Freedom’s Mask

by

Andrew Oberg

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To N, L, and K, with love always

– May the world be made better for you
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Freedom’s Mask
Chapter One

I could feel the sun blazing down on my face, lighting up my eyelids and threatening to outdo the pain that was throbbing behind them, my right especially banging away. No, not my right eye, the place behind my right eye, just at the root of the socket, where all the gangly wires join the eyeball to the brain. I was keeping those lids firmly closed. More pain was not what I needed.

But the poking continued. And that voice. Was it a voice? It was something patterned, it had to be human. Repetitive. Was it English? No, something similar perhaps. A sing-song pattern, ups and downs, ups and downs. I thought that maybe if I rolled over my eye might hurt less, but it felt like I was lying on some wet and squishy ground so I decided that might not be such a good idea. No telling what I’d roll over onto. But I had to do something. Whoever it was out there – and by that point I knew it had to be a who and not a what – wouldn’t shut up. I moved my right arm to put a hand over that dancing ball planted in my face, to put some pressure on top that might help calm the fires beneath, and as I did so I felt my sleeve cling to me; it was soaking wet. How did that happen? One thing at a time. I squeezed both of my eyelids shut extra tightly to gird myself for the big move.

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and then cracked open the left, blinking immediately and rapidly under that scorching inferno in the sky, letting the focus come slowly as a shape shifted above me.

It was human. He was human. And still poking away, muttering that same string of nonsense. I blinked a few more times and pressed down a little harder on my right eye; the thing would not let up. What was the guy wearing? Some kind of conical hat like the kind you saw fake Asians wearing in movies from the fifties. He didn’t look like a real Asian though, but then he didn’t look black or white either. I couldn’t place him racially speaking, not that it really mattered. He might have been all races at once for all I knew. He did have a thin beard, or maybe well-trimmed stubble; a style choice? His eyes looked kind enough; real concern hovered there amongst the soft browns. Thick black eyebrows, a tall straight nose. Why wouldn’t he stop poking me? I blinked again and tried to speak, my voice coming out like gravel, rocks being dragged on asphalt; speech was evidently a non-starter, all wrong, dead. I was in shocking pain, wet, and my throat was evidently damaged to boot. Giving up on chatter for the time being I cocked my left arm under me to prop myself up, keeping my right where it was to hold down that jack-in-the-box of agony. He, the guy, took a couple of steps back and stood up slightly, looking
away and maybe calling to someone. He was dressed in a set of black pyjamas and rubber boots all speckled with what looked like dirt; and he was wearing one of those goofy Asian hats. I didn’t blame him for the apparel though, the sun was intense. Searing almost. And the humidity; was that why I was so wet?

I tried to look around a little; there were green shoots poking up all over the place. I was on the ground all right, stuck in the mud, and in more ways than one, I mused. I soon discovered too why my clothes felt so drenched. They were drenched. I was lying in a few centimeters of murky water, not more than five so there was no need to swim – of course – but the color of the water, and its warmth, with the little plants everywhere and the sun frying every molecule, instantly made me think the place must be swarming with bugs. I forced myself into a proper sitting position.

For the most part that was easier than I thought it was going to be. I wasn’t injured in any way that I could tell and aside from the ice pick jabbing away behind my eyeball I felt no pain whatsoever. I might have felt other pains had my headache not been drowning them out, but anyway nothing seemed broken, cut, scratched, or bruised. If I had fallen here then I did so somewhat remarkably, or
maybe just luckily, because I didn’t seem to be any the worse for it. Still, I was the worse for not knowing where I was. And why couldn’t I understand the people around me? There were three of them now, with a fourth approaching, all wearing those same black pyjamas and rubber boots, faces shaded by their umbrella tops. I stared at them. They were staring at me so I couldn’t see the harm in it. Their facial features were mixed, quite varied within the group, and their skin tones were differing shades of a pleasant but mysterious not quite red or yellow, black or white, as that church song about Jesus loving the little children goes. It occurred to me that they really ought to retire that song; it’s racist. The two who were most animated were both men and one had a fantastic moustache of a dark brown, kind of reddish hue, while the third and – having just arrived – fourth were women who might have been quite striking had I been able to get a good look at them. For now they hung back and appeared worried.

I tried speaking again but it was still no dice. My throat was a rock tumbler. They, however, had no trouble speaking, and pointing. Calmly though; I had to give them that. I pushed a little harder against my eye and tried to remember what I had gotten up to the night before. It was easy enough to concentrate as I could tune out the
sound of these people’s water-pouring-over-dishes-in-the-sink gibberish without any trouble at all. The trouble came when my memory attempted to stretch beyond about nine p.m. I finished work late-ish, not too bad given my average, and stopped off for a drink on my way home which turned into five. I probably should have eaten something. I vaguely recalled walking (stumbling) to the station, some issue with the stairs – slipping? not falling… – and looking through clouded eyes at blurry and dancing train times. The twenty-one eighteen, that was the one I wanted; did I make it through the gate? Did I collapse on the platform? Did I knock out on a bench? Did I fall onto the tracks? Did I really try walking through a Metro tunnel? It was impossible to tell. I was there then and not now. But where in the hell was I? And why in the hell couldn’t I understand anyone?

I sent my left eye roving upwards again and saw that one of the two women had now stepped forward and appeared to be taking charge, speaking quickly to the two men as she pointed first at me and then at one of them. She seemed to be motioning for the other man, Comrade Moustache, to run off in another direction, though towards where or for what purpose I had no idea. Of course I had no idea. I had no idea about anything. She then approached me directly, bending down to meet my
gaze as I sat there like some dumbfounded cretin, and the look she gave me was one of such warmth and genuine concern that I nearly melted. I was putty. She reached out and gently, delicately, pulled my right hand away from the dancing taw in my face. She seemed satisfied by what she saw – and I was sure my eyeball looked fine because all the trauma was located behind it – and then held her hands up, palms outward and with earnestness etched onto her every detail, apparently signaling that she meant no harm by whatever it was that she was about to do or by what she had done. She could have skipped all that because I would have let her touch me all day long, she was gorgeous and there were no two ways about it. Her brown-black hair was pulled back into a bun that remained just within the shade of the cone cap they were all wearing, some loose bits at the front falling over a tanned forehead and accentuating almond-shaped eyes out of which two emerald jewels shone brightly. I let my gaze slide down between them to a little button nose that perfectly offset a full pair of soft and welcoming lips. I was transfixed. I stared at her with my mouth half open while she leaned forward and placed a hand under my hair to lift it out of the way, inspecting the place where my third eye would be if I were more enlightened. She then made the same non-threatening gesture and undid the top two buttons on my shirt, pulling back first the
right side and then the left, checking the central areas on both sides of my chest. I thought it a pity that she didn’t take the whole thing off. And my pants. Redoing the buttons she nodded at me, allowed a slight smile across her lips and in her eyes, and then stood and turned to face her group. While she spoke to them in low tones I tried to imagine what kind of figure she had underneath her pyjamas; I could barely make out the set of her hips and the fullness of her derriere but it was a challenge I gladly rose to. It even made me forget about my pain for a few blissful seconds.

Turning back she half-smiled at me again and said something that sounded like, “Yemoremileeytolpor-томорымолпорбофин.” While she said that she pointed at herself, the remaining man, and the other woman, both of whom looked concerned and curious, but I also noticed a flash of worry on the man’s face. It’s very hard to describe the timbre of a person’s voice but if I had to I’d compare hers at the time to a long, low bird song, maybe like a Boreal Owl’s but with a tad more energy, a tad more pitch. I guessed that she was introducing herself and the others and so I tried to tell her that my name was Frank Tollman but my voice still wasn’t coming out right. Rasps and gurgles. She patted her own throat gently and smiled again by way of reply and so I quit my feeble
attempt. I had always been good at taking hints to shut up.

The man came over to me, right hand extended and with his left making jabbing motions upwards. I gripped his mitt and he pulled me to my feet, keeping his hold with his right while his left reached out and cautiously supported my lower back. Once I was up and steady he let go and took a step away, though he kept his peepers on me as I winced at the thunderbolt that shot through my brain. It was simply too much. I bent forwards and pushed the base of my palm back against my eye; I didn’t care how it looked, and somehow I wasn’t surprised to feel a reassuring hand on my shoulder. I decided that the guy was all right, despite his hat. The other woman came over as well and kind of rubbed my back while pointing at some high-rises that were barely visible on the horizon, their shapes blurred by what seemed like heat haze, but even so looked to be apartment complexes of some sort. That must have been where we were going because the knock-out started walking and then the woman next to me followed suit with the guy signaling that I should go ahead and he’d take up the rear. Two steps in I realized why we were walking in single file: we were in a field of some kind with tall spiky green shoots coming up in long straight rows, the whole area submerged in that low bath of warm water. Whatever was being grown here wasn’t
corn and it sure wasn’t wheat either. What did that leave?

Rice, it hit me. I spent far too much time in the city. They were fields of rice that I was seeing stretching out on all sides, each paddy separated by low dividing walls that no doubt carried some kind of irrigation works but also must have served as footpaths. Somehow I had managed to wind up in the middle of one of them and we were now heading towards a part of the dividing wall that ran along all four sides of the paddy we were in. The middle of a rice paddy! How did that happen? Not a road, not even an access path, but the middle of the darn thing. I thought back to that tunnel at the Metro station but my mind couldn’t get beyond the blackness of its dark before all memory went completely black and dark itself. Whatever happened I couldn’t recall – it was simply gone. Instead I focused on walking, and felt the damp soaking into my shoes as they sank in the mud, socks floating in their sponginess inside. I wished I had a pair of rubber boots. The momentum seemed to help with my head though, maybe it was just the need to get my blood flowing. A friend had always told me that the worst thing to do when you’re hungover is to lie about; getting active gets you over it sooner. That and oily, greasy food, I found. Was it a hangover? It might have been; all the symptoms were there. On the other hand, I hadn’t woken up in my own
bed – or someone else’s – so it could’ve been something else as well. I tried taking my hand away from my eye to get a better look at where I was but soon discovered I wasn’t ready for that yet. Fine, I thought, so the cure I needed was activity plus constant pressure; and then later coffee and meds too, I hoped. I had never felt the need to wait a hangover out and spent a few moments trying to think of ways to communicate “headache pills” without talking.

As we arrived at the dividing wall the woman in front of me turned to give me a hand up. She was pretty too, but not quite as striking as the other woman. Her skin was a bit lighter, her eyes a deep black, her lips under a thinly arching nose less full but with a nice pink-red combination. She looked thin, or trim anyway, but then they all did. I recalled that even Moustache had had a svelteness to him as he ran off to wherever the bombshell boss had directed him. They were all tall too. As tall or taller than me, and I was no runt.

It was good to get out of the water, and as I stepped up onto the dividing wall I saw that it served not only as a footpath but also as a storage area for their farming tools, a miscellanea of which were spread out on the dirt in front of us. The guy, the worried but nice one, stepped up
behind and then around me, and as I stood there on the narrow walkway the three of them gathered up their tools and put them into what looked like cloth sacks. My dream girl came over and pointed at the buildings in the distance. I still found them hard to make out through the haze, although we now had a slightly better vantage than before. She repeated a phrase a few times, maybe “Almsopopar” or something similar, and then started walking again. We shuffled along behind her – well, I shuffled while the others moved with the vibrancy of accustomed hikers – and as we wound our way through the warren of rice paddies, crossing from the top of one dividing wall to the next, I noted water spigots and drainage pipes sticking out here and there, making up a network feeding all of the fields their life-giving moisture.

I was naturally very curious about such details of the place that I inexplicably found myself in, but even if I weren’t I still would have walked in the head hung, slow and ground-obsessed manner that I was; the sun was so intense that any thought of holding my head upright struck me as completely out of the question. It was easier to keep one hand on my eye that way too. I did wonder why no one had offered me a funny hat, but then they probably didn’t have any extras. Too soon. Just as I thought that, and as if reading my mind, the woman in
front of me suddenly stopped, turned around, and plopped her cone top on my head. The abrupt shade was so refreshing that a few sexual innuendos deducible from what she had just done even flashed through my mind. I smiled to myself, which she must have taken as thanks to her, because she smiled back and waved at me a little before carrying on. A gentleman I wasn’t, that was true, but then I was in pain, lost, and desperately perplexed by the entire scene and situation.

The system of retaining walls finally came to an end and we ascended a long ramp up onto what appeared to be a roadway, only rather than asphalt it was made of compacted dirt, dust, and gravel. It didn’t look wide enough for more than a single car to use at any one time. Our boss gathered everyone around and took some bottles out of her sack, distributing one to each of us. I must have gotten Moustache’s share because she only had four of them. They were all glass bottles with nice flipper-top stoppers on them, the kind that for me had a strong yesteryear connotation, but which you could still sometimes find on bottles of higher-end beers. I flipped the stopper up, swung it open, and then paused to sneak a peek at what the others were doing. Everyone was just drinking normally and so I quaffed mine down in a series of giant gulps. It was just plain water, but there on the dirt
road under the blazing inferno above us it tasted like the purest mead to be had this side of Asgard. I was all ready to sit down and wait for our ride when the boss took the bottles back, nodded, and then said something cheerily and loudly at which the other two started walking again. Were they planning on walking all the way to those buildings? I couldn’t believe it; that must have been a good five kilometers off. I didn’t see anything for it though, and I certainly knew that remaining there by myself wasn’t an option, so I would just have to try and keep up. I trudged on stoically while the guy came up to walk beside me, the two women again taking the lead.

As hot as it was the walk wasn’t that bad. No, that needs some qualifiers; it wasn’t that bad considering the ringing pain in my head, the soggy condition of my shoes and socks, and the fact that I was somehow, by some bizarre twist of the universe, somewhere far from home and with people I had never met, who spoke a language I had never heard, and who looked like no one I had ever seen. Taking all that into account it was brutally tough going, but that one particular part of the day wasn’t that bad. It could have been worse, anyway, and the scenery was certainly nice. Fields of rice stretched out as far as the eye could see on both sides of the little road, straight lines of green sprouts sticking up out of sunken square ponds, each
connected to each via a well-organized system of retaining walls and access paths; all very orderly and, by the look of things, very diligently taken care of. As we passed by other fields the two women in our group would call out greetings to those down doing the tending; it was quite comradely and I felt a bit sad to be so out of place, so out of my element, so foreign. And that even through the pain in my head and despite my long acquaintance with being the odd ball out; there was something terribly warm about the whole setting that struck an idyllic note with me.

The series of fields were only broken by the occasional grouping of trees, mostly of the tropical sort with great twisted roots peeking out above the surface and forming grey tubes that scrambled over one another on their journeys into the subterranean world. They reminded me of some pictures I had seen once of how Angkor Wat looked when it was first discovered, the jungle triumphant over massive blocks of stone. Only for us there was no stone – or at least, none that I could see from where I walked. I wondered if I hadn’t ended up somewhere in the far south. Could I have gotten on a night train or ferry somehow? Transferred off the Metro at Tokyo Station where all the subterranean and standard train lines met? If I had, where would that have put me? Takamatsu? Izumo?
Those were the only south-bound night line destinations that I could recall, and neither ended up in a place as tropical as where I found myself. For that I would have needed to catch a train to Okinawa or something, and I knew that was impossible. But more than all that, no matter what train I got on I should still certainly have been able to recognize and understand the people around me when I got off. And since that was nowhere near the case I couldn’t help feeling like Alice. Dreadfully like Alice. Wherever I was there weren’t even any signs on the road or anything else that might signal location, nor the name of the place we were heading to. My mind kept going back to that tunnel.

For better or for worse, I didn’t have a lot of leeway to wonder about such things, as important as I knew them to be – as crucial as I knew them to be –, both because my aching skull wouldn’t let me think properly and because my walking companion was making great efforts to engage me. Annoyingly great efforts. He kept gesturing to himself and saying “Yemoretomor” and then just “tomor”, “tomor”. That was enough for me to learn two things: his name was evidently Tomor and Yemore must have been something like “My name is”. From his motioning here and there around us as he rattled on I also learned what I thought might be the terms for the funky jungle trees,
palm trees – one of the few tree names that I did know in English –, road, rice, and either the sun or the sky, or possibly “It’s hot today!” I told myself that that wasn’t bad for the condition I was in; I had always been a good listener, and having achieved fluency in two other languages besides my native one I had picked up a few linguistic tricks along the way that had become quite natural coping methods when traveling and when surrounded by new sounds and new sequences. What was a damper on my self-congratulating was the thought that a set of nouns in isolation wasn’t going to help me explain where I needed to get back to very well, nor ask where I currently was, or any of the dozens of other questions that came to mind – requesting headache pills being foremost amongst them. I did not want to complain, exactly; I was happy to be safe and to be taken care of as well as I was, but the sheer disorientation was hitting me to such an extent that I couldn’t even adequately process it. I was operating in shock mode. And on reflection I suppose that’s probably why I handled it as well as I did; there was no option, I simply had to trust Tomor and the others and do what I could do, which right then was sadly little more than pressing my hand against my eye and placing one foot in front of the other.

The buildings gradually closed in on us – or us on the
buildings – but there still seemed to be a heat haze hanging in front of them. That could have just been an effect of the horizon, maybe, as the road we were on appeared to go straight towards the town without any curves or bends between. I kept walking. Tomor chatted on but I tuned him out. He was really making a go of it; he must have been deathly curious. My mind turned back to our little group’s boss walking just a few paces ahead of us, the way she had looked at me, the deftness of her fingers as she examined my eye, head, chest. She had taken charge, made decisions, set us on our course, and with an efficiency and confidence that belied the massive question mark I must have represented to them. A stranger, unable to speak, dressed in his workaday costume of navy slacks, white shirt open at the collar, and coal grey sports jacket, lying there in the middle of their rice paddy like some piece of terrestrial flotsam. Women have often surprised me, in both positive and negative ways, and they have also amazed me, but the grace and self-assurance of that particular woman was almost astonishing. Of course I felt that I had to have her. Charging full-bore into that body would not only be a sexual treat, I told myself, it would prove my worth in some indefinable way: the indefinable way that drives men to chase their dicks. I had long since embraced my shallowness on that score. I reasoned too – perhaps trying
to justify myself to myself – that it would also open up another side to the mind ticking away behind that picturesque face. Not that I felt a craving for pillow talk or anything, but she did strike me as the type that wouldn’t bore even once all the excitement had run its usual course. In truth I had no real reason for assuming that, or any of it really, considering the conditions under which we had just met and the thick wall of no language between us, but it fit my fantasy and I happily allowed myself to wallow in it. The other woman in our group, the one who had lent me her hat, I also would have happily done – and maybe a few times I mused – but afterwards I would immediately make my excuses and be on my way. The boss though; watch out. She was the kind a man obsessed over. Or so I enjoyed thinking anyway.

I could finally make out some details of the place we were slowly approaching. From the point we had reached, and through the remainder of that odd shimmering faux-mirage air, it appeared to be a fairly dense group of mid-sized to high-rise buildings, a good many of them apartment complexes by the look of things, and all of them a stark, sharp white. There were black figures shuffling about here and there, and it seemed that the area around and in front of the buildings was either concreted over or paved by some kind of off-whitish or
cream-colored material; certainly the ground there wasn’t the plain old ground we had been treading on our dirt road. Over on my left side I could see a low round building with a cone-shaped roof; I thought of a joke connecting that cone head to the cone on my head, but it wasn’t worth sharing and anyway I could neither speak whatever it was the people with me bizarrely and inexplicably spoke nor even, given the condition of my throat, speak anything at all. So much for establishing my reputation as a funny man. Many of the buildings were connected by two or three elevated hallways at varying heights and each looked to be accessible via the ground floor through a series of alleys and walking paths. In seeing that I was reminded that in the whole time thus far not a single car or truck had passed us on the road. I couldn’t make out any vehicles in the town ahead either. That was very odd, I thought, for any sizeable dwelling at any time of day anywhere in the world. What time was it? I tried to crane my head up to see where the sun stood in the sky but instantly regretted that as the heat slapped my face from the outside and the dancing bayonet behind my right eye stabbed away from the inside. Whatever time it was, it was still hot. And painful. I returned my attention to my feet and was pleased to see that they remained in motion. We’d get there.
And then we had. The dirt road gave way to a grassy field and I looked up to see that we had arrived. The pavement was in fact a light and pleasing peachy-pinkish tone, and stepping onto it after first having gone from the barren road to the mowed grass I realized that each texture had actually gotten softer. What a nice touch. The hard dirt to the resilient earth to that spongy, giving yet firm, type of hardened rubber, or perhaps a similar material. We were then just a few meters from the round building and I could clearly see past it and into what I noticed to be not a town but a full-blown city stretching out into the distance, complete with a set of trolley tracks winding its way from just in front of where we stood deep into the receding sets of buildings beyond. Everything was a clinical white and everyone I saw was wearing black pyjamas and the goofy cone hats.

Only it wasn’t just people that I saw. I also saw robots. Yes, robots. I couldn’t believe my eyes, and it was so startling that I was using both eyes, my pain momentarily fading into oblivion as the steel blue humanoid figures mounted on a pair of wheels buzzed here and there. Were they running errands? Picking up trash? Fixing things? I had no idea but there were at least ten of them in full view right at that random moment. My jaw must have been on the ground because I heard someone burst out laughing
and turned to see that the mirth was directed at me. It was our boss, and I noted that she looked even more gorgeous with her face lit up like that. She took me by the shoulder and led me over to a window at the front of the round building behind which sat, or rather stood, one of the robots. It was chirping away about something, I supposed it must have been in the local language, and a little red light was flashing on the side of its round and nondescript head. I looked at it, looked at our boss, and then must have looked lost because she put her hands on either side of my face and held my head steady in front of the robot. Her fingers were thin but calloused; I wouldn’t have called them delicate but their touch excited me. The robot’s light flashed long and then short and then short again, and she let go. I wasn’t sure what had just happened but after that the rest of our group took turns standing in front of the robot while the light blinked a different pattern: just one quick flash for each of them. We moved around the cone-topped building, evidently some kind of checkpoint or gateway – although I didn’t see anything blocking entry into the city if one were inclined to just blow by the robot guard –, and to a low platform that was positioned behind it and protected from the sun by an overhang; what must have been the trolley tracks, but of a type I didn’t recognize, stretched out ahead. That, at least, was familiar. Not the trolley itself as
such, although Tokyo did still have two lines for those as I recalled, but the feeling of waiting for the train. We didn’t have to wait long.

A striking light blue trolley car with a green stripe down its side pulled up to our platform and its passengers all disembarked from the rear while we entered at its front. Of course, as that was the end of the line, the front became the rear and vice versa, but trolleys are wonderfully symmetrical in that regards. There was no driver. My companions all boarded and so I assumed it to be safe enough and stepped up into the entrance. Habit is a funny thing; I had only ridden Tokyo’s Arakawa trolley line once but when I did I noticed that it used a similar ticket system to the city buses, something that I was fairly used to from the time when I lived outside of Tokyo – a paper ticket system for those who didn’t have a scannable electronic pass, that is. In those days, before my company had transferred me from the branch I was at into the capital, I would hop on a bus and take a little ticket with a number on it from a machine, and that number would match with a display board above where the driver sat, a board listing the various fares for each number depending on point of pick up. The rate increased as you rode and when you got off you dumped your ticket and the coins required into a little feeding machine next to the driver. It
was all very orderly and transparent. Without thinking I assumed the trolley I had just boarded would work like the Arakawa Line, which worked like the city buses, and so I stood there searching and searching for a numbered piece of paper to take. There was no such paper. There wasn’t even a ticket machine or, apparently, a machine for payment. Given that wherever I was it was no longer Tokyo that should not necessarily have surprised me, but like I said, habit is a funny thing. Tomor finally came over and pulled me down onto a bench on the side of the car opposite the platform, between him and the woman who had given me her hat. The object of my fast-developing crush was seated next to Tomor so we were all in a row. The inevitable fatigue brought on by the whole experience of that day washed over me as soon as I was settled and my head knocked back against the trolley windows of its own accord. As the cone hat got pushed down over my face by the impact I remembered that I was wearing it and sheepishly took the thing off to return it to its owner. She smiled her thanks and set it in her lap. I wondered how thoroughly she’d wash it before putting it on again, and what that would say about her opinion of me.

As tired as I was, the city slowly unfolding around me as the trolley clacked its way down the broad tree-lined
avenue it dominated was too remarkable to let myself drift off to sleep. Not really “clacked”, that is, it would be better to describe the sound the motion of the carriage made as *fizzed* or *fuzzed* or *foozed*, or something along those lines. It was nearly silent and the ride felt very smooth. I wished I had gotten a better look at the type of tracks we rode on but there were far too many other details demanding my attention. Through the window opposite us I could see a pattern developing in the ground floors of the buildings that lined the street. The first in the series would have an open marketplace where otherwise rooms or apartments would be, permanently in the shade of course, nestled amongst the upper floors’ supporting beams and with a cool and inviting look. That would be followed by the next building housing an indoor sports or recreation facility behind floor to ceiling windows with the word “Stathor” written above, and additionally labeled with a smaller word afterwards that was preceded by a dash. Judging by the differing activities I saw inside I assumed that smaller word indicated the specialty, such as a type of tennis-like sport, or swimming, or running, or weight lifting, or a throwing game of some manner. The third building would then have either what looked like a board game, reading, or otherwise “sit down and do something mental” area, or a café, while the fourth always had what must have been a restaurant. All of those
were similarly labeled with simple signs above their windows, and after a sequence of these there would be six buildings that didn’t seem to have anything other than private residences on their bottom floors, making the overall pattern one of units of tens. What was also striking was the complete lack of advertisements anywhere on the street, or indeed even within the trolley car. That took me aback and I realized just how utterly bombarded with ads Tokyo, and every other city I had ever been in, really was. Rising above all of the marketplaces, gyms, cafés, and restaurants, were buildings of roughly equal size though varying in height and containing what were surely apartments. I arrived at that conclusion mainly by the laundry hanging outside in the balcony areas, but I still felt pleased by my own astuteness. I then realized that I had not yet seen an area of stand-alone houses, or even a single stand-alone house. Did everyone live in an apartment? And where were the offices? I had seen a few buildings that clearly weren’t apartment complexes but whose first floors still held to the regular pattern; I wondered if they were places of business. It was hard to tell.

The trolley fizzed on and we began curving outwards, away from a large round building with another cone-shaped roof that was coming into view, similar to
the gateway building at the city’s entrance only much larger. I elbowed Tomor and pointed at it with what I hoped would be perceived as a quizzical look on my face, and he duly responded with a long string of words, the meaning of which were all lost on me. Perhaps sensing that he then made two beaks with his hands and squawked them at each other before pointing to me, himself, and then our boss and walking two fingers across a palm. He appeared to find that, or maybe doing that, very amusing. I blinked at him; I felt a little like the butt of a joke.

The tracks curved sharply again and after another trolley went past us going the other way I saw an identical cone-topped building come into view, which we skirted in a similar fashion as we had the first, although this time the trolley wound round the opposite side of the building before the tracks straightened out once more. About a block later I was pulled to my feet and we all alighted from the carriage onto a platform – without any of us paying anything, I noted. As the others walked ahead I stopped to look at a map posted next to what must have been a timetable for the train services. It seemed the city we were in – possibly called “Sheenda” based on the label – was oval in shape, with the point of the egg evidently the area where we had entered. The two large
round buildings I had noticed were roughly in the center, and in addition to the one main avenue going through the town that we had just been traversing on the trolley, there was another running east-west, which also looked to have a tram line on it. Very many side roads and alleyways also spread between the buildings, of course, and all were laid out in a grid save for the primary north-south boulevard. That street for the most part ran straight down the middle of the city from the narrow point to the wide, except for when it got to the two big buildings in the center, at which point it wrapped around one side of the first building, cut back the reverse direction to travel in between the two, and then around the other side of the second building before resuming its regular top-to-bottom route. It was an intriguing way to lay out a city and the design of it was clearly pre-planned in great detail; the whole effect lent a good deal of weight to the two main buildings as well – whatever they were for –, especially when considered that way from a bird’s eye point of view.

I heard an “Ohoto!” and turned to see that Tomor was beckoning to me to hurry up. I joined them at the edge of the platform where to my surprise we waved goodbye to the woman who had lent me her hat and watched her cross the street and head down a side alleyway into a hive of clinically white buildings. The sun was beginning to
set and the extreme heat had waned considerably. I was feeling much better although my headache remained and I wondered what was to happen next. We started walking again. Naturally. It made sense to me at once why everyone was in such good shape: all they did was walk. We hiked for about twenty minutes down narrow side roads and passages between buildings, with all sorts of different services and shops sprinkled here and there on the ground floors of apartment complexes, before finally stepping into the entranceway of one of them. Were we going to Tomor and our boss’ place? Were they a couple? The thought depressed me somewhat but I remembered that wherever I was I would need to be quickly making my way back to where I should be, and so the marital status or otherwise of the two wasn’t really an issue. Besides, even if the boss were married to the guy I knew that I’d still make every effort to set anchor in her in the time available. I considered it a duty to myself, a tribute to my manhood, an acknowledgement and recognition of the value that was imparted on me by what I did with my penis. I was a straight-shooter in that way, and not afraid to call things as I saw them. I even took some measure of pride in my callowness.

We walked across the clean and empty foyer and stopped in front of what had to be an elevator. Thank goodness we
apparently wouldn’t be taking the stairs. The doors opened and we stepped inside, Tomor and the boss chatting away amiably. On the floor selection plate I noticed that the numbered buttons were displayed in the familiar Arabic numerals I had always used. The Latin script on the buildings outside had been unexpected, but those numbers weren’t; yet again the question pushed itself on me: where was I? Once I realized that we were surrounded by rice paddies I had assumed I was somewhere in Asia, but then nowhere in Asia that I knew of was like the place I was in now. The people around me also clearly weren’t Asian, but then they weren’t clearly anything that could be nicely and squarely fit into a racial background box to be ticked on a customer survey form. I left work, I went to my Metro line, blackness, I woke up. The universe was toying with me. I knew that I belonged in Tokyo, but that I couldn’t get back to Tokyo until I could find out where I was, and I couldn’t find out where I was until I could speak again and tell these nice people that I had no idea what language they were using and to please speak to me in something else – preferably but not necessarily English. I fought the doubts that something far deeper than a geographic shift was afoot, despite all the clues pointing in that direction. I could only handle so much, after all.
We exited on the thirteenth floor and I followed them down a hallway to room number seven on the left. Unfortunately Tomor didn’t stop to let himself into any of the other rooms; it appeared that the two did in fact belong together. No matter, I told myself. The boss ran her thumbprint over a pad next to the apartment’s front door and it slid open with a satisfying shooshing noise. We all stepped inside and as the door automatically closed behind us Tomor and the boss started taking their clothes off. I was shocked. Excited of course, but shocked. They slid off their rubber boots in the little sunken entrance as I expected them to, but they didn’t stop there. Up came the pyjama tops, down went the pyjama bottoms. The boss had an even more exquisite body than I was prepared for. Slender shoulders that trickled down into lithe limbs, a smooth taut belly with just about two fingers of fat at its edges that flowed into slightly rounding hips. Silky thighs that betrayed the tension of the muscles beneath as they slid down into shapely calves, tapering at just the right degree. She was sadly wearing panties and what must have been a sports bra of some kind, but both were bare enough to give my imagination plenty to go on.

Tomor’s body I barely glanced at; it looked like a hairless muscular but thin thing, the kind of body a male model
would likely have, but in Tomor’s case it was probably a lot more functional since his physique no doubt came from his farm work and not from avoiding carbs while “working out” with tiny one kilogram dumbbells. While I stood and stared at the boss both of them signaled that I ought to disrobe as well. I wasn’t ready for such an eventuality. Taking off my shoes was not a problem, it was evidently their home after all, and I would be happy to get my soggy socks off too, but I was unaccustomed to getting naked in strangers’ entryways. Then again, when in Rome; also I apparently had no choice. I took my sports jacket off, folded it, and placed it on the floor next to where they had put their pyjamas. My shirt and undershirt followed and I took my time with them; they were my work clothes. Then my pants. I was glad to be wearing briefs that day as the tightness of the material was helping to hold down the Eiffel Tower that the sight of the boss’ body had breathed my lifeblood into. The random erections of my early teenage years were enough of an embarrassment to last for a lifetime; I did not need another episode well into adulthood. And also the boss needn’t and shouldn’t, I thought, get acquainted with the Tollman’s tollgate until after we had first got rid of Tomor. Such was not to be though, at least not then, as the boss gathered up all our clothes and headed into a different room while Tomor mumbled something and waved for
me to follow him.

Their apartment was lovely. Everything looked so modern, hypermodern really. That shouldn’t have surprised me given the robots I had seen tooling around outside, but being disoriented, lost, and deeply confused sets your mind in strange and unpredictable ways. I had thought that Japan had the most advanced robots in the world but where I currently found myself seemed to be ahead in the game. Wherever it was. I was reminded by that thought that I would eventually have to get back to my real life, but at that moment everything was far too new and interesting to worry about such. My inner explorer had been activated and I had always been a nomad, always on the lookout for the unknown and the intriguing. Besides, it wasn’t the first time that I’d failed to show up at work and I hadn’t been fired yet. As long as I met deadlines my boss didn’t seem to care too much about daily attendance; when she bothered to step out of her office and notice, that is.

Like the outside of the building the interior walls and ceilings of the apartment were all a sharp white that was accentuated by either a wood flooring or a really good facsimile of a wood flooring. Whichever was the case it was also glossed over and felt cool and soothing on my
feet, especially after the heat of the day. To my right must have been the living room, a couple of deep upholstered chairs sat on one side and one end of a low table, opposed by a three-seater sofa of the same material. Some oil paintings by an artist that I didn’t recognize hung on the wall under a large round clock. Abstract, I guessed, all lines and shapes and bold colors that jumped right out at the viewer. Ahead of us I could see the kitchen, a typical island countertop design with the sink, oven, and burners against the back wall surrounded by cabinets above and below. I didn’t see a microwave. Next to that was a small living room table. Tomor led me through to a hallway off of which appeared to be two bedrooms and a nice bath unit.

The apartment was a good size; knowing that there was at least another room next to the entrance where the boss had disappeared, I estimated the whole thing to be around eighty to ninety square meters. A space that big would cost a pretty penny in Tokyo, and the effect was impressive. I felt somehow at ease, despite my being a total stranger; the whiteness and the layout and the coolness of the air all combined to yield a real sense of elbow room. I grew up taking that for granted but years of being an expat in the world’s most populated metropolitan area had warped all perceptions of normality.
in that regard. It had also warped my English and made it a hodgepodge of bits and pieces from all over the Anglophone world, but that was another story.

It seemed that I was being introduced to the shower. Tomor explained – he must have been explaining – at great length, and in a noticeably slower manner of speaking, as he demonstrated how to turn the water on and off, which of the tubes along one wall to use for washing my body and which one for washing my hair. I was a bit offended by the manner and depth of his presumed explanation, and I got a sneaking sense of being mocked again, but I decided to make allowances for cultural differences. He then led me back towards the entrance and I saw that the other room our boss had gone into was a washing and storage room. She was still in there, and still in her underwear heaven be praised, rubbing the excess dirt off of their farming tools and lining them up neatly. It hadn’t clicked earlier but it struck me how low-tech and crappy, really, those tools were when compared to the breath-taking cleanliness and efficiency of the city and of their apartment. When I first saw their farming equipment I guessed that I was in some remote and backwards hamlet, and the entire long walk on the dirt road to get to the city did nothing to dispel that image. Nor did the uniform and entirely uninvetive
clothing everyone wore. The sheer oddity of what I was experiencing totaled up on me, startled me, pounced on me, and I was at once mystified afresh; just where in the wide world had I ended up? And how?

Tomor took a towel from off a shelf and said something to the boss to which she replied with something else. A lesson that I had learned every time I moved to a new country was that not knowing the language of a place can be quite liberating in some ways; I hadn’t a care in the world what their exchange had been about; I just wished it would have gone on longer so that I could have stared at the boss’ body a bit more. Instead I was taken back to the bath and ushered inside. A shower was in fact what I badly needed, but I still remembered to point to my head and make a grimacing face. Tomor smiled a little as he made what might have been a joke and pulled a bottle out of a sunken area behind the mirror, tapping out one small pill and handing it over with a nearby glass that he filled from the tap. He didn’t seem to mind sharing with me the glass they evidently used for rinsing their mouths and whatnot, and as I didn’t either I proceeded to shoot the thing down. By the time he had left the room and I had started to fiddle with the waterworks my pain had subsided considerably. Whatever was in that pill was pretty good. That and the warm water splashing over me
soon had me feeling right as rain. Thoughts of our boss bubbled up as I held my face under the showerhead and all the blood that had been pulsing behind my right eyeball made its way to another eye, of sorts, and pulsed with a lot more spirit. What else could I do? I wanked the thoughts right out, or at least wanked the urgency out of them. I saw no point in holding back and no need for decorum. I tried to take it slow and enjoy the ride but in my imagination the boss was just too much; not even half a dozen strokes and I was already pollocking the wall in front of me. Being a guest I knew that I’d have to clean it up but few things are easier when you’re already in the shower. That accomplished, I leisurely turned to wash my body, getting all the sweat and dirt off, enjoying every moment of what was a good long soak. And then when I got out I found a set of house clothes already waiting for me to put on, resting on a low rack next to the sink. How very considerate.

Thoroughly refreshed I made my way back to the kitchen where I saw Tomor, now in house clothes exactly like mine, stirring something in a frying pan over one of the burners. He gave me a look that could have killed. Glowering is too soft a word for it, glared isn’t even quite there. His were the eyes of rage. I was dumbfounded. I looked over to the boss, who was sadly clothed as well.
and seated at the dining table, but there was no support to be found from those quarters. If possible she looked even madder. Right after I had finished masturbating to her she was getting annoyingly three-dimensional on me, ruining the fantasy I had built up. People and their feelings, I thought, purposely leaving the thinker out of that category. Tomor turned the burner off and motioned for me to sit down, barking out a word that must have meant the same. I duly took my place at the table and avoided looking at the boss, much as I wanted to. She said something in a low voice that didn’t really come off as aggressive but it was clearly serious. And a little ominous. When Tomor sat down across from me he was holding a small device that was about the same shape but a bit bigger than a smartphone. He managed to control whatever was eating away at him and spoke very slowly, very clearly.

I naturally had no idea what he was saying, but seeing his little gadget reminded me that I had left my smartphone in my briefcase which was who knows where by that point. That had a depressing effect on me as I had recently gotten a high score on “Dance-a-panda-monium”, one of those free puzzle games with little baby pandas that danced to a frenetic club beat. What a shame it was to lose that record. With luck I thought that someone might have found my satchel and dropped it off at the station’s
lost and found. One thing that I had always appreciated about Japan was that people rarely stole goods they came across; you could even get your wallet back with your cash still in it. That was an entirely remarkable feature of the country and didn’t get noted often enough.

When Tomor finished whatever he was going on about I sat and stared at him blankly, but with an effort to appear polite nonetheless. His anger seemed to redouble and he began once more in that same steady – but at times quivering – slow and clear voice. When he again finished I again stared at him blankly. Once more: slower and clearer, and just barely contained. I felt bad for him; he was making such an effort and I had no means with which to reciprocate. If my throat had been functional I would of course have stated my case in English since I knew by then that whatever language they were using wasn’t Japanese and English was the closest thing we had to a universal tongue. But my throat, and hence my voice, were for whatever reason as lost as I was. Very visibly frustrated, he finally gave up speaking and started drawing something on the mini-tablet he held. When he finished he put his fingers over the screen and made a pulling motion with his hand which lifted the image out and displayed it in the air as a hologram. I was transfixed. He then flipped the flat image upwards so that it hung
there suspended like a whiteboard. This is what I saw:

![Image of a drawing with a water meter and numbers]

For being such a fancy-looking device I was a little disappointed by his finger art, but I thought I more or less understood what he was getting at. As if to emphasize his message he then pointed a menacing finger at me, the seventy-five liter mark, the boss and himself, and finally the no shower mark. They must have had a meter for tracking water output; I had used up too much and they wouldn’t be able to shower that day. I was sorry, but I could hardly have known that the area was under water rationing. After all, I had just washed up on their shores that afternoon. I was Gulliver on unintended travels.
Surely they could pardon me for that?

I tried to apologize but my throat was still not having it. I’m sure I looked very embarrassed though, and I certainly felt every bit of it. The atmosphere was heavy, incredibly uncomfortable, and not helping matters any the boss silently got up and headed towards the bathroom. Tomor looked at me for another long moment, sighed, and then stood himself. He came back to the table a moment later and set an opened bottle down in front of me that looked a lot like a beer. Was it a peace offering? Had my nonverbal apology been accepted? I glanced up at him and saw that he was already back at the stove finishing whatever he had been preparing earlier. For the moment it appeared that the storm had passed.

The sound of water being run wafted over to me from down the hallway and I deduced that meant that the boss was at least able to wash to some degree; she must have been using the sink to make do. Not as good as a shower, true, but certainly better than not washing at all after a hot day spent in the great outdoors. Everything had worked out fine, I thought; kind of. I would have to be careful the next day, if I were even still here to shower at all. It was both freeing and frightening to be so powerless to make any decisions about my own person.
I timidly started my drink and found that it was in fact a beer, a very nice pale ale that seemed to perfectly suit an evening at home. Immediately I began to feel better, more relaxed and much more at peace. I watched Tomor as he cooked; he was just stirring whatever he had in the frying pan and glancing at a couple of pots on the other burners, it didn’t look too demanding. He was chatting away again, possibly to himself, but turning his head in my direction every now and then. He really must have thought I spoke their language. He motioned a few times to the bathroom and repeated the word “milee” in a compassionate tone. Was he talking about the boss? Was that her name? I recalled that she had introduced herself and the others when she first spoke to me but I couldn’t remember what she had said at the time. As soon as my voice was back I thought that I’d have to try out my new “Yemore Frank Tollman” line on her and see if that prompted a reciprocal re-naming on her part. Whatever was wrong with my vocal chords the medicine that Tomor had given me for my head didn’t seem to be helping. I assumed that if they had had something for my throat they would have already given it to me; they knew it wasn’t working, after all. I saw little choice but to just stick it out. It would have been nice to be able to communicate, but anyway I couldn’t speak their language and they evidently couldn’t
speak anything other than their own so it was probably just as well, all things considered. I was surprised that they hadn’t at least tried out a little English, but then there was an awful lot that puzzled me about the place. I was nearly ready for another beer.

The boss came back with her hair down. It was shorter than I had thought it would be but suited the way her face formed a soft angle at the chin, more or less following that line and bobbing under slightly just above the shoulders. She still looked a bit irritated; I sat up straighter and tried to hide the fact that the beer was sitting in me so well. I had always found appearances to be paramount. Noticing her hair made me realize I hadn’t bothered to notice much about Tomor’s. His was tied up in a bun as hers had been, I saw. Jet black though, a couple of shades darker than the boss’. Somehow that made me think that despite everything else I was still in Asia; I found that comforting. All roads on the continent lead to Tokyo, I told myself. Or that was at least how Tokyoites saw it, and for all intents and purposes that is what I was. The locals would never admit to that; me being first, foremost, and always just a foreigner to them, but after a decade in the city that was how I saw it and nuts to them if they tried to tell me otherwise.
Dinner was then served. A bowl of mixed vegetables over a bed of rice with a side dish of fried tofu and another of most likely seaweed soup. A fresh beer as well, for each of us I noted. My impression was that it didn’t look bad – it looked good, actually – but that it was a little on the light side; maybe it was just starters, I told myself. It wasn’t.

We all ate with spoons, and for me that didn’t take long. Had I been able to join in their conversation I might have eaten a bit more slowly but there really wasn’t much to get through. Based on all that I had seen thus far the couple didn’t appear to need to cut corners – aside from their farm tools, that is. Was I being served some kind of Buddhist diet? If I was then we definitely weren’t anywhere in north Asia as I didn’t know of anyone in the region who took the whole no meat precept seriously, but then I already knew that it hadn’t been north Asian flora I was seeing. The food did taste nice, and I did feel mostly full afterwards, but where was the fun? It occurred to me that if everyone here ate like this then it would be yet another reason why all the people I had seen looked so thin. Had I somehow got caught up in a weird healthy cult?

Whatever its demerits, dinner – and the beer – at least had
the effect of relaxing the boss and that lifted the mood of the whole table. It had been a long time since I had a dinner at home without the TV and/or my smartphone for company and it felt nice. I would have offered to wash the dishes afterwards but I was worried about water use, and anyway Tomor motioned for me to sit down while he saw to the cleaning up. The guy impressed me. As he began on that the boss disappeared for a couple of minutes and then came back carrying a load of wet clothes in a big wicker basket. She pulled open a sliding door behind the dining room table and started to hang them to dry on a rack on their balcony. I immediately jumped up and began handing clothes to her from out of the basket while Tomor saw to the kitchen. She nodded her thanks to me as she continued working; step one of ingratiating myself and the beginning of my charm offensive had clicked into gear. I had no idea how long I’d be staying here but I had to do something to get on their good sides, and the boss especially I was eager to please.

With the chores done I was more than ready to just relax and happily followed the boss into the living room while Tomor wandered off for what I guessed was his turn to wash himself. The boss pointed at the couch and said something over her shoulder to me as she headed towards where I knew the bedrooms to be. I wasn’t sure what to
do and didn’t see a computer or TV anywhere so I sat down and just kind of looked at the surface of the coffee table. After that trick Tomor had pulled with his smartphone doohickey I thought that maybe there was a projector or screen hidden somewhere in there that we could all watch things on. I had already seen so much that was new, and become so completely disoriented by my circumstances, that I felt like nothing would have surprised me. When the boss did come back with a twelve-string guitar in hand, she took one look at me sitting there on the couch and stifled a laugh. I will admit that I probably appeared a bit ridiculous if you were to take the time to pay attention to me. I was wearing what must have been Tomor’s clothes, and as he was taller and thinner than me the combined effect of those factors meant that my sleeves and legs were hanging loosely off their ends while absolutely everything else was too tight. She set the guitar down on one of the upholstered chairs and went away again, returning quickly with what looked like a tape measure. She then had me stand up, took my height, shoulders, waist – that part greatly excited me – and also measured my feet, chatting away in a friendly banter the whole time. After she had finished that, she next retrieved and punched away at the little tablet gizmo, re-measured my feet and then typed a bit more, before finally smiling and saying something along the lines of,
“Douforkentetalaborsinth. Temsikurlteyendogo. Sotou!” What I heard was two sentences and an exclamatory word on the end, but I understood well enough that for the time being I would be wearing what I was wearing. She plopped down into one of the big, deep chairs and started tuning her guitar. I returned to my place on the couch opposite her and settled in. If we weren’t going to be watching any movies at least I could stare at the boss.

I must have nodded off. A hand on my shoulder startled me and I lifted my chin off my chest to see the boss standing there, Tomor now seated in the other chair at the end of the table reading a book. An actual paper book. What a legend the man was. The boss said something and smiled a little before taking a step towards the hallway. Was she leading me away? She must have been. Finally. We were going to their bedroom for wet, sloppy, and intense sex while Tomor sat there and read. At least in the flicker of my fantasy we were; what actually happened was that she led me to their spare room and pointed at a padded mat that had been very generously laid out on the floor.

That, though, was another odd detail. I was used to sleeping on futons from my days before I moved into the city and spent the money to get a real bed, but I hadn’t
seen them anywhere outside of Japan. Other places had things they called “futons” of course, but usually they either involved a folding couch in some respect or were single mats. A proper futon, I knew, has both a firmer lower mattress and a softer upper mat, the sheets and blankets then go on top of that layer but the whole ensemble can still be folded up into thirds. My bed was just like that; and all set up in the manner of good hospitality, ready for me to crawl inside.

I kind of bowed my thanks to her – old habits, I guessed, as I still had no proper bead on where we were, but then again I supposed that we still might have been in a bowing culture – and as the boss shut the door behind her I took a moment to look around before returning to dreamland. It was a simple and small room, carpeted in a shade of white that was a touch darker than the walls and mostly empty save for a few books that had babies on their covers and some mixed newborn toys and clothes inside a wooden chest that sat in the corner. Was the boss pregnant? Were they trying? That would be perfect – a side fling with me could then easily be disguised by the boss. The thought of that as it formed made little sense even to me, but I was still half asleep and given what I had been through that day my brain was clearly at low tide. I then allowed myself to wallow in anticipation. If I
did in fact find myself stuck for some days wherever it was that I was then pursuing the boss would have to be my goal. It was decided. Moving into the soft folds of the futon the next incoherent thought to take root was that I might somehow bed down for the night and wake up back in my own apartment, or at least on one of the platforms in my home Metro station; that both comforted and disappointed me. I felt that if I did then it would mean having missed out on a singular adventure. An adventure that perhaps had not been real after all, but it had seemed real enough as I lived through it – and wouldn’t that make it real? Waking up like that would also, though, mean safety, security, and the pleasing continuation of the known. All that I was used to. As appealing as those features usually are for people, to me they were only partially reassuring. I had a life to get back to sure, but it wasn’t one that I couldn’t let go of.
Chapter Two

I didn’t wake up back at home. Of course I didn’t. I woke up in the bedroom I had gone to sleep in and everything was exactly how it had been when I went to sleep. However I got here, and wherever “here” was, it looked like I was here to stay, at least, I assumed, until I could somehow make my own way back. The thought of if I could somehow make my own way back then suddenly slapped me on the cheek. It was a bit too much to start the day.

Lying there I instead took a moment to appreciate the feel of the covers over me and the padding beneath me as I tried to think about what had happened, to roll my mind back and put the pieces together. I had left work, enjoyed a few drinks, made my way to the station – so far, so normal – then through the gates I went and to the platform, then a blank, the tunnel, another blank, and then somehow I woke up in a rice paddy in the middle of some place that had a semi-tropical climate and where everyone looked like no people I had ever seen before, and who spoke and wrote a language I had neither heard, nor even heard of. The same people apparently had no cars and farmed by hand, but they lived in a city that bustled with robots and hologram machines and who knew what other
technological wonders. Was I on some hidden island? Smuggled into some secretive group? Off the radar and covered up? The thought occurred to me that I may have been brought here. Purposely, that is. Knocked out and transported while unconscious, perhaps. But who would do such a thing, and more importantly why? I was nobody special, just an expat working for one of the many companies that had its branches in far-flung cities across the planet. I was an outsider, a free-floater, an unattached and community-free cog in the great wheel of international commerce. There must have been millions of people like me. Though maybe not. Maybe I was special and just didn’t realize it. Maybe I was a part of a larger plan whose contours had yet to be revealed to me. I remembered the Mulder character from *The X-Files* and how the cigarette-smoking man kept saying how important he was to “The Project” and its success. What a great show that was. They didn’t make them like that anymore. Maybe I was Mulder and would slowly come to see the vast conspiracy circling beneath my feet, learn my pivotal role in some grand overarching drama. Resting comfortably in bed as the cobwebs of sleep lifted, that thought gave me strength even while I half suspected it of being dangerously delusional. After all, nobody likes to think that they’re a nobody, especially if they are. I was no exception.
I took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, and muttered, “Well, here we go” softly to myself. I then said it again, louder. My voice was back. Just as mysteriously as it had gone awry my throat had healed up. What a difference a day makes. I knew that once I could communicate with my hosts, even if only in a very stripped-down version of English that they could understand – assuming that they had at least some command of the language, because after all who didn’t? – I could find out where I was, and maybe even what had happened to me. Having arrived in the way I had, and having firmly established that it was not all just a dream, I wasn’t sure – when I allowed myself to think the thought – that I definitely could get back. But then having taken that mental step I realized that I also wasn’t sure that I wanted to get back. On balance I recognized that given the way I was feeling I was in no hurry to resume my daily doldrums, yet I did also think pretty hard about the fairly extensive amount of nice things in my apartment that I enjoyed and would miss; and of course on top of that I knew too that I had something of a career path going for me, some family, a few friends and former lovers to half keep in touch with. But what was funny, even to me and even at the time, was that right at that just-only-awake moment hovering above all of those other factors my mind was stuck on “Dance-a-panda-
I stretched a bit to shake off the sleep; I had no idea what time it was but the sun was already up and shining brightly from beneath the room’s curtains. I hadn’t noticed them the night before; they were a nice pale blue and lent a comforting air to the whole space. Whatever kid was destined to have this bedroom would be pretty comfortable here. It could do with a bit more decorating, I thought as I looked around, but I supposed that would come. If the boss were pregnant she wasn’t showing at all and so there must have been time enough. I wondered if she would cook breakfast for me that day, or if all the food preparation was Tomor’s domain. They seemed to share their household duties about fifty-fifty from what I had seen the day before.

“Hi, good morning. Thank you so much for yesterday,” I said as I walked into the kitchen where my two hosts
were already finishing up their breakfasts. They looked at me as if I had just gotten down on one knee and proposed to their elderly mother. Startled doesn’t even begin to describe it. They were astounded. Muted. Completely shell-shocked, side-swiped, sent to the Moon. Even I could see that, and I have never been accused of being good with people. Their reaction made me start to feel as they looked, and I quickly decided to start over.

“Yemore Frank Tollman,” I said, hoping that some of the new words I had picked up might melt a little of the ice I had inadvertently put down.

Still clearly bowled over the boss replied first, hesitantly, cautiously, “Yemore Milee.”

Her name was Milee; I had gotten it right. I wondered if she had a surname and if so why she didn’t offer it to me.

“Yemore Tomor,” Tomor said, his voice, and hands, trembling a little.

We were off to a start; we were communicating. I was excited by that fact, but more so worried by their demeanor, and thought that if it was simply my use of English that had been the cause of the evident tectonic
shift in their attitudes towards me then I would be in far more trouble than I had presumed. Their change might, though, have only been due to a prior assumption that I couldn’t speak at all since I hadn’t spoken a word the entire day before. It was a little comforting to think that, but whatever the case was I knew we simply had to plow on. Tomor’s name I had already learned and was sure of, but he couldn’t have known that, I supposed. Nor had I any way of knowing, or even guessing at, what he knew, but I wished that I did, particularly with the expression that was on his face. The slipperiness of social knowledge, especially when it came to what goes on inside another’s head; we are all so lost so much of the time. It was a fact in life that I had mostly ignored – surely everyone does –, only taking note of it when I arrived in a new country. I was taking note of it again.

We had all established our names, and that was at least something, but what we had not established was whether they could speak any English, although the signs were not good. Judging, trepidatiously, that I had nothing to lose I decided to press the point. I spotted the little tablet thingy Tomor had used the evening before resting on their kitchen counter and pointing at it asked, “May I?” even though I suspected that message would not get through; the verbal portion of it anyway. The gist of what I meant
would naturally be understood.

Tomor handed the device over to me, deer-eyed and unsteadily, and I instantly swiped my finger across the screen the way I was used to, looking for what apps it held and most of all looking for a way to get online. I could make neither heads nor tails of it, a fact that greatly surprised me. It appeared to have little places that could be touched, and if you pushed one of those places – I wouldn’t have called them icons exactly – various programs did seem to load, but what purpose they served was beyond me. It wasn’t just that I couldn’t read anything, it was also that everything that popped up looked starkly different from all that I had come to expect from an app. Charts, graphs, tables of data, and dense text blocks filled the screen every time I banged away on it. I could feel my concerns starting to give way to frustration.

“Does this thing have the internet?” I asked, and then repeated “Internet?” much more slowly for good measure.

A now pale-faced – deathly so – Tomor took the machine back from me and tapped it a few times before holding one end of it angled towards my face as he said, “Keewak.” While he said that he made a kind of spread-fingered explosion motion with his fingers in front
of his mouth, which I gathered meant that he wanted me to speak.

I repeated my question. He signaled for more, showing consternation; I asked where we were. He motioned for more again and so I said that I lived in Tokyo and worked for Blutton International. He kept requesting that I continue talking and so, in ever mounting exasperation at what now seemed an impossible impasse, I finally started blathering about all the questions I had and how confused I was and also if possible that I’d appreciate it if some food could go with those answers as I was in fact quite hungry. Tomor finally held his hand up for me to stop and then stared at the screen in what looked like increasing disbelief at whatever it was telling him, eyes waxing and waning like tides. After about a minute or so of watching him apparently have his mind blown he called Milee over and I got to watch her face go through the same motions. I wondered if the thing was analyzing my speech. Translating it for them? Analyzing me?

“English?” Tomor queried furtively, struggling a little to pronounce the word. He glanced back down at the mini-tablet and then added the more correct, “Do you speak English?”
“Yes, I do,” I nodded, happy to finally be understood. That generated deeply worried looks from both of them and a long series of delicately surreptitious words were exchanged, quietly, like a couple at their breakfast table who have just received word of a terrible accident in the family. And aside from the family part I supposed that they had; or might have seen it – seen me – that way. Fresh apprehensions cropped up, along with an increasing foreboding.

Milee appeared to have an idea and tapped a few things into the tablet. She then very slowly and very cautiously sounded out a few words, noticeably avoiding eye contact with me as she did so, “There is no trahnsleyteeun.”

I said nothing and must have looked confused because after finally glancing up at me she added, “Sotou, sotou. There is no translation.”

No translator? That was fine. What was the problem? We could continue using their machine, surely. After all, it seemed to be working thus far and I could see no reason not to continue on the current path, which was already painfully slow enough. It was all much too much; particularly as I had finally thought that I might be able to start making some sense of what had happened to me. No
answers had been forthcoming though, nor did any seem immediately likely. I found myself irritated, annoyed, disappointed, and famished. Neither my mind nor my stomach were in much of a mood for patience, although I recognized full well that things were far beyond my control.

Milee, however, appeared to be focused on her own anxieties as she looked down at the device again and added, “You must learn to keewak.”

“Pardon me?” I said. I thought that I had probably gathered what “keewak” meant but I disagreed with her conclusion. Forcefully so, though that was probably more a result of my general state of mind than of any clear reasoning on my part. “I will try to learn your language but in the meantime let’s use that translating software you’ve obviously got going.” I felt powerless, overwhelmed – or underwhelmed, I couldn’t decide which –, and though I was somewhat able to understand why the two of them were reacting in the way they were, more than anything I was disoriented. Once more. It didn’t make any sense to me. They were surprised, I got that, but what was so odd about someone speaking English? Was it just a matter of their lack of training in the language? If they were able to tell me that there was
no translator then they must have had something happening with their little gizmo. Whatever that something was it seemed logical enough to keep using it. Why not? We were finally engaging in real communication and not just gestures and speculation.

In response to my statement Milee kind of shrugged, made a large X mark by crossing her arms in front of herself, and then handed the mini-tablet over to me. It was cute and I did have a moment of enjoying her express perplexity – it came with an endearing little frown – but the obstacle struck me as needless and bothersome. As soon as I had looked at the device, however, I realized why we weren’t making very much progress. We had in fact reached the end of the road.

The screen displayed a large block of text in their language, the contents of which were naturally lost on me, but I did spy a list that looked to be names of the major languages I knew in their own language – French as français, for example –, followed by bracketed words in something else after each one that I supposed were pronunciation guides. The one marked “English [iŋ-gleʃ]” had been highlighted and beneath it a series of phrases in a separate text box was superimposed over the rest of the entry. The English phrases, from which my two hosts had
just been reading, were along the lines of: “Do you speak English?”, “Hello”, “It’s a sunny day”, “You must learn to knit”, “My favorite food is rice”, “I love you”. The last one in the series was “There is no translation”, although each selection, at least, did appear to have translations, and also further pronunciation guides in brackets placed underneath. I couldn’t tell if the phrases were meant to be useful when traveling or not, but they didn’t seem to be much more than a random selection that was included almost for curiosity’s sake. I dearly wished that I was able to read the entry itself for some context.

Hoping for more, I scanned the whole article again and again but there was nowhere to punch in a word and have another one spit out. There was no translation, indeed. Milee had known to swap “knit” out for another word in “You must learn to” though, so I wondered how similar the grammatical structures of our languages were.

Whatever the answer to that question was, it struck me as largely academic as what was most pertinent to me was not, it seemed, going to be satisfactorily handled. That was depressing. If I were to hope to get to the bottom of what had happened, and moreover attempt to deal with my situation as it stood, I determined that I would just have to learn to speak and read whatever it was that they
spoke and read, at least to some degree and for the near future. I had fallen into some boggling White Rabbit’s hole, I had woken up with little memory in a strange place that offered bafflement at every turn, and the two people upon whom I found myself depending for sustenance could not even speak English. Nor could their fancy machine do anything useful. How is a person supposed to deal with a situation like that? Intellectual questions fade into the background as the now and the necessary become everything. Food. Shelter. I had those, I was grateful for that, I was, and so I would try for the rest, I would try to access what answers I could from the inside and then later, with enough luck and enough leeway, I would decide what to do about getting back to my life. And how. I would apparently be here longer than I had anticipated and I could see no way around that. My circumstances could not have been more bizarre, and the fact was not lost on me, but I felt so entirely impotent to do anything other than take one moment at a time. And that in a condition where I was compelled to do what I was told, like it or not. I was at the mercy of my merciful hosts, my temporary lifeblood. I felt like the living dead, and it was all only explicable as being inexplicable. I squared my chin though, and I reminded myself that I still retained a streak of optimism, that I had always been good at learning languages; I could do this, I could learn
what I needed to, get some answers through my own efforts, and then, finally, figure it all out. I decided to spend the day getting my hands on the necessary materials, for that would be a first step, a start, and something for me to take real charge of. Me, doing for myself; me, doing what was required.

Such, sadly, was not to be. I could not, in fact, do. I could not, in fact, take charge. I could not, in fact, fulfill anything. After our linguistic standoff my hosts seemed to be in a hurry, either recovering quickly from their shock or putting it to one side. Almost immediately Tomor began cooking something and Milee lithely darted down the hallway only to return at once with a set of black pyjamas and a cone hat. She gave those to me and pulled me over to the bathroom, signaling that I should get dressed. She also pointed at the shower, made the X mark again, and strongly added, “Daapey!” I gathered that must have meant “no”. Don’t take a shower, don’t use too much water, yes, yes, understood. My own mental flow had been so disrupted and my desires so suddenly and thoroughly derailed that I found the strict mother routine more irksome than I normally might have. I attempted to calm myself with the idea that our roles would be reversed in the boudoir later, and shuffled into a state of mind where I could just go with whatever was being
forced on me moment by moment. I knew that I anyway had no choice in the matter.

My pyjamas were at least a perfect fit, but they didn’t do a great deal to hide my belly – which remained disturbingly empty. I wasn’t fat, but I wasn’t a twig like Tomor either, and given the body shapes of those around me I saw no reason to advertise that. Yet as with everything else, I was aware that my opinion surely mattered little; such were evidently to be my clothes and I was to put them on. They were quite comfortable, and my new hat topped it all off, as they say. I was officially a cone head. Was this the start of something bigger?

Back in the kitchen I was handed a bowl and spoon. It was rice again. And some vegetables and tofu. Hungry as I was I would have eaten anything, but I still would have preferred something else, at a minimum some variety from the night before. I reminded myself that I was to go with the flow and that fighting the inevitable would lead nowhere – and that in my condition everything at the moment was inevitable. Tomor leaned against the sink and appeared to be waiting for me to finish, his body language expressing a reservation and distance that was close to the opposite of how he had been towards me. My bewilderment with the whole scene deepened and I
switched over into full autopilot, eating quickly. It wasn’t hard to get it down since, as with its doppelganger dinner, there wasn’t a lot there. It might even have been leftovers.

With breakfast done I was ushered to the front door where Milee was waiting with the sack she had been carrying the day before. She pointed at a pair of rubber boots and said something that I couldn’t catch, keeping her eyes elsewhere. She too seemed to have lost a good deal of warmth. As I slid into what must have been my new boots I realized that we’d be heading back to the paddies and that I was likely in for a long morning walk. I was now dressed for it though, and I was glad for that, but also deeply curious as to how the clothes and boots that fit so well had appeared so quickly. I remembered that Milee had taken my measurements the night before; had she gone out to buy them after I went to sleep? If so, that would be something else to be thankful for. I wondered how she had felt when she picked out my underwear and socks. The idea of her thinking of me in connection with my undergarments brought a fresh surge of excitation. There were bright spots to being stuck here, no doubt.

I motioned an offer to carry the sack for Milee and she actually let me, seemingly pleased in spite of her newfound reticence. As she handed it over I glanced
inside to see a few picking and scooping tools and some bottles of water, the same glass kind with the nice stoppers that we had used the day prior. Rice farming must not have required a great deal of equipment – at least not when done by hand – because we weren’t carrying much. But where were our lunches? Having just eaten I was nearly feeling hungry again and my mind went implacably to food. All I could see were a few pieces of fruit and some balls of cloth that looked to have something in them. Possibly rice balls à la the kind I had grown so used to from convenience stores around town. Surely that wasn’t going to be it?

We did of course walk the entire way out to the farm and I was predictably useless once we got there. All the hard work of preparing the fields must have been done long before I arrived, and as everything had already been planted the only real task we seemed to have was to pick out the extra growth between the established shoots, which I assumed was done in order to maintain a desired distance. Ostensibly such would be for optimal growth, though I had no background in rice farming and was content to do as instructed. That turned out to be scooping up a bit of mud with the extra sproutlings and saving them in a little wicker basket. All morning under the scorching sun. Tomor modeled for me with great care and
patience – though with a noticeable caution, almost fear, as well – how to preserve what I scooped; he seemed to be very concerned that no shoot go to waste and took the additional time to walk me over to their mostly empty neighboring paddy where he demonstrated how the extras we’d be pulling up would be replanted. I had no idea what farmers in Tokyo did with their extra growth but my guess was that they just went over their fields with a tractor and cut down the undesirables. The people here – the people I suddenly found myself amongst – didn’t seem to eat much, so they might have needed extra food and hence the extra care; but then I wondered how they could run a city like the one Milee and Tomor lived in.

The contradictions seemed too many to deal with, and the language barrier and abrupt coldness of my hosts meant that getting any kind of substantive knowledge was a very tall order. That didn’t stop me from questioning though. For instance, with all of the rice paddies that I had seen coming and going between the apartment and the fields we now worked, how could the city be in short supply of food? Was it in short supply? Or were we laboring for future exports? And why in the world did they farm by hand when the technology for robots and floating trams was available? Even not having seen any cars yet I could not imagine that tractors or other mechanized instruments
were nowhere to be found.

There may not have been much to what we did, but it was backbreaking and exhausting work. Bent over nearly double all day in the hot sun, sweating profusely into the murky brown water I trod in, hands dipping in and out of the muck, scooping, saving, scooping, saving. The only break from the monotony came when my basket filled up and I got to walk over to the next paddy and hand my wares to the person who had already begun replanting the shoots there. To my surprise she was someone I knew, the woman who had lent me her hat the day before. We exchanged names and I learned that she was called Bofim. Her man Moustache must have been around somewhere as well; I thought that I’d have to get his proper name too when I got the chance. Bofim showed quite a bit of surprise when I introduced myself, but then I hadn’t been able to speak before and so she may have thought, like my hosts may have too, that I couldn’t speak at all. She didn’t try to chat with me though as once the hand-off was completed she returned her attention to what she was doing and I begrudgingly staggered back for more scooping.

When our midday break came at last I was pointedly ostracized. Tomor indicated where I should sit to eat
while the other four of them – Milee, Tomor, Bofim, and Moustache – quietly huddled together a few meters away, Milee spinning out what I guessed must have been all the gossip about me as a houseguest. As natural as I knew such to be I couldn’t help feeling offended; they might have tried to include me in some way. I was also becoming increasingly concerned at the new, and far less welcoming, stance that Milee and Tomor had taken towards me. My only human interaction during the whole sad meal of what was in fact a rice ball and a piece of fruit was to get Moustache’s moniker at long last. It was Rolm. As we broke to return to our various duties Tomor approached me, and with a sheepish look on his face he placed a hand on my shoulder as he said, “Sotou. Kolteemaygantarfar. Goulhaneesobimbi.” I appreciated that, whatever it meant, and after having heard the word in context enough I gathered that “sotou” must have been something along the lines of “sorry” or “I’m sorry”. I was learning. I knew that it was helpful to have others around me communicating with each other, even if it was hard to concentrate on what they were saying through the sweat and the ache pouring out of and into me.

The sun was still pretty high but beginning to near the horizon when we called it a day, probably around four in the afternoon I’d guess, and then there was the long walk
back to town. Even being the outsider that I was, and even having the walls of language and culture between us, the act of having spent the day together at a common task made me feel like I was bonding with the two couples. For my part, that is. How they viewed me was hard to judge but it was clearly with less openness than before. Still, we were a working crew, or they were at least, and with me pitching in the crew was being enlarged but not changing its identity all that much. The thought of that lent me a burgeoning feeling of belonging unlike the one I had at my real job, where although I saw the same people day in and day out we all had separate concerns and our interactions were outside the sphere of our work proper. In the office the workplace facilitated interactions; on the farm it generated them. A nuanced difference perhaps, but it was something that I picked up on.

Another series of thoughts that occurred to me as we made our way home – home for the time being, anyway – was about how the faces that are presented to you are different when you’re not in your birth culture. At that point I wasn’t sure anymore just where my real culture, my place of belonging, actually was, but being in that city and its fields brought back to mind the feelings I had when I first arrived in Japan and everything was so absolutely foreign. It was like I was floating in space, a
protective suit surrounding me and distancing everything I came in contact with. The faces that drifted into view as I struggled to manage the buses and trains, buy food, pay bills, get from here to there, all had a distinctly alien quality. I knew that the creatures who were expressing themselves through those faces weren’t all that different from me, but instead of offering a window into their souls as happened with the people I grew up around, those new faces were somehow masks, hiding true qualities and barring meaningful connections. It was like that again, starting with Milee and Tomor but too with Bofim and Rolm, especially after our lunch break.

It went both ways though, I did recognize that. When I saw my hosts I unthinkingly saw only providers, sustainers, helpers, beings from whom I hoped to gain something. I automatically failed to see them as people, even as I acknowledged my failure to do so. I did sense that each had much they could teach me, and of course I was determined to possess Milee sexually, but they somehow still remained as tools to me, as objects. I hadn’t yet been able to approach them as fully independent and fully contained equals. Despite knowing that was the way I was dealing with them, my self-regard – my self-obsession – seemed somehow unadjustable, as if it grabbed at me from some unreachable inner depth.
That could have been a result of the very real barriers between us, and maybe that is just how everyone is when abroad – or maybe that was simply how my own childhood period of acculturation had taught me to be –, but when I found myself in a new place amongst new people that was always how it was for me, no matter where or how often or how far I moved. All of those other destination-specific details were supplementary, ancillary: what seemed to matter most was the newness.

That evening was spent much like the last one had been. There was less drama though as I followed instructions on water use and the generally tepid atmosphere continued. After being shown again how to work the faucet and showerhead I carefully rinsed, turned the water off to wash, turned it back on to rinse again, et cetera. There actually was a meter indicating how much water you had used right there inside the bath, I just hadn’t noticed it before. As tired as I was from our farming I did still manage to rub one out to the thought of Milee, though it was slightly less satisfying than it had been the day prior. Inevitable really, I thought; the more a person becomes a person to you the less those animal urges seem to work. That was probably for the better, I reasoned, though I also thought that might account for why the world was filled with so much porn. Milee was still distant enough to do
the trick for me, and her new aloofness had become something of a turn-on, but I had an inkling that if things continued in the way they were my attraction to her would either shift in content or weaken in urgency. If I really got to know her, and once – or if – the city and its people became familiar, then it would all come down to her personality. Either she’d turn me on in a whole other way, or once I’d planted my flag in her I’d find myself hunting other prey. That was how I was wired, that was how I perceived the world, and that was how I had always assumed the natural and biologically fitting way to be was. I never left a lover dissatisfied, but I always left. I couldn’t help it.

Beer never tasted so good as it did after a day laboring in the sun. That was an aspect to whatever time I had here that I thought I would relish getting used to, for however long or short it proved to be. Living with farmers did seem to indicate a certain repetitious lifestyle, after all. Another pleasant surprise that night was that some books for me had arrived. When my hosts had ordered them and how they had gotten to the doorstep so quickly was beyond me, but a whole stack of what appeared to be children’s stories, the alphabet and phonics, workbooks, and picture cards were all there waiting when we got back. If I weren’t able to get a proper grammar text with
patterns and rules set out and all explained in English then books like those would do perfectly. Exposure was always the key to learning a language, and since I was immersed in whatever it was that people spoke I could supplement what I heard with what I read. Once I had the basic structure under my belt it would simply be a matter of building vocabulary. That was a process I was used to and good at; I was certain that I’d be speaking in no time. And maybe then I’d get some answers.

And so the days passed in a blur. I farmed, I did what I was told, I studied, I ate rice and vegetables, I slept. My hosts mostly avoided talking to me, and I noticed that at home they tended to huddle over their tablet thingy, both reading something and then discussing it quietly between themselves. I tried not to let it bother me. On the odd day off, which never seemed to fall regularly, I went for a walk around the neighborhood or followed Milee and/or Tomor to a park or a café. I never noticed them paying for anything. I saw Milee with her hair down and with it back in a bun. I saw her worried, I saw her content. I helped her hang the laundry and I listened while she played the guitar. She tolerated my attention but certainly didn’t seem flattered by it. No matter.

Aware that I was still a guest I did what I could to chip in
and be polite. Tomor eventually started to let me clean up the kitchen once he was confident that I knew how to do so using a minimum amount of water. That task turned out to actually be quite easy as most of the process was automatic; once the dishwasher was full the machine ran itself, and no doubt did so very efficiently. Wiping down the counters and putting the clean dishes away was child’s play.

Through all that I wanked and wanked, confident that my charm offensive would see me through to achieving my obsession. I focused my mental life on little else aside from that and my language studies. As I found myself able to communicate better getting to know Milee actually seemed to make her more attractive. She was quirky, funny, yet oddly ill at ease with herself at times and for reasons I could only guess at. She knew what she wanted but was entirely at peace with the pace with which she was approaching her goals, even if to my mind she wasn’t approaching them at all. She may have been content never even achieving them. Yet behind that complacency seemed to lay a certain lack of confidence, a troubling “what if?” that appeared to be stuck in her mind. Tomor, for his part, appeared to be very intelligent and very charismatic; he had an outlook on life that was settled, calm, and confident. He knew his place and filled
his role with a strength of character and determination that I found admirable. He was a man’s man in no way I had ever considered a man to be a man. He was open, compassionate, clear, and sensitive. I didn’t want to become him but I found myself respecting him much more than I would have thought. I discovered that I was actually looking forward to speaking with both of them at more depth once I was linguistically able. I found too though that certain topics seemed very much off-limits, especially – and sadly – those that I took to be most related to myself and my situation. All of my early attempts at getting some solid information on where I was were rebuffed with a definiteness I could not have foreseen, and every time I tried again with either of them, however subtly, I was just told, “No”, or “Not that”, or at best, “Not now.”

As the days turned into weeks it all at once hit me that I was doing just fine. That was sometime near the middle of June, which they called Month Six in their language, a tongue they referred to simply as Language, I discovered with some amusement. Being in June told me that I had been there for nearly a month by my reckoning, although based on the intense heat I would have guessed that I had turned up in mid-August. All during that time I had been trying so hard to learn and get used to how life was lived
here that I had never paused to consider whether or not I really wanted to be here. I had fallen into the everyday, and I realized with a jolt that I had mostly stopped thinking about getting back. Yet for all that I had never consciously determined that I wanted to stay either; each day simply presented its own challenges and chores. In the suddenness of how the thought occurred to me I saw that I still wasn’t sure what I wanted. I had worked out how to fit in, and mostly found a nice niche for myself, but I couldn’t go on being a houseguest forever. And a farmer? Was that how I saw myself? No, on reflection all of it was just temporary, something I had to do to get by while I adapted. But how long could I float along? I had no particularly important ties holding me down anywhere, but I knew that it would nevertheless be much easier to go back to my life in Tokyo even though I also recognized that by that point I would have been fired. Probably not evicted but fired, making me jobless but not homeless. Finding another job was something I could easily handle, but the mystery of the where and the how of my present remained just that – a mystery. Without answers I was stuck, but being stuck gave me the liberty of not having to choose.

