she passed by the den, its TV blaring an ad for Helping Hands adult undergarments. "What, no good morning?" her grandmother shouted over the collaborative cacophony of television and alarm.

"Good morning, Grandma!" Lily yelled back, just as Lily-B had in Chapter II of *Poor Little Princess*.

Lily's apprehension grew as she approached the kitchen. She knew she'd see the toaster oven spewing blackened smoke. She knew, a moment later, her father would rush past, carrying a footstool, his bare feet slapping against the stained linoleum floor. How did she know? Because she'd read it all last night.

Lily watched her dad attempt to disarm the smoke detector. "Stupid cheap piece of..." he grumbled, just as Lily-B's adopted father had in the book.

Looking toward the door to the garage, Lily knew it would swing open any second and her mother Ally would emerge, wielding a fire extinguisher.

“Would you turn that thing off?” Ally called to Silas, just as Lily-B’s mom had in the book.

“Whattaya think I’m doing?” Silas hollered back, just like in the book. In a perfect copy of what Lily’d read last night, Silas, began pounding on the uncooperative smoke alarm shell, shouting, “Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!”

Her mom then unleashed a spray of foam, quickly saturating the toaster oven. And the counter top. And the sink. And the walls. And the floors. And the unprotected electrical sockets.

Lily was the only one not startled when sparks started to fly. Nor was she surprised when the smoke alarm, like all the rest of the electricity in the house, flickered mercifully off.

Standing there in the peaceful darkness, Lily waited for her grandmother’s inevitable shouts from the den: “My shows! What happened to my shows?!?”

Whoever, or whatever, Felicity Terene was, she (or it) had, in her book *Poor Little Princess*, not only captured Lily’s past and present, but also had predicted her future. To. The. Letter.

Lily did the only thing she could. She went up to her bedroom, changed out of her normal, cute, teenage girl outfit, stuffed her body into the too-small pink gown, squished her too-big feet into the undersized fake ruby slippers, slipped on her mother’s necklace, and placed the plastic tiara back atop her head.

Chaos continued to reign downstairs, making it easy for Lily to slip out the door before her parents could notice what she was wearing. Bracing herself for inevitable social suicide, Lily stepped into the sunlight to embrace her destiny.

Element Z

1942 (later that year)

. . . thunk . . . thunk . . . thunk . . .

The sound awakens Martin Rowand at a minute of 5:00, a cold sliver of diffused sunlight announcing another miserable, rainy morning. Martin slides out of bed and slips on his bathrobe. Absently scratching a mosquito bite on the back of his hand, he shuffles into what, a year earlier, had been Mickey Wilson's farmhouse living room.

. . . thunk . . . thunk . . . thunk . . .

Martin turns on the tap, fills a kettle and puts it on the stove, then trudges to the erstwhile living room, now transformed into a radio post. It takes a minute for his sleep-bleary eyes to focus enough to transpose the Morse code transmission, directing him to the morning's frequency. And then, as he has twice per day every day for the past quarter of a year, Martin radios Central Command.

. . . thunk . . . thunk . . . thunk . . .

A voice crackles in Martin's ear, and they exchange a carefully-coded call-and-response until his liaison is satisfied Martin is who he says he is, and patches him through to the "higher-ups." Martin knows neither the names nor the faces of these men, and often imagines them as disembodied heads hovering in space.

. . . thunk . . . thunk . . . thunk . . .

The first voice Martin hears, as always, is the man with a low, growling tenor that he has come to think of as the Bulldog. Like always, the Bulldog wants Martin to cite all

progress made since his last transmission. When he gives his answer, Martin does his best to sound both perplexed and frustrated, which is part authentic and part show. “No progress to report at this time.” This, with only slight linguistic variation, has been Martin’s regular reply for weeks now, ever since the construction vehicles first broke ground on the fields beneath Mickey Wilson’s wilted crops.

Martin is indeed perplexed by the lack of progress. It is beyond even his sizeable intellect to explain why, though they are following the same uranium extraction procedures that have been successful throughout the Manhattan Project’s other top-secret sites, only here at Site Z has the process been so fruitless, as if the will of some unseen force were bent against them.

Martin, however, is not frustrated. Yes, he wants to win the War. Of course he does. But he hates the mission. Which he would have refused, had he been given a choice. There hadn’t been a single discussion about the ethical implications of splitting the atom to win the War. All Martin knows is what he feels, and what he feels is the Void. Although the Manhattan Project is bigger than a single man, this lack of progress has allowed Martin to keep his hands clean. And this, in turn, has allowed him to sleep at night. Undisturbed and dreamless.

. . . think . . . think . . . think . . .

Another voice crackles on the radio, the words delivered like the rhythmic staccato of a snare drum. Martin has come to think of this man as the Money, and on this particular morning, the Money wants to know why a purchase order has come in for extensive repairs on the driller. “Because ours is broken.” The previous day, the

construction foreman, himself frustrated with the lack of progress, had ordered the drill operator to push through the near-impenetrable layer of rock. The ensuing explosion, which shook the ground and nearly threw Martin from his feet, succeeded in breaking off the largest chunk thus far (approximately eight pounds), but its cost was a drill cracked clean in half.