Such was my thinking when one evening Tomor approached me as I sat in a comfy armchair in the living
room, going through one of my vocabulary notebooks that had been rapidly filling up. I was never offered one of the little tablet machines I saw my two hosts use on occasion, but even if I had been I still would have asked for paper notebooks and pens, or even pencils, for study. There really was no substitute for physically writing something down if you wanted to remember it quickly and have it stick. That was a lesson I had learned young when getting a hold of my first foreign language, and it had never failed me. Vocabulary is the absolute mortar of skilled language acquisition and use; without an extensive one you may as well resign yourself to nothing more than asking where the toilet is and what time the train will depart.

“Tomorrow is a very important day,” Tomor said.

“Why?” I asked, pleased to be conversing in Language. From the look on his face I had a feeling that it would be a conversation of some substance.

“We will all go to the House of Decisions. The Kolhaup will be deciding what to do with you.”

“What does ‘kolhaup’ mean?” I asked.
“They are leaders from each district in our city. They change every year, but there are always the same number of them,” he answered. It was a good explanation; a city council, perhaps.

“Do they make all the city’s decisions?” I was very curious about how the place ran itself; I thought that learning about the “kolhaup” might be a good clue for me, and that it might lead to a deeper knowledge of local organization and administration.

“Oh no, only small decisions,” he answered. “The major decisions involve everyone but that is a very big event. It takes us a few days of meetings, discussions, and troyz.”

“Troyz?”

“How can I explain it… Like when you raise your hand to show your opinion. Only we push buttons after listening to different people speak.” Tomor said.

“Ah, I see.” Voting, of course. “Am I a small decision?” It was asked half in jest but only half in jest; I really did care about how I was considered.

Tomor smiled at me the way you might a child who has
said something cute and very naïve. It was a little off-putting.

“We are all small decisions. But we live with that and find joy in each day. Such is life,” he said softly.

I wasn’t sure what he meant by that. The latter part I grasped fine of course, certainly as far as the language went, but how that related to all of “us” – and I didn’t know if I was included as an “us” or not; I supposed that might have been part of the kolhaup’s job – being “small decisions” was not entirely clear. He may simply have meant it in a Buddhist or kind of half-Stoic way – along the lines of life itself being in many respects beyond any of us – but somehow I felt like it betrayed a certain lack of care for the individual as an individual. I was quite possibly reading into things, I knew, and his comment may have been nothing, but it seemed important and did affect my mood a little.

Tomor glanced at my studies and smiled warmly again. “There will be many things that you can’t understand at the meeting, but I will explain the important parts to you later.”

He stood and let me get back to it, not waiting for the
response which I anyway did not have to offer. I watched him head into the kitchen and say something quietly to Milee who was seated at the dining room table bent over a canvas. I supposed she was planning out her next painting; all of the art in the apartment was actually her work. I wouldn’t say she was great but she did have a good sense for color and balance. I may have been prejudiced in that though. Over the years I’d noticed that when you know the person who has produced some work of art or other object, that is, gotten to know them personally prior to learning that they produced things, you tended to quite naturally mentally downgrade the quality of what they’ve created. Call it the artist’s dilemma. Such folk probably want to be recognized as artists but are only seen that way by people who don’t know them. That amounts to strangers associating a label – artist – with a name. Maybe those strangers greatly respect the person behind that name, but what good does it do the actual artist?

I will admit that in the case of Milee I too did probably rate her paintings higher before I knew that she was the one who had done them. I realized that I shouldn’t, but that still seemed to be my gut reaction. Even so, having learned of her artistic abilities and temperament allowed me to tweak some of the fantasies that I frequently
indulged in when masturbating to her in the shower. That was a definite bonus and it did in some ways force me to reconsider her work, or at least consider it differently. At any rate, I thought that whatever was to take place at the rather ominous-sounding House of Decisions the next day, I was glad that all three of us would be present. Living with people will do that to you: an unavoidable creeping dependence. Not usually a bad thing from what I had heard, although I hadn’t had much personal experience with it. I had always previously been a lone wolf, and given my general fear of commitment up to that point in my life the fact was unsurprising when I took the time to reflect on it, which I very rarely did.

The next morning when I walked into the kitchen for breakfast I was surprised to see Milee and Tomor wearing clothes that I had never seen them in before. They both had on a loose pair of thin-looking colored pants that came in at the ankles, Milee’s green and Tomor’s brown, with white shirts buttoned all the way up to the top. The shirts were similar to ones I had seen people wearing in Okinawa and some Southeast Asian countries as a kind of formal dress, the collars consisting of a single stiff ring around the neck rather than the folded-over and pointed down double arrow version that most dress shirts had. Noticing those collars brought back to me the old
questions about where I was that had somehow seemed to cease mattering much on a day-to-day basis, yet that also never really left my mind. Milee’s hair was down and I noticed that she looked to be growing it out. I was pleased by that. Tomor’s was back in a ponytail and he appeared to be freshly shaven. That reminded me that I also needed to shave; having any kind of beard did not help with the heat.

While Tomor was bowling our morning rice and side dishes, Milee glanced at my workaday black pyjamas and remarked, “The Kolhaup have an important role. You should wear nice clothes when you meet them. You need to go change.”

I had decided to tentatively list “kolhaup” in my latest vocabulary notebook as “council/councilor”. Having now heard it again used as a title I decided that I might want to capitalize it. It could only have been a title, or it could also have referred to a function; I would have to keep my ears open and wait and see. I found that not having access to a dictionary was actually quite liberating as it allowed me to adjust for nuances as I learned them, assigning a new word now to this English term, now to that.

“What should I wear?” I asked.
“The clothes that you arrived in would be best,” Milee replied, smiling a little conspiratorially, green eyes flashing as their corners turned up. I took that to mean that she thought I looked good in my jacket and slacks and returned what was really only a half-smile with a full version.

“I will do that right after breakfast.”

“No, you will do it now,” she corrected. The boss. She was back; but really she had never left, although our positions would sometimes flip when I let my mind wander. It was irritating but I sauntered off to obey.

By that point I hadn’t worn my old stuff since the first day and nothing fit all that well anymore. I had lost considerable weight and was starting to look like a local; except, that was, for my too-light hair and overly pasty skin tone which had reddened from long hours in the sun but not properly tanned. In thinking about that I thought that I wouldn’t call the locals just “tanned” either, but their skin was clearly darker than mine, though by varying degrees and shades. Between that and the mixed features I constantly saw around me I had started to think of them as non-racial rather than as Asian or Black or
Hispanic or Non-Hispanic Caucasian of Northwestern European Descent, or whatever category you wanted to trot out.

I cinched up my belt to its last loop and headed back for my delayed meal. It actually felt really good to be in a sports jacket again, I felt like a real professional. If I did decide not to go back to Tokyo then I would have to get into something other than farming. I thought that maybe I could put my jacket on over my black pyjamas as even the staff in the cafés, restaurants, and other places we had so far visited had been wearing what must have been the standard local attire. The pyjamas were functional, and did help with the heat – I wouldn’t argue that –, but the same thing day in and day out did get boring. Some people I’d seen had added little accessories and trim to theirs, though neither of my hosts had bothered. I thought that I might try to liven up my own three sets of black pyjamas at some point, but I would need to learn what was available for doing so first and then how to get it.

After breakfast, and with Milee remarking her approval of my clothing, we made our way to the local tram stop. Since that first ride I had learned that the trams ran on altered maglev tracks, which at first seemed like a waste to me as they were so slow compared with the
five-hundred plus kilometers per hour that an intercity maglev could do, but in fact the engines and tracks involved were much more energy efficient than my known reference points and were also extraordinarily smooth and quiet. I read about all that in a textbook for upper elementary school-aged children. We really were riding on thin air when we took one.

There were only the north-south and east-west tram lines in the city but they seemed to provide everyone with the necessary access, and as we all walked so much anyway I for one didn’t mind the fifteen to twenty minute stroll from the apartment to the platform. And if I didn’t mind then surely no one else would; after all, they had grown up here and it was all normal to them.

Milee and Tomor seemed very nervous for some reason, though neither shared their concerns with me. They spoke furtively and quietly together, walking slightly ahead; I paid them little attention. For my part I had been playing it so loose and free since arriving in that mysterious place that whatever the councilors said I was certain it wouldn’t be too likely to faze me. I was constantly putting my questions out of mind the better to enjoy the lifestyle I had been leading. I still wanted to know everything that had happened – of course I still wanted to know – but I
also knew that sometimes not knowing was the wisest option available. When you learn to go with the flow the flow goes with you, as I had often told myself after being relocated to a new city. I wished I could translate that as it struck me as being very generally apt and I wanted to be appreciated for having thought of it, but I wasn’t sure what “the flow”, with its few layers of subtext, would be in Language. I needed to keep at the books.

There weren’t many people in our carriage – I knew from experience that those farming would have been heading to their fields by that time of the morning, while those working in town would have been opening up for the day – but those who were on board stared and stared at me. It must have been the clothes I had on. For the first time I wished that the interior of the car had some posters or advertisements or video screens or anything for me to look at so I could ignore the other riders. In my short time in the city I had grown very fond of the absence of “BUY ME!” being shouted from all directions, but the upshot of that lack were evenly clean, some might say bland, public spaces and transit system. The ride wasn’t long though and once we had alighted I soon forgot about the oglers. People had gawked at me in the south of Japan too before I moved into Tokyo. C’est la vie as the French say, or tulhoop ka as Language put it.
I recognized where we got off, it was in front of the southern of the two massive complexes that dominated the center of the city. It was my first time to go inside one of them and I was very excited. Tomor had told me they were reserved for special events, and so I started thinking that maybe I was special after all, even if I was a “small decision”. I could have been mysteriously brought here, I told myself, and it was possible that I had some special role to play that the councilors, wise elders that they no doubt were, would reveal to the shock of the simple farmers who hosted me. I let my mind roam and imagined that the city leaders would be privy to deep thoughts and far-reaching plans, to plots within plots that governed the politics of the metropolis, and that in their knowledge they would label me Indispensible and a Somebody, an honest to goodness V.I.P. That would be sure to impress, I whimsically mused, even Milee would have to look at me anew after that pronouncement.

Illusions of grandeur are all the more comforting when you don’t know your way around well enough to see the forest for the trees. Upon entering the building through glass outer doors I saw that the foyer was a grand open room with a vaulting ceiling that sloped slightly downwards to a further set of double doors. The carpeting
and walls were a deep red which made the golden columns that staggered in a V-shape towards the central interior entry really stand out. It was very visually impressive and left no doubt as to what was of central importance.

“That’s where the Great Hall is,” Tomor said, pointing straight ahead. “The southern districts gather there to vote while the northern districts use the Great Hall in the next building.”

“Why doesn’t everyone vote together?” I asked.

“There are too many of us. Our city has a population of one hundred thousand people,” he replied.

“Even so, if you vote by pushing buttons then all you need is one big room,” I countered, ever, always, curious about the procedures involved.

“That would work if no one spoke,” Tomor acceded, “but each district chooses a speaker to present their views on the issues and the speeches can get quite long. Although there are only half of us in each Great Hall it still takes at least a day for everyone to be heard and then there are discussions after that.” Memories of some of the working
committees I had sat through came to mind – they were never fun.

“So that room can hold fifty thousand people?” I asked, pointing at the entrance in turn. I was impressed but a little dubious; it looked big from the outside but not that big.

“Oh no, the children and their caretakers don’t vote. Watching the children during such times is a rotated duty, but those doing it always tell their preferences to specified others who are allowed to vote in their place.”

That was logical and made sense, but the numbers involved would still be large. A new thought then occurred to me, and it was personally related. “If everything is divided in half, then will I only be meeting with the councilors from the southern districts today?” I asked.

Tomor shook his head and replied, “No, the entire group will be here from both the north and south sections. We vote separately when we need to, but when the councilors have to decide something they all get together.”

I nodded, that too made sense to me. Milee touched
Tomor’s arm and directed us to look towards one of the side doors off to the left that was open onto a small room. We walked in to find that two opposing sets of chairs had been set up, three in the middle of the room and three long lines against the far wall. I counted them. There were nine in the front row, eleven in the middle, and twelve in the rear. If each councilor was from a separate district that meant there were thirty-two districts in the city, probably evenly split between North and South as most aspects of the city seemed to be very well planned and to generally favor symmetry. I wondered what they did in the case of a sixteen to sixteen decision. Who would provide the tie-breaking vote?

We sat down in the three chairs in the center that were obviously meant for us. I was on the left facing the other rows of chairs with Tomor in the middle and Milee on the right. Sitting there looking at the empty seats and imagining the mass of people that would soon be looking at me, asking me questions, listening, weighing, judging, and then determining what was “to be done about me” made me start to feel very nervous. The whole thing was suddenly intensely intimidating, from the giant building with its imposing entry to the large empty space between the little group of us opposing the full number of them.
Feeling that way made me remember some meetings that I had been a small part of back in Tokyo, between our company and the board of one of our clients. Whenever we went to see them they had set up their conference room in such a way that we were stuck on the far end of a long table, our chairs shoved close together to fit, while they wrapped themselves comfortably around the sides and opposite end, being sure to leave at least an empty meter between the one of them closest to us and the one of us closest to them. We always had to arrive first and sit sweating until they came in, slowly, relaxed, silently. The stiff and overly formal greetings, the prescribed and oh so proper bows, the stern and purposely opaque looks. The brinksmanship. It had been almost like how I imagined the military to be. And I had never wanted to join the military.

When the councilors started to file in from the rear both Milee and Tomor stood and so I followed suit and joined them. They were all wearing judicial-looking robes, ash grey with gold trim around the shoulders and necklines, and the kind of wigs that judges and barristers wore in Commonwealth countries, relics from an earlier time. As they began to turn and face us I saw that the gold trim formed an embroidered necklace on each councilor’s robe, coming together roughly at the sternum where a gold and
encircled five-pointed star was also embroidered with its topmost point connected to the threaded necklace line, giving the effect of an icon being held by a chain. That star caught my eye further because in the middle of it there appeared to be a small dark red owl image, the same dark red that the carpeting employed. I had no idea what such symbolism might mean in unison but the owl’s association with wisdom was not foreign to me, nor was the pentagram’s with revelation or spirituality when it pointed up like that. Spiritual wisdom then? Revealing of mystic secrets? From a group of city administrators? It didn’t seem to connect, but I suspected that I might have been missing some associations that the colors hinted at. Or it might have been nothing. At any rate, it wasn’t until they were all in the room and seated that we returned to ours.

The woman in the center of the foremost row spoke first, introducing herself and her colleagues and stating that they had assembled in order to answer the query presented by the appearance of an unannounced and unexpected outsider – me. As she said that she smiled kindly at me. She had an attractive face, dark skin with smooth features offset by her cropped hair and high cheekbones. It was a nice touch, that smile, and I relaxed a tiny amount, only to tense up again a moment later. I
had thought – daydreamed – that I might have been brought here for something, for some purpose or plan, and that something would be revealed by the wise councilors. I had only ever half believed it anyway, but since both Milee and Tomor had been very tight-lipped about where we were, and had both similarly always deflected my generally prying questions to them, I had started to think more was afoot than my just being lost. Hearing the way my presence had been introduced, however, made me lose heart in that pet theory of mine; if I really was an unannounced and unexpected visitor then I wasn’t anything special, and my purpose here was as blank as it was in Tokyo. Blanker, even; at least in Tokyo I had a job. Or used to.

The same speaker then continued by asking Milee and Tomor to describe how it was that they had found me, the condition I was in at the time, and how they responded. Milee explained in some detail all the events that had happened that day, starting with the two of them leaving for their fields as usual. While she spoke I listened carefully and tried to take mental notes on their perspective of things; my own memory of that day was not crystal clear and I still had no idea how I could possibly have wound up lying there facing the sky in that rice paddy. Unfortunately, Milee’s talk was not entirely
helpful in that regard as no trace of me nor any possible transport of me entered the picture until I was discovered in the position my own recollection put me in.

The councilors took all that into account, interrupting now and then to ask for more specifics or for Milee to clarify a little. They would sometimes speak quite rapidly – which made me realize how considerate Tomor had been in his constant use of slow and careful language with me – but I was actually able to take in quite a bit. Language, that is, what everyone here spoke, was an incredibly easy tongue to learn, especially for someone with a background in English. Grammatically it was very simple, with no verb conjugations, few declensions, only prepositions of place, no particles, articles, or similar purely grammatical items, and no gendered terms. Structurally it was almost exactly like English as far as putting together a sentence went. If I wanted to say, for example, “I’m eating a banana” then in Language it would be “Now I eat banana”, or “That man’s boots are red” would become something along the lines of “That man own boots red”, or “Put it down over there next to the book” would be said as “Put that object there next book”. Easy and intuitive. It was almost too easy, making me suspect that Language might have had its roots in an artificial language. After only about a week of going
through how it was set up, I found that my main problems in understanding and being understood were a lack of vocabulary and not being practiced at adding the time phrases and other markers that took the place of conjugations and the like. The latter would come naturally with practice, and so I had been focusing on the former.

One councilor, a man with a strikingly sharp nose and round face, asked if I had any marks of a criminal, to which Milee responded that she had checked my forehead and chest and found none. That explained why she had looked at me that way when I first met her; what a pity she hadn’t simply been checking me out; in the other sense, of course.

Another councilor, a small woman sitting in the back row who was hard to make out, asked how I had been since they took me in, and Tomor spoke up to answer that although I was clumsy at farming and generally a bit wasteful in my hygiene habits, I had been working hard and studying Language every day. That caused something of a stir; the same councilor then pushed Tomor to elaborate and he said, very sheepishly I noticed, that since he and Milee had first filed their report about me to the councilors and been ordered to secrecy, they had
discovered that listing me as unable to communicate was not exactly accurate; instead I actually appeared to be an English speaker. Pandemonium broke out at that as the councilors turned to one another in a panic, speaking quickly, loudly over each other, each confiding with any number of multiple others in a disorganized frenzy.

I had no idea what to do and so I sat silently and tried to think positive thoughts, fantastical thoughts, conjuring up a scenario wherein there was some local myth about an outsider who spoke a strange dialect and would lead them all to glory, that they would elevate me to a position of power, and that I would take whatever I wanted, starting with Milee. It was nonsense, naturally, but when you find yourself in a new culture where none of your existing intuitions seem to work properly it’s easy to gloss over truths and create self-satisfying narratives. Fun too. Milee and Tomor exchanged worried glances.

After some minutes of chaos the apparent leader of the group, the woman in the center who had spoken first, finally got everyone to calm down and the councilors turned once more to face the three of us.

“Do you think he will be useful?” another councilor from the rear asked.

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“Frank can work,” Milee replied. “In time I think he’ll be able to contribute.”

“What is your estimation of his abilities?” another queried.

“At first we assumed he was very stupid; he couldn’t even speak, could barely walk properly, seemed out of shape, and was wearing the ridiculous clothes you see him in today,” Milee said.

Thank you for that, Milee. It clicked that that must have been why she smiled at me the way she did when she told me to put my work gear back on. Yes, thanks very much, I brooded. With my attention drawn to my clothes though I did notice that the color of my sports jacket strangely matched the hue of the councilor’s robes; could there be any significance to that coincidence? It too seemed to justify the illusions of grandeur I favored and wanted to believe – could I possibly be right? There seemed little hope of that, but if there was any hope I was going to grasp at it.

“But then we learned that he spoke English, of all things, and decided to train him how to live until we could meet
officially with you. We have been very worried and didn’t want to do the wrong thing. We’ve also been quite careful not to tell him anything. As it is now we basically treat him like a child,” Milee continued.

That explained an awful lot, and especially why I had so far been kept entirely in the dark. Still, I found her forthrightness discomforting as surely she must have known that I would have understood her. I wondered if she really thought so little of me, or if such statements were nothing more than reflections of an overly honest character. Neither option struck me as being particularly good. Maybe she was just trying to curry favor with the councilors.

“Honestly, we have no idea what to think,” Milee said in a fluster as she finished her response. It must have been stressful for her and Tomor to have me, I recognized that, and although her words cut I knew – or sensed – that they didn’t come from an intention to hurt. That was still small comfort though.

A heavy silence descended over the room and lasted for a few long moments. Finally the same central councilor, the group’s nice-looking chief, faced me directly and began questioning me without the assistance of the middlemen.
“Do you have a name other than Frank?” she asked.

“Yes, my final name is Tollman and my middle name is Ulbrecht.”

More heated discussion and worried looks, although briefer this time. I wasn’t sure what “surname” was in Language and so I had gone with “final name” in lieu, and even I winced a bit as both my middle name and my initials had been the source of endless ribbing when I was younger, all the more so when classmates learned that fút in Vietnamese meant “foot”. The simpler connection with the much cooler fútbol was sadly lost on them. I was “Heil Ulbrecht!” and “Stinky Fút Tollman” for all of junior high, though the latter was sometimes abbreviated to just S.F.T. What fun we had in those days.

“What is your role?” she asked next.

“Now I help on the farm with Milee and Tomor.”

“Of course. Is that the only work you’ve had?” She seemed annoyed by my response and I couldn’t blame her for that, but I really didn’t know what else to say.
“I am, or used to be, an,” I paused. I had no idea how to say “accountant” in Language. I sat there fidgeting a little with a screwed up face as I searched my brain. Nothing came. Finally I settled on, “I used to work with numbers for a…” Then the same block again. Business! For whatever reason I had never yet come across either of those terms in any of the books I’d read or conversations I’d heard. That in itself struck me as odd, but realizing such was of no help. “Accountant” was admittedly something of a minor title, but why wasn’t a very ordinary term like “business” more prominent?

“I used to work for a big store,” was the best, and admittedly very lame, answer that I could give. Yet at that again the excitement and the glances followed, with even my interlocutor now struggling to keep herself contained. She appeared to take a couple of deep breaths before continuing, and when ready she cautiously queried, “And where did you work?”

“In Tokyo, Japan.”

I hadn’t actually learned those place names yet in Language either, so I just said them as I would have in English. “My, uh, big store sent me there. I lived there and I want to know how to get back there. Do you
know?”

In saying that some mixed feelings sprouted up again. I had started to enjoy my life in a way that I hadn’t for many years, but I was still something of an interloper and I had mentally been filing all my experiences away as temporary. I was neither here nor there – I was having an adventure – but I did at least want to know how to get back, and I figured it was worth a shot asking the Council although I had already had the very same question rebuffed by Milee and Tomor so many times. They never even taught me what the Language equivalences of the place names were. Then for good measure, and before the councilor could say anything, I added, “By the way, where are we now?”

If I had thought that the first time the councilors broke their stately decorum – after Tomor told them that I was an English speaker – was remarkable, I had sorely underestimated the degree to which I seemed capable of causing flabbergast. Chairs were overturned as councilors leapt to their feet shouting at one another, astonished looks were exchanged, helpless gestures and empty attempts to articulate marked a few, some even sat in stunned paralysis, unblinking eyes wide open and jaws dropped onto the floor.
I looked over at Tomor seated next to me, his face was a shade of white that I didn’t think possible given his deeply tanned tone; I thought he might be sick. Deeply confused I craned my neck around him to catch a glimpse of Milee and I saw that she, on the other hand, had set her chin squarely and was staring straight ahead with an expression of steely determination. She even looked a bit angry. She may have been wondering why it had all happened to her – Tomor certainly seemed to be.

It was a question I had naturally asked myself any number of times over the previous weeks and even before then. It’s a question we all ask when confronted by what can only be described as a stark and horrid, deeply disturbing randomness: that randomness was life’s little secret. At least, that’s how I saw it; and waking up one day in the middle of a rice paddy somewhere in the subtropics as a stranger in a strange land certainly seemed to confirm that view. Randomness, the fundamental unpredictability of the universe and the absence of any sort of objective justice that it implied; it was a depressing worldview but I had clung to it, even while knowing that I could not face it, that I had all my life but turned away in one manner or another, closed my eyes and pressed on forwards day in and day out. Groped on
forwards. I was prepared to continue doing the same.

A minute or two or three passed slowly, and as I sat there alone with my thoughts it dawned on me that I wasn’t in fact ready for anything. Who was I fooling? I was no more pressing forwards than I was being carried forwards. I wasn’t even willingly admitting myself to the whims of the gods; I was simply along for the ride in a hijacked car. All I had done was to cease trying to do anything myself, and in that I had convinced myself that I had achieved some kind of grand enlightenment. My whole outlook could simply have been put this way: If the outcome of the struggle could not be guaranteed then why struggle? That was as far as I had gotten. It struck me then, as I sat there having to look it in the eye, as a pitiable half-measure. A pathetic half-measure. Whatever the councilors would decide was to be my fate for the immediate future, and in that regard I was as powerless as I seemed to be. But no wait; was I really? Was I truly prepared to simply and docilely accept their decision as I had accepted everything else since the moment I first arrived?

“Frank,” a councilor from the middle row began, “What year is it?”
He asked the question simply and straightforwardly and I answered the same way. “Twenty-eights,” I said, as naturally as I would have responded “blue” had I been asked the color of the sky. It required zero thought. Yet the reaction it generated was a stunned silence. A deafening silence, as they say, very unnerving and very off-putting. The kind of silence that sends chills down your spine.

I began once more to feel quite uncomfortable but no quarter was to be found from either of my companions seated next to me. I felt like I had nowhere to rest even my gaze. The moments passed achingly as I tried to make sense of the reaction my answer had generated. How could I have been wrong about the calendar year? What would it mean if I were? Time travel? Ridiculous. That would explain many things – nearly everything – but the mere notion of it was ludicrous. Impossible. Obviously so. It was too fantastic to be entertained.

I suddenly started to feel chilled, almost nauseated, and then the unearthly quiet was broken by a councilor who stated crisply, “We must discuss this. Please wait.” The group of them then turned in their chairs as well as they could to form a kind of false circle, a clumsy huddled mass, and they bent their heads together and spoke in that
bizarre misshape in low and inaudible tones.

All the pieces of my mystery were starting to fit together despite my internal preconceived cries to the contrary. I had so far enjoyed the luxury of a comfortable ignorance, a willed and willful ignorance; that was now dissipating. It’s a funny thing about human beings though, that we won’t admit the truth even when it’s staring us in the face, particularly if that truth is threatening to the secure mental fortresses we’ve built for ourselves. My own fortress was in the midst of being on the receiving end of a fierce fusillade but still I sheltered in it, barricading the gate against the logic that said “what” to my preferred reasoning that said “what not”.

I knew that we usually want to believe the best in others and are generally right to do so, for instance, but I also knew that sometimes the guys holding the keys to the bank really are the same ones that break legs in back alleys and leave long-handled calling cards protruding out of people’s backs. I could see both sides to the question of what year it was and I liked neither. I did not feel at all threatened by the councilors and had come to accept and even like many things about the lifestyle I had been leading here, but a persistent squeaky little voice in my head was telling me that I was in for a very cold shower, a
rude awakening that was every bit as menacing as a suited thug of the moneyed class.

Tomor and Milee next to me were sitting quietly as they had been told to; the only real change was that now Milee had the same pallor as Tomor, her angry determination seemingly having faded into an apprehensive resignation. She knew what he knew what I knew and yet still wouldn’t let myself know. A storm had become visible on the horizon.

I did recognize that whatever I had meant to my hosts I would thereafter take on the air of something entirely different, regardless of what the Council decided. I had had a certain occult atmosphere around me, to be sure, but the reactions that I had seen the councilors give to the testimony they heard, and especially in regards to my stating of the year, told me that I might well become more akin to an ill omen, a crow perched on the window ledge and peering inside at your happy household, head cocked to one side, curious, self-assured, foreboding. I was suddenly less concerned with however they might take what truth was forthcoming than I was with how I might take it.

“Attention, please”, a thin-faced councilor announced in a
pleasant and soft voice from the front row. “We have made a decision but it is tentative and temporary. We wish much more time to discuss this matter and to observe Frank as he operates amongst us, here in our city and there in our fields. What we have decided is just for now; please keep that in mind as you go today.”

Here it came, I told myself, my moment of fate. Perhaps not answers to all my questions, not yet, but we were there to find out what was to become of me and that was now to be declared. In my defensive efforts to keep the wolves of my intellect at bay and ignore the obvious, my mind reached out for distraction and snagged itself on the “our fields” that the councilor had mentioned. As far as I knew the land we had been working was Milee and Tomor’s, or maybe theirs with Bofim and Rolm; but perhaps, I thought, she was just speaking metaphorically, linking the phrase in with “our city”. It was a triviality, but I would take it. It let me ignore the far greater issue. And I went from there to my next mental oasis, the temporary decision of the Council. I focused on that and reassured myself: a temporary decision was something I could live with whatever it turned out to be. My fate would not be sealed forever.

“What we have arrived at, then,” the same councilor
continued, “after some discussion and a great deal of uncertainty, is that Frank will remain with his hosts and continue assisting them until after the harvest. If he has comported himself with the expected dignity and tenacity, then on the Day of Choosing he will be allowed to participate in the ceremony and the permanent manner in which he will remain with us shall be determined. In the meantime the District Thirteen South authorities, led by myself, will arrange housing for him. After the Day of Choosing, assuming that he does continue in the contributory manner in which he has been living, he will be able to move into his own apartment and begin life here afresh.”

Not a word about their reactions or their surprise; they were meant to decide on my conditions and they had done just that. Nothing more. I wasn’t certain that I had caught every word, but “permanent” stood out for me, ominously in a way, yet that coupled with staying together with Milee and Tomor until housing was arranged at least bought me some insurance. There were other parts that I didn’t understand too of course, particularly the business about the Day of Choosing, but the general drift seemed clear enough. For the time being I would stay put and then, in a couple of months, probably, after the crops had been taken in, there would be some kind of ceremony
where I could decide something for myself. Then I’d get my own place. But what about getting back to Tokyo? Wasn’t that an option? How could it not be? My mind threw down its gates again at what the absence of that choice represented. I would have the essentials, I told myself. Something to do, food to eat, a place to live. I reflexively pushed all else out of my mind. I had to – it was a kind of survival mechanism, an automatic and unthought maneuver. The councilor who announced it was apparently one of the leaders of District Thirteen South where I’d be living if I stayed; fine, great. That was what I told myself: “if I stayed”. I had to have that “if”. It was curious that I couldn’t choose my own apartment, I mused, but if they were going to prepare a residence for me then I wasn’t going to complain. Granting that the rent was reasonable, naturally; if not I’d put up with it for a month or so and then find my own place, surreptitiously if I had to. It had come to that before when company housing hadn’t been up to snuff, but I was happy to withhold judgment on that and wait and see. It could well turn out to be very comfortable. That was the direction my mind turned. Unbelievable, yes, but we humans are built that way, we all live in private imaginaries.

And so I stayed firmly internally parked where I had been: this now, secure once more in the fortress of my
preference, happy not to be forced to confront the glaringly discomforting facts. I turned those off and chanted my mantra: I had some time to continue to ingratiate myself with Milee and Tomor, learn a bit more of Language and hopefully how the city worked, and then I would strike out on my own should I decide to stay. But who knew when boredom might kick in and I’d find myself yearning for Tokyo’s bright lights, crisscrossing trains, and the endless construction of the new. It too was there waiting. I fastened onto any chance to keep thinking what I wanted to think, to keep telling myself that all was still on the table and that I, however things fell out, would be well and safe and secure.

“That is all, you may now return,” another councilor from the front row announced. At that Milee and Tomor stood and bowed elegantly to the councilors. I wasn’t prepared for that but I was an old hand at bowing and so my effort was probably acceptable and maybe even appreciated. My hosts walked purposefully and swiftly to the rear of the room and filed out the door, with me following along behind. Their obedient pet, the clown dressed in strange clothes, the mystery man, the bearer of the hidden sigil.

I had a role and a determined position, it had all just been declared; at that moment it seemed to me that the future,
my own personal future, remained wide open. From within my citadel of comfort I reminded myself that, not for the first time, I was very grateful for that drunken night and whatever it was that had happened on it to lead me here. Wherever and – though I pushed the thought aside – *whenever* “here” was.

We crossed the grand entry with its golden columns and vaulting ceiling, back out onto the street and into the heat of day. Retracing our steps exactly. I couldn’t see the faces of my hosts but I wasn’t concerned with them, I was enjoying my cocoon. They walked quickly and I tried to keep up.

As we approached the platform for our tram journey back home reality made another attempt at getting my attention: Tomor suddenly swiveled on his feet to face me, his expression contorted with an anxiety and confusion that I was very purposefully not feeling. He clearly found nothing from that meeting in which to take solace. “We have to talk,” was all he said, and then turned his back on me to wait silently for the train.
Chapter Three

The generally uncomfortable vibe lasted for a while after we got back from the meeting with the councilors. Tomor had said that we needed to talk, and I certainly had a few questions that I wanted to ask, but decorum kept me from pressing on my hosts any of the points that were pressing on me. I decided that I would exercise what patience I had and wait until I was approached. In the meantime I spent about an hour reading a book aimed at upper junior high school/early high school students in my room – a level that I found matched well with my knowledge of Language at the time – and tried very hard not to be overly worried about the massive hurricane left hanging in the air. That of course proved impossible, and my reading, such as it was, consisted in going over the same sentence about three dozen times while my mind was firmly elsewhere.

Before I had gone into my bedroom I saw Tomor park himself at the dining room table and begin poring over something on their mini-tablet. From the sounds of things Milee, who had gone into their bedroom, was attempting to figure out her own no doubt difficult feelings by trying to learn a new piece on her classical guitar. It needed work. But then she also probably found it hard to
concentrate. I wondered why they didn’t just come out with it, just come clean with me about everything. On top of my brain grinding out its questions and concerns Milee’s discordant notes and repetitive strumming was the last straw, and I was just about to shut my room’s door in a huff when I heard Tomor call my name. I dutifully ambled back out; would this finally be it?

“Sit down, please. Relax,” Tomor said, pointing to one of the deep armchairs in their living room.

He was noticeably not relaxed and still exhibiting the demeanor of barely contained panic that he had when we left the House of Decisions. It had been a long and discomfortingly quiet ride back on the tram, with the ensuing silence on the walk home only punctured by the call of a few song birds. We were all alone together. Once inside we had each split off to our separate areas pretty naturally, something that, for what it was worth, hadn’t felt odd but instead strangely comforting, given the circumstances. Habit, I supposed, entering a familiar space will always do that to you.

Tomor avoided eye contact with me as he spoke and seemed to be having difficulty composing himself. Milee popped out of their bedroom and went to the kitchen
before joining us with six beers in her hands. That was very welcome; I had never known them to drink in the afternoon but both seemed so fidgety that I could only surmise the alcohol was to settle their nerves. Mine needed settling too, I thought, but from the looks on their faces maybe not quite as much. All that I didn’t know couldn’t hurt me. Yet.

“Salud,” I said with a little effort as we flipped the lids back and took our first tastes, always the sweetest. Tomor stared at his bottle and said nothing while Milee, seated next to him on the couch, leaned forwards and fixed me with a pensive look. She too remained silent.

“The year is fifty-three twenty-eight,” Tomor said suddenly, riveting me with eyes that expressed by equal measure compassion and dispossession.

I nearly spilled my beer all over my lap. There were absolutely no means available by which I could have processed that information. All my fears, all my incomprehensible, ungraspable, unacceptable speculations had been thrown into my face. Tomor had just torn down the very foundations of my psychic defenses.
“Excuse me?” I fumbled, shakily setting my bottle down on the coffee table. My mind was a blank. White. The truth of it. The horrid, utter truth.

“It’s not as bad you think,” he began hurriedly, gesturing ineffectively. “We started counting years differently some time ago. If you think it’s twenty-eighteen then by our current method of reckoning that would be fifty-seventeen and not fifty-three twenty-eight. So you’re really only off by three hundred and eleven years.”

“What?” was all I could manage. Three hundred and eleven years? Only off by three hundred and eleven years? How was that not as bad as I thought? How was that even possible? What were they telling me? The premonition that had haunted me as I sat in front of the councilors was trying its hardest to force me into a fully conscious recognition of it, a full and complete awareness. I was trying to rebuild my walls.

“We have no idea how you got here,” Milee cut in, “but your terrible clothes, the fact that you’re useless at everything, that you’re so wasteful and overweight, and of course your archaic language, all point to you being from the past. It’s bizarre, it makes no rational sense, but somehow it seems true, doesn’t it?” Her expression
reflected a confusion mixed with a resolute acceptance of the logical paradox I was, that my being here represented, and that we all now had to face.

I began to turn the conscious wheels in my mind that I had purposely let rust and opened them to my unconscious processing. The answer had been there all along. The robot city, everything within it so clean and efficient, everything so advanced, the lack of money, the clothes, the apartment, the people, the climate, the language. It was like nowhere I knew because it was nowhere I knew. Drunkenness, the train, the tunnel. How had I gotten here? *How had I come to be in the future?* It was not the fact of it that I still could not accept so much as the nature of it. I was having a half-epiphany.

“I’ve been reading up on the era when English was the world’s common language,” Tomor said, seemingly wanting to start over. I listened through a dense fog. The future?

“I’ve been doing a lot of research, maybe you’ve noticed me using our flat board more,” he continued, pointing to their mini-tablet thing. “Your civilization marked the years based on a rough guess of when a particular religious figure who dominated your time was born,
counting forwards from then. It was an arbitrary starting point and so is ours. Some time ago we decided that it would be better to start counting from around the year that human beings began using written language, which of course was circa three thousand B.C.E. by your system. Actually reading about that decision turned out to be quite interesting; there were many people at the time who wanted to start counting from the construction of the Khufu Pyramid – you might know it as the Great Pyramid – since that was thought to be humanity’s most significant achievement ever. But in the end it was decided that to start counting from our pinnacle would be a little depressing as it would always imply a long decline, and so the creation of writing was chosen instead.”

Who the hell cared, Tomor? As the acceptance of what could no longer be avoided set in my disbelief was rapidly changing into a directionless anger. The man just told me that I had somehow shifted three hundred years into the future, and now he was giving me tidbits about some damned new calendar?

“She’s as confused and scared as you must be. You probably have dozens of questions.”

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I did, but I couldn’t formulate any of them. I had so many that it was very hard to know where to start. The anger that had flared up in me a moment ago was quickly deflating into an oddly settled balance of simultaneous belief and disbelief. I could not think but I had to get on with my life. That was perhaps the one thought that I could form – the need to keep going. I found it impossible to really get a grip on the fact that I had somehow been transported into the far future, and so I did the only thing I actually could do and mentally set the fact aside. It would take weeks to digest that. Years. Years! For the time being I simply wanted some details, some way to deal with the necessities of daily life as I had been experiencing it. I knew that I was alive. I woke up, I ate, I worked, I slept. That much at least I thought I could handle.

“Well,” I said slowly, “I guess first of all I want to know where I am.” I had long wanted to know where I was because I had wanted – possibly – to get back to Tokyo, even as I mentally toyed with not getting back. Probably because of that see-sawing I had been engaged in that was the first question that came to mind.

Tomor held a finger up in the air and quickly trotted over
to the dining room table to retrieve his mini-tablet. “Just wait a moment,” he remarked as he made his way back to the living room, typing as he walked. He sat down again and pulled a holographic map of Japan out of the device the way he had before, flipping the image so that it hovered between us and then zooming in on the greater Tokyo area. The projection looked exactly like I would have seen it on any map from my, well, from my own time – my own time! –, right down to the train lines and highways. He typed a bit more and then extracted another map, displaying it next to the first. It too was a map of Japan, but the shorelines looked a bit different, smudged almost, and as he centered in on the Kanto region of which Tokyo formed the singular massive heart, I saw that on the unfamiliar map the same area consisted of a number of much smaller cities, connected to each other via rail lines but with large chunks of empty space between them. It was almost as if the endlessly diffuse megalopolis had been broken up into pieces. Had it been any other situation than the one I was in where I had just been told that I washed up three hundred years ahead of the yesterday I knew, the yesterday wherein I had merely tried, as usual, as always, to take the train home from work, I would have thought that the new map was of a pre-urban sprawl past. Instead I suspected that it was of the present. The future-present. I was right.
“As you can see, this is Tokyo from your time,” Tomor said, pointing to the first map and circling the city with his finger. “You’re still in what was Tokyo, only now it isn’t Tokyo, and of course it isn’t even one city.” He then highlighted a portion of what I knew as the western half of the big loop that the Yamanote train line made around all the major commerce, finance, shopping, and entertainment sections of the city. “This is about where we are, if I compare this to your time’s map…”

“It’s the Shinjuku and Iidabashi areas, roughly,” I said, cutting him off. That was my turf and I wasn’t going to have some future man telling me where I had lived. That much I knew. Whatever else might be the case I knew what that spot on that map meant. I took ownership of that. I was not going to be held by the hand. Not on that. Only on everything else I was. I would have to be. I was the child Milee said they had been treating me like. It sunk in. Hand holding – I was going to have exactly that. I could only have exactly that, the circumstances being what they were. I suddenly felt terribly impotent, emasculated.

“Yes, you’re right. It looks that way, but notice how the bay comes up here all the way past…,” Tomor squinted as
he stared at the map from my time. I was happy for him that he had found a way to distract himself with the details of my predicament, but all I could feel was that I, me, one person, one individual – I wasn’t an experiment. I wasn’t some curiosity to be turned over and examined. Explained. I let out a long and exasperated sigh; frustration, irritation, desperation, all tinged with a mild terror. I no longer cared about the map. My emotions were everywhere and nowhere.

“It looks like Minato, Chuo, and Koto Wards are underwater, and parts of Shinagawa and Ota are missing too,” I said forcefully, as much to put a stop to Tomor’s explanation as anything. I then immediately shuddered as my own words hit me. Minato Ward was underwater? My old stomping grounds of Roppongi and Azabu-juban buried beneath the waves? Was Tokyo Tower poking up from the ocean’s surface somewhere out there like a bizarre, unmoving buoy, a rusted pinnacle tribute to a dead era? The airport, the harbors, those dozens of artificial islands and hectares of reclaimed land stacked high with condos, malls, oceanfront walkways and rec areas, factories too, gas storage tanks, shipping facilities…all gone. My personal circumstances paled by a very large degree. Those horrible predictions had been right. I sensed that a time of tremendous and heavy
suffering laid between this man’s Tokyo and mine.

“The big one finally hit,” I said quietly.

“What do you mean?” Milee asked.

“An earthquake?” Tomor ventured. “Since your time there were two of those, both fairly big though one more so than the other, but what really caused all this change,” he indicated the two maps hovering between us, mostly reading my mind and filling in what he must have thought I wanted to know, “were the sea levels rising, food shortages, an increase in the frequency and severity of storms and all the damage they brought, new and worsening forms of diseases, and above all a shortage of water.”

Water? That took me off-guard; water had never been a problem for the Japan I knew. My dilemma receded a step further into the background. I was after all sitting there comfortably and hearing about – not experiencing – the country’s wracked past. I found myself curious, stumped.

“All of those things hit here?” I asked.

“Not directly, no. This part of the world has always had
plenty of good fresh water,” Tomor confirmed, “and the majority of the disease-related issues were kept more or less in check most of the time, but even the issues that didn’t directly hit these islands did do so indirectly. These were worldwide problems, you see, and they produced worldwide responses. Your generation catastrophically failed at so many different and very basic aspects of human society and organization that the few generations immediately after yours endured a time of increasing disasters.”

I quietly let that settle.

“We all study about your time in school,” Milee added in an excited tone, looking like she was about to burst out of her seat. “How could you have been so stupid? So blind? We’re doing fine now, and maybe we should thank you for wrecking the planet so badly that everyone saw the need to start over, basically from zero, but really! I know it’s said that hindsight is more powerful than foresight yet surely you must have known. You must have.”

She appeared as if she was waiting for me to respond, to defend my birth era or society or something of the sort. Her apparent assumption that I should or could do so was baffling. I felt like a finger had been pointed in my face.
and was still hanging there accusingly. Me. Frank Tollman. All I had ever done was to live normally like everyone else. I had worked and paid my bills and tried to get through each day to see another weekend. How could I have done differently? I was in charge of nothing.

“What happened?” I asked, turning my attention back to Tomor and deciding that Milee’s semi-outburst either required no response or required one of a type I was incapable of giving. My beers were getting warm on the coffee table in front of me – I had barely started on the first – but that concern was far from my mind. A great many concerns that would have seemed paramount an hour ago were far from my mind. Even my own situation adrift in the currents of time had been thrust out of the forefront as I struggled to take in the enormity of the global change that was being described. I knew that somewhere within that narrative my awaited answer as to why the place worked the way it did would be found too.

“Milee, please,” Tomor remarked in a rare show of admonishment. Turning back to me he continued, “Two main historical forces came to a climax more or less at the same time.” The curiosity and intellectual inquisitiveness that had marked his explanation of how the calendar years were counted were now gone, replaced by an earnestness
to communicate as forthrightly as possible, to ensure that I understood. His expression was studious, his words clearly carefully chosen, telling me that this, now, this was important and it must be treated that way.

“The forces in question,” Tomor began, “were economic and environmental. The first one caused all the problems, but the second one pushed everything over the top.” He paused, seemed to consider something, reached out for their tablet-like machine, then stopped himself and took a deep breath. “You see, it was a matter of the blindfolds being removed. I don’t know if you’re in a position to really grasp this, but the people of your time had stopped being people, in the full sense anyway. You were tools. You were cannon fodder.” He hesitated once more, looked down at his lap, took a long drink of beer, glanced over at Milee, who was indicating her encouragement, and then asked, “You do know Plato’s Republic, right?”

“I’ve heard of it, yes” I said. I had never read the book but was vaguely aware of its purpose, message, and argumentative structure. Mentally I had it alongside Thomas Hobbes’ Leviathan but I wasn’t sure if it should be placed in opposition to Hobbes’ work or in support of it. I hadn’t actually read Hobbes’ book either though so it was probably a moot point.
“In it Plato refers to the rulers of a place as being like shepherds, and if I understand what we learned about your times correctly that analogy would have struck you as positive and benign. You seem to have had the notion of a ‘good shepherd’ deeply ingrained into your thought, but that misses the point entirely. You have to think about how Plato’s original audience would have understood the concept. Yes, a shepherd cared for his or her sheep and was concerned when one went missing or got hurt or whatnot, but a shepherd’s whole motive was to profit from the sheep, not raise them up and set them free into the wild. The shepherd sheared the sheep and sold their naturally protective fur for money. The shepherd slaughtered the sheep and then sold their meat for money too, gaining particularly from the killing of the very young. The shepherd drained the blood and burned the internal organs of the sheep as a sacrifice to his or her god. The shepherd was always a predator.”

That had never occurred to me. It was the second piece of information I found myself unable to process since we had started our talk. I felt a little like I was drowning. “Are you referring to the government?” I asked lamely.

“Somewhat, I guess, in a certain way,” Tomor answered,
half demurring.

“Yes and no,” Milee cut in. “The governments of your time were often half-sheep themselves, or maybe a better analogy would be the dog that accompanies the shepherd and helps out.”

“The sheepdog? What are you getting at?” I asked. It was intensely captivating.

“Most of your era’s politicians were little more than actors, playthings for the larger economic system that was in place,” Tomor replied. “A great many of them were probably very deluded individuals, thinking they were doing something real. They might even have thought they were doing something good. But the real truth of the matter was that they functioned as illusions, mere clouds of gas passing in front of mirrors. When you looked at them the reflection of yourself was obscured, and so you thought you were seeing something else, but in fact you saw the same blind fool as you.”

The explanation that I had expected was getting increasingly cryptic and farther and farther away from being an actual explanation. I suddenly felt very annoyed. “What are you talking about? Just tell me who did what
and what happened. Please.” Had I not been as mentally displaced and emotionally stretched as I was from learning about my unintended time travel I might have yelled that. I wanted answers, I wanted clarity, I wanted everything tied up nicely with a bow. What I did not want were vague allusions and half-speak.

“It was those with money, of course,” Milee said. “I mean real money, not your time’s standard fake-rich person who thought they’d made a lot. The truly rich.”

“Those who did not enter the scene but instead controlled it,” Tomor said. “The wealthy children of wealthy parents whose money went all the way back. The people with the right connections who could buy and sell anyone they chose, who stood above the law because they paid for the people who made the laws. They were the ones who used all of you for their further enrichment and power, while all the time giving away enough small tidbits to make you think your lives were getting better.”

“Such as?” I asked. Had the situation been different I probably would have dismissed their comments as conspiracy theories, but the two were speaking from actual history and so I tried to shape my mind in the direction they were indicating. It did not bend easily.
“Oh, you know, healthcare, infrastructure, education, public events, homes, food, most especially entertainment,” Milee said, raising a finger on her right hand as she reeled her list off. “I find it astonishing that their game worked so well for so long. I suppose that you all thought there were no options since everything ran on money and something was always better than nothing.” I looked at her in some wonderment; how much more battering could the worldview that I’d always held take?

“Of course they benefitted from those things too,” Tomor added. “They had much better versions of each for themselves, but they gained additionally from their sheep being healthier, able to commute easier, well-fed and well-brainwashed into thinking the care they were receiving was genuine. Just like the shepherd’s sheep.”

“What exactly are you saying? Just give it to me!” By that point I was yelling. They were pulling a thick and comfortable rug out from under me and I felt myself falling, tumbling down with no safety net. I had enough to think about as it was; I certainly didn’t need any more.

Tomor leaned forward and fixed me with a hard stare. “To use the term in its loose sense, international commerce
and finance – the banking heads, the multinational corporations, the trading company owners, the quiet and very select group of hereditary powers – them above all, they were the ones pulling the strings. They were the puppet masters. They had the whole world in their few hands, including all the governments. And they raped the planet repeatedly and egregiously until it finally broke.”

“The environmental side, you mean?” Pieces were starting to fit together. My mind had stumbled badly but on the ground I found a new perspective.

“Yes,” Tomor replied. “And all the things you heard about on the television news and read about on your many current affairs websites told you nothing about them. They worked very hard and very secretly to maintain themselves and their positions. There were plenty of things that happened that they didn’t like and couldn’t control – they weren’t gods and weren’t omnipotent – but they did know that no matter how bad things got for everyone else they would be insulated because of their great wealth. And so they continued to plunder and planned how to plunder better, never mind the environmental consequences. As long as they could convince enough people to just keep on shopping the great wheels would continue to turn for them. And that
they did.”

“Until when?” I found myself on the edge of my seat.

“Until it became so obvious that the choice they gave you was a false one and that you all – we all, those were generational problems – were well and truly ruined,” Tomor said sadly. “Somehow the people of your era thought that environmental protection was an optional decision, that it was possible to either put the environment first, or economic development first, or freedom of lifestyle first, or what have you. That was never the case. Those other issues depended on the environment for their existence. The environment was and always has been foundational. Any other concerns we human beings have depend absolutely on the environment we inhabit, and if it is wrecked then all else falls apart. All else finally did fall apart.”

“And then how did people react?” The puzzle had been completed, I thought, and I felt like I more or less understood the background that had just been revealed; the big picture at least. There were plenty of hints about its truth even back in – back in! time travel; it was still unthinkable – twenty-eighteen when I paused to reflect on my everyday life from the perspective that Tomor was
describing, but I still couldn’t see how that had led to the here and the now I had gotten somewhat used to since turning up in that rice paddy.

“For the most part people did the only thing they really could, which was to move around,” Tomor said in response to my question. “It started with the world’s poor trying to get into the rich countries, and then went from there to the world’s comparatively rich trying to get someplace where they in turn thought that things were a little bit better. Everyone started going everywhere.”

“But surely there was resistance to that, immigration controls at least.”

“Oh of course,” Tomor answered. “Especially in the beginning. I’m not entirely sure, but the truly powerful may even have been trying to start a great all-out war between the old Middle Eastern countries and the old Western countries. They would really have profited from that and may even have welcomed the side effect of a great slaughtering of many millions; that would have reduced the environmental burden somewhat by reducing the world’s population. It’s very difficult to know, or even guess, how such people thought; the callous calculations of the shepherd, you see. The provocative acts of terror in
your time and the official interpretations and responses to them have always struck me as being very suspicious.”

Tomor let that hang for a moment and then continued, “At any rate, what ended up happening was that at first the feeling was successfully generated in the rich countries that they had to keep the poor out, and the majority of people who happened to have been born in those rich countries went along with that for some time. Gradually though the sheer numbers of the moving poor overwhelmed the safeguards the rich countries had put in place, and during that process the daily lives of those in the rich countries kept getting worse. They had less money than before, the weather was getting more severe, food was getting more expensive even as fuel got cheaper and cheaper, work was to be had but it paid little and was unstable. And the poor kept coming. The rich countries’ politicians repeatedly said the poor were to blame for everything, but having heard that so many times the average person in every one of those rich countries began to see that they were being used just as much as those from the poor countries were. This happened in many places simultaneously, and once it started the momentum was impossible to stop.” He paused to take a sip of beer, a wistful – but engaged, intent – look in his eye. I was absolutely riveted.
“Those native to the rich countries then realized clearly that voting politicians in or out did nothing and could do nothing and so they too moved, initially to what wilderness they could find to make a stab at self-reliance. In some places that worked and in some it didn’t. People kept moving, borders became meaningless, support systems were taxed beyond bearing, and order generally broke down everywhere. The police first, and then the armies, stopped being able to do anything because they too had stopped wanting to do anything to prop up their old masters. They had been used more than anybody. Billions of people shifted to, searched for, sought out, and in one way or another found, new homes in new places supported by new lifestyles. Races blended, ethnicities disappeared, new ways of being were invented. People thought differently, freely mixing and matching ideas and methodologies that would have been anathema to the old orthodoxies that had long since ceased to matter. New voices arose, new prophets were heard, new organizations were created. All of Earth convulsed change for at least a full century, and then things once more started to settle down, people made new cities and repaired the links that had served the old ones. Stability sprang up here, there, then everywhere. We figured out how to live in a way that could be continued, but it is still very difficult. You’ve
been to the fields; you know firsthand that farming isn’t easy by any means. We still suffer from much crop failure and can’t really know what to expect from one harvest to the next. But at least now we have mechanisms in place so that we can assist one another.”

Tomor was a farmer and not a professional historian and so I assumed that the general outline he gave me had been simplified a great deal, but it still shocked me. It made sense, and I could see how one thing would have led to the next, but it was almost inconceivable that the blissful one-new-technology-for-everything future we had always assumed to be just around the corner could have degenerated in the way described. It explained a lot, but it was hard to believe. Very hard. In some ways I thought it was too neat, too packaged. And if farming was as difficult at present as he indicated that it was then why on earth were they doing it by hand? I had to ask.

“But I don’t understand,” I sputtered. “You have such an amazing city, why do you farm the way you do? Especially if yields are as unpredictable as you say? Couldn’t you at least make some machines or something?”

“We have a different relationship with technology and
devices generally than you did,” Milee answered, once more impressively getting to the core of the issue. Tomor for his part seemed to have sunk into a thoughtful silence.

“From what I’ve heard,” Milee continued, “your time was dominated by the machines you made, and most people adjusted their lives in order to match the new technologies that were introduced. We have more or less reversed that; now we use and create machines to augment the kind of lives we’d like to lead rather than let them dictate our lifestyles to us. I really can’t conceive how in your time people never took control of themselves in that way.”

My mind unexpectedly went back to my old smartphone – for those past few weeks it had been long forgotten – and the hours I had spent staring down into it, aimlessly surfing the net or playing all of those free downloaded games. “Surely though farming machines would only help you?” I prodded, not letting go.

“They might,” Milee admitted, “but tell me, how do you feel at the end of the day after having had your hands in the dirt, doing all of that shoveling, scraping, plucking, and planting? It’s nice, isn’t it?” She had a point. It was nice. I had even begun to enjoy the walks to and fro; they
seemed to somehow set the right rhythm for the day.

“We do have some trouble with our crops, that’s true, but we have enough to get by and can rely on having at least that minimum season in and season out,” she added. “I guess that from your perspective you might miss some of the varieties of food that you used to eat, but we were born after most of that had disappeared. It went out with the old economic system. Now we eat foods that change with the time of year and are grown locally.”

“But what about those people who want help from a machine? Or a vehicle of some kind to get to their fields or to get around?” I asked. As much as I enjoyed living the way Milee and Tomor did there must have been people who didn’t. What choices did they have to live differently?

“They can’t have them, such things are not allowed,” Tomor said, perking up again. “Well, bicycles are allowed but they’ve recently gone out of fashion. I had one as a kid, everyone did, but gradually I started to see fewer of them. You might have passed by one or two here or there on your walks around the city but maybe you didn’t take note them; they can still be found though they are less common. I suppose that most people prefer walking.”
“Are vehicles prohibited for environmental reasons?” I couldn’t believe that no one had managed to make a truly clean engine in the past three hundred years.

“No, personal or passenger vehicles could be made using similar technology to that which runs our trams, and they would be perfectly non-polluting,” Tomor replied. “Our city, and most cities, simply decided that they created more problems than they were worth. People can always take the tram or intercity train services to get from place to place if they need to. We think it’s better this way.”

“But what about freedom of choice?” I asked.

“Your time loved that word ‘freedom’, didn’t it?” Milee said sarcastically.

“Choice is, was, and always has been limited,” Tomor said. “You can’t have a society where people can do whatever they want any time they want. Ours simply took the choice of transportation away. What choices did the societies of your time remove? Were you even aware that those choices had been removed?”

It was an unnerving question. Our conversation was
getting increasingly deep and I started to again feel out of my league. It may have been fatigue, or the shock of what I had been hearing, but it seemed as if these two farmers, whom I had always reflexively presumed to be simple people, were getting the best of me. Easily. Not for the first time I realized that I had underestimated my hosts; and maybe a great many other things about the place I found myself in. I took a long drink of beer and started eyeing my second bottle.

“Okay, well, what about the water?” I said, changing the topic to a more manageable one. “If you have to be careful about water use then why isn’t it automatically measured? You must have the technology for that. I mean, I see robots zipping around every time I go out the door.”

Milee reached over and picked up their mini-tablet with a look of great annoyance. “Why do you think we have to type on this thing like someone from your era? Everyone else I know either speaks at theirs or simply thinks at theirs, depending on preference. Tomor here believes in taking control and doing everything manually. Of course we could set our apartment to measure and adjust water use, electricity use, any number of utilities. He just doesn’t want to.” She dropped the device on the table with a loud thud that very clearly emphasized how she
felt about that decision.

“The dumbest idea humankind ever had was trying to make machines like themselves,” Tomor said unapologetically. “I will never lower myself to talking to one if I can help it. They serve me, I don’t want to be their friend and I don’t want to make them an extension of who I am. The less I depend on them the better.” That was a statement of independence, and, it suddenly hit me, one of freedom too. Tomor’s gentleness had disguised the massive pair of balls he had. I was impressed. I was a little envious.

“How do you use your machines then?” I asked. “By and large, that is, as in you people here now, and not just the two of you.” The idea of adjusting machine usage, and even production and manufacture, to fit a desired lifestyle was an entirely new one to me. Like everyone else I had always simply picked up whatever started being sold and wrapped my life around it.

“Well, as you’ve noticed, our city’s robots are employed for various errands: deliveries, retrievals, infrastructure maintenance, security, things like that,” Milee explained. “Also all of our routine manufacturing is done by robots so that people are freed to do jobs more befitting of our
adaptable and social nature.”

“Robots make everything here?” I asked. That was remarkable. And it was, I thought, not unlike the future as we had imagined it back in twenty-eighteen. That “back” again; it was somehow sinking in that I was living in the future. The future-present.

“For the most part. Certain crafts and creative work are still done by people. But if we happen to need something ordinary we just place an order via our flat board and it is produced and delivered. That’s how your new clothes and all of your books and other things got here,” Milee said.

Of course. That clarified a lot for me. “But don’t people often abuse such a system?” I asked. I could think of any number of acquaintances that never would have stopped ordering from such a set-up.

“When desires aren’t constantly being created in you through advertisements and absurd social pressures you find that what you really need is not all that much,” Tomor answered. He must have read up on my time quite well. “Of course some people order things more often than others, especially those who try out new hobbies all the time.” Tomor made a sidelong glance at Milee as he
said that; she was not amused. “But the manufacturing capacity we have far exceeds the demands placed on it.”

“What about food?”

“That is run separately. Everyone gets a portion of rice and an assortment of seasonal vegetables depending on the number and age of the people living in the apartment, and then anything else we may want to eat we can trade for in one of the marketplaces,” Milee said. “Sometimes I’ll use an entire afternoon going from market to market to see what’s on offer and pick up a few different things. It’s a nice way to spend a day off.”

“Does everyone live in apartments?” I realized that I was asking question after question and bouncing around between topics, but I couldn’t help myself. One thought led to another, one answer to another query. And then in thinking about housing for a moment it struck me again that I had yet to see what I could identify as a private home.

“Yes, and they are all the same size,” Tomor replied. “Mostly the same design as well. Your apartment, when you get one, will almost certainly look like this.” He indicated their living space as he spoke. That would be
nice, I thought, and I’d have plenty of room for myself.

“Wait a minute,” I blurted out, “are all apartments the same size? What about big families?”

“A lack of space is a good incentive not to have too many children,” Tomor answered, chuckling a little. “We have learned how to manage our populations better, although different cities do take different approaches. Here we use apartment size; but mostly the monastery is what keeps the city from getting bigger than could be handled.” That was the first I’d heard of a monastery, and I had certainly not come across it, or at least anything that could be recognized as such, on my random wanderings.

“Tell me some more about that, I’m curious.” I said. The alcohol was beginning to have its nicely relaxing effect and my mind had successfully – if only momentarily – turned from its self-related worry.

“The monastery?” Tomor asked. “You might like it, actually; I heard there are still some openings this year. It’s the home to those who don’t want to do any of the regular jobs here in the city or out in the fields. Artists, actors, researchers, scientists, engineers; you know, contemplative and creative types. Each year a certain
number of slots must be filled; we keep ours at twenty percent of the overall population. Of course everyone in the monastery can’t have children so that keeps the population down automatically just by itself.”

“Are they celibate?” The thought horrified me; it nearly sobered me. I took another long drink to combat it.

“Oh no, they just can’t have children,” Milee said. “I’m always amazed that some people would make that choice but I’m glad for the city’s sake that they do.” Sweet relief. Sex had always been a central part of my being, and if the monastery had it then there were options that I might find more fulfilling and that didn’t seem to demand any outrageous sacrifices. Holing up in the monastery could well prove to be very amenable, and since it seemed that food and lodging were guaranteed it might be an ideal place to take a break for a while and give myself the time and distance to figure things out.

“How do people in the monastery pay for their stay?” I asked.

“That’s right, of course you’d wonder about that,” Tomor said. “I’m sorry I forgot to tell you this earlier, but we got rid of money. No one pays for anything anymore. People
here in the city are provided with an apartment and people there in the monastery are provided with a room. Our economy is based on needs and not wants, and so we’ve done away with things like monthly rentals. Basic necessities are covered for everyone, and since we all recognize the different ways we contribute to the city as a whole there aren’t a lot of hard feelings going around. It’s true that some people don’t like what they end up with after the Day of Choosing, but most people get used to it.”

That money was no longer in use was the Ockham’s Razor solution to my ongoing question of why I never saw Milee and Tomor pay for anything, but its obviousness was masked for me by the fact that I had no concept of a world without some kind of currency. It was unimaginable, undreamable, a fairy tale. It seemed to be the antithesis of all practicalities, of common sense itself. Yet they had done it and the world had not stopped, it had in fact evidently improved. Much more food for thought, I decided – but later; Tomor’s comment about the Day of Choosing brought my immediate and personal concerns back to mind. “The Day of Choosing, that’s right. The councilors said I would stay with you until then. What is it?”
“Shortly after the second harvest and during the downtime before the next season’s first planting, the Day of Choosing ceremony is held,” Tomor replied. He shifted forwards a little and took another sip of beer, which I interpreted to be signals that he was about to launch into another extended explanation.

“At that ceremony the young who have finished their education choose the careers they will have for the rest of their lives. Now, what they are able to choose from is based on the current needs of the city, so the options vary a little from year to year. We might need one hundred restaurant chefs this year but only fifty the next, for example. Once the required jobs have been filled no one else can take them, so the best times to choose, if a person wants to choose, are towards the beginning of the ceremony. That all comes down to luck though, because the order the young people get to choose in is determined by a random lottery. We always need plenty of farmers so if a person passes when it’s their turn to choose they become a farmer, or if a person’s turn comes too late in the ceremony and there aren’t any choices left then they become a farmer too. Me, I wanted to be a farmer. My father and mother were farmers and I saw the lives they led and how connected with the natural cycle they were; that was very appealing to me growing up. Anyway, those
who don’t like what they end up with have the back-up plan of joining the monastery. Also some people from the start want to join the monastery.”

“But that’s for life as well,” Milee added, “and that means they can never have children. I really thought about it for myself but in the end I just couldn’t commit to that, it would mean giving up too much.”

My thoughts went back to the bedroom where I was currently staying as she said that, to the beginnings of preparing for a child that it displayed. To relinquish that option, if you were at all interested in having children, would be terribly difficult for anyone. For myself I had no such intent and had always considered fatherhood to be avoided at all costs, but I could see her point of view, or anyway I imagined that I could.

“Yes,” Tomor said, “it’s a big choice. People there undergo an intense period of further education and training in the specialist field they decide to pursue, but they can’t choose just anything so joining is a bit of a risk in that respect. Although I suppose that it’s not really any more risky than the Day of Choosing itself. After their training they then contribute to whatever broad area they end up with in the specific way they chose to, living
secluded from the rest of us up there and pouring themselves into it, day in and day out. If enough people don’t volunteer for the monastery by the end of the year though then some of that year’s graduating class are forced in, taken from the jobs that are considered least necessary based on current needs. That’s done by lottery too, but it only rarely happens as we usually have enough people who want to join to get to the mandatory twenty percent mark.”

“What do you mean they can’t choose just anything?” I asked; the whole scheme sounded draconian and I struggled to withhold judgment till I had the details.

“They get tested for innate abilities and then sorted,” Tomor answered. “If a person is naturally gifted in some area that is where they will work; they can choose a subfield within that area, but not something entirely different. For instance, Milee here is good at art and music and so she could choose a path along those lines, but not one from the hard sciences, say.”

“Of course what they produce or discover is then shared with the city proper,” Milee added. “We get new machines or techniques from the monastery, but also books, theater, public art, concerts, you name it.”
They were both surprisingly upbeat about the process that determined their lives, yet I couldn’t help but to find it appalling. There seemed to be very little real choice in the matter, and once whatever position you had was determined that appeared to be the end of it. “Let me get this straight,” I said. “After you have a job from the Day of Choosing, that’s set and you can never change no matter what?”

“Yes, you’ve got it,” Tomor said. “Unless there happens to be an empty slot for the monastery and you want to take it.”

“But then from there you can’t move back into the city?”

“Right, it’s for life like anything else,” he confirmed. The monastery suddenly looked like a far less appealing option. It might be better to take my chances at the upcoming ceremony. “And you’re lucky that this year there are still some open spaces,” Tomor added. “In a way you have a lot more choice than many would in your situation.”

“There is one exception,” Milee cut in. I listened intently. “Remember that the councilors perform a rotating job,“
she began. “One gets selected to represent their home district each year and then serves for the duration of the following year. Those people spend a whole year doing something other than their regular jobs, but I’ve heard that it’s a lot of micromanaging and bureaucratic work. I don’t think I’d like to do it, even though the position does have a lot of prestige.”

A single year of something else? That was it? That was the big exception? “How are they chosen?” I asked, more out of curiosity than anything. I was sure that I would absolutely never be a councilor.

“We vote for someone at our district meeting shortly after the Day of Choosing finishes, and then the person with the most votes gets the position,” Tomor said.

“What if they don’t want to do it?” I asked.

“It isn’t a choice, it’s a duty,” Tomor replied. “If you happen to get the most votes then that’s what you do for the next year.”

I shuddered. So many aspects – fundamental aspects – of people’s lives were determined from the outside. I thought back to the councilors sitting there in their rows
of chairs, stiff-looking robes and silly wigs, awkwardly trying to have a discussion. They were just regular people alternating through a temporary post, not trained judges; how could they make the weighty decisions necessary? And what if they couldn’t decide on something?

“What exactly are they in charge of?” I wondered out loud.

“Oh, little things mostly,” Tomor said. “Many of the details are determined by the current overall situation and so there isn’t much they need to really work out. Of course, if something comes up then they need to make a decision; you must have presented a terrible problem for them. In the end though they only need a simple majority to carry any one choice forward, and they can usually manage that.”

“What if their vote ends in a tie?” I asked, recalling that there was an even number of them.

“Then the head of the monastery makes the deciding vote,” Tomor said.

I fell silent for a while; I felt like I needed to gather my thoughts. Via some miraculous fluke or malicious
horseplay of the universe I had been transported bodily three hundred years into the future. The world was completely changed, all of the old paradigms that I took for granted and even – had I asked myself – would have considered universal and permanent features of human society, no longer applied. The lifestyle and conditions that had just been explained to me were like some bizarre combination of feudal serfdom with utopian technologies. No one had to pay for anything and was provided with all that they could possibly need, or even want apparently, yet the default occupation was farmer, and if you weren’t one of them you were stuck in what amounted to the service sector for your entire working life. There was no way to do anything different than that to which you had been assigned. You couldn’t even get some machine to do it for you, or to merely help you to do your job.

As far as I knew they had no TVs, no movies, no smartphones, no computers – at least not in the fun sense; the tablet gizmo seemed to be all work and informational research –, no real variety to their clothing, not much in the way of varieties of food, and everyone got around by walking everywhere. Was I in heaven or hell?

What was more, I was already so firmly caught up in this twisted wonderland that I had been dumped in that the
very best I could hope for was to get a decent position at the Day of Choosing ceremony in order to have a crack at picking from a short list of careers that weren’t farmer. My thoughts returned to that councilor who said my apartment would be in her district. Where was it? District Thirteen; South, as I recalled. My fresh start. I very much doubted that if the location was not to my liking I could change anything, and since all the apartments were the same it would only be the location that would make it better or worse. Sickening uniformity. To think I had judged my company lodgings to be bad.

I tried to look on the positive side. The lifestyle was healthy, it was for the most part nice to be outdoors – even as hot as it was –, the apartments were a good size, the beer was tasty. I glanced over at Milee and it hit me why I would stay and attempt neither a run nor the monastery: the women. Of course, it always came down to the women. That helped me weigh my choices. In the monastery no one was allowed to have children but could, apparently, have plenty of sex. That sounded wonderful. On the other hand, eighty percent of the population lived in the city; more people always equaled more, and more types of, wonderfully varied ports of call. How many people did Tomor say the city had? One hundred thousand? That put eighty thousand in town, and if about
half were women then that was thirty thousand more pipes to plumb than were sitting up in the monastery wherever it was. Simple math. Whatever job I ended up with I could half-ass it and still eat and live just as well as anyone else; that would leave all my energies for chasing women. Milee noticed me looking at her and smiled a little – uneasily. I probably had my predator’s face on. Oops.

“You’ve mentioned your city a lot,” I said, returning my attention to Tomor to hide my slight embarrassment at having been caught mid-stalk. “What about your country? How does Japan run itself now?”

“It doesn’t,” Tomor said simply. He was well into his second beer and leaning back comfortably. “The countries from your time more or less disappeared when their borders did. Cities have become the main form of governance and organization again; you might call them city-states if you happen to prefer the old way of thinking about such structures. Ours, Sheenda, is a mid-sized one as we and those around us have labored to keep what you knew as Tokyo from re-emerging. There were just too many issues involved with a city of that complexity.”

“No countries? No national governments? Who runs all
the infrastructure, handles education, transportation, laws, the police, the military, everything?” I asked. The disappearance of every country from the map was nearly as unbelievable to me as was the fact of my unintended time travel.

“Cities do,” Tomor answered. “All of those concerns have just been localized. Each city is responsible for itself and for the connections and relationships it has with all of its neighboring cities. Systems like the intercity train lines are jointly maintained by the places they link, but for the most part a city solely looks after itself. And as far as security goes, the robots can handle that, although since the world shifted over to the current economic system we seem to have a lot less conflict.”

“Is money gone from everywhere then? All over the globe?” My mind was bouncing from surprise to surprise. No countries, no wealth, all the details of life locally run and locally concerned. And that seemingly with great concern, totalitarian concern. Control. Full control yet without wages, without scaled salaries, without recompense or motivators. I admit that I was hung up on it. The disappearance of any form of currency was intriguing; somehow I had assumed, perhaps due to its general incomprehensibility, that when Tomor said earlier
that they didn’t use money he was only referring to them. The results of a global absence were hard for me to imagine. I could picture money just ceasing to be important, and after all I had grown accustomed to not using or having it myself, but beyond what that meant for an individual lifestyle I had trouble picturing the broader social consequences.

“No, some few cities have continued to use forms of payment,” Tomor said. “But the endless profit chasing for the benefit of a tiny few has disappeared, as I told you earlier. Milee and I have traveled to places that still use money, and let me tell you it’s a real pain. Getting there is no problem as the intercity trains are run like our trams, but once you arrive you have to wait in line to get the money to use during your visit. Instead of trading goods directly the way we do they use cash for that, and then the coins and bills themselves can later be exchanged for other things at certain specialty shops. I don’t see the point of it; it just seems to add a layer of inconvenience. The things people need they can order the way we do, so why hassle with any currency at all? I suppose though that it is easier to carry money around than something you hope to trade, so maybe that’s why they do it. I don’t know; I’ve found it annoying the few times we’ve done it.”
More interesting yet, and the subject had gotten more curious too. That practice in particular sounded like more of a novelty for tourists than anything else. It was intriguing, but strange. I realized that I certainly hadn’t missed money in the time I’d been here and if its lack, along with any real failure of needs or wants to be met, led to a default lowering of conflict then it seemed like a purely positive development. That it would lead there did make a sort of sense when I thought about it, yet on the other hand the ability to order anything you wanted whenever you wanted was definitely a very large contributing factor to that. My mind kept turning, and the questions kept coming. Cities all running themselves, and with no national oversight…I wondered.

“Does your city boss just decide everything?” As I asked that it occurred to me that I didn’t know the word for “mayor” in Language. I didn’t even know if it had one.

“City boss?” Tomor repeated. He looked confused.

“Um, the person in charge of city government,” I offered.

“Oh, as I told you, we vote on governance matters at the two Houses of Decisions,” Tomor said. “Our city is too
big to do everything together so problems or issues are rotated between the North side’s House of Decisions and our Southern one. This year they will vote on road repairs and we will vote on new irrigation for the fields, like that. Such things are divided up by category to make the organizing easier. Mostly it’s all pretty automatic, but the meetings are important because everyone gets together and each district can have its leader for that year voice the concerns of its residents. When it comes time to vote we use an automatic system – one button per chair in the Great Hall – and only need a majority to decide anything. Sometimes it takes days to get through the whole agenda, and it can be quite boring at times, but I take it seriously. This is my city, after all. I was born here and I’ll die here.”

Local pride: that was one aspect of life that didn’t seem to have changed. The automatic loyalty generated by the vagaries of having been born somewhere. Maybe it was the way Tomor had said that, or maybe it was the beer again, but I fell into a wistful mood and my inquisitiveness about my new world came to a sudden halt. I turned within.

I had never understood patriotism, but the common sensibilities and outlooks generated by the same
surroundings, culture, climate, and geography that your birthplace gives had always made sense to me. It struck a chord. Even having considered myself to have outgrown where I was from in the way I had while first working and living abroad, those same strings got played when I landed back at the local airport. I learned over the years that you can’t really outgrow a place; you just change differently than the people who are still there. Your new environment affects you in certain ways and you become something of a stranger to your own people – as it were –, but that core of having spent your formative years in that place never leaves you. The more you try to shake it off the more of a fake you become. Any one of us can only reinvent ourselves so much; the rest is just putting on masks.

“What happens now?” I asked. I meant that in the broadest sense possible. I was seemingly stuck in the far future and at a loss. Everything was set up to be decided for me. I had nothing to look forward to aside from the prospect of following my dong around as I tried to get laid, going from day to day, routine in and routine out, waking, working, eating, drinking, sleeping – not terrible, I decided, but neither so different, really, from the life I knew. The life I had consistently doubted whether or not it was worth going back to. How much choice had I had
then, laboring within a mirage of the power to choose? How much choice had I ever had? I couldn’t say, yet there was still a nagging feeling of authoritarianism in the air of my new environment. Decided for me – at least I wanted the illusion of freedom.

“You finish out the season with us in the fields, get your permanent job at the Day of Choosing, move into your new apartment, and give back to our city,” Tomor said matter-of-factly. “The same as we all do, only in your case you’re coming into it from the side rather than up through the schools.”

It was simple. It should have been simple. It seemed simple for him. I glanced over at Milee again. She too was leaning back into the couch comfortably, one leg crossed over the other sipping her beer. She had her side pursuits of music and painting and seemed to take meaning from them; she may have desired something other than to be a farmer but she had made her peace with it. She wanted to have a child; she was secure in herself, in her home, and with her man Tomor. She appeared to have it all figured out. Tomor did too. Life was scripted for them but they didn’t look like they were just playing roles. Was it that simple? I needed a third beer.
I sunk further into my seat and mused through the malty haze. It would take time for the reality of my new life to sink in, I knew that, but it was comfortably structured and I had nothing that I really needed to worry about. I couldn’t logically accept the fact of my time travel and so I simply avoided dwelling on it. I was alive, and whatever happened at the Day of Choosing I would at least have food and shelter guaranteed; that meant a lot. I would also, presumably, have access to the robot manufacturing facilities and be able to order what I wanted beyond the daily necessities. What would I get? What would I want? The options were probably not limitless. Still, with the random goods that filled Milee and Tomor’s apartment, the choices must have been fairly substantial. All these things. Their place maybe didn’t have the digital devices on offer due to Tomor’s odd notions about how he wished to relate to the machines in his life, but if there was something resembling a streaming service or at least a TV I thought that I would be absolutely sure to get it. Not having the distraction of one had meant that I was able to get a lot more study done than I would have otherwise – I recognized that –, and Milee and Tomor did make good use of their evenings playing the guitar, reading, painting, enjoying board and card games, or even just chatting – I recognized that too –, but given the chance to sit and turn my brain off I would take it. How did people accomplish
that before TVs were invented? I supposed they must have knitted a lot, or smoked pipes and looked out windows.

My old love “Dance-a-panda-monium” floated into mental view. Nothing beat a smartphone for killing time, killing thinking. I doubted that anything like that would be available now, and even if it were it would probably be limited in the way Milee and Tomor’s mini-tablet apparently was. I once spent a good hour trying to find something fun on that damned thing and came up with nothing; and that from both the new – new to me – version of the internet it had and from the device itself. Plenty of people had plenty of things to say and share on plenty of different websites, but almost all of them involved reading. What I was looking for was just poking my finger into the screen and watching some colors and shapes slide around like in all of my favorite games. A motivational scoring system would have been a bonus, but that wasn’t strictly necessary for what I was after. Mindless fun; what could be wrong with that?

All would come to me in time. Independence. I helped myself to another beer from the kitchen and got one for each of my hosts, setting the bottles down silently on the coffee table. We had floated away into our separate
worlds while sitting together in the living room and I wasn’t about to ruin that. I thought of the birds I had seen while walking to and from the fields and at odd times during the working day. Kingfishers, plovers, sandpipers, knots, stints. I was going to have to start keeping a list. I wondered if any of the birdwatcher websites I had checked were available in printed form. They must have been. I could order a field guide. An activity like that seemed to somehow fit the place.

My brain filled with a warm drunken fuzz. It occurred to me that I would need to find out how to keep in touch with others, and how to avoid being kept in touch with. That was another area of life that my smartphone had been so helpful in. Once I got my own dwelling in the city it would no doubt quickly become the type of debauched lair that all my apartments had been. Comfortable and welcoming, off-puttingly, reassuringly so, and then to the bedroom. What’s that you’ve found? Well now, how did that get there? Oh, you’re curious are you? Why not, let’s give it a try. Hours of fun. The rice in the fields was tall and full, it wouldn’t be that much longer till the harvest; things would start to move quickly after that and I’d find myself unsupervised and as free as one could be in such a place. It would be best to consider the next few weeks as training for how to live alone.
Where could I get the food I needed? Would I be able to obtain more if I ran out? Which markets were preferred? What kind of goods could be traded for what? How could I get furniture and what types were available? Who would see to whatever training I required for whatever job I ended up with? The practicalities. Being here and knowing where – and when – “here” was meant that playtime was over. I told myself that it was time to get serious. Serious so that when I did land on my own I would land on my feet. And then start running.
Preemptive Epilogue

It’s been a whole year since I published this book and I’ve learned a lot in that time. Accordingly for this little anniversary edition, I chose to add the below extra material as a way to comment on and clarify some of the events related in my story. I wanted to include this section in the way that I have, right here in the midst of things as they’re still unfolding, because by this point you’re basically there. The great big answer to the question of me has either been solved by you or nearly solved, and so some additional details are very much in order. Or at least I think so, anyway.

First though some preparatory remarks, and a word of thanks. I will admit that my book has not been what I would call a best seller; it has not generated a city-wide wave of discussion nor has it been ordered or downloaded by millions of people. But that doesn’t matter. I don’t rely on it to put bread on the table and so I’m free to experiment and play around, free to just keep writing. Artistic license is a real luxury, a liberating and wondrous feature that is very thankfully now a part of all creative endeavors, and I’ve noticed just how experimental a lot of art has become in this era where no one has to worry about paying the bills and where everyone is able to fully
dedicate themselves to the pursuit of their passions. It really is a gift to be allowed to stretch your wings, and I am very grateful for it.

After I was reassigned to the Collective (which you’ll learn about soon enough) and began planning the stages that the book you’re reading would eventually take, I realized that there was one central mystery to my story that lacked any kind of cohesive solution. A dangling loose end hanging out there like a worm on a hook that the reader couldn’t help but bite and regret. That was of course the meaning of it all, of my time travel. When I wrote my book I had no idea myself and so I could only convey to you what I did know, which was very little. In fact, when I wrote this book I didn’t even know how to go about knowing, how or even if I could figure it out so that the pieces would click together and make sense. But then during the few counseling sessions that I had with Sou (you’ll like her when you meet her), an idea gradually began to take root in my mind and an approach that I was not aware of opened itself up to me. At least, it did so in a potential way, and after months and months of trying now this and now that with it I was finally able to make it work and then, more months later, found out what I wanted to via tiny bits that did, in the end, all fit.
The method began as something that Sou did in order to get me to relax with her given the nature of our non-professional relationship; she thought – rightly – that I needed first some kind of jolt in order to shift my attitude to her from the personal to the patient. To do that she had us begin with a kind of joint meditation time employing a style that I was used to but with an added twist: she first put me under hypnosis. After a couple of practice sessions she then showed me how I could actually hypnotize myself, something that I had never considered possible, and thereby practice it on my own at home or wherever. Using that hypno-meditative procedure I was able to delve very deeply into my subconscious mind and even – amazingly, really – recall what I had discovered after bringing myself out of the hypnotic state. It took a lot of work to get it right but once I did I found the method incredibly enlightening, going far beyond what Sou imagined it capable of doing. She, after all, had just intended it to put me at ease with her in a clinical setting; she probably hadn’t even guessed at the potential the technique had within it. I told her about all that, naturally, but not until I was sure that it wouldn’t end up having negative side effects, and not until I felt that I had really perfected it. What I unearthed (or unminded, as it were), and what I now want to share with you, is the answer to that giant riddle sitting there fatly in the middle
of my book: How in the wide world did I come to wake up in that rice paddy some three hundred years in the future?

I died, that’s how. Of course I died. I had drunkenly stumbled onto the tracks of a Tokyo Metro station and instead of climbing back out I trampled on down the tunnel like the world’s biggest idiot. I was bound to get struck by an on-time train hurtling to its next stop long before anyone could have hauled me up from there. My stupidity shocked even me, and I am probably better acquainted with it than nearly anyone else is, even those who can rightly claim to know me very well. It was a terrible decision that wasn’t even properly a decision; it was just the outcome of the confused and random emotions I was feeling, combined with the heavily fogged-over state my brain was in at the time. And so I got hit by a train and died. It was lucky for me, or rather lucky for those related to me, that I wasn’t Japanese too because when that happened in Japan the kin of the deceased were required to pay for all of the cleanup and repair costs that such an act caused. The railway companies – then, at least – would not be found holding the bills for any of that; the thinking must have been that such a policy would help prevent suicides. I hope that it did.
My death, once I realized the fact of it, was not the most interesting result of my hypno-meditative journeys within, however. Not by a long shot. What was far more fascinating was the fact that although I had died it was the same I that blinked his eyes open in the same place they had shut; only above ground and far in the future. I was familiar with the ideas circulating around reincarnation, of course; everyone was and still is. What I had never heard of was some kind of self-reincarnation, or post-temporal pause resurrection, if you will; and yet that was exactly what had appeared to have happened to me.

I continued my explorations, my subconscious plumbing expeditions, eager to understand more. I was able to scroll forwards in bits and pieces, getting now this from a jump too far beyond in the narrative I was trying to reconstruct, getting now that from earlier on, and then another schism and another piece of the puzzle. I naturally won’t present all of what I learned to you in the way it came to me; I will instead just give you the story (that is, as much of the story as I have) starting from my death and carrying on chronologically, though in doing so I want to stress that chronological means nothing to the dead and that what I experienced postmortem was not experienced in anything like a one, two, three, four fashion. It was rather far more
akin to the floating feeling that you get when a particularly strong sensation of déjà vu comes over you, that odd impression of somehow existing in both the present and the past that such brings, the kind of rootless timelessness that grips your senses if only for a moment in those instances; for the dead that same perception also includes an element of existing in the future as well, and it is a constant feeling, not a fleeting one. When you die that’s how it is all the time, only “time” is essentially meaningless, not even really a concept anymore; there is just the recognition or awareness that that’s how some other beings experience portions of their lives, which they then take to be the whole of their lives. What I mean is that the dead come to immediately comprehend that the living mistake the time-bound sections of their corporeal existence for their entire existence. But now I’ve already gone and raised the issue of corporeality, which is probably one of the points you’re wondering about, and so allow me to move on.

To recap, first I died. Then I became aware of my death. (And keep in mind that I am now relating this as I was able to reconstitute it, my subconscious didn’t just deliver up all of what happened in a neat and orderly fashion; as such there are gaps, and there is some conjecture inserted into the story I’ll relay, but when I get to those places I’ll
always tell you about them.) I wrote “became aware” rather than “saw” or another sense term because of the nature of that awareness. It was more of an unmistakable acceptance, a direct bolt of knowledge, than it was a vision or anything like that. Point in fact there was nothing to “see” in the visual sense of the word at all because my perceiving, such as it was, was entirely covered in darkness. An unrecognized darkness since there was no light in contrast, but you and I would call it darkness from our perspectives now. I can’t say what was left of me after death but it was certainly a sensation of a “me”; I was very cognizant of being the same Frank Tollman that I had been prior to being pummeled by an underground train. That is a remarkable thing and I hope that you dwell on it for a moment. In many reincarnation theories, of course, the soul or spirit of the deceased travels through some period of bliss or torture or the like in order to reward past virtues or expunge past vices, and then the identical soul or spirit pops into a womb and is born as a new human being (or animal or insect, I suppose, if the person were really bad; but even then not all reincarnation schemes allow for trans-species hopping), remembering nothing but retaining imprints from its past experiences and starting afresh on the karmic journey that is life. That’s how people in my time used to think about it anyway, and the soul or spirit that
does all that was often thought too to be pretty much like us in life, with our five senses and our penchants for eating, moving, thinking, farting, what have you. The point I’m trying to make here is that it was nothing like that, nothing quite so simple and direct, even if the big picture is basically accurate, and even if that same big picture is largely accepted today. There were also other stories from back then about moving towards the light and such after you died that didn’t depend on broader reincarnation structures, and it was similarly not like that either in case you’re wondering. Nobody anymore holds much truck for the heaven/hell dichotomy, but I can tell you that in my birth era there were still quite a few people that did. They were wrong just like many assumptions about reincarnation were wrong. But none of them then and none of us now are completely wrong, and to me that is a really interesting point.

My awareness of me was not like the awareness we have while living. My awareness of being the same Frank Tollman was rather felt, it was intuitively grasped in such a way that it was unquestionable; it was a priori knowledge as the more learned would put it. Where or what did this knowledge adhere to? It’s a great question and – fair warning that here is the first of my speculative contributions to the events that I uncovered internally – I
don’t have a definitive answer to it. What I think can be said is that somehow, in some way and in some sense, a psychic force or energy or energy/matter/wave continued to exist in a disembodied state after my physical form had been crushed and mangled under X tons of steel, plastic, and electronics. I don’t think that force, if you will, was something that I was entirely born with but rather that it was something that I generated during the course of my twentieth and twenty-first century life as Frank Tollman. That is to say, I don’t think that the force I’m referring to was a kind of encapsulated and unchanging soul that travelled wholesale from a previous person into baby Frank Tollman and then was bound to travel on just like it was into another baby after Frank Tollman kicked the bucket. No, what I am trying to express is that in being Frank Tollman for the time I was during the years that I lived prior to dying, I somehow generated that psychic force, or a good part of that psychic force (with some portion or portions having been inherited), and that it – that force – then lasted beyond the demise of the creature known as Frank Tollman. But then, I hear you asking, how did that same force end up being Frank Tollman again only in the far future? That is an excellent question, dear reader, and the real crux of the full issue. And of death – and life. My experience in this matter may well be a first for the human race (though that, I suspect, is a
big maybe), and as such I have hope that I can contribute something to our present times and to the ways in which we now live, and that potential contribution of mine has nothing at all to do with the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Thankfully!

This new question concerns both the nature of the psychic force that I have been trying to describe and the nature of its relationship to the physical body that, as I have asserted, gave rise to it in the first place. On both counts this is a metaphysical question, and as with all metaphysical issues we will need to think about this in a way that we are perhaps unaccustomed to doing.

More so in my birth era but even now as well, the general tendency that people have is to approach their world and their wonderings about their world from a purely empirical point of view. Such is the legacy of the fantastic success of the sciences and the scientific model of investigation. We have equipped ourselves with these terms of understanding to the extent that we have trouble recognizing anything that does not fit into their predetermined forms; if something appears to lack physical or empirical proof – or the ability to attain such – then we either dismiss the thing (or idea or what have you) outright or we assign it to the realm of fantasy.
Interesting fantasy, perhaps, but fantasy nonetheless. You readers of this time, my current contemporaries, will be more inclined to hear out ideas categorized in the realm of fantasy than those of my birth era would have been but that prejudice still remains. And I use that word very intentionally for that is exactly what I am trying to explain here: prejudice as a pre-judgment, a pre-determined conclusion that necessarily cuts off every other possible conclusion from even being seriously considered, yet alone accepted. I ask you to acknowledge and suspend this default approach, for if adopted it will stop our quest before it has begun.

Let me give you an example of what I mean by all this which may prove helpful: If a person thinks that – perhaps this is a bias or even a well-thought-out and consciously-made decision – only the things which can definitively be shown to exist in the laboratory can be said to be real in any meaningful sense of the term, then what is that person to do with something like the experience of love? It might be that our person tries to answer this by saying that love can be found in the brain’s limbic system, that it can be shown physically via brain scans which reveal movement and use of that area, and that therefore love can be said to be real. Yet on this picture a very important piece is missing. This pointing to
the limbic system and announcing “a ha!” tells us nothing about what it is like to uniquely feel love, nor even what this, that, or another functioning of the limbic system imparts to its particular possessor. Even if our person can specify the very neurons and communications across nerves that are involved in the feeling of love when it is expressed – and we still haven’t been able to do that just as those in my birth era couldn’t; it might be impossible really given the brain’s plasticity –, they still could not make that important explanatory connection between the action of the nerves and the specific sensations experienced by the person who is conscious of their love. You and I might feel love slightly differently, but we both know what it is like to feel love and can relate to each other on the account of our feeling it alone, without any need to refer to root material causes even if we admit that they must be there. What I am attempting to illustrate here is that a purely physicalist or atomistic explanation simply cannot give us the full total of the very well-known and often experienced human emotion of love. That doesn’t mean that such can’t give us important information and can’t teach us much about what is happening on the physical level – just that such can’t be everything, or all there is to it. My point here is not to say that the empirical has no place in attempting to explain things like emotions, nor even that it does not have pride
of place – because indeed, why shouldn’t it? –, but rather that such simply cannot ever be the whole of the story. That missing part – experience of – is a very important part of life as it’s lived, as we all know from our day-to-day existence. The same can of course be said for consciousness itself (a big one historically, and a point I’ll return to), or any other number of phenomena that we know from our personal perspectives but that the laboratory has trouble pinning down with the kind of exact and comprehensive definitions that it insists on.

Where does this leave us? Please, dear reader, I must again ask for your patience. All I have tried to show so far is that certain questions do not have the type of answers that we are used to wanting, and in demonstrating that, or in trying to, I hope to alert you to the fact that you might be biased against the case I am about to make. If so then I ask you to widen your mind and let me first present my claim before you determine its worth. I ask this because what I think – and again this is based on the results of my internal evidence gathering and so could, I suppose, be considered to be empirical in some stretched sense of the word – is the case in this instance is very much like what is the situation for phenomena such as emotions, or consciousness, or similarly personally very familiar, yet physically opaque, occurrences.
Our question, then, was on the nature of the psychic force that I experienced myself becoming after death and its connection with the physical body that housed it or that was it, and which before death I had equally considered to be both completely “mine” and completely “myself”. In that strange way that we are all familiar with when we pause to think about it, I pictured my body as something that “I” owned but that was also entirely “me”. Full stop. I owned me. It’s no wonder that we have trouble with this topic because clearly there is a lot of conceptual confusion involved in our normal and unreflective attitude on the issue of “me”. Anyway, here is what I think can be said about that psychic force: First, everything in our universe is connected, and in that connection, when it is considered in its fullness, it can be thought of as a whole, as a singleness, as a singledom. This makes the most sense if we consider the universe as it was before the Big Bang gave birth to matter, dark matter, energy, dark energy, spacetime, gravitational waves, etc. Prior to that, what was? It is of course hard to say but “nothing” seems to miss the mark as the Big Bang erupted out of – who knows? But it erupted out of and therefore a simple nothing in the sense in which we are accustomed to using the word falls flat. Maybe it was just a vacuum, but even if so that vacuum was a vacuum in a
way that we are, again, unused to thinking of a vacuum. So it is – and probably always must be for the limited creatures that we are – a mystery. It could be that the crucial revelation of energy and matter being equal that was discovered in the twentieth century holds the key to everything, but I for one have no idea. At any rate, I describe that as background.

Since the entire universe is connected, is a whole, each of us when born is already a part of that whole. We are, or were already, a part of that whole prior to birth, in fact (and I hesitate to use the word “fact” here because of its loaded nature in the scientific patterns of thought that we typically employ, but I still wish to emphasize this detail), we are a part of that whole during our regular lives, and we remain a part of that whole after death because there is nothing that isn’t a part of that whole. Note that this presumes that there is a “we” to speak of both prior to and post the instances of birth and death; I will get to that. The universe, our universe and regardless of whether or not there are other universes, is a closed system. Okay, fine, so far so good, you are probably still with me; and let me also point out here that this view of the essential unity and integrity of the entire universe can still hold even if we are purely matter and nothing more. The picture retains its clarity for in that case we are now

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simply living matter and then dead – or better put as non-currently living – matter. It seems to me reasonable and quite acceptable to see the connectivity of all that exists in this way, and it moreover doesn’t require us taking any giant leaps in our ontology.

But now here we have myself as this bizarre hiccup in the overall scheme, we have me as Frank Tollman at one point dying and then somehow waking up more than three hundred years in the future as the very same Frank Tollman and with the very same body. Everything is connected and part of a whole – great, but what on earth are we to make of me? That was my deeply troubling question and what kept me at my hypno-meditative explorations. That is the issue of the “we” to speak of both before and after our births and deaths. I am not simply saying that all matter and energy are looping through our closed-system universe in one form or another, now as star now as human being now as space dust; no, I am making a much deeper claim that this “we”, these “Iṣ” or “mes”, which I’ve described as a psychic force, are continually in existence and co-existing with all of the material and immaterial matter that make up the other parts of the universe with which we are more familiar. I am essentially trying to add this further and unseen element to our cosmology. It could well seem
astounding and ridiculous to you, I understand that, but that is also why I ask for your forbearance in continuing to let me make my case.

As parts of that whole, parts of that whole throughout our prelife – if you will –, life, and postlife, whatever is “us” is connected in with the universe as universal whole and is flowing, moving, being, just like all of the other parts. If we think about all matter and all dark matter as really being two sides of the same coin, or perhaps of matter and energy as instead being matter-energy in the way that space and time have become spacetime, then we can think of this psychic force that I’m describing as one part of an experience that is better known to us biologically as consciousness. We experience consciousness all throughout our lives but don’t really know what it is (other than in its experience, I mean), and have continuously hit upon difficulties in affixing its physical source or cause(s) in the organ that we call a brain. We have always thought that the brain generates or gives rise to consciousness in some manner and have yet – even with all of our trying – to be able to say precisely how or why. Consciousness just seems to appear with us and, we presume, leave when we die. That assumption is what I’m calling into question based on my history of not losing consciousness after death. What I think is the case is that
the psychic force that I became is simply one part of a layer or a sheet, so to speak, that is a single psychic force that permeates the entirety of the universe in the way that energy and matter and spacetime permeate the entirety of the universe and that manifests itself in biologically living organisms as consciousness. Since it is everything and part of everything I suppose that this force also manifests itself in some way in nonliving matter as well, but I of course have no idea how. All I can say is that if it’s everywhere, well then it’s everywhere. It must be. Now, you will remember that I earlier stated that I think we generate this force during our lifetimes and that it isn’t something we’re born outright with. I stated, basically, that I don’t think the idea of a travelling fixed soul bouncing around from place to place or body to body is accurate, but also that I don’t think it’s entirely inaccurate. Let me now explain what I meant by that.

This psychic force is in and is flowing through all areas of everything, it is one of the compositional elements of the universe, and like all of the universe’s other elements it is subject to change, to transformation, to alternation. Water as vapor as liquid as solid, to use a simple and admittedly somewhat misleading analogy. Water in all its forms is still water and the psychic force in all its forms is still the same underlying and pure psychic force, but in its
experience as a consciously lived creature that infinitesimal part of it undergoes a more subtle change than the merely structural changes that H₂O does. This is possible – and here again is some conjecture on my part – because the force in question is not a physical entity, it is somehow a something else, which naturally is quite mysterious but not particularly more so than spacetime or dark matter. In the shifting that this tiny aspect of the psychic force undertakes during its time connected with a specific living biological organism it acquires a kind of identity, or rather a point of view, which it then retains. In its vastness, which is necessarily equal to the vastness of the entire universe itself, it is capable of maintaining these multitudinous points of view in perpetuity. If you wanted to hammer this out into really simple and inadequate terms you could say that we are not born with a complete soul but that we become one through the course of our lives. What kind of soul naturally depending on the kind of life. My own was pretty crappy, and so let me now change gears a bit and move from my theoretical explanations – which are more or less finished – to my description of the experiences I had as a point of view-endowed psychic force (and please remember that what I mean by that is just one fraction or just one facet of the whole and necessarily single and uniform psychic force) after I physically died, and how I then came to be
Frank Tollman in the same physical form once more.

I died. I became aware that I had died. I became aware that I was aware of having died and yet also remained aware of being “me”. All was darkness, there was no perception of any kind in any of the sense-oriented ways that we are used to, yet the darkness was neither disturbing nor threatening. All of that I remarked on earlier. I mentioned also that there was a sensation of timelessness, but calling it a “sensation of timelessness” is misleading because what it really was is better put as an absence of timeliness. We are so used to feeling time and the passage of time, to thinking about our days and our lives as journeys through time, that we assume it must be like that for all sentient organisms. Well, it isn’t. Present, future, past, all collapsed into a single presence of being, a single and very simple fact of existence. I was. I will be. I am. I am. For the first time that reference of the Hebrew prophets that I had to learn about in Sunday School growing up in the late twentieth century made sense to me. And it only took my death for me to get it. Yes, I recognize that I lacked much while alive in regards to both my intellectual curiosity and my maturity, but that – and the result of that – is something I am getting to.

I experienced myself as am in that full be-verb sense, and
without any kind of sensory input. That was not all that I experienced, however. I was also aware, and again aware in a completely *a priori* way, that “I” as that psychic force that I found myself as, was also at the same time far vaster and far more magnificent in being. I was aware that I was much, much, more.

What I think that particular awareness was in reference to was the whole of the psychic force, that is, the pure psychic force in its entirety and in its singledom. I as an individual “I” was – and am, as we all are – just one aspect, just one of its multitudinous trillion faces, as it were. The psychic force again is *one*, just as the universe is one, and each are both elements of the other. It is a closed system wherein all is linked and all is continually whole even as its many parts experience themselves as separate. The awe and the majesty of this awareness cannot be described. I believe – and this is more conjecture – that most psychic forces, in the sense of being recently severed from their bodies psychic forces (using our earlier and confessedly deficient analogy we could call them “newly born souls” or “souls newly released from their physical bodies” or something like that), immediately or almost immediately seek to find, or to rejoin, or to be reabsorbed if they can into the fullness of which they come to be aware. To lose themselves in it.
I think that too, given my own continued sentience as a psychic force, that the principal psychic force has its own meta-point of view, its own overarching self-awareness that exceeds and transcends its many various particulars that it has taken on in the course of imparting consciousness to living physical beings and experiencing itself as their consciousnesses, as their lived lives. This is the mind of the universe, or universal mind, as the mystics have put it. It is unspeakable peace, tranquility, at-oneness and at-itselfness, being in the most profound sense that the word could be used, but also beyond being as the ground of being. It is the undergirding of all, and it is the compositional content of all. Of course in becoming aware of that anyone would want to be it, to experience it completely, for you know that you are already it and that there is no good reason to hold on to the subidentity that you have as an aspect of it. Except that for me, in my case as Frank Tollman, there was.

Now, given the vastness and the age of the universe, I am not trying to claim that I have been the only one who didn’t attempt to simply join the beautiful totality of which my awareness informed me, but that was the decision I made. Nor am I saying that every psychic force can immediately remerge into the pure psychic force; probably most can’t and that is where reincarnation
comes in. What other psychic forces that maybe didn’t attempt a reintegration have done with that decision, if others have indeed made it, I have no idea; I can only speak about my own experience as I was able to piece it back together through the plumbing of my subconscious. Pure and endless bliss was before me but I straightaway turned back, and in part because I knew that pure and endless bliss would always be before me and that there was no reason to fear anything at any time. In my condition of awareness of self and of awareness of what I had been and of awareness of the true and the vast and the wondrous picture, I was filled with distaste for having passed my time while a biological creature in the manner that I did. What a waste my life was! There was no need, no compulsion, no requirement, no forced penance – nothing at all like that – for me to make amends, but I was acutely aware of how very much better I could have done just about everything that I had done. I was disgusted by myself, by the self I had been. I judged myself a piteous and wretched essence that had developed out of a piteous and wretched half-life. I had been a human being, a creature of almost unlimited potential, and I had squandered my years in that condition obsessed with nothing more than distracting myself from what I was. My real, abiding, and sole major concerns had been for ejaculating and/or getting drunk or high. If I put any

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effort into anything it was towards those ends. Otherwise I fiddled around with my smartphone or, before they were invented, played video games or watched TV or something along those lines. Heaven, to put it crudely, was before me but I wasn’t ready to endeavor for it. I wanted another chance, another crack at being human. I wanted to do it better, to live better.

The question of course was how. And so I set about discovering how. After a while – and I have no idea how long it was because again, for me in that state, time was an entirely empty and meaningless concept – I found that I could manipulate matter. I then experimented and struggled and worked and discovered that I could manipulate living matter. Remember that all of this was done entirely absent of any sense perceptions of any kind (save perhaps for the mental if you count that as a sense perception), and so the manipulation being done was mind operated, mind controlled, and mind facilitated. Yet it was not mind constituted; no, it was actually matter being compositionally rearranged in the way that I wanted it to become. If I was being observed in this, perhaps by that transcendent psychic force of which I was mindful of being a part, that is, by the meta-point of view I referred to, no attempt was made to either hinder or to help me. I was unaware of other aspects of that
transcendence that were like myself, but surely there must have been many around, although since I had no perception or recognition of being spatiotemporally located I think that putting it as “many around” is a bit misleading. At any rate, I was only alert to myself, to what I was doing, and to that miraculous all which I chose to put off approaching though I knew that I, and everything, was already really a part of it.

My efforts continued and my progress became more noticeable, my projects more refined. You no doubt see where I’m going with this: I was able finally to recreate a body exactly as I was, as Frank Tollman just before that underground train crashed into him. I was pleased with that and ready to give it a try, to go for the next big step which would be the rehabilitation of the body, the re-entering of myself as psychic force into the form from which it had emerged at death. It was not easy. That process too took many attempts and trials before it was finally successful, and then – well, then I blinked my eyes open and found myself under a beating sun lying face up in a rice paddy.

I have no idea how I ended up in that rice paddy. I was in the same place I had been when I died – only above and not under ground as I noted – but if I was put there by
some benevolence, or if that was where I had been performing my craftwork given that I had after all died there, I do not know. Perhaps I did simply remain in the area I was in at death; without any notion of spatiotemporalness it is impossible to really say. Parts of my memory were gone, as you know from my story here, but after all nothing was entirely gone because I was able to fish it out of my subconscious. I was able to put the pieces back together, to make the puzzle fit, to finally see the whole. How many more years now lie before me as this Frank Tollman I also cannot guess. But I do know that I will spend them far more wisely than I had the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I will make use of this time now, this gift to myself from myself – as it turns out –, to create anew my “me”, to develop and grow and nurture that which I wish to become with the aim always in sight of reaching the potential that lies within. I now know how very much can be achieved in the space of a human life, and that that achievement has nothing to do with others; it is an internal pursuit for the sake of becoming the self that you want to be, of building the soul that you want to have, of moving ever closer to that which is possible. I am what I make, and death holds no threat for me. Nor for anyone. Rest in that, dear reader, and take from it what you will. For me the mystery is solved.
Chapter Four

The harvest was far more work than I had anticipated it being. Cutting, stacking, threshing, cleaning, hauling. Day in and day out. We worked in a team with Bofim and Rolm as we had all season, but many hands did not make light work. I may have made things more difficult for them with my ineptitude; I didn’t know and I didn’t care. What I did care about was the post-harvest party that Tomor kept reminding me of. The thought of kicking back in the local meeting hall with everyone from our district over many drinks and much food was the only motivation I could find for dragging my exhausted frame out of bed each morning. Every single day I tried very hard not to think about the fact that I would almost certainly end up being made a farmer for life at the Day of Choosing, and instead very simply – as palliative and as prophecy – tried to imagine the party.

It was to be held exactly nine days after we had started and everything needed to be done by then, including the final task of gathering the straw from the field. I was hoping the event would also provide an opportunity to set something right. Milee had distanced herself from me after our meeting with the councilors; and for my part I was too enfeebled each evening to help her with the
laundry or otherwise try and ingratiate myself as I had been doing up until that point. Aside from perfunctory greetings and the daily niceties we hadn’t properly spoken to each other for some time. It was a bit confusing for me, but I knew that I would soon be moving out and anyway with everything that had happened it was all I could do to keep it together one day after another. My big revelation – the revealing of what I really was – at the House of Decisions and afterwards may have shifted the image she held of me from mysterious newcomer to something along the lines of Neanderthal Man, but I wasn’t overly worried about it; I could and would make all well again when we got a chance to relax. I reassured myself with the reasoning too that having my own place would smooth our future dalliance – which I was still very sure of –, although there was certainly an element of excitement to be found in the forbidden nature of lighting up my peace pipe inside her teepee right there in the same bed that she and Tomor used. One step at a time though I told myself, we’d get there.

Tomor, on the other hand, had taken a somewhat odd and much enhanced interest in me since that day. He had gone from a slightly aloof big brother to an excessively involved instructor. He practically showed me how to wipe my own rear. It would be a relief to get away from
his hyper-hospitality, but during the harvest I wanted to milk it to avoid any extra duties beyond the mandatory farm work. Pleading ignorance was suddenly a viable option to get out of household chores, and I played that card with abandon. I was a houseguest who had overstayed his welcome, that was true, but it had not been by personal choice after all. I therefore felt entirely justified in washing my hands of my own bad behavior.

The party, when it arrived, was unlike anything I could have predicted. Ever. Not even in my wildest dreams. It was an orgy. An honest-to-goodness orgy. An honest to insaneness orgy. We had spent the day doing the final, thankfully fairly light, harvest duties and around dusk had all walked over to the district hall. It was my first time in the building; from the outside it looked like a non-descript two-storey affair but was fronted by a very nice garden. Once inside we parted company with Milee as she turned to head down a hallway to our right, waving as she went. Tomor indicated that we were to go straight ahead, and I noticed that the men who had entered with us were following suit while all the women had turned off the same way Milee had. At that point I had no clue that it was to be an orgy, and thought there may have been a hot-spring bath involved; I was used to hallways splitting up the sexes in such facilities from my time in Japan. That
is, from my time in Japan back in what was then called Japan during the early two thousands; I still didn’t know how to deal with the reality of that. What I did know was that I was fantastically hungry as we hadn’t had a bite since lunch and had been working in the sun all day. My main thoughts were on food, and although a hot bath struck me as nice I was not particularly looking forward to it.

We entered a large locker room and showering area off to one side of the hall we had been traversing, and as we paused to disrobe in the middle of a row of plastic-looking lockers Tomor told me that everyone had to get good and clean for the party so be sure to wash well. He added with a wink that here I could use as much water as I liked, and even suggested that I leave it running the entire time I showered. I was pleased by that, strange as I found it, and commenced with removing my black pyjamas and placing them inside the box-shaped compartment in front of me, which conveniently contained a towel all ready and waiting. How considerate.

The showers themselves were very much like the kind at onsen that are more or less tiny cubicles situated near the floor. I sat on a little wooden stool in front of a mirror that had a glass bottle of shampoo and a bar of soap on a shelf
beneath it. The shower head was placed in a little holding piece next to the top right of the mirror but could be taken down and directed anywhere, the tubing that connected it to the faucet was about a meter long. It was all very familiar. After I had showered – and I did leave the water running, pure bliss – I found Tomor waiting for me by a side door that I assumed led to the bath. He handed me another towel and said to get dry; I thought that was odd as we’d just be getting wet again, but when in Rome. While I toweled off he explained that I might not be used to the way in which they celebrated the harvest, and so to help me relax I should take a little slip of paper from a box on the counter near the doorway, place it on my tongue, and let it dissolve. That struck me as both suspicious and as being likely to involve LSD. He retrieved two pieces, put one on his own tongue, and then handed me the other.

It wasn’t acid, but it was potent. Particularly on an empty stomach which I now think was part of the point. I steeled myself more out of nervousness at the unexpected than out of a reluctance to imbibe and did the same, placing the sheet lightly in my mouth. As the paper melted away on my tongue I almost immediately felt waves of euphoria rush over me, cresting quickly but only subduing by a tiny fraction. My muscles softened; I was
cheery, confident, slightly blurry-eyed, warm and radiant. Where had they been keeping this stuff and why hadn’t I been taking it every day? I grinned like an idiot and Tomor returned the gesture, slapping me on the shoulder and turning to head out the exit.

We stepped into a little triangular-shaped entry space and directly across from it I could see an identical triangular area where some women were likewise entering. Naked women. Naked like us. Tits, pussies, ear to ear smiles and all. My attention however did not stay fixed on them as it normally would have as between the women’s entrance and our entrance lay not a set of baths but a vast open-air space that was filled with people fucking. Hard. Bodies writhing, shifting, moving, flowing in an undifferentiated mass of glistening and glorious flesh. Tomor said something that I didn’t hear. He said something else that I didn’t hear. He pointed somewhere that I didn’t see. He went somewhere that I didn’t follow. He disappeared. I stood there and stared, stupefied. I had never been to an orgy before and had no idea what to do. That is, I knew what to do but not how to start. I had once almost been in a threesome but when push came to shove it turned out that my services were unnecessary for my two female friends. I may have just been an excuse for them to get together. At the time I watched for a bit and rubbed one
out, leaving the sticky mess on the carpet for them to clean up. I felt somewhat satisfied by that but my revenge was of course bittersweet. The orgy was nothing like that day. It was something new altogether.

I decided to start by doing a circuit. A lap. A premature victory lap for what was certain to be at least an initially premature ejaculation. I hadn’t had sex since I had arrived, and hurried daily wanks in Milee and Tomor’s shower did not count towards producing any level of stamina. I stepped out of the entrance and turned left onto a smooth stone walkway that felt pleasantly cool to my feet, noticing as I did so that the interior garden of the building was circular with little alcoves cut in even increments along its edge. I could see three such side passages between our entryway and the women’s, and glancing at the other side of the circle I could see a further three there, making eight in all. Approaching the first of these I saw that it too led to a triangular-shaped space though without an entry/exit door. Rather it contained a table that had been spread with all sorts of meats: cuts of beef, pork, chicken, with a barbecue nearby and some very happy people chatting and grilling; only the cook was donning an apron as he flipped a steak, otherwise all were as naked as the jay bird I was. The next alcove had a table covered with drinks, and not just beer but all sorts of suds,
and that one was followed by an area with cakes, pies, bars of chocolate, desserts galore. The entirety of the food and beverages I had been longing for had just been displayed in abundance. Meat, sweets, sex, and whiskey to wash it all down with. It was heaven. My own personal version of heaven. How could they possibly have known?

I continued on and came to the women’s entrance just as a curvy thing of about forty was stepping out, wide hips offset by a pair of tits that were screaming to be kneaded and suckled. My confidence was growing with my cock as I felt a shot of blood pulse into it. I glanced down to notice that it was already fully erect. How long had it been like that? Well, the proof was in the pudding; I could do it. I could handle the orgy. I was born for it. This party was why I was brought here in the first place.

On the far side of the circle of fucking the first alcove past the women’s entry contained a few boxes of happy slips, as I had labeled them, and hundreds of pre-rolled giant spliffs. A group of about five looked to be halfway through their first joint, passing it on in their circle and laughing hysterically as I traversed. The following space had a mixture of fruits, vegetables, and kettles of rice – after living off of Tomor’s cooking all that time there was no way I was going near any of that –, and the one after
juices, waters, and what looked like smoothies. Each space was lined with benches running down both sides of the triangular area and were clearly meant to facilitate talking, joking, chatting, discussing, laughing, relaxing, breathing in the fresh nighttime air. It wasn’t just a fuckfest, it was a feast, a social feast; it was the whole year of labor exploding into a joyous night of debauchery. I rounded the circle and returned to the men’s entrance; that must have taken me a good twenty minutes or so, the place was big. If the whole district minus the children and the poor bastards watching them were there then that meant somewhere around two thousand people. Two thousand halved was one thousand gaping vaginas pleading to be filled in. I needed a steak or two to get my energy up; my lad at attention was cut out for his work that night.

I returned to the meats section and kind of sheepishly stood around near the end of the table closest to the grill, eagerly eyeing the steaks. There were about two dozen people in there with me, some eating, some waiting to eat, all chatting merrily. And all naked. I supposed that they were either taking a break from the action in the center of the large interior park or, like me, were still poised to start in on the action. It was a very strange thing to be standing there naked amongst the nude, at once both liberating and
inhibiting. The people in the alcove with me still looked one another in the eye when they spoke – they were probably used to it, after all – but for my part I kept making glances at the other men’s dongs in a kind of subconscious measuring contest while darting between pairs of tits. How could I be blamed for such? All everyone had was on full display, and knowing that all I had was on full display as well created a kind of mental discombobulation that is hard to describe except to say that it wasn’t neither here nor there but somehow both. I didn’t necessarily want to be looked at, but was thrilled to be able to do all the looking that I was. It wasn’t that I was ashamed of my radiant sunflower – who could deny what I had always taken to be my well-proportioned shaft and symmetrically balanced bag of goodies? –, it was just that I was more accustomed to it being viewed in a certain light and that only. When I took young Jones out it was time for business, not for lounging around while my sirloin turned from rare to medium on the cue. I told myself that I needed to find a way to comfortably be in the middling zone where I currently was, and then to just as comfortably transition to the other zone out there, the Fuck, where I knew I was destined to be.

“Here you are, friend,” the man at the grill said to me as he skewered a large chunk of beef off and placed it on a
plate. His smile was warm and welcoming; no doubt his own happy slip buzz was humming along as keenly as mine was. I nodded my thanks and returned the grin as I paced down the table to take a fork and knife and some seasonings from a large pile of utensils and assorted condiments. I wasn’t sure if the flatware was clean or not as there didn’t seem to be any separation into used and unused sections; they were there for everyone to share and apparently no one cared much about mixing germs. Given the context, and the effects of the drug, that seemed entirely reasonable to me at the time. I stood at the table and focused on my food, cutting off large bites and savoring every mastication of my long-lost bosom companion. Meat – where had I been without you?

“You’re that guy from the Dark Times, right?”

Dark Times? I glanced up from my steak to see a youngish-looking woman standing across the table from me with small and largely flat tits but very becoming thick black hair that framed her face well, rounded eyes and cheeks offset by the straight line across her forehead that her bangs formed. She was smiling and very cute. I followed her slight shoulders down to her tits again and saw enough substance for a half-handful. My main man twitched a bit.
“You know, from the past, from a few hundred years ago. I’ve heard about you,” she explained, her tone friendly and her expression not dimming. It was no accusation, it was curiosity. And female curiosity had seldom let me down before.

“Yes, I am. Although I didn’t know my era was the Dark Times,” I said.

“How could it not be? Everyone insecure, running around chasing money, bouncing from place to place and job to job, never knowing what might happen. No guarantees, no stability, no security and no sense of community. Fractured, broken societies. That must have been terrible.” She took a bite of what looked like either chicken or pork, eyes glowing and waiting for my reply. If my quasi-celebrity status hadn’t really sunk in before then it did at that moment. I was an oddity, an unexplainable, and that very naturally piqued people’s interest. I was the freshest meat at the cue. I determined to put that to good use.

“It wasn’t so bad,” I began, arousal percolating in me simply from the act of conversing with such a charming companion. “We saw our lives as filled with hope, and we
always had the expectation that technological advances would provide the answers to our social problems. We were great believers in science.”

“But all that meaningless, inhumane work,” she went on, “didn’t it get to you?”

Her skin was very smooth and almost wholly blemish-free, nipples beautiful pink buttons. “Sometimes, but we had the most wonderful movies and games. Everywhere you turned around there was some new entertainment waiting for you. It was terribly easy to distract yourself and forget about the things you didn’t like in your life. We also didn’t know any differently. Everybody worked and had to do things they didn’t care for. It was all very normal. I don’t see how your times are all that different; in that regard, anyway.” She had cleaned her plate and I was nearing the end of mine.

“Hmm. Well, maybe. Do you want me to take care of that for you?” she asked, pointing to my crotch. “We can chat more later.”

I looked down and remembered that my own personal hallelujah had already warmed up and was ready for the climactic chorus. The whole scene had played itself out
like the most endearing porno, who could have asked for a better lead in? “Yes, please,” I said and popped the final morsel of steak into my mouth.

“Oh, Past Man, follow me,” she said and turned towards the alcove’s opening and out onto the great inner circle.

As I walked after her I noticed that her hips were fairly narrow but her rear had a surprising fullness to it. And firmness. It swayed ever so slightly as she strode on, leading me into the great convocation that was the centerpiece of the outdoor event. As we approached the first thing I noticed was the random patterning of the couples and groups who were engaged with each other and a few on their own; odd patches of empty space stood out here and there, offset by dense gatherings of numerous bodies. I saw too that there were a few cushioned stands here and there; some rounded and some rectangular shapes of varying heights that appeared to function as props. The one nearest to us was in use by a woman who had her hands stretched out on it for support as she stood and took a forceful rodgering from behind by a thin man with close-cropped hair who was also considerately squeezing her giant right breast as he banged away.
Stepping off the encircling sidewalk and onto the soft interior grass my new friend turned to face me. “Welcome to your first Harvest Festival,” she said as she reached down and placed a svelte hand around my cock. “Try to relax and just go with the flow. Be open-minded.”

As she said that she stroked gently back and forth, bringing my fire engine’s crane to its full extension. She then knelt down and, keeping one hand cupped around my ball sack, started to perform the most exquisite blowjob. Slowly, in and out, concentrating on the tip and avoiding any contact with her teeth, the inside of her mouth warm and wet. It quite literally took my breath away, probably the second best blowjob of my life. I reached down and put my right hand on the back of her head, pulling her hair slightly with my fingers. She kept my boy inside, going faster and deeper, now placing both hands on my hips for support as she accelerated and then suddenly slowed, pulled out, grasping me again between thin fingers and licking my gonads with the tip of her tongue, then her full tongue, hand stroking my shaft. I rested my left hand on my lower spine and rubbed the back of her head absent-mindedly, it was phenomenal. She returned my turret to her mouth as she continued to handle its length, keeping the head tightly between closed lips and turning slightly as she moved it in and out, in and
out. I came in her mouth in a full blast of ecstasy; what had seemed like endless weeks of repressed sex drive, sadly sublimated to daily wanks, unleashed itself in an explosion. My only thought was: May the Harvest Festival never end.

She continued for a few more seconds, giving me a nice afterglow. I looked down and beamed at her but wasn’t prepared to return the favor. My mind had already gone to Milee; she was in there somewhere, legs spread, pussy out, waiting for my captain of industry to pummel her. I had to find her. I would fuck my way all across that great circle to get to her. I would have her. Finally.

My companion glanced up and smiled but did not insist on anything from me, she too was already elsewhere. A man to her right seemed to have caught her eye as she wrapped an arm around his waist and pulled him over to her, lying on her back to allow him inside. He happily obliged.

I felt my blood already flowing strongly again, getting ready for another round. That was a very pleasant surprise; I was no longer a young man and typically needed some downtime at least. My guess was that the happy slips were to thank for my newfound stamina.
Boner high I scanned the heaving crowd for Milee while also keeping an eye open for any obvious catches in the immediate vicinity. Just a meter or so ahead a woman with a tight stomach and two perfectly balanced coconut brown breasts was in the midst of fingering herself and, by the expression on her face, doing a very good job of it. She was clearly ready for a new friend.

It was my first time to initiate contact in the carnival but I was no longer reticent. I stepped forward and wordlessly began to lick her out, figuring that would be an excellent way to introduce myself. It was. She moaned her approval as I painted her lips with my mouth, shifted to sucking them softly, and then to titillating her bean with the tip of my tongue, exploring her interior with my middle finger as I did so. Her moan deepened and I moved my body to her left, keeping two fingers inside, and rolled her onto her side. I pushed my way into her, she gasped, dousing my member with warm vaginal juices. Wrapping one leg around hers I inserted deeply with my hips and moved my hand to squeeze her nearest luxurious tit. It was full and soft and smooth. I massaged it as I pumped in deeper and deeper, going slow, enjoying the ride. I pulled on her nipple and then graced a finger down the center of her midriff and into her pussy, tickling her erect clitoris as I increased the speed of my shaft. She was clearly
cumming in fountains and I drove myself home too, splurting out and seeing no need to hold back, no need to shift positions or extend our partnership. There were plenty of others around to play with and lots of time for later. As I stopped she sighed, stood, and began walking towards the edge of the park without a word or peek at me. We had never made eye contact; I found that strangely unsettling. Not very much, it hardly bothered me at all, but it did somewhat. Somehow. Odd.

I rested on my back for a moment and stared at the sky. For the first time I noticed that it was a clear night and the stars were shining brightly overhead. I couldn’t make out any constellations; not for a lack of being able to see them, because even in the midst of the city they were all quite visible – much more so than I ever noticed in Tokyo –, but rather due to my plain ignorance of all things astronomical. It was a subject I had simply never bothered to learn, nor been taught. Still, all the sparkly little dots were quite pretty; and just then I had no regrets about not having studied them.

I stood and thought I caught a glimpse of Milee in amongst a couple of the padded props; she appeared to be fondling and kissing someone. Was it Bofim from our work crew? It might have been; Rolm was standing
nearby. I would have recognized that moustache of his anywhere. They might have been having a threesome or were maybe just close to each other; it was hard to tell with so many bodies moving in so many different ways in such a relatively confined space. I decided to try and make my way over to them; I wanted in on the action, any action that involved Milee. She may have been a bit remote recently but now was the time to move us forwards, I thought, now would be the start of our at least moderately long relationship. I would show my worth to her, Neanderthal Man that I was, by giving her the best sex of her life. My rod was still wet from the last encounter; and now thankfully stiff again too; I knew I could do for Milee what I had done for her. Multiple orgasms. Buckets of cum. It would at long last be it.

Eyes straight forward I gingerly stepped between interlocked bodies, legs, arms, heads, pelvises, pressed together in every which way. Sucking, grasping, fingering, licking, rubbing, exploring; masses of flesh, sweat, grunts, groans. It was all a background of flesh-toned chaos, a collage of inverted pyramids, ringed stars, and rounded obelisks punctuated by splashes of pubic hair. The human body only has so many orifices but all seemed to be in play and no one seemed to notice much what was happening next to them; guy on gal, gal on guy, guy on
guy, gal on gal, guy on guy on gal, gal on gal on guy, guy on guy on gal on guy; it was a free-for-all. Most were in twos as that has always seemed easiest for people, but the imagination can conjure up many other ways to please and I supposed that a large portion of those ways were being tried out somewhere in the ring.

It was Milee all right, and not too far away. Just a few more meters and then the deferred dream would be a reality. I felt a tug on my starship and a sudden warm enveloping. I looked down to see that a woman with long curly hair and sagging tits had pulled me into her mouth as I passed. She was on her knees and taking it hard from a large muscular man behind her, I couldn’t tell if he was giving it to her ass or her cunt. She sucked and pulled earnestly on my pecker with one hand as she balanced on the other, eyes closed. I tried to pull back, to continue on my way, but as my ski pole left her mouth she gasped and yanked me back to her, back inside. How could I deny her? I shifted my stance to allow full dong access but in doing so I unfortunately came face to face with the man behind her, his hands on her hips, biceps flexed, and donning a very serious expression as he hammered away. She let out a loud yell and was then once more at me, bobbing her head furiously. I found it hard to enjoy and closed my eyes to imagine someone else connected to the
mouth around my dick, someone not in any manner on
the receiving end of another man’s diddly-do. He was by
then grunting too, and was so close that I couldn’t tune
him out. I felt my boy going soft; it was terrible. A scream,
from him I think, and then a sudden lessening on the
throttle. I cracked my eyes open to see that he had pulled
out and took a step back, wiping his forehead and looking
exhausted. The woman, however, was not finished with
her chosen task and moved into a position of sitting on
her own feet, knees resting on the ground, straightening
her back and giving my sausage her full attention. I did
not find her attractive. She was, though, good at what she
was doing, and so I shut my eyes again, putting someone
else down there, putting Milee down there. Yes, suck it
Milee, back and forth, oh, you’re so skilled at this, so
delicate. That’s it, yes, the balls, don’t forget the balls,
just a bit more now… Cum, release, exit, done. I turned
and continued my journey; the real thing was just a few
steps further.

Milee, the real one and no longer my fantasy, was sitting
with her legs crossed on one of the round cushions,
running her fingers through her hair. She appeared to be
taking a short breather from the action. That did not deter
me. I approached with purpose but made my best effort to
be charming. I smiled broadly as I neared, catching her

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eye, and even waved a little. Her face was impassive as she saw me, her eyes looked glazed. I wondered where she was behind those pretty green peepers.

A sudden lack of confidence assailed me; I had built up the moment too high for too long and the scene was all wrong. We were supposed to become lovers in private, she was supposed to harbor mixed feelings about it; animal attraction for me yet lingering notions of guilt over all the dirty things we did together. In my mind that would only have increased the passion involved, increased the excitement. Yet there we were, surrounded by untold sexual acts occurring in the immediate vicinity, and guilt seemed the farthest thing from anyone’s mind. As did passion, really, it was all more coitus by mechanics. But it was still fucking and I would still take it. Milee uncrossed her legs and revealed her holy of holies – possibly not on purpose and possibly not directed at me; I couldn’t tell where her gaze was – two vertical luscious pads and a shot of wild black hair. I knelt in front of her and tried to begin cunnilingus, to begin the pleasure patrol that she was to undertake, but she stopped me with a hand on the top of my head. I looked up and saw that she was now certainly engaging me, directing her attention right at me; her tits were much smaller and not as rounded as I imagined them to be, her nipples were
far too large for my liking. Normally, anyway, on Milee I would give them a passing score. Wordlessly she shook her head; was this to be it? Denied at the goalpost? She moved off the cushion and got down on all fours, presenting herself to me ass first. Was she telling me that she was wet already? Just the sight of me had prepared her for penetration? I wouldn’t doubt it, but then, that did seem off. Even I had trouble believing in myself that much. Was she instead saying that she preferred anal sex? That would be unusual but not unheard of. No matter, whatever her preferences might be for me it was pussy; at least initially. I moved behind her and shaft in hand guided my magnificent beast into the glory slot, that perennially perfect match for any warm-blooded male. A penis was never complete alone.

Resistance. She was dry. The Sahara. Why wouldn’t she let me lick her out? What a pain it was becoming; my dream deferred too long, crashing and burning. No, I could salvage it. I reached around and tried to begin fingerling her but she batted my hand away, inserting her own forefinger and rubbing gently in no doubt just the right spot. When she removed her hand I made another attempt; there was some moisture but not enough for a smooth entry. I took it very slowly, just poking really, until I felt her vaginal muscles slacken and I inserted a bit
more of my girth, a bit more of my manhood. There, I was in, all the way in. I put my left hand on her upper rib cage and used my right to massage one tit, still plunging leisurely, feeling her, feeling her deeply. She remained silent, head down. That was a turn off. I tried picking up the pace, I tried rubbing her breast differently, I tried to stimulate her pleasure zone with one hand while I continued with my schlong – no mean feat as it was difficult to keep my pace up while maintaining my balance on my knees as I attempted that. She showed no sign of anything. I then tried to push her over from her hips, thinking to rotate down and let her sit on top of me, but she braced and wouldn’t budge. Confused I gently tried again to change positions, to have her extend her legs up and keep her arms down while I stood behind her.

“Just cum already!” she snapped.

Just cum already. Just cum. Thanks for nothing. The boss; in a far nastier form than I had known her. Something had changed in how she saw me and I could not understand why. I had never learned just what it was that made her suddenly become so cold, that made her close her heart to me. She had been so helpful at first, so considerate and caring, but then, for whatever reason, over the preceding weeks she had drifted away, culminating in that schism
that apparently took place when my status as accidental time traveler was revealed. I may have been a Dark Times freak but I was still a human being. I was offended by her behavior and the thought crossed my mind to just pull out and tell her off. Instead I angrily and thoughtlessly decided to tell her off with Comrade Johnson. Mimicking the muscle man of moments before I went into overdrive, pounding into her and putting all my angst and disappointment and bitterness squarely into every thrust of my hips. I would cum, damn it, just a few more jabs.

When I had finished she stood abruptly and walked off towards another area thick with bodies, keeping her back to me. I saw her run her hand down the arm of a tall man who turned to smile at her. I couldn’t watch what happened next. I needed a drink. I needed a few drinks. I needed a bottle. My mind returned to the alcoves, specifically the one with all the hooch; whiskey was calling. I figured that I would grab some more happy slips on the way too, a pick-me-up of any and every kind was most definitely in order.

I avoided the potheads as well as I could and took two happy slips with me as I proceeded to the alcohol corner, the little triangular pub shooting off the edge of the bizarre interior garden. There was no need to wash the
slips down and so I immediately put them both on my tongue as I rounded the sidewalk up past the women’s entrance, towards what I had naturally come to think of as the top half of the circle. A sudden jolt, an ecstatic high, hit me almost instantaneously as the papers dissolved, and it was so strong that I nearly fell over. Leaning against the inside wall for support from the delirious euphoria that was swamping me, I made it to the bar and gratefully sat down on one of the benches running the length of the two sides. I must have been smirking like a hyena because I felt ready to jump off the roof of the nearest building and sooooooaaaaaaaar.

Enough of my mind was left to realize that that would not be a good idea; enough of my mind was left to realize too that a high that high needed to be balanced by my old friend alcohol. Your first love hits you the hardest, they say, and I had never gotten over my sweetheart whiskey despite all the trouble she had caused me over the years. Oh, beer was fine, beer was lovely, beer was a solid wank to a sexy gal, but whiskey was the real thing. Only I was there to forget about the real thing, I reminded myself, because what was happening out in the park was not what I had expected it to be. I hadn’t quite given up on it though; my break was simply a transition. A recharge.
I ignored the greetings of the others in the bar around me and somehow managed to grab myself a glass and a bottle. My hands didn’t seem to be working as well as they should have, my balance was off too; such were likely mere side effects of a double dose of the happies, I told myself. All would be well in moments. Alcohol. Balance. Sloshing a bit on the table I filled my glass with my sweet brown vixen and chased her down the hatch. Another. Then another. That old numb feeling poked at the edges of my brain as I recognized my gal at her work. An efficient one, that lady. I filled up my glass again and leaned back to ease the intake, to take a load off. I stared at the tumbler in my hand; it could probably hold a good two hundred milliliters and I had just had three. Number four I would take sip by sip, I would savor every drop. What was it that my doctor had said at my last check-up? One hundred and eighty milliliters per day maximum? Phsst. What did she know? Anyway, she was long dead and her clinic buried beneath the sands of time.

My mind went back to Milee as I knew it would. What had taken place out there? She hadn’t refused me, but she surely hadn’t been very willing. It was an obligatory fuck. A tasteless meal tossed onto the table, an unmistakable message to eat and get the hell out. I wondered how much of what was going on in the circle now was duty-based. A
strange tradition. Everyone getting their rocks off any number of times but no one really seeming to be that focused on each other; what they were concentrating on was simply the act. Not unlike my twenties, I realized, a decade spent going from port to port with nearly any willing partner. I hadn’t changed much since then.

What they did maybe wasn’t strange so much as it was compounded. Doing everyone in your area must have had some social cohesion aspects. Thoughts started to form, I began to get it. All those stresses and traumas and troubles of a year could be released in orgasms. Pissed off at Betty down the street? Pork her brains out at the next Harvest Festival; there, done and settled, everyone’s friends again. Sex as revenge. Sex as compensation. Sex as interpersonal balm. Goodness.

Only I wasn’t friends with Milee again; if anything our relationship had worsened by her stunt out there. Her stunt, yes, that’s what it was. Damn her. She had pulled one over on me; she had made a move calculated to give her the upper hand. It was a power game to her.

My drunkenness told me that meant she did have feelings for me. She had to. That was it, of course that was it. She was teasing me, testing me, seeing how I would react. If
she were truly disinterested then she would have just told me to get lost. It all made perfect sense. Unless that was against the rules of the party or something. Were there any rules? Any customs that were expected to be followed?

There did seem to be a clear division between being inside the circle and outside it; that I had picked up on. The saucy fox that had sucked me off to get me going had first led me into the interior before she began; there might have been something to crossing over the sidewalk, to stepping onto the grass. It would admittedly have been odd for her to commence work on Mr. Pipey there next to the barbecue, but still you would think that she could have done it anywhere given the atmosphere of the party. By finding and approaching Milee in the circle was she bound to acquiesce in some form at least? Was there an unwritten code to the madness? If so then I’d have to take advantage of it. If anyone I approached out there was compelled to cooperate then on my next entry I’d make a beeline for the sexiest morsel in sight, whoever she happened to be. If it was a no-holds-barred event then all bets were off. I might find a way to get back at Milee too, to tip the balance in my favor and prove to her – and, depressingly, to myself – that she was attracted to me. But how to do that? An uplifting thought: the pleasure
patrol. I had fallen into her trap by blowing off my load so quickly, by not playing roughly enough. She resisted; that must have meant she wanted some manhandling, I had just misread the signs. A mistake I would not make twice.

People say whiskey makes you angry, that it makes you violent. I have always found it to make me confident. Another long sip from my tumbler; I leaned back further into the wall, letting it envelope me, as my eyes fell on the bottle still sitting there prettily on the table. It was nearly empty. Had I drunk all that? I was pretty sure that it had been unopened when I started in on it. Excellent. By squinting at the container I could just about make out what was written there. Happy Harvest something or other. Either my eyesight had abruptly gone very bad or I was very drunk. Drunk and high. Outdoors. Naked. With a raging hard on. At an orgy. Time to get to it.

I stood and wobbled, unsteady before I had taken a step. My plan would require some delicacy. I had been in worse states before and had always managed to get where I needed to be – well, until the night I ended up in the future anyway. Someone might have been trying to say something to me but whoever’s voice it was became lost in the rumblings of my thoughts. Indistinct. A buzzing, a
fly. I batted my hand at an invisible insect around my ear and took a large, heavy step forwards. There, I had done it and I was still standing. The rest would be easy. I tossed down the remainder of my best gal and let the tumbler fall to the ground beneath me. I for one would not be following suit, no going down, there was no closing the gate on this Tollman. One after the other my feet took me towards the circle, arms out, leaning forward, giving me ballast. The sidewalk was cool beneath my feet; it felt refreshing in the night air that was still balmy despite our having taken the harvest in. It must have already been late in the year, maybe October. What kind of winter did this time have? Unbelievable; I was thinking about temperatures at an orgy. I was drunk.

The grass, soft and warm, fresh earth. I had made it; I had entered the inner circle. The sanctum sanctorum, the cathedral to the heavens, the great temple to the primal spirits that move the world. Jizz and juice, it was all within reach, all so easy. Tits, pussies, mouths, assholes, all in an endless parade before me. I sank to the ground knowing that I had achieved my goal of my getting there. A little rest before my exertions. I stretched my legs out and planted my hands behind me, leaning back to look up at the stars overhead. Hundreds of tiny bright dots splashed across the black sky. Were they looking down at
us? My weather vane was pointing due north; I looked at it with pride and satisfaction and then followed its arrow back up to the heavens. Was that Polaris? My dong wouldn’t steer me wrong. A clever turn of phrase, a new motto. What a pity it wouldn’t rhyme in Language; I’d like to tell it to someone.

My eyes blurred, dimmed, nearly shut. I was ready to nod off, or pass out. Maybe I needed some more food. Wait, no time for that, along came a tender thing with an hourglass figure and a flattop. That ass, pure heaven, bulging out like balloons only to taper back in to two silky thighs. “Hey!” I called out, reaching forward to grasp her hand as she passed.

She shifted, slowly, presenting first a hip and then rotating towards me bringing her left melon into view; I stared as it seemed to approach like a ship over the horizon. Time had slowed nearly to a standstill. Her lips and cheeks were full with a rounded nose setting off straight cheekbones. Big eyes. I smiled and raised an eyebrow. She returned the smile and moved to face me, placed one hand on my shoulder and the other on my citadel, lowering herself down onto it, guiding it in. Ecstasy. I laid down and let her do the work, do her work, watching her grind, watching her move in circles as she
enjoyed me inside her, placing her hands on her knees, closing her eyes, tilting her head back. Her tits bounced and she bit her lower lip; she was a goddess. I had an idea. I sat up suddenly and grabbed her waist. She was surprised but seemed open. I pushed her gently over onto her back while keeping myself inside her, kneeling between her outspread limbs and with her buttocks on my thighs I wrapped my arms under her upper legs for support. It was a potent position, I was able to push deep, feeling my head strike the rear of her vaginal cavity. She squealed in glee. I moved faster and watched the mass of her breasts flow up and down in rhythm. I adjusted, I slowed, I sped up, I paused, I shifted shallow, then deep again, I kept going. It was the performance of a lifetime. I was fucking Milee into the next century. No, my partner wasn’t Milee. She was next. Yes, next. First was someone else. I didn’t know who she was. All I knew was pussy and cock. All I knew was pleasure taken and pleasure given. All I knew was cum. Exhausted. Fulfilled. Mind blank.

She said something; she leaned over and kissed my cheek. What was it? Who was she? Her features had transformed. Was this the same woman? I stood up, I turned; dizzy. I turned back. She looked at me. Concerned. Lines blurred. I muttered something, I waved a hand; that damned fly
was back at my ear. I stumbled forwards, I moved. There were bodies in front of me. Bodies to my side. Bodies everywhere. Milee was in there. She was in that group. My second chance. Yes! I took another step, I angled off to my right, one more step. Two.

A sound, a touch. Familiarity. Haze coming into focus. A face. Tomor’s. “Oh, hi,” I said. His mouth moved. He took my hand. Time for a chat. Wonderful. He led me further on, further in. We got to one of those cushions, a high one, a tall one. He stood behind me. He placed a hand on my shoulder. He ran a finger down my spine. A chill. I shivered. I bent forward, setting my outstretched hands on the chest-high rest, putting my elbows there instead, finding more support. His feet touched mine. His feet pushed my legs apart. A surprise. A shock. Something in my ass, something moving inside me. Tomor’s hands on my shoulders, his breathing getting heavy, a pushing from within. A most bizarre feeling. Pain, friction, but a tingling in the tip of my dick. It somehow felt good. It somehow felt terrible. My head spun. A horrible thought occurred to me. Was this how it was for Milee? A shock of sobriety as it dawned: We all use one another. Pleasure is never divorced from pain. Want, want, want. All we can see are our own wants. Tomor’s hands were on my hips now; he was pulling me backwards, driving deeper. I was
powerless to stop him. Did I want to stop him? Vomit curled up in my throat, hit my mouth. I swallowed it down. I lowered my head. I took it. He would finish soon. Just cum already I screamed inside. Role reversal. Anal bleeding. I would shit out his spunk the next day. There, a pat on the back. A release. An absence of internal presence. I leaned heavily on the stand, wiggled my feet forward, attempted to straighten myself fully upright. Another side to the orgy. How many were there?

I had no means for dealing with that. With it. With what just happened. I felt empty. I felt broken. I felt wrong. I felt out. I was still alive. I wasn’t alive. I wasn’t I. The cushion beneath me held me up. My weight rested fully on it. It was my only support. My body ached. My mind ached. What had happened? What was happening? I couldn’t see straight, that was the problem. Yes, that was it. I couldn’t see. I was mistaken. I had been mistaken. I wasn’t who I thought he was. He wasn’t who I thought I was. I wasn’t… No. No. No, no, that’s not it at all. No. I sank down, I sat on the ground. I sat. I sat with nowhere to go. I breathed. I looked. I opened my eyes. They had never shut. They were open still.

Someone sat next to me. Long hair. Titties. A woman, yes? Yes. A woman. She seemed to stare at me. I could
see her. A Cheshire cat. She reached out a hand. It was soft on my chest, it was gentle. Gentle. I needed gentle. I was grateful for gentle. She seemed familiar. They all did. They all looked the same now. Had I not been one of them? Were they us? When? Her hand rubbed up and down, gently yet. Softly yet. My cock was still hard. My cock was always hard. Happy slips? Hard slips. Hard. I must reciprocate. The circle. The inner circle. The circle of mandatory orgy. The circle of pleasure taken and pleasure given. I must give. I must.

My hand moved over. Mechanically. Automatically. Just a touch, just a soft touch. Just a beginning. Then more. A bit more. Slightly faster. She was getting wet. A finger inside. Yes. Pussy. A finger inside pussy. Two fingers. Yes. That was right. That was known. That was as ought to be. Who was she? She was becoming excited. So was I. It was right. It was who was I. It was redeeming, it was redemption. She shoved me down. She climbed on top. Backwards. She sucked. Gently yet. Softly yet. Up and down. I lifted my head. I put my hands on her hips. I licked. I sucked. Gently too. Softly too. I buried my face. Pussy. Yes. This was right. This was familiar. This was what I did. This was who I was. Who was I? Pussy. What?
I couldn’t cum. Nothing was happening. Nothing down there. I was hard but unresponsive. She was good, it wasn’t her fault, it was a malfunctioning. Would have to check the owner’s warranty, would have to send away for a new one. No; that one was good. There was no replacing that one; that much was for sure. I licked, I sucked. More so, deeper so, changing patterns, stimulating, stimulating. She was cumming. She was clearly cumming. I could taste it. Good for her. Good for me. Bad for me. Nothing doing; no matter. “Thank you, yes, goodbye.” She was breathing heavily but still willing to go at it, still willing to try, still willing to suck me off. I moved her over. I sat up. I smiled. I think I smiled. I couldn’t be sure. Who was she? That face; like another face. Like other faces. Eyes, nose, mouth. Familiar. Did I know you? Did you know me?

Stumbling, forward. Forward. To the next. To the next conquest. To conquest! My dick knew all. I spun and felt it swing. A mighty sword. I was the conqueror! I raised a fist high in the air. I saluted the heavens. I saluted the struggle. I saluted life. I saluted self. I was man! I was human! I was the unbeaten, I was the returning hero. Back at home with no one left to kill and nothing left to prove. The emptiness of the satisfied goal. The dearth of what remains afterwards. I grinned. Half-cocked, mad,
my mouth forcing the feeling into my eyes. I was here to fuck the futurelings into the past. My past. Feel it and be aware of it. Next victim. Next customer. Next new friend.

There, leaning over and eating out, ass in the air, head deep in cunt, partner lying back and rubbing her own nipples, partner loving it. Ass waving like an open invitation, the eater at the feast, the eater focusing on the sumptuous meal, the eaten too with eyes closed and an expression of deep concentration, feeling that joy. Neither aware of the world around, each only knowing each. Closer now I saw the eater had a slender frame, a straight frame, delicate neck silhouetted by shortish hair tucked around the ears, rear a bit flat. No matter. One woman on another – fantastic. I would join in, I would complete their little group. I would conquer all with my johnson, conquer the both of them. But first the eater, that one, that one knelt over, that one in the air. Hands on hips again, steadying, then one hand to guide myself in, one hand to insert Capitaine Pénis. Oh, it was tight. Yes, it was tight. It felt good, it felt great. I pushed in, I conquered. I looked down, I watched the woman on the far end of our chain. She had moved her right hand off her chest and was clasping the head of her pleasure giver, she was spreading her legs out as far as they would stretch, she was beckoning for ever more, she was delirious.
I pumped, I pumped. Yes. She was next for me. First the eater. I pumped. So right. Yes, so deep. I titled my head back, I gazed at the stars. They swooped in spirals, they danced across the sky. They cut trails of brilliant light behind them: yellow, white. My head was spinning; my head had already been spinning; now it was in time with them, with the stars. I pumped to the rhythm of the pirouetting stars. I pumped to the symphony in my brain.

Yes, I did. No. It was dangerous. I had him. I was resting now like he was. I was an open invitation. The circle knew no rules but fuck. The circle was merciless. The circle was never-ending. The circle looped and looped and looped. I must leave. I must save myself. I had nothing left to save.

I fell. I stood. I stepped. I fell again. I rose. I stumbled. I crawled. I made it. The stone of the sidewalk. The encircling ring. The barrier. The boundary. The savior. I kissed the rock. Mist poured over my eyes. Out of my eyes. Safety. Hand on knee I pushed myself upright. I staggered further forwards, I placed another hand on the interior wall. I had support. I was safe. I was out of the second lair, the second of nine. That analogy would not work. The stars swam overhead. The night was getting on. Getting on, ugh. The night was fading. Black ruled now but blue would come. A yellow star shone brightest. Was that East?

I rested meekly against the wall. I was nothing. It held me up. It supported me. It was so much more than I. I moved. I walked. One foot, the next. Around the circle. No, not this alcove; too many others. No space. No, not that one; can’t see through the mist. Grey haze. Bottles. Beer maybe. To calm me. Give me a bottle. My hand grasped

Not sick. No. Not sick but not me. Not functioning as I should. Not knowing how to function. A fish out of water. A fish gasping for air. It was easy to trick such a fish. I had been tricked.

I hadn’t been tricked. Everyone had been forthright. This was how it was, this was the way of things. I didn’t fit in. I couldn’t find my place. That was all. I couldn’t find my place in the one place I belonged. I always thought I belonged. I always thought I belonged to it. I had no idea. How could sex have betrayed me so?

A forkful of chocolate cake. A swig of beer. The heavens be praised; here I was, still alive. Tears rolled down my cheeks. No one would understand them. I wiped them away. The fly was back. I ignored its buzzing. I listened to its buzzing. It was telling me something. What? My head fell onto my chest. I was so tired. So tired. Sleep would bring a new day. Sleep would show all that wrong, all that mistaken. Yes, sleep.

It was not to be had. Not here. Not yet. I looked out, eyes drawn; the circle moved, heaved. A single living organism, an amoeba sending out its pseudopods, multifaceted multipronged tendrils of flesh on flesh, grabbing, poking, sucking, inserting, exploring, exploring,
exploring. They must worship cum, the sick bastards. They surely assigned it all levels of holy relevance. I had freely given mine to them but now I wanted it back. All back. Give it back to me. The cake was good. The cake was messiah. Sugar was what I needed. Fuel for the brain. I hadn’t been thinking right, I hadn’t been right in the head. It was all so obvious. Ahh, beer. Your calming tranquility. You are the yin to whiskey’s yang, the maiden who completes her man. No, I mustn’t think in those terms. They had betrayed me. My still erect me had betrayed me. I sat naked with a stiffy sky high and wanted nothing to do with it. How many hours had I spent tugging on that thing? It had directed me, it had pointed itself, it had honed in on that which I had never consciously considered. Was that a message from my subconscious? Doubt. I was little more than doubt. But that doubt proved that I still was. They hadn’t taken me, they hadn’t beaten me, I was still here and I was still alive. I would show them.

Time for another beer, time to plan my escape. I needed more fuel. I needed more meat. Only do not talk to me. I had no time for pleasantries. It had become a mission. An escape. An escape from prison. Milee. Judas. Your dry pussy kiss wasn’t even worth thirty pieces of silver. I was better than all that. Yes. You thought you were playing
games, but the game had been played on you. A tool, a piece, a pawn in the great show, the puppet masters pulling all the strings. They controlled you but not me. I was free. I was free and I would show my freedom. Did they really think I would stick around being a farmer and take their abuse year after year? No. This would be my first and last time with such cannibals.

“Out!” I screamed, standing over another emptied beer bottle next to an empty whiskey bottle. Had I screamed that? People were staring at me. Let them stare. Vultures. I took two, I took three beer bottles. They were mine, no one could have them. Hands off! Hands off and don’t even think about touching me. I might be naked and my shining goldenrod might be glorious but it is not yours. It had taught me more than you knew. I had conquered it. It was killing me. Hands off!