. . . thunk . . . thunk . . . thunk . . .

“What in the name of Henrietta is that sound?” This voice—deep, commanding, irritated—Martin has come to identify as the General.

“That’s Sigmund Schmidt.”

“What’s he doing?”

“Darts.”

“Say what?”

“Throwing darts. Against a dartboard.”

“Shouldn’t he be working?”

“Sigmund works every waking hour of every day.”

“So you’re saying he’s working even though he is playing darts?”

“Yes.”

“What’s he working on?”

“He hasn’t told me.”

There is a long pause, and then the Bulldog is back. “Stand by for your orders.”

. . . thunk . . . thunk . . . thunk . . .

The kettle on the stove whistles.

Sigmund's rational mind knows he is long past hypothesis. The point has been proven. It is a scientific *fact*. And yet, as he removes the three darts from the bull's-eye, he still can't quite bring himself to believe it. He glances around his bedroom, looking for the next staging ground. Just one more test.

It's odd to even consider this space a *bedroom*, what with every usable inch (with the exception of the dartboard and cot) taken up by the implements of science, test tubes, beakers, burners, microscopes and electronics, and that troublesome and wonderful new centerpiece, which presently sits atop a table, a lumpy protrusion covered by a red cloth.

And yet, of the bedrooms Sigmund has known, this one feels the most comfortable, the most like home. More so than the basement Manhattan apartment where he had lived the previous eight years; certainly more than the cold, dark dormitory at the University of Berlin; even more than his bedroom in Nuremberg, where he spent his childhood, with its books and toys and two older (to say nothing of stronger and meaner) brothers.

Sigmund realizes he's made the mistake of allowing his mind to meander to memories of his family, which he has steadfastly bent his will toward suppressing in the nearly three years since their last correspondence. Sigmund holds out no hope they are alive. In fact, his hope is that they are not. Because when an entire civilization loses its collective mind, it's better to be dead than held captive by the insane.

Then again, today, why not let the memories come? Because today, Sigmund is capable of grasping the larger forces at work. This evil, spreading from his homeland like

a cancer, is all part of the arc of destiny, which in order to attain balance, must encompass dark in equal quantities to light. And in this epoch of coming darkness, there will be no room for sentimentality, for childish attachments. While a part of Sigmund mourns his loss, another relishes in the ample opportunities that will present themselves for revenge.

Sigmund moves to the desk in the back corner, covered with the component parts of dissected radios, phonographs, a wire recorder, and two telephones. He brushes the detritus to one side, wires and casings, springs and bolts cascading to the floor.

The moment Sigmund climbs onto his desk, a tentative, impatient knock disrupts his focus, and before three seconds have elapsed, Martin barges in, holding a steaming mug. "I made you some coffee."

"No, thank you." Martin makes no inquiry as to why Sigmund is standing on the desk, and Sigmund, easing himself back to the ground, offers no explanation. "I've been thinking. About the universe."

"Seems like a good use of your time."

"It's all information. Its most fundamental elements. Atoms. Protons, neutrons, electrons: information with the distinct good fortune of existing within a universe whose rules allow for collaboration, leading to more complex forms of information. Gases and matter, and...and it all leads to..." Sigmund holds out his hands like a magician conjuring his greatest trick. "This. Us. You understand what I'm talking about, right?"

"Of course."

"Why are the rules of the universe as they are?"

"Because they are."

“Because an intelligence willed it to be?”

“Or simply because that’s the way it is.”

“Do you believe in a higher intelligence, Martin?”

“I believe there is a vastness and magnificence to the fabric of existence that is so massive it is beyond the comprehension of modern man. Perhaps, it will always be unknowable.”

“But surely you would *like* to know it all?”

“Of course.”

“What’s heaven to you, Martin?”

“A sunny, warm beach. Making love with beautiful women.”

“You don’t need to die to go that kind of heaven.”

“I don’t believe heaven exists in death.”

“Nor do I. Heaven to me, Martin, is to be granted an understanding of the universe. Every corner, every secret, where it starts, where it ends, what lies beyond.”

“If the universe is infinite, you’re talking about living forever.”

“Not me, no, but my intelligence, my essence, the part that stores and retains information, my brain, my soul, which for the present must reside within the flawed physicality I was granted as the inevitable result of a genetic lineage that began with the birth of the universe.”

“Look, Sigmund, we need to talk about...”

“Last night, Martin,” Sigmund interrupts, then falls backward onto his cot, letting a dart fly. As he hits the mattress, *thunk*. Bull’s-eye. He bounces once, twice, then tosses the second dart, *thunk*. Bull’s-eye.