There, the barbecue. To sit again, yes. I rolled my head at the chef, eyes half closed, no doubt bloodshot. He would understand. He wore an apron. He was not one of the future Cro-Magnons, he was not the Neanderthal they stupidly took me for. He was clothed. At least, he had an apron on. It protected him while he grilled. My clothes would protect me. No more deception. No more falsities. Lie free. No, do not lie down again. Stay upright. Stand.
Back to the wall, yes, back to the wall. Protect yourself. Is she looking at you? Stop! I am not here for you, don’t even think about taking me into that cursed circle. All I wanted was a steak. Maybe two.

Fuel. Meat and beer. That was even better than cake and beer. They say sweets don’t mix with booze; they are so right. What a terrible idea. That buzzing. What? Just speak clearly, little fly! Yes, I see, yes. Escape. That’s right. That is what I want. That is what I must do. That was my mission, that was what drove me. More meat first though. Another steak, please. The words would not come out as they should; broken sounds, garbled nonsense. That fly had gotten into my mouth. That fly was using me to project itself, to boom out its tiny voice. No matter, my empty plate would suffice. All the language I needed. Language. I had learned their language and I would use it against them. I would pay back all the liars and crooks who had stolen from me, who had taken my image, who had taken my cum. My precious holy seed. I had cum inside me. I had Tomor’s cum inside me. I shivered. It was awful. I leaned back, I sat back down. I closed my eyes. A thud. A sound. A clattering. Eyes opened. Smiling face. So friendly. Fake. Fake. I say a fake. Another pawn, another blind fool. Handing me my plate. Handing me more food. Have you poisoned this, you
toad? No matter, my body could withstand it. My body had hardened. I was impenetrable.


Dawn broke. A golden yellow haze lifted the veil of night. Black to a soft shining blue. Almost at once people began filing out. Men to their exit, women to theirs. It must have been time for another show. Just like a hot spring. Fools. Tools. They hadn’t fooled me. I would exit and I would be free. I broke their chains. I would break them. Their sick séance hadn’t worked. Their perverted festival was dead. Dead to me. It worked on them but not on me. I was not dead I was new. A new me. Reborn. Rechristened. Resurrected. All glory to me; look on me and tremble.

A touch on my shoulder. I forced my head upright, my eyes open. Had I slept? Had I been sleeping? Tomor. Another accessory of the enemy, another plaything of their evil. It wasn’t his fault and it wasn’t Milee’s. They were being used. They had been deceived. Roles assigned.

“It’s all over,” he said. I could see him looking at my cock.

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It was still hard. His wasn’t. I wondered why. It was a relief though, a soothing balm. He couldn’t hurt me in that condition. “Time to go.”

He motioned towards the exit, back to the showers, back to the locker room. Yes, it was time to go. Time to be gone. Escape.
Chapter Five

“Are you sure?” Tomor asked.

“You do know what you’re doing, right?” Milee added.

I did. At least I thought I did. I wanted out, I knew that, and it seemed like my best, and maybe my only chance. Fortune had smiled on me in that this year the quota had not been filled, and since the remaining slots would be forcibly assigned – I assumed temporarily – prior to the closing of the harvest period’s moon cycle, and with it the end of the calendar year, if I were to volunteer then it was now or never. The only time, my one shot. As I understood the process, once the fast-approaching Day of Choosing took place a new year would begin and the quota would reset; and that new quota might even be filled on the very same day, depending on the others in the graduating class involved, their choices, and the random order for making those choices that was to be assigned. If that happened, if the quota did get filled, then I would be forced to take what was left; and there was a very good chance that “what was left” would mean becoming a farmer. For life. Milee had heard from a friend who knew someone on the Council that there were hardly any non-farming jobs available this year. Truth be
told though, even if there were plenty of other work to go around I would still have wanted out. The prospects of a bachelor pad in the city and a cruisy, lazily-done gig had significantly lost their luster after the Harvest Festival; everything, really, that I had put stock in had lost its luster after the Harvest Festival. It was truly amazing what a difference an event like that could make; an Event in the sense that my professors used to use the word.

I slept for nearly two days after that ill-fated party, and when I awoke I did feel somewhat better. Still broken but better. I found it very difficult to sort through my feelings. I was filled with guilt and regret, but the anger that had been so strong in me at and immediately after the party had given way to self-blame and self-loathing. I tried to convince myself that I had been raped and that I was a victim, but I knew it wasn’t that simple. Maybe I had been raped, maybe I hadn’t. Maybe I had raped – that hit me harder. It was an orgy, and everyone there seemed to know the rules. Hadn’t I? I certainly wasn’t blind to what I saw going on, and I certainly never stopped to question what was freely given nor to take what I wanted.

Milee came to mind often in those days. She had grudgingly let me have my way, let me have her, and I had in turn grudgingly let Tomor have his way, let him
have me. It could just as well have been another man; all things considered I was probably lucky that it hadn’t happened earlier in the night or more often. I didn’t know if he had sought me out and I didn’t ask, but I did know that I had sought Milee out and despite all the signs of her only halfway-given consent I had carried through with what I thought I wanted.

What I thought I wanted. So much of what I thought I wanted seemed mistaken after that night; that is, after everything that I had put into myself had worn off and I was able to think a bit straighter. The fullness of my entire way of life had been shoved in my face by that one drawn-out incident, and I was forced to understand that all that I had taken to be normal and rational about the way I had lived was from others’ points of view very far from that. Living abroad as often and as long as I had that was a lesson that had settled into me intellectually, but I had still always somehow assumed that people weren’t all that different and that perspectives were culturally-bound veneers; the Harvest Festival showed me that modes of thought could go just as deep as biology. I found myself realizing that I had been a predator, the type that used and disposed of people the same way I had used and disposed of so much in my life. Bodies that I had tossed into the trash next to the office water cooler. Drink, cum, crumple,
drop, back alone at my desk. Somehow the notions of respect and endurance had been lost on me, I knew only pleasure and that only in the short-term; and I applied that ethos, if you could call it that, to both objects and persons. I had viewed the others in my life through the singular lens of what they could give me. The orgy was that magnified a thousand-fold. People didn’t even talk to each other in the circle, they just got off. Repeatedly and with anyone. That should have been heaven to me; it was exactly what I was after. Was after. Not anymore. Reality is a cruel teacher and I had learned my lesson many times over. I determined that it was time for a re-start, a new orientation; it was time to change my entire self. Of course I had no idea how to do that, and that was a big part of the reason why I made the choice I did.

The monastery. I thought that if any place could fix me it would be there. I had never been religious before and wasn’t looking to become religious either, but the way I understood it that was no obstacle to monastery life. Neither Milee nor Tomor seemed to know very much about the place, but I gathered that it functioned as both the city’s scientific and engineering research and development center, and its arts and entertainment hub. I knew that there I would be tested for my natural abilities, whatever they might be, and then put into a program to
develop those abilities. That sounded to me like an advanced study course, a bit like how I imagined graduate school must have been in my own time. All of the music that we had been going to hear or the plays we had been going to see were performed by people from the monastery. I knew too that the new model of service robots had similarly been designed there, and that the upkeep on the irrigation systems was undertaken by a specific section within the monastery. The people tucked away up there were the specialists it seemed, and since I recalled Milee saying that the monks couldn’t have children I supposed it also served as a default population check. I think I even might have been told that by someone. It was yet another facet of the place. Right then I wanted, needed, to figure out how to be better and thought that a rigorous time of mental, and possibly physical, training would be the way to do that. I was inwardly crying out for help.

It wasn’t that I blamed or faulted Milee or Tomor or that I didn’t want to become like them. For their parts they seemed very much at peace with their lives and their places, they appeared to enjoy the seasonal work patterns they went through, the quiet evenings they spent at home, and the little bits and pieces that are part of anyone’s day-to-day in the environments they inhabit. They clearly
had no problems with what went on at the Harvest Festival and didn’t even really talk about it. The most they had discussed on the way home afterward was a new composting technique that Milee had heard about from someone in the juices and smoothies alcove at the party. Tomor was very interested in that. For them having random sex with anyone and everyone in sight once a year was completely normal; they had probably been doing it since puberty. And since no one wore any condoms or other obvious birth control devices I assumed that they equally didn’t care about Milee getting pregnant from a stranger or that everyone was on something that prevented unwanted pregnancies. It was a question I suddenly felt uncomfortable asking, though I did learn that sexually transmitted diseases were thankfully a thing of the past. My past, of course, as was pointed out to me, but anyway nothing I needed to ever worry about.

I had plenty to otherwise worry about; hence my choice for the monastery. Structure was what I wanted, at least for a while I thought, and a routine that I could set my clock to and that would thereby set me straight. I told myself that maybe after that point I could launch back into the city and do it well; maybe by then I could get my head on solidly enough that I would know how to deal with what seemed like the inevitable life as a farmer, and
how to handle the annual orgies when they did come up. Maybe I could even learn how to enjoy them because clearly everyone else seemed to do just that. It was a matter of an education that I lacked by having arrived from the outside. It was a matter not just of acculturation – that I could have gotten simply by going through the motions long enough –, but of making the deep mental changes that were called for. I had to start to see the world like one of them if I were to live healthily and successfully as one of them, and the way to do that was to get to where they stopped being “them” for me and started being “us”. Such was my thinking anyway.

I informed my hosts that I did know what I was doing, that I was sure, that there was nothing more to discuss, and then, as with so much else over those preceding few months, I let them take care of the details for me. The proper authorities would be informed, I assumed, the proper paperwork – or rather electronic data – would be sent and processed, and the proper preparations would be undertaken. I would be on my way. And like the well-oiled machine that the city so often seemed, that was just what happened.

Two days after sharing my decision with them I awoke and entered the kitchen as usual to find Milee holding
back tears and Tomor forlornly pushing some cut eggplant and asparagus around in his frying pan, cooking up the usual for us. Did their behavior mean that everything had been readied and I would soon be gone? I thought that it must have; yet the display of emotion was something I was unused to from them. I really had no idea that they cared, especially Milee.

“Today’s the day,” she said. “You’re off to the monastery. Everything’s been prepared ahead for you; you’ll just need to show up.”

“Thank you so much,” I replied, genuinely moved by her sadness. “But don’t worry, I’ll see you again soon. I owe both of you so much and I hope to find a way to repay you. Maybe if all goes well I can write a play or compose a song that you’ll come and enjoy a performance of in one of the parks.”

“I hope so, I’d like that,” Milee said. Her face betrayed a deep doubt that such would ever occur, but she said the right thing.

“When you first showed up I thought for sure that you would be trouble,” Tomor said, turning away from the burner to face me. “But after all I learned a lot from you.
When we heard that you somehow arrived here from the past, well, that put a lot of things into place, our history started to make a lot more sense to me. I’ve been reminded to be so grateful that we found the way to live in the manner that we do, and in a way we have your era to thank for that. If you hadn’t been so horribly irresponsible we never would have rebuilt from scratch. Even knowing that though, I have still been able to realize – through you – that, as individuals, your people were a lot like ours. I really hope you make the best of it over there.”

I smiled inwardly at that. Good old Tomor, he had always known how to turn a compliment into an insult and then back into a compliment. His careful form of candor was a nice match for Milee’s more direct style; I supposed that they really did suit each other. I wished them a beautiful baby as soon as they were ready.

“Thank you Tomor,” I said, reaching out to shake his hand. “Really, for everything. I don’t know where I’d be without you.”

His handshake wasn’t the best but then I thought that he might have been out of practice; I hadn’t noticed a lot of handshaking, but then I hadn’t been looking. I had

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noticed that bows could still be spotted, but nothing like it was in the Tokyo I knew. I turned to shake Milee’s hand as well but she took mine in both of hers and kind of touched it to her forehead. It was a lovely gesture.

“You’ll need to leave right after breakfast,” Milee informed me. “It’s a long way to the monastery and you’re required to walk the entire route. Tomor packed a lunch and some extras for you in case you don’t make it there by evening, and I gave you an additional bottle of water; I know how much you like to use it.” She winked a little at that, smiling slyly. “You can take whatever else you’d like with you, but keep in mind that you’ll be carrying your bag all day and that all necessities will be provided once you arrive and get settled.”

I thought about that for a moment; what did I think was worth taking? My work clothes, certainly, would need to go – they were my only remaining connection to the increasingly distant “my time” of the early twenty-first century – but other than them maybe just a couple of the books that I had come to enjoy from my study of Language, along with my notebooks as well, of course. I had been so busy learning how to speak, read, and write, that I hadn’t taken up any of the hobbies that my hosts filled their time with, nor had I any inclination to include
the non-study items that had filled my days – especially those horridly retro gardening tools – in what I took. For me, for the time being I reasoned, farming was thankfully finished. What else?

It occurred to me that a memento might be nice but I couldn’t think of what would be appropriate. As the time to depart had so suddenly arrived, I found that I was a bit sorrowful at saying goodbye to these two, and also to the others like Bofim and Rolm that I had gotten to know a little from our work in the fields. Well, perhaps not sorrowful; wistful might be a better description of what I felt as I was certainly more than ready to put it all behind me. Too much had changed within me over the previous few days; the world that presented itself had become one that was entirely different from the world I had interacted with before the Harvest Festival. The externals were of course all the same, and certainly for Tomor and Milee all was business as usual; for them even the Harvest Festival had been business as usual. But for me the world had turned; what was “me” had been broken and the new “me” was only just beginning to take shape. It would need time and guidance. I would need time and guidance. I was still trying to become the new “me”, and that would require effort and patience. Identity is so profoundly emotional.
Seeing Milee like that as we prepared to part, the thought crossed my mind that her attitude towards me at the orgy was likely not a rejection of me as a person at all; she was probably simply not in the mood to have sex at the time I caught her. She had been relaxing and appeared to be at rest; she might well have reacted that way to anyone who had broken her tranquil moment. The rules seemed to be that if you remained in the circle you were fair game and so she had grudgingly obliged. On the other hand, if she had felt anything for me beyond friendship, or perhaps a duty to care for the lost puppy that I in some ways was, my approach, even if it interrupted her quietude, would have been met with at least a partially warmer response. I reasoned that I had learned something in that moment, another hint at what I, as an external, might be to her in her world as she looked out from behind those stunning green eyes. Eyes that had pinned me altogether differently from how I had pinned them; but not negatively, no. Well, perhaps not. Sex, however, is never purely mechanical, and that was perhaps the genius and the flaw of the Harvest Festival. For better or for worse sex shifted relationships, it bound people, it turned things emotionally. If the physical act weren’t renewed those effects could and did fade, but the nature of the party meant that such had at least a once a year shot at being maintained, and again for the better or for the worse.
Tomor had not approached me after that night in any way differently from how he had before, but there was still something hanging there between us – for me, anyway – that made me think he might have viewed it as a deepening of our comradeship, a physical expression of mutual respect rather than dominance. Prior to that I had been so used to being the sexual aggressor, the spear-wielder, the conqueror, that I had never even considered how it might be for the one on the receiving end. I took it badly and still took it badly, it remained a horrid memory for me; but in that moment of insight about how Milee might have seen things I also saw how Tomor might have seen things, and that granted some distance from my own reactions. No, no item would represent all that for me. No item could. What I would carry with me to the monastery would mostly be memories.

“Well, let’s eat,” Tomor said, a tinge sadly. “Breakfast is all ready.”

The meal was a mostly silent one; we exchanged forced smiles across the table and ate slowly, each lost in our own thoughts. This was to be it, _au revoir_, until then, whenever then might be. I realized that I wasn’t terribly sad about our separating; resigned, and in some ways
relieved, was a better fit for how I felt. I thought that my decision was for the best, and although there were definitely some elements of the life that I had been living that I would miss they were neither numerous nor extensive. I thought that mostly I would just miss being around those two, though I knew that I would also be very comforted not to have to be around them; that is, the new me would be comforted by that. Long proximity has that double-edged inuring effect – becoming both attaching and repelling, regardless of the object involved. I had grown used to always being in their company and it would of course hurt to no longer be so, but it had also come to sting to be so near to ones who had hurt me – the old me, but me – and I them, in ways that I didn’t know were possible. Even with my self-perceived insights into how they might have understood their actions, those very actions which had cut me so deeply, that feeling remained.

It naturally would have been different had we been a formal family – in whatever sense – but I was and always had been an outsider, a house guest, a temporary fixture. This day would have come in one way or another sooner or later; in fact it would have come very soon, following the Day of Choosing and my housing assignment; only then I supposed that I would have remained in the city
and that would have made it all feel very different. No matter, I sighed inwardly, there we were and it was time to say farewell. I was ready for that.

“You’ll need to take the South Gate out of the city,” Tomor said, instructive to the last. “The road to the monastery heads to the northwest, and there are a few points along the way where you’ll need to turn onto other roads.”

He paused, a look of deep concern crossed his face, and then, keeping his eyes downcast and seemingly speaking to his bowl of rice and vegetables, he continued, “I don’t know how to tell you where or when you’ll have to turn. I can’t give you good directions.” At that he glanced up at me, pained, “The whole place seems to purposely shroud itself in mystery. All we could get out of the monastery ombudsman currently stationed with the councilors is that there are markers along the way and that you would recognize them. How you’re supposed to do that and what they’re supposed to tell you is anyone’s guess.”

“It’s so stupid,” Milee burst in. “Of course it’s far and of course it’s isolated and of course you have to walk there, but there’s no reason that I can see for them not giving you a map of some kind.”
“The ombudsman said the journey would put you in the right frame of mind,” Tomor said. “It’s supposed to help you transition to monastery life.”

“If being confused and tired is the right frame of mind then it will certainly do that,” Milee added with an extra dose of her usual forthrightness. “Are you sure this is what you want? Well, it’s too late now anyway.”

I was sure, and I was prepared to undertake the walk and the bewilderment and the fatigue that no doubt lay ahead, but Milee’s afterthought on it being too late did give me pause. Too late? How could anything ever be too late until it had already been done?

“I am, yes, thank you again for your concern,” I said. “But I’ll be fine. Though I imagine that I’m likely to get lost once or twice. Do you know about how far it is?”

“Something like twenty kilometers,” Tomor said. “It’s on the river.”

Twenty kilometers northwest from what was roughly the Iidabashi to Shinjuku area of my time would make that river the Arakawa River. I wondered a little what it was
called now and if the monastery didn’t have a different term for it. That river, when it reached Tokyo, flowed through the eastern parts of the city, which had become another city altogether; separately organized and separately run. Back in my time I had been to barbecues on its banks once or twice, and the Asakusa and surrounding areas in Taito Ward, so popular with tourists, skirted its edges as well. It was a beautiful, wide, slow-flowing river.

Twenty kilometers would be a walk, a good half day I estimated, all things considered. Allowing for the odd wrong turn and doubling back. I was glad that at least, in all the centuries between the present and my birth time, measurements hadn’t been changed. That made everything so much easier, one less adjustment I had to make. I supposed it would have been near impossible to improve on the metric system and that was the reason for its continued use; thank you once again dear France, where would the world be without you?

I knew, of course, that having been to the river in my time was no guarantee of having any advantage in finding the monastery; too much had changed in the three hundred-plus years that had passed, and the location on the river would no doubt not be exactly where I had
visited anyway. Additionally, I would have taken a train there, it would have been a mostly underground journey, or even an entirely underground journey depending on my point of departure, and I would have emerged from the station with helpful maps and signs posted. All of those were complicating factors, yet I somehow felt hopeful that things would work out.

The mental approach to finding, to journeys, that this future-yet-present time had came from a different perspective than that of the Tokyo I remembered; theirs – ours, I supposed that I must start getting used to being a “we” – had a manner of thinking that didn’t stress convenience above all else. Some aspects of life were even made more difficult on purpose, such as farming with those ridiculous archaic tools. The idea seemed to be that effort is healthy, and that a bit of labor is as good for the mind as it is for the body. Or rather, that physical labor is a part of life and ought to be so, our bodies are to be employed in ways other than how our heads are when sitting at a desk or hunched over a glowing device. I sensed a general movement in thought away from the mind-body disconnect that had plagued us for at least five hundred years as we twenty-first century-ites stared at our screens and stood listlessly on escalators and moving sidewalks. Not that I expected Tomor or Milee would
articulate it in just that way if asked; it was more of a background adjustment in general outlook that I suspected had taken place. Whatever the case was, it did appear that, based on Tomor and Milee’s comments, the idea of locating, of “discovering” – and not just of arriving – went doubly for the monastery. I wondered what else I would be put through on my personal path to betterment. I felt ready for anything that they could throw at me; I was chomping at the bit.

“That will be nice, I’m sure the scenery will be lovely,” I said, quietly finishing my meal and moving to put the dishes in the sink the way that I knew Tomor preferred them to be. I didn’t see any need to drag the goodbye out more than it already had been. “I’ll just go put some things together to take with me. What should I do with what I don’t want to carry?”

“You can just leave them in your room,” Milee said. That was quite possibly the first time she had used the phrase “your room” to refer to their spare bedroom. “We’ll keep them for a while and then maybe recycle them if we don’t hear from you,” she continued. Her face was pensive and she too now avoided eye contact.

I smiled, a little emptily, and then silently excused myself
and walked down the short hallway to the room that I had occupied since that dizzying first day when all I could think about was ending the throbbing pain lodged behind my right eye. I hadn’t had a headache like that since, but I had certainly had my share of ups and downs. Common fare for a traveler, and I assumed that further helpings were surely in store as I moved again to a new locale and a new way of life. I was used to transitioning; that never made it any easier but I had learned to relish the excitement just beforehand. Mostly that was what I was feeling.

A knock on the door startled me. I had left it open and didn’t think anyone would have reason to stop by while I packed. Glancing behind me and seeing that it was Milee standing there was a further surprise.

“I brought your sack,” she said, looking like she wanted to say much more. “Your water and food are already at the bottom so if you put something heavy in there be careful.” That was the kind of advice you gave when you didn’t know what to say.

“I will, thank you,” I said, reaching out to take the bag from her extended hand.
She sighed, gazed about the room, crossed then uncrossed her arms, and finally said, “I’m sorry about how I treated you at the Harvest Festival. It was just bad timing, you know, and those drugs we take, well, sometimes they have an odd effect on me. I was so tired right then, too tired to even leave the circle. All those people, it can be exhausting at times. The community needs it, I know, but sometimes…” She looked at me with an expression of remorse that I had never seen on her, a brave and commanding person humbled from within.

“I understand completely, please don’t worry about it,” I offered, standing to meet her face to face.

Her eyes, those almond-shaped emeralds that so enthralled me, watered a bit as she replied, “Thank you, that’s very kind.” She spun a lock of hair around a finger, gazed at the floor and then immediately back to me, and added, “We could try again now if you like, before you leave.”

I was shocked. Never would I have expected to hear that. I had thought that other than at the Harvest Festival sex was approached the way I had always assumed most mature adults approached it: as best kept between a couple when that couple was in any kind of serious and
long-term relationship. I certainly didn’t think the people around me were prudes or anything – they did after all have an annual massive sex block party – but once a pair had established itself I understood, or presumed, them to view the pairing the way I did the few times I had been in committed relationships, with all the pluses and minuses that such brings. Yet here she was, Milee, my obsession for all these long days, weeks, months, offering to go to bed with me right there in the home she shared with Tomor.

I thought first that there must have been a catch of some kind – would Tomor join us? –, then I thought that she must have discussed it with him and gotten his approval or acquiescence beforehand, if such were even necessary, a detail I was forced to admit I had no idea about. How could I possibly respond to such a proposal? I looked at her, at those eyes, those rounded cheeks, the soft point of her chin above that delicate neck, hair that had grown out, still framing her face but now touching her shoulders, the perfectly centered nose whose arch curved inward in the most beguiling way; suddenly I knew. It wasn’t so much of a decision as it was an awakening. The time for all that had passed; I was already someone else, I was me in a way I hadn’t been me even a week before. A break had occurred and it had been a solid, definitive split. The
world – my world – had shifted. For me to sleep with her after that would no longer be genuine, it would be a betrayal to myself and to how we had come to relate to each other.

Whatever the reasons for the way she had treated me at the orgy, and in light of the aims I had for seeking her out in the first place, that forced interaction, that horrible scene of selfishness on my part and contempt on hers; it had taught us both about ourselves. It had taught me a great deal, at any rate, and that she should come to me in the way she now did indicated that it had for her as well. Perhaps there had been some attraction for – or curiosity about – me that she had been repressing and that had unexpectedly surfaced, triggered by the circumstances of my imminent departure. Or perhaps it was simply one of those situations where things just never clicked, a might-have-been that remained a never-was until it was too late.

Regardless of what the case actually was, the moment was gone and my own view of Tomor did play a part in that. Having learned about myself through the mirror of being used – if that was what it was, which I did doubt – I found that my respect for him and the respect I wished to have as a human being was one more reason that I
couldn’t take Milee up on her offer; as old-fashioned as that might sound. But more than anything my interest in her sexually had simply waned; my interest in sex generally seemed to have waned. I wasn’t sure though and couldn’t think clearly about it standing there in a bedroom partially decorated and prepared for a future child, standing there in the middle of getting ready to leave. I wasn’t sure about that, but I was sure on how I ought to respond to Milee.

“Milee,” I said, very slowly, “you are an extremely beautiful person and an extremely beautiful woman. Anyone on earth would be thrilled by your offer. But for me, for right now, I can’t. I need to go and I need to learn and I need to make myself into the person I think that I want to be. With luck and with effort I might grow into someone as good as you are. Please understand that I don’t mean to say no to you, just to say no to that here today.”

She nodded, smiled a little, and touched me on the shoulder, squeezing softly. Then wordlessly she turned and went back towards the kitchen, leaving me to my task.

It didn’t take long, just a few minutes, and then I was at

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the front door calling out my final farewell to Tomor in
the kitchen and Milee wherever she had gone. I suddenly
felt an urgency to leave, to arrive, to start anew. Going to
the monastery was the first real decision I had made since
I so mysteriously showed up here and I had a desire to
truly own it, to embrace it and march forward proudly
with it. “Thank you again, so much, for everything. You
probably saved my life. I would have been completely
lost here without the two of you.”

That was true; without them I likely would have remained
in that rice paddy for at least another day until the
migraine or whatever it was had subsided, wasting away
under that blazing sun, becoming more and more
dehydrated. People talk – or anyway used to talk – about
Good Samaritans, and although in my experiences
travelling I had never stopped encountering them it
seemed to me that their absolute necessity for the smooth
functioning of society was universally underrated, a
tendency in judgment that I had previously been guilty of
myself. No matter how well a social system is set up there
are always plenty of cracks to fall through, especially if
you don’t speak the language fluently – or at all – and are
of a minority group. Those cracks are the domain of the
Good Samaritans, and I was truly grateful to my hosts for
that. I supposed that with everyone on earth speaking the
same language, and with the racial mixing that had been so thoroughly achieved, the issues that faced linguistic and ethnic minorities when I was growing up and as an adult were far less pronounced, but regions will always have those specialty flavors we call culture and that meant the outsider would never really go away. Outsiders need Good Samaritans. Rushing to get away though I was I still recognized that I was unaccustomed to being so wholly incapable of paying a person or persons back, of returning a good deed; and if I were to be honest with myself I would have to further admit that I was unaccustomed to really feeling the need to do so. Words would not suffice for Milee and Tomor yet I could offer them nothing more.

“Please, come and visit me when you can,” I said, a little louder and still alone at the door. “I want to do something for both of you.”

Tomor appeared and looked ill at ease as he approached the apartment’s entryway. “I don’t think we’re allowed to. Remember, you’re joining the monastery.”

“Joining” he said, not “going to”; there was perhaps an important nuance there, and I wondered if I wasn’t forgetting something important. “Well,” I continued, “I
will come to you then, and find some way to repay you for all you’ve done for me.”

“That’s not necessary,” Tomor said, waving the idea away.

“You already have, really,” Milee added, now joining him from their bedroom. “In your own strange, uncivilized way you taught us a lot.”

Tomor nodded. “You really did make the past come alive for us. Living with you and watching you struggle and grow these past months has been an incredible experience. You reconfirmed all my convictions about the way we live. Not only here in the city and in the general sense, but also how Milee and I specifically have chosen to live. Your early habits were the perfect example of what not to do. It would be easy for us to slip back into that lazy and mindless drifting through the everyday, but you were a constant reminder to stay vigilant about ourselves, to choose our lifestyle rather than to have it chosen for us by the things we filled our lives with. We should be thanking you.”

“And we do,” Milee said with the most subtle smile.
I had no idea how to appropriately respond to that but I had learned not to be offended by such comments. It was simply how those two were; Milee especially minced no words. I had been myself and they had taken value from that; it might have been enough. I still felt obligated to do something, and would keep that in mind for the future, but in that moment I simply bowed my head and said, “I will treasure you both always. And I’m sure we’ll meet again.” I pushed the door open behind me and turned to offer one last silent thanks: a smile with an awkward bow.

They stood and waited at the door to see me out, waving and smiling in return through watering eyes. Mine were not quite dry either. The door closed and the building’s hallway echoed the finality it intoned.

I thought about taking the stairs down – walking had been firmly ingrained in me – but then decided that I would be getting enough exercise with the hike ahead and so I rode the clean and clinically white, unadorned elevator for the last time. As I exited and made my way across the foyer my mind went back to the first time I had crossed that threshold; it somehow seemed to me that I was much younger then. Every time in my life that I had arrived somewhere new I had reverted to a twenty year-old, reveling in the unknown and acting out in ways I knew I
could only get away with due to my sheer ignorance of *everything*. Those were always wonderfully fun and full times. They couldn’t last, and never did, but the memories stayed with me. This time around I had been chaperoned and that had cramped my style somewhat, but given the circumstances – the shockingly bizarre circumstances – I could imagine no better way to have put down the shallow roots that I had. By that point having learned my way around a little, and more importantly having become able to find my way around the still unknown, I determined that it was high time for me to claim my independence. I rested a hand on the building’s exterior door, glad that it wasn’t automatic. This push, this last tiny physical effort, would propel me out from all that had been chosen for me and into all that I chose for myself.

Choice, yes, we never realize just what a crucial part of life it is. It occurred to me that that was something I could certainly teach the people of the future-present; after all, they had their entire careers determined by the fully random needs of the city they happened to be born in, and those courses were moreover dictated by a lottery system that ranked who got what and in what order. I had cut myself out of that process, I had made the fullest choice available, and once I had polished myself up at the monastery I determined that I would set about teaching
the importance of choice. Who knows, I mused, maybe that was the reason I had been sent – yes, sent –; maybe I really was an actor in a scheme whose hidden depths could never even be guessed at.

I judged that I really did have that much to offer, that much to give, that much significance – much more than just being an example of what not to do and be; whatever Tomor thought and however well he had meant that. After all, I told myself, I was no longer the same Frank Tollman who took excessively long showers and pined for his smartphone apps. I was already a new man, a man on his way to being an even better and stronger new man, and I would make the full best use of that. In time, I dreamed, I might be remembered as a reformer, as the new blood that offered bold thinking from a fresh perspective. That was an ambition far better than my previous one of lazing about and screwing around in the city. It was an ambition that would take a great deal of study and effort on my part – I did understand that – but after all, that was exactly what I was setting out to do. I squared my jaw, pushed the building’s door open, and stepped onto the street. Alone. Once more. Wonderfully. With all that I cared to possess in a sack slung over my shoulder. A man reborn setting out, facing an open horizon. A bright and glorious future ahead.

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Milee and Tomor had said to exit the city through the South Gate and take the road that led northwest. That would be no problem; the first phase of my adventure could very easily be done. From that gate I was then to somehow recognize and follow the signs that would guide me to the monastery. Based on our daily trips to and from the fields I guessed that the road system would not be overly complex and therefore the decisions required would be minimal. With all of Sheenda City’s connections to other communities maintained primarily by rail lines, and with the total absence of motorized vehicles, the transit system was a greatly simplified one compared to how Tokyo’s had been, and I felt confident in my understanding of it. There was only one broad boulevard out from the North Gate leading to the network of farming areas, and it was easy enough to see where you needed to turn to take the side paths to your specific paddy. How complicated could it be to exit from the other side of the city? I was sure that I would be fine.

I made my way to the main street that the tram tracks formed the center of and turned to follow them south to the city limits, without actually taking the tram itself. The choice not to ride wasn’t one that I put a particular amount of thought into: at the time I just felt like strolling
through the city a little before I left it for what I assumed might be some time. I knew that if I later wanted a final ride on the tram I could always hop on at one of the stations between Tomor and Milee’s and the end of the line heading south. Since I never had to pay to board it my attitude towards the tram had become very bucolic; it was there when I needed it or even only vaguely desired it, there was never any onus to make use of it or to try and maximize how far I could get for a certain minimal price or the like. I felt similarly about all of the city’s amenities, and had observed the same attitude in my hosts. We could have gone out for every meal if we had wanted to, but there is something very satisfying about eating food cooked at home either by yourself or by someone you lived with. I thought that such must be an aspect of human nature.

On the days when we hadn’t worked in the fields Tomor, Milee, and I had often spent time in cafés, museums, parks, or one of the entertainment areas, but we had always come and gone as we pleased and stayed only as long as we felt like: dining, drinking, or doing until we were satisfied. It was incredibly liberating, and the depth of it hit me as it hadn’t before, no doubt simply because I was leaving it. I supposed that such a footloose and carefree lifestyle would have to disappear for the time
being; I imagined the monastery would have at least some kind of structured routine and quite possibly a rigidly structured one. No matter, I told myself, I was going there to improve, and once I thought that that had been accomplished I would take my leave and find my place back in the city.

I at last had a goal, a path, and a dream – a new dream that had even just occurred to me: spreading the message of the beauty of choice –, I just didn’t know how I would be able to go about it. Walking helps thinking though, and so I thought. If the monastery were indeed the city’s source of intellectual work then perhaps I would need to stay based at the monastery so that I could focus on the kind of educational speaking tour I suddenly had in mind; but time would tell on that. One thing that struck me was that if I did leave the monastery to live in the city again I would have to take up one of the city’s officially assigned jobs, and that might hamper me from accomplishing what I had in mind. Nevertheless, and however things eventually worked themselves out, for the foreseeable future I knew that making a decision on such details could wait.

The familiar rows of cleanly laid-out and organized white buildings clipped past as I strolled on. It was still early
enough that the first floor shops and markets were just beginning to open; the sun had started its climb but wasn’t yet nearing either its maximum height nor output. We were approaching winter, I knew, but to me it felt more like a very late summer – maybe the coolest part of the day of a late summer evening; it was probably around twelve to fourteen degrees. It was very pleasant to be out in that, and to be moving, to be feeling the thrill of the adventure ahead and the new discoveries that I sensed lay waiting to be made. What would I learn? What would I undergo? What would I end up doing? There would be a test of my natural abilities – I remembered that aspect quite clearly – and based on that test I would be tracked into an extensive training program where I would develop, stretch, and grow those abilities to eventually be put to use; for the good of the city, presumably. What would my contribution be? I had never quite found my niche back in the life I led, the life and times that I was born into. My life now, I supposed, was still of course the life I was born into, but living here amongst these people in this new era made me realize just how much the external accidents of the world we tumble into mold and shape the days that we spend on this good Earth. Not the person we are or we become; no, that I thought was always up to us, but when you are faced by pressures like the constant need to earn money just to stay alive then it seemed to me that your
options would always be somewhat limited. Back in my birth era I couldn’t have done what I wanted to even if I had known what it was that I wanted to do. I had to do something that would at least afford a decent lifestyle by the standards commonly accepted. Well, I didn’t have to; I could have become homeless or eked it out on the dole year after year, but I knew that I wanted enough that it drove my decisions. Why had I wanted that? What was enough? It was something I had never thought about before. I never asked why I desired my own apartment, or enough money to travel a little here and there, or to be able to afford nice furniture, drinks on the weekend – and weekdays – and toys to pass the time with. Upon reflection all of those cravings had just appeared to be self-evident to me. I didn’t view any of them as being wrong necessarily, nor even bad or simply not good – not as good –, but it somehow seemed as I walked my farewell that if I could put everything I wanted into one sack then all of those extras carried little real significance.

Of course, I wasn’t fooling myself that I was going to live off of what was in my sack; I was after all heading to a nice warm roof over my head where clothing, bedding, and meals would all be provided. I knew that. Still, I thought, beyond shelter, food, and water everything else was just an extra; and those extras could either enhance
your life or they could take you out of your life. They might provide pleasure, and there was nothing amiss with that – nothing amiss that I could see as the sun continued to ascend and the city really woke up around me –, but if those extras didn’t lead to anything other than short-term pleasure then how important could they really be? And if that was so then why had I spent so very much of my time and energy in pursuing them to the neglect of developing myself? That was what I was setting out to put right, and I was glad that I was; it would provide the balance that I needed to achieve, the tipping of the scales in the other direction. It was something I could easily have focused on back in twenty-eighteen or the years prior to it, but I hadn’t. I had been caught up in a dream, a wild goose chase. I had never stopped to see the forest for the trees, and judged that the be-all and end-all would be to urinate on every one of those trees. Leave my mark; stamp my name all over the place. How stupid I must have been. I had no one to remember me in my old life and nothing to show for all of my efforts at wasting time. Life for me had been a carousel ride; and just as boring, really, as going around in circles on a crappy wooden horse.

A low round building told me that I was nearly at the South Gate. Even though I knew that there would be nothing required of me to exit – we simply had to clear a
robotic identity security scan when leaving and entering the city for the fields each day – I still paused and took a deep breath. Once I moved past that last construction of the city I would symbolically be parting from the entirety of what I had known since I arrived, and quite literally be leaving it all behind. Mentally I had somehow been preparing for that moment for the past few days, even really before I had made my final decision to take up whatever it was that the monastery offered, but having come to it the fullness of the action swept over me. I choked up a bit; I couldn’t say that I had particularly loved the life I had been leading as a transient houseguest and lousy farmhand, but it had after all been my life. It was what I knew and had gotten used to. I had embraced it and accepted it and worked hard at learning the ways of the people who lived here, including and especially the language. I was invested, and due to the extreme bizarreness of the way I arrived it had been all the more meaningful for me to take on the idea that their era was now my era, that they were now my people – or would anyway become so – and that there would be no going back, no return, no resumption of my life as I had known it.

That drunken night at the Metro, that half recalled pitch black tunnel and stumbling forwards inside it, that was
my very last twinkle of Tokyo in the early twenty-first century, that great beacon of all that was right and wrong with modern life. That place and that time had been deeply ingrained into me, I had mourned its loss, and then, somehow, the clean break, the mental switch, the emotional shift. I was here in Sheenda, and this place and its time were my home, had become my home. I knew that I didn’t belong and never really would, not truly, not in the way that someone born into it does; but for my part I had begun to consider myself as a person of the city and the present. The future-present. My future-present. It was contemporary and I had become a contemporary within it. The world turns in strange ways and we can hardly know what to make of the very air we breathe when we stop to think about it. It was goodbye to the white buildings dotted with all of the bustling black pyjama clad folk starting their new day. Goodbye to being a farmer. Goodbye to being an urbanite. Goodbye to the comfort of the known. I bowed a little to the city before me; it was a very Japanese thing to do, giving thanks to the blank objects that could never return the gesture in a way that I recognized, but it came out of my heart and it showed how much I both was and wasn’t who I had been.

Then with a nod and a wave to the robot sentries at the gate following my brief eye scan, I stepped off the soft
and soothing pavement I had grown so used to and onto the packed dirt of the road that led out and away. The buzzing of the insects that typically greeted us as we headed towards the paddies was greatly reduced in that season when the nights had become cool and the days less warm, but the green was still there, that thick blanket of trees that flanked both sides of the walkway stretching out underfoot. The road was far less wide than the one that led to the fields out of the North Gate, and I could see that it narrowed further still up ahead. It wasn’t quite what you might call a path, but it was nearly so, and I sensed that after my feet had trod enough kilometers it would become so. There wasn’t anywhere to turn off it at the start so my decision on which way to go was an easy one; there was only, for the time being, one way. I put my left foot in front of my right, then my right in front of my left, then left again; I strode, soon falling into my usual pace. An eyebrowed thrush darted out of the foliage, treating me to a flash of the cute orange legs that they use to such effect when foraging. The city began to fade away into the distance and I tried to keep my mind on what was ahead and not behind.

After an hour or so had passed I was faced by my first potential marker: a little grey stone stood near a side lane that opened up onto what was little more than a trail. I
bent down to examine it; it was mostly smooth and basically conical in shape, sticking up out of the grass as if to say “I’m here!” It looked like it might have had a face carved into it – a crude face if so – consisting only of two straight lines for what may have been eyes, a long L-shaped nose, and then another straight line for the mouth. I pushed some of the grass at its base away and saw that hand shapes had also been carved into it; combs stuck together. If I had had Tomor’s little tablet thing with me I might have used it to draw an image of the stone that went something like this:

Two thoughts came to mind: that the stone must have had
some meaning; and that in any case since I had exited the city I had been travelling mostly west and the new path turned away to the north. I knew that I wanted to go northwest from the city to a place near the Arakawa River – or what I called the Arakawa River –, and so regardless of whether or not the true significance of that little rock carving lay elsewhere I took the route that had opened to me. So far so good, I told myself.

The trees began to thicken and I was forced to duck out of the way of branches or to step over obstacles from time to time. The way was clearly not as well-trodden as the road that I had been on, but I took that to be a good sign as higher traffic meant a more common destination, and the monastery was certainly not that. If push came to shove I could always double back; there hadn’t been any turning points and the route at my feet was clear enough to follow in either direction. It was on ahead or back where I had come from. I pressed forward.

The closeness of the breathing forest around me and the exertion of my efforts started to combine; a slight sweat stuck out under the strip I had slung my sack over despite the relative coolness of the day. I shifted it to my other shoulder and paused to take a break. I thought about having some water or maybe some food but decided
against it; both would have to be rationed out as I wasn’t sure how many more hours it would be, and I really hadn’t gone all that far yet. Winters in the Tokyo area had never been particularly cold per se, or at least not for any noticeable length of time as two or three very chilly days would be followed by a slight rise in temperatures, but if it remained as mild as it was then I assumed that the winters of my new time lacked even the mellow bite of the Decembers, Januarys, and Februarys I had known. Winter, I supposed, had become more of a hiatus, a time for the fields to lie open, the soil to recover, the deciduous leaves to fall and the animals to go about their instinctual low-energy routines. It had always been that of course, but it had also acted as a psychological inward turn as activities shifted and the home took on a warmer and more welcoming feel after having been out in the elements. There was also that cheeriness to winter that came from the sense that the hard work was behind and that it was high time for good food, good friends, and good times indoors where it was comfortable and automatically heated to just the right temperature. Knowing that it was bitterly cold out made the feel of the air coming out of heat ducts that much better. Without a truly frigid outdoors the sense of being happily at home would feel diminished somewhat, I assumed, but then on the other hand, for the people I knew in the city that I had
just left the really hard work actually was behind them in ways that it never was for us in Tokyo. For the farmers anyway, who were by far the majority. I wouldn’t know the feel of winter in the city but I would learn it in the monastery; and then maybe in a few years’ time if I did return I could compare the two. I wondered if the hard work in the monastery ever finished; if it was self-development that you sought then there was no break from that. There couldn’t be.

I came to another crossroads. The path that split off was even narrower than the one I was on and just to embark down it required ducking under some overhanging branches and pushing through the undergrowth. The poetry of Robert Frost came to my mind; that is, the one line that I half knew of one of Frost’s poems. To paraphrase: “Two roads diverged in the woods and I took the one less traveled. That has made all the difference.” The desire to actually know the line in its correct form, and moreover the entire poem – whose title I wasn’t even clear on – suddenly came over me, but such would have to wait until I was able to look it up. If I was able to look it up; I thought the monastery might have some of the tablet gizmos with their informative but far less entertaining version of the internet, but I was unsure of whether something like Frost’s poem would be available.
and in English. At any rate, I took the road less traveled. There was no marker to be found anywhere but I couldn’t resist the chance.

The trail started to veer off east and the going was by no means easy. The undergrowth was so thick that I had to haul my way through it, raising my feet high with each step and keeping my arms out in front of me to ward off the odd branch and frequent spider web crossing the line. I started to think that it couldn’t be right. It occurred to me that the monastery housed twenty percent of the city’s total population; that was a sizeable number. Somewhere around twenty thousand people; there were entire towns made up of fewer than that. Twenty thousand total people, in whatever numbers they happened to come and go year by year and within each year as they travelled to the city to perform their varying tasks and then went back again, would leave a passage considerably easier to traverse than this one. Frost had duped me. Maybe if I actually knew his poem I would have been better off, but as it was I turned back and made my way to that initial split, heading right to return to the path I had been on. It didn’t take long – roads back are always shorter than you think – and somehow intuitively I sensed that I had made the correct choice. Hindsight is usually helpfully accurate, of course, but more than that I felt like the making of mistakes such
as the one I just had was acting to hone my intuition, to clear and strengthen my inner voice, and that that would most definitely be useful in all of my upcoming endeavors.

The path, the original path, continued mostly north but there was a slight bend to the west detectable as it wound on. Another side track appeared that shot off fully west but not seeing any marker of any kind – nothing that stood out and certainly nothing like that first little stone guy – I carried on with the road at my feet. Maybe it was merely the thought that I should be turning or would have to turn that was part of the challenge I was meant to overcome. We have such difficulty in accepting that we’re on the best course available as we travel through life; the grass is always greener as the saying goes – or as the saying went. Somewhere, somehow, things are better elsewhere we tell ourselves; I just have to find it and figure out how to access it. We’re always stuck thinking that just up ahead, just around the corner, some fantastic change awaits. Maybe this now is good enough; maybe working on this me is a better idea than shuttling around and bouncing between locales, jobs, lovers, friends. That was certainly a lesson I had never learned three hundred-odd years prior; the forest seemed to be teaching it to me even as I actually was on my way to the next
I stepped out into a fantastically sunny clearing. A real druid’s grove, one of those natural open circles that you can sometimes come across in the middle of a deep woods where, for whatever reason, the trees just don’t grow in the center and instead leave the space as an unbroken field of grass and flowers soaking up the rain or the sun, facing the great blue sky above. My heart raced and I set my sack down on the ground, stretching my arms out wide and leaning backwards to tilt my chest and face full up to the heavens, showering in the golden rays. That was the most exquisite rest spot I could have imagined and I moved right into the center of it to sit down on the soft earth and enjoy my lunch.

I turned my faithful cone hat upside down in front of my crossed legs and put my sack into it. A slight breeze blew through my matted hair as I dug around for what I hoped would not be a squashed meal. And there it was, neatly wrapped in two red and blue handkerchiefs, thankfully still on top of the glass water bottles. Hand formed balls of what else – rice and vegetables, consistent right to the end. Thank you, Tomor. I bent to eat as the sun warmed the back of my neck, the faint sounds of still somewhat active insects and the chirping of birds serenading me.
Utter peace and utter quiet. I wasn’t given to dreaming that I could have stayed there forever, for as perfect as those moments were they could not possibly last; naturally, but they were beautiful. I couldn’t remain for long and that was what made the break from the hike all the more divine. I was on my way to structure and learning, to meeting other interesting people and to being exposed to challenging ideas. On my way but not there yet. I sat and ate and the sunshine and the green and the breeze and the birds and even the simple food all made those stretched-out minutes blissful. Knowing that they would end only heightened how good they made me feel.

Vigor. That was what I felt, what I was – pure vigor – as I finished my meal, finished my solace, finished my respite and stood to carry on. There was only one pathway on the far side of the clearing and so again the choice that I assumed I would have was not there to be made. Thankfully, in this case. I had no idea how much ground I had left to cover, but given that my pace had been a reasonable one all morning and that the one small error that I had made was corrected fairly quickly, I guessed that I was more than halfway to my final destination. The monastery. My place of training and growth, my means of finding direction and purpose. It would not be far.
An hour or two later I came upon another little stone man and almost without thinking followed his winking eyes off to the left and onto another lane, broader, that slid to the northwest while the one I had been on appeared to tee off northeast. It was that easy. I had learned my lesson – the one I evidently was supposed to learn – to trust my gut and to trust my feet, not to overthink it and not to second-guess myself. Noted. If the trip was supposed to put me into a tranquil state before arriving then it had succeeded in that; a far cry from the confusion and exhaustion that Milee had predicted, but that somehow seemed like it was a very long time ago and in a place very far away. That grove, that final meal from Tomor’s hands, that rest in my journey, had psychologically sealed the city away. What I knew at that moment was the road; and the path had become that again, a proper packed dirt road broad enough for four people to walk abreast, having broken out from the fullness of the forest into the fullness of the open sky. I thought that I must have been getting close.

The final few hours were very smooth going. There was nowhere to turn and no choices to be made. I walked, I took in the trees on either side and noticed the fields that here too stretched out far in neat and even rows, I listened to the sounds of the world around me. I was tired but not
worn out. I was looking forward to getting there, to resting, to having achieved my goal, but I was still enjoying the trip.

And then there it was, it had to be the place, a massive conglomerate of pure white buildings dominating the horizon, stretching up and out like a giant series of apartment complexes. Utilitarian, organized, efficient, built to work and built to last. So this was the monastery.
Chapter Six

As I approached I was surprised to see that the compound was surrounded by a very high wall – likely a good five meters – and that there was one of the rounded robotic guard buildings at the gate as there had been at the city’s north and south entrances. There even appeared to be loops of barbed wire installed along the top of the exterior walls. I wondered if I hadn’t somehow ended up in the wrong place.

From the outside it looked to me more like a prison than a monastery, although I presumed that it was fortified to keep people out. But then why? Could security really have been an issue? I did remember that in addition to the other research that went on in the monastery all technology that the city used was developed inside; that could have had something to do with it, I thought. Whatever the reason for the imposing defenses, the overall effect created was nothing like how I imagined a monastery to look; but I had no clear image of how a monastery should look except for what had been provided to me by movies and so all I could picture beforehand was an old stone church and some caves. There was a figure standing next to the guard building, a tall and thin person with a shaved head wearing loose-fitting grey
pants and a matching top of the kind that folded over itself and was tied at the side, much like the half-bathrobe outfits I used to get at business hotels when my company sent me on an errand somewhere. I had mistakenly thought such garments were kimonos before I arrived in Japan and saw the real versions on the odd occasion when a woman or man would be sporting one; later I learned that the hotel pyjamas were more similar to the summer yukata or jinbei. Whatever the moniker, the tops of such were very comfortable shirts, if you could call them that, as the inside flap got tied on the left side and then the outside flap doubled over and tied off on the right side, about where the pockets would be on a sports jacket. Usually there was a further tie around the sternum area too. Somehow the memory came to mind that I always used to enjoy seeing those outfits on women walking around the hotel at night as the design yielded a nice view of the neck and area around the collarbone; a strange flash of what was now the distant past. I couldn’t tell yet if the person up ahead of me was a woman or not, and the shaved head was naturally of no help. I wondered with a shiver if my own head were to be shaved. If it was indeed the monastery at all. It had to be, of course, but the walls and the security of the place suddenly had me doubting.

The figure waved at me as I got closer, a friendly and
beckoning wave quite unlike a “go away” gesture would have been. Yes, it was the right place after all. I could see that the person was in fact a woman, and quite striking as well. I couldn’t decide if that was because of or despite her shaved head, but her features were very captivating: full and round eyes, a perfectly centered and slightly wide nose, lips that stretched out nearly the breadth of her eyes. Her skin was a shade darker than both Milee’s and Bofim’s had been, and I wondered if she spent even more time outdoors than the two of them did in tending to their paddies. It suddenly dawned on me that she wasn’t wearing a cone hat – or hat of any kind – either. I found that curious as especially with a shaved head she would want to protect herself from the sun; she might not have been the outdoorsy type after all, I reconsidered.

“Welcome!” she called as I reached the guard’s outpost and smiled in her direction before allowing the robot to scan my eyes and give me the all clear to enter. As at the city the gate was technically not a gate in the sense that there was nothing that slid or swung open and closed. It was just empty space next to the guard station, and if you wanted to I supposed that you could simply march straight through it. I wasn’t sure what would happen if you tried to enter without the robot’s approval, nor what happened when entry was actually denied; I had little
desire to find out. I assumed it must have been something at least relatively nasty otherwise there would be no need to have a perimeter system set up. Part of me was curious to discover what, but another part was grateful that I had never been forced to, nor been subjected to witnessing anything disturbing happen at the gates. I had been through enough disturbing experiences as it was. With my identity confirmed and access granted I stepped across the threshold and stood facing my one woman welcoming committee.

“Thank you,” I said, unsure whether to extend a hand or to bow in some manner. She was still smiling and her eyes were very warm; her skin was wrinkled and weathered but there was a sense of youthful radiance about her, the kind of energy that sometimes comes through in people who, although perhaps past their physical prime, have lived well and found contentment and tranquility in their being. I heard once that by fifty everyone gets the face they deserve; I wasn’t there yet but I hoped that when I did get there I would have deserved the kind of face she had.

“My name is Geen and I’m the head of the Sheenda Monastery,” she told me, offering her hand. It was the first time someone had taken the initiative to give me a
handshake since I had arrived. I was immensely pleased by that and judged it to be a very good sign.

“I’ve been studying about your time ever since I heard that you would be coming here,” she continued. “I must confess that I’m quite excited to finally be meeting you. I don’t mean to be rude, but you present an almost unthinkable opportunity. Your whole person is an image of the past come alive. Of course our physicists have been completely flummoxed by the question of how you got here, but that’s for them to work out. They tell me that theoretically it’s almost impossible and yet here you are; empirical proof of the impossible. The can’t-happen in the here and now.”

“Well, thank you again,” I said awkwardly, slightly uneasy about becoming some physicist’s guinea pig. I hadn’t expected a specific type of greeting, or really any greeting at all, but the mouthful that I had just been treated to did throw me off balance a little.

“I’m excited to be here too, and I’m eager to begin to learn how to improve myself. That is what you do here, isn’t it?” I no longer felt any need to keep my cards close to my chest and was hoping to make an impression as a good student. I was, after all, there to understand more
about myself for the sake of myself – and that was it. I would contribute to the city in the manner asked of me but my focus was on me, and not until I was satisfied that I was in a better place personally would I start to make any real efforts at achieving something broadly socially good. I did not consider that selfishness on my part; I saw it instead as taking one step at a time. I was of no use to anyone broken as I was.

“Yes, in a nutshell,” she answered. “You will learn about yourself and you will learn about the world we all find ourselves in, quite by accident of course. None of us chose to be here; or so we tend to think. It may just be that we no longer remember that choice. But then what choices do we ever have, really?”

The topic of choice had been brought up already; I found that very intriguing.

“You will find what your innate skills and abilities are, and we will help you to hone them,” she continued. “Usually this is done via a system of seniors and juniors within each specialty field and subspecialty that a student is placed in following our initial sorting tests. Once we’ve determined where a person is naturally best suited, those already in that area take on the newcomer’s training. In
your case, however,” at that she paused and smiled a tad mischievously I thought, “in your case, wherever you end up I will take on your primary training and then leave the remainder to other specialists if you happen to fall outside of my area.”

“What is your area?” I asked, finding myself engaged already, before even really setting foot into the monastery proper. The voluminous way in which my greeter spoke – Geen she said her name was – drew me in naturally to a relational depth that we couldn’t have achieved in so short a time. And that mention of choice; if I were really to give back to the time I had been hurtled into and the people I found myself living with then increasingly I was thinking that it would have to be in the area of choice; of teaching them the beauty of choice, and of freedom.

“That, for now, is a secret,” she said with a wink. She took my sack from my shoulder and turned towards the entrance of a large and unlabelled building directly in front of the gate.

“Please,” I said, “I’m happy to carry my own things.”

“We share our burdens here,” she replied. “Let me carry your load.”
Was she making a reference to something? Her phrasing sounded terribly twentieth century to me and out of place despite its appropriate context; was it something I had perhaps heard in my youth? A quote? A proverb?

“Your time seemed to be highly concerned with particular historical individuals,” Geen went on as we crossed an expanse of dusty open ground and neared the shade provided by the six or seven-storey building that stood ahead. “I’ve been reading about them, studying their teachings in light of your own personal past. That is, I should say in light of what we’ve learned about your past from the little you’ve told us about it.”

That caught me off guard; it was unsettling, disturbing even. I hadn’t really told the councilors very much at all about my past, and the little extra that I had talked about was only to Milee and Tomor. Had what I said been recorded somehow? Had Milee and/or Tomor informed the councilors or other authority figures about what I had told them, which had then been passed further along? I felt a bit like I had been tattled on, betrayed almost. I knew that I had nothing to hide but it still rankled me. It seemed like an invasion of the privacy I had assumed I’d had.
“What do you mean?” I asked, and my tone must have given me away.

“Oh, don’t worry, please,” Geen answered immediately, stopping mid-stride. “Nothing untoward, I assure you. I asked the councilors whom you spoke to for what we knew about you, and they relayed some things to me and then after checking with your hosts they relayed some more. In none of this did anyone wish you any harm. What I did learn helped me prepare, and I think you’ll be happy with the results.”

“It’s just that I didn’t know about any of this,” I said, a little exasperated and unsure why I was feeling the need to defend myself. Her explanation had been very sensitive to how I might react; somehow that made me even more uneasy. “Nobody told me about what you wanted or that my details were being sent to you,” I said. To me the obviousness of why that mattered could not have been clearer, but Geen nevertheless looked very puzzled by that.

“Why would anyone tell you?” she asked. “They were simply passing on what you yourself had told them.”
“Well because, because it was about me,” I sputtered. Such things were self-evident, surely. How had we come to an impasse so quickly?

“Curious,” she said, and appeared to make a mental note of the incident. “Why would that necessitate your prior acknowledgement? Do you consider the words that you speak to be your private property, or something along those lines?”

Private property? I had gone from open to engaged to defensive to confused in far too short a period of time. Had I made a mistake in coming here? “No,” I said slowly, trying to find the right words, to get back on the right foot. “Not property per se, but if people are talking about me then I feel that I should know.”

Geen turned fully towards me as we stood there just out of reach of the building’s shade, the sun still caressing us with its late afternoon glow. “Were people in your time always informed of the fact when they were being spoken about?”

“Certainly not,” I said as all of the gossip and rumor-mongering I myself had engaged in came rushing to my mind. It was a fair question and she asked it in a
neutral and unassuming tone. “But we had a strong notion of privacy and of protecting private information. Anything personal would fall within strict boundaries for us.”

“So it was a property issue,” she said.

“No, well, maybe, I’m not sure,” was all I could manage. I was already out of my element and I had only just arrived. “In my time, at least in where I was from and in the places I mostly lived, if someone wanted to share something private about you that you told them they usually asked for your permission before they did so.”

“If your colleague asked you where a new employee came from and you knew, did you stop to ask that new employee first if it was okay to share that information or did you simply answer the question?”

“I see your point,” I said. She had me, but it was done so gently and so sincerely that I would not have called it a cross word or a retort or anything of the sort. “Still, I would have liked to have been told first that I was being talked about.”

Geen was silent for a moment and looked at me with deep
concern. Her eyes were a dark brown and their depths impossible to read. She nodded and replied, “Okay. I’m telling you now that I will talk about you and the things we do in your training with others here in the monastery, others who are in charge of the various elements of our educational programs. We will discuss you and your progress and share ideas about how to help you. We will do this often and will not ask for your permission to do so. We consider your coming here as assent to participate in the training you are assigned, and we expect that you will make your fullest efforts to grow and develop and improve. We want to help you.”

I was reassured by that and felt my own manner soften immediately. There wasn’t a hint of sarcasm about her. She seemed to genuinely be attempting to address my needs although she didn’t appear to understand them, and she might even have thought them quaint or worse. Her attitude, possibly despite her own judgment of my position, was a welcome gesture of respect. A very welcome gesture. I had made the right choice.

“I appreciate that,” I said. “I do want to grow and develop and improve. I want to learn how to live more wisely and find some direction. I want to find myself, if that makes any sense.”
Geen smiled, a small, soft, and warm smile. “Yes, it does. Of course it does, that’s why you’re here. That’s why many of us are here.” She started walking again and I fell in step with her. “Now, as I was saying,” she continued, “it seems that your era and the ones prior to it for a good thousand years or possibly two, depending on where you draw the line, were highly concerned with particular historical individuals. Many of those individuals were religious figures, and many were social reformers. From what I could gather, based on the information I was told without your being aware of my being told it,” at that she glanced over at me quizzically and I nodded for her to continue, “I assume that you were born and raised in what was then a sociopolitically organized group of regions managed and run as a single nation, and that that nation contained a majority of people who identified in one way or another as Christians, as followers of the first-century teacher who became known as Jesus the Christ, the Anointed One, the Messiah.”

“You got it,” I said.

“Were you also so raised?” she asked tentatively.

“As a Christian?” I asked for confirmation.
“Yes, that’s what I meant,” she said.

“Yes, I was,” I answered.

“Good,” she replied, seeming relieved. “Then my research direction was right. Now, in addition to that upbringing you also lived here, in this place, which then was also run as a single nation and which had a strong influence from the teachings of the man who came to be called the Buddha.”

“Right again, and I also familiarized myself with Buddhism though I never practiced it. And to be honest, I never really practiced Christianity either, it was just how I grew up,” I told her. I had no idea where she might be heading with any of it but I thought it best to give her a disclosure of my personal position – or lack of one – just in case she got the wrong idea otherwise.

“But you do know the main messages of each, correct?” she asked.

“Yes, in general but maybe not in much detail,” I said.

“That’s fine,” she responded. We had arrived at the
building and stood before a set of three glass doors glazed in quite fetching shades of blue, orange, and red; they were almost like stained glass and each was offset by a wooden vertical handle treated in a deep brown. Geen stopped there abruptly, paused our progress, and turned a serious face to me as she raised her free hand to emphasize what she was about to say, her other hand still lightly holding onto the straps of my sack. “Now, from what I could find out, Christ was a remarkable person and a remarkable teacher within his community, as was the Buddha too, and after he died people began to pray to him like they also began to pray to the Buddha. You know that, I think, but you may not have considered this: the Godness that Christ claimed, his assertion of oneness and identity with the divine, was the Godness that we all have. The Buddha, in his practicality, missed that, although he too ended up being considered divine once he was dead and no longer able to deny it. Humanity has always looked for the divine without and never hesitated to assign such when it seemed appropriate. Here we turn that around. To us Godness is within, and it is a force or power or essence or essentiality that can either be developed or ignored, raised or neglected. Here you will learn about that, and you will learn how to see the world in that way.”
She was right, I had never considered that. It had never even occurred to me to consider that. It sounded like what I would have once called New Age gibberish, but I sensed that there was something to it – some kernel – and that regardless I was entering a monastery of all places and was sure to be told all sorts of things that struck me as odd or that I had trouble accepting. I told myself that decisions on the veracity of such could be put off till later. Much later. For the time being I needed to be willing to hear anyone out and to run anything through my mind; if it was to be a totally fresh start for me as a person then it meant I would have to stay as open as possible – at least at the beginning. When some time had passed and I had learned a bit, then possibly I could choose what to take and what to leave. After still more time had passed, I reminded myself, I could also then choose when and in what manner I myself would leave. Those options would come of their own accord; for now it was my place to listen and to be patient, and to try too to be thoughtful.

“Here is something else to chew on,” Geen said, lowering her hand to shift my sack onto her opposite shoulder. “Was Christ’s message lost to Christ’s ego?”

My old priest, and probably my parents, would have found that an extremely blasphemous statement and
immediately dismissed and deleted the offending remark from their minds. For my part I let it sink in; it was far too much and far too suddenly delivered – and right on top of that business about Godness as well – for me to be able to do anything with at just that moment. I did make an effort to save it for later though.

Geen tilted her head a bit and watched me react to what she had said, looking to be quietly taking me in. Then she straightened, gestured towards the doors, and asked, “Which one do you like?”

“Oh, the orange one, I guess,” I answered, once more caught flat-footed.

“Orange,” she said, and smiled as she took a step to the indicated door and pulled on its long handle. “In you go then,” she added, sweeping me along with her outstretched and open palm. In I went.

If I had somehow been expecting, perhaps unconsciously, that each door led to a different passageway or the like I was wrong. As soon as I walked into the darkened building I turned to see that the other front doors were very naturally right there next to the orange one we had just entered through, right where they had been on the
outside. What was the point of asking me which color I liked? Just a bit of fun? The entrance itself was about as nondescript as the exterior of the building had been; aside from a large section of rows of what looked like miniature personal storage lockers along the wall to our left, there was nothing to see in front, above, or below. It was an empty concrete foyer about three meters deep and maybe four or five wide. It was also lit only by the natural lighting coming in through the side windows. There was no reception, no information booth, not even a desk or a single chair set up anywhere. No wonder I had needed a personal welcome, you would never know where to get started in the place.

“This is our check-in building and health center, used primarily for new arrivals,” Geen told me. “At this time of year it’s mostly very quiet here, but just after the Day of Choosing it really hums. A good section of our members have to put aside whatever they are doing and come to help out with processing and sorting all our new residents. For you though it’ll be easy as you’ll do everything by yourself, and you can therefore take as long as you like on each step of the way. There are no deadlines here; and in general you should forget about whatever concept of time you hold, whether you run to the rhythms of the seasons like the farmers do, or to the
tick tock of the clock like the city workers do. Your coming alone will help you slide into that frame of mind easier than most, I’d think.”

That was an interesting point about lifestyles, and an intriguing implied conception of time; I wondered, as I felt my stomach rumble, if it even extended to meals. I had assumed that the monastery would be highly structured, and had further assumed that such structure would be clock-based, but I might have been wrong. Then again, there were real and important practicalities to consider. Again, take food, in a place as big as the monastery someone – more likely some people – had to prepare a lot for a lot of mouths and to serve everyone would mean a schedule of some kind. Surely it would have to, anyway.

“We’ll take the stairs down the hall to the right. First off you’ll need to undergo our regular health check and that will mean a day or two in our hospital. After that you’ll be shown to the room you’ve been assigned in one of the residence buildings, and once you’ve gotten settled in there and feel like you’re pleased with how you’ve set up your lodgings we’ll begin the training sessions. Like I said, for all of this you’ll be allowed to go at your own pace,” Geen remarked pleasantly.
I took that in with hardly a thought; it made sense and seemed logical enough. I had no objections. “How will I contact you to start my training?” I asked.

“I’ll come and visit you every day, just tell me when you’re ready,” Geen replied. “There will be nothing for you to do this evening but to bathe, eat, and relax. You’ve had a long walk, after all.”

I smiled at that; it would be very nice to stretch out in the tub followed by a good dinner if that was what she was offering, but equally pleasant just to have a shower. She was right, it had been a long walk; a very composing and comforting walk as it turned out, but a long one nonetheless.

“And,” Geen continued, “since aside from a few people with injuries or illnesses the hospital is currently mostly empty, you’ll get a room with a very nice view of the river that runs behind our monastery here.”

The Arakawa River. I had only missed it due to its being blocked from view on the approach along the road. Sitting and staring at its wide coursing waters at the end of the day would certainly keep me in the tranquil mood

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that the walk had provided. Before coming I had already thought that the monastery was a good choice – the only choice for me, really – but it was turning out to be even better than I had imagined it.

I followed Geen up two flights of stairs and down a bare concrete hallway punctuated by in-patient rooms behind sliding doors on either side. Most of the doors were open and I could see into the empty rooms; single beds, a dresser and small set of drawers, a side table and chair. Not altogether very different from the hospitals I was used to from my birth era; and the preponderance of single occupancies was nice to see as well. Back in my Tokyo I had had to stay in hospital for a week once and was forced to share a room with three octo- to nonagenarians, and the incessant noises they made kept me awake to the point where I had to request sleeping pills. Gumming, smacking, grunting, moaning, burping, farting, bleating; it was like they were determined to let their presence on earth be as audibly proclaimed as possible in their few remaining years. Their fully aural legacy.

“Here you are,” Geen said, pointing to a room on the left and holding out my sack for me to take it back from her. “Some medical staff will be by in the morning to see you.
Feel free to make use of whatever you find in the room, and if you need anything there is a small caretaker station at the end of the hallway here. It’s staffed around the clock so don’t worry about the hour if anything comes to mind.”

“Okay,” I said, “that sounds good. Thank you.”

Geen nodded in response. “The bathing facilities are at either end of the hall, and your dinner will be brought to your room when it’s ready,” she added.

“I’ll start with a wash then, and see you again soon, no doubt. Thank you so much for such a lovely welcome here.” I was feeling very pleased with my situation, with my day, with my choice, with myself.

“You’re quite welcome,” Geen answered. “I’ll stop by at some point tomorrow afternoon to see how you’re doing. I think your morning will be taken up by the procedures.” She nodded again, a kind of half bow, and then with a wave turned and headed back the way we had come.

I watched her go and wondered about language, about the nuances of words, and about how much of what was being communicated in Language I was missing out on
by not being a native speaker. Geen had talked voluminously, explaining much in careful detail, and so I judged that she was not the sort to mince words. She had just mentioned that the next morning would be taken up by procedures, and had earlier spoken about some kind of health check. When I heard that I assumed that it would be the standard pee in a cup, have your blood drawn, look here, listen to that, open your mouth, say ahh, cough, throat, heart, back, done. All of that would have fallen under the term “procedure” for me, and in discussing such I might have used the plural form in the way she had. She could also, of course, have meant much more by the remark.

That was the problem with language, any language, be it English, French, Japanese, or Language. There was too much thought hidden away behind the words, too much shared cultural knowledge and mental connections that typically needn’t be communicated and so didn’t find their way into the words themselves. Then there was the other side of the equation too, where the very word units and formations acted as filters and as givers of structure, warping the thoughts trying to be communicated, constantly shaping and not simply expressing through their inevitable associative networks. This term carries these images for me with my background, and for you
with yours. Maybe that background is similar, maybe it isn’t. What do you hear without thinking about it? And can I ever really know how you’ll receive what I’ve said? It is a clumsy instrument at best, this thing we use. How much can we gather of what the other person means? How it feels to be them, to see the world from their eyes and to attempt that relation, to experience the frustration of not being able to ever really express just what they intend?

All of us are in that situation, all of us leave much unsaid, unspoken, incommunicable. Perhaps no one understands this like the outsider, the expatriate struggling alone in an alien environment where no mastery of the local culture, customs, and language can act to remove the daunting barrier that stands between him and absolutely everyone else. To speak another language is to be another person, and when there is a disconnect between what is being verbalized and the root thoughts behind the verbalizations – the thoughts that have already been warped by being put into one’s native language first at some deeply preconscious level before reaching the point where they are articulated –, when those layers don’t match up, then what hope can there ever be for perfect clarity? We are stumbling along in the dark, and none are blinder than those accidental internationals like I had always been. On
top of that I had become a stranger in time, and not just in place. All things considered, I thought, it was a wonder I was doing as well as I was.

As I wasn’t sure exactly when dinner would arrive and was anyway – despite my hunger – dying first for a hot bath, or at least a shower, I set my sack down on the empty chair and left the unpacking till later. Returning to the hallway I decided to aim for the facilities that were on the same end of the corridor as the caretaker station. That way, I reasoned, I would be able to ask about dinner and also to familiarize myself with the layout of the floor a bit. Efficient and effective; I congratulated myself on a solid start to my new monastery life.

Only a few rooms that I passed had their doors shut; I assumed that meant they were occupied. I wondered what the other patients were in for, what ailments they faced that were severe enough to necessitate staying at least a night in hospital. “In for”; that was another one of those phrases that dances along the edge of so many meanings. We speak of being in hospital as if it were being in prison, and in a way that is not inaccurate as both places involve set schedules, small quarters, and of course a loss of freedom, but there were plenty of people that I used to know who treated a stay in hospital as being like a
well-supplied vacation, and I doubted if any of them would similarly think so of prison despite the same warm room, bed, and three square meals a day. Prison food might even have been better for all I knew, but I was still grateful not to have a basis for comparison.

A young man at the staff desk smiled to me as I approached. “Welcome to the monastery, Frank Tollman,” he said. I was impressed by his greeting; especially his use of my full name. It occurred to me that it might have been the first time anyone had extended me that courtesy.

“Thank you very much,” I replied. His nurse’s station looked mostly as I had expected, a semi-round desk that had some medical instruments on one side along with a large version of the tablet thing Milee and Tomor had used. The desktop itself also appeared to be a computer of some sort; it seemed to have embedded in it – or to itself be – a touchscreen and was dotted with little icons. Based on past experience I doubted if any of them linked to silly little games, and in thinking that I found myself pleased to consider that they likely didn’t. Beyond the cure for my previous dependence on such that had slowly grown in me as I got used to the future-present’s style of life, I had come to think that even in a working situation that involved a lot of sitting and waiting there was no call for
unnecessary distractions. In reflecting on that I saw that my values must have been subtly shifting the past few months, and that didn’t surprise me; the settings we find ourselves rooted in extend their own roots into our minds and our behavior. I had long known that. Unseen influences are always all around us, and the meanings we interpret our contextualized experiences to hold often weigh more heavily than we realize. A human being is by nature a deeply social, and socialized, creature. We are products of our places.

“I’m looking for the baths,” I said as I noticed that the man before me also sported a shaved head. My own looming loss of hair seemed to be confirmed by that, and I was swept by a sense of gratitude that such would only be temporary. All through adulthood I had always loved my hair, and one of my biggest points of physical pride had been in not having male-pattern baldness. It was petty of me, and I did know that, but every time I saw a poor sap spouting a crown of unglory right in the top back center of the scalp – right where you could never see it yourself but where everyone around you noticed it immediately – I felt a deep pang of pity. Those poor men had no idea how ridiculous they looked. Or maybe they did and just had to live with it. As with our cultures, we are all just as much the victims of our DNA as we are its...
beneficiaries.

“Just a little bit further down and to your left,” the man told me. “You can’t miss them. And by the way, my name’s Tol, almost the same as yours.”

He smiled at that and I supposed that I must have too. It explained why he had used my surname in address – it nearly matched his own and, as a man, could have matched his own by way of suffix had he inherited the name from his father in another place and era. “Well, very good to meet you, Tol,” I said. “How long will you be working here in the hospital?”

“Forever,” he replied with another healthy grin. “I tested in for the medical field, and I’m glad things turned out that way because we are one of only a very few study/work paths that has its positions rotated into and out of the city. I can see a lot more of where we all live by working in both places, here and there.”

The details of the arrangement were sound enough, but I did wonder why he had put it as lasting for “forever”. Prior to learning that little bit of wisdom from Tol I had been curious where the medical staff in the city had come from as becoming one of them didn’t seem to be an
option at the Day of Choosing. “How long is each posting then?” I asked.

“It varies by need somewhat but I’ve been told that I should be here for the rest of my training, and then spend three to five years in the city before being transferred back here,” he replied.

“How much more training do you need?” I hoped he wouldn’t be drawing blood from me, or doing anything with any instruments, if he were still in his studies.

“One more year of hands-on, my book part is all finished,” he told me with evident pride. “I’ve gotten good feedback from my seniors so far and I’m excited to show them what I can do. Actually in the morning I’ll be working on you.”

“Working on me?” A sleepless night loomed; I shouldn’t have asked.

He laughed but it was not altogether comforting. “Don’t worry, just the basics. Your more involved procedures will be done by staff with a lot more experience than me,” he said.
That was at least something, yet I still remained uncomforted. That word had appeared again: “procedures”. In the plural. And such were to be “involved” in some manner. I knew of course that there was nothing for it but to go through with everything yet I was still starting to feel a growing itch to know in full and explicit detail just what lay ahead. Over the course of time since I first cracked my eyes open in the rice paddy that day I had noticed what I considered to be a strange but very general tendency to only be told what was deemed needed to know; if I thought the monastery might be different from the city in that regard it appeared I was wrong. And what I determined necessary information rarely seemed to be a shared judgment.

“What exactly will be done to me tomorrow?” I asked. There was nothing to be lost in pushing the point, and I was too tired to attempt a more diplomatic phrasing.

“Don’t you know?” Tol asked as a loud beeping started out from the desk in front of him. He quickly pushed one of the icons, read a message that popped up, then stood and started gathering equipment from the pile at the edge of the desk. “I’m very sorry, but can we continue this later?” he said. I knew it wasn’t really a question and I knew that I would continue not to know what I wanted to
know. How much would I have to take on faith while here at the monastery?

I watched Tol run off down the hallway and leave me there on my own to wonder and to worry. Procedures, including some that required seasoned hands, were to be done, that much I was sure of. Such could, or could not, simply be routine analyses, and although it was true that just being able to read an x-ray or blood test result would require someone with more experience than a fellow of Tol’s age would have – judging by the looks of him – I couldn’t shake the feeling that more than that would be involved. Just what though; it might have been my nerves or it might have been my propensity to overly worry, but something did not sit right with me. What further upset me was the thought that it might also have been a premonition. A disturbing premonition. A premonition that was likely to haunt, but unlike most haunting premonitions it would reveal the measure and the depth of its truth all too soon. Or its lack. The next morning would tell all. I thought that I might need to request some sleeping pills to make it through the night; the monastery had already presented some odd ups and downs.

As I showered – there was no tub, but there was a usage meter meaning that I had to turn the tap on and off to
conserve the same way I had under Tomor’s reign of water-saving terror – I convinced myself that I was being paranoid. What would they do to me, really? What could they do? Whatever “procedures” were concerned they couldn’t possibly amount to anything very drastic. I had after all volunteered to come here; nearly everyone who was here had similarly volunteered. People generally didn’t do nasty things to volunteers, and they didn’t do nasty things to those undertaking a course of study. Yes, I knew that there had been plenty of instances of hazing in my own birth era, and that practices of the sort might have been related to human nature and human grouping instincts, and I was also sure that even at the monasteries of my own day the new recruits or initiates or whatever they were called had to undergo some initial unpleasantness too, but it certainly wasn’t like joining the mob back then and I couldn’t see how it might be like that now. No serious harm was ever done; the new recruits, members, volunteers, etc. would need to be useful, after all. As would I. I did have a hunch that my head would be shaved, but I convinced myself that that was very likely to be the worst of it. Geen, the head of the monastery herself, had said that I would be out of the medical area in a couple of days, and so anything that would be serious enough to require more rest than that would not be happening and therefore nothing too severe could be on
my plate for the next day. I had gotten myself worked up over nothing.

Tol wasn’t back at his station as I returned to my room, but even if he had been I had already decided that I wouldn’t have pressed him for more information. I determined that I was fine and would be fine. I was here in the monastery to improve myself and get some direction for my life, and the first step in that thus far had been in coming to terms with how things were done, the procedures and the processes. I felt like I had handled that well. I felt like I was on my way.

Dinner was waiting for me: a little tray set onto the side table just like it might have been back in my birth era. I found it amusing to see that over the past three hundred years it didn’t appear that hospital food had changed all that much. A bowl of rice, a little fish, a side dish of tofu in what was probably a miso soup-type broth, and another side dish with a mix of green vegetables. It could have been much, much worse, and even as it stood I considered it something of an improvement over Tomor’s cooking. I was also hungry enough to eat anything.

I moved my sack onto the floor and sat down in the side chair to look wistfully out the window while I dined.
Night had fallen and the stars were out in full force; there was a wonderful lack of luminescence lifting off of the monastery facilities despite the massive complex of buildings that I could vaguely make out stretching over the grounds. The moon was waxing and its silvery light shone on the surface of the river flowing below me. The tranquility of the moment sank into my bones. I was grateful to the moon for that. Back in Japan, Old Japan as it was long before my association with it, and naturally well prior to Japan as a nation – and all other nations – ceasing to exist as such, people used to really enjoy and even celebrate *tsukimi*, the seasonal viewing of the moon over tea. It was an autumnal ritual, and although technically I thought that tea was definitionally meant to be involved I was pretty sure that *sake* had made its way into the custom in no time at all. The Japanese of my day were great drinkers and I couldn’t recall a single event that hadn’t involved alcohol in some form or other. We had walked a similar path through life on that account, although I supposed that since I was now in the monastery my drinking days would be put on hold for the time being.

Though maybe not necessarily. That might have been an unwarranted assumption on my part; after all, the monastery was presumably nothing like a monastery from
my own era, and even in my own era I was sure that some monasteries made good use of chemicals in one way or another to help with the training or to ease the burden of the training. Even if not then certainly the odd relaxant would be allowed, I reasoned. Granted, neither beer nor wine – grape, rice, or otherwise – was offered to me with my dinner, but I was in hospital. Once I settled into my own dorm or room I would have a better feel for what went on or what could go on. I didn’t remember ever having that many different kinds of beers at Milee and Tomor’s, but the beers that we did have were nice – and of a consistent quality. The orgy had had a large selection of booze, but the variety of available beers there was sadly lost to me in a haze of cursed unhappy slips and the bottle of whiskey I had quaffed. I had no desire to revisit those memories to try and learn more. What was important was that whatever drinks were available were likely to be of at least a decent grade, and I would not complain if nothing beyond drink were available. I judged that the new me had already grown considerably out of the old me, and that however much I might still be beholden to alcohol it was by choice and within the reasonable limits that I set for myself. I would not be stumbling down any more pitch-black Metro tunnels on my home from work, even if such still existed. That much was certain.
I wasn’t sure what to do with my empty tray and a peek into the hallway didn’t help so I decided just to leave it, dirty dishes and all, on the top of the dresser. I set about unpacking my things and was done before I even knew it; there really wasn’t much in my sack. Taking out my old suit brought a stir of memories back to life, probably prompted by my musings on tsukimi over dinner. For all of its maddening hustle and the constant push of crowds, the endless streams of people, people, people, Tokyo had been a wonderful place to live. I supposed that the new-to-me Sheenda City was in a nebulous way still Tokyo, but with the metropolis fragmented into multiple municipalities the way it currently was the feel of everything was all wrong. No, not wrong, just different. Geography aside, there was more or less nothing of the old city remaining; everything had been redone in the upheavals and cultural seismic shifts that had been endured over the past three centuries. Homo Consumodigitalis was extinct and the rise of Homo Farmicus firmly established. Maybe it was better that way but I did miss the old city I had so loved.

Waves of nostalgia washed over me, and for the tiniest little details. Walking down a side shopping street to go to the post office after work, the concrete rising on all sides
and the little shops spilling out onto the pavements beneath the apartment buildings towering over them. The way the wind swept up out of the Metro stations sometimes if you happened to be descending their stairs just as a train was departing or arriving below. How the rain reflected the neon in the warren of side streets that lay on the other side of the famous Shibuya Crossing. Turning a corner in Hiroo and having Tokyo Tower suddenly jump into full view, right there in front of you. Pushing through blocks of the young crowding the side lanes of Shinjuku that were closed to vehicular traffic on Sundays before breaking through to the thoroughfare and then, like a bolt, the vast openness of Shinjuku Gyoen, a park with a truly multinational style, done in delicately manicured parts to be by turn Japanese, French, and English. And host to a thickly wooded walking course to boot, right there in the midst of one of the densest parts of town. All of that and so much, much more. I doubted if I would ever be in a place so enthralled with food and so full of the world’s cuisines in all of its dizzying neighborhoods. It was complex, it was exhausting, it was stressful, but it had been multitudinous and then some; and it had been mine. For a while. And then that tunnel, the sun, my aching head, a rice paddy, Milee, Tomor, Bofim, Rolm. The months had passed in a blur and I had hardly had the time to even notice them.
The silent buzz of a private room in a largely empty hospital let my old suit speak its memories, and they were bittersweet. All that had been and all that had gone. I couldn’t say that I was happy in that life, but I had fit it, somehow. Even as a wandering corporate drone I had fit it; maybe being that drone was really what I had fit, what had fit me. The old me, anyway. I was here now because I was the new me. I was here now because I wanted to make the new me. And I would.

Even after all of that walking I wasn’t quite ready to collapse into sleep but I was nearing there. I climbed into bed and stretched out with one of the few books I had brought from my room at Milee and Tomor’s: a novel that Tomor had recommended about two strangers from opposite sides of the world who alone survived a shipwreck and ended up stranded on an atoll in the Pacific. They were stuck there for six weeks before they were rescued; a lot can happen in six weeks. It was a thoroughly enjoyable read. It was also apparently one of the first books written entirely in Language, and in it I could detect hints here and there of some of the old languages throwing up interference; English mostly, but also a bit of French. There might have been others but that was what I saw. The book was both Language study
and language study for me. Study without being noticeably so, of course, but study nonetheless.

When I awoke the dawn light was streaking through my windows; I had forgotten to shut the curtains and was very glad that I had. The red sun rising on the horizon and casting its light bouncing off the surface of the river was a sight worth getting up for. That day would be my procedures, and I was sure they would be fine.

I wasn’t given any breakfast but neither was I expecting any; I had a health check coming up, after all. An hour or so after I had awoken Tol came in and told me to strip down and put on a hospital gown he had brought with him. I was to get completely naked. So it would be a fairly thorough check; I inferred that that must have been the “involved procedures” mentioned earlier. I hoped they wouldn’t need to check anything that required either a finger or a camera up my rear. Thinking about that brought back terrible memories of the Harvest Festival and I felt myself actually wincing in pain. I was glad that Tol had left to do something while I changed. On second thought, I decided, I would like that area checked because I might have incurred significant damage there. Damage on the inside. That in turn brought on another shudder. What had happened that night? It was a terror both
repressed and covered in the fog of memory loss; and it was why I was here. It was why I was remaking myself. I would have to learn to make my peace with it, if such were possible. If not I would have to learn to simply suppress it sufficiently so that the dread of those events came back to me increasingly less frequently and less harshly. I reminded myself that the Harvest Festival was simply how things were done, that it was normal for them, that there were rules involved and that no one I interacted with had violated those rules. I was mainly in the wrong where wrong had occurred, and what I considered to be wrong was not wrong in their eyes. It was standard, rather; it might even have been good. A chill swept down my spine; and the chill was not an effect of the cold of standing there naked beneath my thin robe open at the back.

When Tol returned he informed me that first they would be checking my senses: eyesight, hearing, reflexes, that sort of thing. I nodded silently and followed him out, down the opposite end of the hallway from the caretaker station and up three flights of stairs to a large and mostly open room that was flanked by numbered booths on both sides. The facility was built for efficiency and I could easily imagine how dozens or even hundreds of people could have been processed through the various sections in
a relatively small amount of time, each cubicle staffed by one or two people checking a specific area repeatedly while patients filed through each in turn, in and out, in and out. As it was, that day I was on my own and the few staff that I could see around me were quite clearly in a relaxed and unhurried mood.

I did the eye test first and was relieved to learn that my vision was still perfect, age be damned. My hearing similarly registered no problems and my height and weight both fell into the normal and healthy spectrum. That was no doubt due to the diet – of sorts – that I had been on since arriving, but it was still a pleasant result. My blood pressure was fine and my heart rate and pulse were right where they should have been. I was healthy and hale.

After that were the fluids: I was given a cup and shown to the restroom where I dutifully urinated into it and handed it off. My blood was drawn, thankfully not by Tol, but by a competent and non-pain inducing female nurse quite a bit older than I assumed he was. A doctor looked into my ears, nose, and throat, and I progressed on to the short series of x-rays.

Once more nothing alarming came up and my confidence
ebbed high. There was no real reason to be confident about being healthy yet I still felt that it was something I could take pride in, somehow an accomplishment. Despite my handicap of not having grown up with the active lifestyle that was the current norm I had managed to make it into the expected ranges of the various results. All things considered I thought that was really something; I could just as easily have been an overweight and generally ill fit middle-aged man coming from the time and the place that I had. Of course the past months had helped immensely in ironing out the bodily problems – if you could call them that – that I had arrived with, but even so I had kept at it and farmed with the best of them. Or anyway I had at least managed to complete the farming tasks set to me by those for whom they were a way of life. No small thing.

A male doctor checked my testicles for bumps and lumps, something which was disagreeable but necessary, I supposed, and he studiedly avoided eye contact while doing so which was highly appreciated. The same doctor then did check my other end, for the sake of my prostrate probably, but only used a gloved finger and aside from the initial unease it was over quite quickly. At the time I found it more emotionally disturbing than physically painful, but given what I had recently been through in that

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vicinity I could hardly have complained.

I exited the booth I had been in and found to my surprise that I had wound my way through the whole gauntlet, there was nothing left to do. Tol appeared again and said that the remaining procedures would be conducted on the floor above and so would I kindly follow him up the steps, please? I wasn’t sure what could have been left to do but I knew that once again it wasn’t really a question that was being put to me, nor was it a request; it was more of a very polite order. I had never particularly chafed at being told what to do as long as it was within reason; it was a skill that had served me quite well in the corporate world. I was certain that it would likewise do so here in the midst of whatever strictures the monastery imposed on its residents, and so I silently and dutifully ascended another split set of stairs.

We entered a much smaller room that was dominated by two outstanding features: a swivel chair in front of a mirror such as the kind I had experienced at countless hair salons, and a large table with a telescopic arm extending from one side that had a wide lamp attached to its end. Both of those pieces of furniture had tables nearby on which a number of ominous-looking tools could be seen. I swallowed hard. I realized suddenly –
belatedly – that there were to be actual procedures involved. I scanned the room for help or possibly a side exit; I wasn’t sure why but somehow I felt an overwhelming need to acquaint myself with the details of the space. No one else was present save Tol and I, and there were no other doors either in or out but the one we had just come through. I did see a large screen over to our left, attached to the wall near the door and opposite to where the table lay, but that was more or less the extent of it. At least I wasn’t outnumbered, I thought bleakly, and if push came to shove I was fairly certain that I could overpower Tol and make a run for it. Where to and for what purpose escaped me, and I immediately recognized the futility of such a plan. I had voluntarily joined the monastery, there was no way around that fact; if anything were to be suggested that I was absolutely not willing to partake in then it would have to be my words that would provide the rescue, neither fight nor flight would be effective in the long term. Perhaps there was less to the room than met the eye – or less menace – and I was simply once more being paranoid. I decided that all I could do was to wait and see.

I didn’t have to wait long. Tol wasted no time in motioning to the chair and instructing me to sit down and relax; we’d be done in no time.
“Done with what?” I asked

“Shaving your head. As you probably noticed we’re all baldies here,” he joked.

So that was it. That was it? I was immediately relieved. Immensely relieved. Once again I chastised myself for needless worrying. How many situations had I been in through the years where a new place and new way of doing things had appeared to present any number of problems which were then very easily solved? I had learned over and over again that there were as many ways of handling situations as there were of navigating from point A to point B, and the fastest route was not always the best nor the smoothest. If they wanted to keep my hair trimmed nice and tightly while I was studying here then that was fine with me. There was no reason to kick up a fuss over something as small as that. My health check was apparently behind me, and with the haircut finished I supposed that I would be allowed to return to my room and maybe – hopefully – be brought a meal of some kind. Geen had said she’d stop by in the afternoon to see how I was doing; perhaps I could then request getting out of hospital early and being shown to my living quarters right away. After all, if nothing showed up in either my urine or
blood tests then I was presumably as healthy as I felt. How long would it take before the results came in? I told myself that I really had nothing to be concerned about.

“Well then shave away, Tol,” I told him as cheerily as I could. I would miss my hair, of course, but it wouldn’t be gone long and I had expected that there would be some aspects of monastery life that might not be exactly to my liking. Such is the way of things; onwards and upwards we go.

I didn’t feel the need to watch him at work with the clippers and so I rather vacantly stared at the wall next to the mirror while clumps of my still wonderfully thick coiffure dropped to the floor. After a mere minute or so I heard him set down the electric razor and glanced up at the mirror to see in reflection Tol taking another device from the table in his hand. It had a general L-shape to it, a rounded endpoint on one side with a kind of half globe set in that connected to a handle shaped like a hair dryer’s. He flipped a switch and a low humming sound came out of the device.

“This is just to finish you up,” he said. “It’ll be another couple of minutes or so.” He rubbed the machine over my freshly clean head, carefully covering the entire surface.
where my hair had been, going over it all once and then once more. I couldn’t tell what was being accomplished by such exactitude but my skin did burn a little, a sensation that was soon soothed as following the polishing, or whatever it was that he had been doing, Tol rubbed an oily substance into my scalp and gave my entire head a very relaxing massage. He needn’t have hurried that part of the procedure, I was very happy to let him continue.

“And that’s it,” he said as he finished. “One more thing and then your entry processing will be all done. After you’ve rested a bit you’ll be shown to your new room and the rest of your life will begin.”

The rest of my life at the monastery, I internally corrected him. What was left to do and what recuperation might be needed?

“Thank you, that was a very nice head massage,” I said. Tol smiled and seemed pleased by that. “What’s the final part?”

“Oh, your kolpunktum, of course,” he replied. “I’ll just go and get the doctors. Please lie down on the table there.”
Tol was out the door before I could ask him what a *kolpunktum* was. It must have been a technical term as I was fairly confident in my grasp of Language by that time and hadn’t been completely lost by a single word for some while. He had asked me to lie down on the table. The table with the large lamp attached to it. The table that looked like it was for surgery. I did not want to lie down on that table and I certainly did not want to be operated on. But what choice did I have? And anyway, things had heretofore been quite painless and nothing at all punishing, so far as I could tell. I had gone through a typical physical and had my head shaved, that was it. I was completely unscathed. Whatever a *kolpunktum* was if it required my lying down then I supposed that I would, but I would certainly also keep an eye on things. Fight or flight was out, it seemed; that was fine. I had my words, even if *kolpunktum* wasn’t one of them. I could negotiate, state my case, demand that I be heard. I was after all a free individual. I had freely joined the monastery and I could freely leave. The choice was mine. If it was to be something so entirely objectionable that I wanted no part of it then surely the same respect that had been extended to me thus far would carry through and my position would be considered. I walked over and lay down. There was a nice soft pillow considerately waiting for me. I felt slightly better. The doctors then came in, all five of them,
and surrounded me: two on either side of the table and one on the far end near my feet. The one at the end spoke up and said that the kolpunktum shouldn’t take more than half an hour or so and that I wouldn’t feel a thing. Half an hour? One of the doctors at my left side produced a syringe and injected it far too close to my crotch for comfort. My gown was pulled up to my waist and the light was swung around to my genitals. A slight panic set in; they were going for that? Both fight and flight were immediately options again. I bolted upright, turned, pushed a doctor, tried to squirm away as four sets of strong hands reacted quickly and pushed me back down. Three doctors lay on top of me as I shoved and thrashed and bit at the air, screaming to be let free, to be let go. Glimpses of the doctor at my feet hurriedly tapping at the large screen mounted on the wall flitted into my eyes as I struggled about, and a fraction of a second later Geen’s face appeared, seemingly broadcast live. I heard the doctor indelicately explain the situation – half sentences piled on top of each other – and asked what was to be done. Geen’s response was simple: Put him out and do it. A gas mask came into view and lowered onto my face. It was held there by an iron hand while the weight of three bodies trapped me. A sensation of swinging. My head whirled. Blackness descended.
Chapter Seven

I blinked heavily. The sun was blazing down on my face again. I thought back to my first day in this future-present and the pain, the pain that kept my eyes shut, that kept my body from moving. It was not that, thankfully, but there was a dullness that clung to me, a lethargy that was hard to shake. I was back in bed in my hospital room, still wearing my thin gown. My gown which had apparently been to facilitate surgery. Surgery of my genitalia. I was almost too afraid to look.

I reached down and gently, so very gently, pulled the cloth up, trying to brace for the worst. Castration? I had no desire to be a eunuch. That was not what I had signed up for. What had I signed up for?

They were still there, thank goodness. Old Tom and Harry. I put a hand to my head in relief and was reminded that I had become completely bald. Shaved. Looking down again and examining more closely I could see that certain areas of my testicles had been shaved as well, and that a tiny scar was visible on the side of each one. Some kind of work had been done there but not, apparently, very large scale work.
Geen must have come into my room while I was still carefully scrutinizing my nether region. I heard a throat being cleared and in looking up to see who it was I was of half a mind to leave everything out in the open as a show of disrespect to my own personal Judas. The decorum that had been drilled into me from an early age got the better of me, however, and I pulled the papery robe back down to my knees.

“After what happened I thought you might need to talk and so I rearranged my schedule to get here earlier than planned,” she said, a look of concern on her face.

I didn’t reply. I was sure that Geen had a busy schedule given that she was the head of a monastery that housed and employed – if that was the word for it – some twenty thousand people, but there was no way I was going to indicate any kind of appreciation towards her after her fascistic behavior earlier. I very much wanted to know exactly what had been done to me and the reason for the tiny scars on each of my testes, but I also didn’t want to engage such a faux Ghandi with invisible jackboots.

She sighed. Good, I thought, feel that frustration because I feel it more. “I was sure that you had been informed of the way we work here,” she began, “but maybe I should
start from the beginning and explain everything just in case.”

Go ahead, explain away. You’ll get nothing in the way of thanks from me.

“Do you mind if I sit down?” she asked, pointing to the chair which was still next to the window where I had left it.

I was determined to keep up my silent treatment of her but a direct question required some kind of response. I remembered then too that Geen was to be my mentor for the entire initial phase of my training – however long that would be – and that we would probably be spending quite a bit of time together. I knew that sooner or later I was going to have to come out of my pouting phase but I didn’t feel ready for that quite yet. The most I could offer her was a nod of acquiescence, and I felt like that was offering a good bit, all things considered.

Geen moved to the chair and sat down delicately on its edge. She had a certain grace, a fluidity, to her movements which managed to nonverbally communicate both confidence and subtlety to the observer. She gave the impression of a person at home in herself and in complete
control of her whole being. Her comportment relayed that she functioned within and towards the world from a settled core, and she wouldn’t, I imagined, brook much dissent. If you were here you were hers, in a way, one of her charges. She might treat you gently or she might treat you harshly, but she was in charge and she held the power. I realized belatedly that the gap between us was much wider than the meter and a half or so from the bed to the chair; it was a chasm.

“First of all, about the surgery,” she said, maintaining that look of concern which I assumed to be genuine, “it was a kolpunktum.”

There was that word again. I would have to look up how it was used elsewhere, in other contexts. But in the meantime I would have to break my silence to ask what she meant or we would get nowhere. “I don’t know that word,” I said as flatly as I could, and trusted that the resentment in my voice would carry through.

Her look of concern seemed to double and her brow furrowed deeply. “It’s an operation that prevents you from having children,” she said. “Part of the purpose of the monastery system is to keep the population down, and so rather than enforce celibacy amongst our members we
instead prohibit recreation.”

That was stated clearly enough, and since each testicle had been worked on the operation must have been a vasectomy. My reaction to that knowledge was blunted by the overall situation but I found that it didn’t actually bother me very much. I had never wanted to have children, although I had equally never wanted to make having children an impossibility. I knew that vasectomies could be reversed and thought that after I left the monastery I might choose to have that done. Or I might not. It would depend on a great deal, and I could hardly predict how I might feel or who I might meet over the next few years such that the idea of having a child with someone would present itself to me.

For the time being I decided that although I was fine with the surgery having been done I was very far from fine with the manner in which it was conducted. I felt a bit of the old me resurfacing, instinctually as it were, old reactions and ingrained ways of thought coming to the fore within. The experience of the Harvest Festival had undoubtedly changed me in deep and profound ways, but a person is an ongoing project and if you want to fundamentally react to the world in different ways, if you want to exist in the world in an entirely altered manner, a
lengthy process of continual effort is required. It must be, always. I was new to all of it – self-creation – but I couldn’t see any other method. And all during that time of making adjustments, and perhaps for all of life, those old habits of mine would die hard and keep popping up. Surely that is why it is so difficult to remake yourself, and why places like monasteries are necessary to really effect it. You have to get away. And I had, I was away, yet away with the me that I was trying to undo raging inside again. I would have to ride it out.

“There is usually some discomfort afterwards,” she said – and there was, I felt a kind of low level pain on each side –, “and there can be bruising or even bleeding. We want to keep you here overnight to make sure that doesn’t happen. Almost certainly you’ll be released and shown to your room tomorrow.”

She watched me take that in, and whatever expression was on my face it didn’t appear to upset her too much. For my part it did seem like a reasonable way to control population growth, and as I didn’t object to sterilization per se the news was possibly easier for me to take than it would have been for someone else in my situation. If it were possible for someone to be in my situation, that is, given the ignorant way I had arrived at the monastery and,
of course, the historical era.

“The follicles on your scalp have also been sealed such that your hair will not re-grow,” Geen added, hitting with me an unexpected sideswipe and forcing me to immediately interrupt her.

“Never?” I asked. That was too much. I found that far worse than making my sperm bland. An eruption of the pre-orgy me burst inside. An explosion. I had always been somewhat vain, and the insistence on maintaining a particular look was a core feature of that. They had not temporarily taken anything away from me with their forced shaving; it was permanent, and as far as I knew technically irreversible; I would have to face the results of that every day in the mirror. It was something that would cause me to think about myself very differently, and it was not a decision I had had any say in. I felt violated, victimized and intensely angry.

“Yes, because you see,” Geen carried on in such a way that it forced me to stifle the objection my mouth had already opened to emit, “because you see,” she said, “you are here for good. The procedures we do are permanent because you are here permanently. There is no leaving the monastery nor the monastic way of life once you have
joined us.”

My anger melted into a confusion, a bewilderment, a failure to process what I knew I had heard correctly and properly understood. What kind of sense did that make? What sense could it make? Of course there was a way of leaving; you simply had to walk out the door. What kind of consequences could there be? Banning me from joining the group again? Why would I even care? It was all _la foutaise_, pardon my French. It was nonsense, balderdash, completely illogical. At the same time I had a sneaking suspicion that I had already known that. Had Milee or Tomor told me? If they had then why hadn’t they made it clearer? Just as the Metro that night seemed to mark a point of impasse for my memory, I found it hard to recall what my two former hosts had told me when we sat down over beers in their living room; the orgy and its consequences somehow stood in the way.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “If I could freely join of course I can freely leave.” Whatever I had or hadn’t been told about the monastery, I did recognize that at an institution like this there might be psychological pressure not to quit – that at least struck me as a logical way of understanding what Geen had said – but beyond such measures I simply could not see any possible practical

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means of making anyone stay anywhere they didn’t want to be. We weren’t talking about prisons, after all.

“Things are a bit different now than they were in your time,” she replied slowly. Obviously, I thought. Tell me another one, Geen. I was oscillating between confusion and annoyance; I felt like I was looking out from inside a cloud and found it irksome and frustrating.

“We have different views on the nature of choice, to put it philosophically,” she continued. “But to put it more straightforwardly, we will not allow you to leave on pain of death,” she paused then, and as she did so she emphasized her last phrase with an expression that begged me to understand.

I didn’t. I couldn’t. I wouldn’t. “I can’t possibly understand that, Geen,” I said with all the sullenness and defiance that was again gripping me. I still had a pair of balls, I told myself, and I was feeling them more forcefully than I had since my old boss had tried to withhold a raise I was due in order to “avoid hurting the feelings of others”.

“When you registered with the guard robot at the gate,” she explained, making an evident effort for care and
delicacy, “your genetic signature and physical and chemical characteristics were stored in a very special security program. If you were to attempt to re-cross the threshold and exit the monastery grounds without authorization you would be killed. If you somehow managed to avoid being killed at the gate every single robot in every single settlement all over the world would still have you registered as ‘Kill on Sight’ and nowhere would be safe for you. Ours is not the only city that has a monastery and that has robots, this is a global network. Locally administered, yes, but globally linked. There are intercity agreements in place to respect one another’s disciplinary decisions and judicial judgments even though each city purely runs itself and its environs and no overarching governance or administrative institution exists. Now, I suppose you could try to live on your own away from all human contact and the robots that are omnipresent in villages, towns, and cities, but you would be under constant threat.” Geen fell quiet at that and for a moment looked thoughtful, almost wistful.

I found her repose exacerbating given the thunderous news that she had just delivered, but it did allow me some time to let what she had said sink in. I had come to the monastery thinking to escape and now I found that there was no escape. Ever. To anywhere. My mood dropped
again, downshifting once more from anger to confusion to shock. The wind had gone out of my sails, the flare-up suddenly doused. The enormity of it all left me in a kind of stupor.

“That is why you cannot leave, not really,” she concluded. “Technically you could try to leave but I am unaware of anyone doing so successfully.”

“Has anyone ever tried?” I asked, more out of curiosity than anything else. Processing that this was now my life and my place until my dying breath was – much like learning that I had fallen into the future had been – a task too weighty to be done in the moment. I needed to distract myself. I had little choice but to accept what she was telling me and to hear her out on whatever else there might have been. I needed details and I would later need the space to think.

“Yes, unfortunately,” Geen said. “She was killed at the gate. That happened in my first year in charge here and I’ve never quite forgiven myself for letting it happen. I simply didn’t see it coming.” Her eyes remained locked on the point on the floor she had directed them to as she added, “I will not let it happen again.”
Killed at the gate; I tried not to think of how. I tried not to think. All I could conclude as I lay there in my post-operation bed was that I had no intention of trying my luck at being the first to pull off a successful run for it. That didn’t mean that I had given up, however. Almost despite myself thoughts were starting to form, but they were sprinkled over a layer of emotions that conflicted with both them and with themselves. I was terribly confused. The old me was crying out to fight, to run, to flee the suffocating trap of it, while the new me was accepting because I realized that the place and the program I had come to was my best shot at actually fully becoming that new me. Rationally I thought it insane to try to escape, it appeared to be a guaranteed suicide and I was not ready for that. I told myself that there must be a third door lurking somewhere, a third option that would reveal itself. My mind turned, I began to weigh what I knew.

The monastery was in fact a prison of sorts, and the security measures that I had seen outside it and assumed were designed to protect the inhabitants were actually in place to keep those very same people firmly inside. Locked away. The grounds, judging by the tiny bit I had seen thus far, were vast, and it didn’t seem like it would be an issue of space that would push down on me; it was
instead the simple knowledge that I was here for good. Till death do us part. I could hardly accept that, it was far too limiting, and my mind still refused to think that a society could function that way. On the other hand, I was fully aware that I could never really even attempt to pull off a jailbreak, the conclusion of an experiment like that was far too easy to predict. No, I thought, I would have to do something far more nefarious if I were to do anything at all.

Knowing what I had just learned, in addition to the desire for personal growth that had brought me here in the first place and that remained very much with me, I felt a new desire rising up, a new plan, and quite possibly – it suddenly occurred to me – the door number three I had been wondering about: purposeful corruption of the system from within. I had already been thinking that choice, the idea of personal choice and the social ramifications of such, was something that I could teach the people around me, a bit of my birth time that would make their time – our time – much better. Freedom; it was a beautiful concept and no one could fail to see that. Freedom meant choice and choice meant freedom. Real choice about how to live your life, about the path you would walk. It was true, of course, that in my birth time too there had been precious little of that, and I wasn’t too
blind to see that I myself was the proof in the pudding. I had slaved away at a job I cared little for so that a company I cared even less for could increase its profits in a never-ending cycle of further expansion and deeper exploitation. Burning through the world’s resources, stepping all over the backs of others, and laughing all the way to the bank. It was the way of every corner of the world. Or thereabouts. I, as one lone man, I could do nothing about that and so I played the game and spent the money and time I was allotted in pursuing pleasure. Everyone did. It was a celebration of the emptiness we all felt deep inside.

But this future-present era now, it already offered within itself another way that seemed to be being overlooked by its residents. They had robots to produce everything for them; why not make some robots to do the farming as well? What was the thinking behind giving everyone a set job for life? It struck me as counterproductive or anyway unnecessary. And the one choice that I thought was an actually open option, namely that of joining the monastery, turned out to be, in most ways, just as much of a nonchoice as all the rest. You were as equally stuck here as you would have been had you found yourself a farmer. It might even be worse, I thought; I didn’t know just what kind of life I would have but I did know that freedom of
movement was not included. Farmers, for all their physical labor, still seemed to have plenty of free time, and judging from how Milee and Tomor spent theirs it appeared that you could pursue just about anything you wanted. What was more, everyone in the city had food and shelter guaranteed. You could be a very lazy farmer or worker and probably not suffer for it. There was a real appeal to that.

Yet here too I would have food and shelter guaranteed, and I guessed that here too I could be a lazy monk or whatever they called their monastery occupants. But being lazy and living for the time outside of work was the exact same life I had had back in twenty-eighteen. Such a lifestyle was also a function of shift-based work, whereas being a monk was a twenty-four hour a day gig; after all, there must be some manner of behavioral restrictions or disciplines and a particular structuring of time or otherwise the place wouldn’t qualify as a monastery.

Regardless of all that though, what I wanted was more than what I had in twenty-eighteen – what I wanted was to be more –, and that was why I had come to the monastery. I was willing to have round the clock training if it were to lead somewhere. I had thought that it would be temporary; it turned out that it wasn’t. There was no
changing that and, apparently, no undoing it either. I had very little choice in the matter; in fact, I had none. What I had hit upon, however – and in working my way back up to it as I just had the thought came to me in its full force –, was that I suddenly had a goal. If I were to be trapped here I would be here on my own terms, and to the fullest extent possible. I made that a firm decision. Towards that end my objective would drive me every day until I had seen it through. My aim, as I formulated it in its rough initial form, was an ambitious one: Preach the good news of freedom until the entire social system had been shifted.

It could be done from within, I reasoned, for I had no problem with the power structure in the city based on the rotating councilors, nor with the presumed hierarchy stemming down under Geen here at the monastery. I was no revolutionary that needed to break through the entire edifice, although I realized that I was a freedom fighter of a certain kind; one in the beginning stages but still a freedom fighter. I wanted to see things loosened up and was certain that all would be made the better for it. It would be my gift to them, to everyone; it was perhaps the reason behind whatever forces had acted to bring me far into the future. I would make my way into the history books, and not just as an anomaly whose presence the physicists couldn’t explain. My jaw set as I sat and
thought. It was hands down the most focused and determined that I had ever been; the new me was taking further shape. If my plan worked out I knew that it would be worth the sacrifices demanded.

“What else?” I asked, coming out of my reverie and determined to keep my cards close to my chest.

“As a permanent resident you will be given training in your specific field,” Geen said, and she seemed to perk up immediately. Good, I judged, she must have thought I was willing to play along. And I was; but not in the way she likely assumed.

“And then following that training you will be allowed to determine your own projects within that field,” she continued, “the results of which will be shared with the others at the monastery and with those in the city. Depending on your field you might work with others collaboratively or you might work on your own, or you might even do both. You will be slotted into a network of those already engaged in your area of work and will be under the supervision of a team leader, who in turn is under a section leader, and they are under the field leaders who all work directly with me.” I thought that she looked pleased to be at the top.
“I could work on whatever I wanted to?” I asked, sensing an opening that might prove exploitable.

“More or less, although your team leader will have to approve it and you will have to report to her or him regularly on your progress and submit the project when you’ve completed it,” she answered. There did seem to be some choice involved in monastery life after all then. That would make my task easier as it would provide a common starting point in the championing of still further choice. My plan was coming together.

“Determining your field will be one of the first things we’ll do after you’ve been released from the health center here,” Geen said. “You will take a number of tests that are perhaps like a combination of the personality and aptitude tests from your time, if you’re familiar with those.”

I was, and nodded at her to indicate that.

“Good,” she said. “Prior to your field-specific training you will also undergo a general training course; that will be with me, as I told you earlier.” Yes, I would do that. And I would use the time to hone the skills needed for my real, hidden, project. Argumentation, rhetoric, critical
thinking and analysis; I was determined to develop myself under her tutelage so that I could subvert and transform the world I found myself in on a broad, society-wide scale. I would work harder than I ever had. The new me would take control.

“One question,” I said, forcefully and with a tone that showed that I considered myself still fully in charge of myself.

“Yes, of course,” Geen replied.

“What is the name of the river down there?”

She seemed taken aback, completely surprised by my query. That greatly pleased me. I thought it indicated that I would be able to exercise some kind of power in our relationship as long as I remained unreadable to her, even if just in part. “It’s called the Arakawa River,” she said.

The Arakawa River. That was what it was to me too, how I had known it. That was a pleasant continuation, and I felt very comforted by the connection between then and now, now and then. I took it as a sign that my plan would succeed, that things would carry over, carry through, that the past would be present and that choice would return.
And I would bring it.

“Is there anything else?” Geen asked, half standing as if to excuse herself. I shook my head that there wasn’t.

“Then I will leave you to continue recovering. A doctor and nurse unit will examine you in the morning and if all is well, as I’m sure it will be, you’ll be released and shown to your room. I’ll meet you there so that we can arrange to begin our training as soon as you’re settled and ready.” She smiled graciously and made her way to the door. As she neared it she paused and turned, and with a contented look added, “This went much better than I thought it would. I’m very happy that you’ve joined us, Frank. I think you’ll adjust in no time.”

I nodded a thank you complete with a genuinely fake smile and watched her out. I would not only adjust to monastery life, I would excel at it. And then, and then, well, we would just have to wait and see, I assured myself conspiratorially. Things were on the cusp and Geen could have no idea of the radicalism that was just around the corner, nor of the harbinger that my arrival would turn out to be. All the better for me, the new me; how it related to her and her position was of less concern. But in the end, when all was said and done, when choice was
re-established, I thought that even she might come to thank me. Time would tell.

Safely alone again I stood and stared down at the river. I did have some physical discomfort but it was nothing major and certainly nothing I considered worth keeping me overnight for. I supposed that they wanted to err on the side of caution; doctors in the Japan I knew would have done the same. Other doctors in other countries – perhaps most – would have sent me home after thirty minutes or so. Those days were gone though, as were the countries whose intricate healthcare systems informed the decisions that their medical staff made in one way or another.

After just a few moments’ reflection I couldn’t help thinking that we really had been so steeped in choice and its attendant freedoms; I wondered if anyone from my time, my birth time, had really noticed that. Mostly I think we took it for granted. Yes, there were many things that we all had to do to get by, and the necessity of survival in a rapaciously predatory economic system meant that billions probably compromised themselves daily in one way or another, yet at every turn there were all those little choices surrounding us. Many of them were meaningless to the point of being banal – what kind of
cereal should I buy? – but many were weighty in the extreme. This era that I found myself in, through whatever quirk of spacetime, seemed to have kept the banal – the daily issues of food, evening entertainment, marketplace browsing on the weekends, hobbies, books, music – while doing away with the weighty. You could no longer choose where to live, nor even what type of building you would live in, what work you would be engaged with, what form your political structures would take, or how you would get around from place to place. So much gone.

The river flowed on quietly beneath me and its ceaseless movement aided my thinking. What kind of balance could be achieved between the banal and the weighty? Could the weighty decisions be brought back into people’s lives without sacrificing the obvious security and economic equality that the future-present had achieved? What would it mean in a society like this to choose your livelihood? Couldn’t more options than the current list be made available? And what had happened to revocability? Why were major decisions, like joining the monastery, irreversible? Who could possibly have the foresight required not to feel at least some regret when it came to an issue like that? The shock of the tumultuous years between when I tried to take that fateful Metro and when
I awoke in that rice paddy had apparently pushed the world in the opposite direction than it had been moving in. I thought that there must be some kind of happy medium possible, it was simply a matter of finding, and then implementing, it.

I had nothing to do but wait for my release and so as the afternoon wore on I made the chair by the window my armchair laboratory. I sat and thought just like I assumed the best of them did. I had had no prior training in reflective and analytic thinking, and after an hour or so I realized just how poor at it I actually was, but I did have my study materials and those provided me with a writing instrument and a place to jot down notes. What I could do, what I had always been good at, was to make lists, and so I set about doing just that, hoping that seeing the relevant issues spelled out would help to clarify what I was trying to get at.

My first list was on “Choice”, but that soon fizzled out into the same confused meanderings I had been engaged in and so I shifted my approach. My next list was on “What’s wrong with this time”, and I followed that up with “What’s right with this time”. Those in fact proved to be quite helpful and allowed me to see that the real thrust of my argument with the present lay in the concept
of consent. More specifically, in the absence of consent that dominated the social systems that were in place. I came to understand that without consent the individual was devalued, and that the feeling of being so devalued was what had been getting under my skin.

I then asked myself a critical question: Where was that feeling coming from? Geen had mentioned that her time, this time, and my birth time had very different notions of the nature of choice. Was my feeling then simply something that had been culturally programmed into me, my reactions just a product of the sociohistorical time I had been brought up in? And that therefore the people born in this time who had had another feeling culturally programmed into them thereby reacted very differently to the nonconsensual aspects in their lives than I did? It was an intriguing line of thought; it seemed that Geen had already started teaching me something. That was good, I thought, I wanted her to teach me even though I planned to pull the rug out from under her. Not her in particular of course, but rather the system that supported her. Still, she might take it personally, as regrettable as that would be.

Cultural programming… Maybe that was it. I couldn’t really see any alternatives. After all, if the people of this time reacted so differently than I did to so many aspects
of their daily lives then it couldn’t have been something intrinsically human that was generating the discord; in that case my judgment would have been shared. No, my responses were coming out of my perspective, surely, and that perspective must have been deeply informed by the place and time that I had grown up in. I had absorbed a lot over the years from all the different cities and countries I had lived in, but no matter how much I changed and evolved during my life those formative years were always leaving their mark, always demonstrating their continued hold on me, even if at times quite subtly.

Assuming that it was a matter of cultural programming allowed me to take the next logical step. Any cultural programming would have to come out of somewhere, and it wasn’t too likely that it would be the result of one woman or one man sitting in a big room and plotting out how she or he wanted to make people feel. It must have been more complicated than that. Of course it must. The cultural programming that accompanied my childhood and that accompanies each place, era, and social milieu, would rather be a result of the multitudinous contextual forces at work in that moment in the midst of history’s great sweep. That would mean that the programming we all received was underpinned by the contemporary values that the people around us held, and that those values then
further reflected themselves in how the same people raised their children to be. The one fed into the other. I was influenced by the values of the place I happened to be born into and I influenced their continuation, in whatever way, by how I related to others – especially my children, had I had any – based on those values. A group of people respected certain things and certain ways of being and therefore passed on those views to their children. That was done explicitly by instructing them how to behave, how to react around others in the community, and how they ought to think about any given thing. Also implicitly by example. The children were of course free to reject the values they had been taught, but if those values weren’t rejected – and if the parental guidance were reinforced by something like an educational system it would take quite a hard-minded child to reject all of that – then the values became further strengthened and informed the actions and social institutions of another generation. There could be periods of massive shifting of received values, and history certainly attested to those I thought as I remembered the twentieth century, but such were the exception to the rule. Far more often tiny adjustments would be made as changing situations called for differing interpretations or applications of the values that had been handed down. That process seemed clear enough. Taking that forward,
the next question that I put to myself was this: What were the values that supported and gave rise to the cultural programming I had received?

Once more I took the idea of consent as my starting place. If the giving and receiving of consent prior to an action being done were such a big deal to me then, based on what I had just worked out, it must also have been a big deal to those around me when I was growing up. What would it mean to insist so much on consent? It must have been rooted in a strong notion of individuality and the worth of the individual, in the belief that each person can and ought to choose for themselves, not the type of “mother knows best” mentality that this future-present seemed to have so much of. Rather, it was a value that said, “Let me decide for myself, thank you very much.” I could already see that choice was central in that. Not just choice though, but as much choice as possible; after all, people now did still have options to choose from, they were simply confined to an extremely limited range. The more that I had before me the more empowered I would feel when choosing amongst them. “Out of all that I ended up here,” I would say to myself, and if that “here” was a good place then I might congratulate myself too. I was in charge of my destiny. Such were the ethos of my past, and I had clearly carried them into the present,
bizarre as the present was for me.

Being in charge was a nice thought, but in looking back over the course of my life I could see how flawed it was. Oh, I had made plenty of choices but I could hardly take either the credit or the blame for how those decisions had turned out. I was honest enough with myself to see that quite a bit of my success was due to luck and/or fortunate circumstances which were well beyond my control. There were times when I pushed through initial failures and my persistence paid off, but even then I suspected that it might not have had the final situation been different. In many ways, I thought, we really are at the whims of fate. Maybe there was some meaning to that.

The river coursed on and its water shifted this way and that as it came across obstacles, some extant and some the result of random chance. A dead tree fell in this manner and not that; a rock tumbled down and happened to hit a smaller rock which changed its path and sent the first rock to this part of the river instead of over there. Such was life. I moved around the things that fell in my way based on much that might have been random, or appeared random, but was nevertheless linked into a thick web of interrelated details. The smelly guy on the train that put me in a bad mood, being at the office entrance just as a
new client happened to walk in, finding a coin on the ground outside a coffee shop, having one more drink before heading to the Metro. Those tiny and seemingly insignificant little nothings could change the course of an entire lifetime. Responding to them were the real choices in life, but even those responses went largely unnoticed and so too unappreciated. It was the big things that we wanted to choose, or at least to have the illusion of the power of choice over. That was how we thought in my birth time anyway, and although I knew that my take on that was just as culturally influenced as the feelings themselves, I still thought that there was something to it. If you allow people to be in charge of their own lives, or at least to think that they are in charge of their own lives as they blissfully ignore all of the randomness and lucky or unlucky breaks involved, then those people will feel enabled and invested and will appreciate their lives more. They may even feel happier, although I wasn’t sure about that as I had never been particularly happy and didn’t have anything to compare how I felt or might feel against in order to make much of an informed judgment.

Consent, then, was a sign of respect for the individual, and that respect was a cornerstone of my time and the way of thought that I had inherited. It might have been a hollow respect but that didn’t matter because we all
believed it and we all also believed in it, treating each other in certain ways because we shared that respect. We built our institutions on it too, even if they became corrupted and the people running them soon lost all care for everyone but themselves. The crucial part was that the institutions had been designed around individual respect and so somehow kept a semblance of that, regardless of the kind of person or people who happened to be running them. In turn that meant that we individuals had to be vigilant and to watch our watchers. Many of us probably failed at that; I certainly had. Life got too busy and the pursuit of pleasure too all-consuming. No matter.

In this time consent was not required and an individual’s wishes weren’t even pretended to be respected. You really only had one choice in life: take your chances at the Day of Choosing or take your chances at the monastery. In either case you ended up being forced into something. At the Day of Choosing if your number didn’t come up early in the initial lottery you got the job that was left – for life. If your number did come up early you could pick from a handful of uninspiring jobs – also for life. No changing, no shifting around, no alterations. You were then assigned a place to live and again without consent. At the monastery, where they violently sterilized you and permanently removed your hair, you took a test that
determined your natural abilities and were forced into that field. Yes, you could pick a subfield out of wherever you ended up and could even choose your projects, but what if you hated mathematics despite being naturally very good at them? Would I be forced to slave away at geometric theorems that I pursued as the lesser of algebraic or calculus-inspired evils? I shuddered at the thought and rubbed my still strangely bald head in exasperation, a physical tick that had already become something of a habit. And here too, where you lived within the monastery grounds was handed over to you as an ultimatum and with no concern given for your personal preferences. Geen had already mentioned a few times that I would be “shown to my room” without once asking what kind of room I would like or even where I would like the room to be within the vast complex of buildings. There was a fundamental lack of consideration for the individual that marked the future-present, and that was what I intended to change. How I would be able to go about that transformation would depend on the working slot I got fitted into though, and so I realized that I would have to play their game a little. Take the test, see what my natural skills were, see what area I ended up in, and then from there, wherever there turned out to be, figure out how to get my message out. That was my path and who knew, I might just hit upon another lucky break.
The next morning my check was over in a matter of minutes and as expected I was cleared for release. An orderly came to escort me to where I would be living for the rest of my life – another rub of my head at that –, and after gathering the few things I had brought with me from the city I followed him out. We wound our way back down the stairs to that first blank entrance and its three strikingly colored doors and then stepped outside. The sun was shining and there was a just noticeable crispness to the air, a sliver of the cool left over from the night prior. Before me I could see the gate that I now knew to be my prison guard, and the barb-wired exterior walls stretched high and long on either side. The area in front of the health center was largely graveled over in the manner that the roads were, presumably to allow vehicular access I thought before stopping to remind myself that there were no vehicles other than trains and trams and then wondering what they did with people in a physical emergency. Otherwise the ground around us was as richly grassy and well-taken care of as the stretch leading up to the city gate and the peculiar urban pavement that followed it had been. As much as I appreciated that grass I realized that if I ended up on the monastery’s gardening team I would have a hard time bringing my plan to fruition – no pun intended.
We walked along between the outside walls and a string of nondescript and sharply white concrete buildings, all seven stories high and sharing the general appearance of an urban housing and/or office compound as the buildings in the city had done. It was pleasant enough, and the earth underfoot almost lent a general air of being in a park. The orderly ducked into an alleyway and we emerged on the far side of what I suddenly saw had been merely the front row of buildings in the complex; a wide and spacious open field flanked by further rows of concrete edifices greeted us warmly. The field was not all that deep to look at but it was very broad. From my window in the health center I hadn’t been able to make out much of it due to the angle at which I had been looking, but from the perspective lent by where we now walked it appeared to be maybe ten meters deep until it hit the river’s edge, and three or four times that between the two sets of other buildings set off at slight angles on either side. If you had a bird’s eye view of the whole monastery I assumed that it would look like an isosceles trapezoid with the river forming the longest side. There were perhaps other parts to the grounds that I would find out about in due course, but that central section certainly appeared to be the main. I wondered what the area before us was used for and noted with some relief that it contained none of the
padded furniture that had marked the interior garden reserved for the city’s orgy. I had zero desire to take part in an activity like that again. For now anyway, I thought, before catching myself as I remembered that returning to the city was not, after all, in the cards. We would just see about that though, I mused. Changes to how things were done might be afoot.

The orderly hung to our left and guided me to the third of nine buildings that formed one side of the trapezoid. We entered and once more I noticed that, like Milee and Tomor’s apartment building had been, all was cleanly white and bare. A row of numbered boxes along a wall again stood out – organized so that there must have been one for each room in the building, I guessed – but other than that there was nothing. Merely a staircase up; no elevator in sight, no maintenance room, no bulletin board, no announcements, nothing. We hiked the empty stairs to the seventh floor and despite the exhaustion that I knew doing that daily would generate I was happy to be on the top floor and to have nobody living above me. I thought that perhaps a bit of luck was in fact starting to come my way.

Sadly such was not to last. To my great disappointment my room was on the side of the building that did not face
the river. I would have to content myself with the view of trees and low green mountains in the distance that my window gave sight to. After he had let me in and handed me the keycard to my new – and permanent I reminded myself – digs the orderly was off with a wave, a smile, and a slight bow. He had a full day ahead, no doubt, and there was no reason for him to stick around and chat. Equally I didn’t want him to; I wanted some time to situate myself.

The room was fine as far as it went. More of a dorm than an apartment, really, although unlike my university dorm I was pleased to see that the unit contained a shower and toilet off to my right as I stood in front of the door. Those were divided by a wall between them and separate entrances, I noted, even though they were physically adjacent. One more bit of the Japan I had known that remained; it was nice. I had grown used to my toilet not being a part of the bathing area and found that I liked it better that way. Somehow it felt cleaner, even if the toilet space always ended up being tiny and cramped. The whole of my living quarters was probably about six meters by six meters, making it only slightly smaller than the apartment I had had in Tokyo. Thirty-six square meters compared to forty – no problem at all, I judged. My bed, situated immediately to the left, was an actual
bed and not a floor mat, a dresser and a set of drawers stood along the far wall opposite the entry and next to a bookshelf that stretched floor to ceiling. There was also a very nice-looking wooden desk and chair in front of the double window that nearly ran the length of the room. I went over and sat down.

Right away I noticed that there was a power button set into the top of the left desk leg and so I switched it on to see what would happen. A keyboard appeared on the surface of the desk, or rather *in* the surface of the desk, meaning that although the piece appeared to be of solid wood it actually had a touchscreen either built in or making up the entirety of the exterior. The standard icons for other software tools that I remembered from Milee and Tomor’s tablet thing lit up here and there, but instead of touching any one of those I started typing a little out of curiosity as I couldn’t spot a monitor of any sort. There, floating right in front of me, appeared my words, dark black letters set against the sunshine streaming in through the window. That was impressive, and was yet another bit of technology that was functional and welcoming even if it was meant for work and not play. I hoped to find myself in a position that required me to make frequent use of such a device.
Opening the drawers I found that there were three sets of the top and bottom combos that I had seen others wearing folded neatly and waiting for me. My pants were grey like everyone else’s had so far been, but my shirts were a light blue; I wondered if that indicated a rank of some kind, trainee perhaps. Trying on a pair I found that they fit perfectly and assumed that they had just been produced after my measurements had been taken at the health check. The efficiency of made-to-order robot manufacturing. I kept my new outfit on as I put my old clothes and other items away and then stood silently in the small space between the end of the bed and the desk, looking out the broad window. The off-white curtains at either end were a nice accent against the medium brown of the interior, the overall feeling being warm and comforting; I thought that I wouldn’t mind spending a good deal of time in my new home. I could see a number of low buildings dotted here and there amongst the thick growth of trees that stretched out away from what must have been a whole section of housing. A few of them were tiny and almost looked like temples, while some were quite large and had satellite dishes and antennae visible on their flat roofs. Running through the woods I could also see the thin grey stripe of the exterior wall that kept us in; the grounds really were quite large as it must have been more than two kilometers out in the distance when the side of that wall turned
towards the river and marked the extent of the monastery. I wondered what kind of security was in place at the river itself and if anyone had ever tried to make a watery escape.

A knock on my door cut short my contemplation. “Come in,” I called and then remembered the automatic door lock. I strode over and pulled it open to see Geen standing there waiting for me, a slight smile on her lips.

“Oh good, you’ve already dressed,” she said by way of greeting.

“These were in my drawers,” I replied, though I knew she knew that.

“Yes, we had them made for you last night,” Geen said as we stepped into the room. She probably knew that I knew that as well.

“Does the blue signify anything?” I asked.

“It does,” Geen answered, “very observant. Light blue means that you’re in your first year here and is a sign to everyone else that you may not know exactly what to do at every moment, that you might need some help from

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time to time. After your first year you’ll get a color assigned based on the field you test into. Black for research and applied science, light green for advanced mathematics, dark green for theoretical science, light orange for research engineering, dark orange for infrastructure and robotic engineering and maintenance, light red for the performing arts, dark red for literature of both fiction and nonfiction, pink for the medical section, et cetera. People like me in charge of management and day-to-day affairs all wear grey.”

“Is there any meaning to the grey pants?” I asked. “Everyone seems to have the same shade.”

“We use grey to indicate the power of choice,” she replied. I was so surprised by the comment that I nearly blurted out something that might have compromised the mission I had taken on for myself.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “It doesn’t seem like there’s a great deal to choose from if people can’t leave and are assigned their working areas.” Already that was saying too much, I knew, but I wanted to learn her perspective, the institutional perspective which Geen, as the head, would represent and share, and I thought as well that if I could come to understand how they viewed
choice then my championing of it in the way I understood it – actual, real choice – would be that much stronger. I would thereby be able to make it all the better, all the more appealing. The hidden objection in my statement was risky but it might pay off; it was also already out of my lips.

Geen looked at me a little quizzically and appeared to be taking the time to weigh her words that I should have used. “As you’ll learn in your training,” she began, keeping a keen eye on my face and no doubt searching for what my nonverbal reactions might tell her, “the power of choice is always present. It is there in how you move in the world, of course, but it is also there in the way the world moves around you. Not being able to randomly pick your field of study is no absence of choice, as you seem to be implying. It is rather a liberated and liberating means of gaining knowledge about yourself. I would offer that your time in the early twenty-first century had even less choice than ours does when viewed from the proper perspective.”

We would see about that, I thought; and her buried barb about “randomly” selecting a field did not go unnoticed. Still, I put on my best passive face, so well practiced from working in corporate Tokyo, and repeated my new mantra,
“I’m eager to learn about that and many other things. Thank you for giving me your time.”

“Not at all,” Geen said, lightening up. “On the contrary, thank you.” She glanced around my room and seemed satisfied. “So then, when would you like to take your placement test? Once we know your results and where you’ll end up I’ll be able to tailor my initial training of you so that your entry into your eventual field will be smoother. I think that we’ll only need a few days of sessions together, and actually with my schedule I was hoping that we could meet in the mornings and that in the afternoons you could concurrently begin your specialized training with your section’s team leader. Coming at the time of year you did you’re a bit off of our regular program and we will very soon have our hands full with the new batch that comes after the Day of Choosing has passed.”

“Of course, that would be no problem,” I said as pleasantly as I could, and I meant it, for what that was worth. I noted though that she didn’t ask me if I liked my room or not, or if I would prefer anything to be different than it was. Whatever notion of choice she was coming from it was hard for me to ascertain any real element of respect for the individual in it; it seemed, rather, to be
more of a “choice” in the sense that how we react to something like fate is a choice. “I didn’t ask for this but here it is and so I’ll respond with X”; that kind of thing. If such passed for choice then I determined that I had much to offer indeed.

“I’m a blue trainee, after all, so I’ll do as I’m told,” I added. Geen nodded her thanks and I continued, “Do you get a lot of people coming after the Day of Choosing who didn’t like what they ended up with at the event?”

“Some are like that,” Geen replied. “Some wanted to come here prior to the ceremony but had to wait until after the Day as before then all recent graduates are considered minor members of the community and not yet full adults. There are also some who must come here to maintain the population of the city at its current manageable level.” She gave me that surveilling look again and then said, “We consider even those in the last group to retain the power of choice, although you might see them as being forced into joining our monastery.”

I decided, perhaps wisely, not to comment on the remark and hoped that my face gave nothing away. “As for your first question,” I said, changing the subject, “I’m happy to take the placement test immediately.”
“Wonderful,” Geen responded, her demeanor relaxing once more. “That will be a big help. I’ll call ahead and have it readied.” She raised her left arm and as she did so I noticed for the first time that she wore a watch of some kind. Pushing a button on it and then typing out a series on a keypad that appeared hovering in the air above the watch’s face led to what was evidently a video call getting patched through. I could see a youngish-looking and very attractive woman – once more either because of or despite her having no hair – take the call as her face replaced the keypad hologram. Geen told her that I was ready and that we would be heading her way forthwith. The woman on the other end nodded and indicated that she would prepare for our arrival. I wondered if I would eventually be given a watch like that. I hoped so.

“Let’s go then,” Geen said. “The testing center is not far from here; in fact you may even be able to see it from your window.”

The walk was once more a pleasant one. Exiting my new building – home now – we started down a path winding through a small forest that appeared to be left completely untended, nature being allowed to take its course. As we strolled along the fresh air and the scent of the woods
revived my spirits and I felt it really was an exciting adventure that I was setting out on. It had been a rocky start to things, that was true, but then I told myself that beginnings were often rocky and filled with unforeseen challenges, and I had arrived at a course to take, a goal that would require much effort and therefore be rewarding no matter how it turned out – the journey naturally being the main part of any goal –, and a fresh program and routine that would add needed structure to my life and result in personal growth. I found Geen’s light talk about where things were located within the grounds and how a typical day unfolded to be interesting and informative. In some ways it sounded very much like how I expected a monastery to be, only on a significantly larger scale. Up at five a.m., group morning meditation sessions at five-thirty in your building’s second floor hall, over to the building’s cafeteria for breakfast at six a.m., a morning working session from seven to eleven, more meditation then lunch, work again after lunch, free time, dinner, a final group meditation, and then the evening stretched out as you wanted it to. Not bad at all, I thought. There were no regular days off from that general eating and meditation schedule although each week we had a full day without any work at all, and in addition once or twice a month we finished after the morning shift.
The testing center was much smaller than I thought it would be, and unlike the standardized, nondescript, and function-oriented buildings that seemed to fill the monastery and especially the city, it was shaped like a tall pagoda. I wondered if there was any meaning to that. The woman from the video call met us at the door and although she wasn’t as attractive or as young-looking as she had appeared on screen she was very pleasant and extremely warm: a comforting aura itself. She made me feel even more at ease than I had on the way over.

We took a short flight of steps upstairs and I could see that despite the building’s size it would be able to accommodate quite a few people testing at the same time. The room was lined on all sides with low tables and cushions on the straw mat floor, and each table had a tablet device on it of the same size that Milee and Tomor’s had been; I presumed that each of the structure’s five storeys was arranged similarly. It was to be a computerized test, it seemed; that made sense. I was ushered over to a table and told to take my time, there was no need to rush and in fact the test worked better if you answered slowly, thoughtfully, and carefully. It usually took new entrants about two hours to complete but I shouldn’t worry about that. I should work at my own pace. Geen and the attendant then left me to it and
disappeared into a side room. I was sure that Geen would have other things to do and would come back when I finished, but even if she didn’t I knew that I would be taken care of. I was in an excellent mood to have my abilities measured.

The test itself was actually a lot of fun. Geen had described it well; it was like an aptitude and personality test combined, and I particularly enjoyed what must have been the individual judgment sections where I was to imagine myself in various scenarios and select how I would react to each. As usual for me I guessed that I did poorly on the spatial thinking questions, and I had no clue how to do the calculus problems although I was somehow able to muddle through the algebra section and to a lesser extent the geometry as well. There was a short essay required which I found myself spending an enormous amount of time on but that was likely the most gratifying portion of the entire test. In it I had to answer the following question and give a detailed account of the rationale I used to justify my reaction: If a human being is essentially a biological machine then why hasn’t science been able to create a technology that matches the human brain? I ended up writing four full screens of text in response to that. Following the essay was a listening portion and as I was the only person present I didn’t
bother to use the headphones provided, I just turned up the volume on the machine’s speakers. My reflexes were taken too, via a program that was strikingly similar to the kinds I used to waste time on using my old smartphone while riding the Metro. Flashing colors danced around the screen and I had to be quite dexterous to match the order and speed required. I found the game, such as it was, both more difficult and much less addictive than my phone’s various apps had been.

Another hour or so and half a dozen sections later I finished and pushed the final submit button that appeared on my screen. After that I put the computer down to rest and stood and stretched. I was tired but I still felt good. It had been both an amusing and demanding exam and it was good to be done. I would never have to do it again, although in some ways I did kind of want to. I remembered that the results of what I had just completed would determine the course of my time at the monastery, and more than that, by how things were currently arranged, it would determine the course of the rest of my life. Had I not had the plan for vast changes in mind that I did I may have been somewhat disturbed by that; one lone test would have seemed overly important to me in that case. I did have my plan and my goal though, and that allowed me to see what I had just done as the first
step on my way to much else. It would furnish the means by which my little thought revolution for these people and this time would be undertaken. Phase One Complete.

The center’s attendant came out of her office carrying a tray with two cups of tea on it; green, of course. She told me that my results were being processed and would be transmitted to Geen, who would then return with the team leader of the area in the section and field that I was to join. We sat at the table I had used and drank our tea and chatted. She was quite charming and I thoroughly enjoyed talking with her. She told me about her life at the center, about all of the faces she had seen come and go through those doors, about the hopes and disappointments that marked each person getting their results, about the Stoic resolve many showed and the despair that many others openly displayed. She herself had been somewhat put off by being assigned to her work as when she had entered the monastery and been placed in the psychology section she had initially wanted to do personal counseling. The sudden death of her predecessor had forced her to shift her chosen team into this one, however, with the concession that she could pursue her counseling during the lulls between intakes of new members. Those had proved less frequent and less lengthy than she had anticipated, but she was at least able to do a lot of
research as her daily duties were not overly demanding. Her name was Sou and I told her that I would very much like to meet with her again. She smiled at that, blue eyes twinkling, and twitched her button nose a little. I rubbed my bald head.

Geen came through the door again with a heavily bearded and thin, almost gaunt, man in tow. He had a hard look to him, a weathered look like Geen’s but far fiercer, and his black beard was flecked with much white. His small brown eyes displayed compassion and a deep intelligence. He was no taller than me and as I stood to greet him he too extended his hand to honor me with a firm handshake straight out of my formative years. We looked each other in the eye and an understanding seemed to pass between us.

“This is Zerre,” Geen said, addressing me. “He’s in charge of the writing team in the Literature section of the Arts and Humanities field. Based on your results that is where you’ll fit in best.” I had never imagined that I would get that, it was nothing like how I had made a living all the long years prior to waking up in that rice paddy.

“Those are your section and field, and you cannot change
them,” Geen continued, “but you can change your team later if you decide that you want to. There are other options within the Literature section that would fit as well. In that case your team leader would change too, but for now Zerre will help you train.” He nodded at me and gave me a half-smile.

“It turns out that you excel at nothing,” he said wryly. “Welcome to the world of writing.”
Chapter Eight

My morning training times with Geen were far more interesting than I had anticipated they would be. They were also far more challenging, and were conducted in a manner that surprised me. Each evening I received a mail from her on where and when we would meet the next day, now at 8am at a café next to the river, now at 10 in the lobby of the Robotics Research and Development Center, now at 7:30 at the entrance to a hiking trail that wound through the woods which skirted the western edge of the park. It was always new and it was always stimulating and conducive to thought, and in bits and pieces I quickly became very familiar with the breadth of the grounds.

She seemed to have some ideas about what she wanted to cover during each meeting but kept the flow loose and free. After first laying out a few basic fundamental rules of conduct that I was to follow in the monastery she quickly moved into a discussion of metaphysics and epistemology, actually using the behavioral rules as a segue to bridge the gap. And as far as those rules went, there wasn’t much on the “to do” list that was required of me other than to attend the meditation sessions and show up for work, and I saw no reason to object to either of those. The meditation would be good mental training, I
thought, and a job was of course a job, no matter where it was located. There similarly wasn’t much that I was prohibited from doing. I couldn’t change out of my field and section but I knew that already, and besides that the only hard and fast negative rule that we had to follow was that we weren’t allowed to drink or use drugs, but since such were not available anyway abstaining from them was easily accomplished simply by default.

My initial reaction to that final “don’t” was disappointment – drink had been a nearly lifelong companion – but Geen skillfully explained the reason for the rule in such a simple and straightforward way that I was able to take it on because I shared the goal that lay behind it: development. Drink and drugs were fine in and of themselves, Geen said, but for those who were after mental growth they were hindrances as they were fundamentally consciousness altering. She went on: Some drugs, such as natural stimulants like those found in tea or coffee, were not consciousness altering in any way that adversely affected the functioning of the mind, although they did of course influence the brain. Some other drugs, such as hallucinogens, could be very positively consciousness altering but long-term use tended to lead to either permanent brain damage (in whatever degree) or psychological and/or physical dependence. Those drugs
were sometimes used at the monastery but only under special circumstances and in circumscribed ways; regular members were therefore not allowed to use them recreationally. I could see the logic behind such a move. What Geen then did next was far more intriguing. Taking consciousness as her focus, she launched into a series of talks that presented me with a worldview I had never previously had the opportunity to consider. Consciousness, she averred, was a fundamental phenomenon found throughout the entire physical universe. Seen otherwise there was no rational way to explain its presence, not only in us but in every creature that displayed it. Try as they might, she told me, scientists in my birth era had never been able to reduce mind purely down to the physical happenings in the brain, and although scientists of the present era had discovered how mind did arise out of the way a brain physically functioned, there remained a number of unsolved mysteries surrounding it, not least concerning the interaction between an emerged and established mind and its constituent physical parts. The position that consciousness must therefore be one of the essential functions of the universe, a necessary and inevitable development of how life unfolded, gradually came to be accepted, and given its universal presence – admittedly in varying levels amongst the many living organisms exhibiting very different cerebral structures –
that “one of the essential functions” view slowly evolved into a “central essential function” view, and consciousness and mind came to be attributed in vast and expansive ways.

A human being, she continued, was uniquely positioned – on our planet uniquely at least, so far as we knew – to be able to develop their own consciousness by working towards the unity of what we had traditionally, and wrongly, assumed to be two opposing sides to our nature: the rational and the emotional, the left brain and the right. We are gifted with higher consciousness from birth and it is the rightful goal of each person to spend their lives in the pursuit of its development, she said. Our rational and emotional sides are neither at odds nor countervailing; they must both be embraced and both made to grow to work together, to work as one. I interjected that if that were so then why weren’t we just made with a brain that didn’t have hemispheres? She answered me patiently and from a position that was clearly used to having such questions put to her. Leaning over her cup of coffee she began by remarking that we weren’t made, we evolved. We are part of the ongoing self-expression of the living universe, and that is a natural and difficult to predict process. If there is a separate intelligence beyond the consciousness that is so pervasive then it is an
intelligence that stands outside of time, for spacetime itself is an emergent property of the evolving universe just as matter is. If time does not even exist for such an intelligence then it may either choose to guide evolution or simply observe it; how could we possibly know? It would stand too far beyond our concepts of good and evil and outside of our judgments of should. She herself remained agnostic on the question of the existence of such an intelligence within, or as a part of, or even as the underlying element of the universe, but she had no doubts about the importance of consciousness.

The way to achieve one’s development, one’s growth, she asserted, was the way of the mirror. It was an ancient way, perhaps stretching all the way back to our dawn, and although it had been repeatedly subverted by religions and ideologies seeking control over truth, power over knowledge, it had always been with us. It was simple: Know yourself. Look within and discover. She told me to accept that which was experientially given in the quest without holding it against the strictures of received law, received wisdom, or even rigid reasoning. I was to remember that we are emotional creatures just as much, or more than, we are rational creatures. Intuition can be a powerful guide and nurturing voice on the journey. Do not doubt what you gain from within, she said, and do not
assume that how you were taught to think is how you ought to or must think. The same applied to her, she assured me; I was not simply to swallow every little thing she said. I was rather to take it as advice, as sign pointers on the way which could only be mine and which would necessarily be a lonesome and individual journey. The institutional religions had mostly died out with the nation-state, she said, but spirituality was healthier than it had ever been. In some places of the contemporary world, at least. She stressed that the things we do as occupations are not how we occupy ourselves; the externals, the necessities, do not matter. What does matter, and only this, is the quest for self-knowledge, self-development, self-growth: the inward quest. That is why the city is run in the way it is, she explained. People there do what is needed in order to guarantee the comfort and survival of all, and each resident is assured a way of life that provides ample free time for this higher, this highest, pursuit.

At that point I interrupted her again because it was there that many of my personal questions lay, and there that most touched on the nature of my own self-appointed quest; namely, the restoration and promotion of choice. Individual choice. Which might actually fit in well I thought, glancing at the river from where we sat in the
café’s simple stone-laced terrace and remembering that each moment is its own and never returns, with the highly individuated nature of the spiritual program she had been describing. “If that’s the case then why do people still have to work at all?” I asked. “Why not just get robots to do everything? It seems technically possible.”

“We could, that’s true,” Geen conceded. “There are a few reasons that we don’t, however. First and foremost, physical activity is very healthy and will often benefit the entire body, including of course the brain. Although, as your time taught us, people often need a reason to remain physically active, and so we give them one. Note the manner in which it is given as well: farmers work in groups and use simple tools, as you experienced, but so too do those who work in the city. Robots do not cook our food, make our drinks, attend to goods bartering, cut our hair, et cetera, et cetera. All is done by us, by hand, and amongst others. Then there is also the fact that the work people engage in is very meaningful and meaning-generating for them. A great many take enormous pride in the crops they produce, the shops they manage, the restaurants they run, the markets they organize. Not everyone will be drawn to the more intellectual nature of the work that we do here in the monastery, and nor should they be. To those for whom
such a life appeals they will find their way here, yet those who remain in the city will still need structure and routine, rhythm and balance in their lives. People need something to do and the time to follow their hearts. For a healthy human psychology there must be both.”

“Then why not let people choose to do whatever they want?” I pressed.

Geen sighed a little. “As I said, our occupations are not really what matters. The city is run based on need, and to meet those needs certain slots must be filled. Except for the rare year when a great many new graduates who happen to be near the top of the order at the Day of Choosing all take the monastery, the option of coming here always remains for those who don’t like the job they are assigned. Some compromises must be made, and we consider assigning work based on community need to be one such compromise worth making. Don’t forget that our economy is not like yours was; the constant attempt to generate wealth for its own sake is not what drives us and so our real needs are quite few. A person who decided to pour their life into starting a business doing something no one required would be wasting their time and unnecessarily distracting themselves from where their real efforts should be focused: on personal growth and
self-knowledge. Those who find themselves farmers and those who find themselves clerks and those who find themselves hairstylists, or whatever, all have a job that demands the acquisition and development of skills, a structured working time and place, and attainable achievements about which they can be pleased. They have a role and they fulfill that role. Outside of the working day they also have access to all that might be called for to pursue the activities that are wholly chosen by themselves and no one else. People have plenty of opportunities to do whatever they want, and those opportunities are generally put to good use. From my studies of your era I noticed that most of you, at least in the so-called ‘developed countries’ as they were known then, tended to exist somewhere in between having a strong inner life and having a strong outer life, and therefore to really have neither. Loneliness, melancholy, alienation, and a deep-seated sense of directionlessness seemed to be the rule. What we have strived to create is a society in which everyone has a place and everyone knows their place, in which everyone is dependent on others and aware that others are dependent on them. We attempt to encourage and facilitate personal growth, while at the same time emphasizing community and social belonging.”
Geen made a good case, and she was largely right about how I, at least, remembered feeling about my own life in the twenty-first century, yet I still remained unconvinced at the necessity of the conclusions her analysis had led her to. I thought that there must be a better way than to force the long working days I had experienced as a farmer on those unwilling to do them. I understood her point about the community having certain practical concerns that must of course be met, but the randomness involved at the Day of Choosing and the fact that you could never change your job once it had been assigned to you struck me as imminently unfair. I judged that at a minimum there ought to be a mechanism whereby if you didn’t like the job you got you would only have to do it for a year, and then at the following Day of Choosing you could be one of the very first to pick a new job. Something of that nature seemed like it would work, even taking into consideration that what was called for in the city would vary from annum to annum. It might not be ideal, I admitted to myself, but given the circumstances that people were already living with I thought that it would be an improvement. Then there was the orgy; what role did that fill and had Geen purposefully been trying to avoid the issue?

“You haven’t mentioned the Harvest Festival,” I said. “I
understand your points about people requiring something to do with their days and about the community’s needs having to be met, but what purpose does that serve? I can’t see how it would contribute to self-development.” It remained a touchy and sensitive topic for me, and that must have been evident in the way I put my question to her.

“I largely agree with you,” Geen replied, taking me by surprise. A pleasant surprise, but a confusing one. “That is an unfortunate hangover from your time,” she added, “where the focus of people’s lives was more purely physical and material, more purely the singular pursuit of pleasure.”

“We never had anything like that,” I rejoined, perhaps a bit too strongly – and oddly defensively.

“No, not like that exactly, at least not for most people,” Geen said. “But I gather that the underlying approach that you took to one another was more or less the same thinking that gets exhibited at the Harvest Festival. For my part I’d like to see it abolished, but it’s become a deeply ingrained tradition and I suppose it does have some merits, community cohesion perhaps being foremost amongst them. For some participants it can be
quite psychologically revelatory as well, and the mix of exhaustion and euphoric drug use has been known to trigger visions from time to time. Such might be helpful in self-discovery, although I suspect that whatever visions are experienced there tend not to be as instructive as they could given the distracting nature of the surroundings. For the time being the councilors have consistently decided to maintain the tradition whenever an objection to it has been raised, and so on we go.”