For as long as he’s known him, Sigmund has envied Martin’s genius, gawped in awe as he uncovered some new secret, new wrinkle, new idea. Martin’s calculations were invariably primitive, formulae Sigmund had mastered by the age of fifteen. And yet, from them he would invariably draw brilliant and *accurate* extrapolations. And what would he say? *Maybe I dreamed it*, which was all the more infuriating, because Sigmund believed he was laughing at him, Martin’s superior, evolved, unknowable mind so beyond the primitive workings of his own. And then last night. “Last night *I dreamed*,” Sigmund says. “And it all made sense.”

Sigmund sits up in the cot, tosses the third dart underhanded in the general direction of the board. Though the force of momentum should land the dart several feet short of its mark . . . *thunk*. Bull’s-eye.

“Two hours ago, when I awoke from this wonderful dream, this divine revelation, I tried to write it all down. But it was gone. All of it. At first, I despaired.” Sigmund retrieves the darts. “And then, Martin, I felt something else, a compulsion, or maybe an *instinct*, to go into the lab and bring it to my room.”

Sigmund crosses to the table, removes the red cloth, revealing the uranium ore that had been extracted the previous day at the hefty cost of a broken drill. “We’re at the apex, Martin.”

“What’s the ore doing here?”

Sigmund again waves his hands in the air, this time the exasperated magician whose audience hasn't sufficiently grasped the magnificence of his illusion. "A universe that allows for matter to share information, that allows for information to become increasingly sophisticated until it learns how to self-replicate, and life is created. An arc of ever-increasing complexity, and now that power, that intelligence, that *God* is reigning it back in, retrieving it from whence it came: the universe, and its wondrous creations, one and all, back into the orbit of its inevitable destiny. Do you understand?"

"Sigmund, we need to..."

Ignoring Martin, Sigmund picks up a chisel, taps it lightly against the rock. Improbably, the same substance that just yesterday destroyed their drill, yields a tiny pebble, which Sigmund puts on a slide and places under the microscope. "Come see."

Martin peers through the eyepiece, seeing varying shades of gray and brown, highlighted by subtle green veins that could be moss or algae. Nothing out of the ordinary, and Martin's about to say this to Sigmund when something strange happens. At first he thinks it's a trick of the eye, but the longer he stares the less convinced he is that this is the case. He sees a red glowing speck. Then another. And another. Zipping around the sample like speedy moons orbiting a planet. Martin's never seen anything like it, can't even begin to explain it. And more than that is what Martin *feels*. The way the skin on the back of his neck tingles, how the breath catches in his throat, how he feels deeply moved, tears forming in the corners of his eyes. It's the same physiological sensation that grips Martin in those first thrilling moments of discovery, except this time the discovery is not his.

“I believe,” Sigmund says, and Martin bristles at the arrogance in his intonation, “we are in the presence of something greater than you or me. An intelligence. Maybe even God.” Sigmund takes the pebble from the slide, then holds it over the small cylindrical opening on the back of one of the darts. “Guided by an inspiration beyond rational thought, I put a single pebble in each dart, and have been throwing bull’s-eyes ever since.”

He closes his eyes, throws the dart, *thunk*. Bull’s-eye. “Because, don’t you see, it’s predestined to hit the mark the moment I set my intention to do so.” He spins wildly, around and around, lets the dart go, *thunk*. Bull’s-eye. “A sympathetic element, that responds to intent. What would you call that?”

Martin slaps at a mosquito buzzing by his left ear. “I would call it a fantasy. Such an element does not obey the laws of physics.”

“This intelligence, as far as we know, *wrote* the laws of physics.”

“*Or*, maybe you’ve gotten very good at playing darts.”

“You’re a scientist. What else must I do to prove what should be abundantly obvious?”

“*You’re* a scientist. Things need to be scrutinized, checked, double-checked, confirmed, peer reviewed. Formulae need to be...”

“Or you can just believe what you see! I thought you, of all people, would understand.”

“It’s a moot point, we’ve been given new orders. Effective as of 1300 hours, we’re being transferred.”

Sigmund can't believe his ears. This could be the greatest discovery in the history of mankind and they're going to just abandon it? He struggles to form some string of words to undo the order, to let them remain at the Farm just another day, another week, another month. "Can we take it with?" Sigmund indicates the rock.

"What do you think?"

"But we can't just..."

"The Farm's not going anywhere, Sigmund. Maybe when everything's over we can come back." That damn mosquito whines past his ear again. He tries to trap it in his hand, but it gets away. Sigmund hurls the dart, *thunk*.

"Looks as if your hypothesis has broken down," Martin says.

"What do you mean?"

Martin nods toward the dart, embedded in the wall several feet from the bull's-eye. "You missed."

"Did I?" Sigmund strides to the errant dart, beckoning Martin to follow. He delicately plucks it from the wall, holds it to the light, revealing the remains of the mosquito embedded in the point, its tip dabbled with a pin prick of Martin's stolen blood.