“I hated it,” I confessed. “Not at first but soon thereafter. I barely made it through the night.” Even the simple act of telling Geen that stirred memories in me which brought with them waves of fresh pain.

Geen nodded sympathetically.

“In fact,” I added, “that was what made me decide to come here.”

“Well then,” she said, “the Harvest Festival did accomplish at least one good thing this year.”

It was a nice comment and I appreciated the compliment it contained. Geen was glad I was here. I was too. I had already learned a lot, and although I hadn’t yet figured
out how individual choice and a deeper respect for personal autonomy might be promulgated from within the existing socioeconomic system, I had a much better grasp of the structure of that system and the reasoning that lay behind it. There was a way forward, I was sure of that; I just had to find it.

“Something else; and this just occurred to me,” I said. Geen had been running my training sessions like an open workshop and had encouraged me to interject with questions whenever they arose. Her talks had been tailored to my unusual needs, I suspected, but even so the leeway I was given to say anything at any time had been enormously helpful and had added many layers of clarity to what she had been talking about. “You said that people in the city are given enough free time so that they can pursue the kind of self-knowledge and self-development that we focus on here in the monastery, but do you know how people there actually use their free time? In my experience mostly just to pursue their hobbies or relax.”

Geen nodded, “Yes, that’s right. No one is forced to do anything with the time that is theirs. Remember that what we do here is very difficult, very lonesome, and most certainly not for everyone. Pursuing something like a hobby can be a wonderful way to both acquire skills and
to learn about yourself in the process, to see what it is that comes out of you when you engage in your chosen task, whatever it may be. Such can also be socially fulfilling, and as you know that is a very deep need in most of humanity; the average person is an intensely cultural creature, as we’ve been discussing. The way of the mirror goes against all of that and is a hard, narrow, and endlessly demanding road to take. There are no rules, no methods, no rituals to follow, you have to be your own guide and personal experience is your only teacher. We could hardly try to fit that into everyone’s lives or even recommend it to everyone. Historically we, by and large all of us, have needed standards and specific guidelines; most of the major religions were structured on that approach. Those faiths that had that structure, however, were predominately based on the assumption that the truth or the divine must be looked for without, that it is \textit{out there} somewhere and must be searched for and sought after. Even the more philosophical faiths that didn’t see truth as being an ‘Other’ still filled themselves with practices directed outwards. People required such. In our time we have instead learned to find the truth within, where, perhaps to the surprise of many, it has always been, as a part of each and every one of us just waiting to be noticed; quietly teaching, speaking, guiding, and nourishing. You are the truth and so am I; this truth can be
found in many, many different ways. And so people in the city are allowed to do what they will and we hope that the environment we can offer them, and the work that is produced here that we can share with them, will somehow aid on the paths they have adopted. The monastery doesn’t run the city, you see, and our role is simply to contribute to it. We really can do nothing more than to offer ourselves and our place as an option for those who would tread the path on the precipice that monastery life is.”

Geen paused and then added, “Well, we do have some sway over city matters, I suppose. The head of the monastery acts as the tie-breaker in cases where the councilors’ vote is evenly split. In fact, there is a trial to be held in a few weeks’ time and my presence has been requested for the adjudicating of it. The other councilors wish for the whole Council to be present and that includes me, even though my duties here normally keep me from participating in their affairs.”

“A trial?” I asked. That aspect of community life hadn’t yet come up for me and I had quite forgotten that the judicial branch of governance existed. Out of sight, out of mind, I supposed, though it was strange that I should have ignored it so completely.
“A rather serious one,” Geen replied. “I might ask you to come with me. It could be good for you to see firsthand how such things work.” I was intrigued, and curious. I hoped that she would invite me when the time came.

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During those days of heady morning discussions learning about the metaphysics that grounded my new time and place’s worldview and the sociopolitical gears that kept the whole thing running, the afternoon training sessions with Zerre were of an altogether different sort. His task was to teach me how to write so that whatever I had inside could come out in such a way that others might benefit from reading what I produced. The content of my thought he said he would leave to me for the time being; his goal, as he described it, was first to push my sentences into shape. After that he might recommend some books that would help me develop my thinking or ask someone else to see to it if he himself didn’t feel that he was up to the task; a judgment he would make based on whatever my cognitive starting point turned out to be.

On the first day Zerre met me in the commons section of the offices of the team he headed, a rectangular space
dominated by a long conference table and surrounded by a series of doors leading to individual working areas; one room was set aside for me should I eventually officially join. We sat down and he immediately gave me a pile of texts that he dismissively said the section leader insisted everyone in our team should read; mostly how-to books about the ins and outs of both fiction and nonfiction writing. Zerre told me that I was welcome to waste my time on them if I so wished but that his approach would be different. He said that the only way I would be able to amount to anything resembling a writer was to write until my fingers bled. The placement test had indicated that I had some natural aptitude for the practice and so the challenge was to pull that out. He gave me timed writing assignments – to be done by hand with pen and paper – one after another on all manner of topics and in all manner of forms. A paragraph on this, a page on that, an expository essay, a poem, a chapter from a novel, a section from a dissertation, a soliloquy, a monologue, a dialogue. After my time expired I had to immediately give him what I had written for his feedback and remarks. “Crap!” he would announce, “Crap, crap, and more crap.” Do it again, he would instruct me. And again. Again. Again. To my surprise the method worked; strengths started to emerge and the type of writing I was assigned became more and more focused. It was at that point that I
started to notice him taking an interest in the content of what I wrote, and my required topics too were nudged into a more specific categorization. Primarily that was of the philosophical and/or sociopolitical variety, often with a dash of history or at least the bound perspective of my own birth time, and inevitably taking the form of either a persuasive or an argumentative essay. I was evidently to be an essayist. The lowest form of writer, Zerre assured me, but he had to work with what he was given. I felt honored.

That whole process of narrowing down only took two or three days as each working session was filled to the brim with intense bursts of writing, the immediate proclamation of inadequacy, and then in the follow-up piece either a determination that the particular type in question was something I could get better at or not. Zerre seemed to have an eye for potential and wasted no time on what he determined to be paths leading nowhere. If after two poems, say, I showed no sign of improvement then the genre was simply dropped and never returned to. My writing may have given indications of strengths other than in essays but as, it seemed, that form was what I was naturally tuned to – as it were – that became the focus of all that we did thereafter. Once that target had been decided on I was explicitly taught the nitty-gritties: the

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proper structure for an introduction and conclusion, crafting a well-honed thesis, supporting that thesis and the organization of the supporting material, making connections, transitioning, argumentative format, induction, deduction, anticipating objections, engaging with the reader, guiding the reader forward; everything that I had imagined went into an essay plus much, much more.

At first Zerre wanted me to try and convince him of the themes on which I wrote, but he proved to be a surprisingly easy sell. He was of course aware of my background and the unorthodox way at which I had arrived at the monastery, and he made no attempt to hide – at least when working alone with me at the empty central table – his interest in the thought that I was feeding him. Thought that came directly from what had been occupying my mind at the time, thought that was a result of my own analysis of what had made my birth time tick. I had, or suspected that I had, my first convert to choice based on individual autonomy already before I had made anything public. A path for my quest began to present itself to me; the big question, as I saw it, was whether or not my essays would ever be allowed to see the light of day beyond the eyes of Zerre.
During that initial week he never complimented my style but as my essays got churned out he did comment less and less on technical details and more and more on content. I was unsure how the publishing process worked and had not yet ordered a book or other type of printed material for myself – Tomor had taken care of all that –, but I couldn’t help but think that if Zerre were as interested as he seemed to be then somehow or other my works would find their way to whatever website or websites it was that people ordered their reading material from. As befitted the time and economy of the future-present, all of the books I owned had been printed on demand and immediately sent to the apartment via the robotic delivery service; perhaps my essays would be bound into a collection and delivered in a similar way. It was a thrilling idea, really. The challenge, the main hurdle, I guessed, was in making my essays known so that they would be ordered by enough people to create something like a critical mass. After all, I mused, I wasn’t just in the monastery to improve my own self, I was here to try to improve the lives of all those living in the city and even, to a lesser degree, those with me in the monastery. I had taken it upon myself to champion choice; if that were to work then I would need to gain a wide readership, and I knew that would mean first getting my works out there. Luckily in that regard I had one great advantage: my
reputation as the famous Man from the Past, the Living Neanderthal, the Relativity Hiccup in the Rice Paddy, the Anomaly. It was a tremendous head start and I was grateful for it; things seemed to be falling into place quite nicely and I took the liberty of daydreaming about the success I would see.

My first real break came early, during my second week of training at the Writers’ Collective – as they called it – and my first week of full-time writing. I had finished my morning sessions with Geen and was to spend the next six days entirely under Zerre’s watchful eyes before on the seventh day being allowed to make what would, by the way the system in place worked, be the final decision of my life: whether to stay on with the team I had been assigned to, or switch to another team within the field and section I had been appointed. Clearly such a system had faults; fuel for the fire raging inside me. Zerre dutifully spent a good chunk of our afternoons that week explaining the other teams and what they had to offer but he made it clear that he hoped I would stay with him. He also arranged for me to get access to a personal office earlier than I would have otherwise, no doubt done as further incentive for me to stick around.

I was told that trainees typically had to sweat it out in a
public space until they finished their entire course and then, depending on their field, section, and what team they ended up on, they would be assigned their workplace. In the case of the Arts and Humanities field the labor environments ran the gamut as could be expected, but most teams within the Literature section were afforded more privacy due to the nature of the activities undertaken, and in the case of the Writers’ Collective everyone had their own closed-off office within a large room whose open core served as the meeting area, break space, conference center, and general multipurpose zone; it was where I had thus far been stationed. The office doors all faced inwards to that center and ran in a ring around the room but thankfully there weren’t any openings in those doors and so the sense of solitude behind them was complete. That greatly facilitated the writing we could get done, and I was thankful for the lack of interruptions. My office, and every other office except for the four corner ones, was sized more like a large cubicle than an office proper, but I had nothing to complain about. It was probably three meters deep and one and half, maybe two at a stretch, wide, with a window on the wall opposite the door. It was deadly quiet, the only sounds coming from outside when I opened the window. Best of all it was in a building that faced the river, on the far side of the half of the monastery where
my housing unit stood, but further back towards the compound’s exterior wall and nestled between the theater people’s working area on one hand and the painters’ and sculptors’ area on the other. We were in good company.

I was at my desk one day staring at the empty bookshelves running along a side wall and wondering what I should fill them with when Zerre came in. “This is quite good,” he said, catching me off guard and laying a printed version of my latest attempt at pleasing him on top of my touchscreen desk. I picked it up and reread the title, “Individual Consent: What It Is and What It Means”. In another lifetime I would have chuckled at that and assumed that the “consent” in question was of an entirely different sort but I had come a long way since then. The Harvest Festival had been my initiation rite; it had been my symbolic murder, my real life death and rebirth.

“Thank you,” I said, unsure how to respond to that first and most unexpected, but very welcome, compliment.

“Not the writing per se, but the ideas it contains are quite good,” Zerre added. Yes, of course, I thought. Thank you? I decided that I would still take it.

“Your recent work in general, but particularly this piece,
has given voice to a certain unspoken, unspeakable malaise I’ve had lurking within,” he went on, appearing deadly serious. He avoided eye contact as he spoke but I had no doubts as to his sincerity; the forthrightness of his comment took me aback.

“How’s that?” I asked cautiously. It was a direct and personal question, and given the circumstances of the senior-junior hierarchy that marked our relationship, along with the top-down nature of how the monastery was structured, it was also a fairly risky one. Back in my Tokyo I would have simply remained quiet and let Zerre say what he would or would not; here I pushed him ever so slightly. My sense was that there had been a kind of an affinity building between us, an air of being comrades-in-arms. Unless I was mistaken in that, I thought that my question would not be stepping on any toes.

“Do you know how Geen got her position?” he asked. A non sequitur. I wondered if I hadn’t offended him after all and started to feel slightly nervous.

“No,” I answered. At the mention of Geen he appeared to grow upset somehow, in some small way, and I didn’t want to say any more than was necessary.
“She was chosen by the previous head of the monastery. Directly. Without any consultation from any of us. It’s always been that way,” Zerre answered. “It doesn’t sit right with me, and it never has. Now I know why. It’s the method that’s the problem. We need something more like…”

He was silent for a few moments and so I thought that he might be waiting for me to fill in his ellipsis. “Democracy?” I ventured.

“No, don’t be a fool,” Zerre snapped. “Democracy was bullshit, a façade from the get-go to enable the rich and their backers to flaunt false credentials. Masquerading as having the people’s consent. That’s it, you know, consent. You’re onto something with this,” he pointed at my paper again. “The question though is how to arrange for consent to be given and received without losing the positive organizational elements that we’ve already managed.”

He paused and looked thoughtful, whatever irritation he had felt melting from his face as he turned away from me to half sit on the edge of my desk. He stared at my blank walls while I sat uncomfortably close to him locked in behind my desk and the rear wall, waiting for some sign
that I should say or do something. “Well, it’s a start anyway. I’ll give you that,” Zerre said finally. He stood and faced me again. “I want to release this even though the tone is so whiningly plaintive and your syntax is off in places. Work on those points and get this ready to be read, I’ve highlighted my areas of concern and given you some general comments at the end.”

“Okay, I’ll work on that right away,” I said. What did it mean to have something released? Was I about to be published? The thought thrilled me.

“Good. Drop whatever else it is you’re doing and focus on this,” he added. “But listen, there’s a catch. There will in fact have to be an ongoing catch if you’re to continue writing on topics like these, and you absolutely should keep writing on topics like these.”

It was never hard to get Zerre’s point. “What’s that?” I asked.

“This kind of thing is rather inflammatory; it calls into question some of the most basic assumptions that undergird our society. As such it could bring down a lot of trouble on you and especially on me.”
I could see that. I guessed that Geen for one would probably not be in favor of what I had written, and she was the final authority that we all worked under. “Do we need to worry about censors?” I asked for clarification.

“No, nothing like that,” Zerre answered. “All of us at the monastery are allowed to produce whatever we want and the public is permitted to be the sole judge and jury of our works’ worth. Rather, if we are perceived to be pushing certain boundaries too hard then political questions will arise and the scrutiny could get intense.” He grimaced a little and looked out the window behind me. “In the worst case scenario we could end up on trial. Then the city’s councilors would decide our fate.”

I was unsure what kind of punitive measures were in place other than the very harsh ones Geen had earlier described in reference to those who tried to quit the monastery or exit the compound without permission. But I certainly didn’t want to find out. A creeping feeling of being torn between my adopted mission and the desire for self-preservation began to come over me; I must have been missing something in what Zerre was offering. “I’m not sure I want to risk that,” I said finally, hoping that I wouldn’t appear to be a coward.
Zerre guffawed. “I’m sure that I don’t,” he said flatly. “That’s why the catch is that you’ve got to write this stuff anonymously.”

And there it was: option number three. I thought about it. I thought about getting my message out without my name. I thought about what I considered to be more important. I thought about needing to think about it some more. “How do our works get read?” I asked. More information was a must before I could make the decision that was being asked of me.

“The Writers’ Collective contributes to the Literature section’s website, where people in the city, and here in the monastery, can go to acquire all the various works that get produced. If something’s ordered it gets printed, bound, and delivered the same way everything else is manufactured and shipped. Unless of course someone wants a digital file for some strange reason, then just the data gets sent to their flat board.”

Flat board; that was what they called their tablet devices. The label had never stuck with me. “Is there any product promotion involved?” I asked.

He looked at me a bit strangely. The term I wanted to use
was “advertising”, or possibly “marketing”, but I didn’t know those words in Language and wasn’t sure if Language even had them. “You know, letting people hear about it, working to make it publically known that the new writing is available,” I added, hoping that would suffice.

“Oh, I see,” Zerre said. “I vaguely remember reading about people in your time doing a lot of that. No, no product promotion. I haven’t even heard that phrase used before, you might have invented it.”

Although there were still obvious gaps in my Language learning, as I had just been reminded of, I had always been pleased when traveling or living in a new place when the opportunity came up to use words in novel or unpredictable ways. There was something about being a second language speaker that afforded one a deal of creative liberty with a tongue.

“The website is simply divided into genres, types, and categories, and then the latest works are placed on top of the list,” Zerre explained. “If something looks interesting the reader first goes through an introductory screen and then either orders it or doesn’t. What that means is that if we want to get people’s attention we’ll have to come up
with a far better title than the one you’ve given your essay, and then from there rely on word of mouth. I’m certain that once a few people read this it’ll quickly become the talk of a great many.”

I felt happy about the potential he saw in my piece but was still a little on the fence; I was having trouble juggling priorities. “Don’t you think that if people knew I wrote it more would want to read it? I mean, given the strange manner of my background and presence here, that is.”

He nodded in agreement. “Yes, naturally. But that would also raise a number of risks and put you directly in danger if the councilors and/or Geen decided that punitive measures were called for. And that reminds me, the other side of this coin has a catch to it as well.” I was listening; what else could be involved?

“You’ll have to produce other, non-risky work,” he said. “We give your pieces like this one innocuous-sounding but intriguing titles to get them read, and then to camouflage who is doing the writing you release other works – preferably written in a different style – under your own name. If you don’t do that it’ll look like you’re doing nothing, which will immediately lead people to
connect you with our anonymous writer as no one in the monastery does nothing.”

I could see that. If I were the only person in the Writers’ Collective who wasn’t putting works out on the website but a certain Anonymous suddenly started showing up it wouldn’t take people long to put two and two together. I was getting closer to a decision – it increasingly seemed like a good idea to me – but a new risk appeared in my mind. “If we have our own website though won’t the authorities know that it’s someone in the Collective who is producing this material anyway?”

“There are ways to disguise that,” Zerre said. “And the website isn’t exclusive to our team; it’s for the entire Literature section, as I said. The number of potential authors will act as a shield of sorts, and there is also the precedent of non-Literature people sometimes producing written work that they wish to share. Those files are listed differently and as the team leader I’m in charge of posting the finalized works so I can list your anonymously written essays that way. With enough potential distance between us and who this Anonymous could possibly be we should be reasonably safe. The question you have to ask yourself is this: Can you be satisfied with getting no credit for your ideas if it means that your ideas will be read and
considered? That’s something I can’t answer for you, and you should think about it carefully."

Zerre had hit on my exact quandary. He must have meant to give me time to turn it over because he then started to move towards the door but abruptly stopped, came back to my desk, and actually squatted down to be on the same eye level with me as I sat there, his bushy beard further closing the gap between us. “The potential benefits are enormous, you know. If these kinds of ideas catch on we could really shake things up, even change how people live. We could make a real difference here.”

Zerre’s eyes were intense, alight, kindled. He evidently had the same fire for transformation burning under him that I did. I knew then that I would commit to his team and go along with his plan; how could I not? My way forward had just presented itself to me on a silver platter, despite its catches. And the unforeseen offer of assistance had given me a strength I was theretofore unsure I had.

“I’m in,” I said suddenly, almost despite myself. “I don’t even need to mull it over. I’m in.”

He grinned and slapped my desk, sending the touchscreen into a brief frenzy as it tried to load the multiple
applications his hand had activated. “Yes!” he whisper-shouted. “Good. After you’ve edited this piece on consent then get to work on something as different as possible so we can release that in your real name within a decent amount of time. Don’t forget that you’re going to have to do a double workload at the same rate that most others produce a single work.”

That was asking a lot of a new writer but I was motivated at least. I also luckily had no clue what I was in for. “What else should I write?” I asked.

“Believe it or not your second best type of writing is poetry,” he said. “And your poetry’s crap so get some books in here and start reading widely, you’ve got a lot to learn. And I don’t mean to read those stupid worthless how-to books. I mean get some real poetry and read and read and read as many different kinds and as many different authors as you can. Maybe something will rub off.” He moved back to the door and gave me a confident, conspiratorial nod. Our partnership had begun.

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A few days later, just after I had given Zerre the final version of my soon to be published – published! – essay, I
got a message from Geen saying that I was to meet her that morning after breakfast in front of the building that housed the health center. It seemed that I was in fact to join her on a trip to the city so that she could participate in judging the trial she had mentioned and I could observe how the criminal prosecution and defense process unfolded. I was relieved to have gotten the Anonymous essay done before hearing from her as I wouldn’t have wanted something like that hanging over my head during the days away. I would have mentally obsessed over the piece, and likely failed to take due notice of what was sure to be an interesting arrangement; but luck was on my side and I could travel back to the place I had only very recently left with a relatively clear and carefree mind.

As my thoughts then naturally turned to the city, and to the manner of my leaving, I realized that in just those three short weeks I had undergone a number of further changes, further shifts in character and outlook brought on by my new circumstances and by my having to deal with the initial shock and then the recovery of facing the irrevocable, of learning that certain decisions could not be undone and certain steps could not be retaken. For the present, anyway. I wasn’t as sure as Zerre appeared to be that my essay would have the impact that it needed to, but in time and with enough of Anonymous’ work produced
and read the cumulative effect we hoped that the writings would have might start to show. If people were ready, I thought. Milee and Tomor had seemed happy enough in their lives; if the city were filled with balanced and well-adjusted people like them then perhaps all of my work would fall on deaf ears. But perhaps not.

Milee and Tomor; I wondered if I would happen to see them while I was there. Surely our foray to the city would be short and efficient. It was a business trip, after all. I assumed that we would go and do what Geen needed to do and then leave. There wouldn’t be time to call on anyone, and in considering it I wasn’t sure that I wanted to. When I had left I was certain that I would see Milee and Tomor again; but then I had been certain too that the monastery was a temporary choice and that it would be merely a stepping stone onto bigger and better things for me. I hadn’t imagined that it would be the final choice of my life, that joining would lead to so many permanent changes, both in my body and in my situation. It had though, and coming to terms with that had meant I was forced to once more adjust my outlook, and part of that adjustment had been emotionally letting go of the city and the people that I knew in it. I hoped that the system running all of the immutable decisions might be changed – that was what I had already begun working for – but I
wasn’t counting on it, and by not counting on it I hadn’t yet allowed my heart to really open up to the possibility of change. It remained a distant hope, even if it was one for which I was determined to struggle. I tried to find how I might feel if I ran into Milee and Tomor, Milee or Tomor. Of the two I couldn’t say who I would want to see more, and that surprised me. Before searching my feelings I would have assumed that I would much prefer to see Milee, but in looking within I discovered that she no longer played the role for me that she had, and that somehow, far below the surface, it was my talks with Tomor that had established and then cemented certain long-term internal bonds. They had both hurt me deeply yet I owed both of them very much; and in the end I saw that it was me who had allowed them to hurt me, not them who had set out to hurt. Any pain I had was from their points of view unintended, incidental almost. They likely saw themselves as caring for me, and they no doubt did. I hadn’t known how to receive that, and I hadn’t known how to be around them, how to be with them.

Then too there was Sou. After meeting her at the testing center I had seen her a few times in the evenings; we had taken long walks together in the central park area between the main housing complexes, strolling along the river’s bank and lying on the grass to gaze up at the stars. We
had shared teas together, gone for desserts, dropped into and into bed. It had all happened so naturally, so effortlessly. She was an eminently interesting person, intriguing, and I had quite forgotten about my obsession with Milee. It’s funny how falling for someone tends to shift so many of the views you’ve held, the primary concerns you’ve set, the importances you’ve assigned. I wondered if it might have been actual love. For her part Sou seemed captivated by me too, and not just because I was a sort of living research subject for her psychological studies; listening to me and my thoughts certainly must have fleshed out the mentality of twenty-first century people for her, but that wasn’t a time period she had been particularly interested in. At least not before getting to know me. She had though confessed a certain fascination for the multiple and deeply held neuroses that seemed to define the character of my birth era. I hoped to help her where I could – and there was also much that I could learn from her, much that we could learn from each other –, but mostly I think we simply, truly enjoyed being in one another’s company. Maybe it was love, the start of it, or something like it.

It was therefore a little bittersweet for me to leave the monastery even though I realized it would only be for the duration of the trial – which I thought surely couldn’t last
more than a few days – before we turned around and made our way back. Geen was in high spirits when I met her. She inquired about my training immediately and seemed very pleased to hear that I would be staying with the team I was first assigned to. I took her approval of that final decision on my part to be proof positive, to her at least, that the system worked and could be trusted. I of course had my doubts, but she didn’t ask about those and I didn’t share them. She seemed to be either excited to be taking part in the trial or excited that I would get to see it. I think she was very curious about what I would make of the proceedings and quizzed me as we walked on the processes used in my time, about which I was unfortunately not able to tell her very much beyond what I had seen in courtroom dramas and movies. I hoped that Law & Order was as accurate as I assumed it was because the show figured largely in my explanations. That also had the added effect of putting its theme music on a running loop inside my head during our hike through the forest – which was both pleasant and slightly annoying at the same time – as we followed the trail I had used to arrive in reverse.

On reaching the city Geen approached the guard house first and initiated what must have been some kind of special entrance routine before calling me over to have
the robot scan my retinas. I was curious to know how such things operated, but when I questioned her about it all Geen would tell me was that only people with the proper credentials were allowed to enact such programs. She added that she had set our period of stay as “indefinite” since she wasn’t sure how long the case would go on; that meant we would need to be scanned again on the way out rather than having our data automatically reset. I was afraid to ask what would happen to us when we tried to re-enter the monastery if we didn’t remember to do that when we exited the city and made a mental note to remind Geen, though I was sure that she wouldn’t forget. I now had too much to live for to throw it all away on a stupid mistake like that.

It wasn’t as strange to be back in Sheenda as I thought it would be. It felt natural; it felt like old hat to be strolling down the oddly soft roads and gazing up at the sterile white buildings that stood tall and pristine in every direction. It no longer seemed like home, but that was only because I had established a new emotional base. It was true that as far as familiarity went the city and its ways were still more etched into my bones than the monastery was, but the heart dictates such things as “home” and not the head. I mused that if all went according to plan and the kind of mini-revolution that
Zerre and I were plotting came to fruition then the city might well carry my heart again too, but it would have to include Sou and, I supposed, it would have to include me being an essayist in it and not a farmer or shopkeeper or restaurateur or what have you.

It did strike me as a bit unusual the way I had taken to considering myself to be “a writer” after decades of doing something entirely different, but being told that you have a built-in propensity for something has a way of binding that thing into your personal identity that work done by default or merely to get by can never have. I hadn’t self-identified with how I made rent in my old life, and having just found that I did self-identify with a line of work it seemed cruel to me the way people in my time would affix irremovable labels to each other based on nothing more than the person’s paycheck. It occurred to me that that was as inhumane a shearing away of personal choice as it was to be forced to become a rice farmer for all of your years based just on community need; well, maybe not as inhumane but close. No, my birth time may actually have been worse in that regard as it was assumed that whatever you happened to do was something you had actively and purposely chosen. Economic necessity never seemed to figure into people’s minds when they asked what you did and then slotted you away mentally as they...
tagged you with a nice juicy judgment about your character, talents, and abilities, all neatly provided by your occupational designation. “Oh, you’re an X”, a nod, a half-smile, a clicking over of the gears behind the eyes, and a slight adjustment in treatment, a slight alteration in behavior. I’m so glad you learned my life story from that one word; good for you.

We got on the tram and headed north to the two towering round buildings that dominated the city center and around whose foundations the tram line itself bent. The north and south branches of the House of Decisions, the places where all important matters of city conduct and policy were decided; it was only natural that the city’s trials would be held here too. We alighted and entered the House assigned to the north side, and then, to my great surprise, instead of turning into one of the side rooms off of the grand foyer we proceeded to the main hall itself and made our way through a side access corridor to its reserved center. As we stepped out of the private hallway and onto the pitch, as it were, my face must have said what my mouth wasn’t because Geen quickly told me that all trials are public affairs and that anyone whose work allowed it made every effort to come and watch the proceedings. I knew that the hall could seat around fifty thousand in order to accommodate the great assemblies
that were held in it concurrently with the same events in the southern side’s House, and there must have been close to that number seated and waiting already. I gazed up in awe at the faces and faces in all directions before turning my attention to the scene that was in front of me. There, in the middle of the great circular colosseum, was evidently where all the action would take place. Three ascending rows of seats were set up behind a long and tall wooden podium, seven in the front, ten higher up in the middle, and sixteen highest yet in the rear, and opposite them – facing the podium that fronted the rows of chairs – stood two tables with five cushioned chairs behind each. All of that was surrounded by the perfectly circular receding rings of spectator seats piled higher and higher up all the way to the great hall’s ceilings. There couldn’t have been a clearer picture of how the actual Colosseum looked and felt from a viewpoint standing on its central floor. I got dizzy staring up at the rivers of people, their features blurring together into an endless expanse of stretched out faces dotting the indoor sky everywhere I looked. It was enough to give you vertigo; I suddenly felt the need to sit down and asked Geen where my place was. Not there on the floor, fortunately. A seat in the front with a side view of both the sets of tables and the councilor’s section had been reserved for me. As Geen pointed it out I gratefully went to take it through an open gate cut into the
dividing boards that circled the center area and separated it from the audience, happy to turn my back to at least some of the masses that stared down in unison at the waiting spectacle. It must have been nearly time to start.

Geen then took her chair too, and as the first one of the councilors to do so, I noticed. She positioned herself in the top row and on the side closest to me, making me wonder if she partially wanted to keep an eye on me. The other councilors soon filed in from the same entrance we had used and joined Geen in a smooth and quick succession. I still had no idea if there was a ranking system in place amongst the councilors or not, although based on my earlier experience with them I had a slight feeling that the middle seats were of the most importance. I tried to make out if the same people that I had seen were still councilors or not, and if so whether they sat in the same places, but my memory of that event was reduced to my recollections of how it felt and what they said; the actual faces of the people involved were lost to me. That had been a traumatic day and so my memory failure shouldn’t have been too much of a surprise, but I was still a little disappointed in myself. The councilors’ matching grey robes reminded me of the shade that Geen usually wore on top and bottom as part of the monastery’s administrative contingent – now underneath her
councilor’s costume —; it was the same shade that my own monastery-issued pants were, and, in thinking about it again, the very same grey that my old sports jacket was. Of course none of those other pieces of clothing carried the embroidered gold chains, stars, or owls that the councilor’s robes did, but the preponderance of grey was the point that really stood out.

Once the councilors were in place what I assumed were the prosecution and defense entered, taking up positions at the tables facing the podium and the raised seating behind it. They too were dressed in robes of a similar design to the councilors’ only theirs were white and lacked the added symbology. Amongst them was a very nervous looking man in the standard black pyjamas but without his cone hat; he would no doubt be the defendant. He alone remained standing while all others sat, forlornly stuck between the podium a few paces in front of him and the tables a few paces behind. He faced the councilors and the pleading look for mercy etched across his countenance was clear enough to me in the front and probably carried quite a few rows back. I felt instantly sorry for the man and wondered what he had done to end up like that.

A white-robed man from one of the tables stood and
addressed the councilors in a somber tone, evidently granting them some kind of standardized honorific greeting. He then sat and the woman next to him stood to introduce the man on trial, stating his name, occupation, and his accusation. He was called Gurt and his alleged crime was the forsaking of public duty. She then sat and there followed a detailed explanation by the other three robed figures at their table of how it was that poor Gurt had failed in his duties to the city. He was a farmer, of course – statistically speaking that would have been a safe bet had money been in use and had people gambled for it –, and it seemed that two members of his farming team had submitted a report accusing him of shirking his responsibilities. He mostly showed up at the fields as required, it was relayed, but once there he barely went through the motions, took extra-long and frequent breaks, and was absent by dint of being sick so often that it was noticeably suspicious. His accusers stated that his sloth had meant they had to work beyond the call of duty and that their harvest had suffered for it; some produce needed to be left in the fields so long before it could be gathered that animals were able to get to the vegetables they grew and a portion that normally would have been saved was thereby lost. The official presentation process was then repeated by the five at the other table, but following the perfunctory greeting a denial of the
accusation was issued and then an explanation of Gurt’s behavior was given, including a statement from his domestic partner. Gurt was simply unwell, they said, and although the doctors had not been able to find any specific cause his partner, a man called Diyek, could testify that the past year Gurt had not been himself and had seemed always to be running low on energy.

A cross-examination, of sorts, then took place in which the prosecution’s table presented testimonial evidence against Diyek and his character, with the same other farming team members noting that Diyek himself was a poor worker and that they had even considered bringing a further accusation against him. This was in turn refuted by the defense team, who produced the word of other farmers in the area that stated that they hadn’t noticed anything amiss about Diyek but had noticed that Gurt was gone a lot; not, they stressed, suspiciously so, but enough to raise concern for his well-being. The whole thing struck me as a bit silly; it was like one set of neighbors gossiping against another, the Jones against the Smiths. How could any of it possibly constitute a criminal act? Negligence didn’t seem to quite fit, and that was as close as I could come to thinking up what might be at stake.

Thereafter the councilors, like they had done before with
me, moved to face each other and began discussing the case right then and there. They didn’t even adjourn. They also didn’t seem to spend very long at it. Naturally none of us in the audience could hear what they were saying, but I still strained my ears in order to do so from not too far away – just a matter of some tens of meters from where I sat in the front row. In failing at my eavesdropping endeavor I realized that the earlier portions must have been broadcast using hidden microphones in some way; the silence that suddenly swept over the hall was enormous. Everyone waited to hear what the verdict would be, and very few, around me at least, dared to whisper in hushed tones with their seatmates. While all that went on the prosecution and defense teams sat stone-faced at their tables and Gurt was left to sweat it out from his position in between, the heat and the weight of thousands and thousands of sets of eyes boring down into him. I wouldn’t have blamed him if he had collapsed on the spot.

After only a very few minutes the councilors then turned back towards the defendant and the two sets of lawyer teams. One of them, I couldn’t tell which councilor nor seated where, intoned that a decision had been reached. By majority vote the Council had agreed upon Gurt’s fate. For potentially endangering the food supply that all in
Sheenda depended on he was to be branded with a mark on the chest and permanently exiled from the city. His partner Diyek was to be assigned to another farming team as far away as possible from the one he had theretofore been on. Gurt would be allowed to pack his things and decide what to take with him, and he would furthermore be allowed to claim refuge in the nearest exile city, but he would never be allowed back into theirs. The two lawyers who had given the councilors their official greetings, one from the prosecution’s side and one from the defense’s, then stood and each grabbed an arm of forlorn Gurt, dragging him from the floor towards the hallway they had used to enter.

For his part Gurt looked like how I imagined he must have felt: completely devastated. The whole thing was over in what must have been less than two hours and I was left in a kind of stupor. Branding and permanent exile? For supposedly simply being lazy? What kind of branding would it be and what kind of pain would it cause him? What was an “exile city” and what did it mean to claim refuge there? What would happen to Diyek now that his partner had been ripped away from him? Would he be forced to remain in the home they had shared? The memories of the life they had built and which was now gone forever surrounding him at every turn? Was
evidence as flimsy as the word of two apparent busybodies really enough to engender the results that had just been dealt out? Every fiber in me strained at the injustice of it all. I had my calling, I had my method, and I suddenly had all the motivation I might have lacked. I determined that revolution must come. But I would risk neither losing nor harming Sou to get it. Zerre and I would have to succeed, and we would have to do so in a way that kept the costs strictly limited to us personally but that spread the benefits universally. We would tear the monster down from the inside the way parasites do: bite by bite and cell by cell. Our host organism – those fetid grey robes – would never even notice until it was far too late.
Chapter Nine

Months passed and my essays piled up. In addition to my first topic of consent I also wrote about autonomy, about individual freedoms, about what it was to always have the option open of changing your mind, of going back, trying again, redoing or starting over from scratch. In each of these essays I focused on the individual and how it felt to be one person living in the midst of a society that can be stifling, that can feel like it is killing your individuality and turning you into something that you never agreed to become. I then started to look at society more generally, zooming out a bit – as it were – to examine what it was and where it came from, whether it was a thing in itself or whether it existed only as the aggregate of many people living and working together in one place. My essays were perhaps not as numerous as they might have been had I not also been working on my poetry in order to have publications listed under my own name, but they nevertheless turned out to be surprisingly well read. Especially from within the monastery they seemed to enjoy frequent ordering, and I even spotted a few people around the grounds with a copy in their hands here and there. It was the oddest feeling to see a stranger reading your own work, particularly for me given that I could never reveal that the piece in question was actually mine.
It was exciting, of course, but also terrifying to actually observe a person reading what you had written and to scour their face for any sign of either agreement or disagreement, belief or disbelief, amusement, irritation, shock, anger, anything, any kind of reaction at all.

During that fervent time I also found myself becoming rather proud of my poetry, and in some ways I wished that I could focus more exclusively on it. But the demands of the Revolution were steep, and so I labored on. Another factor in that decision though was of a more purely practical nature: to my disappointment my poetry seemed to lack the mainstream appeal that my provocative essays enjoyed, and so my desire to be read kept more of my attention on my essays than otherwise might have been the case. That was a pity I thought, though without being able to relinquish the pride that drove me, because in my poems I sought to explore the same issues I was writing about in my essays only from an emotional and phenomenal point of view rather than an abstract or philosophical one. It occurred to me later that the partly aligned nature of the subject matter of those essays and poems might have been a tad risky as it could have provided a clue as to a common author, but as hardly anyone was reading my poetry I rather resignedly assumed that the danger was after all quite minimal.
I was sitting in my office one day reading Émile Durkheim – happily available in the original French when ordered through the monastery’s archives – in preparation for an essay on social organization when a knock on my door was immediately followed by the bursting entrance of Zerre, typical of his way of barging in before I even had a chance to say anything. I never understood what he took the purpose of knocking to be.

“We’re doing great,” he announced, holding up a flat board – I had finally gotten used to the proper term for them – and clicking on the holographic projector to display the screen he was looking at. It listed the physical order and download count for each of Anonymous’ essays and I could see that they were indeed getting impressive. In the thousands for each, with two – on autonomy and on starting over – being particularly high. Copies of physical printings outnumbered digital download counts by around one hundred to one but that was to be expected; whatever else you might say about the era and the culture, the people of the future-present did have sophisticated standards and I admired them for it.

“Wonderful,” I said. “How is my poetry doing?”
“Who cares?” Zerre replied derisively. “Those are just a front; I don’t even bother checking the stats. Now, look at this,” and he clicked over to another screen that gave the same information further divided into the reader count for each essay by city and monastery categories. That was instructive; my readers in the monastery were nearly eighty percent of the total. I wouldn’t have expected that, even having been living here and seeing people reading the essays I wouldn’t have put the count so high.

“This really tells us something,” Zerre said. “This teaches us where to target our efforts and helps us see what direction our writing needs to take. We are on the cusp of something here, I can sense it.” His eyes burned feverishly and I could feel his lust for What Must Be punctuating each word.

I leaned back in my chair and said nothing for a moment or two; I just observed him. It didn’t bother me that Zerre used the subjective plural and possessive pronouns when referring to what was ostensibly solely my own work since I recognized that his editing efforts and talents significantly affected the final shape that my writing took. What did bother me was his dismissal out of hand of my other work, my more artistic work, work of which I was – I felt – deservedly proud. It bothered me too, though only
a little, that Zerre seemed to be taking, at least in his mind, what was meant to be our joint project to a level and in a direction that we had not yet discussed. I was as ready for our revolution as he was, perhaps even more so given my background and the failure of the current system to ever ingrain itself into my mental life as something normal and to be expected, yet I also wanted it to be done right, not rushed, and in a careful and cautious manner. That, I thought, was more likely to lead to success than the full speed ahead methodology that Zerre seemed to be favoring. If ours was a true partnership then I wanted at least some say in the manner that we went about things, even if Zerre was technically my boss as the head of our larger writing team, the leader of our Collective. After all, I thought, no one else in the Writers’ Collective was engaged in the work we were doing; it was strictly between us and we guarded our secret with the utmost care. It was too risky, we had agreed, for even those close colleagues of ours, people we saw and interacted with every day, to know about. In order to protect ourselves and in order to allow our work to continue unharassed through the camouflaging of who was involved, and thereby too the prevention of those higher up in the monastery’s hierarchy from coming down on us and forcing us to stop, mum had to be the word.
That went doubly for me as I desperately wanted to protect Sou from any blowback there might be from being involved with someone who was engaged in such things. She especially could never learn about what I was doing – and that for her own sake. She needed to be able to deny knowing that I was involved in order to escape without even a trace of guilt by association should we ever be found out. If what I was doing did come to light I knew that she would suffer enough in the way that poor Diyek suffered after Gurt’s trial; I could not and would not risk letting anything worse happen to her. No matter what the cost to me.

Apparently without any regard for what I might have been thinking or the reason for my clearly tepid reaction to the statistics he had shown me, Zerre continued his exhortation, “Since our work is so well read by those here at the monastery I think we need to tweak our approach a little to account for our likely audience.”

“In what way?” I asked, breaking my unnoticed silence. Zerre was still the boss and I knew how necessary he and his part were for the success of our endeavor; things hadn’t gotten to the point where I was ready to break with him, nor did I foresee them ever getting to that point. I could swallow my feelings about my poems and remind
myself that the things that bothered me – such as the sense that Zerre was, perhaps just to himself but even so, taking undue credit for what was after all my work – were really very tiny and best ignored. To the extent that I could do that, I decided that I would.

“Let’s push them a little and see what happens,” Zerre said with a grin. “We know that our fellow monks represent the intellectual and artistic forefront of the city. We are the producers of the cerebral products that the city consumes, we provide them with entertainment, of course, but that is hardly all. We give them literature, art, music, and all of those things can challenge and force the way that our essays do, all of those things can create an environment of social and political criticism. Not everyone will respond to an essay, after all. For some a painting will click their minds over, for others it will be a piece of music, for still others a serving of storytelling.”

“Or even a poem,” I cut in, unable to help myself.

Zerre laughed jollily; I hadn’t been joking. “Yes, even a poem,” he said through his chuckles. “You see my point. As we know that so many other producers of this sort of thing are reading us we now throw down the glove, as I believe you might have said in your time, and see what
else others can come up with. If enough of us are all pushing in the same direction, even in a very broad way, then the results we see in the city may start to mirror the results we see here.”

“Results?” Beyond being read I wasn’t sure of what was actually happening at the monastery that could qualify as an achievement.

“Thought,” Zerre said, tapping his left temple. “Thought is the first step, dissatisfaction with the status quo the second, reaction against those currently benefiting from the status quo the third, and then explosion is the fourth. You need to do more theoretical reading to go with all these ideas on individualism that you’ve been churning out.” He paused a moment and then added, “Stick with the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; get yourself a better foundation for the background to your own times. Then use that to see where your era failed and what we can still take from the past, applied specifically to our own situations and our own issues, of course.”

That was exactly what I thought I was doing. “Anyone in particular you want to recommend?” I asked, slightly peeved at what I took to be a lot of unshared work being so casually dumped onto my shoulders.
“You’ll figure it out,” he responded. “The important thing is to push, to get others to help us here. The next couple of months will be a trial period for that, and with any luck we’ll get so many allies on board that Geen won’t be able to shut us down even if she tries.” Zerre gave me his now trademark conspiratorial nod followed by a fist pump and then excused himself in the same abrupt manner he had entered.

Geen. I wondered if Zerre’s true enemy wasn’t less the social structure we lived with and more personally Geen herself. He would occasionally make derogatory marks about her leadership style that I didn’t think exactly fit in with the program we were attempting to undertake. I knew where I stood with her and as far as I could tell Geen was an authentic and caring person who really was trying to do her best. She was authoritarian, that was true, and she had taken the strictures we lived under to be so entirely justified I doubted if she had ever really questioned them, but I couldn’t despise her the way Zerre seemed to. There was possibly something in their shared past that had turned him against her in some way. Had they once been lovers? Had he been spurned? It couldn’t have been so simple; whatever it was that ate away at Zerre I would have to wait until he shared it with me as I
had no one I could really trust enough to talk to about it. Sou might have had some idea, but any mention of Zerre and Geen together would likely get her razor sharp mind racing down an avenue that could easily lead to where I didn’t want it to go. I would have to remain patient for the time being. Zerre had given me homework of a sort, a very annoyingly vague assignment to read more in depth about my birth era’s “background”; that was a better place to put my attention than wondering about what may have been between my boss and my mentor. I returned to Durkheim; he at least was certain to fit Zerre’s bill.

Schemes regarding how to go about challenging other monks to create works conducive to social and political criticism started to pull at different corners of my brain, breaking any concentration I may have achieved for Durkheim’s sometimes onerous prose. It occurred to me that Zerre may have been right in assessing that my theoretical grounding was inadequate for the topics I had been writing about, but he was wrong to think that such applied to the new direction he wanted me to take. If I was to pen essays that would move others to join us in championing the concepts we were expounding on that was one thing, but motivating people to create their own original works which would lead to the building of critical thought in the consumers of those works was
something else. I wondered what he had meant. If we – if I – was being read in the numbers Zerre had been so excited about then the ideas were probably speaking for themselves; the two roads I had been musing on would likely come together. That must have been what Zerre had in mind. I no longer needed to sell the ideas per se; it wasn’t an issue of getting monks to embrace them so much as it was an issue of getting monks to actually do something with or for them. Some of the data we were seeing were no doubt simply the results of curiosity; for many such topics had probably never even been considered. The consistency with which the essays were being ordered though indicated that there was something else at foot, and that almost certainly had to do with content. People found them interesting and wanted to read more. It made perfect sense.

Working through all that I came to see that Zerre had simply left the dots unconnected; he probably felt like he didn’t need to spell every little thing out for me. My new job was to generate action; the seeds of the ideas had already been planted, and later on when more theoretical depth was needed to cultivate those seeds that were starting to sprout, that was when I could return to writing about the ideas themselves and by that time, hopefully, I would have both figured out who to read and have

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already read them. One problem remained: how was I going to motivate other monks to use the mediums they were daily engaged in to foment an atmosphere constructive of social and political criticism? Then another problem quickly popped up: even if such an atmosphere were successfully created, how could we predict what the people in the city would do about it and how – in what manner – could we or should we try and direct what their reactions turned out to be? The process that we were seeking to unfold may have been an organic and natural one, but I couldn’t see how if things were simply left to themselves that they wouldn’t fizzle out of their own accord. Surely some kind of overarching direction was needed? Some kind of leadership from the top? That is, direction done in a top-down manner for the sake of the bottom-up protest we were trying to achieve. As I saw it, regardless of how angry people got and no matter how much they exploded à la Zerre’s fourth step, if matters remained at the grassroots level then they were bound to be too chaotic to make any real difference at all. It would be like those sadly ineffective mass protest movements from my time when everyone tried to get total approval for group actions and shied away from making any leadership-imposed initiatives for fear of being seen as undemocratic. All participants deciding together led to no clear-cut decisions ever being made and nothing
concrete ever being done or accomplished. Obviously. I wondered if there were some theoretical authors I could look up on political decision-making. One step at a time though, I supposed; first I would have to produce something motivating, and that was enough of a new challenge.

Over the next few days I alternated between reading and struggling with how to communicate in such a way as to propel the kind of creations we hoped to see. I put off meeting Sou in the evenings to concentrate on my poetry so that I’d have something to show for the working days that were fast clicking by, and also because I was afraid that sooner or later I’d slip up and ask for her advice on how to move people to craft critical pieces; that would tip her off to what I was really up to with my writing. I could not, and would not, let myself take any risk – no matter how remote – that might lead to compromising the position of plausible ignorance I had carefully built to shield her from any potential fallout. That was a promise I made to myself and I repeated it often. If Sou had even a hint of what Zerre and I were doing then she would have enough trouble hiding it that things could very quickly go very badly for us. For all of us. I would never forgive myself for that.
At last I hit upon a method that seemed to work; at least to me it seemed like it may work. I realized finally who my audience was, and that was what made all the difference. I was no longer writing for the general reader; I was instead writing for artists, free thinkers, intellectuals with a strongly independent bend to them, people who tried to fit square pegs into round holes. All I really needed to do with such people was to convince them to be themselves and the criticisms and critiques would start pouring out. No matter what kind of society human beings lived in, the artists would always see fit to create or discover a means of finding fault with it; I daresay that such good folk as the monks I was surrounded by would be lampooning God in heaven with graffiti sprayed onto the golden roads and walls. It was in their nature; it was how they were put together. Of course that didn’t apply to all of the monks, but then I was hardly trying to get the engineers and chemists on board – not yet, anyway –; I was going for those who would be able to stir things up in ways that reached far beyond what I was capable of on my own. A gentle but consistent prodding that didn’t spell things out too directly and left plenty of room for interpretation was all that they would need. Having reached that point the words started to flow and I was done in no time, edited, approved, and posted by Zerre; then away we went, waiting for the results to come in. It
didn’t take long.

We started to see the first manifestations within two weeks of my essay being released. Zerre noticed them initially as he was keeping two eyes keenly open, but I learned of them soon thereafter and not just through Zerre either. I actually experienced some for myself. The first one I spotted was hard to miss: it was a statue placed right on our grounds of a giant thumb pressing down on a group of people. I didn’t know that they had that saying in Language. It was tastefully done and no hint was given as to just what exactly the thumb symbolized, but the overall message was clear enough. Possibly even too clear, I thought. The next was a piece of music; a stirring choral number in what I guessed was a throwback opera style. No modern person spoke the Italian used in its lyrics and so again nothing was too overt but I was pretty sure that \textit{la libertà} got repeated a lot in it. Then Zerre showed me a photo of an oil painting he had come across that had what appeared to be – very abstractly presented – a farmer killing herself with her own farming tools right in the middle of a field. It seemed that my essay had opened quite the can of worms; Zerre’s four steps to social change came back to my mind and I realized that people, or at least the people in the Arts and Humanities field around us in the monastery, were already pretty well
primed to explode. They had hardly just received the tiniest nudge and were responding in ways far beyond what I had expected. I think even Zerre was taken by surprise.

Another, more forceful, essay was requested of me and I started in on it; freer, more loosely, and much more explicitly than I had in my previous one. I followed the same format that I had used then, a style choice which somehow gave me the mental breathing room to really spread my wings. Since I no longer had to fret over how to approach the task at hand I found myself delineating everything in a very expansive manner. It was a persuasive essay with some punch behind it, at least from my point of view, and left no doubt as to what changes I thought were necessary and what I hoped to see from others to try and get those changes happening. It was a call to arms. Zerre loved it and his edits were accordingly light and quick; he was extremely eager to see it posted and even mentioned that he might order a few hundred copies and leave them lying around in public spaces. When I asked him if that wasn’t a bit too risky he answered simply that it was the time to start taking risks, that while things were happening was the right moment to strike. He may have been prepared to court a danger like that but I was very glad he didn’t ask me to do the same. I
never would have wanted to chance being seen distributing what was in effect a propaganda leaflet, nor be called to task on agitation charges. I didn’t even want to have a large order of essays be traceable back to me. I was still a blue shirt after all, still a first year newbie learning the ropes, and hardly secure in my position. On top of all that I was also in a relationship that I cared very deeply about and in no way wanted to jeopardize. Zerre was welcome to run the dangers which he saw fit as long as I could hide behind the Anonymous nom de guerre and Zerre’s position of authority should the need arise. I may have been behind the budding revolution – of sorts – but I wouldn’t be taking the fall for it. Of course I judged that if we succeeded I would be willing to take my fair share of the credit, but that was something that I would have to wait and see on.

Things started to move pretty quickly after that. Very quickly, actually. One work after another began to cascade out of the monastery, and reports from the city even started to trickle in about citizen meetings taking place where none had before, about whispered discontentment and voiced dissatisfactions. Signs started to appear in restaurants, bars, cafés, and markets calling for the possibility of change, of going back, of shifting the tracks people were placed into. A petition even began
to circulate that suggested to the councilors – in very polite terms I thought when I heard about them – that some type of mechanism be put in place such that those who didn’t like their assigned careers be allowed another opportunity at the next Day of Choosing.

During all of that semi-uproar people still dutifully went about their jobs and the city continued to function uninterruptedly, but I knew from my own times that such wouldn’t last and that if the grievances, once aired, were not addressed the complaints would fester and turn into resentment and then, when the circumstances were right, that resentment would give way to violence and/or the disruption of the status quo. Once they had discovered them people could only dwell on their perceived injustices for so long before something gave way, something broke. I thought that maybe soon there wouldn’t be an explosion per se, as Zerre had described it, but that there would be enough of a push that the authorities would have to sit up and take notice.

Although I wasn’t there and therefore couldn’t really be sure, the seeming relative calm of the city was another story entirely from what we were seeing at the monastery. Very visible divisions had already formed with the so-called Noes being answered by counter-works done by
the Yeses in support of the status quo. Arguments were at first confined to paper and canvas but then spilled over into the mealtimes as some monks suddenly felt strongly enough about what they were thinking to actually begin discussions about the topics. Both Zerre and Sou told me that nothing like that had ever happened before. That was the birth of a real politics, a real meeting of minds, a real movement. Something was happening that could no longer be contained, that could at best only be met and compromised with. At worst, at least from the establishment’s point of view, the situation would spill over to the extent that actual and significant changes would be forced upon the social structures and functions that had long been established.

Zerre relished all of it; I could see him absolutely licking his chops, a racehorse raring for the gate to be swung open. For my part I was much more hesitant. I was already an outsider in place and time, already an oddity, already one who didn’t really fit in; that had always been a role that I had cherished as I moved from country to country with my job – I felt that it gave me a certain leeway not to care too much about the affairs of where I was living, not to ever be forced to put down roots and genuinely get involved – but here the story was different. Here I was already deeply committed to the place I was
living in for by the rules of the game I could never leave it. I was moreover truly concerned, and did honestly wish to see real adjustments made; I just couldn’t bring myself to become some kind of figurehead for them. Whether it was doubt, humility, an identity issue, or some combination of the three that accounted for my reticence, I didn’t know. What I did know was that while I was thrilled to see changes starting to be demanded – the very changes that I was pushing for, in fact – I also found myself a bit scared about what those changes might bring, and I was in no way ready to put my face to the words that I had splashed over all those pages.

That decision, though, was soon made for me. I was lazily looking through the website that was used to post and order our writing one night when, after checking in on my poetry releases, I tapped over to the nonfiction section and there, right on top and with its title in all capital letters and bolded, saw an entry marked “I AM ANONYMOUS”. No, I am Anonymous, I thought as I clicked to download an electronic copy of the file so that I could immediately see its contents. The piece was not long and got right to the point: Zerre was proclaiming himself the author of all of my essays and the leader of what he called the Movement for Owning and Retaking All of Life. Clever acronym. He spelled out, in a writing
voice that was a very good mimic of my own, his program for the new movement and the goals he wished to see achieved, as well as a list of demands he would “immediately” put to Geen. First in the monastery and then in the city, he decreed, freedom would once more be the lot of humankind. Well, at any rate the lot of humankind in our city, I thought cynically, but that point seemed to escape Zerre’s localist perspective. I was naturally deeply disturbed by the development. On the one hand it was in a way a relief for me that he was taking the credit and therefore also the blame, but beyond the suspicious timing of releasing an announcement like that at the hour he had – ten p.m. – there was also the unsettling feeling that I was about to be screwed.

I reasoned that Zerre was perhaps betting that in putting it out when he did he would get the maximum attention possible overnight before the break of the following day when what he had done would likely come to everyone’s notice and Geen and her associates would no doubt haul him in; would that attention protect him? Was he destined for the kind of show trial that I had witnessed in the city? If that were the case then what would happen to me? Could I really expect to skate scot-free out of all of it?

On top of those worries I also had a sickening sense of
betrayal that sat squarely in the center of my gut. Taking credit for my essays myself was the furthest thing from my mind just then, but that didn’t mean that I wanted Zerre to do it. I had poured my heart and soul into those pieces; even if the aptly named – I had to admit – MORAL revolution succeeded it would all come down to Zerre, and I – the real mastermind, at least to myself – would be left politely clapping on the sidelines. I was more ambitious than that, even if I was ambitious in a risk-averse way. I couldn’t sort out how I felt about that move of Zerre’s, nor what I should do about it, nor even if I should do anything about it. I was torn between being relieved at the removal of responsibility that it represented for me and beside myself with anger at the manner in which it had been done. I hadn’t even been consulted! The announcement was as much a surprise to me as it was to everyone else, and I actually was Anonymous. I had no idea where it would lead nor what would happen next, and I even feared contacting Zerre to talk to him – or to yell at him, however it came out – lest the authorities, which I thought were sure to soon come down heavily on him, caught wind of our discussion and came down just as, or more, heavily on me. Were our flat boards bugged? Were video calls recorded by some central agency? What degree of privacy did we actually have living here in dorms in the monastery? Was there a
hidden camera tucked away in my room somewhere? Paranoia set in; paranoia on top of confusion and rage. It would be a sleepless few hours and would probably just mark the first of a series of sleepless nights, I thought; that much seemed clear.

The restless dark, wracked as it was with a deep worry, eventually gave way, as it must, to the light of a dawn marked by some surprise – filled with surprise, even. I couldn’t have been the only one who had difficulty staying focused during our morning meditation session. When we had finished and made our way into our building’s cafeteria the voices that had obediently stayed silent during our timed period of contemplation broke out into a chorus of whispers about what had happened overnight. Many had no idea of course, but they were soon informed that Anonymous, whose presence had already been felt so strongly in the monastery over the past few weeks, was none other than Zerre, an insignificant team leader in charge of a minor group of marginalized writers in the Literature section. The only noteworthy people that section had ever produced, I overheard, were all novelists; a groundbreaking force like Anonymous coming out of something called the “Writers’ Collective” was scandalous indeed. Why hadn’t anyone noticed the revolutionary fervor of Zerre’s writing before?
Quite simply because it had not been there, I thought, but I said nothing. Even in my weakened state after not having properly slept all night I was still mentally fit enough to know to keep my mouth shut. I determined that if Zerre were prepared to be the face to my essays then he had better be prepared to be the fall guy as well, should it come to that. And I was sure that it would come to that.

Very shortly after we had been seated and started eating, someone whom I had never seen before strode to the front of the room and stood before the serving row that we had all just passed through to get our breakfasts. A sudden hush fell over the room and the man announced that in his capacity as field leader for Applied Mathematics and Sciences, Geen had personally authorized him to inform us that there would be an emergency monastery-wide gathering following the morning meal. No one was to work that day; we were instead to report to the Central Complex where an open meeting would take place to discuss the recent events and to come to an agreement that was satisfactory to all parties. The meeting would last as long as was necessary and after it had finished we would have the remainder of the day off, to report for work as usual the following day. That was a nice and clever touch by those in charge, I thought, putting the length of the meeting on us and dangling the carrot of free
time above our heads to encourage us to hurry up and get on with it. I also thought that it might well backfire on them; there was certain to be more than one monk who wanted to be heard, and with the differences of opinion as wide as they were very likely to be it might prove to be tough going to find some common ground. We did all eat quickly enough after the announcement finished though; everyone seemed to be in the same frame of mind on that point at least.

It was a strange feeling to be walking in the crowd headed towards the meeting venue, a place that I had never been in before and knew very little about. I had seen it from the outside of course; it was hard to miss due to both its size and very similar design with the two Houses of Decision that marked the center of the city. And like them I assumed that it was mostly composed of a large center multipurpose stadium area that could seat all of us who lived and worked in the monastery. I did wonder how often it got used though; from the reactions of those around me at breakfast, and even as we shuffled together en masse to our suddenly common destination, it almost seemed like something of a rare treat to be going to the building – unless I was mistaken and my colleagues’ feelings were instead directed at the prospect of an unforeseen day off.

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We made our way down the flights of stairs in our housing complex, painfully slow in our human traffic jam, to the ground floor and out the building’s front entrance whereupon we started to cross the vast open park area that Sou and I spent so many of our evenings in. I cast my gaze upwards and noticed that almost in tune with the exclusively human events on the ground the sky had clouded over since the sun broke its overnight silence that morning and a strong north wind had begun to sweep through, kicking up little waves on the surface of the river in the distance. I hadn’t been forced to move at the pace of a crowd for many long months; there in the midst of those highly unusual circumstances I realized that I found it somehow comforting. It reminded me of Tokyo in my time, of transferring Metro lines in busy underground stations, of always needing to hurry to catch the next train but never being able to hurry as you’d like. Born out of that sense of rush was the irritation I used to feel at having my forward direction abruptly blocked by a stranger getting in the way, followed by the exhilaration of breaking free, stepping aside or around, finding the space to increase my speed and shuttle past, only to once more have my momentum halted. It was in many ways an unconscious game that I had played; a series of tactical maneuvers marked by the thrill of making the right choice.
and gaining the room to move or the regret of choosing wrongly and discovering myself stuck, still, always.

I was in no hurry that morning and hence lacked any of the frustration I would otherwise have felt, but the press and the forced halting nature of my steps, the retardation of my normal stride, pushed the impression of nostalgia home; and as the memories of how I used to feel in situations like that filled my wearied and sleep-starved brain I realized how very much I missed those days, as unfulfilling as they had been for me. It’s a funny thing how a place, a way of life that has not really been chosen, can get to you and become a part of you. In a way that’s what we were all headed to discuss, marching under a dark grey sky with the wind howling down and the feel of grass and earth beneath our feet; marching as a single body to attend a single event where our multitudinous voices would rise and our multifarious ears would listen; marching we knew that somehow in the midst of our buzzing and separated minds a commonality would arise and a consensus would present itself. The human organism functioning as one through its transcendental cultural properties, just as Durkheim would have noted.

And then that thought of a group-based triumph led to another, a shock, an alarming pause: it suddenly struck
me that perhaps I had been all wrong; perhaps I had employed an unsound approach or my analysis had been overly shallow, overly simplistic. Had I been fooled by the beauty of certain terms that carried far more emotional weight than they did conceptual strength? I frowned, trying to think my way clear, but it was no good. I needed rest. I had a vague sense of having made an errant decision, of having had my mind halted the way my advance might have been in a crowded Tokyo Metro station. I might not have found the mental space that I thought I had; I might have only stirred up confusion with all of those essays purporting to point the way to freedom. Were my instructions aimed ultimately at a dead end? Fatigue, doubt, exhaustion; I knew that I would stay quiet at the meeting, that I would watch, listen, learn. That I would take a backseat.

We crossed the park and the looser formation our march had taken in its expanse was once more compacted by the narrow confines of the rows of buildings we began to pass between. We entered the central section of the monastery, the headquarters or command center or brain – or whatever you wished to call it – of the organization. It was the area where the administrative, health and welfare, and diplomatic offices piled high one upon the other. On the rare occasion when the city’s councilors would visit
for some bit of business, or the rarer occasions when representatives from other cities or other monasteries would come, the place could exhibit a certain liveliness to it; or so I was told by Sou anyway as I had yet to witness any of the above events. The day’s special meeting would perhaps provide a glimpse of that, I thought, for there already seemed to be a buzz in the air where I would otherwise have expected the standard bureaucratic hum to be in place, that dead pulse of human beings functioning like machines, of minds attuned to the procedural, of inflexible fleshly automatons that mirrored the robot guards with their dead eyes and flat, commanding tones. That morning the masses were present to shake things up, or to at least be heard, and our clatter overwhelmed and no doubt disturbed the area’s regular denizens. I may have been harboring fresh misgivings as to the merits of the movement that Zerre and I – no, I and Zerre – had hatched, but I could not deny the thrill that started to quicken my blood as I saw the Central Complex come into view. Whatever might happen today, I mused, tomorrow would be very different from yesterday by virtue of it.

As we filed into the grand auditorium where our monastery-complete gathering would take place I noticed that there were subtle differences between it and the
House of Decisions. The spectator seats were once again divided into ascending rows but instead of being perfectly circular the room had a well-defined and flat front section that consisted of a raised stage upon which two opposing podiums had been placed, slightly angled to face both each other and the audience. Behind each of them and similarly angled sat a row of six deeply upholstered chairs. The setting was confrontational, or anyway anticipatory of confrontation, and reminded me of the televised political debates I used to half watch over beers when nothing else of interest was on. Seating was unassigned – which meant haphazard – and as I wanted to be able to get a good view of what went on but didn’t want to be particularly noticed or even noticeable, I made my way to a back row near the sections that approached the ceiling but which were still centrally located.

As soon as I sat down my fatigue came roaring back, threatening to overwhelm me. This will not do I thought, I needed rest. I reasoned that if I were to try and stave the feeling off it would only get worse and so, despite the excitement of the moment, I determined that right then and there was the time to try and catch a little shut-eye before the meeting officially began. I was sure that I would naturally wake up as soon as those around me quieted down and the proceedings started to be broadcast.
from the strategically-placed speakers positioned hither and thither for optimum sound. That plan did not of course come to fruition. When I did finally come to from my ill-timed nap things were well underway and there were a number of people gathered on the stage engaged in a fierce clash of words. On the right side, as I faced it, stood Geen and some others who, judging by their uniforms, were either field leaders or purely administrative functionaries. They were anyway, I was sure, the bosses of the monastery. On the other side was a gaggle of individuals representing the spectrum of all of us monks, some donning the colors of the science areas, some engineering, some art, et cetera. Amongst them stood Zerre, wearing an expression that could only possibly be described as exhilarated. No one was making any use of the chairs that had been provided.

One of the rabble – our rabble, my people, we the commoners, I remarked internally as I felt a flood of identitarian pride – was now positioned at his side’s podium and was speaking very passionately about his deep regrets at not being able to have any children. He was starting to cry. His tears became sobs and a gentle touch on his shoulder by another moved him away from the podium. The great room fell into silence; my drowsiness was completely erased by the intense
poignancy of the juncture that greeted my awakening. Something was indeed happening and I cursed myself for having missed any of it.

On the opposite side of the stage Geen, clearly very distressed, stepped over to the opposing podium and said, “I’m so sorry. Please know that those are my feelings too and that that is an issue that I have struggled with for many years and agonized over what to do about. I did not make the rules by which our monastery is run, I simply inherited them and trusted to the wisdom of our forebears.”

“Well then change them!” came a shout from the audience, a voice from somewhere down to my left.

“Please,” Geen said, “let us have some order. Those who wish to speak should come up on stage and replace one of the speakers already present.”

“There’s no need for that,” Zerre interjected, seizing the moment as he positioned himself behind the podium. A certain edge marked his voice, a feature that I had come to know well and that gave me a clue into the adversarial and commanding mood that he was in. He would have a plan for how he wanted things to proceed; he would be
prepared and calculating.

“I will repeat it,” Zerre continued. “Given your position of authority as head of the entire monastery Geen, you, and you alone, are able to change the rules that you say you have inherited. You claim that you yourself have struggled with this problem and yet in all the years that you’ve been our leader you haven’t done a single thing to give any of us any relief from what can only be described as an onerous burden and personally limiting bond. We are in chains here and you’ve done nothing! How can you expect us to believe you when you say that you’ve struggled too? Your tenure has been marked by the simple-minded continuation of the rules that have kept every one of us down all of our adult lives. We came to the monastery because we wanted to learn, to study, and to give back to the city through our works, not because we wanted to have our lives dictated to us.” Zerre’s statement was met with a scattered but sustained applause and even a few shouts of approval. He was clearly on form and relishing the developments he had played a part in bringing about.

Despite being on the receiving end of that sharp thrust, I could see – even positioned as far away as I was – that the look of sympathy and concern did not leave Geen’s face.
She motioned for quiet so that she could respond and began slowly and carefully, “I appreciate your feedback, Zerre. I feel that I must, however, remind you that the rules of the monastery are well known and are taught in all of our city’s schools out of which our pool of new residents is drawn every year. Before you, or I, or any of us joined the monastery we knew and were reminded by our teachers of what we could expect upon entering. Nothing has been kept secret from anyone. My own struggle with regret at not being able to have children, just like Tylm’s, centers on the regret that I have concerning myself and the decision that I made. It is also a complicated regret because the monastery has given my life a structure and a meaning that it would otherwise not have had. All I can do is speculate on what it might have been like to have a child, and the alternate structure and meaning that such might have given. Nevertheless, my regrets are personal and are not directed against what I knew would be required of me upon entering the monastery precisely because I knew it would be required of me.”

No one clapped for her but I could see more than a few heads nodding in agreement. What Geen had said made sense and was entirely rational, but rationality is often only the start of an argument and very rarely comes out
on the winning side. The argument that I had begun, that Zerre and I had been engaged in, was also based on logic and reasoning, that much was true, but I could see already from the way Zerre was bending in to the podium to respond that any logic and reasoning we may have started with was about to be jettisoned in favor of something far more powerful.

“Oh yes, we were told the rules,” Zerre said, his tone one of mocking conciliation, “we were told all about what we might expect. In the great wisdom we had at sixteen years old we were told and we made our decisions. Sixteen! Looking back on myself of sixteen from the vantage point of forty years later I can scarcely believe that I was able to feed myself, let alone make decisions that would last a lifetime! How is it that we have no chance to reassess, no opportunity to change our minds, no hint of grace, leniency, second chances? Once we – at a mere sixteen! – make our decisions we’re bound for life! And what have you done to help us? Nothing! Nothing at all!” He was really hammering it home, even pointing an accusatory finger at Geen to complete the salvo. Zerre had found his caricatable enemy that his supporters – our supporters, I had to remind myself – could rally around and he was working hard to build that notion of a personalized target in the monks’ heads. He was creating a scapegoat for all
of the pent-up frustrations and resentments that we had started to set loose through those essays. I had no idea that Zerre had that level of manipulative politician in him; it was as impressive to me as it was scary.

“Now, now, wait,” Geen said, almost pleading. I could see that she was failing to match his raw emotion with a force of her own; by taking a defensive stance, however justified and however reflective of how she actually felt, Geen was handing Zerre’s talking points to him; she was acceding to the picture he was drawing. I almost felt sorry for her; no, I did feel sorry for her. She deserved none of it. However inequitable the system may have been, Geen was just as much a forced participant in it as the rest of us were; surely a compromise approach could be found that didn’t end up with her hanging from the gallows. I leaned forward to catch her every word.

“Please,” Geen continued, “think about the implications. If everyone were allowed to go back or to change or to start afresh all of the organization upon which our city depends would crumble. It would be anarchy. We couldn’t guarantee the smooth functioning of the infrastructure, food supply, services, sustainable population size, everything. Once we open the door to that we lose all that we worked so hard to build out of the ashes of the old
world.”

“Yes, let’s talk about that old world,” Zerre said, evidently realizing his strength in the debate and taking the bull by the horns. I was certain he would launch into some of the same issues that I had raised in my essay on consent. I thought he might even plagiarize me.

“Let’s talk about that time and how people were treated,” he orated, beginning grandly. “We all know that it was a terrible era of crushing meaninglessness and that people’s lives were shallow, vapid, and empty. Everyone was a slave to some kind of moneymaking venture and no one was guaranteed any stability or security without having a continuous income, an income that itself could be taken away at any moment due solely to the whims of something they called ‘the invisible hand of the market’. Every single day the planet died a bit more due to humanity’s overconsumption of every resource imaginable, and every single day real people in some areas died of malnutrition and poverty while real people in other areas dined on caviar and champagne. We all know about that time and no one wants to go back to it. But let me tell you something else about that time,” Zerre paused at that for a long moment, building the tension and raising his accusatory finger once more.
“Let me tell you, Geen, something else which I know that you already know from your reading of history,” he continued. “That era’s laws were built on the concept of consent, and no one was forced to do anything that they did not overtly agree to. Oh sure, many, many people worked jobs that they didn’t like out of economic necessity, but they still chose those jobs from amongst a pool of possibilities. Nothing was assigned to anyone. Freedom of choice existed at each and every turn. And do you know what else? If a person wanted to quit their job, they just did. It was always possible to make changes and to give yourself a new direction, a fresh start, based entirely on your own choosing. Where is that in our world, Geen? Where is any of that here in your monastery, Geen? You, who have the power to give that to us, yet don’t. I hold you personally responsible for all of the heartbreak that Tylm described just a moment ago, the heartbreak that so very many of us who are trapped like prisoners here know only too well. The heartbreak that you yourself admitted to having. You are your own victim and you have made all of us into victims. You, Geen. It has always only been you.”

It was of course a shocking conclusion to make and one that could hardly be called reasonable. Pinning everything
personally on Geen that way made her out to be some kind of horrible tyrant, completely separate from the functioning set of social institutions that she was actually bound in. Geen was no dictator and the rules she followed were in place long before she took over as head of the monastery. For all I knew she might have changed some of them in some fashion or she might not have, but she certainly couldn’t be held individually responsible for the lot. That point, however, was naturally lost on the crowd that Zerre had already stirred up. Not everyone present perhaps, but enough that the roar of applause and approval that greeted his final flourish meant one thing – if nothing else – and that was now very clear to all: Zerre had bought himself lots and lots of breathing room. It had become unthinkable for Geen to come down on him in any way that would not trigger a riotous response that might well prove impossible to control. There would be no trial for Zerre, at least not any day soon, and in the meantime I knew it to be a safe bet that he would work on consolidating his newfound power and pushing his agenda in any way he could.

Geen was silent for a long while. When she finally did respond it was couched as a conciliatory gesture that was intended to deflate the tension that Zerre had so skillfully created. She offered a compromise. “I have heard you all
these past few hours, and I have heard you, Zerre. We here,” at that she gestured to those few administrators and leaders who stood behind her on the stage and who by then were looking extremely despondent and some a bit sheepish, “we have heard your complaints and your demands that things be otherwise. Here is what I propose. First of all, and in order to additionally hear the opinions and feelings of that vast group who have not spoken today, I suggest that we take some time to use the channels already in place for the continued communication of your grievances and messages. Each of you are in a team that is part of a section that is part of a field; let us make use of that structure even if it ultimately means that we change that structure. Tell your team leaders your wishes and desires, your views on the lives we have been leading, on the lives that you led while in the city, and on the lives your families and friends who are still in the city are leading. I call on you team leaders to then collate that information, leaving out names and identities and only assembling the thoughts and outlooks. That information should then be passed on to the section leaders who will further collate it and give their lists and reports to the field leaders. The field leaders and I are in regular contact and we will of course meet often and at length to make every effort to come to understand what it is that you, each and every one of you who calls this monastery home,
would like to see happen here and indeed even in the city. We will consider each and every change you suggest and each and every point of view you express. When we have had the opportunity to properly go through all of that – and it might take many months, be aware of that fact – then we will call another great assembly such as the one we’ve had today and we will put our own ideas for change forward to you. We will discuss it all again and see if together we cannot arrive at some final decisions.”

That struck me as an imminently fair plan, and having come to know Geen personally a little through the training that she had given me I judged that it also wasn’t simply a stalling tactic but was instead a genuine expression of her concern. Geen had proven herself to be far more willing to hear us out than I would have imagined; reform and not revolution suddenly seemed like a real option to me. She did want to defend the status quo, that much was clear as well, but she also expressed a readiness to shift and possibly transform that same status quo that deeply surprised me. She even seemed to have a desire to make changes herself, to some degree.

That, anyway, was the impression that I had while watching her put the case to us and patiently waiting for our reaction. Murmurs of approval, nods of heads,
scattered applause and calls of “Thank you!” rang out. Her proposal seemed to have a general endorsement and I could not see why it wouldn’t. It was reasonable, it was thoughtful, and it was rational. It would take time, of course, and in the time it took we would have to carry on living and working as we had been, but even that in itself was not so bad. After all, we were to be a part of the process that would eventually result, almost certainly, in the altering of our situations and the widening of our prospects. I began to feel that the future was once more open, but open in a way that rested on security. It would no doubt involve some unforeseeables, but it was not entirely a question mark, and it was most definitely a far cry from the unnerving openness that futures had exhibited in my own era where everyone feared what would become of them once they stopped working due to retirement, being laid off, downsized, demoted, restructured, let go, or otherwise, and thereby ceased having the incomes they had relied so heavily on. No, the proffered plan and its results – if it all panned out – would entail an openness somewhere in between what we had way back then and what people currently had. The thought of it was exhilarating; a future where I had more choice and more options than I did now, and possibly even the opportunity to change my mind and start anew in some fashion, but that still guaranteed me a home, food,
comfort, transport, and the chance to engage in the kind of work that provided structure for my life while also allowing plenty of leisure for my own pursuits. For my part I was absolutely ready to take Geen at her word and to at least try out her plan to see where it took us. I was happily prepared to give her the time it would take.

Zerre, however, was not. “We have heard your response and we find it inadequate,” he announced. Judging from the surprised looks on most of the faces around him on stage I did not think Zerre spoke for very many when he used that plural pronoun. “For how can we be sure that your field leaders will not adjust, edit, censor the ideas and views that we team leaders dutifully collect from those we work with? How can we really know that there will not be modifications that are then presented to us as having come from our own mouths? You could very easily collect all of that information and then say to us ‘This is what you have said you wanted’ when in fact we said nothing of the sort.” He stood defiantly, a scowl across his face. It was a gamble, I thought, playing the conspiracy card as he had, but Zerre was angling from a position of some strength and if there were enough monks who doubted Geen to at least a fraction of the degree expressed by Zerre then it might further his case. In some fashion, at any rate. Geen had played her own hand very
well though, and without knowing the real mood of the hall I supposed that it was anyone’s guess how Zerre’s riposte would come off.

“You will just have to trust us,” Geen said, in a tone that was touched with exasperation. I didn’t blame her. “You know us and you have known us for some time. You have known me for some time, Zerre. You will have to take our word that we will not deceive you.”

“As a team leader myself I demand to be present when the information is given to the field leaders and then again when they give it to you,” Zerre said. He was really pushing it.

It occurred to me then for the first time that the whole set-up, the whole concerted effort for a restructuring of how everything was run, the revolution that was ours but had increasingly become his – culminating in that very moment – may have been undertaken for motives that weren’t entirely unequivocal. I started to feel as if I had been used. Could all of it really just have been about Zerre’s personal power? I knew that he was ambitious, and I knew that there was something lurking in the background between him and Geen, but what that something was I unfortunately didn’t know. All I had
really been able to get out of him up to that point was a complaint once about the procedure by which Geen had been selected as the head of the monastery. She had simply been appointed by her predecessor in the position, and I vaguely recalled Zerre rather bitterly mentioning how unfair he thought that had been. Did he want to become the head of the monastery himself? If so, for what purpose? How committed was he to the changes we had been promoting? Misgivings crept into my mind. Was he merely exploiting the situation for his own gains?

Fresh doubts on top of other doubts; I had arrived at the gathering with an unexpected and unlooked-for thought that I may have been wrong – at least partly – in my ideas on freedom of choice and what that concept entailed. That thought by itself might have been set aside, but after seeing how the meeting had played out, and especially the climax it had come to, instead deepened my initial worry and added to it another that I had also been wrong to trust the man who had engineered the entire scenario. Could Zerre really be the kind of power-hungry puppet master that would set an entire social movement in play purely for his own benefit? And if so, where did that leave me since I was already knee-deep in the whole sticky business? I was very grateful to be anonymously knee-deep but I was still far more involved than I would
have liked to be given what had just happened; yet I also realized that had I not been involved none of it would have happened. The points we had argued for – I had argued for – remained ones that I thought I believed in, to some degree anyway. I was still not ready to make any painful sacrifices for the budding revolution, but it increasingly looked like I would need to. I desperately wished that I could talk to Sou about all of it but I knew that could only lead to harm. Her harm. That was not an option, and so I was stuck.

“If you so desire,” Geen responded graciously to Zerre’s patently aggressive demand. “In fact, in order to put everyone’s minds at ease about the transparency of what I have proposed and about our genuinely good intentions” – she enunciated those last three words very slowly, very carefully, and quite forcefully; her point surely lost on no one and causing some embarrassment to show on Zerre’s face – “I further suggest that all of the team leaders be present both when the gathered viewpoints, opinions, and ideas are presented to the field leaders and again when those same field leaders present their final report to me. Pursuant to that I would also like the team leaders to dutifully inform their own team members about the developments and, once that has been done, to submit official statements to me about what they told the
members of their teams and how those members reacted when they heard the contents of the field leaders’ final report. Let us all keep an eye on each other so that no one is in any doubt.” Geen finished with a firmness that she had either been hiding or holding in reserve. If I didn’t know better I would also have sworn that she shot a glance at me when she did so.

That was how things were to be then, and on that our grand meeting came to a rather abrupt close. We were dismissed, told to enjoy our day, and then to report for work as usual the next morning where, in addition to our normal duties, the collection of what we wished to communicate to the monastery’s administration and leadership would begin. The pause button on the tumultuous events that we had witnessed cascading down about us those past few weeks had just been pushed, and I was far too confused to hazard a prediction as to how the story might eventually turn out.
Chapter Ten

When I got back to my room I saw that Zerre had already messaged me, as I suspected that he would, to meet him early before work the next morning; I was to eat breakfast quickly, but not noticeably quickly, and then rather than first returning home afterwards to freshen up or relax a little as most of us usually did, I was to head directly to the office. I was sure that he intended to see where I stood, to poke a bit and see how I reacted. He had shown his cards and now, I supposed, wanted to see mine. I wasn’t sure where I stood though, nor how I might react; I needed time to think and to process what had happened.

The message, and its usual forthright tone, annoyed me somehow; I already had too much to ponder for myself to spend any energy trying to predict what Zerre may or may not say when I saw him and didn’t want to dwell on it. I decided instead to simply push the coming meeting – or confrontation – out of my mind for the rest of the day. My afternoon was then spent, like most others’ I would imagine, deep in conversation about what had just happened and what might happen next; mostly focusing on the monastery but not without thoughts for the city and the people who had become emotionally associated with it for me. I met Sou, of course, at our usual spot in the

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park and from there we embarked on one of the walking routes that circumnavigated the monastery grounds; we had a lot to talk about and both wanted to walk as we talked, our constant movement ensuring a kind of privacy while keeping our brains fresh and stretching our legs after the long period of motionlessness.

For her part Sou’s initial excitement at the prospect of change had, like mine, begun to wane. She saw things as a psychologist did, and what she saw on display at the meeting had disturbed her. People were getting swept away, she thought, in ideas that lacked real coherence. She remained open to the new types of possibilities that a restructuring of how we lived might bring about, and she was definitely not in favor of just carrying on with the status quo ad infinitum, but she thought that things might be moving a little too quickly. Specifically she was concerned about Zerre. She revealed to me that she had once treated him, and although she naturally couldn’t divulge any of the contents of what they had discussed during their sessions, she could tell me that he was an exceptionally ambitious person. That was not news to me, but having it confirmed in the thoughtful and clinical manner with which Sou communicated it was instructive. She also said that she had long held the opinion that he felt held back by never having risen beyond the rank of
team leader; he most likely felt underappreciated and that his talents were being ignored, going to waste. That can grate on a person, she said, though she really needn’t have – even a non-specialist like me knew that –, and when combined with ambition multiple compressed layers of frustration could certainly cause a particular type of time bomb to be built; a time bomb which would have to go off in one way or another.

I replied that there were a great many people like that in my time, especially those in industries where merit was not always taken into account. Sou was very surprised to hear that even in the twenty-first century a number of places and a number of cultures practiced a system of work promotions that were based primarily not on skills or ability but on age and, in some cases, personal connections. She couldn’t believe anyone would put up with that, but I told her that when you have no real safety net and must do something for money all of the time then you become willing to put up with quite a lot. There was also of course the fact of inculcation and a resulting inability for people to see any real alternatives. That made her very sad, and in remembering those times I felt a bit depressed as well; all of those wasted years that marked a good two decades of my life.
We left the topic of Zerre and moved on to a likely timeline, to what we could reasonably expect of the next few months, but as she speculated on what was down the line I couldn’t help but to mentally return to my boss. He wanted more, felt very capable of more, and yet was not given much of a chance. I could fully relate to that; and in thinking back to those bad years at the grind it struck me that the real reason I drank so much was that my own ambitions had been frustrated. At the time I couldn’t have clearly spelled out just what it was that I wanted, but I knew I wanted more – or anyway something different – from what I had, and I knew that my natural talents were going to waste. I had probably never had the drive that Zerre apparently did, but I still wanted to do what I could in a way that would be recognized and appreciated. I wanted my work to mean something, to myself most of all, but also to those who witnessed it. I supposed that in a sense it might have meant something to those who benefited from the profits my labor – combined with everyone else’s – brought in, and I of course was a partial recipient of those profits too via the pay I received, but I found that whole loop to ultimately be very empty. It was degrading, dehumanizing. My industry and my efforts produced nothing of direct value to myself and were invisibly part of the vast corporate whole. I was a shell; we all were, and we all thought that the getting and
spending of money was the answer to our angst. We could have been focused otherwise, directed otherwise. A person needs direction, I thought, but a person also needs to find their own direction.

A light went on. I stopped in my tracks and stared at Sou. We were deep in one of the wooded sections not far from where the testing center was and perhaps somehow the thought of that, the preconscious tickling of that, provoked my epiphany. “That’s it,” I said. “I’ve got it!”

“What’s it?” she asked, pausing herself and turning to face me.

“It isn’t about consent, it’s about alteration,” I said slowly, letting the notion compose itself as I spoke. It had been a bolt of nonverbal, intuitive insight and I needed to find the words to be sure that it came out right.

“Go on,” she said, narrowing her eyes and looking at me rather quizzically.

“You system here is actually really good, people – especially young people – need some kind of direction to be given to them, some way of establishing what they can do and what they will be able to take meaning from, some
manner of drawing out their natural talents and providing them with a path to develop those talents. But it can’t stop there. Now you – we that is – have a great starting point for everyone but for the sake of stability the structural systems have allowed that starting point to also be the endpoint. People need to be able to adjust their paths through life simply because people change. Oh, a teenager and maybe even someone in their twenties or thirties will benefit greatly from the current set-up, but if a person, once they’ve learned about themselves, then wishes to adopt a new course, or to at least shift the one they’re on, they ought to be allowed to do so. They ought to be re-equipped with the know-how that they’ll need as well. All we are missing is that mechanism for alteration, and what is needed now is therefore just to make space for that while still somehow maintaining the security that our ordered and organized work has produced.”

“That mechanism is leaving the city and joining the monastery,” Sou countered. “We already have that and it clearly isn’t enough.”

“Yes, it isn’t enough, because that isn’t enough of a choice,” I said. “What about a person who wants to go from the market to the farm? Or from the farm to the theater? Or from their assigned role in the monastery to a
whole other field in the monastery? If we all have multiple talents then why can’t we pursue multiple talents, even if it’s an abrupt transition from where our dominant natural abilities lay at the time we were sorted and placed into our current trajectories?”

Sou looked pensive. “Establishing something like that would take a lot of reorganization, and I would worry about the maintenance of our food, services, and other areas. It would take very careful planning.”

“It would,” I said, excitement growing inside me, ready to burst. “And mistakes would be made and some suffering seems inevitable, but surely given our automated labor and production forces we could minimize that suffering while we worked out the kinks.”

“You know,” Sou said, shifting her stance and looking directly and deeply into my eyes, “I never believed that Zerre was capable of writing all those essays.”

A chill went down my spine. I froze. Horrified. What did she know? What did she guess? If Sou had doubts about that who else did? Had Zerre’s and my cautious moves all been for naught? How well-known was Zerre’s writing and how visibly not his had my own been? It occurred to
me that since Zerre had claimed authorship of the Anonymous pieces all manner of comparisons between his past work and those essays could suddenly be undertaken. He may have already sunk us, I thought. Inadvertently? Purposely? I had to deal with it; I had to make it a priority when I met Zerre the next day; but at that moment I more urgently had to at least put Sou’s focus off of myself. I had to change the subject.

“Oh?” I stammered, stalling. Was that the best I could do?

“Yes. The voice was all wrong, the writing voice I mean,” she said, still keeping her gaze burrowing into me, surely alert for any sign, any giveaway. I was reminded of the dangers of dating a psychologist in the most uncomfortable way.

“I’m not quite sure who it could have been,” she continued, hesitating yet maintaining that lock of hers dead to rights. I was caught off guard and panicking but instinctively went into my best stone-faced working-in-Tokyo’s-office-world mode. I was not raised to hide my emotions but through a series of painful embarrassments I had more or less gotten the knack of it.

“No, I’m not sure,” Sou said again, “but something tells
me that I don’t need to dig into it. If I find out then I find out, and if not then that would be fine too. It is after all beside the point given our current situation.”

Relief swept over me, big waves of it crashing far inland, pushed by a strong offshore wind. I had either dodged a bullet or she was freely offering me a pass; I suspected the latter. It may have been an opening too, an offer to let me confess and ease whatever stress I had from keeping a secret – if I had any. I did of course but I wasn’t about to confess; instead I rested in my welcome comfort. I knew that I couldn’t let that show either, but it was definitely there. Piles and piles of it.

“I hadn’t noticed that, but then I’m not very familiar with his earlier work,” I said as diplomatically as I could, hoping that would suffice. “But as you say, whoever the real author was – if it wasn’t in fact Zerre – is no longer of much importance. What we do now and where we go from here is everything.”

Sou nodded very thoughtfully, and with a tinge of disappointment just escaping from her eyes I thought, and then slowly began walking again. I fell in beside her and we were silent for a long moment, letting the trees and the breeze do our talking for us. “You know,” she said finally,
“you can tell me anything, Frank.”

I appreciated that, I did, and I told her so. In that one instance though I still felt that I couldn’t tell her, and that was simply to protect her. Sou had to be afforded the most believable deniability she could have, and even if she did harbor suspicions that Anonymous was really me, I determined that as long as she didn’t know for certain she would at least have that layer of defense should she ever come to need it. Which I desperately hoped that she wouldn’t. I had no clear idea of how much danger I was in, nor how I could find out. Sou had probably read ten or twenty times as much of my poetry as anyone else had, and she had also heard hours and hours of my talking and was therefore familiar with both my regular patterns of thought and my manner of expression. I reasoned that if anyone were able to find similarities between what I did and said and Anonymous’ writing then it would be her. Others would most likely not know me well enough to spot the nuances involved. There was hope, some hope at least I reasoned, that Sou could be the only one who suspected, and maybe no one really knew. Unless… I pushed the idea out of my mind. It was far too terrifying.

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I met with Zerre early the next morning as instructed. He was in something of a manic state, bouncing between topics and swinging from elation to deep insecurity. My original plan had been to challenge him both about the manner in which he suddenly declared himself to be the author of my essays, and about the way he had unilaterally taken over the entire process that we had started together and that – from my point of view anyway – had always been a joint effort. On seeing the condition he was in, however, I decided that it would be best to remain mostly silent and instead try to get a gauge on where he was at personally with what he had set in motion, what he expected would come of it, and where he wanted to see it go. I was both surprised and disappointed by what I found out.

He began by telling me, without even first asking after me – again, given the circumstances, both surprising and disappointing from my perspective – that I was already in too deep, that we – he actually said “we” – had crossed the threshold and that there was no turning back. I would have to soldier on – another disturbing development; his use of a military analogy revealed that mentally he put me squarely under his authority, and the expected obedience that invoked was palpable even if the language used had been chosen without much forethought – but that I
needn’t worry because he had a plan. The revolution must be seen through, he proclaimed, and we – again, that knifepoint “we” – would be victorious, and once he – no longer “we” – was installed as the head of the monastery the changes outlined in all of those many essays would start to be put in place. The wheels clicked. The lock opened. Black bile filled my mouth. Black bile filled my brain. Zerre was in it for himself, at least to some degree, and the whole orchestrated plan of his that started with the supposed unveiling of Anonymous and that had then subsequently been put fully into motion at the meeting was directed towards one aim above all others: his personal power. The achievement and attainment of that which he evidently thought he deserved, and quite possibly had thought he deserved for many long years. Head of the monastery. Zerre.

I asked him how that would fit in with the basis of all of our work – I, for my part, used that “our” quite consciously and purposively –, how something like that could be said to be based on consent when as far as I could tell he wasn’t even considering any alternatives or allowing for regular monks to have their say. He brushed that aside with a dismissive scowl and said that he would see to it that consent was made a part of life both here and in the city and that I had no cause for concern. I objected
that consent was also about agreeing to the power structures that one lived under and that some monks might feel that the authoritative infrastructure here was in need of some changing as well. Again, he paid no heed to that and said that first things first, he would be head of the monastery and once he was installed then, and only then, could we begin to worry about “little details” like that. What we needed to do just then, he said – and by that particular “we” I knew he meant only me –, was to draw up a manifesto of sorts that reflected our main aims and that could be released as soon as possible in order to influence the material that was to be collected by the team leaders and presented first to the section leaders and then to the field leaders. If the views, opinions, and ideas that were to be gathered could be unified as much as possible then the movement would have its best chance of success. I was of course to leave out the part about Zerre becoming head of the monastery. I was curious as to how he planned to go about accomplishing that point given that he evidently meant, at least for the time being, to go along with Geen’s plan of gathering up feedback and allowing the power structures already in place to decide on possible changes to be put to the community at large and from which our options for alterations could be chosen. I held back though; a voice inside said that it might be best not to know, that Zerre’s fragile state at the
moment might not be conducive to prying, and that anyway I was quite eager to get away from him. Instead of saying anything I simply nodded and made every appearance that I was on board with the plan.

I had to start my regular workday that way, and the entirety was perforce to be spent on said manifesto. It very quickly started to disgust me. I found it hard to focus and couldn’t stop fixating on the gall Zerre had in determining that “first and foremost” he was to be made the head of the monastery. We would simply be trading one boss for another, and I actually thought that Geen made a great boss. I judged that if we were to truly implement the types of changes that I had argued for then the entire post of “head of the monastery” really ought to be abolished altogether. Or replaced with some kind of rotation or affixed with a means for swapping out the executive. As I understood things the present head of the monastery remained in power for as long as they liked; they were it until they chose their successor personally from amongst the monks currently in the monastery. Even then they were able to determine the time of their stepping down once they had decided on and “adequately” trained the monk who would follow. As for that training and its duration, that too seemed to be left open to the discretion of the reigning head. That was a lot of leeway
for one person to enjoy and my hunch was that if – if – Zerre could pull off his grand strategy he would remain firmly ensconced until the day he bid his mortal coil a fond adieu. It was unsettling to say the least.

I stared out my window at the more comforting scene outdoors, at the Japanese wagtails, Eurasian tree sparrows, and the odd eyebrowed thrushes that would greet me. Familiar birds and familiar sights from my old life. And of course it would have been amiss not to notice the jungle crows, whose ever present cawing had become for me a comforting harbinger of the not yet, the unresolved. Their jet black presence, their tilting of the head, gleaming intelligence behind inky eyes, always seemed to me to somehow restate the connection between humanity and the natural world that we oftentimes tried so hard to ignore, to our peril. They were true friends to remind us of our humble roots; and of the grave that indiscriminately beckons to one and all alike that tread this soft earth. My mind drifted into a contemplative mood and I felt a slight itch to compose a poem. I refrained though, for something else then peeked around the corner of my mind. A doubt had resurfaced: consent. I had just been trying to work out a way of laying consent as the cornerstone of the manifesto I had been assigned, trying to figure out how I could connect it to all of the
specifically structural social and political ideas that I had in mind in as direct and easily understandable a way as possible. It occurred to me that I may have overinvested in the concept, and given the foundational position that consent occupied in the so-called revolution that was quickly becoming a coup d’état, that potential overinvestment was very important. Disturbingly important. An overinvestment would make the entire scaffolding liable to collapse.

Individual consent; based on respect for individual autonomy and functioning within a province where the choices were many and from which each person felt both a freedom and willingness to choose. There was freedom again. The word carried such power and weight, intuitively far more so than even consent, and yet I stumbled over what it really meant. Oh, I could repeat all the slogans and catchy calls from my birth era, I knew what “Freedom!” meant when it was shouted in the face of opposing nations and political ideologies – the latter of which, to our detriment, were actually more or less nonexistent by the turn of the twenty-first century but that fact was conveniently ignored –, and I knew all the horror stories that were fed to us by well-meaning or well-paid people who told of the struggles they underwent growing up in X place where “the people aren’t free”. But aside
from a certain – not a complete but a certain – lack of concern about self-censoring my statements lest I wind up in trouble, I couldn’t really understand what it meant to be free. I either was no more free back then than I was at present or I didn’t properly grasp what the implications were of being free and therefore lacked the necessary comparisons. I thought that thinking about consent again might help, and that was after all what I was supposed to be writing about, and so I returned to that narrower idea and tabled freedom for the time being. My intention was to see how it could be that in my birth time, stretching across the late twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries, the giving and taking of consent was so much more a part of people’s lives than it was of the future-present I found myself in. That effort, however, failed rather miserably.

The consent that I at first thought had been such a cornerstone of my life turned out on inspection to be fairly empty and meaningless. Since work was so much a part of our lives back then I thought of that first; I thought of my career. It was not something I had ever actively pursued but rather something that I more or less fell into. I never loved what I did but I never hated it either. It paid the bills, and I had a lot of bills. We all did. We started out as kids being able to choose nothing, really, and then in
In our late teens a significant choice cropped up: quit school or continue. Only a fool would quit school given the economic consequences of doing so, and there was also enormous pressure not to, usually coming from both social and familial sources. That wasn’t much of a choice; the consent involved seemed very forced. Like nearly everyone else I graduated and then went on to university – again, more or less by default. I did choose my university from amongst a few options, but a large number of economic and social factors played into that choice. I started a course of study that I was interested in but a couple of years later when I wanted to change my major I found that I really couldn’t because it would mean spending another year in school and another huge round of tuition payments and increased debt. Instead I simply graduated again, keeping my initial major and betraying my heart in the interests of my bank account. Then it was time to work. And guess what? My dream job wasn’t available – what a surprise. I worked a few part-time jobs for a while until I landed something full-time and then kept at that. My bills had ballooned somewhat and I still had all of that student debt to pay off. A theme was emerging. All of the vaunted consent, and yes the freedom too, that I had always been told about growing up in many cases boiled down to economic concerns. The overwhelming majority of my decisions had been made...
based almost entirely on matters of money. Stability in life required a steady income, and you did what you had to in order to get a steady income.

It was no wonder that distractions came to be pursued with the vigor they did; there must have been countless millions, billions, of people like me who found very little purpose and satisfaction in how they spent the bulk of their waking hours and the plurality of their lives. Even those distractions depended on money; I personally knew plenty of co-workers who would save an entire year for a blow-out two week vacation somewhere warm where they could get drunk or high every day. Then back to the grind to shore up for another three hundred sixty-five until paid leave rolled around again. Of course a great many also saw the pointlessness in all that but what could they do? They were trapped in the same system the rest of us were. If we gave our consent to anything it was to the whole life package, and there was only one on offer. In fairness, and for the sake of argument, I suppose that being homeless or a criminal or a survivalist or something could arguably be called other life packages on offer back then, but who could really choose those? Some did of course, and some had that choice thrust on them by whatever outside forces, but for ninety-nine percent of us that was not it. No, we played the game, the only game in
town, and never thought that things could be otherwise. Had freedom been a delusion? Even our political choices were contrived, and when it came time to vote – except in very rare circumstances – a vote for one was a vote for the other. Who of our representatives was representing what? Nobody seemed to care much unless it touched their wallets. Economics again, how we obsessed over that. I half remembered Geen once saying something along those lines to me.

Geen. I needed her help with my analysis. I thought that there was something to consent, but that I just couldn’t get at it. Freedom seemed like an empty pursuit without first nailing consent down; and freedom as an idea, at least in the way it was used, appeared to me to be so broad as to possibly be meaningless however it was looked at. Once you got down to the practicalities of it, anyway. Freedom always had and always would signify very little in the absence of the assurance of daily necessities; daily comforts even. Permanent drunkenness was the only thing I could think of to take the edge off a life lived alone and where you didn’t know where your next meal would come from. Geen had been an excellent mentor to me and I had thoroughly enjoyed our talks. She had challenged me and forced me to expand my thinking on a great range of topics. She may even have been what
allowed me to gain the analytic prowess – such as it was – to write all of those essays. I couldn’t go to her with this particular manifesto-related problem, of course, but could I go to her? I wondered. Could I share my doubts about such ideas as consent and freedom? Possibly framing them in the context of me simply as a reader of Anonymous’ essays? Possibly as someone working under Zerre who had now become afraid of where he was trying to take the monastery? It seemed like it might work, but Geen had the potential to see through me and I was pretty sure that she might, if nothing else, be suspicious if I approached her in that way. Still, I thought that it could be worth a shot. Even if the whole thing did blow up in my face Sou would still be protected; she would have that safe distance. For that to remain the case though it would be better to act quickly lest Sou herself put two and two together or push me to the point where she finally got the truth out of me. She had come perilously close on our walk the day before and that was not a chance I wanted to take again.

As seemed to regularly happen to me once I opened up to the idea of it, fate intervened at just that crucial moment. I had half decided to simply recycle old material from my essays for the manifesto that Zerre was insisting on but I was still feeling a bit reluctant to actually get to it, and so
I wrote a little memo indicating that I would be back in a few minutes, stuck it to the outside of my office door, and then quietly left the building. Thankfully no one, especially Zerre, was in the common area when I snuck out because I wouldn’t have wanted to make the necessary excuses for why I wasn’t sweating over my assignment. What I wanted was some fresh air and a change of scene, but I didn’t have any particular destination or objective in mind. I started walking and followed my feet, as it were, enjoying the still somewhat cool air and knowing that it wouldn’t last long. The heat and the humidity would start to press down on us from daybreak to midnight very soon.

I found myself easing into my usual route from work to home; it had become somewhat instinctual, I supposed, and it didn’t surprise me that that was where I was headed once I noticed the direction my steps were taking. It was only about a twenty minute walk from the building where the Writers’ Collective was located to my housing complex, and the commute was largely a pleasant one regardless of the weather. The monastery’s grounds were well designed in that way.

As I walked it entered into my mind that I might want to check my messages. That would have been an easily and
instantaneously done task from anywhere I happened to be back in the hustle and bustle of smartphone-wired Tokyo, but in the monastery, as with so much else, a different approach had been taken to digital communication. The mail functions had been disabled from all but the home units of computers, and there was also some kind of limiting application installed on flat boards so that the messaging available via them no longer functioned once a person’s dwelling place was exited. I saw very, very few people carrying their flat boards around, both in the city but especially in the monastery, and that might have been part of the reason.

I hadn’t noticed that point about mails – their unimportance, really – until I started living in the monastery as previously I had had no reason to either read or write them from or to anyone; but being a part of the regular working world again and no longer doing a homestay, as it were, I realized how nice it was not to have to care about email. At first I thought that only having access to my messaging service in my room would be a major inconvenience and would doubly feel like taking work home with me every day, but it hadn’t turned out like that. If someone really needed to get in touch with you they could – the special watches with their hologram video calls that even I was eventually given
were used for that, or alternatively the display boards in certain places like the one that Geen had bellowed out of during my vasectomy surgery – and so mails weren’t really sent all that often. I had gotten into the habit of only opening my account during the morning break between breakfast and the start of the workday; that was usually sufficient and I hadn’t yet had a speck of trouble from missing anything pertinent. Since on that particular day I had immediately headed to the office and not gone back to my room after breakfast I still hadn’t checked to see if any messages had come in. I might as well now, I thought; given the circumstances we were in someone might have sent something important.

Someone had. And the very someone I had been thinking about. Fate? Geen wanted to see me, she said, it was urgent, she stressed, and it concerned matters that would affect the entire monastery. She needed me, she added reassuringly, and I was not to worry. She had a special assignment for me. None of that even remotely put my mind at ease but I recognized, at least, the depth at which the events that had been set in motion had arrived; that they had taken on a life of their own and that whatever might happen from here on out there was no going back and no redoing an earlier move so that things might turn out differently. We were stuck. The wheels of history –
however localized – were turning and either I would be crushed underneath them or I would ride them to the next common destination. Whether that meant with Geen or with Zerre at the helm was anyone’s guess, even with my insider position I was unsure and unwilling to bet. I decided that since the call had come I would have to go and see Geen, and I would trust my gut to tell me how to act with her when I saw her. Would I come clean? Would I feign ignorance? Would I play my hand of being a worried underling looking for guidance? Or would I instead play a differently duplicitous approach and set Geen up in some way so that Zerre’s – and mine? I was unsure if I still had any ownership of it – plan might gain some advantage? As soon as I could make it, she had written, please, please come and see her in her office.

My first reaction after reading her mail was that I was happy to oblige, but I soon realized that I needed to be more cautious than that, and what was more that I didn’t even know where Geen’s office actually was. It was somewhere in the Central Complex, I did know that, but exactly where was unclear to me. When we had met regularly for my initiation training we had used a number of different locations spread around the monastery grounds to help me get a feel for the whole area and how all of the buildings and facilities fit together; it was a nice
touch, I thought at the time, and it was indeed very helpful. It did however leave me with this specific blank. I paused a moment to reflect at my desk, comfortable and safe in my little room, my little kingdom, and then stood and turned to take in all that had become so familiar and so welcoming.

I knew that the moment I faced was a turning point; not necessarily for the monastery but certainly for me personally. A selection was imminent, a choice, and although I had no definitive idea what it would be I knew that I would make it, and I knew where my heart was leaning. Geen would be expecting to hear from me; Zerre would be expecting me back if he had noticed that I was gone. The decision already seemed to be presenting itself to me in that way: Geen or Zerre? Zerre or Geen? I had worked many long hours to make the situation – the transformative moment – possible, and finding myself now in it, with the unforeseen path that it had taken, I was more uncertain than ever. I couldn’t have guessed that Zerre would burst onto the scene and take charge in the way that he had, but then I could hardly blame him for doing so as from the start I had had no clear idea of what I was after while he – evidently – did. Unbeknownst to me he had wanted, long wanted, to be the head of the monastery and saw it as his chance to accomplish that. He
may from the start only have been interested in my ideas purely because he thought they would lead there. I doubted that though; whatever else I might have thought about him he did seem genuinely intrigued by the ideas – and for the ideas’ sake. If he did manage to gain power I would learn soon enough the extent of his fervor by what he enacted and when.

Yet that was very much beside the point, I reminded myself. Just then I had to choose whether or not to respond to Geen’s request immediately or to put it off. I couldn’t delay for very long, but I could give it a day or so; certainly the rest of the day would be doable. Geen wouldn’t even bat an eye at my not replying until that evening, and might consider that to be a quick answer despite her marking the mail as very urgent. The monastery had that kind of a culture to it, the kind of mood or setting that allowed things to unfold as they did and didn’t insist on rushing anything. Still, I knew that how I reacted to that mail, having seen it, would tell me a lot about how I reacted to the bigger picture of the power struggle that had begun. It would tell me a lot about myself and the place I saw myself in. It would tell me, if nothing else, where my feelings were. Not surprisingly, perhaps, I found myself wanting to call up Geen and ask her where her office was. I told myself that I was curious
to see what she wanted – and I was – but I was also open to what she might say and honestly wished for her help in coming to terms with some of the concepts that I had once been so convinced by but that I had, out of nowhere, started to doubt the veracity of. If the meeting went poorly that would also tell me a lot, and it would help me decide what to do; a part of which would likely mean attempting to regain a deeper measure of control over where the movement was headed. If what Geen had to say pushed me deeper into Zerre’s camp – my camp, I reminded myself – then all for the better and all for the clearer. Either way, I had to find out what she had in mind, what she offered, and what she could or would or was planning to do. For the first time I activated the video call function on my watch. That in itself was exciting.

I apologized for not getting ahold of her earlier, I had just seen her mail; Geen brushed that aside as I knew she would and asked when I could come. Right away, I told her, only I didn’t know where. Central Complex, the same building as the grand auditorium, she’d meet me in the lobby. We were set and I was on my way.

I think I had somehow expected a somber and serious Geen to greet me when I saw her but just the opposite turned out to be the case. She was elated, ecstatic, and
couldn’t wipe the smile off her face. Things had come a long way in Japan if a person in charge was no longer able to hide their emotions from one and all, I thought. But then we were no longer in Japan, whatever the shape of the islands we inhabited and their location on the globe. The world had changed, nations had disappeared, life had at once become far more locally concerned and far more globally connected and interlaced. It was a new world and we were just one tiny city and one tiny monastery in the midst of a constellation of tiny cities and tiny monasteries, or whatever the equivalent of a monastery was amongst other peoples in other places. All self-governing, all self-concerned, yet all plugged into a universal network that balanced human sustenance with environmental protection. The resource rapists and thieves were long dead, and so were their ways of doing things. Back then I would have called that display of Geen’s honne if I were in a sufficiently Japanese mood; or just plain direct if I weren’t. What puzzled me was not how she felt but why on earth she might have felt that way.

The answer was clear soon enough. We skirted the auditorium and took a side access hallway to the rear of the building where an out-of-the-way stairwell took us up five metal flights to a tiny grated landing that gave way to a single locked door. If a person were curious enough to
discover those stairs and ascend them she would find her progress blocked just at the point where it became most obviously significant. To further the mystery the door had a large black “5” painted on it right at about the height you might look for an apartment’s marker to be. I half expected to see a little peephole fixed in beneath it. “5” for the fifth floor? Room number five? Of how many? Why? Geen placed a flattened hand onto the door and a whizzing and whirring told me that it was no simple lock like the one on my own room’s door; it was set to open to her particular hand print and hers only. I did wonder why an iris scanner hadn’t been installed for that purpose as that seemed even more secure, but with everything else I was wondering about right then I soon forgot it.

As the door slid open Geen beckoned me inside. Her office was about as nice as I expected it to be. Not ornate, not luxurious, but nice. I estimated that it was maybe double the size of my quarters, but off to my right I could see that it contained the same desk as the one I had and even the same style of chair behind it. Offset from the desk, on the other side of the room, it also contained the same seating arrangement that I remembered from Milee and Tomor’s apartment; those must have been somewhat standard. Fully automated manufacturing, after all; but then surely there were more furniture sets to choose
from? Choice again, that kept coming up for me… An entire section of the office was devoted to an expansive bookcase filled to bursting with volumes that I was curious to peruse, while detailed maps of the world and of our little corner of it were framed and hanging interspersed with some very fine oil paintings – a few of which I even recognized as being from the twentieth century – to the rear of Geen’s desk and wrapping around onto the wall behind me and to my left as I stood in the entrance. A counter placed near the guest seating appeared to be a kitchenette or a drinks area, to which Geen headed as she offered me some tea. I accepted.

The side furthest from me, opposite her desk and the one unadorned section of the room, was taken up by a large window. I inwardly excused myself and trod across the thick brown carpet – wonderful to walk on – to go and gaze out of it. I did not gaze “out”, though, but down. The window allowed the room’s occupants a view of the auditorium where our gathering had taken place, and was centered on the permanent stage I had first noticed when I entered for the meeting. I immediately recalled the trial I had witnessed in the House of Decisions in the city and the even bigger facilities there; was that building too equipped with a similar bird’s eye view lookout? If so then for what purpose? The councilors had all been
present there on the floor, and the monastery’s administrators – as far as I could tell and remember – had similarly all been on stage during our session here. Was someone secretly observing all of us, gauging crowd reactions, and feeding that information to those in charge? It was an unsettling thought, but it seemed entirely plausible. I wondered why Geen would allow me to see that unless she had some purpose in letting me in on that particular secret. But was it even a secret? Or did everyone in the city, and the monastery, know that the big meetings, when they were called, were surveilled in such a way? On the other hand, if everyone did not know, would something like that help explain the added security and exclusive nature of the office that – presumably – housed each successive head of the monastery? How hidden was its location? I had assumed that I hadn’t known where Geen’s office was simply because I was new. Was it deeper than that though? And why again was Geen in such a good mood?

She set a tray with our cups, pot, and even some scones and sweets, down on the low table between the opposing sofas that framed its long sides. I was unsure if we were to sit on them or rather in the single deep seated chairs of matching design that were placed at the table’s narrow ends, and as the presence of an actual tea set seemed to
indicate a degree of formality I intended to wait until Geen sat and then follow suit. Instead, like any good host, she cheerfully told me to recline at a sofa and then once I was settled positioned herself opposite me and poured the tea. She asked if I preferred milk or lemon. Sugar? For a reason I couldn’t explain I began to feel very nervous.

“Well, thank you again for coming right away,” Geen said, carefully stirring her milk into her tea by holding her spoon upright and scooping the liquid from six to twelve in small arcs. What was going on? It was all far too proper; I was glad I had taken lemon.

“To get right to the matter,” she went on, brown eyes glowing, gleaming, “we have arrived at a point that I’ve been longing to see for many years.” That too was odd; I began to wonder if Geen was secretly on Zerre’s – that is, on our – side. Had she been wanting to make the kinds of changes now out in the open all along and simply been unable to? Perhaps due to procedural, bureaucratic, or entrenched political concerns? My mind was racing.

“What do you mean?” I asked innocently, and that particular innocence, at least, was not feigned; it was the innocence of curiosity.
“With Zerre of course,” she replied. She paused, looked up from her tea at me with a furrowed brow, and then added, “You do know, don’t you?” It was the first sign of uncertainty I had noticed in her since we met that day, the first doubt.

“Know what?” I didn’t know, in all honesty.

“Hasn’t he told you our history?” she asked. “I was certain that he would have. How else could he have gotten you to write all those silly essays for him?”

Bits of my brain splattered across her finely upholstered furniture. The simplicity of my position vanished. My innocence was dead while my ignorance was alive and well. She knew. She apparently knew all along. I was shocked. Shell shocked. My jaw dropped. The blood drained from my face. My heart stopped and then abruptly started pounding like I had just finished a hundred meter sprint in a new world record time. She knew! How on earth did she know and how was I supposed to handle that? I suddenly had no words, not even my childlike questions; I had nothing to offer, nothing to say – I was putty sitting at a proper tea. A tea whose etiquette I couldn’t even handle yet alone deal with such a revelatory verbal blast. I sat in stunned silence and
no doubt looked every bit the fool I felt. There was no delicately hiding my emotions nor stiff upper lipped stonefacing possible. She knew!

Geen set her spoon down gently, silently, on her saucer and leaned forward. “I know you better than that, Frank Tollman. You must have some words for me.”

“I, I, I’m deeply confused,” I finally stammered. My hands were shaking so badly that I nearly spilled the tea I was holding. This would not do.

“Are you?” Geen asked, in a tone that managed to be both accusatory and playful. “Well, shall I start at the beginning then?” She was very clearly enjoying herself. Here it would come, I thought, answers at last. Answers at least. More questions from me would no doubt follow, but the picture in my head would get filled in a bit.

“Some years ago, five or six now I think, Zerre and I were both close to the previous head of the monastery. We both considered ourselves to be in the running to replace her, we both considered ourselves to be being groomed for leadership. In the end she chose me. She gave neither of us an outright reason for her decision and when pushed to provide one – by Zerre of course – she said simply that
she thought I would make a better head of the monastery than he would. That settled it; for me, and for the institution. Changes of staff were implemented as happens during such times and I took over and began running things. A few months later she died and each of us mourned her, though there was a lingering hostility on Zerre’s part which was visible even at the memorial service we held. I took that as a warning and acted accordingly, seeking to defuse the potential threat that Zerre posed, thinking that in time he would get over it and we could move on. Unfortunately he has never gotten over it. I had a difficult decision to make: what to do with the man? I had no good reason to exile him and as long as the threat he represented remained only a potential one I could hardly act preemptively in some manner. And the thing was, and is mind you, the man is a very good administrator. He should be a part of the operations here at the Central Complex but of course I could hardly allow that while he still carried all of that bitterness for me. If he had been here he would undoubtedly have set a similar plan in motion years ago to the one he’s now cracked with you. He has surely been biding his time and waiting for his chance. So I did what seemed most sensible to me. I gave him some power but largely meaningless power. I put him in charge in a low-ranking slot so that I could keep an eye on him, ready to promote him to something
better as soon as I saw an improvement in his outlook towards my own administration. That never came, and as a result Zerre has wallowed in the swampland of the Writers’ Collective. Imagine that! Here is a competent and talented man wasting his energies and abilities on an insignificant little group of outcasts and nobodies like that bunch over there. Independent writers. My goodness, what a group. Still, I suppose that the city needs people like them if for no other reason than to have a place to dump the otherwise useless.” She had been looking intently at me as she spoke but as her thoughts turned to Zerre’s and my team I noticed that her eyes trailed off into the distance, finally ending up fixated on her tea again. I took no offence at her comments about the Collective; I took no offence at anything, nor could I – I was still numb.

“Of course I know that you’re in that group, but don’t take my remarks personally,” Geen continued, returning her attention to me. “You were put there.”

“Wait, what? I was?” I blurted out, taken off guard yet again. “I clearly remember doing the aptitude test and receiving my results the very same day.” It was unexpected, so unexpected that some life snapped back into me, blood again flowed.
“Yes, naturally you did. And you did demonstrate an ability to write, and to write well. Your strongest score was suppressed however, because I wanted to put you into Zerre’s team to see what happened, and what did happen is more or less just what I thought would happen,” Geen replied evenly. Her good mood was starting to wear very thin as my brain began its resuscitation and the implications of the conspiracy she had been conducting started to become clear to me.

“What was my strongest score?” I asked, although I knew that I didn’t want to know. Becoming a writer had meant a lot to me and I had taken great stock in thinking of myself that way: it had become a supporting pillar of my identity.

“I suppose you would refer to it as accounting,” she answered, “though our version works a bit differently than yours did.” Another chill swept down my spine. Accounting. Oh. Ugh. There it was again, my low-level skill with numbers. Not theoretical calculus, not advanced algebra, not even non-Euclidean geometry, but accounting. Categorization and organization. Balance and clear data analysis. Great. Wonderful. I was, in fact, born to be a calculator.
“So you altered the test?” I asked. Just how crestfallen I felt must have been clearly visible as I had long since given up trying to maintain a poker face.

“No, no, I just had your results routed to my private files first and then lowered your top score to be just below your second score, which was your writing score, before resending them to the main computer at the testing center. Sou wasn’t involved in any of it, by the way.” I thought that Geen must have also known about Sou and I for her to make a comment like that, although if she did it would hardly be surprising as we had never tried to hide the fact that we were seeing each other, nor had there ever been any reason for us to do so. It did, however, mean that Geen had been keeping an unseen eye on me – or it anyway might have meant that –; for after all, in a monastery of twenty thousand people there must have been hundreds, even thousands, of romantic groupings that she neither knew nor cared about.

“You are a talented writer, Frank,” Geen added in a show of genuine kindness. “I especially enjoy your poetry. Your essays are good but your conceptual thinking is muddled; I suppose you’ve come to realize that yourself and that’s a part of why you’re here.” That set me even further on my
back foot. She was so sharp, so perceptive. She had read
me like the kind of book that I wanted to write and was
now turning the pages of me for me. I was confused; I
was up then down then up again; I was sure that there had
to be some ulterior motive behind every word that came
out of her mouth.

“You should keep at it,” she went on, “and don’t let your
superior data organization skills depress you. Be the
person you want to be.” That sounded an awful lot like
something I would have put into an essay. It might even
have been a line from one of my essays. I appreciated it
but it did not lead me out of the woods. I was lost, scared,
cornered. I felt powerless.

“Please, let’s just stay with Zerre,” I said, even though I
knew that she would come back to Zerre. He – discussing
him – was a topic that I thought I could handle; I would
need much more time and space to return to myself. “You
said that you put me into his team, which as I recall was
presented to me as a choice, in order to set him up in
some manner. Is that right?”

“More or less,” Geen said, “though it was done more
subtly than that. The vast majority of people stay in the
team in which they’re initially placed but there are some
who change, and given your unusual background it was possible that you might be one of them. I therefore had to have some backup plans at the ready. Yet my overriding thinking was to put you with Zerre in order to gauge where Zerre might be mentally a bit more, in order to test him via your presence and to see what might occur. You were the lit fuse to his powder keg. If he did still harbor schemes and ambitions to present a challenge to my leadership then I wanted to have out with it and to finally confront it head on; I was tired of waiting and wondering. If, on the other hand, he had given up all such ideas then I would be able to safely position him in a place where his talents might be better realized and where he might be of greater service to the monastery at large.”

As Geen spoke I realized that I didn’t know how to take what she was explaining about her dealings with Zerre any more positively than I could her dealings with me. Her methods struck me as quasi-Machiavellian, as a kind of possibly well-intentioned subterfuge or power play. What was I to make of something like that? I was more confused than ever about whose side I should be on, whose side I was supposed to be on, whose side I ought to be supporting and assisting. I seemed to be universally used. It suddenly occurred to me that I might not even need to choose sides; I might be better off being for
myself. Just quitting. No; if I were someone else that may have worked, but already having been placed squarely in the middle I quickly realized that was simply not an option. Choice again. I remembered then why I had wanted to come see Geen in the first place.

“To be honest, I don’t know how to respond to any of this,” I said exhaustedly. There were no more games, no more hidden agendas, no more cards up my sleeves; nor were any even possible. I determined that it was time to come clean and to see how things fell into place having done so. I had apparently been out of my league from the very start and it seemed like no loss could come of it. I was built to confront the world in a straightforward manner only; I was simply not cut out to be a player in politics.

“And I think I need to get my thinking clear before I can really choose anything,” I added. “You mentioned that some of the concepts that I’ve written about – I admit it, I was Anonymous; you already know that anyway – are confused, and frankly that’s how I’ve been feeling. Substantial doubts have cropped up one after the other in my mind. I desperately want to get clear.”

“And you must,” Geen said, “for that is the only way for
you to decide what you will do from here and what path you will take. Despite all my plans and despite this long-running behind the scenes war of attrition that Zerre and I have been engaged in, and even despite the way we’ve both used you in that, choices have been there for you all along. I suppose that at times you couldn’t see them, but they existed at each and every step and they exist now too, many more than you might think. Let’s talk, you and I, and help you find the clarity you seek. Then we may or may not carry on together. From my point of view I already have what I wanted: Zerre has exposed himself and I can now deal with him and end this. The question is no longer about you and really never was about you. So let’s talk about just you now, Frank, let’s concentrate on you.”

Put that way I thought that it was something I could deal with, that I was something I could deal with, that getting to the bottom of my approach to choice was something I was ready to deal with; and I was happy to remain on that alone and put off sorting out how I felt about the new and wholly unforeseen twist in the political situation – a situation that I had considered myself to have created but now realized I had simply been caught up in.

“Well, I suppose that we’ll have to start with freedom,
and maybe from there go backwards to consent,” I began, placing the issues that I took to be core solely into the spotlight. Geen had made me feel safe, reassured, and although I half suspected that I might still be being manipulated in some manner I decided just to go with it – but in a way that stayed on the ideas. “Those notions seem fundamental to me, and I have based much of my current thought on them and found a great deal of power in them. But have I gotten the concepts all wrong? I can hardly say what freedom is and what it means to live free, even when I push myself for a definition. I actually wonder if I haven’t been deluding myself all along.”

“I think that you probably have,” Geen answered. “From your essays I’ve gathered, reading in a bit of course and supplementing what you wrote with what I know about you as a person, that you have the impression that your birth era was much freer than ours. I think that thought probably comes from the same kinds of subconscious influences we are all subject to via the cultures and sociohistorical climates we are born into, and so let’s spend a moment on that birth era of yours and how it was that the people of those times did in fact live.” She paused for another sip of tea and then a bite of scone. I had been wondering what to do with my own scone and had wanted to dip it into my tea the way I might have a
doughnut, but I had been patiently restraining myself. It was a stupid thing to think about given all that had occurred so far, but there it was.

“As only a little bit of examination will show, nearly all of the selections that people made in that time were based on economic concerns,” Geen said.

“Yes, I recently realized that too,” I agreed. “It was always money. The question ‘How much did it cost?’ must have passed through my lips anytime anyone told me anything about something they had done or recently acquired. It informed where I lived, how I spent my free time, the types of jobs I applied for and hoped to land, even the very food I ate.”

“I imagine it did, and how often have you asked that here?” Geen put that to me very squarely, and its impact was immediate.

“Never,” I said, and as soon as the word escaped my lips the enormous significance of it sank in. That moment was like moving the capstone on the Great Pyramid into place; all at once I had a magnificent structure that illuminated all else in its full glory. “Never,” I repeated. “All of those concerns have been removed now.”
“And the removal of those concerns revolutionized all human life on this planet, making it possible for us to re-prioritize and re-organize our entire ways of being,” Geen said. “We have now, finally, become able to focus on ourselves, but not in the crass way that that phrase might sound to you. What I mean is the focus on personal betterment and development, spiritual growth if you like, as the impetus for what we choose to do and how we choose to spend the limited time of our short lives. The main reason that almost all the human societies of your era, and really even before then though there were notable exceptions, were never able to advance very far when seen from a purely individuated perspective was that all political theory and political activity remained frozenly fixated, absolutely over and above all else, on the concerns of production and consumption. It wasn’t until we were able to eliminate economics as the driving force of all human life that we could shift to an objective, a political but also a spiritual objective, of the growth and constant improvement of the individual. That was what really set us free, and I mean free in a way that you have probably never thought to consider until now. Your societies were machines for sustenance, not growth; they engaged in, they indulged, zero sum cultures. The entire human project had become that way. No more.”
It was a powerful statement and it hit me with the type of dawning realization that happens when something new has clicked over in your mind, when a fresh mental page has been turned, an unseen door opened. “So your freedom, your idea of freedom, is the absence of economic totalitarianism?”

“Yes, but it’s also more than that,” Geen answered. “You think, and this brings us to choice and consent, that being free means more or less the ability to do what you want, but those of your time consistently failed to see that freedom in that sense never existed outside the strictures of the financially feasible. In that crucial way your freedom was severely limited and must inevitably have remained so. What we have accomplished here is to remove those barriers and to equip people with the means of pursuing whichever path they like, whatever it is that they might choose to do.”

“How can you possibly say that when people are being forcefully assigned jobs that they must work for their entire lives and have no option of ever changing?” I asked. I was more than willing to hear Geen out but what she was proposing did not add up.
“As I think I told you before,” she replied patiently, “our occupations are not what define us. People need structure for their lives, people need rules, routines, rituals, and our city itself also has certain needs that must be met. Those are purely practical concerns and no one grants them much importance beyond that practical and everyday realm to which they belong. Far more crucial is how we deal with them. Of course we could have robots farm our food, but what would the majority of people do with their days then? And lest you misunderstand me,” Geen raised a finger to silence me as she spoke, and was right to do so as I was just about to interrupt, “physical labor and maintaining a connection with the land are important elements of personal development and spiritual growth. Surely you must recognize what you were missing in avoiding nature the way your people did.”

She had a point, I gave her that, but I still pressed mine. “But not everyone is a farmer, and there is no consent involved in the careers everyone gets.”

“No, not everyone is a farmer,” Geen acceded. “But everyone has easy access to the natural world and those who aren’t farmers can work a garden any time they would like to. Aside from the physical elements of the tasks that the people in the city get, the roles they are
assigned help them in developing and maintaining their identities as participants in the community that we all share and build together; no one defines themselves by such as the people in your time did because no one is thought to have pursued such. It is what is done in order to contribute, and everyone contributes. How people do define themselves, and the true source of their personal identities, comes in what they choose to pursue with the very ample free time that every individual has. The case is of course slightly different for those of us here in the monastery, but you can see the parallels and have probably considered how that has helped form your own current personal identity and view of yourself. And on that very important point, the point of individually decided pursuits, the options truly are limitless and in no way bound by financial or time constraints. We have sought to find a middle way between what must be done, a part of which involves the necessary daily structuring of human life, and what we wish to do. And I daresay that we have found a balance far closer to favoring the ‘wish to do’ side of that equation than at any time in human history.”

“And consent?” I asked.

“I’ll let you figure that out for yourself,” Geen said. “I’ve
given you enough dots that surely you can connect them.” She smiled warmly and had another bite of her scone. “I’ll see you again soon, Frank. Keep a look out for the next message from me.”

And very abruptly that was that. She told me not to worry about anything; that I would be fine, that neither I nor Sou – nor anyone – was in any danger. The whole revolution was just a little dustup between old rivals, nothing more. Things would be settled in the monastery and things would carry on in the city much as they had but perhaps with a bit of tweaking, a bit of adjusting, and a bit of compromise. I was very politely shown to the door and my meeting with Geen finished as mysteriously as it had begun. My head was in the clouds and my mind on a thousand topics at once – but I did feel safe, free even, odd as it struck me to think that I felt that way. As I exited that strange door numbered five and descended the stairwell I glanced down at my watch. It was already nearly eleven o’clock in the morning and was well past time for me to get back to work, back to Zerre. How would I face him? What would I do? I had come intending to clear my mind and determine where I stood; I had achieved neither but thought that I was in a far, far better place than I had been. The pressure was off; I didn’t have to worry about hiding anything or protecting
Sou from any repercussions. I could choose what I would do – choice. It had been there all along.
Chapter Eleven

As I walked back towards my office I decided to try and connect the dots that Geen had referenced, to try to understand the place that consent held in our lives generally and in light of what she had said about freedom and about choice. I gradually came to the conclusion that consent didn’t rest in the big picture details but rather in the small. In one way or another, what we did vocationally was largely a matter of fate or chance. In the future-present that meant the Day of Choosing and the results that occurred there; in my birth era it meant the economic forces at work whenever you happened to be looking for a job in addition to the vagaries of place, time, and sociohistorical currents in which you and your search were situated. There were also of course the personal influences that acted to shape and form the interests and desires that played themselves out in you, both of a biological and a social nature. Those more individuated nudgings, if you will, pushed people in my birth time to try to pursue certain careers; here they pushed people to try to pursue certain fields and areas in their non-work pursuits. Either way we were and always have been, I supposed, pushed from the outside and from the inside. Pushed, in other words, by the whole interconnected world in which we all stand embedded.
Both eras, moreover, involved some elements of luck. The future-present: How many slots of what jobs were available and for how many was the monastery option still possible? Those varied from year to year, and from what I gathered could vary quite a lot. My birth era: What openings were you aware of? To what degree did they match your qualifications and background? Were you able to get an interview? How did you feel on the day of the interview and, much more significantly for the results, how did the person or people interviewing you feel? I realized that all of those elements involved a great many variables, and whether the underlying forces establishing them are deterministic or completely random matters little for how they play out in our lives and how our lives are shaped by them. As then, so now, I thought. I had no idea what the theories of particle physics might have to say about such matters as far as the determinism issues were concerned, but I was certain that whatever those theories might have said back then they were unlikely to still be saying them. That in itself was instructive. Oh, I knew that there were many people in my birth time who held that their hard work and perseverance were the causes of their having the occupations and, maybe, successes that they did; and such elements would clearly play their part if for no other reason than to increase the chances of
getting what they wanted – bet on red enough and sooner or later it’s bound to come up. I did accept that much, but it was not the whole of the picture and to claim that hard work and perseverance alone could guarantee the desired results was fantasy, just as claiming – if anyone were to – that marking out a particular diagram or the like would guarantee a good slot at the Day of Choosing. The world is always more complex than we are comfortable in understanding it to be.

No, consent was not about those issues and I had been wrong to insist that it was. It did still matter to me that there was no going back on what you ended up with, and I did still think that there ought to have been at least some way to have a chance at change, but with the surveys of desired alterations underway and Geen committed to negotiating with us monks I had reason to be confident that something of the sort could be arranged. Where consent mattered was in our everyday actions, in how we chose to go about living our lives and interacting with those around us. That was where the giving and taking of permission, of consideration, of agreement and disagreement, played themselves out. I had simply been thinking of consent only on one level; and it had been the wrong level at that. I needed to come down to the basic, to the daily, to the you and me and her and him. After all,
as Geen had hinted, even in the midst of all of those contextual forces over which none of us have any remote hope of control, there are always myriad choices facing us and those choices deal both with what we do and how we think. That is the level of consent, and it is connected with freedom, just not in the way I had imagined.

I felt like I was getting somewhere. If you were assigned to be a farmer, as most were, you retained the ability to give your consent to that in the manner in which you carried out your duties. You could try to skirt them, and you might be brought to court for it – I recalled that with a shudder as the memory of the trial and its results that I had witnessed surfaced anew; there remained things that I simply could not come to terms with –, or you could accept those duties and do what needed to be done for the sake of the city that you were a part of while focusing on the other activities that were dear to your heart, meaningful in themselves and meaning producing for your life. In that sense it was little different from making peace with the career you had that may not have been what you dreamt of as a little girl or boy but that still put food on the table and provided a measure of comfort. I had to admit that neither system generated the ideal, but what system could? And in the future-present, at least, the pressure to put food on the table had been entirely taken
off the list of considerations. This society, Sheenda City and its monastery, and probably other cities and other monasteries elsewhere, wasn’t a perfect society; I knew that and recognized that and I don’t think Geen had been trying to change my mind about that. It could be made better and the process of starting to make it better had already begun. Problems would no doubt continue to come up and adjustments continue to be necessary. There was no perfect ending. Ever or anywhere; to be human meant to remain in struggle. I saw no argument against that to be called for or even to be possible. The idea that a perfect society that never required any change could be established was a distraction at best and pure futility at worst. The main point, the main achievement of the culture in which I found myself, as far as I could tell, was that self-knowledge and self-development had become the focus of life, not getting by and certainly not chasing vapid economic concerns. On that important point choice and – to the degree that others were involved – consent remained central. On that important point freedom was total. Truly total.

As soon as I walked into our office I saw that Zerre had been waiting for me in the common area. He did not look pleased. Here it was, I thought: confrontation at last. The master and the disciple, the shepherd and the wayward
sheep, the general and the soldier who had gone AWOL. Who would fill what role? There was little doubt in my mind of the position that Zerre had assigned himself; he had told me as much and always, right from the beginning, had presented himself as such. He even had the institutional backing to take the stance that he always had. He was the boss, plain and simple. I saw then that I nevertheless was presented with another choice, and with the thoughts I had been considering still burning in my mind it seemed a particularly pertinent one: How would I approach him? I would wait and see how he initiated things, of course, but the manner in which that would begin seemed apparent enough – his demeanor said it all. Still, I would let my gut tell me how to respond, I told myself; I would struggle to stay cool, to stay in control, and then, after a few words had been exchanged and battle lines drawn, then I would make my decision on just what, and how much, to tell him. Having heard from Geen that I was safe, and more importantly that Sou was safe too, I found an unexpected courage rising up within me, and an unlooked-for clarity as well. I remembered that ostensibly, and perhaps even in fact, Zerre and I were still on the same team; to what degree and in what shape would also soon be determined. The conversation was certain to be very interesting.
“You’re back,” Zerre said, looking up from something he had been reading. He actually looked a little worried as well as angry, concern etched in with his hard tone. I hadn’t expected that. I had predicted only a furnace.

“Sorry to have left like that. I needed some fresh air, I needed to move and think. I’ve been struggling a little with this manifesto,” I replied. He seemed to eye me over, to weigh what I said. Was he searching for hints of falseness? Was he seeing if there were lines to be read between? Surely both.

“Yes, well, don’t worry about that. It struck me that at this point we actually don’t need anything too flowery or too in-depth; what we need instead is simply a list of demands. I’ve compiled one; take a look and tell me if you see anything missing.”

Softer yet, I thought, and Zerre emphasized the “we” rather strongly. That was more unexpected. He stood as he handed me the paper he had been looking at, and I saw that it was in fact a simple list, bullet points outlining in broad form the changes we were demanding. No, he was demanding. He was? And me? I felt suddenly confused. The points were straightforward and lifted from what I had been writing about, divided into two categories to
make them even easier to follow: one list for the monastery and one for the city. The monastery list included items such as the ability to change fields, to choose where one lived given available rooms, to make the meditation sessions optional, to be able to have children, to be able to keep one’s hair. The city list was largely similar in its thrust but also included the creation of a small body of district representatives and working representatives – separated out by type of work – that would stand in for the average person before the Council and be accountable only to their home districts. It was an interesting and new idea that I hadn’t thought of and that we hadn’t discussed before, a kind of multiple ombudsman set-up. The confrontation I had expected had become more interesting yet; it had turned again. Missing from both lists, I noticed, was the specific position Zerre would have; I had predicted that but, in some ways out of curiosity given the breadth of the demand lists, I still wanted to quiz him on it, and with the conciliatory tone he had set I felt like I could. Zerre seemed remarkably changed from that morning, he had either managed to get control of himself or he had come to some calming decision; or perhaps he had crafted some plan to see himself through. I wondered if so what such might be.

“Well, what do you think?” Zerre asked.
“Is this the full list? Is this all you want to suggest that we demand?” I was giving him an opening; would he take it?

“You tell me,” Zerre replied challengingly, with a touch of flint. “As you can see I’ve made some room for consent to be sought from amongst ordinary monks and also for alterations to the authoritative structures, as you said you wanted.” I assumed by that he meant the ombudsmen system he was proposing.

“Yes, I can see that. This representative scheme is very interesting,” I said. “And I suppose that some of these demands are included simply as points to be negotiated away, right? A sign of good faith and whatnot.”

“That’s right, concessions to the enemy,” he said. I noted the use of the term “enemy”; speaking openly in such a way was a new development. “Housing choice in the monastery is one that I thought most monks wouldn’t care about giving away,” he added, “but it might be worth including it merely as an initial demand.”

“You know that monks can’t be allowed to have children though or the monastery would cease to function as population control and our work here would also cease to
be possible in the way it is now,” I said.

“Other means of population control could be introduced,” Zerre answered, surprising me. How deeply did his ideas go?

“The second phase in this project would have the monastery and the city be more closely linked,” he continued, “this is just the first list, just to get the ball rolling.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “As far as I can tell, and this just came to me earlier in a bolt of insight, what is called for above all else is actually something quite simple: what we importantly lack is some way for us monks and for those in the city to be able to change their overall direction in life to more closely match current interests as we develop and grow. I realize now that our jobs aren’t everything, and that the city and the monastery of course have needs that must be provided for and the provision of those needs requires some structuring elements to be in place, but I think we could maintain all that and still let people go from being a farmer to running a market, from studying chemistry to painting pictures, as long as we kept it balanced. That’s where our efforts should be. After all, what we do does not determine who
we are.”

“You’ve been talking to her, haven’t you?” Zerre asked, his tone, and his features, suddenly hardening far beyond where they had been. “All of this fluffy nonsense about what we do does not determine who we are, about people ‘developing’ and ‘growing’. That’s the exact claptrap Geen has always spouted. So out with it.” He crossed his arms, spread his legs a little, and squared off to me. Zerre was not a big man but he could be very intimidating, and with his chin now thrust out making his thick brown beard all the more prominent and his eyes narrowed and piercing, I knew he had me. I couldn’t hide behind pretending to be fully on board with him any longer, but I thought that I could try and fish out some details of what it was that he actually had in mind, for he clearly had plans much bigger than the little and largely innocuous lists he had given me.

“That’s right, she called me in to her office,” I admitted. I saw no point in concealing anything, but that did not mean that I would just confess everything either.

“So you’ve been in Number Five?” Zerre said, suddenly surprised and, I noticed, impressed. I half expected him to ask for a description of what it was like. Nothing of the
sort followed though for he soon regained his aggressive posture.

“And did she pull out her famous tea set?” he mocked. “She uses that technique on everyone. Some cultural relic from the past she was briefly interested in. But just like her damnable tea ritualism, all that she filled your head with is empty and meaningless. Gestures towards something which simply isn’t there, which simply does not match reality. Of course what we do determines who we are; just think of how many hours each of us spends at the office every day. And here we are stuck doing crap jobs with no chance of escape!” He was working himself up even further than he had earlier; I wanted to press him but I wanted too to try and remain calm as I did so. I needed to refrain from raising my voice or from letting any counter-aggression escape from my own features. I deemed Zerre’s condition to be fragile enough.

“It was a bit silly, you should have seen how she stirred in her milk,” I said, taking part in his joke in a calculated attempt to defuse him slightly. “But her point was well taken. I think my approach to choice and consent has been all wrong. We have many more choices than we usually think we do; and as for consent, well, long story short is that I was simply looking in the wrong places.”
Zerre’s expression told me he was having none of it. He would not be defused and he would not relent. “Of course she fooled you,” he said nastily. “You’re a broken man from a broken era whose mind has been so filled with piddling drivel all your life that you can hardly walk straight let alone think straight. I am far more than a team leader and I have never had the chance to demonstrate my skills. If this monastery were the meritocracy I intend on making it then I would have risen to the top years ago.”

He had gotten personal; I decided that I would too but only with enough effort exerted to counter it with the space for reflection. “I heard that you nearly did but in the end were passed over.”

Zerre fumed, his face went a deep red, almost purple. I may have gone too far. I did not want it to become physical. “Geen cheated somehow. She must have. I was the better choice by far. And ever since then I’ve been stuck here.” He glanced away from me briefly, a tad, just a token, of wistfulness spread across his face, but the eyes he returned to mine held a deep resentment.

I thought about telling him that Geen said she was willing and ready to promote him and only wished for his loyalty.
first but then thought better of it. Zerre wouldn’t have believed it anyway. I suddenly felt that my best option was to remain silent and see where things went.

“I knew from the first that you weren’t a real revolutionary,” Zerre sneered, regaining his hostility. “You come from a wasted time when the rich fed on the living dead that they made damn sure to brainwash by the millions. You have no capacity for force, no ability to see things through to their hard end. Did you see the people at the meeting? They were calling out for a real leader, for real initiative, for a real man to grab this place by its foundation and tear it down to be rebuilt. That man is and always has been me, and now I’ve got my chance. I played you like a horn to get it, but your usefulness is finished.”

“What next then?” I asked as innocuously as I could and without any acrimony. As he spoke I found that I had passed beyond the reach of Zerre’s words and his opinion of me was quite irrelevant. I simply did not care what he thought. But I was curious because if he did indeed intend to push the movement that we had started towards some particular end I wanted to know what that end might be. If it were something I could live with, or even favor, then I would simply let him get on with it and allow the game
between him and Geen to work itself out with me watching from the sidelines. If it were something else though; well, if it were something else I found myself thinking that I might still have a hand to play in the drama and might have to do something about it.

Zerre turned towards me again and the contempt that he held me in was as plain as day. “You are no one and can do nothing and so I’ll tell you my little secret. You won’t be able to stop me, but you need to learn to fear me. I, however, have absolutely nothing to dread from an impotent peon like you. Now listen, and let my brilliance hit home. What I have started here, yes that’s right me, is a process that will eventually result in my becoming head of the monastery. Inexorably it will lead to that. Everyone knows that it came down to Geen and I when the last head passed on her authority and everyone now knows what a shambles Geen’s tenure has been. I made sure of that at the meeting. I made her personally the target for a good reason. The enemy must be given a face, you see. You thought that people would rise up against a system! What a fool you are. People rise up against something simple, something they can point to. I pointed at Geen.”

That was true, I thought, he had been very clever in that regard.
“Then, when I am head of the monastery,” Zerre continued, “I will give some of these demands I listed to the monks over a series of months, timed for maximum effect. I know how to do that. One of them is my representative system which looks so good and so fair from the outside but is very double-edged. I will use monks who are loyal to me and send them out to their home districts to be those representatives; of course they will also be spies. I will at the same time use my position on the Council, something that Geen has almost entirely neglected, to become far more involved in the city’s affairs. Ultimately I will install myself there as the head of the Council; it only makes sense for one man to govern both the monastery and the city since both of them function together and are so clearly dependent upon one another. Geen apparently has been unable to see that, and it has hampered any transformation that might have been. She thinks people ought to focus on their free time! She has no vision for greatness.”

“That could take years and something could go wrong at any number of points,” I responded, a bit meekly. I was so shocked by the height of his ambition – much more than I had expected – that I hardly knew what to say. Was it merely power that he was after? With no clear picture of
what to do with it and seeing nothing beyond the attaining of it?

“It might and there might be setbacks,” Zerre said coolly. His attack on me seemed to have been spent and his appearance shifted, lightened, to one that gave the impression of basking in what he foresaw. “But I will handle them and I will guide the process as skillfully as I have guided the movement I started so far. Do not doubt my ability. And do not think of yourself more highly than you ought. This was never something we did, it was all me. I thank you for your usefulness but as I said that is done now and so are you. I have no reason to see you again. If you are quiet I will make sure that you are taken care of when the new order begins. If you attempt anything, if you make any kind of noise whatsoever, then I will crush you as I will crush Geen. I can’t see that happening considering how weak and ineffectual you are, but you might be stupid enough to try.”

He said that with such confidence that I just stood there and stared at him. Was I being fired? Was that even possible? What would I do with my days if I didn’t have any assignments? I was more confused than anything, certainly more confused than angry. It had gotten out of hand and I had somehow been cut adrift in the process. I
had wanted to work for change and there it was in monstrous form. I had thought that I could contribute to the time I found myself in, that I could leave my mark on it, offer it something from the past that I came from in order to make the future-present and its future better. Yet what had I actually done? I had been used – apparently by all sides – and then discarded.

I tried to look back on the sequence of events that had gotten me to that point and all I could see was the same confusion marking one step to the next. I woke up in the future – incredibly – and was taken in by two locals. I farmed with them and obsessed over one of them. I learned from both of them about their era and how it worked. I was lobotomized at the city’s orgy and emerged a completely new person. I sought escape and then fame and ran to the monastery. I pursued the path Zerre led me on because I thought it would win me eventual renown through what I also thought would be beneficial social change; my gift and my reward. All along I had been constantly projecting out, and even when I thought I was working on myself – by coming to the monastery – I ended up working on something else. I was the project I had always neglected. Geen was right; self-development and self-growth through the knowledge of oneself and the constant struggle of introspection with the widening of
one’s mind and honing of one’s abilities were what really mattered. All that really mattered. I had been darting from this to that for so long that I had never paused to look within, and that had been my undoing. No wonder I was so easily manipulated by Zerre. I was and remained fundamentally lost. Well, if I were being fired, I thought, then I would have plenty of time to begin what I should have started long ago. I just needed to learn how. At least the worry of not being able to feed or clothe or house myself was gone. That was the real revolution that humanity had needed, and it had already been accomplished many years before I showed up in that rice paddy. Freedom from economics, freedom from money and possessions being the center of it all. That was the freedom to really live.

“What are you waiting for?” Zerre demanded, exploding once more. “Get out of here and don’t come back. Spend your time in your room, spend your time in the park, spend your time drowning yourself in the river, I don’t care. I have much to do and don’t need you getting in the way. My time has finally come.” As if to emphasize his final statement he patted himself on the chest and then pointed forcefully at the exit as he spoke. “I’ll have the things in your office sent over to your room. Goodbye.”
I had nothing more to say to him and so without a word or any sign of acknowledgement I simply did as I was told. I walked out. It was strangely exhilarating. I was free, I had nothing to fear, and I had finally learned that by constantly keeping my attention elsewhere I had always been my biggest stumbling block. No longer. The change that was needed had to first come from within, and accomplishing that would no doubt be an endless task. It was a task I could commit myself to though, and in that commitment also discover what I could do for others along the way. Geen’s words finally sank in. Perhaps the whole purpose of the entire social structure was to allow people the space to pursue their own growth and development in the format of guided and determined days that contributed life’s framework but that left the interior entirely up to the occupant. If only I had seen that when I first arrived; but then, I would not have known how.

The next two weeks passed by in a blur, a wondrous haze. I did what I wanted and didn’t worry about anything. I still went to the meditation sessions and our communal meals, but when everyone else went off to work I wandered back to my room and did what I felt like doing. If I wanted to go for a walk I went for a walk. If I wanted to stare at the river I stared at the river. If I wanted to do a bit of reading or writing and then go for a coffee
somewhere that was just what I did. I didn’t worry about anyone noticing and commenting on my truancy because if they did the blame and responsibility would fall squarely onto Zerre and I was very willing for that to happen. I wouldn’t say that I wanted it to happen, or that I felt the need to get back at him somehow, but I realized that if anyone were to be put on trial for my sudden non-contribution to the community then it would be him and not me. Zerre of course would have been hard at work on his plans, and Geen would have as well, and although I had no idea what was going on behind the scenes with those two I was sure that both sides were shoring up support and counting numbers to determine the strength of the positions they planned to eventually put forward. For myself I decided not to be concerned with that, not to be a player anymore; though I did in some ways want to try and throw a monkey wrench into Zerre’s plans. I just didn’t know how. I wasn’t sure what he told my former teammates about my absence and so I was afraid to approach the few of them that lived in my building and shared our dining hall. That was disappointing and I felt the loss of their friendship; I had enjoyed exchanging ideas and critiques of each other’s work with them. For their part they avoided me as well. That was the real low point of those days when I felt completely untethered, and I noticed it most acutely right
before the listlessness set in.

It was fine and nice and wonderful to have all that time after the dramatic personal events that I had gone through, and I was able to work out and to discover much about how I felt that I hadn’t been properly aware of, but it soon got to be too much of a good thing. That especially when I thought of everyone else laboring away at something for long and structured sections of the day while I did nothing much. Put very simply, I got bored and needed something to do. I had my writing, of course, and my poetry had exploded since I had stopped producing essays, but poetry as a medium was only taking me so far. I judged that I needed a project with more girth to engage in; and I was also becoming increasingly curious about what was happening between the two titans at the top of the monastery’s political battle.

There was a slow-burning revolution at hand, after all – no, smouldering really, considering the time that Geen had bought herself with her plan to collect, assess, and process everyone’s views –, and it contained much that was good in it but was being steered in the wrong direction. I wanted to see some changes happen, some aspects of life open up, even as I wanted much to stay the same. I discovered that I had come to care about the place,
and not just in the default way I always had when I found myself living somewhere. Instead I felt genuinely connected to the people around me and considered myself to be a part of the community despite my outsider origins. It helped tremendously of course that I was treated as a part of the community, but I also recognized that I had made real efforts to shorten the distance between myself and others and that those efforts had been effective. “They” had become “we”. I needed something to do with myself that would still let me focus on the important personal work I had been engaged in while also giving back to those around me. I needed a job. In coming to that conclusion I saw anew the beauty of the way that life was patterned here, and I felt even more motivated not to let Zerre, or anyone, tear it down or reshape it for personal gain. It needed shifting in some ways, yes, but its foundations were sound. Life, and life together, was anyway an endless effort and I knew full well that there was never any perfect and final ending possible. We worked on it and we worked on it and we worked on it, and it was always best to keep our options open and as many of us involved in the social and the political as possible. Representatives took that out of our hands.

Another bolt of lightning. I had been going over all that while pacing back and forth in my room and suddenly
found that I had to sit down. Representatives. That was it, that was my contribution and that was my task. I needed to expose the fake ombudsmen scheme that Zerre was trying to put in motion. When you read his list of demands it stood out as a great idea; it had for me and I was sure that it would for others. Yet no one would be able to see it for what it really was: the giving away of personal power to an easily corruptible select few. I was uniquely positioned to foresee that dark possibility – and indeed it was Zerre’s admitted plan as he himself had told me – because I had lived through it in my birth era. That was how everything was run back then and most people believed it was fair and equal and just and that even if they weren’t in charge they at least had a say and a stake in the existing power relations. It had all been illusory, and that did eventually come to be understood, but enough time had passed and enough generations had come and gone that the people of the future-present might not be able to appreciate the very hollow core at the center of such systems. Our good monks and city dwellers might very easily be duped by Zerre’s so-called representatives. After all, my birth time was deeply fooled by similar structures, and it was so for centuries. Yes, that was what I could do. I had been trained as an essayist and an essayist I would once more become. It had to be argued for, it had to get out, to be released – people must
be made aware of it. The only problem was how to get the thing read. I had lost the outlet for my writing when I had lost my job; all of my recent work sat in files in my computer or jotted down in notebooks. No matter, I told myself, the first thing was to start writing, and perhaps during the process of that a way to get it published would occur to me. I moved back over to my desk, ideas ablaze and fingers burning to start.

The project consumed me for the next week. I lived hunched over the embedded keyboard in my desk, dried and bloodshot eyes staring at the letters that floated in the air before me as I typed, all else forgotten about. I cancelled any plans I had with Sou – busy at work I told her – and ordered book after book to be delivered directly to my room so that my research for the piece could continue uninterrupted. The only times I left home were to meditate with the group sessions, eat – alone, silently, constantly keeping my thoughts running –, or to go for long walks to clear my lungs and move my legs. My mind never let up and even in my sleep my dreams became reflective of the work I was so feverishly bringing into the world. Page piled upon page and I rushed past the three thousand word mark, the four thousand word mark, five. I began to worry about length; too much and no one would get through it, readers would get bogged down. I
had been careful to avoid technicalities; it was informative, logical, well-reasoned and well connected; it was a polemic, a treatise; but was it readable?

I anyway had to bring it to a close. I needed something powerful to end on, something that would shoot people out of their chairs, something that would cement minds to action and commit them to the particular course of avoiding at all costs the errors of the past. I did not want to tell my fellow monks what to do nor how they ought to respond to Geen’s summons for their opinions and ideas on our society and the running of it; no, I simply wanted to say: Not This. Do not go back. Do not go down that road for it leads to an increasingly sinister place. We went there once in our past and despite all the promise of its early days we did not find freedom, we did not find happiness, we did not find fraternity; we found only the ever-tightening and ever-widening divisions between those who had and did, and everyone else who struggled and fought, powerlessly grasping daily at the straws afforded them in lives they could not possibly hope to control. Going down the path that was being offered to us as a bright new beginning might even reopen the doors to the tyranny of liberalized economics, of resource and distribution wars. We had come too far from the dismal twenty-first century to march back to it, and the proposed
representatives were the first step on that way. That was the warning I wished to give and I realized finally that the best way to do that would be to write my own story; yet that would mean not an essay but a book, and that in turn would mean many long months, years, of preparation. For the moment all of that had to be condensed and put into metaphor; but I knew that I had my next work lined up already and that thrilled me. First things came first though, I reminded myself.

I went all the way back to the beginning of my piece and read through my chain of arguments, my assumptions, definitions, clauses, premises, conclusions, and then when I came again to the closing I remembered Zerre’s words about people needing to put a face to their enemy, about people needing to have someone or something very concrete to point at, and that it was a mistake to try and direct their umbrage at an abstraction. I thought about giving them Zerre but that was too obvious and he had managed to get too many monks already emotionally attached to himself; they would not have the eyes to see what I was trying to illuminate if I pinned him as a deceiver. It had to be cleverer than that. I had to get my point across in a way that vilified none of the current contenders but that still personalized the ideas on offer; because in the end it was the ideas that really and truly
mattered.

And so at last I decided to give them myself. The book length version could and would come later; the essay would simply be a confession of my deep confusion and deluded mind, an admission to being the real Anonymous, and a description of the process that had unfolded for me. I reasoned that if people knew that all that was taking place was the result of the Neanderthal Man in their midst they very well might – and very well should – find far less merit in what was being put to them as revolutionary fanfare. After all, I was the dope from the bad past, the leftover of the times no one purposely wanted to return to. I had thought that some things from my era could contribute to their era, to making the present era better, and I was right about that in one important sense: my birth era is an excellent symbol of what not to do. Human society had come so far since then and there was no way it ought to go back.

Inserting all that would mean adding a couple of thousand words to my essay, but I thought that the inclusion of the story and the narrative would make for a more interesting and engaging reading experience and would also make what would otherwise be a heavy and heady piece far more approachable. Not everyone in the monastery and
not everyone in the city was an egghead, after all, but everyone needed to be made aware of the very real danger that they faced in what was happening. The status quo needed adjusting, yes, but the status quo that had been achieved only required a few tweaks. Had it been my birth era I would have advocated abandoning entire institutions and social structures; I would have called for demonstrations, marches, madness, and refusals; I would have advanced a true and total revolution; but it wasn’t my birth era and human freedom had been achieved. My new contemporaries just needed reminding of that, and if putting myself on the hangman’s gallows would accomplish that then I was ready. Gladly. Geen already knew that I was the real Anonymous anyway, and should she now be forced to put me on trial by my public admission of it I was willing to bet on the leniency of the Council’s judgment in light of what I was seeking to accomplish by doing so. First I would finish the essay, then I would go to Geen with it, and then I would trust Geen to protect me if the consequences of my essay turned out to be beyond what I expected. Yes, I assured myself, that was a good plan, and, it occurred to me, possibly the only way to get my essay made widely available. If Zerre would no longer release my works then surely Geen could. A plan, the necessary motivation, and a procedure to see the details through. I got back to work.
It took longer than I thought it would to rework my piece in the manner I had decided, but then I expected it to take longer than I thought it would. One lesson that writing had taught me was that very rarely did things go according to plan. Things did go though – at least in that case and with that essay – and I found myself wrapping up a final proofread and thinking about when to get in touch with Geen. Had she said that she would contact me or that I should contact her? I couldn’t remember and didn’t think it mattered. I was ready to move forward with the work and through her was the only way I could see to do that. The message was paramount and the timing important. I may have waited too long already, although as far as I knew there had been no announcement of the cessation of the ongoing material collection, nor of the next phase in the official process having begun. What likely were coming to completion though were the thoughts inside monks’ heads, and with them the closing of the ranks in and around the various camps. Zerre would have been courting supporters, and he would need a lot if he were to pull off his coup, and Geen would have been looking for ways to undermine him while at the same time shoring up support for the system that she was still the head of, still the emblem of.
I had never been able to get a good feel for how Geen viewed her own power; was it something that she wanted to hold onto, or was she more concerned with the proper running of the established organization? Clearly she wouldn’t want to let Zerre put himself in charge, but might she be willing to let someone else take over if it emerged that she had been irretrievably tainted by Zerre’s attacks and that the only means to save the way of living that had been established was to voluntarily hand over the reins to a neutral, or semi-neutral, third party? I didn’t think that Zerre would halt in his offensive in that case, but I thought that it might erode enough of his support that his plans would be made futile. I did remember that both Geen and Zerre had told me that by the way things worked the current head of the monastery simply chose the next one, and that such was an entirely personal and individual choice.

Again, the idea of choice stepped centrally into the picture. This place and this time, this future-present, seemed to have developed a more collective view of choice – determining what was best for everyone – rather than the self-expressive view that my era and my personal background had exhibited. If so then might people be more willing to let Geen make that choice for them, to allow her to just pick someone to take over so that an
agreeable compromise could be reached and no one had to settle on either her or Zerre? I wondered. It would depend, of course, on how the average monk saw the contest being waged. Zerre had gone to great lengths to make it a personal one, but what we were actually engaged in was much more akin to a community-wide referendum than it was to an election of some sort, particularly given the absence of democratic methods and the evident distaste that nearly everyone held such archaic practices in. I realized that I was probably the only person who saw it as a vote of some kind; that was revelatory. It was stupid of me to understand the movement underway as one of Zerre versus Geen even if Zerre himself actually did intend to take over from her. My fellow monks would see the process for what it was: an opportunity for them to air grievances and then to watch how the authorities dealt with those grievances once aired. If satisfaction was not achieved then those same monks might push for more; that was the long game that Zerre was probably playing. He was also, no doubt, attempting to ensure that along with the tools for his future further dominating reach – the so-called representatives – the additionally aired grievances would be of a caliber such that the authorities could not adequately deal with them within the current framework.
It suddenly occurred to me that the list of changes I had seen was far more a test of me than it was an indication of what Zerre really had up his sleeve. I had failed that test and he had written me off. He did admit some details of his long-term ambitions, safe in the thought that I was powerless, but surely he left out much as well. Chances were, I mulled, that he was still planning to start small and gain ground for a bigger push that would really break the walls if it were acceded to, but I knew that I would be in the dark on very much. Still, it seemed clear that if the grievances he was able to influence into being a particular way weren’t accepted then he could once more very publically cry foul and insist that the voices of the monks had simply fallen on deaf ears. It was a good plan, as sketchily as I could work it out – and if that really was it. No one should have underestimated Zerre, and Geen would definitely not have been guilty of that. Whatever I did and didn’t know about Zerre’s scheme, I told myself that I did know about his representatives idea, and the centrality with which he placed it in both his list and his boasting almost certainly meant that it was real and not a ruse to trip me up. That point had been what my essay focused on, and the personal revelations that I had put into it served to illustrate and augment my arguments, as well as to undercut the position of authority that Zerre had claimed by pretending to be Anonymous. That was
me, and I was about to tell that to everyone.

I had just decided to sleep on it before I went ahead and contacted Geen when fate once more intervened. My watch started beeping and buzzing alarmingly, and as I looked down at it I saw a message hovering in the air above its face: Incoming call from Sou – Accept? That was the first time anyone had called me and I won’t deny being very excited by it. The system seemed to be used mainly for emergencies or matters of great urgency – had I misused it when I called Geen earlier? –, and prior to that moment I had only gotten brief mails from Sou about where to meet and when; almost all of our communication had been face to face. I actually found it quite nice to do things that way. I accepted the call by pushing the OK button on the bottom of my watch and gazed with some amusement at the hologram of Sou’s face that appeared before me. She looked pensive, or maybe just tired. She apologized for bothering me when I was busy and for the lateness of the hour – it was around eight p.m. and Sou was well aware of my proclivity for staying in during the evenings – but said that she felt like she couldn’t hold it in any longer and really, really needed someone she could trust to talk to. I was very honored that she would have called me and put her request in those terms. I replied that of course I would meet her and
could leave right away. Where was best?

Sou must have been far more worried about being overheard than I would have expected because the place she suggested was a little tucked away nook next to the river, reachable only by actually stepping into the water and walking around a large rock outcropping to access the small beach that it partially hid. The location was visible from other angles on the shoreline despite also being somewhat protected by a line of trees but very few people wanted to get their feet wet to get to it, and so we could be reasonably assured of a deep privacy, particularly at night.

Spring was by that time fully upon us and in spite of the dark and the breeze off the waters I didn’t feel at all chilled as I exited my building and started walking towards the edge of the central park and down its grassy expanse to the shore. There were wisps of clouds strung across the sky, black underneath and gray-white on top where they were lit up by a bright and entrancing half-moon. I had read that the moon was very slowly drifting away from its Earth-bound orbit and indeed had been doing so for many, many millennia; since it first obtained its ring around us, probably. That had filled me with a great sense of sadness and loss, and I thought
about what it would have been like to have been alive tens of thousands of years ago when the moon was closer and bigger and brighter than it was now. As our moon slowly left us were we also losing some of that famed moon influence that the old myths talked about? Were we becoming less wise, less intuitive, less wild at heart and less ruled by the whims of our emotions? Would those developments be positive or negative?

Both, anyone would answer; it meant we were becoming less ourselves, less the selves we had been, and moving into something else. Was that growth or just change? It was hard to judge, but looking at that beckoning silvery half circle reminded me that there is no finality and that cycle after cycle we go from one to the next in an endless series of miniscule adaptations. There is no endpoint to being human, and there is no endpoint to the natural world; there is only the ring. I wanted to keep our moon and its ring with us but I knew that physics cared nothing for my desires. I raised a hand to the sky in a silent salute, a show of friendship and respect. I was glad for the dark and the warmth and the moon, all three seemed to put me in the perfect mood to listen.

As I neared it the river lapped on the stones and the sand that the grass had given way to. I rolled my pants up, took
my shoes and socks off, and stepped into the chilly waters. As I traversed the outcrop I saw that Sou was already there waiting for me, standing and staring into the water with her arms crossed over her chest, shadows playing on her face while her shaved head reflected the moonlight from above. Mine would have been doing too. We were clouds.

“Thank you so much for coming,” Sou said, concern for me evident in her expression. “I’m sure you would have preferred to meet at your place but somehow I just felt like being outdoors would help. And it’s such a nice night.”

“That’s true,” I said, and it was. A gorgeous spring night. “And honestly, I don’t mind. I enjoyed the walk over here.” Sou nodded and returned to contemplating the river. After a minute or two of just being there silently with her I prodded, “What is it?”

She kept her gaze outward a moment longer and then turned towards me and started slowly, very deliberately, “This is somewhat delicate. Actually, very delicate, so you must promise not to tell anyone what I’m about to share.” Her eyes were imploring and I knew that she meant it.
“Of course,” I said.

“Well, I’ve been having a number of, let’s say ‘visitors’, at the testing center recently,” she began. “Visitors that are volunteers for what Zerre is trying to do, people working with him to try and enact the changes that we all discussed at the meeting. You remember that, right?”

“I do,” I said, knowing that her question was more of a query of my support than it was of my memory.

“They’ve made me something of an offer, really, and I’m extremely tempted by it,” she continued. That was curious; I was all ears.

“Go on,” I urged her, “I won’t judge you, just tell me everything.”

She nodded again, gratefully I thought, and said, “You see, they want me, in my position as the director – really the sole worker in many ways – of the Testing and Placement Center to sign on with them, to testify publically that the entire work placement system is fundamentally flawed and in need of a total overhaul.”
“Is it?” I cut in. I was unsure of that myself and thought it an important point.

“I don’t think so, no, not fundamentally,” Sou replied. “There are issues with the sorting mechanisms, I think, and as I’ve probably told you there have been many times when I could see how terribly disappointed people were with what they ended up getting, but on the whole I think it works well for what it’s designed to do.”

I thought back to Geen confessing to overriding my scores so that I ended up in Zerre’s outfit and wondered how often that happened. Surely I wasn’t the only one who had been misplaced, as it were; I had presented a special case though, and an opportunity for her that few others – if any – would have. I wondered. “What exactly is it designed to do?” I asked.

“Find people’s natural talents and then match them with an area of work or study that suits those abilities,” she answered.

“And there aren’t any considerations of how many people are currently doing what job involved?” I pressed, wondering if in the monastery, like in the city, there were quotas to be filled and maximums that could not be
surpassed.

“Oh no, as our work isn’t oriented towards basic needs there aren’t slots to fill such as there are for the city’s occupations,” she said. “Although, come to think of it, if we were to run out of engineers or something then we would of course have to adjust for that. But at least in the years I’ve been here nothing like that has ever come up.”

“Why do you think people are occasionally disappointed with what they get?” I asked, although I knew that in my case I would have been one of them had not Geen intervened and steered me in another direction. I had to remind myself that I really ought to feel thankful for that as the manner in which it was done still rankled somewhat.

“Well, that’s the main area that I see in need of change. Sometimes people’s scores in very different areas are quite close, but as it is now the top score just gets precedence and determines their placement. What people are naturally good at doesn’t always match how they see themselves or want to see themselves, and if someone is nearly equally good at music and chemistry, for example, then I think they should be given the choice. Granted, results like that don’t come up all that frequently, and it
would be going too far to say that people are often disappointed, but it does happen. What Zerre’s volunteers have been offering is to let me totally redesign the system, and I would actually love to take on that challenge. Small changes like the one I just told you about could be incorporated fairly easily in the short-term while I did some research and design on more far-reaching changes.”

“While still keeping the basic system in place?” I put that to Sou more for clarification than anything else, but I was very interested in how she answered it.

“More or less. And that’s what troubles me,” Sou replied. “I don’t want to testify publically about anything, least of all that the testing and placement system is fundamentally flawed, because I don’t think it fundamentally is. If, though, saying that is the only way to actually introduce changes into it then maybe I should. Well, I don’t know. I really dislike how they are going about this; these visiting volunteers, I mean. What do you think?”

Her heart was in the right place, as I knew it would be. I had a sudden urge to tell her everything. “Couldn’t you put it off a bit to wait and see what happens?” I asked. What happens, I thought, might well depend on my latest work once Geen had gotten it out; that is, provided that
she did get it out, but I couldn’t see why she wouldn’t. That might save Sou from the difficult situation she found herself in without forcing her into an uncomfortable choice.

As I was thinking that it suddenly dawns on me that I was trying to take a decision away from her – out of concern for her – and that trying to do so had come quite naturally to me. Did I really know best? Of course not, and I wasn’t claiming that I did. But I was forced to acknowledge that I was attempting to adjust the situation in what I thought were her own best interests. What I thought. Facing that difficult choice was instead maybe something that Sou should do and shouldn’t be “saved” from. Choosing whatever she did would teach her about herself and would set her steps in life on one path or on another, and no one could fully predict where either might lead. It ought to be up to her, yes, but she also should have all the information she needed to make that choice, and how often are any of us able to make a truly informed decision? In this case, at least, I could help her with that. And helping her would be far better than choosing for her. I decided that I had to open up.

“Not for much longer,” Sou said, answering my question. “When the collection of monks’ viewpoints finishes at the
end of this week, they say, it will be too late and they will go to someone else. It’s now or never.”

I really was out of the loop. Completely out. That shocked me. The materials gathering would finish in just a few days? How had I missed that? Not going to a workplace must have severed many community information ties for me that I hadn’t even guessed at. I had assumed, wrongly it turned out, that such announcements would be made at mealtimes or during one of our meditation sessions. Apparently they weren’t. Not knowing that could have jeopardized my entire plan. Zerre was right to assume that I was powerless; he would have known how ill-informed I would become and that I would have no real outlets for anything I may have to say. He might have considered that I could go to Geen, but he must have trusted that I wouldn’t do so in time or that even if I did the consequences would not affect him. I needed to learn what else I didn’t know, and Sou seemed like the best and by far the most trustworthy source. Between that and everything else I didn’t need any further reasons to tell her what had happened to me and the position I found myself occupying and so I determined to just dive right in. I had been so preoccupied with my essay that I had missed the obvious: Sou’s security had been guaranteed by the head of the monastery herself and that made it
harmless for me to talk to her. Only if Zerre succeeded in everything, and only if after his success he had some reason to punish her, would Sou be in any possible danger. He may well succeed, I knew, but the odds of him succeeding and wanting revenge on Sou seemed incredibly remote even if I was a far more likely target for him. It did strike me that Zerre might want to get to me through her; but I had to gamble, I had to try and stop him, and for that I had to get Sou’s advice and assistance.

“Listen, Sou,” I started, “before I tell you what I think about your problem there’s something you need to know. A few things actually, and if we were indoors or somewhere with more space I’d tell you to sit down for them.”

She looked at me with those sparkling blue eyes of hers wider than I had ever seen them; pure surprise had replaced her look of confusion and anxiety.

“There’s no easy way to get to this so I’ll just say it: I’m the real Anonymous. All of those essays were written by me.”

“I knew it!” she exclaimed.
“I thought you might,” I said. “And I see now how wrong my thinking was. Geen saw through it too, she knew all along, apparently, that I was the real author and recently had me in to her office to talk about where we found ourselves and where my thinking was at.”

“You’ve been inside Geen’s office?” Sou asked suddenly.

I had not failed to notice the mark that fact seemed to leave on people but I couldn’t help being very slightly annoyed by the interjection. “Yes, and it was nice. The point though is that Geen knew everything and actually had been curious as to what would happen with me working under Zerre. She and Zerre have been involved in some type of rivalry it seems.”

“Oh yes, everyone knows that Zerre badly wanted to be made head of the monastery, that’s probably one of the main reasons that he wasn’t,” Sou told me.

“I see,” I said, my gut reacting negatively to the news. I was very likely the only one who wasn’t aware of that, I thought, and that had made me all the better positioned to act as a test of Zerre’s intentions. Geen had indeed used me very well; her bishop gambit in the game she and Zerre had been playing. Had Geen been a little too
cavalier with me? Or was I being overly sensitive? The pieces had already been moved and the issue was a moot one, but I still had not sorted out how I felt about being tossed around by both sides in the way I had been. Some bitterness remained.

“It seems that Geen actually put me there,” I continued. “She overrode my test scores so that I would fall into Zerre’s working area. I was one of your people who had two top scores that were very similar, and Geen tipped my second highest score up a bit to get me where she wanted me.”

Sou looked appalled. That was more or less how I thought I felt about it but my judgments were by then getting repeatedly jumbled with each new piece of information. “She broke her own rules?” Sou asked. “I mean, the monastery’s rules that she is meant to abide by and support?”

“It looks that way. Peering down from the top as she does she might consider herself to be above the rules, I have no idea. But honestly, I’m glad she did because now I’ve discovered writing,” I said, and in saying it I realized how true it was. “What she did was dirty and probably wrong but in my case it worked out, maybe, for the best.” I
paused. Yes, perhaps overall it was for the best, for me and for the monastery.

“Anyway,” I went on, “Zerre let me write about anything I wanted to initially and as I had been thinking about some issues in relation to my own birth time as compared with this one, somehow or other I wrote a piece on consent. That triggered something in Zerre; following that he started guiding my writing in subtle ways and I won’t hide the fact that I appreciated the attention and care I received. Zerre filled me with thoughts of the two of us starting a revolution, changing the system, making our marks on the whole of the monastery and the city. I had these enormous dreams of becoming someone important, someone who would remain in the history books, someone worth talking about.”

“Oh Frank,” Sou said softly, “every one of us is. You don’t need a historically outstanding legacy for that.”

It was deeply embarrassing. “I know, I know,” I said. “My birth era was obsessed with fame and I guess some of that rubbed off on me.”

Sou reached over and caressed my shoulder. She didn’t say anything and she didn’t need to. I appreciated that.
“From then on little by little Zerre started to take over,” I said after a moment. “And suddenly out of the blue he announced that he was Anonymous, and that meeting happened, and he told me flatly that he planned to install himself as the head of the monastery and even has a plan for making himself the top of the city’s Council and therefore the de facto boss of both the monastery and the city. He’s gone mad.” It was pouring out of me and I was probably omitting far too much but my heart had fully taken over all powers of speech from my head.

“I don’t think he’s gone mad,” Sou replied slowly. “I think he’s always had that in him. He has from the start been the most ambitious person I’ve ever known, and I think that all of these years where he’s been kept down have only compounded that. Geen should have promoted him to a section leader at least, even a field leader.”

“She said that she wanted to but first she needed to make sure that he was trustworthy,” I told her.

“I think he would have come into that had he been given the chance,” Sou said. “It’s my feeling, as a psychologist, that she erred in her dealings with him. That, however, is beside the point. What will you do?”
“I’ve decided to come clean with our community and in doing so I hope to take some of the wind out of Zerre’s sails. Like you I’ve concluded that on the whole the monastery, and even the city, does actually work pretty well. What are needed are some adjustments, not a total overhaul and certainly not Zerre as the lord of it all. This isn’t my time, and contrary to what I initially thought the early twenty-first century has almost nothing to teach us now. Well, maybe what not to do, but that’s about it.”

“I’m not sure what you mean, I would need to brush up on my history,” Geen said thoughtfully. I had forgotten just how far out of people’s minds history becomes when it is history. Most of us never even try to put ourselves in the place of someone who lived two or three centuries prior to our time – though I was convinced that it was a potentially very useful exercise, a thought experiment that could be widely applicable. “How will you do this, how will you come clean?” she asked.

“I’ve written an essay that lays out the whole story and reveals the core of Zerre’s plan, including his drive for personal power. The only problem now is getting it read,” I replied.
“Aren’t you afraid of what might happen to you if you come forward like that?” Sou asked.

“No, not anymore. I would have come forward earlier but I wanted to protect you. Guilt by association, you know.”

She smiled. “That wouldn’t have happened but thank you. That’s very sweet. And I’ve never been prouder of you; it’s a noble thing you want to do.”

“I was thinking to contact Geen to see about getting my essay released. I don’t know if it will do the good that I hope it will but I really think that everyone should be aware of what’s going on behind the scenes, and that this collecting of our views and opinions is just the start of what Zerre hopes will be a long period of revolt that ends with him on top,” I said.

“That makes sense to me, and it’s probably your only real avenue if you’re serious about getting your essay published,” Sou agreed. Her face became somber and a little pensive as she added, “I’m also not sure if it will have the impact you expect, or even if it will have any impact at all, but people should know this, people should be given the chance to know this. And really, no matter how it all turns out, this process has been good for us

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monks, making us think about what we’ve got and how it works and whether or not we like it. You may not have meant them this way, but your initial writings forced us to question our way of life and did much to help us see how well we have things and how fulfilling our days actually are.”

“This whole process has made me see that too,” I confirmed. “Now we are free from economics and that has made us truly free.”

Sou looked puzzled by my comment but I could hardly blame her. She hadn’t been through what I had and she had no frame of reference for what existence was like when it came down to coins and bills, coins and bills. The people of her time – and it had become mine too – lived to develop themselves, in one way or another, and took their identities from those personal efforts and from the contributions they made to the common cause of their city, their community, not from what they happened to be paid to do. Pay itself no longer mattered, and just staying afloat was no longer something to be concerned about. Food was always on the table and no one would find themselves homeless if they failed to save enough during their working years. No one was homeless. People had finally gotten it right. I had to contact Geen.
Sou seemed relieved and like her mind had been put at ease; she too had made her decision. She told me that she would politely decline Zerre’s offer and try to stay in the middle as just one more monk giving her views and watching to see how we were heard. She was willing to wait. That seemed best to me and I nodded my agreement, suggesting that we then head back to my place. We made love very slowly and passionately, each feeling the other in the deep way that comes from having an emotional bond and from having dropped all defenses. I confessed to having been fired and not been at my office all that time; she wasn’t upset as I was afraid she might be and understood that I had needed time to work on my essay even if she still appeared to be a little hurt that I hadn’t come forward and told her everything earlier. She thought that I should tell Geen about Zerre dismissing me as well since she had never heard of something like that happening and didn’t know what it would mean for my future at the monastery. As Sou bid me a good night before she returned to her own room in another housing complex she smiled and thanked me for helping her figure out what to do. I protested that I had really only talked about myself, but she replied that in looking at me and my trouble she had realized that she was far more interested in developing an individualized counseling
practice than in overhauling an organizational institution. No matter what happened that was where her heart would be. Mine would be there too, I thought, offering what support I could. That was a better mark to make than the one Zerre had offered. It’s funny how we so easily lose sight of that.
Chapter Twelve

The morning after meeting with Sou at the riverside I called Geen from my watch device; breakfast had finished shortly before and I assumed that she would be back in her office by that time. I didn’t want to chance catching her when she was surrounded by any others. I still couldn’t remember if she had said to wait for her to contact me or not, but I decided that with the collection of views and opinions nearly finished, and with my essay intended to forestall any possibly heavy tilting of the balance in Zerre’s favor when it came to those views and opinions, that it was far better to get a jump on things. When Geen answered she seemed harried and tired, but once I told her how urgent it was that I see her and how it would directly affect the quickly completing gathering of viewpoints she agreed to a meeting. If I were offering help, she said, then she could probably use it.

That comment had an unusually ominous tone to it, I thought, and as I made my way over to the famous Office Number Five I braced myself for what might be an unpleasant surprise. Had Zerre somehow already been successful? Had he managed to arrange the initial stage of the unfolding process in such a way that it forced Geen’s hand to make concessions that she otherwise would not
have been willing to? How might he have been able to achieve something like that? He had insisted that the procedures be internally supervised by the lower levels of management so that when the field leaders met with Geen there could be no misrepresentation or skewing of the data – not that I, nor probably very many monks, expected that there would be; pushing the point as he did was probably simply to create a degree of paranoia amongst the rank and file –; did that mean that Zerre had actually been able to get his hands on the data first and instead alter it himself in some way? It struck me as a real possibility; but even if that were the case then how could Geen be worried about it? She wouldn’t be privy to such information until it had been presented to her. Unless, of course, she had her own spies or informants or whomever working from within and monitoring the monitors. That too did seem possible to me. It also seemed highly complex and highly speculative; I told myself that there was little point in wondering about such matters until I knew at least a bit more than I did. I was likely to obsess over all of the what ifs otherwise, and if any one of the points I was imagining were sufficiently different from how I was imagining them – as seemed likely given the many layers of my musing – then the whole series would topple like a chain of dominoes. It was better to wait and see and then think about how to react or what to do. I was
already on the outs with Zerre anyway and could hardly toss my lot in with him anymore.

I reflected, with a tinge of resignation, that even if Geen’s side appeared to be the losing cause that was where I found myself. The die had been cast. Well, perhaps not; there did still remain to me the role of neutral observer that Zerre had warned me to be – or else –, but having put such effort into my essay against him I felt that I could hardly stay on the sidelines. I had invested too much emotionally in the matter if nothing else; I had already dived into the side aligning itself against Zerre and his big plans. There was, once more, no turning back I thought; and that certainly so after my essay had been published.

I knocked on the mysterious door tucked away alone in its obscure stairwell, marked only by that single number, and as Geen opened it to let me in I saw clearly that the intervening days had not been kind to her. She looked as if she had hardly slept, soft brown eyes wracked with fatigue and her skin much paler than it ought to have been. Her entire demeanor spoke of exhaustion as she greeted me and motioned me over to the set of chairs we had used before. She did not offer any tea and I did not blame her for that; I resolved to make my visit as brief as possible.
“Are you all right?” I asked as we sat down. I had to; she plainly wasn’t.

“Yes, thank you. I’ve just been caught off guard,” Geen said, her voice oddly flat. “Repeatedly,” she added.

“I’m sorry to hear that. Well, I won’t keep you long, and thank you again for agreeing to meet with me,” I began, seeing no point in either mincing words or focusing overlong on pleasantries.

“Of course,” Geen replied, with some of her old self in the response, some spirit and vigor making its way out. “You mentioned that you might be able to help?”

“Yes, I hope so. Without knowing the details of what’s currently going on I can’t predict just how beneficial this might be, but I’ve written an essay that confesses to being the real Anonymous and that attacks some of what Zerre has revealed to me personally, some aspects of his future plans which are not widely known,” I told her. Geen looked intrigued by that, an encouraging sign.

“Really?” she asked. “You’ve certainly come into being a writer. I’m very pleased and I’m very curious to find out what he’s thinking. Did you send the piece to my
No, actually, I was worried about how to safely get the file to you and somehow thought that the mail system might be compromised in some way. Things like that went on back in my birth era, you know,” I said. “Instead of that I simply moved the file from my desk computer to my flat board and brought that with me. It’s all on here, let me just open the document for you. It might be best to read the whole thing first and then maybe we could decide what to do. It’s not overly long though it did come out a bit denser than I had intended,” I added as I handed her the device.

Geen nodded and took the proffered board. As she began to read she stood and started pacing around the room. I watched her face intently, looking for indications of approval or disapproval, worry or concern. With that essay she would hold my fate in her hands; and she was better positioned than anyone to know what the fallout for me personally would be from releasing something like it and admitting to the role that I had played. It was a risk that I of course was willing to take – otherwise I would not have been there – but I still hoped to avoid any hardships. Don’t we all?
As she read a new thought occurred to me: even from her privileged position Geen would almost certainly not know about any of Zerre’s long-term plans and would also likely not be aware of how he actually wanted to put his representative scheme to use if she had happened to hear that he was planning on pushing for such to be introduced. If Geen decided that she was able to use that information effectively then it might not be necessary for my essay to be published in order for the piece to do its intended work; Geen might be able to do something about Zerre’s plans behind the scenes and arrange things so that they failed. If that turned out to be the case then I would be in no danger whatsoever and would have Geen, the head of the monastery, grateful to me. I would have no worries about facing any possible punitive measures for my role as the writer of all of those initial Anonymous essays, and would even be sheltered from whatever fallout might happen from my being fired. In short, I would be safe from everything and could most likely just carry on as I had been, though probably reassigned to a different writing team.

That would also, however, mean that my public star would remain non-shining, that I would continue to be a no one and the sensation that my writing – mine and not Zerre’s – had caused would stay unacknowledged. I
would still be the nobody I was whose collection of poetry remained beloved only to my lover. It was true that Sou had been right to point out to me the hollowness of the fame that I sought, and the fact that I placed so much of my self-worth in being publically recognized; I knew that but still had trouble feeling it in some ways. I couldn’t say whether it was simply as a result of having my work stolen from me, or whether it was more closely related to a deep-seated desire to have what I labored so very hard on creating be widely shared and appreciated – thus justifying, at least to me, the hours and hours and hours of effort that I had put in –, but whatever the source of the angst I felt I had an unshakable desire to shout out, “Yes, I did that. It was me! Those Anonymous essays you loved were written by me!”

And all that despite knowing that the content of those essays had been fundamentally flawed, based as they were on mistaken or misunderstood concepts. I simply couldn’t help myself; I still had that longing. My work had been loved and valued, and so I too, I must have unconsciously thought, was loved and valued. But could it really be that straightforward, to just be about a direct subconscious relationship between my works and my personhood, I asked myself. Didn’t I want the works to be appreciated for their own sake even if that appreciation
didn’t reflect on me?

But then again, I reasoned, unlike with my poetry, those essays actually were widely shared and appreciated, only in their case the upswing of that appreciation was that the love and valuation they engendered had been unfortunately misdirected. To Zerre, that bastard. I realized that I wanted what he had – I could and did admit to that, as shallow as I knew it to be –, only without the social movement that was attached to it. Yet the entire point of writing those essays was to generate that social movement. Understanding everything, consciously realizing the entire lot, still did nothing to change how I felt; there was that mismatch between how I thought I should feel and how I did feel. What strange beasts we human animals are.

Whatever the psychological case of what I was going through – and I knew that Sou would be able to help me later with it – I thought again that my fate was at that moment literally in Geen’s hands. She was in charge and what she decided would go. I had abandoned my old, assigned boss and gone over his head. In some ways. Since he had fired me I had ceased thinking about Zerre as my boss, and if I were honest with myself I knew that ever since he had declared himself to be Anonymous I
had really stopped thinking about him as my boss. That was a betrayal, at least in the way it was done with him not even consulting me beforehand, and although at the time I rationalized it mentally as the safest route for me – and Sou – it still boiled down to betrayal; something I understood emotionally even if not logically. Another play on the disparity that can exist between our hearts and our heads.

In turning my mind to the way I had interpreted Zerre’s act I suddenly remembered how wrong I had been about the danger I thought Sou faced via her association with me. She had brushed that off when I told her about what I had done, or rather not done, in order to protect her. She had reacted as if there never was any need to keep her in the dark; she didn’t seem to think she had been at even a remote risk. Was my assuming that she would be threatened in some way simply an error of judgment?

All at once it hit me that the entire time since waking up in that rice paddy I had been operating in the place and era I found myself as if I were still in my own place and era. I had been viewing all of the people I met and the situations I was in through the lens of my own birth culture’s intuitions and biases. Even traveling and living abroad as much as I had, I had never been able to fully
shake those inbuilt core reactions that were always bubbling up. I had never stopped to realize that people had developed, in the many intervening years since my ill-fated drunken stumble at that Tokyo Metro station, an entirely new system of valuing, considering, and relating to each other and their world. How they saw the world was significantly different from how I saw it, and I had thus far only been able to take on the currently prevailing point of view in some small and disconnected ways. I was still an outsider in that sense.

Recognizing that about myself and my perspective did not, of course, indicate that people’s ways had become perfect, or that I needed to adopt all of them, but just noting that failure of mine helped me see that I still had quite a lot to learn and that only after having learned much more would I be in a position to have anything to really offer as far as social criticisms went. I had jumped the gun. Zerre’s pushing me to keep writing as I had been took on an even newer light. He was deeply, deeply crafty, and had used me and exploited the circumstances excellently. Coming to see Geen was absolutely the right choice.

Still, as I sat there watching her read I did feel a bit like someone who had turned state’s evidence, or at least how
I imagined they must have felt based on how all those actors in the law dramas I’d seen had played their characters. I had not thought about anything like that for many long months, and that it should come to mind was a surprise to me; what a change my lifestyle had undergone, even if it hadn’t been matched by an equally large change in my way of thinking. Very simple things like television shows used to carry such weight and importance for me. How incredibly vapid that had been, I thought, to have cared so much about so little. It was enjoyable, all of that twenty-first century entertainment, and very well done – there was no denying that – but it demanded nothing of me and in the end delivered nothing other than time successfully wasted and perhaps a series of titillated emotions. At least with the things I had spent my time watching. Once in a while something had come along that caught my eye and would make me think, but it hardly ever lasted.

My friends were mostly the same; almost no one tried to better themselves and I hadn’t even thought to blame them – it never would have occurred to me – as I certainly hadn’t made any efforts in that direction either. And with such fantastic distractions always to hand it was no wonder. That difference between then and the future-present was something else life here had to offer,
and as I thought that I reminded myself that whatever Geen might decide and whatever might or might not happen to me personally, there were far larger issues at stake. Ours was a community and a way of being that I had come to be deeply concerned about; I would do what I could to help save it regardless of what that meant for my silly little ego. I could not and would not let Zerre open any doors back to how we were.

Geen stopped pacing, held my flat board up closer to her face, squinting her eyes as a dark expression passed over her usually soft features. She must have gotten to the part about what Zerre thought he could do with his representatives, or how he plotted to install himself at the top of the city’s councilors in addition to being the head of the monastery. She would come to realize, if she hadn’t already, the full force of his ambition. That was about two thirds of the way through the essay, I recalled, and she would soon finish reading. After that, well, I would have to be patient; there was no telling how the meeting would turn out although I judged from the expression on Geen’s face that she would be considerably more animated than she was when I entered.

When she had completed my essay Geen let out a long sigh, shot me an exasperated look, and then came back
over to sit down across from me. She returned my flat board and said, “Thank you very much. Please send that to my account right away, now even. It’s safe to do so and I must have a copy.” She was obviously still very upset and so I silently went through the options to do as told. She would naturally need some time to think about how to respond and I was happy to let her. It was no longer my decision, I reminded myself – though I hardly needed to –; my place and my position was to offer what assistance I could and, if it came to it, choose amongst the options I was given. Simply by coming to see Geen my hand had been played and I, for one, had no further plans to see out.

“Let me now repay the favor and tell you a little about what’s been going on at the higher administrative levels in the monastery here,” she began as I set the flat board down on the table. Her face was very expressive: earnest, open, worried, tired. I could only guess at how much she had to say.

“The first thing you have to understand is that the role of head of the monastery is always a rather demanding and delicate balance,” she said, leaning slightly forward. “The head monk has very great decision-making powers, and those powers stretch all the way down to the foundations of monastery life. We have traditions, of course, and for
the most part nearly every head of the monastery has kept those traditions and only tweaked things here and there, but our traditions are not binding and if a head wanted to she or he could institute vast changes, even to the daily schedules of every single monk that lives here.”

That was hardly the first thing that I expected to hear from Geen based on what I knew to be in my essay, and I found the simplicity of the system so described to be absolutely incredible; it almost sounded like a monarchy – or a dictatorship. “How did you allow such a singularly powerful office to develop and what has kept abuse in check?” I interjected. I couldn’t decide if the topic was a distraction or not but I had to ask; I also couldn’t believe the job would be that straightforward.

“To answer your second question first,” Geen said, displaying patience at my interruption, “the quality of the people who have become head has limited any potential abuse of power to almost zero. That is why it is so important for the current top to very carefully choose their successor. There is also the point that the leaders of the various fields can, if they agree unanimously, choose to eject the head of the monastery and replace her or him with someone else, but not someone from amongst their number.” That was interesting, I thought, a well-reasoned
safeguard seemingly aimed at limiting corruption. Why weren’t there more of those?

“And to answer your first question,” Geen continued, “the office needs to have the power it does to be able to be flexible enough to deal with anything that might come up. One thing we learned from your time, and the time that immediately followed it, is that a system of governance that cannot respond quickly tends to allow problems to fester and grow, especially internal problems. Little things whose solution may not be easily agreeable upon or, which perhaps you are more familiar with as your time especially demonstrated this tendency, small but powerful groups who can successfully prevent changes that would benefit the vast majority in order to preserve their own narrow interests; such simply cannot be properly handled. The institutions that you had were always freezing up and getting stuck; in-fighting amongst your many groups and many people involved created one stalemate after another, and one group who succeeded in gaining power would undo what the previous group had done only to lose to yet another group a few years later and have their policies subsequently undone. Frankly I still do not understand how intelligent human beings could tolerate such a situation and not put a stop to it until it was too late to prevent disaster. But then I suppose those who did see
clearly enough were always blocked by others who stood
to profit from the status quo. Yours were bizarre times,”
she paused and her gaze drifted off to the far wall of her
office as I noticed it tended to whenever Geen talked
about my birth era. My sense was that she honestly could
not come to terms with what to make of us back then. Her
mind just wouldn’t bend that far.

“But enough about that,” Geen said finally, “You needn’t
hear all the details as they don’t really concern you and
probably never will. What you do need to be aware of for
things to be comprehensible to you are: one, that
important mechanism for changing the head of the
monastery, and two, the really quite vast powers that the
head has. Here is what Zerre has been doing about that.”
Geen paused again but her eyes did not drift off, they
rather locked onto mine and I saw in a flash how deadly
serious and deeply worried she was.

“Zerre,” Geen started again, noticeably swallowing hard,
“has found and begun exploiting an extraordinary
weakness which none of my predecessors noticed because
they never faced a broad movement like I am now. What
he is doing, and he is succeeding at it, is getting not the
field leaders on his side but the section leaders. He is
doing this by promising them positions as field leaders. If
they are promoted to become field leaders, and if all of them owe that to Zerre, then they will be indebted to him, won’t they? And,” she swallowed again, “remember that the field leaders cannot elect one of their own to be the head of the monastery.”

“And Zerre will not make himself a field leader,” I put in.

“Of course, he will pose as a humble messenger of the masses,” Geen replied, “as he has been ever since that general meeting. He will put on his best face and when power is given to him pretend not to want it.”

“That tactic has worked before,” I said, remembering more than a few politicians and public leaders from what I knew of history and from my own times. “Quite often, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Yes it has, because it is effective,” Geen said. “Then as now. People may live very differently from your own era, and from the past before that, but people still have, and I suspect might always have, some similar wants. People in groups also tend to think in alternative ways than people do when they are alone.” That was true, I concurred, wondering about human nature and if there really were such a thing. There had to be in some ways, some
essentialities at least.

“But how can he promise the section leaders anything?” I asked. “How can Zerre make sure that they get promoted? Aren’t you in charge of determining who is the leader of what?”

“Here is the real genius of Zerre’s plan,” Geen replied, “and don’t worry, you had nothing to do with this.” She managed, through her evident concern, to say that with a half-smile, an implied wink, but I heard it with only relief as I had already started to feel very guilty. “Just how he managed to pull it all together I’m not sure, but from the preliminary reports on the results of our current monastery-wide survey that my informants have been giving me, he has been able to get quite a lot of monks, and I mean very, very many, to state that they would like to be able to directly choose their own team leaders from within their working groups. If the plan stopped there it wouldn’t be so bad, but the team leaders themselves are saying the same regarding their section leaders, and the section leaders regarding their field leaders. You can see how this poses a problem. Most of the current field leaders are entirely on board with me, naturally, but if they are replaced none of that will matter. Now, this expressed wish to have some input into one’s own
working leader is a very hard thing to deny, especially given the mood everyone’s in after that rather chaotic meeting we had. If I were to simply disallow it or try to ignore it then I’m not sure that the resultant feelings could be contained. We might easily careen into a far more severe situation than we already find ourselves in, and no doubt Zerre has some kind of back-up mass strike or demonstration or march or vandalistic ploys or whatnot up his sleeve. If, on the other hand, I were to allow it; well, let me tell you what I think would happen in that case because in some ways it’s even more frightening.”

Geen was calm as she continued, but her evident trouble could not be contained. “Presumably nearly all, or even all, current team leaders would continue on as at present ordinary monks would not know how to, and would be unused to, contesting leadership. Additionally, during times of large or rather large change I’m told that people tend to want some things, particularly those things that are close to their day-to-day lives, to stay more or less the same as a way of dealing with all the other adjustments that are suddenly called for. Such is not a consciously made decision, mind you, just how people typically react. So the team leaders would stay in place and the same, I’m sure, would go for the section leaders. They, however, are a much smaller and more manageable group to deal with,
if one were inclined to deal with them in a certain way, and that is why Zerre very perceptively chose them as the point at which to strike at me. They would not choose to keep the current field leaders, no; they would instead promote themselves, that is, promote from within themselves, while those who could not ascend due to the more limited number of positions available would no doubt be recompensed in some way. When Zerre then judged the time to be right, he would activate his plan and they would all elect to get rid of me and install him; and that would be that.”

It struck me as an astonishingly effective plan, and I was sure that Zerre was right to gamble on it. He had very good odds of succeeding either in the outright fashion that Geen had just explained should she allow us monks to start picking our leaders, or in the more roundabout way of first forcing Geen to accept the change through further other disruptive action and then implementing the voting scheme. That must also have been why Zerre had so confidently declared to me that if I just kept my mouth shut I would be well taken care of when his new order was erected. He really did have it all worked out and I understood why Geen felt like she was in the bind she was.
“What will you do?” I asked. “Is there anything you can do?”

“That is what I have been losing sleep over,” Geen confessed. “But you, bless you, have now given me a means.” I was very happy to hear that, and probably blushed a little; I had become unaccustomed to praise and realized moreover that that must have been the first time I received a real compliment from Geen, even if it had not been an outright one.

“If you are in agreement,” Geen continued, watching me intently, “I think it might be best to follow this course of action.” She paused slightly and just looked at me, no doubt wanting to gauge my reaction, search for some sign. I was all ears. “You should know, however, that it might have some social fallout for you amongst your peers.” She stated that cautiously and pronouncedly, further prefacing her remarks. I couldn’t help but feel nervous.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“What I’m thinking to do is to send your essay to every single monk in the monastery,” Geen said. “Directly. Right to their personal message files. Some people will start to think quite poorly of you for your role in all of
I thought about that. I hadn’t made a great many friends at the monastery but I very much enjoyed the collegial relations that I had with the monks that I did know, especially the other writers in my – well, their; my former – collective. What continued to pain me most about being fired was losing daily contact with them; they had been a connection to the world outside my head and a breath of fresh air that was at times sorely needed. I was certain they all felt similarly about not only me but each member of the little group; writing is an excessively cerebral and entirely lonesome path in life, and even the hardiest of those of us who are yoked to it needs a pair of listening ears now and then. What would they start to think of me? The disdain of those who were effectively strangers I could easily weather – years of living as a foreign resident in this country or that had equipped me with a vast array of coping mechanisms – but those with whom I felt something was shared; that was much more difficult.

“And I suppose there’s no other way? You couldn’t release this anonymously?” I asked without much forethought.

“Frank, in your essay you claim to be the real Anonymous,
how could I release it anonymously?” Geen asked as she suppressed a chuckle.

“Oh right, of course,” I said, cheeks burning. At least I had managed to lighten her mood a little.

“There might in fact be other ways to defuse this situation now that I know more of the details about what Zerre plans,” Geen continued, “but my feeling is that sending your essay to everyone will put us all on the same page and do a great deal of damage to Zerre’s reputation. That in itself might be enough to discredit him, but we shall have to see. It will anyway be a start and will give me something to build on.”

That made sense; much of what Zerre had going for him was his public image as Anonymous, and the credit that gave him as a would-be reformer and fighter for the common monk. His display at the meeting had been meant to cement that impression – and it did seem to have largely worked –, and then his personalizing of the monks’ grievances in the form of Geen herself had also been designed to damage her reputation to the benefit of his. That appeared to have worked as well. As I reflected on those points another thought altogether struck me.
“There is something else,” I said. Geen looked at me attentively. “Zerre actually fired me a few weeks ago right after the mass meeting we had. I haven’t been in to work this whole time; I’ve just been writing that essay I showed you on my own.”

Geen was visibly shocked. “He fired you? He can’t do that. He doesn’t have the power; no one does except me, and even then I would have to immediately re-assign the person somewhere else within the monastery.”

“Well, he did,” I responded.

“Did he actually use that word?” Geen asked. “It’s a highly technical term given its rarity and I’m surprised you even know it.”

“I did have to look it up,” I admitted. “I scoured some sources in comparative historical literature until I found it. And no, he didn’t use ‘fired’. He said simply that he never wanted to see me again and that I was never to return.” As a Language learner I felt proud at that, as a monk ashamed.

“Well, what he meant was clear enough if he said that,” Geen snorted. She was obviously upset again.
“Will I be all right? I mentioned this to someone and she thought that I should check with you as my place here might be in jeopardy or at least uncertain.” I thought it judicious to leave out Sou’s name even though I was sure that nothing would happen to her as a result of her knowing about my situation. I was also fairly sure that Geen would immediately know who I was talking about.

“Yes, of course, don’t worry at all about yourself,” Geen reassured me. “That is my concern. Once the dust from all this has settled I’ll place you in another team. I was planning on doing that anyway now that Zerre has shown himself. I assume that you still want to write?”

“If I am given the choice, most certainly yes,” I said. “I remember you telling me that my actual highest placement score was in non-monetary accounting and so I’ve been worried that if I am allowed to stay I might have to do that.”

Geen looked at me for a long time, her scowl fading quickly and being replaced by a deep compassion. She was silent for a fecund moment more and then said, “You have just humanized for me a very real problem with the way we do things. It’s no wonder that Zerre was able to
get so many monks so angry. Thank you, Frank. In the
end this will all have done some real good.” She smiled –
a genuine, warm-hearted smile – and added, “If we can
keep Zerre out of this office, that is.”

I understood that to mean that Geen had finally realized,
fully and deeply, that there should be some adjustments
made to the work allocation mechanism. I thought again
about Sou and about what she might have to add to any
process of making procedural changes, and to her own
desire to work more in one-on-one counseling. I decided
to be brave.

“If you mean what I think you mean then I’m certain that
the current operator of the Testing and Placement Center
would be a big help in any alterations to how the system
functions,” I offered.

“Sou? Yes, naturally she would, and I will be in touch
with her and work closely with her regardless,” Geen
replied. “But first things first, are you willing to let me
send your essay out?” Once again I found myself to have
been needlessly concerned. And once again a choice, a
real choice, an unlooked for and nearly unnoticed choice,
had been presented to me.
“Yes,” I said emphatically. Of course. I had decided the moment she mentioned it; I had decided before that moment. I already trusted Geen’s judgment – despite being on its barbed end at times –, and trusted it more so after what she had shared. There could be no real dithering about anything anymore, it was time to act, and any emotional pause that I might have had was closer to a wistful “what if” than to a doubt as to what I would be willing to do. It was after all my big move in the game in which I was a very minor player, and from the beginning I had been open to any potentially negative consequences.

“Excellent,” Geen said, “thank you. I will get to that immediately and then think more about what to do with this firing business. That may offer yet another opportunity to strike back in some way.”

I knew that we were finished, that my hand had been played to its last card, and that it was time for me to go. I felt a bit empty at that somehow, directionless. “Thank you again for your time,” I said as I rose from my seat.

“No, no, thank you,” Geen responded, heavily emphasizing her gratitude as she spoke the words. She gave me another one of her handshakes, such a nice touch considering that the practice was no longer in use, and
smiled warmly. She plainly felt a world better than she had when I first entered. What happened next, I knew, was in her hands, and they were capable ones. Zerre would not know what hit him.

On my way out I noticed a schematic map of the monastery hanging on Geen’s wall that listed the building her office was in – the same building where our public monastery-wide meetings took place – and a number of other constructions in the central area. This complex was labeled as Structure #5. Curious, I thought, hers was room number five in building number five. There must have been some significance to that, something that I was still missing. I made a mental note to look into it.

Geen’s counterblow came quickly. After our meeting, with nothing else to do and nowhere to go, I headed back to my room and thought that I might as well check my messages again, and there waiting for me was Geen’s mass missive to every single one of us. It was tersely worded but informative, giving an impression of Geen as a no-nonsense leader who got to the point. She was that, I knew, but she was also quick to listen and slow to speak; aspects of her that her public persona might not hint at. Her message stated that we had collectively been misled in certain recent events, that the true author of the
Anonymous essays was not Zerre but someone else, and that said true author was now coming forward (see the attached). The person in question, she added, also had other information which directly related to the course we were deciding to take, the manner and type of changes that might be made to the monastery’s operations. It was extremely urgent to take all of the new information into account, Geen wrote, and she therefore requested that all of us read the file she was sending carefully and thoughtfully as soon as possible. She was canceling all work for the next day and calling another public meeting to discuss both where we currently stood and what our reactions may be to the material contained in the new essay by the real writer of the earlier Anonymous pieces. With that she thanked us for our time and continuing efforts and wished us all the best of luck.

It was very dramatic of her not to name me in the message itself, I thought; that touch added a nice bit of tension and mystery and would practically guarantee that everyone would at least open the file upon reading the mail even if they didn’t go through the entire thing right at that moment. Some people, I knew, might not even see the message until the following morning depending on their computer habits, but given that when I turned my computer on there was a flashing red icon impossible to
miss directing me to check my inbox file I was sure that it wouldn’t be overlooked entirely except by a very few. And those who did manage not to see it would surely hear about it at breakfast the next day and then rush back to their desks to read it before the latest monastery-wide meeting got started.

I allowed myself to wonder what would happen at that meeting; I knew there was certain to be a confrontation of some kind between Geen and Zerre – what form would it take? He had previously found himself on stage with a surprising number of supporters; would they still stand by him? Geen would have her fellow administrators, her field leaders, and a few others backing her up, but what would become of Zerre next? Would my essay really be enough to isolate him and force a change of tactics on his part? Was it possible that it even caused him to strike a conciliatory tone? If he did then what would happen to him? I was far removed from all of that now, and any dreams of grandeur I might have had were likely to go up in smoke. They already had, really. My name would be known not as a great reformer who had shown the era how it could live better, but rather as a lost and lonely voice from the past that had come to realize how well the people of the present actually lived. I had become one of those people, and whatever the damage to my reputation
– such as it was – and to the burying of my silly hopes for historical greatness might be, I would remain one of those people. Living well, living fully, living freely, and living for the purpose of continually developing myself. That was something, it really was. I finally knew that.

I spent the rest of the morning and afternoon in something like a daydream. I had wrapped everything up and, most likely uniquely in the monastery, had nothing at which to apply myself. My life depended entirely on the outcome of the public meeting to be held the following day. I doubted that Zerre would be able to pull off his full victory – certainly not in the way that he had foreseen –, but I reasoned too that that did not mean a victory for Geen was assured. Far from it. It seemed most likely, I mused, that some kind of stalemate would emerge while the sides re-mustered their forces and re-formulated their strategies to deal with the new reality that my essay had introduced. The advantage would now move towards Geen – probably, anyway, although that did depend somewhat on the public mood – but the desire for change that had after all fueled the social movement that had gotten off its feet would still be there.

That movement, egged on and directed by what turned out to be a vested interest as it was, remained an organic
movement, and once people started to come together on something then nothing that had thereby been established really went away. Protests could be quashed, leaders removed, platforms dropped, added, adjusted, but the underlying idea that got people excited in the first place never truly disappears. It ferments, it sprouts roots, it metastasizes, but it does not just drop off the mental map. Monks wanted their lives to be run differently and they would see that they were, in one way or another by one means or another, within the existing system or by revolting against the existing system. Geen was betting on the former – and indeed she represented the former –, while Zerre was betting on the latter; and he too had come to represent that latter. Or so he thought.

That was now suddenly to be determined, and it would depend on how people reacted to my essay. Zerre had set himself up as the face of what could be by declaring himself Anonymous; that deception was now exposed. If most monks accepted that I, little old me, the Neanderthal Man, the relic and quaint oddity, was in fact Anonymous then I would become the face of the movement. That would shock and even dishearten quite a few; it would give added cause for reflection.

I had no reason to doubt that most monks would affirm
the truth of my essay given the evidence that I had laid out in it, and I equally had no reason to doubt that Zerre would simply refute my assertions. It would not come down to his word against mine though, for I could trace all of my writings and all of my ideas, and that was a part of what I had done in my essay. I could and did show where everything that I had written had come from, and I could and did similarly show how my analyses had been done and what the flaws were in those analyses that I later came to realize. I could and I had, it was all there in the paper.

I was of course a biased judge, but I thought the case was a solid one even if not completely airtight as I admittedly had no secondary witnesses or the like given the silence under which Zerre and I had engaged in our tasks. I did however have all of the working files of my pieces showing earlier drafts and comments inserted by Zerre, files that I had previously archived in the secure Writers’ Collective directory for safekeeping, and had provided links to them in my essay. Geen could unlock and make visible those files and she no doubt already had now that she had the links to find them – I spent a few minutes checking each. The diligent too would confirm the evidence and the less diligent would trust it, possibly having that trust corroborated by those who did follow the
trails. It was all very convincing, I thought, and I wasn’t worried about being challenged on my claims.

I was, though, worried about Geen being challenged on the derivative claims and the public stance that she decided to take. I was sure that she wouldn’t suddenly declare that there was no need to adjust anything at all and that the status quo would simply remain; no, she was far too astute for that. Still, she might wish to keep more than the majority wanted to keep, and if she did that then there could well be pushback against her and that resistance would no doubt present another opportunity for Zerre. He could sell what he had done as being necessary for the sake of the movement – which had after all preceded his announcement – arguing that it was obvious to him that I, as the inexperienced and still mostly ignorant monk that I was, could not have championed the cause of broad societal transformation with any kind of practicality. He had to do something, he could say. I was the ideas man, that would be clear, and Zerre the action man, that would be clear too. People who want change need an action man, they need a catalyst, and if the monks who most desired that were sufficiently numerous and of a particular disposition – if the pendulum had swung that far – then they might be willing to forgive Zerre his dramatic excesses in return for his continued labor as the
skilled tactician who, perhaps alone, could steer them to their desired end.

I either didn’t know enough or wasn’t wise enough to be able to read the mood of the times and the place that I found myself in; I had no idea which way the balance would tip and what the appropriate nuance would be to cause it to move towards Geen and not Zerre. If I had to guess I would have predicted that Zerre would lose some personal support and Geen remain about the same. But then I had to remind myself that it wasn’t one of our silly twenty-first century elections, it wasn’t a contest between two personalities and the wider policy initiatives that they represented and would possibly enact if chosen as leader; it was instead a battle between two sets of ideas about the manner, pace, and form of change.

It then dawned on me that there was little difference in substance between those two, between an election of the kind that I remembered and the present grouping of options, that in many ways the current situation was in fact quite like an election – of sorts – and that moreover by making it about himself Zerre had turned it into an election. Thanks to my revealing essay what we had become engaged in was no longer just the gathering of perspectives and attitudes and the subsequent plan for
adjusting structural and procedural mechanisms that came out of the data provided, no; what we had entered into now was a referendum on Zerre himself. He had intended to turn the social movement into his individual path to power and making that plan of his known had perhaps been my significant contribution. I actually had changed society after all, I thought, by showing it how quickly it could descend back into the bad past if it were not appropriately vigilant.

Power concentrated would always be sought by someone, and the more concentrated it was the more it would be desired. The Zerres of the world would never disappear. There might be much more structural change needed than was assumed; how could we ensure that a person like Zerre never made it into the top slot? The current head of the monastery chose the next head and that did seem to have worked well thus far, but the fact that Zerre had previously gotten so close surely spoke of the potential for disaster. Mightn’t there be some way to overcome that? There was the safety feature of the field leaders being able to eject the head of the monastery, but if the new head simply replaced them all en masse then that would hardly work as a balance. If, on the other hand, the field leaders were given some kind of mandatory term length such that they necessarily stuck around for a year
or two after the new head started then there would quickly develop a rivalry between them such that the field leaders tried to push and pull the new head in whatever direction they wanted on threat of eviction before they themselves could be replaced. In some disturbing ways such a scenario would approach how Rome had worked, and not only Rome. And, like all such split-power systems tended to generate, wouldn’t that end up being a terrible distraction on the actual administrative duties that needed to daily take place? It was an incredibly interesting problem, it occurred to me, and I decided then and there on my next research and writing project. I thought that it might even turn into something larger than the book on my life that I had already planned to do.

I saw Sou again after dinner and we mostly avoided talking about what might happen at the meeting. She was relieved that I was in no danger of losing my place at the monastery or any other kind of negative fallout from being fired, and I was happy to be able to inform her of Geen’s desire to work with her on adjusting the occupational placement system. Beyond that we were content to let what may happen be for the moment, and just enjoy the evening air, the river, and the warm southern winds that always made their way to the archipelago at that time of year. We both understood that
whatever decisions lay ahead of us would have to wait until we knew more about how the game underway was playing itself out; we were at one of those points that life sometimes presents where you simply keep your eyes open because your next move depends first on that beyond your control. Guessing about what might occur and making alternative plans for X or Y can be helpful and instructive in such cases, but on that particular night we opted instead to just enjoy each other. It was the right choice.

And then it all happened. We made our way to the Central Complex and its mass meeting hall, all twenty thousand of us, a sea of bald heads glistening in the sun, a rainbow of matching style uniforms, a hydra converging on a common purpose. Whispers, rumors, innuendoes, speculations, guesses; I half listened to all of it with steps light and heart racing. My name came up, of course, but no one approached me directly. Too much remained to be seen. After the meeting I supposed that I would be likely to receive applause and condemnation in equal measure, but in that instant my fellow monks exercised their discretion and held back. I decided that if things went well for the position I wanted to see prevail then the conciliatory tone I had taken in my confessional essay would probably help put how I had acted in a more
positive light; if things went the other way then I would instead be more apt to receive grudging acknowledgments of a service rendered even if it was done poorly and even if I remained a confused and lost soul. I thought that only in the very worst case scenario was I open to any kind of real punishment, and if it did come to that then I would try to convince Zerre to exile me and Sou as a pair, if she were willing. Surely I or we could claim refuge somewhere nicer than a monastery and city run by a vengeful Zerre. I remained hopeful.

I was not able to find Sou in the mass of people filling the auditorium and so I took the seat nearest to the stage that I could. There was no way I was going to doze off for this public meeting like I so unfortunately had at the last. My eyes were saucers, my pulse a gazelle. Geen was already at her lectern, flanked by the same group that had joined her earlier, and opposite her stood Zerre, with some of the same faces and some different amongst the six supporter chairs allotted for each of the two sides. No one on stage sat until the last of us had filed in and taken our places and then, as if on cue, the twelve supporting monks lowered themselves in unison and left Geen and Zerre to stare at each other across the open space between them. I thought that Zerre looked far more nervous than he had the last time. There was no accusatory finger being raised.
by him just yet.

Geen opened the proceedings with some kind of set series of formal phrases – I couldn’t hear the details over the clamor of my mind racing with what ifs – and then more informally greeted us and welcomed us to what was, she said, our collective debate about our collective future. Together. She stressed that last word and I imagine that it had a nice effect on everyone; it did on me anyway.

“Well then,” Geen continued, “shall we begin?” Her smile faded, she cleared her throat, and she turned from facing us, the gathered masses, to facing only Zerre as she pronounced quite sternly, “Zerre, it has been revealed that you are not in fact Anonymous. Why would you make that claim and what bearing do you think your falseness should have on the collection of monks’ viewpoints regarding revisions to our operations that is only now coming to a close?”

Zerre avoided looking at us, and even appeared to avoid looking directly at Geen, as he responded, “Frank is a liar, pure and simple. I am Anonymous and that man’s little stunt should have no bearing whatsoever on anything. Our responses have been collected, or mostly so considering that you, Geen, cut that short to call this
meeting, and whatever is represented in them is what should be dealt with.” He paused, seemed to call up some courage, and added, “If you cannot accept what is in those reports I suspect that you are not fit for your office.” Zerre then made an excellent show of putting on an aggressive face but I, at least, thought that I could see through it.

“Come now Zerre, there is no denying it, Frank provided all the evidence anyone could ask for,” Geen chided. She may have been enjoying herself a bit too much. Geen swiveled to face us again and called out, “By show of hands, my fellow monks, who really thinks that Frank could have made all that up?” I craned my neck around to see how many hands there might be in the air and although there were a few they could hardly be said to be many, probably less than a hundred in the entire auditorium. That was a minuscule percentage of our total number. The six men and women sitting behind Zerre squirmed a bit uncomfortably; they probably hadn’t expected him to try to deny what had become so obvious.

Zerre glanced around himself and his nervousness became even clearer. “Fine, yes, Frank did author the original essays but do not overlook the role I played in their formation. As his boss I directed, edited, commented
on, and generally oversaw all of his work. In many ways I was the co-author of each and every one of them. But what is more important Geen,” and that finger of his came up as his voice gained strength, “the writer or the ideas contained therein? It was the content of those essays that launched us all into action. Do not forget that you are facing a real social movement amongst us monks here. We are angry and we demand change!” That was well played, I had to admit; he had both deflected Geen’s attack and buried his earlier mistake, successfully changing the subject.

“That is true,” Geen said evenly, “but if you would lead this movement then I think that your character has something to do with the issues at stake. If we are to properly implement the adjustments that all of us together agree on, and I want to remind everyone that I too am in favor of that, then I for one only want the best type of person involved in overseeing and actuating those amendments. In fact I have someone in mind for it.” Geen added the last statement almost as an afterthought, or at least that was how it came off. It was also another effective parry; Geen had refused to be painted as an obstacle and had simultaneously kept the issue of Zerre’s deceit at the forefront. She also presented everyone with a nice puzzle to think about – whom did she mean?
“Who is better suited to this than me?” Zerre demanded. “I was nearly made the head of the monastery when that duty unfortunately fell to you. I think it safe to say that everyone here now agrees that that decision was a mistake on the part of our predecessor.” A number of boos and jeers greeted Zerre at that, but there was some mixed applause and shouts of support as well.

“Is this really only about you then?” Geen shot back immediately and with a force that was startling.

“Why no, of course not,” Zerre responded, but he was clearly on the back foot. He had fumbled and he knew it.

“Frank’s essay seemed to imply otherwise,” Geen retorted. “One could even say Frank’s essay flatly stated otherwise. And as we have just seen, his essay appears to be overwhelmingly accepted as accurate by our peers gathered here today.” A nice use of “peers” I thought; Geen had aligned herself with us while Zerre had reminded everyone that he was almost their boss. She was quite skilled.

“Just because I admitted that Frank authored those original essays in their initial and pre-edited forms,” Zerre
began, cunningly attempting to take some credit for my work through his implied co-authorship of the final versions that the formation of his rejoinder injected into the debate, “does not mean that I admitted everything in his recent so-called factual account is true. For one, he was sorely mistaken about what I intend with my plan to introduce city district and monastery work representatives. There is nothing untoward in that arrangement, I assure you. Those positions are to ensure that the average city person’s and the average monk’s concerns are always considered, to increase accountability for those at the top, and to install a mechanism whereby each one of us can be heard and our ideas and opinions respected and taken into account. It is meant to give everyone a say in what happens to them.” He finished roundly and proudly, even banging his fist on the podium.

Put that way it sounded great, I was ready to concede that. I recalled too that when I first saw the sketch of his idea I was quite taken with it. Yet I was also ready to remember that such was pure balderdash and that Zerre himself had told me what he really planned to do with his representatives, although that point, I knew, was something for which I had no evidence. It was a weakness in my paper, and a rather important one. Had I been able to actually prove that I probably could have sunk Zerre
outright; as it was those inclined to support him had no reason not to simply disbelieve the assertion, and even those inclined against Zerre had no real rationale to accept it other than that they might want to. And without placing that on trust all of my subsequent analysis about society slipping back into the dark ages of the remote past was at best speculation and at worst idle musing. I regretted making it such a central part of the attack I meant to level at Zerre. I somehow just thought that I would be taken at my word; Geen had done so but she knew a lot more about Zerre than nearly everyone else did and therefore had plenty of other causes to accept my accusation. For the first time that day I began to feel genuinely worried about how the meeting might go.

“And what if a particular city resident or a particular monk were to make a series of serious and far-reaching complaints about the line of work they were in, or about, say, their supervisor?” Geen asked. Why was she querying him on something like that? It seemed more likely to provide Zerre with an opportunity than anything else. Did she really think he would have nothing to say? Or was she trying to give him enough rope to hang himself with in some manner? It struck me as a risky approach.
“That person would be heard and respected, as I said,” Zerre replied. His tone had calmed considerably and his confidence was clearly back. “What I want to do, what we want to do, is to introduce a system that will give everyone more control over how they spend the bulk of their time, which, after all, is at work. The idea is to make life better by letting us do the jobs that we actually want to do.”

“And what if by so doing we run out of robot maintenance workers or irrigation engineers? That would threaten our food supply and our availability of goods,” Geen pressed. She appeared to be half curious and half skeptical in her questioning; not obviously leading him on but neither plainly on board. She must have had some plan with all of it, but I was still feeling more and more nervous. Everything could not be allowed to go up in smoke, I told myself, though I had no inkling of what to do about it.

“We could introduce some kind of temporary measure, put workers in temporarily,” Zerre said, undoubtedly reaching. He evidently hadn’t expected Geen’s line of questioning to take the approach it had. “I don’t have all of the answers right now, the details can be worked out as necessary,” he added, managing to make a rather strong
closing and somehow still appear to be in control.

“And when those temporary workers are no longer needed would you then dismiss them from their posts the way you dismissed Frank when he had served his purposes for you?” Geen pumped that out like nails from a nail gun. Biting, precise, sharp point after sharp point, evenly stated and evenly timed. That was what she had been building up to. The fog at last cleared and Geen’s picture revealed itself to me, but the fallout was another matter.

It actually proved to be a fatal blow. Zerre must have assumed that I would never have told anyone about that – or at least not before he was able to realize his goals –, and he would have been correct had I not mentioned it to Sou and she indicated that I ought to tell Geen right away to be on the safe side. I really would have kept that to myself until everything had blown over as the fact of it left me with literally nowhere that I belonged and I had no reason to think that Zerre couldn’t do what he had done. He was my boss; to my mind of course he could fire me. And with no way to look for other work myself I was completely adrift – who would admit to that given everything else that was happening? It never would have occurred to me to go and bother Geen about my personal
situation in the midst of her epic struggle, I needed prodding for that; plus I was a little afraid of what she might say. Thankfully my own inclinations were not what were followed through on; I was pushed and I did go and see her, not putting it off till a more opportune moment presented itself. Fate had intervened – or good fortune –, and the right person knew the right information and used it at the right time for the right effect. I was quite surprised by what resulted.

Zerre flubbed his answer; he was shocked, completely taken aback. He spluttered, stammered, started to say “No, it wasn’t like that”, and then realizing what had come out tried instead to immediately fix it with “I never did that”, but it was too late. Everyone could see that he was lying, his whole mannerism expressed it, and that coming on top of his earlier admission about not really being Anonymous tore out what was left of his credibility. But not only that. The crowd turned very visibly, and very angrily, against him. Those on stage with him stood and loudly wondered if they wouldn’t be next when he was through with them. Others yelled and shook their fists. Abuse of power, abuse of position. Nearly the entire enormous gathering was on its feet. Some even screamed out for exile, for branding, for permanent removal starting from that moment forward. I was incredulous; I never
could have predicted an outcome like that, and even Sou expressed to me later that she was astonished by the severity of it.

Universal employment, I learned, was one of the very core and central values of the era; ever since societies all around the planet had been rebuilt following the chaos that marked the end of the world I grew up in, the necessary and meaningful – meaning making – feature of everyone having and engaging in work had been cherished almost above all else. Every person had a place, every individual contributed, each took pride and a feeling of community from that, even if they still chose to self-identity in ways other than the jobs they did. To take someone’s career away was worse than taking their life; when Sou first heard about it from me she was so shocked that she simply didn’t know what to make of it and could only guess at the worst; she explained that that was why she had told me to approach Geen and why she also hadn’t mentioned any of the implications. She was very worried that I might face some kind of punishment; but she trusted Geen’s judgment and she knew the situation was a peculiar one, so much so that it certainly wouldn’t be treated by the books. She couldn’t help feeling anxious though, and didn’t want me to be too.
Geen had similarly known that I would be clueless about how such an act was viewed and kept me in the dark evidently for the sake of her surprise at the meeting. I’m sure she had an idea for what to do with me, but in the meantime she probably wanted to circumvent any risk of it getting out that she knew what had been done. In hindsight I was for the most part glad that she had decided to play her hand that way because of how well it worked. For the most part. I told myself that I had lost nothing but needless fear by not knowing. A piece of me, though, did feel like I deserved to know, or anyway should have been told since it so clearly concerned me in a very direct way, but perhaps that disconnect was just one more aspect of the way that people’s thinking had shifted between my birth time and the one I found myself in. Once more I saw how very much I still had to adjust to.

Zerre was in fact exiled after that, although not before he was given one of the same kinds of trials that I witnessed earlier with the accused farm work shirker. He was branded too, on both the chest and the forehead. All of his plans came to light before the gathered full Council; there was no point for him to try and deny anything as those who had been his close associates provided enough circumstantial evidence and hearsay that his true
intentions could be deduced even if no one had actually recorded Zerre saying the things that eventually sunk him. As the details became known his crimes of attempting to oust the head of the monastery, of plotting to reorganize the Council into a subservient body, of wrongly applying the authority he had been invested with as a team leader, and of using genuine and honest monks as tools for gaining personal power, were deemed unforgiveable.

For her part Geen remained as the head of the monastery, and she did not put off responding to the monks’ various appeals that had been collected nor to laying out her blueprint for the long-term overhaul of the work placement process, one that included the introduction of a graded tier system for those in the city who wished to swap jobs at some point: those who had longest wanted something else were to be given priority over those who more recently decided they’d like to try their hand at another career. She and Sou worked long hours over a period of months on the plan and it came out very well, I thought, though I was surely a biased judge. It had enough safeguards such that there would never be a lack of what was necessary for both the city and the monastery to function smoothly while retaining full employment, of course, but done in a more flexible manner than it previously had been. To my surprise when it came to it
very few people actually wanted to change what they did; that was something that Geen and Sou had foreseen and was no doubt a result of the differing approach that had been taken to working. It struck me again that there were still some underlying assumptions, some core and foundational patterns, ingrained in my head that I just could not get over; that having been one of them.

Those patterns, those relics of an earlier era, were not without their benefits though as I returned to my position as a writer – back in the Collective again after all since Zerre was now gone, back amongst those I had come to know, like, and respect – and pursued my studies of social structures and governing systems, searching for a way to help prevent the power hungry from getting near it, searching for a way to root out and preclude the excesses that the twenty-first century had displayed in such plentitude.

My goal was, and is, to help our city and our monastery move forward, and although we’ve achieved much and are well on our way to more I know that the journey is never truly over and that the only real endpoint is to keep trying, keep striving, keep developing, keep growing. Sharing that message was why I wrote this book; I thought that my own story of growth might be worthwhile.
for others. I can’t take sole credit for the idea though; Sou had suggested to me that I try to find some way to make peace with where I’ve come from now that I’ve made peace with where I am. I was the first of her new batch of patients in the individualized practice she launched alongside her reorganized duties at the Testing and Placement Center, and I’m pleased to add that my treatment sessions were over quite quickly. I was able to concertedly push through and hammer things out; and it was naturally best for the sake of our private relationship to end that professional aspect in a hurry too. We remain happy.

Well, whether you’re reading this in the city or here at the monastery, I hope that for you the tale has been a useful one. And if there’s anything else, you know where to find me, and you know how to get a hold of me. Our world is thankfully not that big.
About the author:

Andrew Oberg is a human being – and that is a wonderful thing. He currently lives in Kochi, Japan, with his wife and two daughters.

Andrew may be contacted through Drugstore Books at:
drugstorebooks@gmail.com
or via his personal and professional website:
andrewoberg.blogspot.jp

His other works available through Drugstore Books are: *Green Skies* (graphic novel: historical adventure), *Randolph’s One Bedroom* (twenty serial short stories: surrealist humor), and *Tomorrow, as the Crow Flies* (contemporary philosophy: ethics and political theory).

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